

Alan Murphy Jukes a Crook

By

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PRE-PUBLICATION ISSUE

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Chapter 1

Alan Murphy was out of his element. Walking from the parking lot toward the ticket gate at Freeport Falcon Stadium, he had checked out the other kids his age to see if they were with parents or just walking in with some of their friends. As he suspected, many of his classmates were being let out of cars near the gate and were being allowed to buy their own tickets and enter the stadium without adult supervision. Well, he hadn't really had that option.

Ordinarily, he wouldn't have minded having his grandfather, Angus, tagging along. Cooler than anyone over thirty that Alan knew, his grandfather was a little eccentric, but he knew enough not to pretend to be 'just one of the guys.' He knew what a grandfather's role was, and he played that role perfectly. If it weren't for his grandfather, Alan knew that he would never have made it to the game. Certainly his grandfather knew little about American football and would have had little desire to sit out in the cold to watch the Falcons play if it were not to please his grandson.

"Oh, well," Alan thought, "I doubt that anyone notices me in this crowd. They'll all be watching the football players and the cheerleaders."

Just then, the crunching of the football player's cleats could be heard on the gravel walkway leading from the field house to the stadium. Alan turned to see the team captain, Lance Russell, leading his teammates through the gate and through the crowd which was parting to let them pass. All of the adults moved quickly to the side although some of the ex-players and fathers stayed close enough to pat 'their player' on the shoulder pads as the team passed—shouting words of encouragement. Many of the onlookers raised their hands with both thumbs interconnected—

flapping their ‘wings’ to represent a falcon in flight looking for prey.

Many of the players had black pitch rubbed under their eyes even though the game would start well after dusk. Some of the players had perfected their unique version of the ‘falcon shriek,’ and those high-pitched sounds, intended to send chills down the spines of their opponents, were irritating to say the least. Alan, a fun-loving guy if there ever was one, tried his best to mimic the shriek, and he could tell by the look on his grandfather’s face that he was producing a sufficiently irritating sound.

Instinctively, his grandfather reached for him. A blow to his back and neck knocked him sharply into his grandfather and carried them both down the embankment to the sidelines of the football field. “So much for thinking that I won’t be noticed with my grandfather,” he thought as he quickly jumped to his feet and looked toward the stands on the home team’s side of the field. About a third of the fans were pointing at him and his grandfather; another third were just looking and laughing; the other third, mothers and grandmothers most likely, had looks of concern for his grandfather’s well being.

Alan’s concern and affection for his grandfather quickly replaced his own concern about his reputation among his fellow students. “Are you hurt, grandfather?” he asked as he helped his grandfather to his feet.

“Don’t worry about me,” Angus Murphy answered with a broad smile on his face and a gleam in his eyes. “That’s the closest I’ve come to playing rugby in twenty years. How do we get back up there?” He pointed toward the top of the steep slope.

Alan would have simply run up the slope if he had been by himself, but he knew his grandfather might not be able to do that without slipping and falling again. Not about to let that happen, he looked around for another route to the top.

When he saw the football team coming toward them again from the end zone, he realized the easiest way to the stands would be to walk down the sidelines to the end of the field and take the gradually sloping path along the fence back toward the entrance to the field. Grabbing his grandfather's arm, he pointed toward the end zone and said, "That way, grandfather; there's the path back to the top."

His grandfather walked beside him up the sideline but seemed to be distracted by the football team running onto the field. When Alan checked out where his grandfather had been looking, he noticed that the football team captain was looking their way with a satisfied smirk on his face. Racing ahead of the rest of the team, he raised his arms with his hands in the 'falcon flight' gesture and shrieked loudly.

The crowd roared.

Suddenly, as Lance crossed the big '30' painted on the field, he tumbled face first to the turf, unable to disconnect his hands to cushion his fall. Except for the boy's parents and one of the cheerleaders, the crowd roared in laughter—again. Alan heard a familiar voice calling to him from the embankment.

"Is your grandfather okay?" Brent Blakely asked.

"He's having a ball," Alan shouted before turning back to his grandfather. He noticed a wide smile on the face of his grandfather who was watching the boy who had fallen try to regain his composure. That wasn't like his grandfather at all; normally he would be feeling sympathy for the youngster. Turning back to his friend, he noticed a similar smile on Brent's face. Now that was really strange.

Quickly returning a medium-sized black box to a large duffel bag that he hoisted on his shoulder, Brent rushed along the path toward the end zone to catch up with the team. Alan and his grandfather walked in the same direction and met Brent just after he had made the turn and headed onto field at the ten yard line.

“I’m sorry about your fall, Mr. Murphy,” Brent called to them as he continued to race along the sideline toward the players’ bench. “I’m glad you’re all right,” he shouted back over his shoulder.

As they made the turn and headed toward a seat in the stands, Alan’s grandfather remarked. “You have a good friend in that boy, Alan. Don’t ever let anything little come between you.”

His grandfather’s words brought his thoughts back to the reason he had come to the game that night. Indeed Brent was his friend, but something strange was happening at these football games, and Alan had a strange feeling that Brent was somehow involved. As his friend, Alan intended to find out not only what was going on but how much his friend was actually involved. If Brent was caught up in something that could later hurt him, he was determined to help his friend—even if his friend didn’t want that help. That’s what friends are for.

Chapter 2

As Brent stashed his duffel bag next to one of the water coolers on the sideline, he looked over at the team huddled around the coach. Lance Russell had already forgotten about his fall and was leading his team in a response to the pep talk that they were being given. Winners of their last six games, they seemed ready to win their seventh—their biggest game of the season.

Although most of the cheerleaders were smiling and jumping and waving their pom-poms in the air, Brent noticed that Lynette Roberts was looking at him with a scowl. She shook her head as if in a warning to him as she jumped along with the others. “What could she know?” he wondered.

When Lynette turned back to the crowd and led the squad in the next cheer, Brent convinced himself that he had no reason to worry. “There’s no way,” he thought. “She doesn’t know anything. Nobody does.”

Perhaps Brent had been right about Lynette. After all, cheerleaders weren’t supposed to be smart; they just had to be popular. As Brent knew, a lot of people just didn’t like others who seemed smarter than they were. However, he knew that Lynette wasn’t that type. Although he had once thought she wanted to be popular more than anything else, he had learned that she was extremely intelligent. In fact, Lynette and his friend, Alan, had been primarily responsible for bailing him out of his last jam. He couldn’t think about that right now; he was too busy getting himself further into an even bigger jam.

As the team captains walked out to the center of the field, Brent forgot about the look that Lynette had given him. He also forgot to wonder why Alan Murphy and his grandfather had chosen to come to a Freeport Middle School football game. Making a visual check of the field, he focused on what role his little gadgets might play in this

particular game. After all, the Canton Cats looked pretty ferocious. His team would need some help to win this game; of that he had little doubt.

From the stands, Alan Murphy kept his attention on his friend. He knew little about the game of football, but he wasn't worried about that. He hadn't seen the look on Lynette's face, but his own face had the very same expression. Looking down at the two teams, he could tell that the Cats' players were much bigger. Having won the regional championship the year before, they appeared extremely confident. He wondered how his own middle school team, losing more games than they had won the year before, had suddenly become a winning football team.

"A team of destiny," he had heard them called. Doubting that Lance Russell, a jerk on and off the field, was being blessed by "destiny" or any real power or force in the universe, Alan was convinced that Brent was playing a critical role in the team's successful season. "But how?" he wondered. "He's just the team manager; he doesn't even play."

When he overheard Mrs. Blakely, Brent's mother, explaining to his grandfather how the falcons had pulled off a miracle win the week before, a cold chill ran down Alan's spine and seemed to fill up the pit of his stomach.

"Their defender just fell down," she explained. "The receiver was all alone at the twenty yard line; the quarterback couldn't miss him."

Alan looked back toward the field at the numeral '30' where Lance Russell had 'just fallen down' only minutes before. He wondered if the defender from the previous game had tripped at the thirty yard line to leave the receiver all alone 'at the twenty.'

"I like American football," his grandfather called to him above the roar of the crowd. "Enjoy the game; I'm feeling fine." His grandfather obviously thought Alan's

concern about their tumble down the embankment had dampened his enthusiasm for the game. He forced a smile.

“Right, grandfather; let’s enjoy the game,” he shouted back. He returned his attention to the field and looked closely to find Brent on the sideline. When he spotted him sitting on the bench, he was startled to see that Brent was staring right back at him. Alan gave him a ‘thumbs up’ gesture to reassure him again that his grandfather was okay. Although Brent waved back in acknowledgement, Alan could tell from the look on his friend’s face that he was not just concerned about the well-being of Angus Murphy.

Chapter 3

Despite his grandfather's previous claim that he "enjoyed American football," Alan never remembered him watching a game before. As the game progressed, his grandfather did seem to follow the action and cheer at most of the right times, but he clearly was confused the first time that one of the quarterbacks threw the ball down the field to another player.

"Can he do that?" his grandfather asked.

"It's called a forward pass," answered Mrs. Blakely. Of course, Alan had known that much about the game, but he preferred letting Brent's mother answer his grandfather's questions. He wanted to focus on Brent and what he might be doing to affect the outcome of the game.

Based on what had happened before the game, Alan suspected that Brent might be operating some kind of remote-controlled device to snag an opposing player's foot. He couldn't think of anything else that could have been responsible for tripping up Lance Russell as he ran onto the field. Brent had been holding that black box when it happened, and it would have been just like his friend to get back at Lance for knocking Alan and his grandfather down the embankment. Of course, he really hadn't seen Lance hit him from behind, but he had noticed his grandfather glowering at Lance, and Lance was clearly the one that Brent had tripped up as payback. Alan believed in "innocent until proven guilty," but he was pretty sure that his grandfather would testify that Lance was guilty once they were in the car on the way home. What baffled him was seeing his friend sitting on the bench—apparently not involved in the game at all.

When the Falcons took their first time out, Brent bolted off the bench, grabbed a tray of water bottles, and headed out onto the field—nothing unusual in that. Returning to his seat on the bench, he watched the game

like the bench warmers and all of the others on the sidelines. When the crowd in the stands stood to cheer the team, Brent stood with the others on the sideline. Finally, with the clock showing '1:02' on the scoreboard, Alan decided that monitoring Brent was a complete waste of time; he began watching the action on the field.

The game was still scoreless, but the crowd jumped to its feet when Lance Russell raced down the home team's side of the field with two opposing players in pursuit. Alan could tell that number '22' was gaining ground pretty fast and would surely catch Lance before he could reach the end zone. Looking back toward the '30' on the north end of the field, Alan wondered if a similar booby trap might exist on the south end. However, the defender caught Lance and threw him to the ground without anything suspicious happening.

The crowd moaned when the football bounced free. One man shouted, "Fumble!" Jennifer Blakely cried, "Get that ball, somebody!" Others shouted out similar instructions to the players who had little chance of hearing any of them.

"Number '42' will get the ball," predicted Angus Murphy. Alan could see what almost everyone in the crowd had recognized. One of the Cats was about to recover the fumble, and that would keep the Falcons from scoring. Most likely, the momentum of the game would shift, and the Cats would win the game.

Even though Lance Russell would most likely be treated as the scapegoat and that might be poetic justice for the bully who had pushed him prior to the game, Alan cheered like the most avid Falcon Fan for somebody else to get to the ball before number '42' could get to it. The nearest player was Jock Benson, number '76,' whose block on the play had allowed Lance to get into the open. However, he wasn't fast—Alan knew—and number '42' was within a few yards of the ball.

Then it happened. Number '42' tripped and fell, sliding to a stop a few feet from the ball. Recovering quickly, he crawled toward the ball, but big Jock dove on top of him, pinning him to the ground and sliding across his back to recover the fumble for the Falcons. The crowd went wild.

When Alan located Brent on the sideline, he noticed that his friend was again looking up at the stands. "He knows that I suspect something," thought Alan. Brent quickly looked back toward the field to watch the jubilant Falcons pounding big Jock on the back. The coach quickly called 'time out' to give Jock a breather. From Lance Russell's body language, Alan could see that the captain was relieved to no longer be in line to be the team's scapegoat.

Number '42' was checking the ground that had apparently tripped him up and apparently couldn't find a thing. The Cats were a dejected team as the 'time out' ended and they took their positions on the defensive side of the ball. Not surprisingly, the Falcons scored in only three plays with Lance running across the goal line with only seconds remaining in the first half.

When Brent followed the team off the field at halftime, Alan was surprised that he didn't carry the duffel bag. He wondered if it had been left on the sideline and whether he might be able to slip down to the player's bench and take a closer look at the black box.

He had spotted the duffel bag and was weighing his chances of getting to the bag without being stopped when he saw the black box coming toward him in someone else's possession. "No wonder I didn't see Brent operating the control box," he said to himself. One of the assistant coaches, Jeremiah Bullock, was carrying the black box down the aisle. Apparently Coach Bullock had been up in the press box during the first half with the black box in his possession. Brent might be innocent after all.

Then remembering the looks Brent had given him before and during the game, Alan realized that Brent wasn't entirely innocent. He was involved in some way. At the very least, he knew what was going on. Thinking back to his friend's joy when he had talked about the team's winning streak earlier that season, Alan realized that Brent had most likely been a major player in whatever trickery had been happening on the football field back then. Perhaps now he had regrets. Perhaps he only regretted that Alan knew that something was amiss.

Confident that he would get to the bottom of this mystery, Alan allowed himself to enjoy the halftime show. "Lynette Roberts is a pretty good cheerleader," he thought as he watched the cheerleaders take part in the band's formation. He half expected the formation to change into a "falcon in flight" with the cheerleaders playing kazoos to imitate the falcon shriek. That didn't happen; at least it didn't happen at the ball game. If he dreamed it later that night, he wouldn't be surprised.

As the band ended their performance and left the field, Alan watched the Freeport cheerleaders run to the other side of the field to join the Canton cheerleaders. After performing a cheer for the Canton fans, the two cheerleader groups raced back across the field holding hands to allow the Canton squad to return the favor. Alan marveled at the sportsmanship being shown by the cheerleaders while his own school's football team was apparently caught up in something very unsportsmanlike. He wondered again why Brent had let himself get involved.

Chapter 4

The second half of the Canton–Freeport game followed the pattern of the first half. The Canton coach had somehow restored the determination and emotion that motivated his players in the first half. Their quarterback, destined to be the next great quarterback for the Freeport High School team next season, showed why he was so highly regarded. Time after time he threw the ball accurately to different receivers as his team marched down the field—apparently headed for a game-tying touchdown.

The Falcons’ defense was playing hard, and Lance Russell had shown the crowd why he was also a likely freshman starter for the high school team. Had he not made the tackles he had made, the Cats would have most likely scored before the next strange play happened. Alan had been waiting for it, but he had concluded that he would have to wait until the Falcons got the ball back. Looking back over his shoulder at the press box, he had located Coach Bullock behind the press box opening which allowed those in the box to see the field.

When he heard the elated roar from the home team fans, he was looking directly at Coach Bullock and was surprised to see that the coach wasn’t looking down on the field. He had apparently been looking at something in the press box. Alan wondered if there was some kind of monitor up there because he doubted that the coach had to be looking at the black box to properly operate it.

On the field, the reason for the crowd’s happiness was apparently. The quarterback of the Cats was lying on his back about seven yards behind the line of scrimmage with the ball in his throwing hand. There wasn’t a single Falcon player near him. Apparently, Falcon Field had tackled another opposing player—this time for a significant loss.

Alan couldn't force a cheer for his team. He wanted to do something to even things up—to undo the deceitful practices being used by his team's coaches and his own friend -- if his suspicions were proven to be correct. "Innocent until proven guilty," he kept telling himself. He would never abandon his friendship with Brent, but he wondered if Brent felt the same way. He realized that he might not know his friend as well as he had thought did.

