

4th & Long

A Gridiron Parable



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Published 2022. Garrett M. Stapleton

This book is dedicated to my Father, Leo D. Stapleton, my personal hero. The former Commissioner of the Boston Fire Department and a prolific author of eleven books, he reviewed

my excerpts and encouraged me to keep writing. He provided me with a life to envy for which I'll be forever grateful.

It's been said everyone has a book inside themselves. Here's mine.

CHAPTER ONE

Today! One magnificent day and both were excited. They had met in college, their attraction immediate. He, Paul Gordon, was well on his way to becoming an engineer while she, Lindsey Mann, a teacher. Not intentionally looking but finding love anyway. A five-star wedding followed and then the best news of all--she was pregnant! The joy of becoming parents, tempered now by a troubling discovery. Their son, Matthew, was diagnosed with mosaic Down syndrome. Stunning for sure, but over time came understanding. They raise this boy with a happiness only a newborn can bring. Unconditional love.

Paul and Lindsey discovered their state contains an Early Intervention Program, which monitors Down syndrome children from six months to age three. Matty displayed an avid curiosity to interact with other Down syndrome toddlers. He charted well in that environment.

From ages three to six, Matty was enrolled in the Chelsea Public School's Developmental Evaluation System, with hurdles in place to assess competence during these formative years. Upon completion, tests reveal Matty possesses an average I.Q. and can be expected to perform routine tasks at a high level. The decision is made to allow Matty to attend Chelsea's grade school full-time, with his process monitored. It's his first experience in mainstream surroundings, being the only one of his group to achieve this level.

Throughout his grade school years, Matty makes some casual friendships but an unflinching feeling existed--was he really *that different*? What was with the finger-pointing, whispers and giggles?

Matty advanced through the middle school years with the normal wants of any child. Paul was his hero and overly protective, as a father should be. Lindsey, doting. Matty was a joy in their lives although they worry about his future and the challenges that lay ahead.

One routine weekday evening, Paul was running late. He phoned Lindsey.

"It's been a crazy day, Honey. I totally lost track of time. If you want to start eating now, I get it."

"We can wait for you, Mister Gordon," she jokingly replied. "I'll hold off on dinner until you arrive."

"Sounds great," Paul answered, "I'll be there as quickly as I can."

Lindsey expected Paul to be a half hour to an hour late. It was closing in on two hours with no word from him. She tried reaching him on his cell phone with no luck. Deep down, Lindsey knew something wasn't right. She phoned Paul's work and the night watchman confirmed everyone had left. She was worried. Matty could sense this and was nervous too.

"What's going on Mom?" he asked. "Where's Dad?"

Masking a poker face, Lindsey replied, "He's just a little late. Why don't you play upstairs?" Matty nodded and headed to his room.

Lindsey thought she may be overreacting. Still, the feeling remained.

As Matty climbed the steps, red and blue lights flashed in the window, stopping him in his tracks. A police car had arrived and Lindsey's heart sank. Matty raced down the stairs to be near her.

The officers knocked on the door and delivered the news no one wants to hear--a drunk driver traveled in the wrong direction. Paul was instantly killed in a head-on collision.

While clutching Matty, Lindsey composed herself and thanked the officers. Lindsey and Matty clung to each other and wept. Her husband and his father gone. *Unimaginable*.

Matty was devastated. His champion and fail-safe had been taken. He no longer felt protected, no longer secure. Lindsey did her best to console him, while coping with her own grief.

CHAPTER TWO

As the academic year approached, Matty was enrolled at Chelsea High School. Lindsey had many connections throughout the educational system and made sure Matty would attend the same school where she taught. Daily contact was an asset, however, his social development would be upclose and personal.

The high school experience is like no other, with bigger classes, difference backgrounds, and a yearning to fit in. Everyone feels it. No specific tutorial direction unless requested. Keep up or fall behind. Plus girls. Matty had never been in a school with *so many* girls. Excitement and nervousness simultaneously. Still, the giggling and whispers continue. He would need to suppress his handful of attractions while garnering little attention.

Lindsey tried to keep him busy with a full schedule and plenty of homework. Despite her efforts, a void existed. Matty made a couple of cursory friends, but no one to connect with on a steady basis. He *needs* something.

One afternoon, Lindsey brought home a video game player. Maybe a distraction from reality would help. Matty loved it! He had a handful of favorites and would get lost in the environment. In this world, he could be anyone he wanted. Here, he would not be judged. Lindsey kept an eye on his playing time while secretly pleased there was an outlet which made Matty happy.

Lindsey's emptiness is unmistakable. Paul was gone. How could this happen? Didn't she have enough on her plate? She spent the next year going through the motions, accepting other's condolences, but refusing to dwell on them. That would make it all too real. She was pretty busy with teacher conferences and PTA meetings. Lindsey would make time to check in on Matty during the school day--a certain tracking most parents can't access. She became his sounding board and councilor. There was comfort in this.

One Monday morning in the school's corridor, Matty experienced a confrontation for the first time. A boy, larger than he, was peppering him with loud, crowd-forming insults. Matty understands his difference, but asks himself how is it any of this guy's business and why were the majority backing him? Have I done something wrong? Am I missing out on anything? Suddenly, it became physical. He was pushed into the lockers. Hard. Very hard. Some of the students cheered, while others watched. A few more pushes and it was over. *What just happened?* Matty kept this encounter to himself as he didn't want his mom worrying.

That evening, Lindsey attended another P.T.A. meeting. While giving only as much effort as necessary, she noticed someone new. He was tall and strapping, yes, but she stayed away. This system has worked well.

At one point, Lindsey found herself on the other side of the parent/teacher meeting. Naturally co-workers kept her abreast of Matty's progress, but this was official. Heading into his sophomore year, Matty was solid academically, yet developed a troubling trend. He distanced himself and risked nothing. Go along to get along. Head down and marching as his stilted social skills embraced this behavior. At home he was quiet but seemed ok. He *needs* something.

Tuesday morning while walking to class, Lindsey noticed the football tryouts on an adjacent field. Among the potential players, there he was--the new guy from the PTA meeting. His first

year in Chelsea, a teacher *and* football coach. Lindsey caught a spark, let the feeling linger, then fade. Forget it.

Wednesday afternoon, as classes concluded, Lindsey paid a visit to the teacher's lounge. She grabbed some coffee, found a table, and began grading papers. Looking around she spotted him once more. She caught herself glancing in his direction and quickly turned away. *Had he glanced back?* He headed toward her, although she was seated close to the exit. *He's just leaving*, she thought. Quietly he stopped and introduced himself, Joe Donovan, then asked if he could join her. Lindsey's nerves were tingling but undetectable. She had mastered that craft. He asked about her son while she feigned interest. Nothing to be gained here. He was persistent, naturally filling the awkward gaps. She began to feel comfortable and actually laughed a few times. When he referenced Matty again, Lindsey decided to participate. Doing well enough, but keeping to himself. He missed his dad and that void was unfillable. Joe asked about football and she wondered why. Surely, he doesn't expect Matty to tryout? No, no, nothing like that. What if Matty became a water boy for the team? Her immediate thought was *no way*. Teens can be cruel but football jocks, brutal. She'd witnessed this before and wasn't about to put Matty in that environment. Joe was calm and convincing. Sure there'd be jeers, he wouldn't deny it. However, Joe was the coach. He would monitor and frown upon any heckling. Joe promised Lindsey he'd look after Matty and maybe her boy would find a reason to enjoy high school. He might need something like that in his life.

Need something. There it was! While not the perfect solution, Lindsey realized the opportunity she'd been waiting for had finally arrived. She agreed. Lindsey would bring Matty to the field at the end of the week, when tryouts were complete. *Go along to get along? Hardly.*

Matty didn't want to go. "Football players? I'm not a football player. Water boy? Are you for real?" Lindsey was insistent and always had the final say. Always. Matty had liked that before. Now? Maybe not.

CHAPTER THREE

Friday saw Lindsey bringing Matty over to Joe, and Joe welcomed him. He described the workload of a water boy. As Joe explained Matty's role, the more he relaxed. There might be a few bumps along the way, but finally a purpose.

With fingers crossed, Lindsey left them. Joe showed Matty how things were done, and why the schedule must be consistent. He'd be expected to keep the team hydrated, plus there'd be a lot of janitorial duties. One duty Matty hadn't counted on was participating in practice. Not actually playing, he would retrieve bad tosses and field goal attempts. Matty wasn't thrilled by the job description. He agreed because Mom said so.

The Chelsea Rams emerged from the locker room and wandered around the field. When they saw Matty, some stared, others grinned. They all knew who he was. There were a couple of jokes, but Joe told them to lay off. They also knew the duties of a water boy. The players would have ample opportunities down the road to have their fun with him. To top things off, there appeared a tremendous problem Matty couldn't have anticipated. The starting quarterback was the same kid who confronted and pushed him into his locker! This could be trouble. There was no doubt the starting quarterback, Brian Anderson, was the leader on the field. He's the conductor and what he says goes. As soon as he spotted Matty, Brian made a few comments. Nothing specific or outrageous-- both would come later.

Sports are a microcosm of society and football is no different. Prior to becoming the team's water boy, Matty felt it was him against the world. Everyone else was *normal*. Now he witnessed a chain of command, a value attached to your place on the football ladder. Your peers, for the most part, assigned you a rung. Whether to climb up or not was your choice. The upper rungs were for the cream of the crop. First string quarterback. Top running back. Surest receivers. Most dependable blockers. Best tacklers. Joe treated them differently and cut them more slack. Their talent had earned it. Next came the remaining starters and the backups. Lagging behind were the benchwarmers, who wouldn't play unless dire circumstances arose. Finally, there's the water boy, leaving no doubt as to where he stood in the pecking order. Matty was last.

Football season would begin in two weeks. The team would practice daily. Matty would face many challenges. Brian purposely threw long passes to no one simply because Matty would have to fetch them. There were countless calls for water and instances to heckle. Back in the locker room, used towels were tossed all over the floor instead of into the laundry baskets. High school mentality, for sure. Matty kept going. He hustled and did his job.

One unexpected bonus was the bond Matty shared with the benchwarmers. They were also subjected to ridicule and understood all too well what Matty'd been going through. They became his band of brothers. There was strength in numbers and Matty liked it. His other hurdle was a nickname. Everybody gets one. Some were obvious; Lefty, Speedy, Clutch. Others were not. There was something for everyone and Matty worried what his might be. Whatever they chose, it's how he'd be addressed from then on. Turned out it wasn't too bad. They dubbed him *Bucket*. Not the most creative tag, but certainly acceptable. He wondered if Joe had something to do with this. If so, he was grateful.

Lindsey noticed a change taking place. Matty was more confident, self-assured. The pranks and giggles weren't as important as they had seemed. She was grateful and wanted to thank Joe. The next time Lindsey saw him, she would offer a dinner invitation. One he would readily accept. Just a thank you with nothing more to it.

As she prepared dinner, Matty questioned what was going on. Why was the coach coming here? Lindsey replied it was his idea to have Matty join the football team so wouldn't it be proper to have Joe over to thank him? Matty shrugged.

Dinner was pleasant enough. Lindsey reiterated her appreciation while Joe minimized his part. Both were happy Matty had something extra in his life. After dessert, Matty excused himself. Lindsey and Joe started talking. He was a confirmed bachelor, buried in teaching and coaching. Lindsey was impressed with his work ethic. She heard herself asking him what he did for fun. Joe explained his jobs *were* his fun. Lindsey liked this. After they finished their coffee, he prepared to leave. Lindsey said she'd see him at school. She thanked him once more and Joe replied dinner was thanks enough. He enjoyed helping her and her son. As he walked away, she couldn't help but watch. Something about him. When he reached his car he looked back and waved. Her heart was racing! A definite attraction. She closed the door and shook her head.

CHAPTER FOUR

Matty was settling into the water boy's routine. After a few unremarkable jokes, everyone settled in. Matty became part of the team. Most of the players had their own problems and couldn't be bothered with anyone else's. Once in a while, Brian would make some "Bucket" remark which drew chuckles, but Matty ignored it. He actually felt bad for his bench-warming

friends, who were distinct targets during practice. Every time the starters made a mistake, they would blame the benchwarmers. It would begin with a simple accusation, and sometimes escalate into cruel and personal comments. Even though Joe tried to minimize it, he couldn't control everything.

If practice went particularly bad, watch out in the locker room. Once Joe recited his post-practice evaluations, the team was unsupervised. Everyone, except the starters, was fair game. They would berate the easiest candidates, in an effort to make themselves feel better. Even though he hated it, Matty remained silent. At least it's not me.

The team was gearing up for the first game. Practices were more concise. No clowning around. If you hadn't learned the playbook by now, you were gone. Unless, of course, you were talented.

During the final practice, things weren't going well for Brian. He'd made some foolish plays and Joe was all over him. Clearly frustrated, Brian scanned the field for a scapegoat. His eyes locked onto Bucket. He started throwing long balls for fun--fun because Matty had to chase them.

After a few bombs, Joe asked, "What are you doing?"

Brian replied, "Just trying to get my arm loose, Coach."

This seemed reasonable and Joe dropped it. Matty, on the other hand, wasn't having any fun and the starters took notice. They would chirp in with sly comments, some harmless, others spiteful. When Joe had heard enough, he ended practice and the team went inside. In the locker room, Joe gave a pep talk and challenged everyone to be ready for Saturday. First game of the season and this one counts. Joe returned to his office.

As soon as he was out of earshot, Brian took aim at Matty. "Hey, Bucket, what's your problem? You don't enjoy running after my pretty passes?" The room went silent. Matty was standing by the lockers and Brian was coming right at him. "You think you're someone special because your mom is dating the coach? You think you have some say around here?" And there it was again. A push. Hard. Back against the lockers.

Matty looked around for help, but the benchwarmers and backups weren't going there. He was on his own. Frustrated, he pushed Brian. Hard. The surprised quarterback stumbled back a couple of feet, regained his balance and pushed Matty as hard as he could. Matty fell backward into the lockers. *That wasn't so bad*, he thought. *I'm stronger than him*.

Everyone gasped, anxious to see what the next move would be. Matty surveyed the room and realized two things: he could push back much harder, which would undercut Brian's leadership, or he could walk away amid mocks and jeers, leaving Brian's top-rung status intact. Matty chose the latter, although he knew he had plenty in his tank to handle this guy.

CHAPTER FIVE

Brian Anderson was a superstar with a chip on his shoulder. The only child of Bob and Patrice Anderson, he played football, baseball and hockey as a boy, excelling in all three. Never popular, he'd be incredibly quick to point out a teammate's mistake. Nothing was ever his fault. *Ever!* Upon entering high school, Brian decided to focus on football. He possessed a great arm and a deep understanding of the game. A natural quarterback, he was willing to work hard to improve. Making the varsity as a freshman was impressive, and Brian served as a reserve. He won the starting job during his sophomore year and never looked back. The Rams improved over his next two seasons but they didn't contend for the title. With a new head coach, Brian eagerly

anticipated his senior year. He was attractive as well, with plenty of girls wanting to pair up. On the outside, Brian had it all. One, however, never knows what occurs behind closed doors.

Brian's father was a strict and sometimes cruel parent. His wife was intimidated and verbally bullied. She would always defer to him and never questioned his tactics. Bob was a laborer and hated his lot in life. He was jealous of those he considered luckier. Instead of relishing in his son's talents, he dismissed them. Bob wouldn't attend any games so neither could Patrice. Nothing Brian accomplished would satisfy his father. Scored three goals in a hockey game? Why didn't you score four? Pitched a one-hitter *and* blasted the game-winning home run? Why did you allow a hit? Keep in mind Bob couldn't find a dart board without a GPS. Children, no matter what talent they possess, must be loved and nurtured. Patrice did her best when he was at work. Bob never validated Brian and that emptiness left its mark.

CHAPTER SIX

Back at school, there was a new gait. The locker room encounter had left Matty with an air of confidence. Where he once walked with his head down, he now strutted knowing he belonged. High school kids are almost always into themselves, yet a few noticed. Matty acknowledged them with a grin or a nod with some reciprocating. He no longer heard much laughter. If there was any, he refused to waste his time with it. Things were different.

Lindsey noticed the change immediately and asked him how he was doing. Matty grinned from ear-to-ear. He told her he loved being part of the football team and thanked her for making it happen. This was a first, and of course Lindsey was happy. Maybe a little of *her* stress was relieved too.

On the field, the team was struggling as they prepared for the season's opener. Everyone was on edge and things weren't improving. Maybe they weren't going to be very good. Matty hadn't considered this or how hostile the environment could become. Surprisingly, he was no longer the automatic target for verbal abuse. Brian rerouted his attention toward the starters and backups. Maybe he was trying to motivate them. Maybe he was frustrated. Matty wasn't sure and dismissed the thought.

Near the far end of the field, the cheerleaders were holding their auditions. If you think football tryouts are competitive, try making the cheerleader's squad. The competition was second to none. Matty approached their general vicinity while retrieving another misguided pass. He paused to take a look. Most of the cheerleaders didn't notice, or if they had, didn't react. Except for one girl. The Captain of the cheerleaders and easily the prettiest of the bunch, she seemed to smile, nod, then turn away. Too quick for Matty to process what, if anything, just happened. *Did she smile at me*, he wondered. He chose to believe she had and caught himself smiling.

Lindsey invited Joe to dinner again. Was Brian right? Is his mother really dating this guy? Matty was about to ask but realized he didn't care. This type of issue wasn't important. He liked that about himself. What became vital was the cheerleader. He replayed their brief encounter over and over. Had it really happened? If so, what did it mean? One thing for sure, he felt an excitement inside but had no clue how to process it. *Relax*, he thought. She'd be back on the field soon. He'd figure it out and turned in for the night.

Downstairs, Lindsey was delighted on a couple of fronts. She was thrilled with Matty's transformation plus she was developing real feelings for Joe. He made her feel happy and safe. Lindsey let her guard down. As for Joe, he was pleasantly surprised to see the change. He was developing those feelings as well, although he didn't want to rush or pressure her. As Joe was

leaving, there could have been that awkward pause ever-present in these situations. Lindsey was having none of it. She thanked him for coming then immediately hugged and kissed him lovingly. No peck on the cheek. This was legit. Joe reciprocated and they both smiled and blushed. They made plans for dinner and a movie. Joe kissed her once more and both said their goodbyes. As she watched him leave, Lindsey realized she was moving into a new relationship. Life sure has a way of surprising you.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Opening day! The Rams finished third last year, completing their finest season to date. They were scheduled to play the defending champions, the Madison Giants, at home. No cakewalk here. They'd have to play much better than in practice. Everyone was fired-up with anticipation. The stadium was packed. Greeted with boos and catcalls, Madison came out first, their players grinning and jogging to the sideline. On the opposite side of the field a banner was held in place which read *Chelsea High Football 2022*. An air horn let out a mighty blast and the team, led by Brian, shredded it! Exhilarated by the standing ovation and the unabashed cheers from the crowd, the Rams thundered to their side of the field. Matty was psyched. He had never experienced such energy, and was swept up in it. This was going to be a blast!

It was Joe's first game as a head coach. Surely he must be nervous, although he didn't show it. Matty made an effort to avoid eye contact, as Joe had enough on his plate. Matty wouldn't give him any reason to worry about the water boy. There's the kick-off. Game on!

Chelsea had first possession and the start was good. The offense made some crisp plays while marching down the field. The drive stalled at Madison's twenty-five yard line and Chelsea had to settle for a field goal attempt. Matty didn't know the kicker, Scotty Woodland, but thought he

looked pretty shaky. The pressure was intense as Matty held his breath. Thankfully, the kick was sharp and true. Chelsea took the lead, 3-0.

Everyone fist pumped Scotty, while the cheerleaders celebrated the early score. Matty noticed the special one. Gosh, she's pretty and athletic too. The thought passed quickly. He had a job to do. As Matty hustled over, the offense grabbed for his water bottles. Everyone was excited and even Brian was pleased. This excitement turned out to be short-lived.

On the following kickoff, Madison's returner caught the ball a couple of yards deep in his end zone. After some terrific dodging, he was suddenly all alone. He was fast. Lightning fast. He blew everyone away and strolled into the end zone. Touchdown! The Chelsea crowd was stunned, and Joe concerned. They had so many chances to get this guy yet he broke every tackle easily.

With the point-after kick, the visitors were up 7-3. It was way too early to panic. Joe clapped his hands and encouraged the offense, while calmly letting the defense know this was unacceptable. In Joe, Matty saw real leadership. As he offered water to the defense, Matty encountered a different scene. The players barely acknowledged him and were too busy sniping at each other. He was walking on thin ice for sure.

As the game progressed, things didn't improve. Trailing 21-3 at halftime, it was obvious the opposition was better. Much better. Matty kept his focus but the atmosphere was bad. Joe, however, surprised them. He didn't overreact to anything and remained upbeat and encouraging. There'll be plenty of time to address these shortcomings at the next practice. *Right now they need to know I'm with them*, he thought, *win or lose*.

The team's reaction was one of relief and respect. They wouldn't quit and would try harder. The two biggest things a coach needs are maximum effort, and a team that wants to play for him.

It's so easy for the players to tune out a coach, especially if they feel it's a lost cause. This team *wanted* to play for Joe, but that didn't mean it would produce instant results.

During the second half, despite Chelsea's continued efforts, Madison cruised. Final score: Madison 31 Chelsea 17. Joe applauded his team's effort and told them to return Tuesday for practice. He had some changes in mind.

Matty was dreading the locker room environment. He was sure it was going to be awful. Although the mood *was* somber there wasn't any of the abuse Matty expected. Loss or no loss, these are still high school boys. Their thoughts quickly shifted to girlfriends and parties that night. This was the social side of high school, an aspect to which Matty wasn't privy. As the locker room emptied, he finished his work, then quietly went home.

Joe came to dinner that night. Matty wondered how he would react after the disappointing debut. Lindsey knew the result and was curious too. Is he the kind of guy who is consumed with this? Will his mood be affected by the box score? This was uncharted territory and both waited anxiously.

Joe was right on time and greeted Lindsey with a hug and kiss. He shook Matty's hand and hugged him as well. Addressing the elephant in the room, Lindsey asked about the loss. Joe recited a brief overview and stressed it was just one game. He liked the team and the fact they hung in until the end. Joe acknowledged Matty's performance and told him to feel good about his effort. That was it! The rest of the evening was spent talking about mutual interests. After dinner, Matty excused himself and let them have some time alone. He sensed they were grateful. Joe was a good man. Matty felt a paternal tug.

Funny thing about the game. Matty was preoccupied with his duties and barely noticed the one person who was most important, the head cheerleader! Alone in his room, he racked his

brain and tried to visualize her. There were no interactions. Matty would never forget it if there had been. He couldn't clearly recall anything about the cheerleading squad. He did remember in the locker room the players were discussing their girlfriends, evening plans and a brief summation regarding the cheerleaders. He learned this girl actually had a name: Maura Thompson. *M A U R A!* Her name was etched in his mind.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Practice on Tuesday wasn't pleasant. While applauding his team's resiliency, Joe began to make the workouts difficult. More wind sprints, jumping jacks and calisthenics, while rehearsing plays over and over. Matty was working harder as well. With all the exertion, the players needed to hydrate often. Some shouted at him to be quicker, others just grabbed the water, drank, and threw the bottle in his general direction. Brian was more harsh. He not only tossed the bottle farther away, but started throwing those unnecessary bombs again. As practice began winding down, Brian told Joe he needed more time to work on his passing. Nothing could be further from the truth. Brian wanted to torment Matty. Armed with Joe's innocent blessing, the players filed off the field, leaving Brian and Matty behind.

In the locker room, Joe became more explicit with the team. "We need to work harder than the rest as this will be our biggest advantage. We have to outthink, outperform and outlast our opponents. We can't just show up and expect to win." He didn't harp on any negatives and dismissed the team until Wednesday's practice.

Joe returned to his office with plenty to think about. As he sat there organizing his observations it occurred to him that he hadn't seen Brian and Matty. *They aren't still on the field, are they?* He hurried out to find them. When Joe spotted Brian mistreating Matty, he was

angered. Brian didn't know Joe was watching and continued to throw the ball everywhere. The passes were never close enough for Matty to actually catch and it became obvious Brian was just bustin' chops. Joe wanted to intervene immediately, but a voice inside said no. Not yet. This is adversity for Matty and he wanted to see how much this boy was willing to take. You could see Matty becoming agitated and Joe wondered when, or if, he'd stand up to this guy. Brian heaved another bomb further away from Matty. He bent down, grabbed the ball and yelled, "Okay, wise guy, you can get this one yourself!"

Throwing the ball toward Brian it flew over his head and landed ten yards behind him. Joe's jaw dropped! Brian, not to be outdone, grabbed the ball and threw it as far as he could. It landed at Matty's feet. He picked it up and threw it over Brian's head *again*! This made Brian furious. He started running toward Matty.

"Who do you think you are, Bucket?" Brian bellowed.

Time for Joe to end this. He acted as though he hadn't seen anything and yelled, "All right, boys, that's it for today." Brian quickly regained his composure and nodded. He was close enough to Matty and muttered under his breath, "this isn't over."

As Brian jogged by, Joe told him, "Good practice. See you tomorrow." He walked over to Matty and asked, "How long have you been able to throw a football like that?" Matty replied it was the first time he'd ever thrown one. Since Joe was coming over for dinner, he gave Matty a ride home.

"You picked the right night to bring me home," Matty said. "Mom's making meatloaf!"

"Sounds great," Joe replied. Still, he couldn't believe what he'd just seen.

CHAPTER NINE

Joe was becoming a regular at the Gordon house. Before dinner that night, he told Lindsey what had happened. At first she didn't know what to make of it other than she was happy Matty stood up for himself. Joe mentioned there might be future problems between Matty and Brian. He would control them on the field but couldn't keep an eye on things during school hours. As tough as this was to swallow, Lindsey knew her son was going to have to deal with it. She'd always worried about him finding his place in society, and this was another example. Lindsey would ask her peers to keep an eye out but Matty must learn how to handle these instances on his own. They'd talk to him over dinner.

Matty, as it turned out, wasn't focusing on any of this. Yes he'd keep his guard up, but that wasn't a priority. Matty wanted to figure out how to spend some time with Maura. To him it was pretty straightforward. He liked this girl, was in way over his head, and lacked the experience to handle it. Where do you go to find the proper course of action? He was going to ask Joe, but decided against it. He needed to talk to someone his own age. Maybe one of the backups or benchwarmers. They weren't good enough to play, but he'd seen some of them walking and talking with girls. Seems like a good place to start. He excused himself and headed to his room. Time to develop a strategy.

Meanwhile Joe and Lindsey had grown very close. Lindsey wanted more and Joe did too. They discussed moving in together and were committed to making this happen, but wanted to make sure it was okay with Matty. When the time felt right she'd tell him.

CHAPTER TEN

Back at school Matty was hatching a plan. He decided to seek advice from a second-string player, Harry Griffin. If looks determined who should start, Harry would be an all-star! His good

looks didn't transfer onto the field, but off they worked just fine. His locker room nickname was *Handsome Hank*, a name the starters could have fun with but privately envy. They cut him more slack because he was an asset socially. Yup, Handsome Hank was Matty's best bet. Even so, there was some risk involved. How do I ask out the head cheerleader? Harry might find that amusing. If he did, he could alert the starters to curry favor. Matty was nervous. He was crossing a bridge without a clue as to what lurked on the other side. *If I'm this nervous now, how am I going to feel when I take a shot at asking her out?*

Sometimes in life, you put so much pressure on yourself, the bubble finally bursts. Total rejection was worth the gamble, as the stress of not knowing was driving Matty crazy. He would pick his spot and talk to Harry.

Practice on the field went much better before game two. Joe noticed some bad habits forming in the first game and focused on fixing them during the workouts. *Practice doesn't make perfect, practice makes perfect preparation.* The starters all felt pressure with the initial loss and concentrated on improving. Even Brian had little regard for Matty as he was determined to win the next game. Matty was impressed with the leadership capabilities Brian displayed. The starters easily handled the second string and benchwarmers all week. That was a good sign. The team is ready.

By now Matty was looking to isolate Harry for his advice. He still felt uneasy yet committed to getting this done. As everyone filed off the field, Matty grabbed Harry and asked if he could help him with a problem.

Harry was a fan of Matty. He liked Matty's innocence, honesty, and work ethic. "What's going on?" he asked. This was the moment of truth for Matty, so he launched into it. When Harry heard the request, he didn't know what to say. Of course he wanted to help Matty, but didn't want to see

him hurt or humiliated. He could sense this was eating Matty up inside, so Harry decided to help. He told Matty about his own travails with girls, and there was always a fear of being let down. He'd had his share of *thanks, but no thanks* encounters. The important thing was to prepare for rejection and ask in spite of it. Once a girl agrees to a date, the feeling of euphoria is like no other and definitely worth the risk. Now to tackle this specific situation. "The head cheerleader?" he asked. Matty nodded.

"You have to understand she's one of the most popular girls in school. She has her pick of the litter." Despite this Harry decided to open the door. "If you're determined to ask her out, you should." Harry didn't think the brief encounter Matty had with Maura was a sign of anything. He didn't know what her social situation was but the odds weren't good for Matty. To find out, step one was to start saying hello and see what kind of response she gives. "Let me know how it goes," said Harry. "Then, we can move to step two."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Lindsey and Joe were tired of keeping their relationship quiet. They arranged subtle rendezvous during the school day and some of their co-workers noticed. They told Matty how things were progressing, with a feeling both could be more open about it. Lindsey told her fellow teachers she was dating Joe and he did the same. The reaction was overwhelmingly positive! Lindsey's friends were extremely happy for her while Joe's joked about him finally settling down. The couple decided it was time to move in together. They'd tell Matty that night.

Joe was a decent and sensitive man. It crossed his mind the team might treat Matty differently, now that he was taking on the role of a father figure. Joe wouldn't allow it to happen. Matty was a water boy, not another player. How do you favor a water boy? It shouldn't have any

bearing on the team. He also remembered Lindsey's unwavering stance on such things--Matty was going to have to fend for himself. Joe admired her compassion and strength. None of this was easy for her, and he knew it was the right thing to do.

Matty decided to launch into step one of Harry's plan. He intended to acknowledge Maura and wait for any feedback. During the lunch break, Matty was heading toward his locker when he spotted her. She and a girlfriend were walking and chatting together. Matty was so nervous he thought he might faint. His determination, however, was intense. As he prepared to pass them, he somehow heard himself say, "Hi, Maura, how are you?"

While surprised by him knowing her name, Maura was not a prudish person and replied politely. "I'm doing quite well, thanks."

Matty wanted to keep the conversation alive, but his mind was racing, trying to find the right words. "I've noticed you with the cheerleading squad and I think you're all great!" *No*, he thought to himself, *I think you're great*. Matty couldn't believe he wasn't more specific. She thanked him for the compliment and the girls went on their way.

Matty was at a loss for what had happened. Yes he made initial contact with Maura, but what to make of it? On the plus side she didn't recoil, dash away, or ignore him. She *did* answer and smile, but that was the end of it. He hadn't learned anything new and still had no clue if she was socially approachable. He felt let down and surely Harry's reaction would be one of disappointment. He ate his lunch and headed back to class.

Leading up to practice, Harry couldn't stop worrying about Matty. He knew this was a dive into the deep end, and hoped Matty wouldn't sink. Harry spotted him on the field and, once their eyes met, he could see the look of sadness on Matty's face. *Oh no, what have I done?* He hurried

down to join his friend and asked about their meeting. As Matty told him about the encounter, Harry heaved a sigh of relief.

"This is a good beginning," he told Matty. "You didn't expect Maura to ask you out right then and there, did you?" Harry chuckled and Matty felt better. As far as Harry was concerned, step one had gone reasonably well and later they would work on step two. Matty was psyched again!

As practice ended, the team was feeling better about themselves. It had been a good week and their next opponent, the Marblehead Schooners, had finished in the cellar last season. This was a road game, although Chelsea was a solid favorite. Joe delivered a fine pep talk. He instructed them to report tomorrow, at the stadium, by 9:00 a.m. Sharp!

That evening over dinner, Lindsey and Joe told Matty they wanted to move in together and start living like a family. On one hand Matty was pleased to see his mom happy. On the other, he wasn't too naive to understand he may continue to have trouble in the locker room. He had already taken some grief when Brian insinuated Lindsey and Joe were dating. How would it be now that they'd made more solid plans? Matty dismissed the notion. He was glad Joe was joining the family. Matty would never forget his father but accepted Joe as his role model and nodded his approval.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Game day. There was excitement in the air and Matty loved it! He greeted the backups and benchwarmers, the only ones who interacted with him, as everyone climbed onto the bus. The cheerleaders had their own transportation. The girls who had cars, drove themselves. The others either rode with them, or were driven by their parents. Matty looked around for Harry but didn't see him in all the commotion. He knew this wasn't the time to ask Harry anything as

everyone was focusing on the game. There's a nervous energy that's detectable before any game. It entails the hopes and dreams of a great victory, coupled with the nervousness of a disastrous loss. One of Matty's duties was to make sure all of the equipment was loaded onto the bus. Most players placed their bags near him. The backups and benchwarmers either put their stuff away or gave Matty some help. Not Brian. He hadn't forgotten their brief encounter earlier in the week. When Matty's back was turned, Brian threw the bag directly at him, almost knocking Matty over! As he caught himself and looked around, he saw Brian chuckling with a couple of starters. "You got a problem, Bucket?" yelled the quarterback. Matty certainly did but showed great restraint and wouldn't reply. "I didn't think so," Brian snorted and stepped inside the bus.

This game was Marblehead's home opener, with an automatic sold-out stadium. The Schooners had lost their first game on the road and were hungry to get a victory too. They were getting the ball first and, after the opening kickoff, started on their twenty yard line. Chelsea's defense, led by middle linebacker Tony *Big Bear* Kavanaugh, was fired up and shut down Marblehead's drive--three plays and out. The Schooners punted. Chelsea got the ball on its thirty-five yard line. Decent field position.