He had no choice but to confront his friend. That could be done later when only he and Brent were present, but it had to be done. Then, if Brent still wanted to be his friend, they'd figure a way out of this predicament. Even if Brent rejected his friendship, Alan knew that wouldn't affect his own loyalty to his best friend. As his grandfather had advised him earlier that evening, he wasn't about to let anything interfere with this friendship—not even if Brent no longer wanted to be his friend.

No further trickery was required to enable the Falcons to win the game. Not even the talented Cats quarterback could pull his team out of a third down situation with thirteen yards needed for a first down. When his third-down pass to number '42' was deflected by a hustling Lance Russell, the momentum that had been regained by the Cats at halftime disappeared for good. The Cats never recovered. The Falcons won 20 – 0!

Alan never saw Brent look back into the stands during the rest of the game. After the game was over, Brent packed up his duffel bag and headed for the field house with the bag over his shoulder. Coach Bullock had left the press box and walked down to the sidelines when the outcome of the game was no longer in doubt. Alan had watched the assistant coach casually walk over to Brent's duffel bag and place the black box inside. When Brent picked up the bag, he didn't bother looking into the bag.

Alan wasn't fooled. He knew that Brent was aware of what had happened to give the Falcons the win.

Otherwise, he wouldn't have been able to use the black box to trip up Lance Russell when the team had been running onto the field. Alan wondered if Brent now regretted his decision to pay Lance back for roughing up Alan and his grandfather. Thinking back to the years that the two had been friends, Alan concluded that Brent would have no such regrets. He knew, too, that he would be able to reach his friend and make him come to his senses if he hadn't already.

Together, they'd figure out a way to make things right. They just had to be able to do that. That was what friends did for each other.

Chapter 5

As Angus Murphy drove his grandson home from the game, he wondered why Alan hadn't seemed to be as jubilant as the other students from Freeport. Angus knew that Alan had considered himself too small to play football as a seventh grader. Even though his friend, Brent, had gone out for the team, Alan had never seemed to question his own decision.

When Brent failed to make the team and surprisingly chose to take a position as a team manager, Alan had supported his friend's decision. Not having his friend by his side left a big hole in Alan's after-school adventures, but he rearranged his evenings to spend time with Brent when football practice was over. If football was important to Brent and since Brent was his best friend, then it was only right to shuffle his schedule to make room for Brent to attend football practice and still make their friendship work. "That's what friends do for each other," he had reminded himself back then, too.

Angus had silently applauded his grandson's decisions to keep Brent as his friend. He encouraged their friendship as often as he could because he realized that good friends are hard to find and sometimes harder to keep. Pleasantly surprised to see that his own grandson had developed into such a fine young man, he respected his silence on the trip home. Only when they pulled in the driveway and Alan seemed to hesitate before getting out of the car did Angus interrupt his grandson's thoughts.

"Do you want to talk about what's bothering you, son?" he asked quietly.

Alan looked up at his grandfather with a look of determination. "Not right now if you don't mind. I need to talk to Brent before I talk to anyone else. Is that okay?"

Angus's pride in his grandson grew even stronger with that statement.

“Whenever you’re ready, I’ll be ready to listen.”

“Thanks, grandfather. You’re still the coolest grandfather in town.”

Angus smiled. With a chuckle he added, “It’s not even close.”

His grandfather’s confidence seemed to engulf Alan. He felt better about his chances of rescuing Brent even though nothing had really been changed by talking to his grandfather. In fact, he really hadn’t talked to his grandfather about Brent. Although he was not exactly sure why he felt better now, Alan got out of the car and headed toward the front door with a little skip in his step. Realizing that he had forgotten something, he turned and ran back to the car.

Through the window on the passenger’s side that had just been lowered, Alan called out, “Thanks for taking me to the game.”

“I think I enjoyed it more than you did,” his grandfather answered. “Maybe I can take you to a real football game next time—one where they don’t allow the players to throw the ball.”

Realizing his grandfather was talking about a game that Americans called ‘soccer,’ he laughed and said, “That would be great. We’ll take Brent with us if that will be okay.”

“Okay by me,” answered Angus Murphy. As he watched his grandson walk back to the front door and enter the house, he closed the car window between them and said aloud, “He should be thinking about Brent. Friends never leave friends on their own.”

Inside the house, Alan called out to tell his parents that he was home. His mother called out to him from the den where they were watching a comedy show. After waiting for the canned laughter from the show to die down, she repeated her question. “Did you see Brent after the game, Alan?”

Puzzled, Alan walked into the den before responding. "I saw him headed for the field house carrying his duffel bag. Is something wrong?"

"Eleanor Blakely called. She was at the game, but Brent was supposed to ride home with one of the coaches. Coach Bullock just called from the field house and said that he can't find Brent; he wondered if he rode home with you and your grandfather."

"Brent wouldn't do that without telling someone, Mom. You know him better than that."

Mrs. Murphy shook her head and picked up the phone.

"I promised I'd call Eleanor back, but you're right. This isn't like Brent at all. That's why she's so worried."

Alan's confident feeling from earlier in the evening had been bolstered by his talk with his grandfather in the car. Now that had disappeared like the air in a balloon when it landed on a holly bush. Alan didn't bother asking his mother and father if he could go back to the school and help look for Brent; he knew that wouldn't be allowed. His father might join the hunt, but Alan would be told to stay at the house.

Remembering what his grandfather often said about doing what was right and apologizing later, Alan decided on a plan of action that only his grandfather would approve. After what seemed like an hour in the den with his parents, Alan decided that he could turn in for the night without arousing too much suspicion. After asking his parents to wake him up if they heard anything at all, he announced that he might just as well go to sleep. His parents were so relieved that he hadn't demanded to go look for his friend that they failed to consider how unlike Alan his reaction had been.

At eleven o'clock, with her husband out looking for the Blakely boy, Jennifer Murphy checked on her sleeping son. When the light from the hallway fell on her son's bed,

she noticed that only his hair was visible under the covers. He didn't respond when she said, "Good night," and she thanked God that he was sleeping so soundly.

Had she checked more closely, she would have found the dummy that Alan, an amateur magician, used for many of his "illusions." Had she not been so worried about the Blakely boy and feeling empathy for the boy's mother, she would have known to check more closely. While the actions attributed to Brent Blakely were clearly not like him, lying in bed asleep while his best friend was missing was even more unlike Alan Murphy.

Chapter 6

By eleven o'clock, Alan had already ridden his bicycle back through the neighborhood and returned to the ball field. Not missed by his mother, he had been spotted by Lynette Roberts while she was standing at her front door saying goodnight to her boyfriend, Lance Russell. Lance's parents waited in their car with the engine running, pretending not to watch Lance give Lynette a goodnight kiss before she went inside.

Lynette wondered what could possibly have motivated Alan Murphy to leave home this late at night. "Something must be wrong," she thought. Lynette considered Eleanor Blakely to be a good friend and Eleanor was Alan's best friend's mother; she would might know what could have happened to draw Alan out this late at night. She would if it involved Brent.

Eleanor Blakely answered the phone on the first ring. "Hello, this is Eleanor Blakely. Have you heard from Brent?"

Lynette had suspected that something might be wrong, but she was startled just the same. "This is Lynette, Mrs. Blakely. I just saw Alan Murphy riding toward the school on his bicycle and I thought you might know something. What happened to Brent?"

Hearing Lynette's voice reminded Eleanor Blakely of the time two years before when her son had been drugged by the awful Edwin Holtzman. She began to cry--unable to hold back any longer.

"Brent is missing, Lynette. He was supposed to ride home with Coach Bullock after the game, but the coach called to see if he had ridden home with someone else. Did you see him after the game?"

"It seems like I saw him returning to the field house, Mrs. Blakely. I walked with Lance after the game

and waited with his parents until he came out of the field house. I'm pretty sure that I saw Brent go inside."

"Thanks, Lynette. I need to keep the phone line open in case somebody tries to call about Brent. His dad and some of the other neighbors have gone to search for him. I'm sure that he'll turn up, but he's never done anything like this before."

"Goodbye, Mrs. Blakely," Lynette responded. "I'm sure he'll be fine. He probably went off with some of the players to celebrate. Sometimes they go to that little hamburger joint, you know, to eat after the game. Maybe Brent was so excited that he forgot to tell Coach Bullock that he had another ride."

"Maybe so, Lynette. I'll call the Burger Barn to see if he's there. You're probably right. Thanks."

Lynette hated to give Mrs. Blakely false hopes, but she didn't want her to worry needlessly. Brent could have gone to the Burger Barn with some friends, but Lynette knew that he hadn't seemed that happy after the game. In fact, she remembered wondering why he had been so sad after such a wonderful victory.

Looking back into the living room at her father, she remembered the last emergency and her father's reaction at that time. It wasn't that he didn't care about other people; he just didn't get involved unless somebody asked for his help. At least she was pretty sure of that.

Well, this time her father wouldn't be staying in his own house while the rest of the neighborhood men were out searching for Brent Blakely. She would ask him to take her to the Burger Barn for a milk shake. On the way, she would tell him that Brent was missing and implore him to be a good neighbor. He would help, too; she just knew he would.

Her dad was reclining in front of the television—
asleep. "Hey, dad," she began. "Wake up; I want a milkshake."

Waking up, her dad fumbled for his car keys. She knew that she would get him out of the house. He will help, too, she assured herself. If I have to, I'll remind him of the last time that he stayed in the house and what might have happened to his daughter.

"But only if I have to," she repeated aloud.

Handing her father his jacket, she walked ahead of him to the garage. She wondered if the car had enough gas to drive across town; they seldom drove it since her father worked at the store next to their house seven days a week. When the car started after only a slight hesitation, Eleanor breathed a sigh of relief.

As they rode toward the Burger Barn, she stared out the window intently for any sign of Alan or Brent. As they passed the school, she thought she recognized Alan's bicycle over by the entrance to the ball field. She also thought she saw a flashlight beam or two out on the field. Lynette was relieved.

"They're probably just doing something crazy out there on the football field to celebrate the victory," she said more to herself than to her father.

"What's that, Lynette."

"Nothing, Dad. Everything's fine. Let's go get that milkshake, and I'll tell you all about the game and how well Lance played."

Unlike Angus Murphy, Leonard Roberts had no skill at "reading between the lines" when he spoke with young people. He never considered her request to go get a milkshake to be anything more than that. Although he was a hardworking man who loved his daughter more than anything else in the world, he knew little about what made his little girl tick.

Lynette realized that she could hardly expect to change her father. She knew he loved her, but she also knew that he would never be "cool" like Angus Murphy or "have feelings" like Eleanor Blakely. Neither would they

be as hardworking as her father was. People were different; they had different priorities.

At the Burger Barn, she laughed and talked with her father as she drank a strawberry milkshake. Her father drank coffee which the Burger Barn had to make especially for him. As she slurped the last of her milkshake she wondered again what Brent and Alan had really been up to at the football field.

On the return ride home, Lynette held her father's "to go" cup of coffee while he drove. She didn't see any flashlight beams crossing the football field as they passed. With a sense of relief, she noticed that Alan's bicycle was no longer leaning against the fence near the entrance. She did spot a red pickup parked beside the entrance, but she couldn't place the truck although it did seem familiar. Had she looked back toward the ball field after they passed, she would have seen Alan's bicycle in the bed of that red pickup truck. Had she looked even closer, she might have spotted Alan's head above the back of the passenger seat in the cab of the truck.

Chapter 7

In the cab of the truck, Alan listened to the driver talking to Mrs. Blakely on his cell phone. "Brent's still missing, Mrs. Blakely, but don't worry. We'll find him pretty soon. He's got to be around here somewhere."

"He's not 'still missing,'" snarled Alan Murphy. "He's missing again." Although his hands were taped together, Alan's feet had not yet been taped together. While he could, he kicked Coach Bullock as hard as he could several times.

Angered, the small wiry assistant coach thought about smacking the boy, but realized that Alan was only doing what anyone would do in the same situation. Bending over, he held onto the boy's ankles while he wound the duct tape around them. Although he couldn't avoid another kick or two, he did manage to get them bound up in short order. "I'll let you go as soon as we find Brent and make sure that he fully understands the situation."

Alan thought about his friend and what he might be doing. If the shoe were on the other foot (or the tape was around the other pair of ankles and wrists) Alan would be pounding on the side of the truck, demanding that his friend be released. Leaving a friend to take the 'rap' alone was certainly not like the old Brent that he knew.

"He'll be here, soon. You don't have to worry about that." Alan paused for emphasis, presenting his speech as he imagined his friend would do. "And he'll bring help; that's for sure." Coach Bullock laughed. He didn't even respond to the threat.

"Once you both understand that I've got your bicycle that I found at the scene and the shovel with Brent's fingerprints all over the handle, I'll take you back to your parents and let you go. I've also got pictures. If either one of you starts feeling gabby after that, just remember that

I've got enough evidence to have both of you arrested for vandalizing the football field.. You'll both have to pay the price if either one of you doesn't keep his mouth shut."

He pulled out of the parking lot slowly with his high beams shedding as much light as possible. There was no way he would harm either of the boys; he was just trying to put a scare into them. If they didn't keep their mouths shut, he would follow through on his threat -- accusing them of vandalizing the field. If they claimed that he was involved, nobody would believe them. After all, he was a teacher with a good reputation; everyone knew the kind of imagination that the Murphy kid had; everyone also knew how jealous the Blakely boy was of Lance Russell.

He decided to search for Brent for another hour or so before turning Alan over to his parents. By doing that, he'd take the air out of any tale the boys tried to tell. After all, he'd been the one to report that Brent was missing earlier that night. Why would he have done that if he'd been afraid of what the boy had to tell? He'd explain that he had collared the Murphy kid at the scene of the crime, but that the Blakely boy had run away. Any sensible adult would believe a coach over the boys.

Still, he was disappointed that he hadn't been able to get them both together and threaten them. In any case, he didn't plan to reinstall those gadgets on the football field and use them in the future. He'd have to make the most of the wins they'd achieved already. "Who knows," he thought, "we might even be able to win our final game on our own. We're certainly full of confidence."

"You're a team of destiny," Alan responded sarcastically. He couldn't help laughing. The whole scheme to win a middle school region championship in such a complex fashion was ridiculous. Why did they care that much? If you didn't win the games fair and square, how could you take any pride in winning them?

Both passengers in the truck were staring out the window for any sight of Brent. Coach Bullock ignored the sarcasm. He was feeling pretty good about what he'd accomplished that night. Although he hadn't been sure what the Blakely boy intended to do with the hardware that he'd dug up out of the football field, he imagined that the boy intended to go to the papers. Well, he wouldn't do that now; he'd keep his mouth shut or he'd go to jail.

Alan squirmed in the seat beside him, but could do no more than that. He knew that he would never do anything that might harm his friend. "We'll figure out something," he mumbled to himself. He wondered where Brent was at that very minute.

Coach Bullock was wondering the very same thing. Then Brent was there.

Chapter 8

Just up ahead with his thumb sticking out in a hitch hiker's pose, Brent stood on the side of the road with a duffel bag over his shoulder. He was smiling broadly, and Alan began to smile as the coach coasted to a stop beside his friend. Seeing both the boys smiling surely had to unnerve Coach Bullock.

Bullock unlocked the passenger side door and let the window down so that Brent could easily hear his instructions. "Get in the truck, Blakely." The coach had thought about freeing Alan's hands and feet so that the other boy wouldn't fear the worst and run away again. He hadn't needed to worry.