In football, when the offense lines up, there are usually two running backs near the quarterback. They are there for handoffs during a running play and to protect the quarterback on passing plays. The fullback is usually the larger of the two and he's expected to slow down any defensive rusher, allowing the quarterback enough time to look for his receivers.

Joe was a *pay attention to the details* kind of coach. He'd prep the team for any situation to make sure there were few surprises. Joe immediately felt a sense of dread when the teams lined up. Who was this giant playing middle linebacker for Marblehead? He was listed as six feet, two inches and 190 pounds but looked much larger. Coaches sometimes list their player's height and

weight with all their equipment on, projecting a bigger team than really exists. Joe had never seen it in reverse. Either this kid had a colossal growth spurt or they'd disguised his actual girth. This was going to be a problem. Joe decided to start his offense conservatively, and tried two running plays that went nowhere. On third down Brian threw a short pass, designed to get the ball out fast. The Schooners reacted quickly and the pass fell incomplete. Chelsea punted.

Joe huddled with his offense on the sideline. They were asking him about the linebacker and what to do. A good coach can adjust when he sees things are changing, and Joe was a very good coach. What was going to be an air show by Brian was about to turn into a running clinic to stay away from this behemoth. "We'll be okay," he assured them. Inside he wasn't as confident.

The good news for the Rams was Marblehead had a terrible offense, as their quarterback lacked confidence. When Chelsea applied pressure his decision-making wasn't sound. Chelsea kept the heat on and the Schooners weren't adjusting. Three and out.

There are down times inherent in football. After a failed possession, it takes time for the offenses and defenses to swap off. After touchdowns, kickoffs, or during timeouts, the teams get a chance to regroup. That's when the marching band and cheerleaders take the field. As busy as Matty was with his responsibilities, he wasn't going to miss this. Chelsea's cheerleaders were performing one of their routines while the band accompanied them, to fire up the players and fans. Matty loved everything about this. He watched the cheerleaders, Maura Thompson in particular, as she instinctively led the ensemble and her ability to perform was impressive. Everything seemed second nature to her. If something went wrong she could ad-lib and get everyone back on track. Matty felt himself smiling and he wasn't the only one. As he turned around, he caught Harry's eye, who smiled at him and nodded his approval. Matty blushed and returned to his duties.

Meanwhile the offense was going nowhere. Passing plays found Brian racing around. He wasn't getting enough protection to try anything downfield. In the huddle, he barked at his offensive line and running backs. "Can't anybody handle this guy? Double-team him if you have to. I need more time. Come on, it shouldn't be that hard!"

By halftime, with a scoreless tie, Joe understood there was no way to stop Marblehead's linebacker. Joe rallied the troops and reiterated how important it was to keep trying. Out they trudged for the second half.

It was more of the same for the remainder of the game. Chelsea's only chance was for the *defense* to find a way to score. With under a minute remaining and the Schooners pinned deep in their own end, Joe gambled on an all-out blitz. A blitz is when everyone charges to overwhelm the quarterback or force him into making a mistake. The trouble is if you didn't get to him quickly, he'd find plenty of open receivers down field, ready and able, giving Marblehead the chance of making a great play. As the ball was snapped, Chelsea stormed forward and the Schooner's quarterback didn't have enough time for anything. His instinct told him to back up and try to throw a pass. He retreated into his end zone, but before he could unload the pigskin he was sacked by Chelsea's swarm. A safety. Two points for the Rams! Joe's gamble had paid off. The defense was fist pumping and congratulating each other.

The game ended with a final score of Chelsea 2, Marblehead 0. As relieved as he was, Joe knew he had a big problem. If one of the worst teams can disrupt his offense so easily, what will happen when they face tougher teams down the road? He decided to congratulate his players and enjoy the victory.

During dinner, Joe gave a brief account of the game. He was happy with the win but spotted a serious weakness in his offense--they weren't big enough to handle a really strong opponent. He

wasn't sure of a quick fix as he knew his team very well. Joe couldn't grab a bigger, stronger, backup or benchwarmer. None of his players fit the bill. He was going to have to come up with something fast. Really fast. West Newton was next on the schedule and they were a much better team than Marblehead. "Try not to worry," Lindsey said. "I'm sure you'll figure things out."

As Matty turned in for the night, Joe and Lindsey headed to the front porch. They sat quietly together and gazed at the stars. It was such a beautiful night, but Lindsey sensed a different mood from Joe. He had a serious look on his face. Joe told Lindsey they needed to talk and those words startled her. They're usually a sign of relationship trouble. She nervously smiled and braced herself for what might be coming.

"Lindsey," Joe began, "the last thing I expected was to meet a beautiful woman and fall in love. However," he continued, "that's exactly what happened. I met and fell in love with you. The fact that you have this wonderful boy is an added bonus. Honestly, I've never felt this way before. That is why," Joe said as he knelt on one knee and reached into his pocket, "I'm asking you to make me the happiest I've ever been. Lindsey, will you marry me?"

She couldn't believe her ears! Seconds earlier she felt dismayed, now suddenly Lindsey's wildest dream was coming true. "Of course I'll marry you," she exclaimed. "You have no idea how much I love you!"

He slipped the engagement ring on her finger and they kissed and hugged tenderly. "Lindsey," he asked, "what do you think of getting married now?"

Lindsey was over-the-moon. "Well, Joe, when I married Paul it was a large wedding and a grand event. I don't need that again, unless you want it for yourself." Lindsey suspected a big wedding wasn't on Joe's bucket list.

"I'm fine with a civil ceremony," he replied, "with Matty serving as my best man. I want to make this family official."

Lindsey glided toward him and they embraced.

"I feel so lucky to have found you."

Joe answered, "I'm the lucky one, we're going to have a wonderful life together."

They headed inside and retired for the night.

During breakfast they surprised Matty with the news. "Listen, Matty," Joe began, "I asked your mom to marry me last night and she said yes. Once we wed, you will automatically become my stepson. How would you feel if I adopted you? I'm not trying to replace Paul. I know he had a tremendous impact on your life. However, I love you and want you as my son. What do you think of the name *Matthew Gordon Donovan*?" Matty was ecstatic! Not knowing what to say or do, he hugged Joe. Sure he missed his father but how many kids are lucky enough to have two great dads in a lifetime? "Matthew Gordon Donovan," Matty replied, "I like the sound of that."

Lindsey would invite her best friends, Jennifer Torrey and Summer Richardson to the ceremony. Both were teachers at Chelsea High. Joe would ask a couple of close friends, Troy Fitzgerald and Edward Thornton to attend. They all agreed to meet the next day, after school, at city hall.

The service was short and sweet, followed by dinner at their favorite restaurant. The smile on Joe's face revealed everything. He'd finally found his better half.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Joe felt the need to get something clear from the start. He expected Matty to continue with his water boy duties and told him he was proud of his efforts. "Thanks, Dad," Matty replied. "I like being the water boy. I'm there for as long as you want."

Joe and Lindsey leaked the news about the wedding, and it spread quickly. Their peers felt happy the two had found each other. The response to Matty was muted as most of the student body didn't know him. Much to his surprise and delight, Harry rushed to Matty as soon as he saw him.

"Fabulous news, Matty!" Harry exclaimed. "I couldn't be happier for you."

At practice all the second stringers and benchwarmers took their turns congratulating Matty. It seemed as though everybody was happy for him. Well, not quite everyone. Brian was not pleased and ordered the starters not to approach Bucket. He'd be a teacher's pet for sure. *I don't know how, where or when*, he thought to himself, *but I'm going to be a nightmare for this kid*.

On the field, Joe gathered the team for his assessment. A truly good coach knows when a team needs a boost and when they need a reality check, no matter how bad. "We were manhandled Saturday," he began, "and we're not going to let that happen again! There's enough blame to pass around," he continued, "including my own. I've come up with a new strategy and everyone must be on the same page for this to work." Joe's solution was simple. "We need to be more conservative, no matter how few passing plays we attempt," he remarked. "I'm bringing another player into the backfield to help protect our quarterback." This decision would frustrate Brian. They practiced both running and passing plays with guarding him as the top priority. Joe understood one thing: Brian was a talented player and Joe would need him to accept this new concept.

Brian was not satisfied. He wanted to showcase his ability, and deep down was more narcissistic than the *one for all and all for one* approach. He'd go along with this for now, but if it wasn't working, Brian would revert back to his gunslinging ways.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Things were clicking for Lindsey, Joe and Matty. They decided to move into a larger house, in a cul-de-sac, less than a mile from school. It was beautiful and had plenty of acreage, although most of it needed to be landscaped. Joe was a talented guy and not averse to getting his hands dirty. He told Lindsey he'd do most of the work and would solicit Matty for some help. Lindsey was fine with it. She thought this was a good chance for them to spend more time together. Matty liked being around Joe. A high school boy needs a solid paternal figure during this period of his life. Lindsey was important, of course, but there are certain things you just can't discuss with your mom. They closed on the house later that week, and the painstaking process of moving began in earnest.

After Wednesday's practice, Matty met with Harry to begin step two. Harry's advice was to greet Maura, this time with some talking points in mind. "First," he began, "compliment Maura's cheerleading again. No one tires of praise. Then discuss the football team, school in general or the weather. If she engages you, be a good listener. You may learn something about her you never imagined." Harry knew Matty had a pretty good sense of humor. "If a funny comment appears, don't be afraid to use it. Begin to show her a side of yourself most students don't see. Remember, you have everything to gain and nothing to lose. Who knows, she may be *Miss Right* or maybe not. If it doesn't go well, at least you'll know you tried. One other thing, the experiences you gather with these situations now, the more they will help later. The fallout will

be minor. There aren't many guys who would even approach her. Most would tip their cap at your effort."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

By the time Thursday's practice rolled around it was pretty evident Brian was not pleased with this new system. He felt like a handoff machine, with a pass or two included along the way. Brian decided to tell Joe what was on his mind. "Listen, Coach," he began, "this is my senior year and I'm not sure what kind of scholarships I'll garner with your new outlook. Do you really expect me to abandon my passing skills to try and squeak out wins with low scoring games? It's not who I am."

Joe tried to reassure Brian his plan was sound. "Brian, you saw what happened against Marblehead. They're not a good team yet we only won because they couldn't score. You scrambled around all day. Our schedule has some difficult games ahead and I'm wary of the results if we don't adjust. Give it some time to see if we're heading in the right direction. I'm not afraid of shaking things up, trying different options. If I think this isn't working I'll take another look. Hang in there for now and let's watch how this plays out, okay?" Brian nodded and returned to practice. He disagreed but decided to give it an honest effort.

Matty was ready for step two. Encouraged by Harry's talk, he set out to bump into Maura again. In a perfect world she'd be alone. This situation was hard enough as it is, never mind with another girlfriend or two alongside. It was lunchtime and students could eat in the cafeteria or at designated areas on campus. Matty scoured the mess hall, but didn't see Maura. He headed outside to look around and couldn't believe his luck. There she was, sitting under an elm tree

with not a soul in sight. Matty's pulse started to race. In spite of it, he marched doggedly in her direction. Matty was only twenty feet away when another student cut him off. It was Brian! Mister Quarterback, Mister Cool and supposedly the cherished one of all the girls. He greeted Maura and she invited him to join her. Matty watched motionlessly for a few seconds, just long enough to catch a sly smile from Brian obviously directed at him. Matty threw his lunch away and left. Brian Anderson. There was no competing with him.

Matty didn't know Brian and Maura had dated during their sophomore year. It was brief but they were comfortable enough to have a friendship. There was nothing more to it. Maura hadn't noticed Matty approaching her. She only saw Brian. He knew what Matty was up to. Brian caught him on the sideline staring at Maura and when Matty turned around, he saw Harry nod and Matty blush. This was ammunition! Brian bided his time and waited for his chance. Now was the first opportunity for payback and he grabbed it. Did you really think I'd let you off the hook that easily? Brian chuckled. He got a kick out of every second.

When Lindsey and Joe arrived home that evening they could see something was bothering Matty. At first he didn't want to discuss it, but after some soft prodding from Lindsey, he explained what happened. Lindsey remarked how sometimes things can go awry, especially in high school.

"Kids are growing up and trying to figure out who they are. High school brings the ultimate peer pressure, and there are times when flawed decisions are made. Things are inconsistent and hard to predict. The important thing is to try and learn from them. Don't worry Matty, there are plenty of girls at school and one day you'll meet someone new". Lindsey gave him a hug and kiss as Matty retreated upstairs.

Joe knew about Matty and Brian's near confrontation and felt certain there were nasty intentions present. The thing was, if he got involved, it would surely look like he was protecting Matty. Since when does a football coach bother with the social aspects of a high school student? Joe'd keep an eye on this but making it an issue now would do no good. Without knowing it, however, Brian had tipped his hand, something Joe wouldn't forget.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Friday's practice was the final tune-up before Saturday's game. Joe knew he was lucky to have grabbed the victory against Marblehead. Up next were the New Haven Hawkeyes, who had started their season with two victories. This was Chelsea's second home game, yet would prove to be another difficult test. When practicing it's hard to accurately gauge things. You're not going full tilt and you don't want anyone hurt. Plays are simulated as close to game conditions as possible, while halting the action a handful of seconds after full contact. You can basically tweak your team but still wonder if it will be effective enough in real game conditions.

After the workout, Harry searched for Matty. He was worried about step two. Matty would have to be ready to handle any change in plan. Everything was scripted until Maura responded, after which it would become spontaneous. You never knew what might pop into your head when you're winging it. The chance for a slipup or misunderstanding looms large. Harry spotted Matty and jogged right over. When he asked about step two, Matty told Harry his sad saga.

"What? Harry replied. While not knowing Maura's dating status he was pretty sure she and Brian weren't a couple. As he tried to make sense of it, Harry asked Matty about his relationship with Brian.

"There was one time last year," Matty began, "Brian pushed me into a locker. We didn't know each other and I couldn't understand why. When I became the water boy this year, I had no idea he was on the team. He made a few jokes at my expense, as did most of the starters. Last week after practice, he told Coach he needed to work on his passing. I was enlisted to be his gofer. What he really wanted was to frustrate me by throwing uncatchable balls, knowing I'd have to go get them. Finally, Coach came out and ended it."

Harry smelled a rat and was determined to get to the bottom of this. He told Matty to stay patient and let him look into it. Matty was grateful. Harry was a good ally. Matty felt reassured and would wait it out.

Harry did a little snooping and spoke with enough of the cheerleaders to confirm there was no romance between Brian and Maura. Armed with this information, he needed to figure out how to handle things with Matty. He anticipated Matty's reaction would be one of confusion and anger. Harry needed a well-thought-out response before taking any action.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Game 3. The stadium embraced another full house, while the marching band and cheerleaders performed their productions. Regardless of what else was happening in Matty's life, he loved the pre-game rush of adrenaline. His mind wandered at times, pretending the applause was for him! He would quickly snap out of it, as he had his own tasks to perform.

Joe was anxious for the team. His ability to mask his emotions was quite a gift, but he knew they'd have to be almost perfect to win. It's a lot of pressure to put on anyone. Joe understood a couple of things. New Haven was almost as good as Madison and Brian was a reluctant quarterback. He'd prepared his team the best he could and hoped they were ready.

New Haven kicked off and Tommy Benson returned it to the Ram's twenty-yard line. Joe began the game utilizing three players in the backfield to protect Brian, but the Hawkeyes were quick and physical. Chelsea was having trouble handling them. Joe's defense was solid but his offense struggled to shield Brian. The addition of a third blocker meant one less receiver down field. Brian was clearly frustrated with their inability to move the ball. Joe wondered if his quarterback would stay the course. The teams jogged off at halftime with New Haven leading 13-0.

Although Brian was unhappy, he realized how bad it would look if he suddenly went rogue. Always thinking about college and scholarships, he knew any program could be wary of a loose cannon. He would stick to Joe's plan. Regardless of his *actual* motive, Brian played admirably in the second half. Despite having to rush decision-making while eluding pressure, Brian managed to lead Chelsea to a couple of touchdowns. Try as he might, it wasn't good enough. The final score of 23-14 looked much closer than the game had been. New Haven was never in danger of being caught and played conservatively in the second half, assuring victory.

In the locker room Joe was perplexed. He was convinced more protection would alleviate some of the pressure on Brian. It hadn't. Once again the opponent had strength on their side and Chelsea couldn't compete. Joe thanked his team for playing hard and said they'd meet again at Tuesday's practice.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

While enjoying dinner Saturday, Joe asked Matty if he would help him clear some of the trees and shrubs in the backyard. Matty was enthusiastic. The coach and water boy labels were dismissed at the game's conclusion, replaced with a father and son dynamic.

Sunday brought pleasant conditions as Joe and Matty headed outside. There was plenty to do with shrubs to be uprooted and trees needing pruning or removal. This wasn't going to be easy but Joe was determined and Matty eager to help. Joe was a muscular guy, a former college linebacker who enjoyed the outdoors. The work was strenuous. Matty was a pretty strong boy and had no problem keeping up. Joe complimented him on his assistance and ability to adapt. Working together strengthened their bond. Joe was cutting the tree trunks into three-foot sections, while Matty would place them in a wheelbarrow, then shuttle them into a pile in front of the house. The loads were heavy but Matty was handling them with ease. Later they would fill Joe's pickup truck and bring everything to the town's recycle center.

Harry spent all of Sunday trying to figure out the next move. He knew this whole relationship between Maura and Matty was doubtful at best. He was familiar with Maura and understood her to be an intelligent and mindful girl. He decided to make her aware of the situation, if it was okay with Matty. Harry debated whether or not to include Brian's juvenile attempt to frustrate Matty and concluded Maura should know.

As Monday dawned, Matty was anxious to see what kind of information Harry had gathered. Seeing Brian and Maura together wasn't a mirage. He felt foolish for entertaining the idea that a girl like Maura would be interested in him. Matty's just the water boy and was convinced this would be a sad day.

Harry caught up with Matty as the school day began and told him they'd discuss things during lunch. Matty tried to read Harry's face for any sign, good or bad. All he saw was a blank slate and Matty didn't know what to make of it. During morning classes the time dragged. Matty tapped on his desk waiting for the midday break. Not knowing what Harry'd say was nerve-racking.

Down the hall, Joe was conducting his Advanced History class, but was preoccupied with his team. He caught himself searching for answers. Questions from his students grounded him. Joe really loved all aspects of history and was convinced the only way his pupils could make informed decisions going forward was to explore the past. His topics were always interesting, with the students anxious to learn. There was no conflict of interest, as none of his players were in this class. He'd cut them no slack academically if any were.

Lindsey was having one of her greatest Mondays on record. She was married to a man she was head-over-heels in love with. A man who not only loved her but loved Matty as well. A sense of euphoria was back. Lindsey enjoyed her simplest duties. She caught herself smiling much more than before and looked forward to going home at day's end to catch up with Joe and Matty. Her colleagues were delighted with this turn of events.

During lunch, Harry sat down to discuss with Matty what he wanted to do. Matty admired Harry. For one thing he was a senior, and that class churned out more *big man on campus* candidates than any other grade. Harry had a way with people. He was a good guy and most everyone genuinely liked him. Matty felt whatever plan Harry made he'd be fine with. Harry would set the wheels in motion. He told Matty to keep greeting Maura, but be aware of Brian. He'd be waiting for any opportunity to pounce. Matty told Harry not to worry and thanked him for this advice.

Tuesday's practice provided a chance to assess the team's performance. Joe had no illusions. He didn't have the league's best team, nor its worst. He needed to figure out how to improve. They were working as hard as ever, Brian too, but Joe wanted to see results. The games had been difficult from the start. Saturday's opponent was Hyannis, a perennial doormat who had endured three straight defeats. During the week, Joe decided to give some of the second stringers another

chance, partly to shake things up and also make the starters aware their playing time wasn't guaranteed. They weren't going to be overconfident either, with losses to Madison and New Haven sandwiched around the close victory over winless Marblehead still fresh in their minds.

The cheerleaders fine-tuned their efforts nearby and were finishing up. Subsequently, Harry went looking for Maura. He spotted her and asked if she had a minute to talk.

"Of course, Harry," Maura chimed. "What's up?"

"Matty has a crush on you," Harry began. "He came to me and asked for some advice. I told him not to get his hopes up, but he looked pretty frazzled and I could tell he needed to resolve this. I said to greet you and try to start a conversation. It's why he began talking to you in the first place. I'm sorry for putting you in the middle and would understand if you were upset with me."

Maura reassured him it was okay and not to feel bad. Maybe Matty would have done it on his own anyway. Maura *had* smiled and nodded at Matty weeks before, but it was more of a reflex than anything else. She hadn't given it a second thought. Harry then explained Brian's role and how he went out of his way to undermine Matty.

This was quite a thing to process. Maura told Harry she needed time to think. She understood Matty's situation and was sympathetic. She was angry with Brian for stooping so low. She'd tell him so when she got the chance but her primary focus stayed on point--what to say to Matty. Harry thanked her and jogged away, convinced he should downplay any possibility between Maura and Matty.

Maura was unsure of which way to turn. She had girlfriends with whom she shared and received rumors on a daily basis. This was different. Despite promises of silence, promises Maura had broken as well, she knew once she told anyone, the word would spread and the

accounts would vary dramatically. This needed to be handled carefully. It's a situation where parental guidance might be warranted.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Wednesday's practice grouped the starters and some backups taking turns running the plays. While initially unhappy, the starter's competitive instincts took over and they tried to outdo the second stringers on every snap. The backups, sensing the opportunity, tried to up their games as well. Harry was in the mix. He possessed all the attributes of a star, but couldn't quite make them mesh. During his three seasons prior to Joe's arrival, he'd been given ample time to prove himself. His trouble was consistency. He had none! Harry could go out and make two or three impressive catches, then drop the easiest pass of all. He wasn't clutch and would never be your first option in a crucial situation because you never knew what to expect. Harry couldn't handle the pressure of a big moment. Brian understood, having played with him the past two seasons. Everyone understood. It was why Brian would never look for Harry during crunch time. The receivers and running backs needed to earn Brian's trust. Chelsea's three best receivers, seniors Johnny Watson, Tommy Benson and Leo Mitchell, had proven their mettle. Joe learned this from training camp as well. Harry only played when Johnny, Tommy or Leo needed a break. During this week's sessions Joe would have an open-minded attitude. Harry would get another shot.

Practice confirmed the current linemen and running backs couldn't block well enough to help Brian. Since there was little contact, Brian went untouched. If it had been a real game he would have been sacked often. Joe mixed in the starters and second stringers. It made little difference. The offense couldn't save Brian. Period. Joe was running out of options.

As practice ended, Maura marched toward Brian. "Hey Champ, got a second?" she asked sarcastically.

"Sure," Brian cluelessly replied.

Maura launched into a tirade that caught Brian completely off guard.

"Who do you think you are playing tricks on Matty while using me as an unknowing accomplice? You value everyone's self-worth solely on their ability to play sports? It's a shallow way to judge anyone. Plenty of people aren't physically gifted but they have other talents. If you stopped to understand how much of a risk Matty was taking, I'd like to believe you'd think twice. But you don't bother with that, do you Brian? I wonder if you would have inserted yourself at all if it was another player who had an interest in me, rather than Matty. You have to figure out who you are and what you want to be. The person in front of me isn't anyone I want to be associated with!"

Brian was at a loss for words. "I-I'm sorry Maura," he managed. "I never looked at things that way. Please, Maura. I apologize."

Maura had her doubts. "Oh, yeah?" she replied. "You expect me to believe you? You're just saying what you think I want to hear."

"No, really. I promise, Maura," Brian answered. "It'll never happen again."

"Well, we'll see then, won't we. I want to believe there's a good person inside of you, Brian. I truly do!"

CHAPTER TWENTY

At home, Joe, Lindsey and Matty were settling into their new digs. While Lindsey handled the interior decorating, Joe and Matty were making significant progress in the yard. Joe was learning

just how strong and determined Matty was by slowly adding weight to the wheelbarrow. He seemed unaffected by the additions as he marched down to the pile. *Interesting*, Joe thought. They loaded the truck again. This time Joe let Matty handle the bulk of the work. No problem. Joe placed his arm over Matty's shoulders and they called it quits for the day.

Retiring for the evening, Joe had an idea and decided he wanted Lindsey's input.

"Honey," Joe began, "a thought has been nagging me for a few days." Lindsey's ears perked up and she gave Joe her undivided attention. "I know I've told you about the team and our inability to block. We don't really have a chance to try anything elaborate because our quarterback doesn't have adequate protection. I've noticed over the past week or so just how strong Matty is." Lindsey was laser focused. "If you find this unreasonable then say so, but I'm thinking about having Matty tryout as a running back. Not to actually run with the ball but to help us protect Brian. He's had no coaching, I understand that and I'm not sure if he's capable. However, he's really strong. I mean *seriously* strong. There is a risk to consider. If I do this and he fails, it would haunt him. The starters would be merciless and would ride him hard. He'd probably quit as our water boy. Heck, I don't even know if Matty would be interested in any of this. If he is, I think he might be able to help. What do you think?"

Lindsey's initial shock gave way to her trust in Joe. "My dear," she replied, "if there's one thing I know it's how much you love Matty. That really is the bottom line. I know you would never intentionally put him in harm's way. Do you really believe he could handle it?"

"I'm not sure," Joe responded. "What I think is he's the strongest person associated with the team. If you'd seen him deal with these man-like tasks in the yard, I know you'd agree with me. Keep in mind if Matty doesn't want to, that's the end of it. I'll never ask him again."

This was a lot to take in, but Lindsey didn't feel the need to sleep on it. "Joe, if you believe this is the right way to go, do it. I trust you with Matty as I trust you with myself. If he's up for this, then give him a chance."

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

During breakfast Thursday morning, Joe told Matty what was on his mind. "Son," he began, "I was very impressed with the strength you showed while helping me with the yard work. You're really quite strong and I have a question for you, how would you like to try out for the Rams?"

Matty was baffled. He wondered if he'd really heard what Joe said. "Why would I do that?" he asked. "I've never played football in my life!" Matty wanted some clarity. Joe explained specifically what he had in mind. "Let me get this straight," Matty responded. "You're saying you want me to safeguard Brian to help the team win?"

Joe swallowed hard, knowing the two weren't friendly, and nodded. "Matty, we can't reach our potential unless I have someone who can really protect Brian. Without it we can't succeed. We need someone strong enough to be effective and I think that someone is you."

Matty's first reaction was, *no way! Why should I help Brian with anything? He's been nothing but a thorn in my side since day one.* Matty was about to convey these thoughts when another struck him like a lightning bolt! *If I actually made the team, it's got to help my chances with Maura.* Matty could hardly contain himself. "Sure, Dad! If you think I can do this, I'll give it a go."

His answer brought relief to Joe. Lindsey nodded and smiled. For the next few minutes, Joe detailed how Matty's role would work. There was no time to lose. Matty would have to be taught

as quickly as possible. Joe had no illusions. This could either be very good or an abject failure. Matty's overwhelming response put Joe's fears to rest. Matty understood the risk, only he knew *why* he was willing to take it.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

Maura decided to talk to her parents. She had given Harry her message for Matty, but was unsure of what to say when she saw him. She wanted to be firm but not mean, as Maura liked Matty and dreaded hurting him. Her parents listened, discussed, and offered their opinion.

"Your mother and I feel this is a little more complicated because of Matty's condition," her father said. "Yes, it will be awkward at first but that feeling will diminish with each encounter. Be sensitive and straightforward. He needs to know exactly where you stand. We're confident you'll find the right words."

While Maura felt good with her parent's recommendation, she was still on edge. Her next experience with Matty wouldn't be pleasant and there was no getting around it.

When Matty arrived at school he noticed Harry waiting by his locker. Matty's heart skipped a beat. Harry was there, however, to deliver some disappointing news and he wanted to get it over with as soon as possible.

"Matty," he started, "I talked with Maura yesterday and she told me, while she believes you're a great person, she doesn't have any feelings for dating you. I'm sorry pal."

A sheepish grin crossed Matty's face and Harry didn't know what to make of it. *That's okay*, Matty thought to himself, *she doesn't know I'm trying out for the team*. He thanked Harry for being his advocate, and headed for class. Harry scratched his head as he went on his way.

Thursday's classes couldn't end fast enough. Matty was pumped about this new development and was looking forward to it. He knew the usual suspects would have something negative to say, but his focus remained solid--this will impress Maura!

Finally, the school day was over and it was time for practice. Matty was really excited, knowing he was sitting on a blockbuster announcement. Joe had Matty wait in his office while the other players dressed. When they were all out on the field, Joe gave Matty the equipment he would need. He told Matty to come out when he was ready and stay on the sideline. The players were doing some drills and stretching when Matty emerged from the locker room.

"What in the world is this?" shouted Brian. "Hey, Bucket, why are you wearing that costume? It ain't Halloween!" Apparently Brian's promise to Maura had a short shelf life.

The starters howled. The backups and benchwarmers were confused. Harry was shocked. Matty didn't care. He believed Joe would never purposely put him in a situation to fail.

Joe called the squad together to let them know what was happening. "All right, settle down. It's no secret we haven't protected Brian very well. I'm giving Matty a chance because I think he could help. Understood? We'll run some drills and go from there. Treat him like any other player. Let's go!"

One of the ways to test players is to have two line up opposite each other and see who can get past whom. Simple drill. Most of it is strength. With good technique, however, a smaller player *could* handle a larger one some of the time. Joe didn't want to put Matty in with the starters so he grabbed a backup lineman. He instructed Matty how to get the right stance and blew the whistle. Off they went and bang, Matty leveled him! When the starters saw this, they inched closer.

"Again," hollered Joe. Next attempt, same result. Joe wasn't trying to embarrass anyone so he grabbed another backup and repeated the drill. Matty put him right down and was having fun. *If this is what Joe has in mind*, he thought, *I love it!* Joe had seen enough to satisfy his curiosity.

"Okay, boys," he yelled, "go run some laps. You, too, Matty." Joe watched as the players jogged around the field. Matty had made quite a first impression. *This might work*, he thought. Joe couldn't wait to tell Lindsey.

In the locker room not everyone was impressed. The consensus being Matty had overpowered a couple of second-stringers. Big deal. Brian, never at a loss for words, said as much.

"Listen, Bucket, I hope you don't get the wrong idea. A starter would have squashed you like a bug. If you think you're going to actually play then you're delusional!"

Matty refused to engage and the murmuring subsided. He thought how ironic it was having him play to make the game easier for Brian.

Joe spent most of Friday tutoring Matty. He showed him different stances and techniques, which forced a defender into the direction he wanted and how to win these one-on-one battles with quickness and skill. Matty was handling it well. Joe put a couple of starters against him and Matty either held them off or overpowered them. As impressive as this was, there was no way Joe was going to play him this soon. Matty needed another week to get ready. As the players headed for parts unknown, Harry caught up with Matty.

"Jeez, Matty," Harry began, "I didn't know you could play like that!"

"Neither did I," Matty replied.

"I don't know if many players could shake off one of your blocks, you're a pretty strong guy."

Quickly changing the subject, Matty blurted out, "What do you think Maura will say now? I'm going to be more than a water boy. Maybe she'll reconsider."

This troubled Harry. He knew it wouldn't make any difference to Maura. Rather than respond, Harry allowed Matty to enjoy the moment. The reality check would come soon enough.

Chelsea's next game would be against the Hyannis Cyclones. The team was still working hard although deep down they knew the Cyclones were no match. Despite their confidence, there was pressure. The Rams *had* to win, knowing another loss could possibly eliminate any playoff hopes.

Later that day, Harry ran into Maura and told her what was going on.

"Are you telling me Matty's going to play for the team?" she asked.

Harry replied, "It's not a hundred percent certain, but based on what I've seen at practice, it sure looks like it. One more thing," he continued, "even though I gave Matty your message, things aren't resolved. He's all fired up. Matty's going to ask you out again."

"Oh, dear," Maura replied. "Don't worry Harry, I've got this."

Back home, Lindsey was anxious to hear about Matty's progress. Joe told her things had gone exceptionally well. Although he didn't know how much Matty would eventually play, he was definitely good enough to be on the team. Lindsey was beaming! She was proud of her son and made sure he knew it.

During dinner, Joe had one last request. While assuring Matty he was on the team and would wear a uniform for the remainder of the season, Joe didn't have enough time to find Matty's replacement before the Hyannis game. "Will you continue to be our water boy one last time?" Joe asked.

"Not a problem," Matty said. "You're the reason I'm with this team. Whatever you need, works for me!"

Joe was delighted. "That's great, Son. Thank you."

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

Game 4. Chelsea traveled to Hyannis for a battle they would surely win. In the locker room Matty was setting up, going about his duties. It didn't take Brian long to start squawking.

"Hey, Bucket, I'm glad to see Coach has come to his senses and put you back on the job that suits you. This team doesn't need you to play," Brian railed. "What a joke." Matty didn't respond.

From another part of the room came a familiar voice. "Hey, Brian," Harry shouted, "why don't you lighten up?"

Brian whirled toward Harry. "Now, what," Brian fumed. "This from the guy who couldn't catch a cold! What's up, Harry, you've got something to say to me?"

Now Harry wasn't intimidated by the likes of Brian. Physically they were equal. He stood up and stared Brian down. "Yeah, Brian," Harry snarled, "come closer, I've got plenty to say."

Brian sensed this was trouble. The look in Harry's eyes told Brian all he needed to know: don't go there. "Whatever," Brian barked and returned to his locker.

Joe stepped out from his office.

"All right, boys, Hyannis is a team we should beat. If we give less than our best, this game could slip away. Stay committed and let's get this done!"

Chelsea kicked off. When Hyannis fielded the ball at the goal line, their returner danced and weaved his way upfield. Before the crowd could settle in, he was gone. Touchdown! The Cyclone fans roared! *No, not another kickoff returned for a touchdown*, Joe thought. If you were

unlucky, this might happen once a year. For Chelsea, it was the second time in four games. They hadn't laid a glove on the returner. Joe was not happy but looked unfazed. He approached the defense to ask what the heck happened. Joe's question was rhetorical. "Come on, boys," Joe snapped. "Get your heads into the game!"