Alan wiggled over to the center of the seat to make room for Brent. As Brent stashed the duffel back on the floorboard near his feet, the coach explained, "You can take the tape off his hands and feet now." "I had to keep him like that so that he wouldn't run away. I caught him at the ball field doing figure eights on his bicycle. He made a mess of the field."

Alan shook his head to indicate to Brent that he didn't need to argue. Coach Bullock continued. "I've decided to be lenient. I'm going to keep his bicycle for a while as evidence in case you boys invent some wild story about me being involved in some scheme to 'fix football games.'

The boys looked at each other. Each one could almost read the other's thoughts. They would figure out something when they were released. For now, they would let Coach Bullock do all the talking.

"Of course, you're going to quit the football team, Blakely. I've got that shovel with somebody's fingerprints on it; I suspect they might just be yours. Anyway, I don't want you sneaking around the field house trying to dig up

dirt on the team.” Coach Bullock smiled at his play on words, and Alan couldn’t help laughing out loud.

Alan loved any kind of joke or riddle—no matter who told it and what the circumstances were. Brent laughed too but only because his friend’s laughter was contagious. Of course, he had been thinking of a plan when he had approached the truck. Now, hearing Coach Bullock’s threats, he realized that his plan would need a lot of changes. Whatever it took, he and Alan would be more than a match for the dishonest school teacher and coach who seemed to have the upper hand tonight.

Seeing the determination and confidence on the other two faces, Alan decided that all three of them were optimists if there ever had been any. He was reminded of his grandfather’s joke about the three optimists.

“What do three optimists say when they see a half-empty glass of water?” Angus Murphy would ask. After a suitable pause, he would provide the answers and laugh like he had told the funniest story ever told. Each of the answers surely fit one of them. Each of them was an optimist, but each had a different way of looking at his situation.

Brent was the typical optimist; he saw the glass as half-full of water. Coach Bullock was the optimist who would be happy because it would be hard to spill the water out of the half-empty glass. Alan was the optimist who wasn’t thirsty anyway. He’d have been happy if there hadn’t been any water at all in the glass.

“I’m going to take you boys to the Burger Barn for a hamburger, fries, and a shake,” announced the coach. He had to laugh at the astonished expressions on the faces of the boys. He punched a number into his cell phone. The coach waited until someone answered and then proceeded to explain to Eleanor Blakely that he had found Brent who had locked himself in the storage room at the field house. Since the poor boy was okay, but had missed the

celebration with the team, Coach Bullock felt like it was only fitting that he take him down to the Burger Barn. After all the poor boy was starving.

Alan was impressed by the convincing story that Coach Bullock had invented on a moment's notice. Some of his own confidence began to disappear. Perhaps the two boys wouldn't be a match for their adult enemy after all. Bullock continued talking to Brent's mother.

"You may want to call Mr. and Mrs. Murphy and tell them that their son is with us as well. I can only guess that he started out looking for Brent on his own, but I found him doing something that I don't think they'll be too proud of. You don't have to mention that to the Murphys; I'll handle that. I've given both boys a good 'talking to' about their irresponsible behavior."

Bullock listened for a minute to Mrs. Blakely then added something else with a wink at the boys. "I'm just too kind hearted, Eleanor. I couldn't stand to make Alan sit there and watch Brent and me eat our burgers and drink our shakes. I'm going to buy his meal, too."

Again he listened to the voice on the other end of the line before adding the finishing touch. "You don't have to say that, Eleanor. I'm not that great an example for the boys. I just try to do what my own mother taught me when I was a young boy." Moments later he hung up.

"Now, boys, let's get to the Burger Barn. Even if you guys are not hungry any more, I'm starved. Let's go celebrate 'this team of destiny.'"

"Yeah, right," both boys said in unison, no longer confident. Although many people considered Eleanor Blakely to be an air head, the boys knew from working with her on their previous 'adventure,' that she was pretty sharp. If Coach Bullock had deceived her as easily as it sounded from their end of the cell phone call, then the coach was pretty smart himself.

They rode in silence to the Burger Barn; Bullock turned up the radio and listened to some country music. Brent was desperately trying to come up with a new plan. Alan was thinking back to earlier in the evening when Brent and he had been digging up the gadgets that had been used to trip up the Cats' number '42' and their star quarterback as well.

He now knew why and how his friend had become involved in the coach's dishonest scheme. He didn't care what he and Brent had to do to make things right; they would figure out a way to make sure that the Falcons didn't win the championship dishonestly. He thought back to Brent's explanation of what had happened to him at football practice and what he had done to get back at the bully who had wronged him. He had to smile as he thought back at how his little friend had slain his own giant adversary.

Chapter 9

Earlier that night, Alan had pedaled his bicycle as hard as he could for as long as he could in an effort to reach the top of the big hill near the school before having to rest. Having done that, he was able to rest his legs as he coasted down the hill toward the school. Seeing the headlights from the parents' cars in the parking lot, he had circled the block before stopping his bicycle out of sight.

As he waited for the fathers to finish their search of the football field, Alan heard a familiar voice. "What are you doing here, Alan?"

"Checking on my missing friend, Brent."

"Yeah, right" they both said. Alan's "yeah right" was a lot more jovial than his friend's. He tried to encourage Brent. "Whatever you're going to do, I'm here to help."

"I'm glad you came," replied Brent in a loud whisper.

Alan heard the car doors slam and looked up to see that the search team would be gone in a few more seconds. "Didn't you expect me to come? Maybe you thought that I wouldn't know where you were?"

Brent's voice cracked as he explained. "I didn't mean that I was glad that you came here just now; I'm glad you came to the game tonight."

Alan was surprised to hear that. He wasn't sure what to say. He said all he could think of to say. "It's okay, Brent. That's what friends are for."

Brent was silent almost a full minute before responding. "Well, this friend sure needs a friend right now. I'm about to get into a lot of trouble."

"Then, don't do it, Brent. Climb on my bicycle with me and we'll head back home. You don't have to do anything to get yourself into more trouble."

“More trouble,” repeated Brent. “I knew that you had figured out what I had done. I was ashamed for you to know about it. That’s when I realized that what I had been doing was wrong—when I realized that I didn’t want you to know. That’s when I decided that I was going to make right every wrong that I had done.”

“We can do it some other night in some other way,” proposed Alan. We can figure out a way to do it so that you don’t get into trouble.”

Brent then asked the question that really mattered. “Would you just walk away, Alan? Would you leave all of those snares out there on the football field where they could be used next week. Would you help the Falcons win even if they didn’t deserve to win?”

Alan didn’t have to answer. His friend had known the answer when he had looked up to where he stood in the stands beside his grandfather earlier that evening. Brent waited for Alan to push his bicycle around the corner of the shed where he leaned it against one of the supporting posts for the tool shed.

“Get that wheelbarrow, Alan.”

Alan grabbed the handles of the wheelbarrow. Brent had already started walking toward the entrance to the football field with a shovel in his right hand. Alan pushed the wheelbarrow ahead of him and trailed his friend down to the field.

“How long is this going to take?” asked Alan when they walked out onto the field.

Brent didn’t answer; he just pressed the shovel point into the ground, flipped out something that looked like a thin piece of tubing then moved over a couple of feet and did the same thing again. As Brent moved on to the next location, Alan tossed the first “snare” into the wheelbarrow.

Brent spoke as he continued to dig--never turning to look at his friend. "I want to tell you what happened to me and why I did what I shouldn't have done."

"Whenever you're ready," replied Alan.

Retrieving all twenty-seven sets of snares took over an hour. Alan made three different trips to the dumpster to unload his wheelbarrow. By the time Brent placed his shovel into the turf to retrieve the last snare, he had finished his story—the story that covered the last three months--from the first football practice until tonight's game.

If Alan had been the crying type, he would have laughed and cried as his friend told his amazing story. As it was, he laughed and wiped his eyes when he got a piece of dirt in them. A lot of dirt was flying around the field that night.

Chapter 10

When Brent announced that he was going to try out for the middle school football team earlier that fall, Alan told him that trying out as a seventh grader was a bad idea. “You’re just too small and not quite fast enough,” he argued.

Brent countered with an argument of his own. “It will be fun if we both try out. If we do it together, you know we’ll figure out some way to make the team.”

“We always have,” Alan admitted, “but I just don’t like football.” He mimicked a line from another one of his grandfather favorite phrases, “And I don’t want to do it.”

Their friendly argument was interrupted when the Blakely’s back door opened and John Blakely called out to his son. “Time to practice, Brent. I’ll show you how I made the middle school team when I was in the seventh grade. I was just about your size, and I started all eight games that season.”

Alan realized then that Brent wasn’t trying out because he wanted to play football.” He was playing because his father expected him to carry on the family tradition.

Alan didn’t doubt that Brent’s father might have been the same size that his son was now, but he knew that players now were a lot bigger than players were when John Blakely played. He thought of big Jerome Bailey who weighed over two hundred pounds as a seventh grader. Then, there was Hank Brown—no bigger than Brent but as quick as lightning. Those two seventh graders might make the team, but there was no way his little buddy was going to be a Falcon this season.

As he watched Brent and his father practice together in their front yard, Alan wondered if perhaps he was jealous because his own father didn’t care whether he played football or not. As he watched, John Blakely show

his son out to “juke” an opponent, he had to laugh, but he also had to admit that Brent wasn’t all that bad. However, when the father demonstrated how to “bull rush” an opponent, Alan knew for sure that he had been right to be concerned about his friend. There was no way that Brent would be able to “run over” any other player trying out for the team. “I hope he doesn’t try that on Lance Russell or Jerome Bailey,” he said to himself as he headed home.

A few days later, Brent waved to Alan from his parents’ car as he headed for practice with his mother behind the wheel. For some reason his father was out of town and wouldn’t be able to watch him try out. Alan thought that might be a blessing. Brent had told him that his father promised to be back by the team’s first scrimmage game just three weeks away.

Chapter 11

Although Alan had heard bits and pieces about what had happened at practice, he was glad that he was getting the chance to hear the full story in Brent's own words.

"I did okay until it was time for 'one-on-one' drills. Sure, I had a little trouble getting all those pads fastened in the right places. I was the last one to get out on the field, and the rest had already started around the track for the warm up run. Then, my shoe came untied, and it took me forever to figure out how to bend over and reach my shoe laces. Those shoulder pads kept me from bending over as much as I needed to reach my shoes."

"I can imagine," responded Alan.

Brent ignored the smile on Alan's face and continued the story.

"I finally slipped the football shoes off my feet, and flipped them up into the air with my toes. After I tied each shoe, I dropped it back to the ground. Then, I was able to wiggle my feet back into the shoes."

"I bet they really felt good"

"Sure," remarked Brent, meaning just the opposite. "I don't think my heel was totally inside the shoe on my right foot until I was half way around the track. By then, the rest of the players had formed a circle around Coach Barker and were all waiting for me to finish my warm up run."

"At least, they didn't laugh," offered Alan.

"Yeah, right," they both said. Alan had managed to cheer up his buddy. A smile had crept onto his face as he continued digging up the snares.

"What were the 'one-on-one' drills?" asked Alan. Brent explained.

"All the running backs, wide receivers, line backers, and defensive backs are supposed to pair up with someone their size. One player is on offense, and the other guy plays

defense. When the coach says, “Go,” the offensive player tries to get around the defensive player. Whether he does or not, the quarterback throws him the ball.”

Having watched his first football game that day, Alan had learned enough to understand how the drill probably worked. “If you catch the ball, you did good; if the other guy catches the ball or knocks it down, you didn’t do so good.”

Brent was a better English student than Alan, but he didn’t correct his friend’s grammar ever. He just said it right when he had the chance and hoped that his good grammar rubbed off on his friend. “I didn’t do well at all.”

Alan had heard this part from Jerome and Hank during seventh grade study hall. He asked the question that had baffled the only two seventh graders who had made the team—just as Alan had predicted. “Why did you pair up with Lance Russell for the one-on-one drill? What were you thinking?”

Brent’s answer amazed Alan and made him wonder why he had let his friend try out alone. “I should have tried out with him,” Alan said to himself. “I could have been there so that he could have paired up with me. He could have showed me up in the one-on-one drills.” Alan was even smaller than Brent.

“I remembered the story about Robin Hood and Little John on the log across the stream,” explained Brent. “When Robin beat little John, he earned the respect of all the merry men.” Even as he said the words, a sheepish smile appeared on his face.

“So, you picked out the team captain figuring that once you outplayed him, your position on the team was ensured.”

“It could have worked,” Brent argued.

“If it had,” offered Alan, “you’d have been a ‘shoo-in’ for team captain next year.

Alan tried to help his friend through the next part of the story. He'd heard most of it already and knew that Brent would have trouble telling how Lance had made him look like he belonged anywhere other than a football field. "Lance didn't really want to be paired up with you, but Coach Bullock wouldn't let him switch out. That only made him madder."

"Yeah, that only made him madder. I tried to 'juke' him on the first drill. I took one step to the left and looked back over my left shoulder. When Lance reacted by taking a step to his right, I whirled around and headed to the right as fast as I could run. I had him beat."

"Except," Alan reminded him, "you didn't duck under his forearm."

"Yeah, right," remembered Brent. He clotheslined'd me, and I hit the ground hard—right on my back."

"But that didn't stop you."

"Well, it stopped me for at least five minutes. It seemed longer to me. Everyone was laughing—even the cheerleaders."

"Surely all of the cheerleaders weren't laughing at you."

"All of them," Brent confirmed. "Even our friend, Lynette Roberts. I was so mad that I tried to bull rush Lance on my next try."

"That's why there's an 'out' in 'try out,'" joked Alan

"Funny," admitted Brent, but he wasn't grinning. "I tried to run over him and shove him backwards like my dad taught me, but he didn't just wait for me to get to him like my dad did."

"Forearm again?" Alan asked although he already knew the answer.

"Both forearms the second time. I didn't wake up for fifteen minutes."

"Good time to take a science test on the milky way."

“What are you talking about,” asked Brent. Clearly, he didn’t understand the connection.

Alan provided it. “You were seeing stars!”

When Brent acted like he was gagging, Alan stated the obvious. “Most seventh graders would have quit right then. Why didn’t you? I mean, you had tried your best. You just weren’t big enough or quick enough. You’ll probably do just fine next year.”

Brent stopped digging and turned around to look at Alan.

“You wouldn’t have quit,” he said in a determined voice. “You would have asked for another chance, and you would have figured out some way to beat Lance Russell.”

“I wouldn’t have chosen to compete against Lance Russell in the first place,” Alan said to himself.

To Brent he said, “You’re probably right. I’d have gathered up some magic dust to throw in his eyes or used some kind of illusion to distract him while I ran around him. I’d have done something like that.”

“Exactly,” agreed Brent. “But I’m not a magician like you. I had to do something that I could do.”

“So you invented a snare which could be extended by remote control.” Alan held up a pair of the snares, one in each hand. “When you tied fishing line between these two ‘thing-a-ma-gadgets,’ nobody could see it, and only you knew it was there.

Brent nodded but continued with the story. “The coach didn’t want to give me a second try, but I insisted. I told him I’d be his team manager all season if I failed, but he had to let me be on the team if I succeeded.”

Alan knew from overhearing the other two seventh graders that Brent’s scheme hadn’t failed. “Why didn’t you make the team? I thought everything worked perfectly.”

Brent’s smile was larger than ever.

“It worked pretty well. I had decided to switch things around. I bull rushed him on the first attempt and

took him by surprise. He took one step backward, and that was one step too many. I had buried the snare where I knew he would be standing. He tripped over it and fell on his behind. I zipped right on by him.”

Alan had guessed what must have happened.

“But you didn’t catch the pass.”

“Right,” Brent admitted. “The quarterback was laughing so hard that the pass was way over my head; I jumped but I couldn’t even touch it.”

“Same thing on the next one?”

“Pretty much,” answered Brent. “It just took a little ‘juke’ on my part to draw him in. He started out behind the snare; he had backed off a step. I took a quick step to the right—remember I had gone left the day before. When I looked back over my right shoulder toward the passer, Lance came forward to cover me. I pressed the remote control button, and Lance started falling toward me. Before he hit the ground, I whirled around to my left and headed up the field.”

“Bad throw again?”

Brent had to laugh at himself.

“No. This time my shoe laces caught on the snare, and I went sprawling just like Lance. I still hadn’t learned to tie those shoe strings, and the loop on my right shoe was too big.”

“The quarterback didn’t even throw the ball, did he?” guessed Alan.

“Oh, yes, he threw it all right. He threw it as hard as he could while I was still on the ground. Hit me right in the ribs.”

“Did everyone laugh again?” asked Alan.

“No, they weren’t laughing at me then. I guess they all felt sorry for me. After all, it must have seemed to them that I had beaten Lance on both plays. They did start laughing when the coach threw a second football.

“Did you catch it?”

“In a way, I did. The coach hit Lance in the helmet with the ball and it bounced straight up into the air. I rolled over to see what was happening and the ball landed right in my lap. I guess you could say that I caught it.”

Alan couldn’t help laughing. Hearing Brent tell it was a lot funnier than listening to the version that he had already heard.

“Everyone was laughing—just like you are. I would have been laughing if I hadn’t been hurting so badly. The only other people who weren’t laughing were Lance and his girlfriend.”

“Lynette Roberts,” supplied Alan.

Chapter 12

When the last of the twenty-seven snares had been picked up, Alan turned the wheelbarrow toward the entrance and stopped in his tracks. Brent was still tidying up the field where the snares had been buried and was still talking.

“I forgot to release the button; the snare would have retracted if I’d just released the button. Because of that, I tripped; and when I tripped, Coach Bullock noticed the snare. He pulled me up and told me to head for the showers. When I finished cleaning up, I was to meet him at the storage room where he would start training me to be the team manager.”

“Brent!” called out Alan.

Brent finally turned around and saw that Coach Bullock was standing at the entrance to the field. The coach snapped on a flashlight with a very bright beam and yelled down to them. “You boys need to bring those snares up here and load them into the bed of my pickup.”

When the boys had emptied the wheel barrow, Coach Bullock realized that many of the snares were missing. “Where are the rest?” he asked.

Alan turned and pointed at the dumpster.

“We dumped them in the dumpster,” Alan announced—almost singing the words. “I’ll haul them back over here to the truck if you want me to.”

“No reason to do that; I can just back the truck up to the dumpster.”

Alan continued pushing the wheelbarrow toward the dumpster. Even when Coach Bullock yelled for him to come back, he kept moving further away. Bullock looked from one of them to the other—obviously confused about how to keep control of them both.

Apparently deciding that Brent was less likely to make a run for it, Coach Bullock moved quickly to catch

Alan. He had been wrong. When he turned around again, Brent was gone.

Chapter 13

The bright neon sign proclaiming “Burger Barn” brought Alan’s thoughts back to the present, but his mind drifted back a few seconds later. Brent had taken off while the coach was catching Alan. Most likely, he had never gone that far away. When he realized that Alan would not be able to escape without his help, Brent decided to rejoin his friend—even though he must have wondered what Coach Bullock might do to them.

Brent had not yet had the chance to explain why he had agreed to let them use his gadgets to unfairly change the outcome of the Falcon football games. Had the coach threatened Brent in some way? Alan didn’t think so. Based on the guilt that had seemed to be weighing so heavily on Brent, Alan believed that his friend must have been a willing accomplice in the scheme. Of course he had been the technical “expert” who knew how to make the snares operate by remote control.

Coach Bullock must have provided the football insight that enabled them to place the snares where they could do the most damage to their opponent. Based on what Alan had seen at the Canton game, the coach had been the one who actually operated the controls to ‘trip up’ the opposing players. Only he would have known where each player would be on each play.

Was there someone else involved in the scheme? Did the head coach know or had he been kept in the dark? What did Coach Bullock, an assistant coach, stand to gain by the Falcons’ winning streak? Perhaps Brent knew; he certainly had to know more about the inner workings of the team and its staff than Alan did. Alan had seen his first forward pass earlier that evening when he’d watched his first football game.

Surprisingly, the coach didn’t take his pickup truck through the ‘drive through.’ He parked in a parking spot

reserved for the owner of the Burger Barn and waited for the boys to get out. "You can run again if you like. Running won't change anything. I've still got Blakely's fingerprints on the shovel handle, Murphy's prints on the wheel barrow handle, and pictures of what you two did to the field." Alan looked surprised. This was the first time his own fingerprints had been mentioned.

Coach Bullock smiled as Alan's expression changed. "I still have the bicycle, and I'm pretty sure that I'll have a picture that shows the bicycle down near the field where the vandals left it. I noticed you were thinking a lot while we were riding over here, and I wanted to let you know that I've got fingerprint evidence on you as well as Blakely.

Suddenly it dawned on Alan. Coach Bullock had just remembered the wheel barrow. Only the shovel and the bicycle were in the back of the truck with all the snares. If he could get back to the school before Coach Bullock did, he could wipe the wheel barrow handles clean. He or Brent could also do the same with the shovel if they got a chance.

"You're thinking again, Murphy. Don't make me regret trusting you to have enough sense to keep your mouth shut. I've seen boys who've been to jail; you won't benefit from the experience; I can guarantee that!"

Chapter 14

It was almost one o'clock when they left the restaurant parking lot. Both boys had ordered a double cheeseburger with chili cheese fries. Alan had ordered a chocolate milk shake, but Brent had strawberry--his favorite flavor for almost everything. When Alan mentioned that he needed to wash his hands, Coach Bullock hadn't objected. Alan's hands had been covered with mud and dirt--so much so that Alan doubted that he had left any fingerprints on the wheel barrow handle. He might have left some when he was pushing the wheelbarrow from the shed to the field before they began hauling the snares to the dumpster.

Suspecting that the dirt and mud on his hands had probably covered any fingerprints left earlier, Alan thought about running out to the coach's pickup truck and wiping down the shovel handle. That would eliminate Brent's fingerprints on the shovel. Again he thought about the mud and dirt on Brent's hands. There probably weren't any of Brent's fingerprints still on the shovel handle.

The coach allowed Brent to leave the table to wash his hands as soon as Alan returned. Then he surprised them both by leaving the table to wash his own hands. The coach didn't seem to be in any hurry; he stopped by a table where an older man sat with two Falcon football fans. Alan could hear the two fans congratulating Coach Bullock on the team's big win.

Brent grabbed Alan's arm when he kept watching the coach across the room. "We can make a run for it, Alan. I'll grab the shovel and wipe my fingerprints off. Then we can head through the park; we'll reach the tool shed before he can get there by truck. Maybe he won't even realize which way we've gone if we head in another direction first."

"You mean we can juke him."

“Whatever! Listen to me Alan. We can wipe your fingerprints off the wheelbarrow handles, too. He won’t have the evidence that he’s counting on. We won’t have to worry about him after this if we hurry.”

Alan smiled at his friend. Brent was a thinker; he always came up with a plan. However, Alan was always the one who had to fix the plans Brent developed; there were always one or two steps in Brent’s plans that needed just a little more planning. Such was the case with this latest plan. It might have worked except for one thing that Brent had overlooked.

Coach Bullock wanted them to do exactly what Brent had proposed. He wasn’t counting on Brent’s fingerprints being on the shovel handle. The mud and dirt would have smeared them. The same was true of the wheelbarrow handles. Coach Bullock hadn’t mentioned them before because he wasn’t counting on them either. Why had he mentioned them? The answer was as clear to Alan as it was unclear to Brent. He wanted the boys to make a run for it. He wanted them to run out to the pickup and wipe off the handle of the shovel. If they had then run off through the park toward the school, Coach Bullock would have been a happy man.

Alan needed to explain why they had to stay with Coach Bullock until he took them home. The coach’s plan had been brilliant—Alan could see that now. He had been ‘playing’ them all along like a football play drawn out with X’s and O’s. A man like that would not be thinking about winning middle school football games for any other reason than to advance his own career.

Alan pointed up at a television-type monitor hanging above the cash register. “What do you see on that screen?” he asked his friend.

Brent studied it awhile before responding. “I see the parking lot—so?”

“Coach Bullock wants us to make a run for it. That’s why he’s over there across the room now; he wants us to run out to his truck and grab that shovel or, even better, wipe off the shovel handle.”

“Why would he want us to do that? If he doesn’t have any evidence of us being at the field, he can’t prove that we did anything wrong.”

Alan asked the question again. “What do you see on that monitor?”

This time Brent didn’t just see the parking lot. He saw the part of the parking lot where the owner parked his own car; he saw a pickup truck—Coach Bullock’s pickup truck. “He’d have us on tape if we went anywhere near his truck.” Brent realized that he owed his friend even more. Had their roles been reversed; had he somehow been captured and Alan remained free, he would have fallen into the trap.

Like Alan had figured out a few minutes earlier, Brent suddenly realized that they were dealing with a very clever man. Unlike Mr. Holt from their earlier adventure, Coach Bullock wasn’t likely to underestimate them or overestimate his own ability. He was smart, but he seemed to always have a backup plan.

Unfortunately for the boys, his backup plans always seemed to be better than the original plan. When the coach realized that the boys hadn’t fallen for his latest plan, would his next plan be even better? Could they avoid falling into the next trap? What bothered Alan the most was that Coach Bullock might have set the next trap so that the only way to avoid this trap was to fall headfirst into the next one.

A shrieking noise interrupted his thoughts. The two Falcon fans had raised their hands over their heads to imitate a falcon’s flight in the same way that the middle school students had done at the ball game. The source of the shrieking was harder to find. Had he imagined it? Was

his imagination trying to warn him that the coach, like a bird of prey, had them in his sights.

“Let’s make a run for it, Brent”

“But you said he wants us to. What about the camera?”

“Now! We’ve got to go now. Let me have your milkshake.”

Brent thought his friend had lost it completely. When Brent had wanted to make a run for it, Alan had shown him how foolish that would have been. Now, he seemed to be reversing his position. Why? Surely, he didn’t just want an extra milkshake.

Alan headed toward the door, and Brent was right behind him. As soon as they were outside the door, Alan took Brent’s milkshake from him and then started running again—keeping out of sight next to the building. As they reached the window closest to where Coach Bullock had been, Alan peaked in to see how the coach had reacted. He wasn’t surprised to see that the coach had moved closer to the cash register to watch the monitor screen.

As soon as Bullock turned his back, Alan slipped over to the corner of the building next to the door they had entered a few minutes earlier. He splashed the contents of the strawberry milkshake onto a spot above the door in much the same way that his grandfather splashed gasoline on a wasp’s nest at home. Then he took the chocolate milkshake and repeated what he had done with the strawberry shake.

“Quickly,” he demanded. “Follow me; we’ve got to hurry to pull this off.”

Brent followed him, but he didn’t understand what was going on—at all. “Why are we going this direction?” he asked but got no answer.

“Get down,” commanded Alan when they reached their destination. “We can’t let him see us.”

Brent didn't understand Alan's reasoning at all, but he trusted his friend completely. He really didn't have a choice. When he had needed a friend, Alan had responded. He couldn't help thinking, "He'll see us sooner or later, especially if we stay here." He just didn't bother saying what he was thinking.

Chapter 15

Coach Bullock had a big smile on his face as he watched the boys head out the side door. By moving to where he could get a better look at the monitor, he couldn't see his pickup, but he was confident that the TV camera would catch whatever was happening there. Even better, the camera would record whatever happened; he'd have the evidence he needed to prove that the boys were guilty. Why else would they be wiping off the handle of the shovel and heading back toward the school. The homes of both boys were east of the Burger Barn; they had headed north.

Suddenly the screen turned dark. As it began to lighten again, pink vertical streaks could be seen but little else. Then it turned dark again. Somebody had covered the camera lens with something.

"Pink and brown," he said to himself as the screen revealed large irregular blobs of both those colors.

"Strawberry and chocolate," a waitress said. The kids do it all the time; they don't like being monitored when they're in the parking lot.

"It's too late," Bullock thought as he headed toward the door and his pickup truck. He was right. The shovel was no longer in the bed of the truck although the bicycle was still there. He could imagine the boys heading through the park on the dead run; they could reach the school using the short cut well before he could make it in the truck. Luckily for him, he had a backup plan.

Pulling his cell phone out of his pocket he pressed a speed dial button and then SEND. The phone was answered on the first ring.

"They're on their way back to the school. Make sure you record everything they do."

Whatever the person at the other end said, it angered Coach Bullock.

“Don’t underestimate these two kids,” he emphasized. They’re a lot smarter than we thought, especially the Murphy kid.”

Again he waited for the person on the other end to stop talking.

“I don’t care if he does make D’s and C’s in your classes. I’m telling you; he’s a lot more clever than we thought. If you don’t get him on video at the school, we won’t have any leverage. We’ll just have to hope that they realize the Blakely boy is as guilty as we are. They really can’t incriminate us without showing everyone how guilty he is as well.”

He opened the door on the driver’s side as he gave final instructions to his accomplice at the school. “They should be there by now; maybe they just headed home; maybe, they’re more afraid of me than I thought.

As the person on the other end of the phone call said goodbye, the boys straightened up in their seats.

Neither of them would ever forget the expression on the coach’s face.

“We’d rather ride than walk, Coach.”

“Why did you guys run out of there like that if you were going to get in the truck and wait for a ride home?”

Brent answered the coach. Alan had explained what he wanted him to say as they waited in the truck for Coach Bullock. “We wanted you to see that we’re going to cooperate. We’re not going to fall into any of your traps, but we don’t have any reason to expose you either. I’m as guilty as you are.

Bullock wanted to believe him. He really didn’t have a choice. “You’re right, of course. You went along with everything we did. You were just as happy as we were when we won those games. I’m glad you’re seeing things that way. It’s about time you rejoined the team.”

Alan spoke in Brent’s defense. “There’s just one difference between you and Brent.”

Bullock looked over at this boy whom he was learning to respect more and more at every turn. “How is that, Mr. Murphy?”

His answer struck deep into Coach Bullock’s jaded heart. “He knows that what he did was wrong; he won’t do it again.”

“And me?”

“Oh, you know it’s wrong, too. You know it’s wrong, but you’d do it all over again. You probably will do it again—somewhere else and another time—whenever you get the chance and think you can get away with it.”

Bullock was again amazed. Alan had him figured out pretty well.

“He just doesn’t know how close ‘somewhere else and another time’ are,” he thought. “He’s pretty smart, and he’s pretty well figured everything out for here and now, but he doesn’t know how close the future is for me.”

Chapter 16

When he dropped the boys off at their houses, Coach Bullock gave Alan some additional advice. “Your parents are going to ask you about what I told them earlier. I told them you had done something you shouldn’t have, but that I would take care of it. They’ll probably insist that you tell them what I did.”

Alan waited for the coach to continue.

“You can tell them you weren’t wearing the proper light reflective clothing for riding at night. I’ll back you up.”

Alan’s smile was not a happy smile, but he nodded his head to indicate that he understood. “Hopefully, I don’t become as good a liar as you,” he thought but didn’t say aloud. Alan was beginning to realize how easy it could become to make up lies to avoid unwanted consequences. He decided right then that he would tell his parents the truth. He’d leave Brent on his own; he could tell his parents what he wanted to tell them. Alan had decided that he didn’t ever want to become a man like Coach Bullock.