Fortunately for Chelsea, Hyannis wasn't very good. Brian got the offense rolling seamlessly, with a mixture of running and passing plays. The Cyclones weren't very big up front, so their ability to get pressure on Brian was negligible. Chelsea scored early and often. With the Rams leading 24-7, they were on cruise control. Joe had the luxury of substituting some backups, who were more than capable of handling Hyannis' starters. During a few of Chelsea's plays, Brian's primary target should have been Harry. For some reason he wasn't, and Joe took notice. Brian was lighting it up with the other receivers, so there wasn't much to complain about. He tucked it away for now. The clock wound down to zero, signaling halftime.

"Okay, boys," Joe addressed the team, "after that initial hiccup, we played a strong first half. I like what I'm seeing. Let's have more of the same going forward and we'll be fine. This is no time for a let down." Joe stepped into his office to finalize his second half strategy.

By the middle of the third quarter it became clear Chelsea could dominate at will. Joe was not the type of coach to run up the score and went exclusively with his second stringers, giving his starters a well-deserved rest. Chelsea's backup quarterback, Mike O'Brien, hadn't played a snap in the first three games. Suddenly, he was afforded all this playing time and making the most of it. No matter how well he performed Mike knew he was no threat to replace Brian. But it was great fun to actually play! For the most part Chelsea ran the ball, eating up the clock. However, Mike made some nice passes, especially two toward Harry for touchdowns. Joe noticed Harry had no trouble getting open and didn't make any damaging drops. He seemed unusually focused.

I wish he was always locked in like this, Joe thought. When Harry applied himself, he was excellent. Final score 41-7. At last Chelsea had shown their potential. Whether or not this would continue, was yet to be determined.

Harry had played well and made his presence in the locker room much more noticeable. Teammates gathered around to congratulate him with fist pumps and pats on the back. Brian had plenty of opportunities to join in, if so inclined. He didn't.

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

Sunday morning, Lindsey rewarded her boys with a fine breakfast. They discussed Saturday's game and Joe was satisfied with the victory. The team was competitive and Matty would become a part of the game plan. Joe reached under his chair and pulled out a shirt. It was a dark green player's jersey with Chelsea, in gold lettering, emblazoned across the front. The back sported the name Donovan with the number 31.

"Consider yourself a player now," Joe said. "During this week's practices, you're a part of the offense." Matty was thrilled.

Lindsey couldn't hide her enthusiasm as she hugged and kissed her boy. "Well, what are you waiting for?" she said. "Try it on!"

Matty proudly slipped into the jersey. He gave Joe a hug. "Thank you, Dad. Thanks for everything." He asked if he could be excused. Lindsey nodded and smiled. Matty bounded up the stairs and into his room.

Monday morning saw Matty standing by his locker. He couldn't wait to surprise Maura with the big news. His upgraded status was an open secret for the team, and would become official

during Tuesday's practice. Matty knew Harry told Maura he was trying out. Now there was tangible proof he'd made it. *She has to be impressed*, Matty thought to himself.

Maura, on the other hand, was readying herself for what would surely be an uncomfortable situation. She was worried about hurting Matty's feelings, but felt a sense of urgency to be done with it. She headed for Matty's locker knowing he would be there before the first bell. As Maura turned the corner, she and Matty spotted each other. "Hi, Maura," Matty cried out, "come here, I want to show you something!" Maura wanted to get right to the point but waited patiently as Matty unveiled his team jersey. "How do you like this?"

"Oh, Matty, it's wonderful!" she replied. "When Harry told me you had a chance of making the team, I couldn't believe it. What you've done is amazing! Now, as thrilled as I am for you, Matty, I need you to understand something. This doesn't change the way I feel about us. There's no doubt you're a great guy, but you and I won't be dating. You can bet I'll be cheering you on with the other girls Saturday, and I can't wait to see you play."

She clenched her fists and waited for his answer. Surprisingly, Matty took it in stride. He told Maura, though disappointed, he understood her decision. He neglected to mention his determination to become impressive. Matty figured Maura would be more amenable once he shined on the field. Matty thanked her for speaking with him and Maura turned and walked away relieved. *That was a hard thing to get through*, she thought to herself. *At least it's over*. In Matty's mind it was anything but.

Between mid-morning classes, Harry caught up with Matty. Maura had told him what happened and he wanted to make sure his friend was okay.

"I'm all right, Harry," Matty said. "What I want *you* to know is how much I appreciated your standing up to Brian. You really are a great friend."

"Not a problem," Harry replied. "Brian's had this coming for a long time. Do you think he got my message?"

"I think the whole team got your message," Matty said, chuckling.

Tuesday's practice was a coming-out party. Matty's teammates had seen what an asset he was in the backfield and their attitude toward him changed. Brian wasn't thrilled but wouldn't rock the boat as long as it worked.

For the entire practice Matty ran drills with the first unit, and with each snap he improved. He took on linemen, linebackers and blitzing players with confidence. For the most part he could negate any advancement, as well as knock opponents to the ground. Joe was encouraged. He was impressed with Matty's ability and very proud of his son.

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

Next up on the schedule were the Wilmington Cowboys. They were tied with the Rams and would be much more dangerous. Chelsea would be tested. This was their second consecutive road game and securing a win would be difficult. Practices ran smoothly all week and Joe was feeling very good about their chances.

Matty noticed Maura at times during the cheerleader's workouts. He would wave and she smiled. Despite their conversation, Matty mistook this as encouragement.

Saturday arrived and Joe decided to drive with Lindsey, even though it meant there'd be no supervision on the team bus. When Matty climbed on, there was chatter among the starters and

they offered him a seat. Matty spotted Harry and immediately grabbed the seat next to him.

"That's okay," Matty replied, "I'm comfortable right here."

There was no way Matty was going to abandon Harry. Not for anyone or anything. If Matty's status had moved up a few rungs, he wasn't going to forget where he had been weeks earlier. Matty continued to make time for the backups and benchwarmers, as they had been his glue from the start.

Kickoff! Game 5. Chelsea received the ball and after a solid return started on their thirty-yard line. From the beginning, Joe decided to be aggressive. He wanted to see how productive this offense would be. Matty's role was to protect Brian when he was passing and create openings on running plays. He would lead the way for fullback Danny King by nailing opposing linemen and creating space. To say this initial drive was a success would be an understatement! Matty could take on any opponent in every situation. Brian, who was used to being rushed, suddenly enjoyed the handful of seconds he needed to read the field. Joe called for a combination of passing and running plays, gauging their effectiveness. The strategy paid off. Chelsea marched downfield to the two-yard line. In a final push, Brian handed off to Danny while Matty generated a huge opening, allowing Danny to dash into the end zone. Touchdown! The point-after kick was good, making the score 7-0. Matty jogged over to the sideline exchanging fist pumps with everyone. Even Brian patted him on the helmet. Matty saved the last fist pump for Harry, as they both took in the moment.

"We might have a good team after all." Harry said.

"Heck, yeah," replied Matty.

Lindsey hadn't been to any games. Football was not her thing. The large stadiums, crowds, and screaming did not appeal to her. Now that Matty was playing, you couldn't keep her away. In the beginning, it was almost unbearable. The players looked enormous! What if Matty gets hurt? It's a feeling every player's parents must endure. But in short order, Lindsey was on her feet cheering with the rest of them. She surprised herself with how vocal she became. This new atmosphere was exciting. Matty was shining and smack in the middle of it! She was glued to the game and knowing parents smiled and nodded. Lindsey was officially a football mom.

The tone of the defense was set from the beginning. The Ram's defenders, always the strength of the team up to this point, continued their fine play. Anything Wilmington's offense tried, Chelsea handled easily. Once the Rams had the ball, Matty's blocking was *spectacular*. Brian had enough time to succeed on any play. Chelsea's fans were rockin'! The score soared to 24-0 by halftime.

In the locker room, Joe was enthusiastic but measured. "That was as fine a first half as we've ever played. Now, let's not get overconfident. We can't afford to let them back into the game." As was his custom, Joe went into his office to refine his plans for the second half.

"Matty," Brian volunteered, "you're as good a blocker as any teammate I've ever had. You keep playing like this and the sky's the limit." The team rallied around Matty, but leave it to Brian to find a way to get a dig in. "Heck, the way we're playing, we may even use Harry out there," he chuckled.

"You never know, Brian," Harry quipped. "Stranger things have happened!"

The entire team laughed, negating Brian's jab. Matty smiled and gave a knowing nod. *I don't care whatever happens*, Matty thought, *Harry's my friend forever*.

During the second half, Chelsea continued their dominance. Even though Wilmington was much more of a threat than Hyannis, when the score reached 31-0, Joe started sending in his backups. Enter the Mike and Harry show! Mike was psyched to be quarterbacking again, in real-time situations. He didn't have the size or arm strength of Brian but was more than capable of throwing short, error-free passes. The Rams ran the ball more than tossed it, however Mike and Harry connected on a few stellar plays. Joe didn't read much into this, which was the correct assessment. When leading by a wide margin, the pressure is off and makes it much harder to grade the action. By the end of the third quarter, with Joe emptying his bench of backups, Wilmington basically conceded. With a final score of 38-0, Chelsea had thrust itself back into contention!

Lindsey waited anxiously for her boys. She was overwhelmed by the hugs and compliments from other player's parents. As Matty and Joe approached, Lindsey called out, "That was fantastic! Who knew you were so good?" As the three shared a laugh, Lindsey threw her arms around them.

"Thanks, Mom," Matty replied, "*it was* fantastic!"

"You played a great game, Son," Joe said.

"The crowd was roaring, Dad," Matty replied. "Did you hear them?"

"You bet I did, and you were the difference. The offense is much more powerful now. You were great. I do want to caution you. The fans cheering today won't be content with anything less than a win. We are never as good as we think, nor as bad. The truth usually lies somewhere in the middle. Just to be clear, you accomplished more today than anything I could have imagined! I couldn't be more proud of you."

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

Sunday morning's Church services held quite a surprise as Matty was showered with more fist pumps and hugs than ever. This congregation was generally a happy lot, even more so now that life had changed dramatically for Lindsey. She'd spent many hours worrying if her son would fit in. It never occurred to her Matty may one day thrive.

Returning to school Monday, Matty understood Maura wouldn't throw herself at him because of a football game. He remembered Harry's previous advice--it's better to become friends with a person and, if something romantic develops, great! Matty was determined to know more about Maura and the only way was to engage her frequently.

During lunch Harry met up with Matty. They discussed Saturday's game. Harry was blown away by Matty's strength and his ability to change pace quickly.

"I really feel like a wrestler out there," Matty said. "For me, Wilmington was a team of wrestlers and I only needed to deal with a few. What really surprised me was the reaction from the student body. I never knew how many of them were following our team. We're so popular!" Matty switched gears. "Do you think Maura will look at me differently now that I'm a starter?"

Harry thought it was time to be more forceful. "Listen, Matty," he began, "I wouldn't become too hopeful regarding Maura. I agree having her as a friend is nice, but don't read too much into it. She's not going to change her mind about dating you. Remember this: *there are plenty of fish in the sea.*"

Matty nodded and sighed but was not convinced. As Matty's friend, Harry had done all he could. He'd said his piece. He would only broach the subject again if Maura brought it up. For Harry, it was case closed.

The players were sky high at Tuesday's practice, basking in the afterglow of Saturday's big win. It was up to Joe to ground them. "Listen, guys," he began, "Saturday was great but it's time to turn the page. We have three wins and two losses. If we're to qualify for the playoffs, I believe we need to win four out of our last five games. The entire league was surprised by Saturday's blowout and you can be sure our opponents will be scouting us more thoroughly. Now, let's get out there!" Joe drilled them as hard as ever. He knew they'd have to be even better going forward.

In the locker room, Brian said he wanted to make an announcement. He was such a loose cannon, anyone or anything was a potential concern. Oblivious as to where he would go, the backups, all except Harry, and benchwarmers ducked for cover. "Listen up," he commanded. "Everyone gets a nickname. Once this has been decided, it never changes. We're about to make an exception. We all know Matty's nickname is Bucket, which seemed appropriate at the time. Because of Saturday's game, I move we strike it and rename him *Ironman*. He's as solid as an iron wall and deserves this recognition."

Caught off guard, the players let it sink in. Suddenly the room exploded! His teammates stood and cheered. *Ironman*, thought Matty, *now that's a keeper!*

On the occasions Matty bumped into Maura, he downplayed any interactions. She had congratulated him on his eye-opening debut, but Matty understood it was just a compliment. Harry told him there wouldn't be a relationship with Maura. *I get it*, Matty thought, *but I want more.*

CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

Game 6--The Highland Tigers. With a record of two wins and three losses, the Tigers were no pushover. Their losses had all been close games and their wins were by wide margins. It's a home game for Chelsea, although Joe wasn't about to let them become complacent. Practice during the week was intense and the team thrived. Matty loved the process remembering Joe's motto: *preparation above all else*. You couldn't predict exact situations during the game but you *could* be on guard for anything, if well-schooled. This game would be demanding, delivering another cliffhanger for the parents to endure.

Chelsea kicked off and pinned Highland on their ten-yard line. The defense was more than ready and stopped the Tigers quickly. Highland punted. Chelsea received the ball at mid-field and the offense trotted out to the huddle.

"All right," Brian said, "let's show these guys we came to play!"

After a couple of short runs, Chelsea was in a third down and six-yard situation at the Highland forty-four. Brian's favorite receiver was Leo Mitchell. Leo was very fast and at times made the game look easy. Brian hit him with a short pass over the middle, designed to secure a first down. Highland didn't react quickly enough and, after a few clutch blocks, Leo was gone. Touchdown! The game had barely started and the score was 7-0.

Chelsea controlled the offensive and defensive sides of the ball and their efforts resulted in a blowout. Brian was brilliant, finding open receivers time and again. Danny had a solid day, rushing for 113 yards. Matty's blocking was superb, the kind of effort the team had come to expect. Mike replaced Brian for the fourth quarter. Joe's plays were conservative and time-expending. Game over. Final score, 29-13.

In the locker room the players were buzzing. The atmosphere had changed since their second loss. Joe was complimentary and pleasantly surprised by their level of play. He was beginning to think this team had a chance of becoming something special.

"Great game, boys," he acknowledged. "Now enjoy the weekend, be careful and get ready to go on Tuesday."

Like most things in life, good times bring good moods. Everyone was excited as they discussed their weekend plans. Out of the blue, Brian told Matty there was a party that night, a backyard cookout at cheerleader Lennon Grasselli's house.

"We'll all be there," Brian said. "You should come."

Matty was only fifteen and the median age was seventeen. Having been invited by Brian was a big deal. Harry shot Matty a thumbs-up. As long as his parents were okay with it, he was in.

With little back and forth, Joe and Lindsey gave their approval. They knew Harry would be around and would watch over Matty. Like every parent, they crossed their fingers and hoped for the best. Matty, Lindsey, and Joe were about to get a taste of high school society, up close and personal. Were they ready?

Harry picked Matty up at 7:00 p.m. Matty was excited, but a little nervous about the unknown. Harry reassured him. "Not to worry, pal. Everything's going to be fine."

Upon arrival, Matty and Harry were greeted enthusiastically by Lennon. "Welcome, guys," she said, "make yourselves right at home."

In the spacious backyard, a grille and picnic table had been set up. Next to them, a barrel of ice chilled the bottles of water and soft drinks. Harry stuck with Matty. As they roamed around, the whispers and pointing had been replaced with handshakes and fist pumps. It hadn't dawned

on Matty that his status had been elevated. He was now a starter on the varsity football team and this carried a lot of clout! In no time, Matty was engaged in light conversation with the other guests, mostly football players and jocks. Plus cheerleaders. There were lots of girls here. One of them happened to be Maura. Seeing her made Matty's heart skip a beat. Sensing this, Harry reeled him in. He told Matty to enjoy the whole party and not to place his entire focus on Maura.

Occasionally, a girl would approach Matty and strike up a conversation. Some complimented his football performances while others spoke of general occurrences at school. This was new, yet Matty would talk to anyone. Harry lagged behind and watched Matty's confidence grow. He advanced from an apprehensive participant to a downright engager! Harry had become the ultimate big brother and would always have Matty's back.

Matty wandered inside and noticed an elaborate game room in the basement. It had a pool table, dartboard, Ping-Pong table, and a video game player. A dozen or so teenagers were wrapped up watching a game of pool. Matty noticed no one was using the video player and dove right in. This was familiar territory. As Matty was navigating his way around the many roadblocks, eliminating zombies and defending turf, a few of the party-goers gathered to watch. "Man, this guy can play," Matty heard one proclaim. A crowd gathered, cheering him on with each accomplishment. Matty was in his ruling world and loved it! Harry and Maura followed the noise and witnessed the spectacle. With so much fascination, it was hard to get close. Matty's new fans applauded as he became the focal point. At game's end, Matty had crushed all virtual opponents. "The same as he does on the football field," Lennon volunteered. The crowd toasted him and cheered.