Alan had never like cheating or people that cheated. Brent’s actions had been disappointing to him, but he realized now that telling lies was merely another way of cheating.

After watching the Blakely’s rush outside to hug Brent and welcome him home, Alan turned the knob of his front door and pushed it open. “Telling the truth might be hard,” he thought, but I’m going to stick to the truth from now on.”

His father and mother were sitting on the couch with a familiar figure—the dummy that had been in Alan’s bed earlier that night. “Tell this fellow goodbye,” his father said. “He’s leaving tonight, and he won’t be coming back.”

“Is grandfather asleep? Alan asked. They didn’t need to answer. His grandfather’s voice came from the kitchen. “I’m going home now that Alan is home.”

He would tell his grandfather all about tonight some other time. Tonight was for his parents; they needed to understand that he wouldn’t have sneaked out of the house unless he had thought Brent was in danger.

His parents didn’t believe all of what he told them at first, but they soon realized that he was being more open with them than ever before. “Our son has done a lot of growing up tonight,” Laura Murphy thought as she listened to him. Andrew Murphy remained very concerned for his son although he liked the way that Alan seemed to be opening up to them. Alan’s father realized how hard it was for Alan to tell them as much as he had about what his friend had done wrong, and he appreciated his son’s desire to make them understand what had driven him to deceive them,

At the Blakely house, a similar confession had taken place. Somehow, telling his parents was much easier for Brent now that his best friend knew and still accepted him. His parents would forgive him as well.

Their family council decided that there was little to gain by trying to report Coach Bullock to the authorities. After all, middle school football games were not that important. Brent’s father had even laughed when Brent told about the practice sessions and how poorly he had done. He agreed with Alan’s assessment; Brent would have a better chance next year—assuming, of course, that Coach Bullock moved on.

Like Andrew Murphy had concluded after hearing his son’s account of this night’s events, John Blakely decided that he would have to take a more active role in keeping tabs on his son. He wanted to talk to his neighbor and try to get a similar commitment from him. Together, they might just be able to do a decent job of keeping Alan

and Blake out of any future trouble. Each of the boys was grounded for a week.

As for football, the Falcons had two more games—both against very weak teams; there seemed to be little chance for them to lose. The Cats had two more games, as well, against much weaker opponents. Both boys were determined to right the wrong that had been done to the Cats. Each one of them had “come clean” with their parents about what had happened earlier in the season, but each also realized that he would not be allowed to pursue justice for the Cats if he confided further to his parents. It seemed unlikely that the two of them could affect the outcome of the Falcon’s game just six days away if they obeyed the restrictions their parents had placed on them.

“We’ll figure something out,” promised Alan during the one phone call that he was allowed to make each day that he was grounded. Of course, they still had their shared computer network and emails; their parents hadn’t thought about restricting access to their computers. That wasn’t true for video games and television; those activities had been severely curtailed.

Brent was much more methodical; he wanted to make sure Alan realized that there were several options, but not an infinite number. Besides, he always felt better when he could see something written down. Although he was getting better at reading Alan’s mind, he preferred reading words that had been typed on a piece of paper or on a computer screen. Reading from his screen to Alan on the other end of the telephone line, Brent reminded him that they could achieve their goal by any one of the alternatives.

“If we only deal with the future and don’t try to change what has already happened, four things have to happen. The Cats must win against Monroe this week and Central next week while the Falcons are losing to Central this week and Monroe next week. Since the Falcons won

the head-to-head meeting, they will be the champions if both teams have only one loss.”

Alan listened patiently—understanding Brent’s need to lay the situation out precisely. “That means we’ll have to figure out a way to make Central and Monroe better when they play the Falcons or figure out a way to make the Falcons worse. That’s going to be hard, especially since we are both grounded.”

“If you’d only stayed home,” Brent joked.. He didn’t get a rise out of Alan who knew him too well. “The Cats have to win both games, but that should happen without our help”

“If the Cats can’t win then they don’t deserve to be champions. All we have to do is make sure the Falcons lose.”

Brent was still bothered by how that sounded. He had worked so hard to make sure that the Falcons won their first six games. Now, he was on the other side. He shook his head as if to reorganize his brain. It didn’t work, of course; it still saddened him to think that the Falcons would not be champions this year.

“Or make sure that Central and Monroe win when they play against us,” added Brent. Somehow, phrasing it that way made it sound better.

“Doing it that way will be almost impossible. After you got yourself kicked off the team, we won’t have much access to the Falcons; we’ll have even less access to the opposition.”

“And the games will be ‘away games,’” Brent reminded him.

The only scheme they had come up with involved placing a tiny radio receiver inside the shoulder pads of a key Falcon player. Not surprisingly, Lance Russell had been a unanimous choice as the guinea pig.

“I don’t think there are any other alternatives,” concluded Alan. “Plan A is all that we’ve got.”

“No!” Brent asserted. “We do have Plan B.”

“Plan B is not acceptable to me,” argued Alan.

“Well, it is to me, and I really don’t need your help if it comes down to plan B.”

With that statement, Brent ended the call.

Frustrated and worried that his friend might foolishly resort to Plan B without notice, Alan punched in the Blakely’s phone number and mashed SEND. Mrs. Blakely answered. When he asked to speak to Brent for just one minute more, Eleanor Blakely, rejected his request without apology.

“You know the rules, Alan. You guys are only allowed one phone call per day.”

Alan knew Mrs. Blakely pretty well. He knew that her concern for her son would override any rule that Mr. Blakely might have put into effect. Although he doubted that he could get her to change her position this time, he wanted to make it easier to tip the scales in his favor the next time he talked to her.

“I understand, Mrs. Blakely. I was just concerned for Brent. Maybe nothing will happen to him until tomorrow when I get a chance to talk to him again.”

Of course, Mrs. Blakely knew that Alan was working on her parental concern; she knew exactly what he was trying to do. That didn’t mean that his words wouldn’t weigh on her all night and into the next day until Brent was safely home from school.

Alan put the finishing touches on his attempt to bring Eleanor Blakely over to their side. “Just tell him that I asked you to remind him that Plan B is a terrible plan. Remind him that it would be very, very damaging for him.

Eleanor Blakely was shocked that Alan would actually try to scare her in order to talk to her son for “one minute more.” Her reaction wasn’t exactly what Alan had expected.

"I'm disappointed in you, Alan Murphy. Maybe you and Brent would be better off if you didn't even get one phone call today. Consider the telephone off limits for the rest of the time that you boys are grounded."

"No, Mrs. Blakely," argued Alan, but with no success. He argued non-stop for several seconds before realizing that no one was listening on the other end. Mrs. Blakely had succeeded in turning the tables on him; he was the one who would be worried all night until he could talk to Brent the next morning.

Proud of herself for being firm but not completely able to shake off the feeling of anxiety that Alan wanted her to have, Mrs. Blakely went up to Brent's room and turned on the light. Even though Brent appeared to be asleep with his sheet and quilt pulled up over his ears, she walked over and flipped his head with her finger—mimicking a shopper testing a melon to see if it was ripe enough.

"Ow!" complained Brent. "What was that for?"

His mother laughed, feeling proud of herself again. "I was just checking to see if that melon-headed dummy of yours was in the bed. Maybe, I'd better do that again; something didn't sound right."

Acting like she was about to flip his head again, she placed her hand beside his head with the thumb holding the middle finger in a pre-release position. "Okay, Mom," Brent responded, "do whatever you have to do."

"I have to do this," his mother said as she patted him on the head and told him how much she loved him.

"You, too" offered Brent—again headed for a deep sleep but not-so-pleasant dreams. He knew that Plan B would be very unpleasant for him if they had to implement it. Plan B required Brent to turn himself in to the principal and admit that he had rigged the game against the Cats. The principal would have no choice; the game against Canton would have to be forfeited. Then, it wouldn't

matter if the Falcons won or lost the final two games; they wouldn't win the championship because the Cats would be undefeated. Deep down, he knew that Plan B was the only fitting way to 'right the wrong' that he had done.

Brent believed that the reaction from the other students would be even worse than Alan predicted. It would be worse because Alan had no way of knowing how much Brent wanted to be liked and respected by those students. That was the main reason he had agreed to help Coach Bullock install the snares for use during game competition. He wanted to be appreciated and respected for helping the team win their first championship since his father had played thirty years before.

Coach Bullock had figured him out. Telling Brent that he would be recognized at the end of the season as one of the key members of the team was all that Brent needed to hear. He forgot what he had always been taught about fairness and earning what you got. The coach had added the finishing touch. "If this works out for us, Brent, I'm going to say that having you on the team was like having another coach on the sidelines."

"How could I have been so gullible?" Brent asked himself. Deep down, he wanted Plan B to become necessary. "How else can I stop feeling guilty for what I've done?"

Chapter 17

As the boys walked to school the next morning, Alan repeated his warning about how bad Plan B would be. Realizing that Brent would be more easily persuaded if he thought Alan would be adversely affected as well, he explained how the other students would turn on them both.

Recognizing what his friend was trying to do, Brent raised his hand and asked, "Can you be quiet for a few minutes, buddy. I promise that I'll give plan A a chance if you'll be quiet so that I can figure out how I'm going to hide the receiver in Lance Russell's shoulder pads.

"Why not put it in his helmet? Won't that be closer to his ears? Can't we keep the volume lower if we put it closer to his ears?"

Although Alan was very perceptive about most things, Brent was always amazed at how little awareness he had about some pretty basic issues. Putting the receiver in Lance's helmet would be a very bad move for at least two reasons.

"If we put it in the helmet, we won't be able to hide it very well. There's just not enough padding."

"And," Alan added, suddenly remembering what it was that Brent had told him at least two other times that morning.

Brent continued, "And he might get injured or the receiver might be damaged when he gets hit on the helmet."

Alan finished, "Or hits somebody else with his helmet. That's more likely to happen for your old buddy Lance."

"Don't remind me," begged Brent, thinking back to that one-on-one drill at the first football practice.

"You beat him the second time, little man," encouraged Alan.

Brent's answer was the same, "Don't remind me." He grimaced, remembering that snagging his shoelaces on the snares on the second one-on-one drill was what had allowed Coach Bullock to notice them.

Alan's face lit up as he realized that this was the first opportunity that he and Brent had been alone together since Coach Bullard had shown up at the football field the previous night. Brent had been about to tell him the rest of the story.

"I won't remind you again if you'll finish your story. Tell me how you and Coach Bullock were able to get all those snares installed and how he knew how to operate those controls at just the right time.

Brent's sense of guilt still had to battle the rush of pride that remained for what he and Coach Bullock had accomplished. Although he now realized that he and the coach were in the wrong, he couldn't completely erase his memory of how good he felt as their system worked even better than they could have anticipated.

Brent had liked being called a genius although he knew he was far from being one. He had liked seeing Coach Bullock give him the "thumbs up" gesture when an opposing player tripped at just the right time to let a Falcon player score. The rush had been tremendous, and the way he felt when he remembered those plays could never be completely erased from his mind.

"I thought I'd already told you about this," joked Brent, wanting to aggravate his friend. He got the rise out of him that he wanted. "Okay, okay," he agreed, "I'll tell you everything that happened. Do you want the longer version or the shorter version?"

"Give me the first half of the longer version this morning. After school, you can finish up."

Brent began telling what happened. If Alan hadn't seen the effects during the game with the Cats, he might not have believed him. Even then, he often questioned Brent

with a look that seemed to say, “You’re making that up!” Regardless, every word of the story was true. Ashamed and somehow proud at the same time, Brent told the first half of the story just the way it had happened.

Chapter 18

“While I was lying there on the football field with the football in my lap, I thought my football season was over before it had started. I didn’t know what I was going to tell my dad. I must have got some dirt in my eyes because Coach Bullock thought I was crying.”

Alan didn’t smile this time; Brent continued.

“Coach Bullock grabbed my arms and picked me up like I was a sack of dog food. ‘Come with me, Blakely,’ he said, ‘you and I need to talk.’”

“He said it just like that? Are you sure he didn’t say ‘you and me need to talk?’”

Brent shook his head and asked, “Do you want me to tell you the story or not?”

Flicking his hand as if to say “Just go on,” Alan waited for Brent to get over the interruption and proceed with the story.

“He told me that what I had done to Lance was the most amazing thing he had ever seen. Of course, it didn’t hurt when he mentioned that Lance deserved it and that he was a jerk who was overdue to get what had happened to him.”

Alan couldn’t just sit still without responding.

“He had you then, didn’t he?”

“Yes, he had me. He wanted me to explain how the gadgets worked. We didn’t call them snares until later on. ‘How much will it cost to make about twenty of them,’ he asked. I told him that I could get them made for about forty dollars a pair. Of course, the fishing line was cheap, but the remotely-operated retractable radio antennas were pretty expensive. A pair of them ended up costing closer to two hundred dollars with the motors and the batteries included.”

“Who decided where to put them,” asked Alan.

“Oh, that was Coach Bullock’s area of expertise. He promised to teach me; he wanted me to be able to operate the snares if he ever had to leave the press box.”

“How did you know that the signal would reach the field from the press box?”

“I knew that we could get a signal booster if we needed it. The transmitter is the device that needs the most power; since it was located in the press box, we could add as many batteries as we needed.”

Something didn’t compute. Alan remembered the day he had come to the game.

“How did you operate the controls to trip up Lance after he ran over my grandfather and me at the Canton game?”

“I didn’t.” Brent was having trouble holding back a grin. “He just took a tumble because he lost his balance trying to do the Falcon Flight while running.”

Alan just waited as Brent burst out laughing. Finally he was able to stop and answer Alan’s question. “We finally installed a repeater transmitter in the press box. A smaller transmitter was fine near the sideline because it only had to send a signal to the repeater.”

“A directional signal,” amended Alan. Brent was amazed that Alan knew the difference.

“The repeater was non-directional; it could receive from and transmit to any location within one hundred yards. Coach Bullock could be walking on the sideline or sitting in the press box. In fact, he could have been at the concession stand, if he got hungry.”

“No way,” argued Alan. “He couldn’t see the field from the concession stand. He wouldn’t have known what button to operate or when to operate it.

“Way,” corrected Brent, holding up a cell phone with a built in camera. “This baby provides a live feed to any compatible device at a rate of two frames per second.”

How could he argue? Alan knew that it had worked. Growing tired of the technical discussion, he urged Brent to move on. "Tell me what happened in the games."

Again Brent felt guilty for having felt so good during those first few successes. He described how the system had worked the first time they tried it.

"Lance burst through a pretty big hole in the line and was all by himself-- running down the sideline. It was pretty easy to see that he wasn't quite in shape; he started to slow down. Everyone thought the safety from the other team was going to catch him."

"That would be Brad Parks, I think. He broke his collar bone on that play."

Brent's smile vanished. "That's right. I had forgotten that."

Alan didn't need to say, "Yeah, right!" The silence said it for him.

Suddenly, Alan didn't want to hear the longer version; he'd heard enough.

Looking ahead, Brent also decided that they were too near the school. "Someone might overhear us," he said. Alan didn't argue.

"I'll finish after school," Brent told him.

"If we have time," cautioned Alan. With a gnawing feeling in his stomach, Alan turned away so that Brent wouldn't see how disgusted he felt. Brent was his friend, but he had done some pretty awful things these last few weeks. "Maybe Plan B wasn't that bad an option," he thought. "Maybe Brent deserves Plant B."

Chapter 21

The boys walked in silence across the school yard to the door on the east side where they always entered the school building in the mornings. Coach Bullock watched them closely.