When the applause finally subsided Matty spotted Maura and Harry and joined them. He was so excited, Harry thought he might hyperventilate.

"Someone grab a paper bag," he teased.

Maura added, "My word Matty, is there anything you can't do?"

They spent the rest of the night mingling outside. As the clock approached 10:00, Harry gently reminded Matty it was time to go.

"No problem," he replied. Matty wanted more access to this world and coming home late would jeopardize it. They thanked Lennon for a wonderful night.

Maura went out of her way to address Matty. "You're just full of surprises, aren't you, Matthew Donovan. I'm going to keep an eye on you."

Matty floated to the car and Harry delivered him home, right on time.

CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

Sunday morning, Matty awoke feeling downright giddy. Did last night's party really happen or was it a dream? He scooted downstairs and found Lindsey and Joe enjoying breakfast.

"I've made pancakes and eggs," she told Matty, "if you're interested that is." She was teasing for sure. They were Matty's two favorites, and he would gobble them up anytime he could.

"Absolutely!" he cried.

Joe and Lindsey nodded to each other and Lindsey began.

"Well, Matty, how was the party?"

"It was unbelievable," he started. "I had so much fun. It's hard to explain."

"Try," Joe laughed.

With that, Matty launched into a detailed version with Lindsey and Joe hanging on every word. "Well," Matty replied, "Harry was my wingman for the better part of an hour. While I was feeling my way around the yard he introduced me to his friends. Maura was there and I had a

chance to talk to her as well. Later I walked into the house. There was a sports complex downstairs and I watched everyone playing pool, darts and Ping-Pong, until I discovered an unattended video box. I used it and was doing pretty well. I noticed some of the kids gathering around me. At first I was a little nervous but managed to calm down and played the best I could. And I was *really* good. As I cruised through the different levels, you wouldn't believe the cheering and applause. I couldn't believe it myself. The time flew by until it was nearing ten o'clock. Harry told me we needed to go and so we left. This was the best night of my life!"

"That's wonderful!" Lindsey exclaimed.

"We're delighted for you, Son," Joe added.

"It was great, Dad. I can't wait for another one!"

The next day, Maura was proactive. She phoned Karen Austin, a sophomore cheerleader with plenty of talent.

"Hi, Karen," Maura began, "may I talk to you?"

"Of course," Karen replied.

"I have this predicament. A sophomore has a crush on me and I let him down as gently as I could. He's a good guy and I feel badly about the situation. He was the water boy on the football team but now he actually plays."

Karen interrupted. "Are you talking about Matty Donovan?"

Maura answered, "Yes. How did you know?"

"All the girls know," Karen replied. "It's quite a story and more than one of us thinks he's cute. Why do you ask?"

"Well, I guess I'd feel better if I could find him a date," Maura responded. "He's shy and would never take the initiative."

"That's fine with me," Karen remarked. "I'd love to have a date with Matty."

"You're aware he has Down syndrome, right?" Maura asked.

"I am," Karen countered. "That's not all he has. When I look at Matty, I see a kind person, one who is happy and enjoys himself. Someone I know I'd have fun with. The problem is I haven't started dating and don't know what to do!"

A greatly relieved Maura told Karen not to worry and promised to help with everything.

CHAPTER TWENTY NINE

Monday morning brought more praise as the school day began. It seemed like everyone wanted a part of Matty, and he gladly accepted the support. He bumped into Harry who was watching the show.

"Looks like you're the big man on campus now," Harry remarked, as they burst into laughter.

"Who'd have expected this?" said Matty.

"Let's enjoy it while we can," Harry cautioned. "It's hero to zero in this game. They love us when we win. When we lose, not so much."

"Not to worry, Harry," Matty replied. Harry smiled as they fist pumped and hurried off to their classes.

At Tuesday's practice the Rams were flying high. With a 4-2 record, they roamed the field with their chests pumped out.

"All right, everyone," Joe began, "you have a right to feel good about the victory. Remember, we have another big game Saturday. Let's get back to work."

As Matty's confidence grew, another side began to emerge. He became more engaged. Encouraging the starters for sure, but more so with the backups and benchwarmers. He would openly applaud good plays by both and would shout for more. Initially surprised, the starters followed his lead. They began helping their less talented teammates to their feet and became more respectful of them. Joe noticed and thought to himself, *I just might have a real leader here.*

After practice, Matty walked over toward the cheerleaders. Maura was running the show and her expertise was on full display. When the time was right he spoke up.

"Hi, Maura," he began. "You really are leading a wonderful squad."

"Thank you, Matty," she replied, "you're doing very well yourself. As a matter of fact, if you have a minute, there's someone here I'd like you to meet."

Maura introduced Karen to Matty. Karen blushed, and Matty was smitten. He thought she was very pretty and seemed genuinely happy to meet him.

"I know we didn't get a chance to talk at Saturday's party," Karen said. "I watched you playing a video game. It was impressive."

Matty felt himself blush and downplayed his skill. "I've watched you, too," Matty fibbed. Until now the cheerleading team had been a one-girl show. Matty was so busy watching Maura, he hadn't noticed anyone else. "I'm convinced the cheerleaders inspire us to play our best."

"It's easy when they have a player like you!" Karen replied.

Their back and forth lasted fifteen minutes. Matty hadn't noticed how Maura quietly slipped away. He was feeling a bit unsure, but given all the nerve-racking situations he'd faced lately, Matty figured what's one more. He fought back any doubts and asked Karen if she'd like to go to the movies on Sunday.

"I'd love to, Matty, " she answered.

"You would?" Matty asked.

"Absolutely. I'd love to."

Matty was elated! He remembered another Harry-ism: *When you ask a girl out and she agrees, the thrill you'll receive is like no other.* Harry sure knows his stuff. Karen and Matty said their goodbyes, agreeing to talk after Saturday's game.

Arriving home, Karen told her parents, January and Maximus, about the date. They looked at each other with concern. For them, this was an uncomfortable situation. They were happy Karen's social life was beginning, but apprehensive of any unwelcomed encounters regarding Matty's condition.

"Karen, your father and I know how popular Matty has become," Jan began. "We want to remind you there are people who can be cruel toward anyone who is different. Remember it's their insecurity that fuels this immature behavior."

While appreciating their warning, Karen quickly dismissed it. "I'm confident the second you meet Matty, your concerns will melt away. You're in for a treat!"

CHAPTER THIRTY

Practices on Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday were intense. The Rams were gearing up for their next opponent, the Richmond Pirates. With a 3-3 record they were capable. This would be a road game which always presented formidable surroundings.

Waiting at Richmond Stadium was another voracious crowd, firing up the Pirates! Lindsey and her friend Jennifer, whose son Sean was the Ram's center, were seated with the other parents. The mothers had become a sorority of sorts and shared the stomach-wrenching as a unit.

"Wow this crowd is deafening, I can barely hear myself!" Lindsey shouted.

"Don't worry," Jennifer said, "we'll get through this together."

The game was tightly contested throughout. Richmond had a very good offense and, despite the Rams stout defense, managed to score on a couple of occasions. Chelsea kept pace with Danny rushing for a touchdown and Tommy Benson making a truly acrobatic catch for another.

In the locker room during halftime, Big Bear barked at the defense. "Come on," he cried, "we can overpower this team. A loss is unacceptable!"

Brian added. "We'll do our part on offense, but we're not worried about the defense. You guys are the best."

Joe was matter of fact. "If we execute well, we win. It really is that simple. Keep plugging away and we'll be fine."

In the stands the parents were becoming fidgety. "I'll tell you something," Big Bear's mom, Courtney Kavanaugh, offered, "when they lost two of their first three games, I was fine. Now that they're good, I'm nervous all the time." The mothers laughed. It was just the relief they needed before play resumed.

During the second half, both offenses had ample opportunities to score, and made good on a few. The game was tied 28-28 with four minutes remaining.

In the huddle, Big Bear went berserk. "We need to stop them right now!" he demanded. "We haven't played our best but that's over. We've got to give our offense a chance to pull this out."

Richmond was on their thirty-yard line with plenty of ways to bleed the clock. Their goal was to score with no time left. Chelsea had to take a couple of timeouts during the drive to conserve precious seconds. Things were going according to Richmond's plan when they faced a third and five on Chelsea's twenty-eight-yard line. The Pirates were in good position to attempt a field

goal. Time remaining: sixty seconds. Chelsea geared up for what would surely be a running play. The Rams charged to clog the line. Surprisingly, Richmond's quarterback retreated and looked downfield for any open receivers. He quickly spotted one. For the spectators this game-changing play became obvious. Lindsey closed her eyes. She couldn't bring herself to watch. Somehow, Big Bear managed to get close enough to tip the pass skyward and dove gallantly, stretching for the ball. Interception! The Chelsea fans stared in disbelief, then exploded! The offense streaked onto the field.

It was Ram's ball on their thirty-five yard line with forty seconds remaining. Brian took charge and laid out his plan. "We're going to move the ball downfield as far as we can and give Scotty a chance to win this. We've got one timeout left and we have to be smart. Let's go!"

All of the plays would be passes. Incompletions would stop the clock. Completions near the sidelines, where a player could step out of bounds, would do the same. Richmond knew this and put blanket coverage on Chelsea's receivers.

Brian fooled them by handing off to Danny. Matty opened a gaping hole, allowing Danny to sprint twenty yards upfield to Richmond's forty-five yard line. Not wanting to use his last time out, Brian rushed the offense into place and spiked the ball to stop the clock. Twenty seconds left.

The Chelsea fans screamed while Richmond's defense tried to regroup. Brian was calling plays quickly, not allowing the Pirates enough time to catch their breath. His next attempt was a sideline pass toward Johnny Watson. Brian overthrew it and the ball sailed harmlessly out of bounds. Eleven seconds to go. Brian knew he had one more chance before Chelsea would have to attempt a field goal from wherever. There was no downside. If Scotty missed, time would expire and the game would head into overtime. Brian still had one timeout in his pocket. *Bread*

and butter, he thought to himself, *Leo over the middle*. The pass was complete but Leo had little wiggle room and was immediately tackled at the Richmond thirty-seven yard line. Joe called his final timeout.

"Not close enough," Brian muttered to himself. He figured to add an additional five or six yards on that play. Field goal time, with five seconds remaining. A forty-five yard attempt. As Brian jogged off the field he whispered, "You can make this Scotty." Scotty nodded as he and Mike trotted into position.

Lindsey and Jennifer felt as though they were in their third trimesters.

"This is too much!" Jennifer exclaimed. She and Lindsey clutched each other. Chelsea's fans held their collective breath accordingly as the play unfolded.

Sean's snap was accurate and the kick pure. As soon as Scotty nailed it, he knew the game was over. The ball sailed through the uprights--the kick was good! Total bedlam on the field and in the stands! Chelsea had squeaked out the victory, 31-28. After the Rams mobbed Scotty, Sean and Matty lifted him up on their shoulders and carried him off triumphantly.

Joe was thrilled but kept his feelings at bay. He walked out to meet the opposing coach, Jordan Williams. They congratulated each other for a well-played game with Jordan adding, "You tell Big Bear he can play for me anytime."

In the stands the parents were wiped out. Jennifer, Lindsey, Courtney, and Summer could finally relax, but their stress meters were off the charts. "Unbelievable!" Courtney exclaimed. "This team never ceases to amaze me."

"You know," Summer mentioned, "obviously we adore our boys whether they win or lose. But I have to tell you, I could get used to this winning thing." The foursome laughed and set off to find their spouses.

Once the excitement subsided, Matty looked for Karen. They sang each other's praises. It was clear they were becoming fond of one another.

"Are we still on for tomorrow?" Matty asked.

"Of course," Karen confirmed. "I have an idea. Since Maura set the wheels in motion, why don't we ask her and Harry to join us?"

"Sounds great!" Matty responded. Having them there would relieve the pressure of their first date. "I'll talk to Harry and Maura. If they agree, we'll pick you up around 1:00. Okay?"

"Perfect," Karen replied. She surprised Matty with a peck on the cheek, one that got his attention. *Tomorrow is going to be great*, he thought to himself.

In the locker room everyone was excited. Matty had grown accustomed to celebrating with the starters, yet he always sought out the second stringers and benchwarmers as well. One of the backups, Summer Richardson's son Gene, grabbed Matty and took him aside. "You're a special person," Gene told him. "When most reserves are promoted, they forget where they came from. Not you. You're always going out of your way to include us and we'll never forget it. You're an amazing friend, Matty," Gene concluded. "Now hit me up!" They fist pumped and laughed.

Matty asked Harry about joining him and Karen. Harry thought this was a good idea and called Maura. She agreed. He and Maura could keep the conversation alive while holding any awkwardness at bay. "I'll pick you up at 12:30 tomorrow."

Joe arrived and addressed the team. "Boys, I'm so proud of you. This game was very difficult yet we showed a great ability to stay committed and win. I haven't been awarding a game ball for the most valuable player, but I'm going to start right now. Who agrees with me that Scotty deserves this ball?"

The team jumped up and cheered. They rushed to congratulate him. A startled Scotty stated, "This is truly an honor. It's a team game and I'm just one player. I will humbly accept this ball and admit to myself, I was the greatest player of the week!"

Well known for his humor, the team laughed and felt even better. Quite an ending to one dramatic day.

CHAPTER THIRTY ONE

A beautiful sunrise accompanied Sunday morning and Matty was extremely excited. His first date ever, and with a very pretty cheerleader no less. He was also nervous, similar to the feelings he had before a game. His mind was racing, thinking of things which could go wrong, or saying or doing something stupid. However, a sense of security set in as he remembered Harry would be there and knew the proper etiquette. Matty headed down for breakfast and noticed Joe and Lindsey at the table discussing yesterday's game.

"That was the most exciting game I've ever seen!" Lindsey declared.

Joe teasingly reminded her she'd only been to a few games and both laughed. They turned their attention toward Matty.

"Well, Son," Joe asked, "any plans for today?"

Matty fumbled for an answer. "Come on, Dad, you know I'm going on a date!"

"Oh, right," Joe kidded. "Seriously, Son, I know you're probably a little nervous. I'm here to tell you everyone feels this way. You're a great kid and I'm sure Karen will have a good time. It's nice having Maura and Harry there. I would love to have had another couple along on my first date. The important thing is to have fun and enjoy the day for what it is, your first opportunity to spend time with a nice girl."

"Matty," Lindsey began, "you have always been a special boy in my eyes. Everything you've accomplished has brought a mind-numbing excitement. Not everyone would be able to keep a level head. You have. This speaks to your character and I couldn't be more proud. Any girl on a date with you is the lucky one. Enjoy this experience and who knows, maybe you'll learn a little more about yourself." She gave him a kiss, then made a fabulous breakfast.

In his room, Matty paced back and forth waiting for Harry. Finally, he heard a car pull up. He glanced at the clock. 12:30. Harry was right on time. Matty jogged down the stairs barely squeaking out a goodbye as he dashed off. Lindsey and Joe stood in the doorway waving to Harry, as Matty jumped into the car. Lindsey called out, "Have a good time, boys!" Harry waved and honked as they drove away.

"A little nervous are we?" Harry asked.

"I guess so," Matty replied.

"Don't be," Harry said. "We're just going out with a couple of cute girls to enjoy a movie and dinner. This will be fun!"

Maura was at the Austin's house and tried to steady Karen's nerves. This being her first date, Karen felt the same as Matty, with troublesome fears and worries of a mistake. Maura calmed Karen by assuring her the feelings were natural. Maura's reassurance certainly helped but wouldn't neutralize every concern. Nothing could.

Harry and Matty arrived promptly at 1:00 p.m. Greeted by Karen's parents, the boys properly introduced themselves. They discussed their plans and promised to have Karen home by eight. Once the couples approached the car, Matty opened the rear door for the girls. Surprise number one. Karen climbed into the back seat, while Maura stepped around and headed toward the front. *Yikes*, thought Matty. *Am I ready for this?* He hopped in and took the seat next to Karen.

"How are you today?" he managed to ask.

"I'm great," Karen replied. "Thanks for inviting me."

Matty and Karen talked about yesterday's game with Maura and Harry joining in. There was a noticeable ease in tension and before long they were engulfed in small talk. Harry and Maura smiled an approving grin. This was going to be fine.

Entering the megaplex, Harry asked for requests from the refreshment stand.

"We don't want to spoil our appetites," Maura winked at Karen. "I guess a soda and some popcorn wouldn't hurt."

They watched the latest super hero release. Matty was so nervous he could barely remember it. He'd sneak a peek at Karen, and if they caught each other looking, they'd giggle. Maura and Harry took it all in. They chuckled quietly, perhaps remembering their own first dates. Afterward, the couples went to a favorite hangout popular with their friends. Most everyone noticed and they exchanged greetings with several. They enjoyed dinner, with the boys picking up the check. Always a classy move and the girls were impressed.

Heading back to the car, Matty pulled Harry aside and asked him what is the correct way of saying goodnight when accompanying Karen to her front door.

"Are you having a good time?" Harry asked.

"Yes, of course," Matty admitted, "I think she's great!"