The person standing beside him watched the boys just as closely—looking for any detectable signs that might indicate their frame of mind. The coach had asked for her opinion, but had been vague about the reason for asking for her help. He really didn't care what she thought; he just wanted to have on record that he had been concerned about the boys.

When Ms. Flanagan had finished briefing him on what she had observed, Coach Bullock thanked her and reminded her that he didn't need a full report. "I'm only concerned about the mental condition of the boys. I don't want anything placed in their record that might reflect badly on them later on. After all, this may just be a phase they're going through."

"I'll have to make a journal entry, but you needn't worry, Coach. My journal is confidential unless I receive a court order."

"Certainly, Ms. Flanagan. I understand that you have rules that you have to abide by. I just wanted your professional opinion; I don't think the boys are dangerous, but if they turn out to be, that journal entry of yours might turn a few heads. Your record will speak for itself."

Bullock was rather proud of his little speech. There was little doubt in his mind that the journal entry-- soon to be written by Ethel Flanagan-- would allow for almost any future character flaw or psychological abnormality that could be imagined, especially those that might be needed to support Bullock's claim that the boys were highly irrational and prone to attempt highly questionable and illogical acts of vandalism.

When he had approached Ms. Flanagan, he had shown her an article he claimed to have been reading from a psychological journal. He had read enough of it to see that it described a condition with similar symptoms to the ones he would attribute to the boys if they went back on their word and gave him trouble. The article had been left on Ms. Flanagan's desk so that she could refer to it when she made her journal entries.

After the school counselor left his room, Bullock moved over to his teacher's desk and maximized the e-mail program that had been open when he left to go talk to Ms. Flanagan. He clicked on a specific email in his INBOX and then clicked on REPLY.

"Worked like a charm," was the only message he typed before clicking on SEND. Seconds later, he received a reply to his reply.

"I've got something important to show you. Meet me in the computer lab right after last period."

Bullock didn't like to be bossed around—not even by his fiancée. He clicked reply and typed in "Can't miss practice today. Sorry."

The subsequent replay sent chills down his spine. "You will be sorry," was all it said.

Hating himself for giving in, he quickly typed, "Just kidding," and sent it on his way.

"One of these days, I'll have the upper hand," he thought. "Then we'll see who'll be sorry. This little town is just a stepping stone for Jeremiah Bullock." As he considered the various professional football teams that would eventually be courting him, he reluctantly resumed his courtship of Donna Forsten. A few clicks on the keyboard ensured that roses would be delivered to the school a little later this very day. He paused, angry at himself for being so dependent on Donna and her father.

Shaking his head, he clicked on the website button labeled SEND FLOWERS and reminded himself that

getting to the top meant stepping up from each rung of the ladder to the next. He would certainly enjoy stepping up from the Burger Barn dynasty here in Freeport. Forgetting how disgusted he had been with himself only a few seconds before, Bullock dialed the number of the Burger Barn restaurant and listened to the voice of the woman who would be climbing with him on the ladder to fame and fortune.

Lisa Finster took his lunch order and promised that she'd try to make the delivery herself on her own lunch break. Bullock promised to be at a picnic table in the park just south of the school.

"I won't be sorry long," he said to himself. "I may be sorry now, but I won't be sorry long!"

Chapter 22

“You’ve got to see this, Jeremiah. I think you’ll see that those boys may still be a problem.” Donna Forsten was carrying about twenty pages which she must have just retrieved from the printer in the computer lab.

“You’re the one who insisted that the Murphy kid was just a C or D student,” Bullock reminded her.

The heir to Burger Barn fortune—restaurants in thirty-two counties across the state—gave him a sharp look. She didn’t appreciate any sign of disrespect. Earl Forsten had taught her that the only way to gain respect was to “expect respect.” Bullock apologized, feeling sorry for himself again.

“What’s that you’re humming, Jerry-honey?”

He remembered thinking how sweet that sounded the first time she called him “Jerry-honey.” Now the words seemed to sting when she said them.

“It won’t be long,” is what I’m humming. Forcing a smile, he added, “We’re almost there.”

“You’d better read these first,” cautioned Donna. “These are just samples of the emails the boys have been sending back and forth. They haven’t emailed much this morning—that’s unusual for those two.”

Bullock was amazed. “How did you get these? Did you hack into their personal folders on the school network?”

Donna wasn’t an exceptional computer programmer, but she was proficient at navigating through most of the more common programs. She smiled when she realized that Bullock, who knew very little about computers, thought she was that good.

“I didn’t have to ‘hack’ into any files. Don’t you remember me telling you that Daddy bought all of these computers for the schools in . . .”

Bullock couldn't stop himself; he blurted out "thirty two counties all across the state" and cringed as he waited for a nasty reaction. He was pleasantly surprised.

"How cute; you do remember." Donna seemed to have missed that he was making fun of her father's little television jingle. In fact, she hadn't missed a thing. Humming the "Won't Be Long" tune, she smiled broadly and reminded him of why she had requested his company.

"The boys have two plans."

"Plan A and Plan B," joked Bullock.

Startled, Donna asked, "How did you know that's what they call them?"

Donna had reinforced her fiancé's opinion that she was a complete air head. That didn't bother Donna who actually had as little use for Jeremiah Bullock, long term, as he had for her. Although she sometimes grew tired of her air-head act, she realized that people who underestimated her because of it were at a disadvantage.

To avoid hearing him explain that Plan A and B were commonly used terms, she pulled out another email or two from near the bottom of the stack. Both Plan A and Plan B were clearly explained. "The Blakely boy is the most organized and record-conscious boy I've ever seen. He writes down everything that happens and a lot of what he thinks is going to happen.

"Cool," was all Bullock could think to say as he finished Plan A and moved on to Plan B. "Oh, no!" was his reaction to Plan B.

"Exactly," commented Donna Forsten. "Those two won't be able to pull off Plan A. They won't have you to fix everything like you did before. Besides, I don't see how a radio playing in somebody's ear is going to make a player mess up on the football field."

Apparently, his fiancée had bought into his version of how he had taken the Blakely boy's rough concept and turned it into an "ingenious and infallible system for

determining the needed outcome of ongoing sporting events.” Bullock was almost as proud of those words as he was of the system itself.

“Perhaps I’ll go into broadcasting after I win my sixth Super Bowl,” he said to himself. Even if he said so to himself, he had really enjoyed giving the sales’ pitch for Brent’s “game changing” gadgets. Presenting them as devices that could “greatly improve the footwork of every skill position-player on the team” was a stroke of genius. Earl “Pap” Forsten had come up with that angle.

“Everyone will see what and how these devices can be used during a game without us telling them,” explained the old man. “We can show them being used in a practice situation.”

“Since they are practically invisible,” the video concluded, “players will learn to run by “feel,” reacting to the slightest pull from an opposing player.”

Actual footage of offensive players tripping and falling from one of the early games of the season was used to show how awkward and clumsy players were before using the Tripping Snare Training Aid. Footage showing the defensive players being tripped up were presented as examples of improved footwork by the offensive players. “Forget the words and the labels I’m using,” the video seemed to be saying. “See how players are tripping and falling for no apparent reason. That can happen for you.”

“How did I get started thinking about the video?” Bullock wondered. Then he remembered Plan A and Plan B. Of course, Plan A would work if the sounds being transmitted to the player were special enough. He laughed as he thought how a player might react to the sound of footsteps approaching. “These boys are geniuses,” he said aloud. “Donna-honey, if we have a little boy, I hope he’s just like this Blakely kid. It’s too bad that the Murphy kid “turned” him. Blakely has the knack.”

“Kids,” thought Donna Forsten. She had already decided that she wouldn’t have any children, but she didn’t say that to her fiancée. “Oh, honey.” Was all she needed to say. She just knew that ‘Jerry-honey’ would understand.

What Jeremiah Bullock didn’t understand was clearly presented in email after email between the two boys. He was pretty sure that Donna’s explanation of the computer software program being used to retrieve supposedly confidential emails would be way over his head..

She began an elaborate explanation, but her fiancée just concentrated on the content of the emails and ignored what she was saying. Rather than being irritated that she was being ignored, Donna chose to have a little fun—at least she had fun doing it. She switched from an explanation of Safeguards Pro to reading the warning label on the back of one of the computer towers without changing the tone of her voice. Jerry-honey didn’t even look up until he was finished reading.

When he did look up, he looked worried.

“Not nearly as proud of the Blakely kid now are you?” .

Bullock was shaking his head.

She summarized what her fiancée should have concluded from his review. “Brent’s leaning more and more toward Plan B—he ‘wants’ to turn himself in. He’s beginning to realize that’s the only way he can really make everything right.”

She had to admire how quickly he adapted. His expression changed from one of frustration to one of optimism in a matter of seconds. “You’ve figured out what to do; haven’t you?” she stated it as a question although the answer was obvious. “Sure didn’t take you very long.”

Realizing that Donna was prompting him to tell her what he had decided to do, Bullock chose his words carefully. He would tell her only enough to ensure her

father's cooperation and support. If he played his cards right, he might just appear to be sacrificing himself for the good of his future family.

That wasn't true at all. Jeremiah Bullock never made quick decisions; he simply made slight modifications to decisions that he had considered at length. His strength was his flexibility -- his ability to react quickly when circumstances changed. Although others might consider his lack of concern for the truth to be a weakness, Bullock considered that to be his most valuable asset—the one trait that set him apart from “ordinary” people.

“What are you going to do, Jeremiah?” Donna had decided to use the direct approach. “Daddy will certainly want to know.”

“Then I'll tell him.” He didn't say the words, but he certainly thought them. He had no choice but to give her the gist of his plan.

“I hate to do it, but it's the only way to make sure that Blakely won't feel like he's got to ‘come clean.’” Looking at her with his best ‘I'd do anything for you’ look, he tried the approach that had always been so effective before. “I'll need your help—as the school computer network administrator.

Donna was impressed. She had no idea what the plan might involve, but she had certainly not expected that she might be asked to jeopardize her own career. A bad feeling crept over her—a sense that upcoming events would be happening very quickly—too quickly for her to remain in control.

Bullock correctly assessed her reaction. He knew—for the first time since he had involved the Forsten's in this scheme—that he had regained the upper hand. Thanks to the Blakely kids desire to make everything right, Bullock now had a chance to move on with his life—the life of a very wealthy and powerful man. More importantly to him

as he stared into the worried face of Donna Forsten, his would be the life of a wealthy, powerful, and single man.

Although Donna didn't say that she would do what he was about to ask her to do, he knew that she would have no choice. Her father would insist. Bullock's new plan would ensure justice for Brent Blakely while protecting Forsten's investment from unwanted publicity. Its success depended on selective advertisement; only a select group of customers would be allowed to see the promotional sales video that had been produced. Even fewer—those that agreed to invest their money to become 'shareholders'—would ever see the actual equipment.

In a way, Bullock was relieved to have come up with a scheme which should satisfy Brent and dismiss him as someone to be concerned about. Bullock would have never hurt one of the kids, but he certainly wasn't sure that Forsten felt the same way. He wasn't even sure about Donna—he didn't know how far she would go to please her father. Of course, that's what he was counting on now.

"Here's what I want you to do," he began.

Chapter 23

“Brent Blakely, report to Ms. Forsten’s office,” the school paging system blared out. Brent was sitting in Ms. Hawkins’ English class and didn’t notice that his name had been called until Rachel Dobbins tapped him on the shoulder. Deep in thought—as he often was these days—Brent looked up when he heard ‘the gigglers’ at the front of the room. Ms. Hawkins was calling out his name.

“Take your books to your locker and report to Ms. Forsten’s office, Brent.” She added a little more than she should have. “You know where her office is, don’t you?” The gigglers started up again.

Smiling a little herself, Ms. Hawkins shushed the girls and added something else that wasn’t really for Brent’s benefit. “Now!”

This time, Brent was fully alert. He got to his feet quickly then grabbed his English book, papers and a pencil which had been knocked to the floor. As he headed for the door, almost every one in the room laughed. The laughter followed him down the hall—spilling out through each of the transoms that he passed. When he realized that he had headed in the wrong direction, he kept on going. There was no way he was going back past Ms. Hawkins classroom door.

The gym was up ahead. If he went inside the gym, he could reach the school’s other hallway though a door on the far side of the of the gym. Coach Barker might yell at him for interrupting P.E. class, but that would be a whole lot better than hearing his classmates laughing at him a second time.

Pushing open the door to the gym, he was surprised to see that the basketball court area was empty. Apparently, the first period students were playing outside. He spotted the other door and headed that way—still carrying his book and papers. Not wanting to carry them

with him to his locker on the other end of the hallway he had just left, he placed them on the bottom row of bleachers. Before he reached the door, he was stopped in his tracks by Coach Barker's famous 'bark.'

To his relief, Barker's 'bark' wasn't directed at him; he was yelling at somebody inside his office. The door wasn't closed, and Brent recognized who was in the office. That person was learning that the head football coach's bark might be worse than his bite—in more ways than one.

Although Brent could hear Barker's side of the conversation, he couldn't hear the other voice. Perhaps, Bullock was speechless—that would be understandable considering how harshly he was being spoken to—but Brent didn't think so. He wanted to get closer. Looking around for something to hide behind nearer the coach's office, he spotted someone else in the gym.

Ms. Forsten was walking toward him with a grim look on her face. Apparently, the page that had summoned him to her office, had originated from Coach Barker's office. As Ms. Forsten came closer, Brent realized that she had not witnessed him doing anything wrong. He had only been considering moving closer to eavesdrop on the men in the coach's office. His route to her office might not have been the shortest route, but there could have been a valid reason why he had taken the longer one.

"On your way to my office, young man?"

Brent's answer was as truthful as he could be under the circumstances. "I guess I got a little confused, but after I'd started toward the gym, I didn't want to go back past Ms. Hawkins class."

Somehow he felt better that he had resisted the temptation to make up a better story. Telling the truth and being vague about some of the details worked a whole lot better than telling a lie. Besides, if he was later challenged about what he had said, he wouldn't have to lie again. He

could stick to his original story because every word that he had said had been the truth.

Ms. Forsten looked doubtful. Later, Brent would understand why she might have been suspicious of him turning up in the gym. At the time, he was busily trying to figure out why Coach Barker was yelling at his assistant coach so harshly.

“Come along, young man. I know that you and Coach Bullock have been working together on the football team. Coach Bullock is being asked to resign, and the game with the Cats will be forfeited.

She and Brent both looked back toward the office where the door was now closed. “That’s what is going on in there right now. Coach Barker is not very happy about losing his unbeaten season.”

Brent couldn’t help feeling like a tremendous weight had been lifted from his shoulders. For some reason, Coach Bullock had decided to confess. He must have also mentioned Brent’s involvement. For some reason, Ms. Forsten had been chosen to discuss Brent’s punishment with him. Brent was glad about that; he wanted no part of what Coach Bullock was receiving in Coach Barker’s office.

As they walked down the hall toward Ms. Forsten’s office, Brent wondered how long it would take the news to leak out to the students at the school. What would their reaction be? He could only imagine how rough the next few days would be for him.

“I’m ready,” he told himself.

When Ms. Forsten asked, “Ready for what?” he realized that he had spoken louder than necessary to talk to himself.

“I’m ready for whatever happens,” he replied.

Ms. Forsten looked at the young boy with a little more respect than she had felt before. She had considered him to be a weakling who was struggling with guilt and

losing the battle. “When he actually has to face the consequences of his actions,” she had thought, “he’ll wish that he had kept quiet about what he has done.”

Now, she realized that Brent thought he was in that situation, but was reacting quite differently than she had expected. “The boy actually thinks that he’s been implicated,” thought Donna Forsten, “and he’s willing to face the consequences.” Tormenting him further would serve no purpose. She decided to let him know that he was “off the hook.”