"Okay," Harry continued. "When you get to the door, ask her if she'd like to go out again. If she says yes, great. Ask her if you could give her a kiss. If she agrees, lean in and give her one. There's no magic or talent needed for kissing. You just angle in and plant it. Got that?"

Matty nodded but had a feeling this was way too much for him to handle. He remembered his mom saying he might learn something about himself. Could this be what she meant? Harry and

Maura watched the scene unfold. Karen and Matty strode to the front door like musicians in a marching band. While not loud enough to understand, Harry and Maura heard a back and forth between them. Happily their conversation ended with Matty kissing Karen. She thanked him and went inside. Matty raced back to the car like a thief in the night.

"Nice job, Sport," Harry remarked.

"Well played, Matthew," Maura offered.

"I think I'm going to be sick," Matty replied.

Harry and Maura burst into laughter and Matty caught himself joining in. *Such a relief*, he thought. Next, with Matty's house nearby, Harry dropped him off. He thanked Maura and Harry for their help. They minimized it and told Matty they'd see him at school. Matty leapt up the stairs and poured himself into the house. Harry and Maura glanced at each other for a job well done.

When they arrived at Maura's home, Harry, ever the gentleman, opened Maura's door and escorted her up to the entrance. Maura paused and asked Harry, "What advice did you give to Matty regarding Karen and ending their date?"

"Well," Harry began, "I told him this being their first date, he should ask Karen if she had a good time. If so, would she like to go out again. If she agreed, I told him to ask for a kiss and let nature take its course. What do you think?"

"I think that's fine," Maura replied. "I'm just wondering how you'd handle yourself in the same situation."

"Oh, it's different for me," Harry said, sensing an opportunity. "I'm a little older and more experienced in these types of settings. Here's how I'd handle it."

Harry pulled Maura toward him and kissed her decisively. When they separated, he asked her out. Maura pulled him in as she initiated a second kiss.

"Does that answer your question, Mr. Griffin?"

Back at Matty's house, he found Lindsey and Joe waiting to hear about the date. They didn't want to cross-examine him so they sat patiently until he was ready to talk. Matty walked into the living room and kicked back on the sofa.

"How did things go?" started Lindsey.

"Fantastic!" Matty answered. "At first, I was so nervous and sensed Karen was too. We watched some movie and somehow managed to get through it. Afterward, we ate at The Blue Scupper, where Maura and Harry saved the day with some small talk. I learned much more about Karen and held up my end of the discussion. Finally, we drove to her house and I escorted Karen to the front door. With some coaching from Harry, I asked her for a second date. When she agreed, I asked if I could kiss her and she nodded. I did. It was unbelievable!"

"That's wonderful," Lindsey stated.

"Make sure you go out of your way to see her tomorrow," Joe advised.

"No problem," Matty replied. "I can't wait to see her again!"

CHAPTER THIRTY TWO

As Monday morning arrived, Harry had a dilemma. He was happy Matty and Karen were hitting it off but felt guilty about the surprising development with Maura. Harry wanted to tell Matty as soon as possible and caught up with him at his locker.

"Hey, Matty," Harry began, "I'm guessing you had a pretty good time yesterday, right?"

"Absolutely," Matty confirmed. "Thank you so much for taking us."

Harry nodded and continued. "There's something you should know. After we dropped you off, Maura and I got to talking and decided to start dating."

Matty was confused for a moment, but quickly sorted things out. "Harry," he said, "I was attracted to Maura initially, but once she introduced me to Karen, those feelings changed. Don't worry for a second. I'm happy for you."

"Thanks for understanding, my friend," Harry replied.

During lunch break, Matty saw Karen sitting in the cafeteria. He carried his tray over and asked if he could join her. She instantly agreed. The two sat and talked about their date and were looking forward to another. Matty worked up the courage and asked Karen if she'd like to come over to his house after school. They could do their homework together, he suggested. Karen nodded. He stacked their trays and headed down the hall to let his mom know.

Upon classes conclusion, Matty and Karen walked together to Matty's house. He dutifully carried her books, a ritual Harry had explained. Lindsey's workday didn't end until late afternoon. When she got home Lindsey discovered them buried in their studies.

As a cheerleader, one would assume Karen was a football fan, and she was. She told Matty how exciting it's been to watch him become a standout player. Matty explained how the whole state of affairs was a happy accident. Sure, he loved the recent attention but always downplayed his importance. Karen was attracted to his modesty. Lindsey asked Karen if she wanted to stay for supper and she agreed. Afterward, Joe and Matty took Karen home. After dropping her off, Matty told Joe how much he liked Karen.

"That's great, Son," Joe replied. "She made quite an impression during dinner. Karen's really smart, has a wonderful personality and is very pretty. I think you've met someone special."

CHAPTER THIRTY THREE

Tuesday's practice was exiting! The victory against Richmond was thrilling and put the Rams on pace to do damage. Their next opponent was the Park City Wolfpack, a home game against a one-win adversary. On paper this was a game Chelsea should win easily, yet Joe knew nothing was certain. He drilled the team hard and knew just how far to push them. As practice was ending, Brian noticed Matty and Karen talking while Harry spoke with Maura. In the past he wouldn't have thought twice about busting some chops in the locker room, but things had changed. His confrontation with Harry was a no-win situation. Harry hadn't blinked, which surprised Brian. Enough said. As for Matty, Brian developed a real appreciation for everything he brought to the table. He was an outstanding blocker, no question about it. He was also a good-natured kid, disinterested in the limelight. Brian had to admit he'd never have the stage on which to perform without Matty.

Chelsea practiced diligently all week and by Saturday, they were fired up and ready to go. The home crowd made their usual team-backing roars as the Rams took to the field. Figuring they were in over their heads, Park City filed out. Quietly.

Jennifer and Lindsey settled in for another torturous afternoon. As it turned out, the game was over early. Chelsea's defense continued to dominate. Once again Brian was given ample time to find his targets. The Rams scored three quick touchdowns. Mike O'Brien, and the rest of the second stringers, were about to receive more playing time than they ever imagined.

Lindsey and Jennifer were issued the opportunity for some relaxed conversation. Lindsey spoke about Matty's first date--something she hoped would happen but quietly feared.

"The whole thing was a smashing success," she recalled.

Jennifer was relieved for her friend. "You do the best you can preparing your kids for life," she reasoned, "then cross your fingers and hope things work out."

On the field the game ran its course, with Joe using the second stringers and benchwarmers, some of whom had *never* played. This was heady stuff for the benchwarmers! Matty joined them on the sideline, yelling encouragement and patting each on the back.

With a final score of 35-0, the coaches met at midfield. The Wolfpack's coach, Timothy Lyons, thanked Joe for calling off the hounds.

"Not a problem, Tim," Joe responded. "Just remember, if the situation is ever reversed, I hope you'll do the same." They shook hands and jogged to their respective locker rooms.

Once everyone settled down, Joe addressed the team. "Great game, boys," he began. "With our record being six and two, I don't see why we can't reach the playoffs. I'm proud of each and every one of you. I'm dedicating the game ball to our entire team, as you all contributed to this win. Now go out, celebrate, and stay safe. I'll see you at Tuesday's practice." They all cheered and splintered into different groups, making plans for Saturday night.

Joe drove Matty to Karen's house. They arranged a get-together to watch TV and play video games. They were kindred spirits, cloaked in a blanket of infatuation and naiveté. Matty ruled in every video game and Karen was amazed. She showed off her latest cheers while Matty's eyes never wavered. They watched a movie and Matty remembered it! All of the nervousness of their first date had been conquered. Jan invited Matty to stay for dinner. The meal was delicious and

the conversation free flowing. Max was a huge football fan and marveled at Matty's success. Their banter was natural.

Joe pulled up the driveway and tooted a couple of quick beeps. Jan and Max excused themselves, leaving Karen and Matty alone to end the night. With the awkwardness of that first kiss behind them, they briefly embraced and enjoyed their second.

"I really like you," Matty told Karen.

"I really like you, too," came her welcomed reply.

"See you at school Monday!" he exclaimed and hustled out the door.

Coincidentally, Maura and Harry were on their first official date. No chaperone duties this time. Harry took Maura to a fancy restaurant. While waiting for their appetizers, the pair settled in.

"Listen, Maura, obviously I am attracted to you. You're definitely someone special." Maura smiled, silently accepting his compliment. "I'm curious to know if the feeling is mutual."

"I wouldn't be here if it wasn't," she replied.

"Why?" Harry asked. "There's nothing grand about me. It's not like I'm a star athlete."

"Oh, Harry," Maura scolded. "Do you think I'm that superficial? Just because I'm the head cheerleader doesn't mean I pick potential boyfriends based on their athletic accomplishments. After I graduate, my goal is to continue with my studies. Cheerleading isn't a factor in determining which college I'll attend. I'm looking for the strength of each school's curriculum in the fields I wish to pursue. Really, Harry. You should know better."

Embarrassed, Harry apologized, but quickly reclaimed his footing.

"I'm sorry, Maura, please forgive me," Harry whimpered. "It's just my fragile male ego."

Maura laughed recognizing Harry's humor. "You may not be a starter on the football team, Harry Griffin, but you're an all-star in my book." They enjoyed the rest of the evening with a promise to see each other again.

CHAPTER THIRTY FOUR

Chelsea found themselves in a two-way tie for second place with their next opponent, the Applegate Eagles. With both teams sporting a 6-2 record, this was a crucial road game for Chelsea. If either Chelsea or Applegate won both of their remaining games, they would play undefeated Madison for the title.

At noon Monday, Matty and Karen shared lunch outside on campus. It was well known they were dating and Matty was fascinated with anything related to Karen. She loved to paint and was gifted. Karen asked Matty if she could paint his portrait. Matty would have never considered putting himself in this type of situation for anyone, yet with Karen it seemed right.

"I'm ready whenever you are," he said.

Maura and Harry were also becoming an item. They hadn't spoken since Saturday night and both were anxious to see each other. Harry spotted Maura by the lockers and quickly headed toward her.

"I had a great time Saturday night," Harry began. "I was wondering if you'd do me a favor. Will you wear this and keep it safe for me?"

Harry offered Maura his class ring. She happily slipped it on and teased, "Okay for now, Harry, but I might have to negotiate a storage fee." They gave each other a quick kiss and promised to meet after school.

With every win, the pressure on Chelsea mounted. Lindsey admired how calm and collected Joe remained. Situations constantly change and Joe tried not to get ahead of himself. His philosophy was to take things one day at a time. He was happy with his team but remained focused on the task at hand, the Applegate Eagles.

Arriving at school, Joe had a message waiting for him. He was asked to meet with Chelsea's Principal, Gail Camden, at day's end. Joe couldn't imagine what was up. Rather than trying to guess, he put it out of his mind and immersed himself in his teaching.

Joe consistently impressed upon his students the value of a good education. "You may do well in high school," he would tell them. "Don't take for granted you'll flourish at the college level. Rely on your strengths but challenge your weaknesses. They will catch up to you at some point."

With his last class finished, Joe headed to see Mrs. Camden. After all of these years, he laughed to himself, I've been summoned to the principal's office. Joe heard the intercom buzz as Mrs. Camden told her receptionist to show him in. When Joe entered, she was seated behind her desk.

"Hello, Principal Camden," Joe started. "I was told you wanted to see me?"

"Absolutely," she replied. "Have a seat, Joe, and please call me Gail." Joe settled into the chair at the front of her desk.

"First of all," she began, "I think you're a valuable teacher. The students thrive in your classes and that's something I treasure. I can't see any reason not to offer you a letter of intent, to activate tenure, at the conclusion of your third year. Joe was stunned.

"Second, I want to acknowledge the football team, whose success has galvanized the student body. Just to be clear, football has nothing to do with your pending tenure. You're only obligated to coach for as long as you like." Gail stood and extended her hand. "Congratulations, Joe."

He quickly rose and followed suit. "This kind of job security means everything. You have no idea how grateful I am. I really don't know what to say."

"Say, yes," she joked.

"Yes. Of course yes, Gail. Thank you so much!"

Bursting, Joe rushed out of the building and couldn't wait to surprise Lindsey and Matty. Somehow he managed to keep a lid on his news until dinner. As Lindsey, Matty and, yes, Karen, settled in, Joe said he had an announcement to make. They gave him the floor and wondered what was coming. "Let me start by saying what an uplifting year this has become. I knew I'd enjoy teaching. Falling in love with you, Lindsey, and with Matty as well, allowed me a happiness I've never known. In addition, meeting a lovely girl like Karen, plus all of our football success, has made this the most wonderful year of my life. To top it off, I just received some outstanding news. Principal Camden signed a letter of intent for my tenure and has offered me an open-ended agreement to coach football!"

Matty and Karen jumped up and applauded as Lindsey rushed into his arms.

"That's wonderful," she exclaimed. "I'm so happy for you!"

"For us!" Joe corrected. "Without you, this wouldn't be possible." Matty wrapped his arms around Joe, squeezing him tightly. "Whoa there, slugger," he pleaded, "you're crushing my ribs." Once the laughter subsided they returned to the table and continued to celebrate.

CHAPTER THIRTY FIVE

Practice sessions throughout the week were demanding. Everyone ramped up their intensity, understanding the importance of the last two games. Brian was showcasing his leadership skills as he was encouraging, rather than critical. He complimented successes and brushed off

mistakes. Brian realized if they qualified for the playoffs, it could possibly bring more college interest. This definitely grabbed his attention.

In the locker room after Friday's walk-thru, Joe spoke to the team.

"All right boys, we all know this is our biggest game to date. Keep your intensity up and I have no doubt we can handle it. Be on the bus tomorrow at nine." The players exhaled and wandered off to relax.

Game time! A standing-room-only stadium was awaiting the Rams. This felt like a playoff game and to a certain degree it was. The Eagles won the opening coin toss and chose to receive the ball. Scotty boomed one into the end zone which left Applegate starting at the twenty-five yard line. Their play calling didn't surprise anyone; however, Chelsea was tight from the start. Two blown coverages allowed Applegate to sprint downfield, which ultimately led to an easy score. The point-after kick was good and it was 7-0. The Eagles' fans were rocking as the Ram's defense trekked to the bench.

"That was pathetic," Big Bear snarled. "Wake up!"

On the ensuing kickoff, the ball settled into Johnny Watson's hands and he headed upfield. After avoiding a couple of tackles, he spotted an opening. Squeezing through the congestion, Johnny was hit hard and lost the ball! In the melee that followed, Applegate recovered the fumble on Chelsea's twenty-yard line. The Eagles' fans exploded! Chelsea's crowd was stunned. Lindsey, Courtney, Jennifer, and Summer looked at each other concealing a feeling of dread. By far the worst way to begin this game.

Big Bear implored the defense. "Forget it, that's history! he wailed. "Let's stuff them here and now."

The momentum was clearly with Applegate. It took the Eagles four plays to find the end zone again. 14-0, in the blink of an eye. Stomping to the sidelines, Big Bear shouted at his teammates.

"Are we going to play today or do you just want to hand them the game?"

Noticing the tension, Joe called his team together.

"Listen, boys, everyone calm down. We have over three and a half quarters to play. Plenty of time to square things. We need to be patient and not deviate from our plan. We don't want any *heroes* trying to right things single-handedly. Play the way we practiced and we'll be OK. Brian," Joe continued, "the offense has got to kill some time and give the defense a chance to rest." Brian nodded. "Now let's get out there and play Ram's football!"

Applegate booted the ball through the end zone. Chelsea would start on their twenty-five yard line. Mindful of Joe's request, Brian utilized the running game, gleaning positive results. The tried-and-true formula of Danny running behind Matty worked well. Matty, with his hard-hitting blocks, was a monster. Chelsea managed to kill seven minutes off the clock, more than enough time to give the defense a second wind. After a few near misses on Applegate's twenty-yard line, Scotty hustled out and delivered his usual solid kick. 14-3, Applegate. *Back in the game*, thought Joe. The Chelsea defense, rested and ready, dismissed Applegate's ideas of racing off to a big lead. The Eagles were in for a fight!

In the stands, Chelsea's fans were edgy. They knew a win would be stupendous and a loss devastating. With the intensity rising, Lindsey and Jennifer felt the knot in their stomachs tighten. Both were worried.

The remainder of the first half was hotly contested with each team thwarting the other. Chelsea secured their second safety of the season when a sloppy Applegate handoff bounced back into their end zone. The Eagles quarterback managed to dive on the ball, minimizing the

damage. Halftime score: Applegate 14 Chelsea 5. The cheerleaders, accompanied by the band, raced onto the field and chanted: "Our team is dynamite, we're going to win tonight. Higher, higher, make that score go higher, *HIGHERRRRR!*" The Chelsea fans roared their approval.

In the locker room, Joe was measured yet optimistic. "Listen guys, I'm really proud of how you've hung in there despite the horrific start. Many teams would have quit, but you've shown you wouldn't. Our outstanding defense needs to remain stingy, while the offensive play-calling will be bolder. We're going to take more chances and I know we'll put some points on the board. You can do this. Now let's go!" The players jumped to their feet. This team was ready for anything!