“I am a certified grief counselor, Brent.” Opening her office door with a key she pulled from her sweater pocket, she pointed to a seat over by her desk. “My job is to help you through the trauma of losing Coach Bullock. Although he’s being asked to resign, he was concerned about you. He wanted me to make sure that you didn’t feel like you were even partially responsible for what has happened to him.”

“But, Ms. Forsten.”

The certified grief counselor held up her hand, and spoke with a practiced, reassuring voice. “Coach Bullock said that you might argue—that you would want to take part of the blame. That’s why I’m being allowed to pass some fairly confidential information along to you. Of course, you must promise never to tell anyone what I’m about to tell you.

Brent could only nod; this time he actually was speechless.

Chapter 24

A lot of conflicting emotions were whirling inside Brent as he sat in Ms. Forsten's office. Having already prepared himself mentally to face the wrath of the student body when they learned that he had caused the team to forfeit to the Cats, he now felt a tremendous relief that he wouldn't have to go through that. He felt thankful, guilty, and lucky all at once.

Had Alan Murphy worked this out somehow? That would be just like his best friend, but he knew that Alan hadn't had the time. He and Alan had been in almost constant communication using e-mail since they had returned home after their struggle with Coach Bullock.

"Unless," thought Brent, 'Alan has figured something out and has just called Coach Bullock about what he had learned.'

"No way," Brent said to himself. He knew Alan as well as he knew himself—maybe better. If Alan had learned something else, he wouldn't have kept it secret from his best friend. After all, they had walked to school together—just a few hours earlier that morning.

"Will you please pay attention to me, Brent-honey. Freeport will be forfeiting the Canton game because an ineligible player played in the game. Do you understand what 'ineligible' means?"

Of course he knew what 'ineligible' meant, but he couldn't figure out why Coach Bullock would be responsible if that had happened. How could Mr. Bullock—no longer a coach it appeared—be expected to know that a player was ineligible?

As Ms. Forsten began to explain in more detail, Brent remembered seeing the list of players with their last semester grades on Coach Bullock's desk early in the season. He tried to remember who on that list had made a 'D' or "F" in one of their subjects. It seemed to him that

the list had been alphabetical and that one or two names had been highlighted using an orange marker. Who had been highlighted on that list?

“Lance Russell failed to turn in three different English papers last semester,” began Ms. Forsten. When his grades were averaged for the semester, those three zeroes pulled his overall grade down to ‘49’ before his final test. Although he made ‘75’ on his ‘final’ essay, his overall grade for the semester was only ‘62.’”

“Enough to pass, but not enough to play,” supplied Brent.

“That’s right, and because Coach Bullock, as the assistant coach, is responsible for making sure each player that plays is eligible, he should not have allowed Lance to play.”

“We would have lost without him,” said Brent.

“We would have lost with him if we hadn’t . . .”

“Don’t say anything more, Brent-honey. Coach Bullock said that you might try to take the blame. He knows how much you’ve done, and how you have always felt that you haven’t always done the right things. He wants you to stay on as team manager to help out Coach Barker through the remaining games of the season.”

Nothing she said seemed to make any sense—especially why she kept calling him ‘Brent-honey.’ “I know you’re frustrated. Is it alright if I call you Brent-honey. That’s what I call my fiancée when he’s feeling down and out. I call him Jerry-honey. He’s pretty frustrated right now, but he does think a lot of you.”

Confusion added to the other conflicting emotions Brent was feeling. “Who is your fiancée?” he asked.

Ms. Forsten smiled broadly. “Oh, Brent-honey, I’m so sorry. I thought everyone knew. Jeremiah Bullock and I are engaged to be married. That really why I’m telling you more than I usually would be allowed to tell you. My Jerry-honey wanted me to tell you so that you wouldn’t feel

guilty since you really don't have any reason to. He messed up, and he's going to take all the blame. You can go back to being the best team manager Jerry has ever been around. He told me to tell you that, too."

Brent didn't know what to say. After a few minutes of the two of them just sitting in silence, Ms. Forsten stood up; Brent stood up, too. Ms. Forsten started around her desk, and Brent recognized the look on her face; she meant to hug him.

"Thanks for everything, Ms. Forsten," he blurted out and headed for the door. Not looking back, he opened the door and headed down the hall toward Ms. Hawkins' class. Then he remembered his books in the gym and retraced his steps.

Ms. Forsten was standing in the doorway to her office and must have thought that he was returning to get the hug he had just rejected. Her 'Brent-honey' remained hanging in the air as he bolted past her and headed for the gym. Of course, Brent was too nice to just leave her standing there.

"I do feel better, Ms. Forsten." He imagined her look of concern changing to a smile. Then, he dashed the smile with an obvious sarcastic reference to something Ms. Forsten had just said. As he was opening the gym door, he yelled back, "You're the best guilt counselor I have ever been around."

Brent stopped abruptly—just inside the gym door—as he came face to face with Coach Bullock. "Listen, you little smart aleck. I'm quitting my job because of you; I'm leaving town because of you, and I'll be lucky if I don't lose my future wife because of you. I'd advise you to keep your nose in your own business from now on. Do you understand that?"

The heavy handed approach had been a mistake and had only turned Brent's confusion and frustration into

anger that now had a target again. “Do you want to hug me, too?” he asked.

The coach’s pent-up anger from listening to Coach Barker tell him what an idiot he was finally erupted. He lost control. Reaching for the young boy who had become the sole focus for his own anger, he grabbed nothing but air. Brent sidestepped Coach Bullock and was laughing as he picked up his books and headed back to English class.

He now realized two things that he hadn’t known until just now—from his meeting with Ms. Forsten and his brief one-on-one drill with Coach Bullock. He knew who the voice was on the other end of Bullock’s cell phone call when they were at the Burger Barn, and he knew how to ‘juke’ someone. He wasn’t sure which he valued the most.

Chapter 25

The announcement that the Canton-Freeport game had been forfeited by the Falcons came just before the final bell. It came only five minutes after Lance Russell was paged to report to Coach Barker's office in the gym. Even though the cause of the forfeiture was simply reported to be an ineligible player, the students were able to connect the dots. Lance must have been paged because he was the ineligible player.

Since nothing else was on the mind of the seventh and eighth graders, the teachers didn't try to carry on with their classes. They didn't even try to keep their students quiet. Alan, sitting in history class, had heard Brent being paged earlier in the day, but he was puzzled even more when Lance was paged and completely baffled when the forfeiture of the game was blamed on an ineligible player.

Lynette Roberts was shocked beyond belief. She began to cry and couldn't stop. The other students weren't sure if she was crying because she was Lance Russell's girl friend or because she was the head cheerleader. Mr. Pierce, the 8th grade math teacher, had three daughters of his own and knew what to do. Since Lynette's mother wasn't around, he wrote out a hall pass and sent her to see the school's certified grief counselor.

After folding the hall pass and placing it in her purse along with the other twenty or so hall passes she kept there, Lynette followed the route Brent had taken to the gym. She wanted to bypass Ms. Forsten's office and she wanted to get to Lance before he did something stupid.

"Something else stupid," she said aloud as she stormed down the hallway.

Nobody tried to stop her; she had been an office aide for her entire time at Freeport. She had roamed the halls freely since her second year at the school began. By

that time she had accumulated enough hall passes in her file to be at any place at any time she wanted to be.

Lynette could imitate any teacher's signature—so much so that Ms. Hawkins had once claimed that a returned check with her signature on it had been forged. Although Ms. Hawkins was probably the most unorganized teacher at Freeport, she did offer proof of her claim to the bank. "Just compare the signature on this returned check to my signature on this hall pass," she demanded of the bank manager.

Orville McGee had to admit that the two signatures certainly looked different. However, when he compared the signature on the returned check to her signature on file at the bank, he found them to be sufficiently similar. "You wrote this check, Ms. Hawkins; I don't know who signed this hall pass."

Ms. Hawkins had no clue, either. The name at the top of the hall pass, where a student's name was typically written was "Ima Bad Girl." After a moment of reflection, Ms. Hawkins responded with the phrase that Orville McGee would tell for years to come.

"I don't have an Ima in any of my classes."

"She could have been joking," Orville would always say. Then he'd add, "but I don't think so—I really don't. We recommended that she move her account to another bank before Ima cleaned her out."

If anyone ever asked if Ms. Hawkins followed his advice, he'd laugh and say, "Ima not going to tell you." Of course, Orville would be the only one laughing; his audience would be wondering what part of his story, if any, was actually true. Orville didn't care; he enjoyed revealing confidential (though hilarious) information about a former customer.

When Lynette reached the gym, she found Lance and his parents with Coach Barker and Coach Bullock. Bullock was doing the talking.

“I’m so sorry, Lance, but I didn’t know what else to do. If I declared you ineligible before the game, we wouldn’t have had a chance to win. I was wrong, but I did the only thing I knew to do to give us a chance to win. I take full responsibility for everything.”

The parents were obviously stunned. Nothing Coach Bullock could say would make them feel better. In either case, even though Lance’s name might not be revealed, everyone would know that Lance was the guilty player.”

Coach Barker wouldn’t let it go. Still mad that his assistant had chosen to bring this up during the season, he blasted him again in front of the parents.

“If Coach Bullock had only brought this to my attention, we could have worked with Ms. Hawkins. I’m sure she would have allowed Lance to submit the three essays the day of the game so that he could be eligible.”

“I don’t understand, Coach Barker.” Everyone turned to look Lynette’s way. None of them asked why she was there or if she had a hall pass. Both coaches had used her to sign their hall passes as well as most of their checks for the past two years.

“This is a private conversation, Lynette.” Bullock’s rude treatment of Lynette went against the grain of the others. Lance moved over to stand by her; his parents scowled at the assistant coach whom they considered to be the cause of this current predicament. Coach Barker dismissed him—officially.

“Leave, Jeremiah. Your services and your presence are no longer wanted around the Freeport Athletic Department.”

The smile on Mr. Bullock’s face appeared only for a second, but each of them saw it. They were shocked. However, the former coach left quickly and didn’t give them a chance to ask anything further. He was glad to leave Freeport Middle School behind.

Lynette got them all back to the subject at hand. “Why are you saying that Lance needed to turn in three extra essays. Did Coach Bullock claim that Lance copied someone else’s work?”

Mrs. Russell moved over to put her arm around Lynette’s shoulders. “No, honey. No one’s saying that at all.”

“Then what is someone saying about Lance and his essays?”

Lynette was obviously troubled. Not only was she Lance’s girl friend, but she had written every one of his essays for him for the last two years. She had even been a big contributor on his final essay which had to be written in class. Because Ms. Hawkins couldn’t get her printer to work the day she typed up her list of acceptable topics for the final essay, Lynette had used the network printer in the school office to print off thirty-three copies. Lynette had delivered the copies in a manila envelope with the initials of the school’s secretary across the sealed flap. Before sealing the envelope, Lynette had already picked an essay topic for Lance.

The essay written by Lance in class was his third on the topic. Lynette was sure that the first draft, written with her help, would have made a B. The second, with only minor input from Lynette, would have earned at least a C+. She had absolutely no doubt that the third, written on the same subject, would have earned at least a C.

Lance was looking at Lynette as if she might be the one person who could save him. He didn’t remember failing to turn in those three essays. After all, Lynette had most likely handed him the paper right before class. All he had to do was drop it off at Ms. Hawkins’ desk as he walked over to his own desk by the window.

Suddenly, Lynette thought she might know the answer. Ms. Hawkins was so disorganized. Perhaps she had misplaced Lance’s paper.

Lynette boldly walked over to Coach Barker's office and went inside. On the desk, she found what she needed to see—a printout for English 8B with each student's grades provided. On the three days on which Lance had received a zero, no other student had a zero listed. If Ms. Hawkins had lost some of the essays, she wouldn't have lost only those Lance had turned in.

One other possibility popped into Lynette's mind. Scanning the grades again, she checked Bubba Grant's grades on the same day that Lance had received his zeroes. Bubba had an A, a B+, and an A-. Those were the grades that Lynette would have expected for Lance's papers if he had turned them in. She wondered if Lance had let Bubba copy the essays on those dates and failed to get his paper back. Of course, she couldn't offer that as a possibility. The only change to the grade sheet that would result from such a statement by Lance would be for Bubba to get zeroes (for cheating) as well. The reason for Lance's zeroes might change, but his zeroes would remain.

She would have to confront Lance with that possibility later. Looking at Lance, Lynette could help thinking of him as a big 'Loser. She would still need him until the prom next spring, but after that, "Goodbye, Lance."

Lynette turned and stalked out of the gym without saying another word. She did know someone else who just might still be able to solve this puzzle in a way that would restore the Falcons' championship. Her friends, Alan and Brent, were pretty good detectives. Maybe—just maybe—they would help her figure out a solution to her dilemma. She knew they probably could, but would they? After all, they were not big fans of Lance Russell.

Chapter 26

The group that had solved the mystery of the hidden icon—their only real ‘case’-- had gathered again at Lynette’s request. The only difference in the makeup of the group this time was that Brent was not under the influence of K345. That drug, injected by a high-tech, remote controlled, miniature mosquito, had temporarily confused Brent and kept him out of the action. On this autumn Saturday afternoon, they were sitting at a booth in the Burger Barn.

Alan Murphy had pleaded with Lynette and Brent for his grandfather to be allowed to join the group, but they both insisted that one adult at a time was enough. If Angus Murphy was to be included, then Eleanor Blakely would have to go. If that’s what Alan wanted, then Alan would have to be the one to tell Mrs. Blakely.

Each member of the group had naturally assumed a parliamentary role without benefit of an election. Alan acted as the president, Brent served as the secretary, and Lynette was only one breath away from being the president. If Alan stopped talking to get his breath, Lynette took over the meeting.

“Mrs. Blakely, or whichever adult was allowed to represent the older generation for a particular ‘case,’ was the advisor, sponsor, or whatever else adults did when they were given responsibility to keep a group of kids under control. On their previous case—when Brent’s health was seemingly at risk—she had overruled everyone and taken Brent out of harm’s way.

That’s why we need an adult,” Alan Murphy had insisted when Lynette called him to set up this meeting. “Sometimes they have some good ideas, but they’re always going to let us know if we’re about to do something that might put one of us at risk..”

Lynette had agreed—thinking that Eleanor Blakely would attend. After all, she and Ms. Blakely had become pretty good friends since their last adventure. Eleanor would be the least likely of any of their five parents to try to control the group. Any of the three dads would have simply tried to disband the group; Alan’s mother would have done the same after discussing the situation with her husband.

Angus Murphy, Alan’s grandfather, was the only other realistic candidate to be the adult representative in these discussions. Although Alan had insisted that he was “cool” and would be perfect for this “case,” Lynette preferred Mrs. Blakely. If she doesn’t get to come then I won’t be there either, she finally said. “Remember; you guys still don’t know what I’ve discovered about this case.

To her surprise, Alan had responded, “Lynette, I don’t think there’s any mystery about that. We already know more about what’s going on than you might think.” He paused for that to sink in then added, “Don’t try to figure that out. Ms. Blakely’s okay by me. I’ll tell Brent to bring her along.”

Two hours later, they sat at a booth toward the back of the Burger Barn. A waitress named Lisa seemed awfully eager to wait on their table; perhaps she needed the tips and pegged Ms. Blakely for a big tipper; she was probably right about that.

Alan had noticed a brief exchange between Lisa and a boy whom he knew as Max. Lisa had handed him something which he slipped in his pocket before heading toward a table by the front window. Lisa had headed another direction with a tray of burgers and soft drinks. “What was that all about,” Alan thought. He wondered if Brent had noticed.

Brent had been too busy talking to his mother about what he wanted to order. Since their family had already eaten “a home-cooked meal,” Ms. Blakely was being

stubborn. “You can have a milk shake or you can have ice water and some fries; you can’t have both.” Lynette and Alan looked at each other; they both knew that the cost of the “snacks” wasn’t the problem; Mrs. Blakely was truly concerned that Brent might be putting on a little extra weight.

Alan caught Brent’s attention and mouthed the word “chubby” very slowly and clearly. After dodging a wadded up napkin tossed his way, he grinned at his friend. Brent had given up.

“I just want a bottled water and a cup of ice,” he told Lisa, who was suddenly standing beside their table with her order pad and pencil in place. The rest of the group followed Brent’s pattern and only ordered something to drink. Alan had some birthday money in his billfold; he ordered chips and salsa for the entire group.

Brent, a boy who did like to eat, mouthed “thank you” to Brent. Apparently, the home-cooked meals entrée had been a dish that ended with the word “casserole.” While they were waiting for their food, Lynette quietly explained what had happened to Lance and why she knew that it couldn’t be true.

When Eleanor Blakely couldn’t keep from chiding Lynette for writing Lance’s essays, Brent cautioned her. “That’s not why you’re here, Mom. You’re here to keep us from doing things like that in the future—not to get onto us for the stuff we’ve already done.”

“Oops” was his mother’s reaction. She smiled at the group and waited for Lynette to continue. The chips, salsa, and soft drinks arrived and Brent was busy pouring the bottled water into his cup filled with ice. Alan took over the conversation and presented a limited version of what had happened to them after the ball game two nights before. When he had finished filling the smallish cup of ice, Brent put the cap back on the bottle and turned to stash it on a ledge behind him.

Alan kept his eye on Brent, but he didn't stop talking. When Brent dropped the water bottle and leaned over to pick it up, Alan intentionally leaned forward toward the center of the table and said, "Keep an eye out for our waitress; I think she's trying to spy on us." When he noticed that Brent had retrieved the bottle and successfully made it stay on the ledge behind him, he continued his recap of what had happened to Brent and himself.

Alan only told enough to ensure that Lynette understood Coach Bullock's motive for doing what he had done. Lance was being used as a scapegoat because the assistant coach had been afraid that Brent was about to confess. He didn't want Brent to tell anyone about the tripping snares they had buried on the football field and used to unfairly win several of the Falcon's games.

"You see, Lynette, the games were going to be forfeited in any case. Bullock didn't really mind that; he just didn't want anyone to know I helped him rig the games." Brent looked embarrassed, but he didn't look down. "I'm sorry that Lance took the blame; he's a jerk, but he didn't deserve being the scapegoat."

Lynette smiled. "Don't worry about that, Brent-honey; he should have been ineligible anyway. He cheated, and I helped him cheat by writing his essays for him (and Bubba she thought to herself). You weren't any more in the wrong than I was."

"She's right, honey," his mother said. "The only one that's not guilty of any wrong doing is Alan."

"Not so fast, Mrs. Blakely. Remember, I'm the one that put the dummy in my bed, and slipped out late that night to go find Brent. I'm grounded, too."

Alan and Brent had already put the entire puzzle together. Alan let Brent explain what they had figured out, but he grew bored pretty soon. Looking around the walls of the Burger Barn, he checked out the framed pictures on

the wall—noticing again that the Burger Barn’s owner was in every one.

Over behind the cash register, the County School Superintendent and the entire Board of Education were presenting a plaque to Mr. Forsten and his daughter, Donna—honoring him for his gift of seventy two new computers to the county school system. The plaque was hanging on the wall beside the picture.

Another picture showed Forsten with Roger Dickens, the local computer expert who had made a fortune designing software protection schemes to prevent hackers from getting into computer systems used by financial corporations. Dickens had designed the protective scheme installed on every one of the school’s new computers to limit access to undesirable Internet sites. Of course, Alan remembered Mr. Dickens from their previous case—the one that had resulted in Dickens giving Brent and Alan a million dollar reward for saving him four billion dollars.

“So you see,” Brent concluded, “Donna Forsten was the person waiting at the school the other night to video us if we made a run for it in that direction. Before Coach Bullard ended the call, I heard the person on the other end call him ‘Jerry-honey.’ I didn’t recognize her then—her voice sounded different over the phone, but I do remember how she ended the call.”

Lynette advanced the conversation by building on what Brent had just told them. “That makes sense—clears it up for me a lot. The Forstens are in this game-rigging scheme with Coach Bullock. They thought they had Alan and Blake scared off although they didn’t get as much evidence on them as they had intended. Ms. Forsten gained access to Brent’s emails—I’m still not real sure how she did that—and realized that Brent was about to confess to helping rig the games. The Forsten’s didn’t want that to happen because ..” She looked around for help.

Alan had noticed that Lisa, the suspicious waitress, was taking a very long time to get the orders of the couple that had just come into the Burger Barn. She must have positioned herself close enough to eavesdrop. Even with her back turned, she couldn't have had any trouble hearing what Lynette and Brent had been saying..

Alan didn't finish Lynette's sentence because he expected Brent to do it. As he waited for Brent, his gaze had shifted to another of the pictures on the wall—the one where Earl Forsten was being honored as the Blackledge University “Booster of the Year.” Also in the picture were several previous winners of the award—all prominent businessmen in the state who had graduated from Blackledge. The picture had been taken twelve years earlier.

The silence from the others finally got Alan's attention. He recovered quickly—pointing to the picture that he had been concentrating on. “That picture on the wall pretty well tells the story. The owner of this restaurant is a prominent booster of the Blackledge University Athletic program. Look around the room; there's not another picture of him with the other Boosters. He needs to ‘boost’ his popularity with the other boosters.”

“So he wants to be a better booster,” remarked Lynette. “What has that got to do with rigging football games?”

Alan just let her question hang there. After a few seconds, Brent caught on; Lynette and Mrs. Blakely figured it out in less than a minute. Lynette finished the sentence she had started a few minutes before.

“The Forstens don't care whether the Freeport Falcons win a game or not. They've just been using the Falcons' games to fine tune the snares so that they can be used to trip up Blackledge University's opponents just like Coach Bullock tripped up the Canton guys.

“And Coach Bullock’s resignation,” added Brent, “allows him to leave town and sign on as some kind of coach at the university. Probably only a few of the boosters will even know about the snares. The rest will just be happy that their team’s record has improved and somehow they’ll learn that Booster Forsten and his future son-in-law were primarily responsible.”

The waitress had gone inside a door marked “Owner’s Office. Alan got Brent’s attention. “Make some more notes on the computer and reposition your water bottle; here they come.”

Their timing was almost perfect. He’d seen Angus Murphy enter the front door about fifteen minutes after their meeting started. That should have meant that two other people had been contacted and were sitting somewhere within fifty feet of Brent’s water bottle.

The group that came out of Forten’s office was led by Earl Forsten who was followed by his daughter with her fiancée, two security guards, and the waitress. When they reached the booth where Alan’s little group were sitting, Bullock started talking in a gruff manner.

“I thought we had an understanding, fellows.

Alan wanted to play along for a while. “We didn’t tell anybody anything!”

Donna Forsten stepped closer and bent down to look straight into Alan’s eyes. She looked awfully mean for a grief counselor—as if she wanted to cause some grief rather than deal with it.. “I saw the emails between you two little scoundrels. That’s exactly what Brent was planning to do. He was feeling so guilty that we couldn’t depend on him keeping his mouth shut.”

Lynette piped in. “Yes, Donna-honey. You thought Brent wouldn’t feel so guilty if the game was already forfeited. You changed Lance’s English grades on the school computer system network so that it would look like he had been ineligible.”

“You’re pretty smart aren’t you? I’m sure Donna could have done that, but she didn’t have to,” countered Jeremiah Bullock. That part of the story was true. I did know that Lance had failed English and should have been ineligible. I was caught up in winning the game—I didn’t tell Coach Barker.

Lynette couldn’t believe him. “But I wrote—I mean I helped him write those papers. All he had to do was turn them in.”

Donna Forsten did better as a grief counselor for Lynette. She helped Lynette understand what had happened. “I don’t know why I’m explaining this, but Jerry asked me to talk with Lance about the papers. Lance ‘sort of’ remembers giving them to his buddy, Bubba, who ‘may have’ turned them in as his own. I don’t think Lance expected the coaches to keep him out of a big game no matter what he did in English.”

Lynette was fuming. “Wait until I see Lance,” she thought. “How could he give the papers I wrote to Bubba?”

Alan wanted to get the discussion back on track. “So what’s the big deal; Brent didn’t have to feel guilty, and he never told anybody about how he and Coach Bullock installed those tripping snares to rig the games.”

“Enough small talk” Having had enough, Pap Forsten took charge and looked directly at Brent. “You little twerp! Lisa heard you discussing every detail with this lady and her daughter. Who else have you told?”

“Told what?” countered Alan. “We did discuss your motive for wanting Brent to keep quiet. We figured you were planning on Coach Bullock using those gadgets to win a few extra games for old Blackedge University, but this lady is Brent’s mother and Lynette is—well—she’s just a busybody who might tell the whole world if she gets the chance.”

“Alan Murphy!” Lynette was fuming again.

Alan winked at her as a way of telling her not to worry. “There’s really nothing you can do about any of this, Mr. Forsten. I don’t think you’re going to murder us so that you can be the Booster of the Year. It couldn’t be worth the risk.”

Pap Forsten looked at Alan with a malicious smile on his face. “You’d be surprised what I might do, son. You’d better think this thing through a little more. I can promise you that you won’t be a happy camper if I turn these two tornados loose on you.”

He was obviously referring to the two security guards that were behind him. They gave Alan their meanest look; he just smiled back at them.

“He must think I’m the most stupid kid he’s ever seen,” thought Alan. He knew that anyone with good sense would at least think of backing off. Alan wasn’t about to do that.

“I do have a couple of questions that might affect what we decide to do, Mr. Forsten. Will you let me ask them?”

“Perhaps, we’re finally getting somewhere,” responded the Burger Barn’s owner. “Go ahead, kid, ask your questions.”

Alan looked at Brent who was typing rapidly on his laptop keyboard. “Is the wireless network that you offer free to Burger Barn customers in service tonight?”

The elder Forsten looked at his daughter. She hurried over to get a closer look at Brent’s laptop screen.

“Send! There it goes,” announced Brent. “The NCAA secretary should have just received our email describing all that we know about Earl “Pap” Forsten and his plans to violate NCAA rules, disregard every aspect of good sportsmanship, and—worst of all—get Jerry-honey hired as an assistant coach at Blackledge University.

Donna grabbed the laptop and used the mouse to quickly check what had happened on the computer’s email

program. "I can't recall it; the system's not that advanced. Here comes the acknowledgement from an Ethel Leengas. The email address could be one at the NCAA, but it could be faked."

Pap Forsten grabbed Alan by the shoulders and turned him around--pulling him up so that Alan's eyes were even with his. "Now you're going to see what happens when someone crosses Pap Forsten."

"You didn't let me ask my second question!"

Alan tried to remain calm, but he was feeling a little intimidated by the large, angry man who felt like he was being taunted by a thirteen year-old kid. "You can ask Gene your stupid second question," he snarled.

As Gene, the larger of the two security guards, grabbed him and started to handcuff him, Alan asked his second question.

"Do you guys look good on camera?"

Gene stopped what he was doing and quickly checked the security camera near the front door. It seemed to be aimed at the cash register—right where it was supposed to be focused. He reached toward Alan again.

Brent had admired how cool Alan had been; he tried his best to match his friends demeanor. "Not that camera," Brent said, holding up the bottle of water so that the tiny 'laptop cam' could be seen inside, "this one!"

With that, he replaced the bottle on the ledge and asked Donna Forsten if he could have his laptop back. Donna had been frantically checking the computer for a video camera application. After clicking and holding several key combinations, she looked relieved.

"They're bluffing, Dad. This baby (meaning the laptop this time) is not running any video. Besides, there are no wires coming out of that bottle. With a triumphant smile on her face, Donna Forsten raised the laptop over her head and slammed it down on the tile floor near her feet. "Oops!"

Brent had trouble maintaining his cool while he watched the pieces from his computer rolling across the floor. He looked fiercely at Ms. Forsten and pointed across the room to a man and a woman who were waving back at them. "Don't need any wires; we've got a line-of- site infrared wireless connection to that laptop over there."

Donna ordered the guard whose name wasn't Gene to "get the other laptop."

Forsten stopped him immediately. "Don't bother, Leo. I recognize that lady."

To his daughter, he said, "Call my lawyer, Donna, and don't say anything else."

Alan was beaming; he and his pals had won. "Most likely that lady was wearing a badge when you last saw her. She works for the state's computer crimes division. The man with her is Roger Dickens, the top computer security expert in the surrounding thirty-two counties."

By that time, Agent Madeline Sawyer had reached them. Several more officers were coming in the doors on each side of the restaurant.

"It's a clear case of entrapment," argued Pap Forsten. "Besides, you failed to tell me that you were recording our conversation."

"I'll be reading you your rights before you say anything more that might be used against you." As the officer handcuffed the two security guards, the lovebirds, and the angry Burger Barn owner, Madeline concluded the warning that accompanied every arrest in the state. Then she tapped Earl Forsten on the shoulder and pointed to a sign over the counter and another over the cash register.

"Can I read it for you, Mr. Forsten," asked Eleanor Blakely.

"No," growled Forsten, "but it doesn't apply to your camera; that warning only applies to mine."

"It applies to all of them," Agent Sawyers corrected. "State supreme court ruled in 1999 that two separate

warnings inside a room is sufficient regardless of the number of cameras in use. It doesn't matter who installed the signs or for what purpose they were initially intended, you were warned that anything you might say or do was potentially being recorded. Anyone reading the signs would have had to assume that the warning covered the entire dining area since no limitations were listed on the signs."

"I'm waiting on my lawyer?" roared Forsten.

Alan stepped forward, smiled, and spoke to the handcuffed older man who had manhandled him only a few minutes before. "I do have one other question, Mr. Forsten."

"What's that, kid?" Apparently beaten, Forsten was gaining respect for his young adversary with each passing minute. It certainly appeared that the kid had outsmarted him.

Alan pointed to a blue sports car pulling out of the parking lot onto the highway. "What kind of car does your daughter drive?"

Forsten shook his head as he watched his daughter drive away. "Maybe she called my lawyer before she left,"

"Maybe she didn't leave her cell phone in your office," offered Lynette. "I'll be glad to check for you."

"Lynette never changes," said Eleanor Blakely. "She's the most helpful girl I've ever met."

Pap Forsten looked at Lynette with imploring eyes. "Young lady, if you'll take this little green book out of my shirt pocket, I think you'll find my lawyer's number. Please call him for me!"

Epilogue

The video cam had served its purpose. Warrants to search the computer systems at each of the thirty-two county school system were granted to the state computer crimes division. Roger Dickens assisted in the investigation at the request of Agent Madeline Sawyer. When the citizens of the thirty-two counties learned that Forsten had been using the Safeguards Pro software to learn the usernames of all the students as well as the those who took advantage of after school programs at the school, his Burger Barns went under in twenty-six counties.

Burger Barns in six of the counties were purchased by a man wanting to buy a small restaurant chain at bargain prices. Alan was pretty sure the man was one of his grandfather's close friends.

The boys didn't get an award for their part in putting the Forstens out of business. They did get an unlimited gift card for all the food they could eat at Angus Grill's in six counties. Alan was never sure if the restaurants were named for the type of beef they were cooking or for his grandfather.