The second half was another battle. Two offenses wielding their might with both defenses holding firm. Brian had attempted a couple of risky throws with little success. He had one more trick up his sleeve: the hook and ladder. Leo Mitchell runs a simple ten-yard route and hooks to the inside back toward Brian. Assuming the pass is complete, the defense will converge on Leo. Simultaneously, Tommy Benson will streak past heading for the outside, with Leo pitching the ball back to him as he races by, catching the defense moving in the wrong direction. The play's been around for years but could still surprise an unsuspecting opponent. Sean snapped the ball and by the time Applegate's defense recognized it, Tommy was gone. He galloped into the end zone uncontested. Touchdown! The entire offense mobbed him as he trotted back the bench. Scotty's sure-kick sailed through the goal posts and the scoreboard flashed: Applegate 14, Chelsea 12. Ten minutes remaining. With little to enjoy up to this point, the marching band exploded, while the cheerleaders rattled the bleachers! Chelsea's fans rocked, releasing their pent-up energy. Troy shouted, "We finally have ourselves a ballgame!"

Applegate had a different point of view. Unwilling to sit on the two-point lead, their offense came out firing with an aerial display absent since the first quarter and picked apart Chelsea's secondary. Despite the Ram's best efforts, Applegate barged downfield, ending the drive with an *in-your-face* touchdown. As the partisan crowd roared, the Eagles stretched their lead to 21-12. With under five minutes remaining, the Chelsea fans were deflated. The most important drive of the year and the Rams couldn't stop it.

"That's, that," Troy grumbled. "It's over."

Although mathematically possible, the odds were against Chelsea staging a comeback.

Lindsey dismissed that notion. "They can still win," she insisted.

"Sure they can," came an uninspired reply.

Joe was doing his best to keep the team upbeat. "I don't see a final score posted," he declared. "This isn't finished!"

Fearing a touchdown return, Applegate chose to kick a short pop-up, keeping the ball away from Chelsea's fastest runners. It's a conservative play and worked fine. The Rams fielded the ball at their twenty and managed to advance it to the thirty-five yard line. Trailing by nine points with three timeouts remaining, the clock read 4:01.

"All right," Brian asserted, "let's kick some Applegate butt!"

The situation cried out for a pass so the Eagles spread out and played deeper. Once again Brian surprised an opponent by running Danny right up the middle behind Matty. Danny made a few quick moves before putting his head down and bulldozing into the Applegate defenders at midfield.

The clock continued to run with less than three-and-a-half minutes to play. A quick pass to Leo netted twelve yards and another first down. Ball on the Applegate thirty-eight. Three

minutes remaining. Joe was reluctant to call any timeouts figuring he'd need them for one last drive. Brian knew the situation, but determined he must try plays that would work. A quick pitch to Danny, sweeping to the right side, gained nine yards. Gambling, Brian threw long toward Tommy near the end zone. Open for a split second, Applegate's cornerback detected the play and batted the ball harmlessly away, stopping the clock with two and a half minutes left. Third down and needing only a yard, Brian kept the ball and ran a quarterback sneak, plowing forward behind his offensive line. First down.

With 2:15 remaining, Joe took his first time out. Brian trotted over to the sideline to discuss the next play. "You're doing great, Brian," Joe remarked, "but we need to score faster. We have to give our defense enough time to make a stop and get the ball back."

"I understand, Coach," said Brian. "But it's tough for anyone to get open downfield." Joe, knowing he needed a touchdown *and* field goal to win, made a surprising call.

"Let's get the field goal now and trust our defense." Brian nodded. Joe sent Scotty out, with Mike holding, for a thirty-five yard kick. Not unreasonable, but no gimme.

The Chelsea fans quickly realized the strategy. If the field goal attempt failed, that would end it for the Rams. Lindsey didn't quite understand all of the ramifications, but could certainly feel the tension. Jennifer quickly whispered, "If Scotty misses, we won't have enough time to catch them." The two clutched each other. "Come on, Scotty!" Lindsey hollered.

Sean snapped the ball, and wait...what's this? Mike suddenly sprang up and ran toward the right sideline. With Applegate closing in, he spotted Johnny Watson open at the five-yard line. Mike drilled a perfect pass and Johnny hauled it in. As Applegate converged, Johnny dove forward and was tackled at the two-yard line. First down! Joe and Brian exchanged fist pumps as the Chelsea fans roared their approval. Mike was given a hero's welcome for the clutch play.

Brian darted back onto the field. "All right, gentlemen," he smirked, "let's do what we do best. Matthew, would you please escort Daniel into the end zone?" The offense chuckled as they positioned themselves for the play. As advertised, Brian handed the ball to Danny, and Matty blew open a hole big enough for two Dannys. Touchdown! Scotty's ever important point-after kick was good and the scoreboard read 21-19, with two minutes remaining.

Back on the sideline, Joe was wrestling whether or not to kickoff deep and hope the defense could stop Applegate quickly, or try an onside kick. An onside kick is when the kicker deliberately topples the ball along the ground. Because of its shape, a football will often take unpredictable bounces. The ball must travel ten yards forward or be touched by a closer opponent. When either occurs the ball is free for anyone to recover. Two problems. One, you can't disguise an onside kick. You must deploy your team in a straight line and close together, allowing them the best chance to succeed in the ensuing scramble. Two, a positive outcome is far-fetched with a success rate of 6 to 7 percent. Joe had another idea. He called the kicking team together and told them his plan.

"All right, guys, here's what we're going to do. Scotty, instead of spinning a ground ball I want you to aim at one of Applegate's closest players and kick a knee-high line drive right at him. I doubt he'll have enough time to react. The ball should hit him, then bounce in our direction. You got that?"

Scotty smiled and replied, "No problem."

"Okay then," Joe barked. "Let's get this ball!"

Chelsea's positioning clearly revealed their plan. Applegate replied with the traditional defense. Scotty noticed number forty-four in the front row and identified him as the patsy. The referee blew his whistle. Scotty slowly jogged to the ball then hammered a screeching line-drive

straight at his target. Scotty's bullet ricocheted off the Applegate mark and bounded back toward Chelsea. This was a live ball! The battle for the pigskin was fierce. Every player wanted to make the recovery. One after another piled on until the bottom was completely concealed. Whistles screamed as the referees rushed into this man-made mountain. Both teams were claiming possession while the refs untangled the puzzle. Finally, it all became clear. Chelsea had recovered the kick. And who jumped up cradling the prize? Matty Donovan! Chelsea's fans were delirious!

"I've never seen anything like it," Eddie shouted.

"Unbelievable," Troy cried.

Jennifer and Lindsey were dancing in their seats. Did that really happen? Yup, it did.

Back on the sideline, Joe tried to quiet everyone. "Listen up," he ordered, "we haven't won anything yet."

The situation: Chelsea's ball, first and ten, at the fifty-yard line. With Joe's clever play-calling the Rams had secured their needed touchdown. Now it was time to get a game-winning field goal. Chelsea had two timeouts remaining and there was 1:45 left to play.

Brian resumed control in the huddle. "All right gentlemen we can do this. Matty, that recovery was gigantic, but it won't mean a thing if we don't win. I figure we need to get to the twenty-five yard line for Scotty to have an easy chance. Let's do it."

They broke from the huddle. First play, another pitch to Danny with Matty leading the way. Eight-yard gain. Applegate was absolutely reeling. Chelsea was milking the clock--they didn't want to leave Applegate any time left to respond. Next was a quick strike to Leo, who fought his way to the thirty-yard line. Applegate immediately called a timeout to conserve seconds and catch their breath.

Maura led the cheerleaders from the sideline. "R-O-W-D-I-E, that's the way we spell rowdy. Rowdy, let's get rowdy, woo!"

First down with a minute left. Chelsea's mission was to get as far downfield as possible without taking any chances. Danny ran up the middle for two hard earned yards. Applegate used their second timeout. Fifty seconds remaining. Danny again, right up the gut. Another yard. Clock ticking. Forty seconds left. Applegate took its third and final timeout. Now, only Chelsea could stop the clock. Brian made another reliable handoff to Danny, who forced himself against Matty and pushed forward. Three yard gain. Twenty-five seconds left and the plan was simple: let the clock run down to three seconds and call a timeout. In the stands the pressure was intense.

"Is everybody having a good time?" Courtney nervously asked.

"We'll let you know it a minute," came Summer's anxious response.

Near the bench, Joe gave Scotty a pep talk. "I know this is a big kick, but don't put too much pressure on yourself. It really is just a game."

"Oh, you want me to make this kick?" Scotty deadpanned then grinned.

"If it's all right with you," Joe replied. In that instance, Joe knew they'd won.

Ball snapped, kick on the way and...good! Final score, Chelsea 22, Applegate 21. The team mobbed Scotty with everyone trying to get a piece.

"This team refuses to lose," Lindsey cried out. "I can't believe what I just saw!"

"Absolutely amazing," Jennifer stated. "I need to lie down." Relieved, everyone laughed as they headed out to greet their kids and celebrate.

In the locker room an ecstatic Joe Donovan couldn't contain his excitement.

"Congratulations, gentlemen," he let out. "This was the greatest win I've ever been a part of. Once again Scotty was *Mister Clutch* when it mattered most, but I want to give this game ball to the player who has earned it all season, Quarterback Brian Anderson!"

The team erupted and cheered wildly, "Brian! Brian! Brian!" He was taken by surprise, but quickly composed himself.

"I want to thank Coach Donovan for having confidence in me, even when I struggled. Receiving this game ball says it all. But it really belongs to the entire team. Our defense was mind-boggling, rising to the occasion every time. Our offense gave everything they had and I'm truly grateful."

"Okay, we get it," Harry interrupted. "You like us and we like you."

The team burst into laughter, Brian too. He concluded, "All right, all right, that's all I've got to say."

Joe resumed control. "Congratulations again everyone. Take care and enjoy the weekend. We'll be back at it next Tuesday."

On the drive home Lindsey was a chatterbox. "I know I said last week's game was unbelievable but today's was incomparable. Look at all you've accomplished Matty, and so quickly! I'm not just talking about football but in every aspect of your life. You are truly amazing. As for you, Joe," she continued, "I don't know how you remained so calm amidst the chaos. You must have nerves of steel!"

"Not really," he replied nonchalantly. "This was just another game." Flashing a Cheshire cat grin, Joe dropped the pretense. "I'm joking!" he laughed. "After today's comeback, I have no idea how to keep this team grounded for next week's game. It's going to be fascinating for sure."

Matty asked Joe and Lindsey if they would like to go out for Sunday brunch, and if it would it be okay to invite Karen, Maura and Harry.

"Of course," Lindsey said, "would you like a home-cooked brunch instead?"

"That'd be great!" Matty replied, "if it's not too much trouble." After a few texts all parties agreed. "Thanks, Mom," Matty proclaimed, "You're the best!"

CHAPTER THIRTY SIX

Sunday morning dawned and Matty was up early. Ecstatic over yesterday's win, he was looking forward to today's brunch. First things first. He, Lindsey and Joe headed out for Sunday's services. Finding himself much more accustomed to this strange turn-of-events, Matty became comfortable with compliments and hugs from other parishioners.

Joe had his own welcoming committee, all avid football fans wanting to know how he came up with that unique onside kick. Lindsey watched proudly, wearing a smile for the two men in her life.

When they returned home, Lindsey started preparing a feast fit for a king. Harry was off picking up Maura and Karen while Matty and Joe rearranged the table for a party of six. The doorbell rang at one o'clock and Matty greeted them. While entering, Harry and the girls exchanged greetings with Joe and Lindsey. They all sat down to a wonderful display. "This is amazing, Mrs. Donovan," said Karen. "Thank you for having us."

The conversation quickly turned to Saturday's game, and how the team was knocking on the playoff door. "That was incredible," Maura began. "I think I'll remember yesterday's game forever."

Karen asked Matty what it felt like recovering that crucial onside kick. "Don't get me wrong," Matty explained, "when I knew I had it I was excited. I also remember the weight of the heap on top of me. Those referees couldn't untangle that stack fast enough," he joked. "I really thought for a second I might not make it. Everyone was trying to wrestle the ball away from me. One thing I learned for sure, whoever captured the ball first, might not have it in the end."

"All I know is," Karen inserted, "I've never been so excited in my entire life."

"All fifteen years of it," Harry teased.

After brunch, Harry and Maura thanked the Donovans for a fine afternoon and said their goodbyes. With his parents' approval, Matty and Karen went upstairs for the afternoon. Karen laughed and told Matty, "Yesterday's game was more thrilling than any of these video games."

Karen stayed for dinner. Afterward, Joe and Matty drove her home. When Karen and Matty got out, Joe pulled the car a few lengths down the street to give them some privacy. They lingered at the front stairs and exchanged a hug and a couple of kisses. Karen thanked him for a wonderful day and they agreed to meet up at school. *Man*, Matty thought to himself, *I could get used to this*.

CHAPTER THIRTY SEVEN

Monday morning produced a broader bandwagon for the team. The campus buzzed with excitement as each and every player received many ovations. Matty lost track of all the handshakes. Looking back on where he had been a couple of months ago, compared to where he was now, was almost incomprehensible.

At one o'clock there was a pause in the classes. Principal Camden's voice resonated over the intercom. "Attention, students. At five o'clock this coming Friday, we will be holding a pep rally,

in the gymnasium, to show our appreciation for all the wonderful accomplishments of our football team. A win on Saturday will qualify them for the championship game, so let's deliver a rally they will never forget. I hope to see you all there."

Upon hearing this announcement the students broke into an applause that reverberated throughout the entire school. Football players were showered with handshakes and pats on the back. This would be a must-see event and the student body embraced it.

As the school day ended, Matty met Karen at her locker.

"I heard there was some sort of an announcement?" she asked emotionlessly.

"For sure," came Matty's confused reply. "Didn't you hear?"

Karen cracked up. "I'm just teasing, Matty. This is so thrilling! Maura's already said we need to work on a new routine for the rally. It'll be our best one yet!" The pair headed for Karen's house with Matty, as always, carrying her books.

Joe's job was simple. He needed to refocus everyone's attention toward Saturday's game. The Ram's final opponent was the Cumberland Bulldogs, who struggled all year, winning just three times. Chelsea was the overwhelming favorite, but this game was crucial. As for Cumberland, with nothing riding on the outcome and no pressure, there was a distinct possibility for an upset. If Chelsea lost and New Haven won their last game against the Park City Wolfpack, both teams would share 7-3 records. This scenario would send New Haven to the championship game, based on their win over Chelsea in week three. Joe emphasized this constantly and the team understood how vital this victory would be.

As practice continued, Matty noticed the cheerleaders working on their material. He'd usually catch Karen's eye once or twice and they'd nod or wink. Gosh, he really liked this girl! Harry caught up with Matty and asked how he and Karen were doing.

"She's someone special," Matty replied. "She's already my best friend."

Harry nodded and thought back to his first love, Hayley Baldwin. He remembered thinking it was a feeling that would never end. First loves are memorable and once in a while last forever. Most often they are a passage in time, something to learn from and build on. As for now, in this moment, Harry knew Matty was experiencing high school in all it's glory. Harry was excited for his young friend. He not only fits in, he's flourishing!

For the remainder of the week the practices were lengthy and grueling. Everyone was focused and chomping at the bit. Joe was pleased with the results and knew they were ready. Friday's workout was only a walk-thru, with final adjustments to make sure everyone was on the same page. Joe called the team together at midfield.

"Gentlemen," he addressed them, "this is the culmination of our regular season. I knew I had a pretty good team but everyone has exceeded my expectations. I want to express my gratitude for your performance. Regardless of the game's outcome, know how proud I am of each and every one of you. Let's enjoy the celebration tonight and give our best effort tomorrow." The team cheered and headed for the locker room.

Harry, Matty and a couple of other cheerleader-dating players sauntered over to watch the girls. When they finished, Karen and Maura joined the boys to discuss their logistics for the pep rally.

"I'll pick everyone up around 4:30," Harry offered, and they all agreed.

Maura added, "We've never held a pep rally before. This should be amazing!" She looked over at Karen and they mirrored mischievous grins. "Well, not to ruin any surprises, but get ready to be wowed tonight."

CHAPTER THIRTY EIGHT

Joe had another surprise waiting for Matty. Although it took much longer than usual, Matty's varsity jacket had finally arrived! Lindsey had signed for the package and immediately placed it neatly on Matty's bed. When Joe and Matty returned home, Lindsey didn't mention it, but winked at Joe. She knew he wanted to see Matty's reaction. As he dashed up to his room to get ready for the rally, Joe and Lindsey quietly followed from behind. Matty's howl of delight sounded like a lion's roar! He turned and saw Joe and Lindsey grinning, anticipating the hug which would surely come.

"I can't believe it!" Matty cried with laughter. "I didn't realize I'd be getting this."

"Why wouldn't you?" Joe asked. "You're a star on this team."

"I bet you can guess what I'm wearing to the pep rally," Matty said as he tried it on. "Karen will love this!"

Approaching 4:30, Harry, with the girls in tow, politely beeped the horn. Much to their amazement, Matty proudly strode down the stairs wearing his perfectly sized jacket.

"No way," Karen shouted, "look what we have here!" They all jumped out of the car and rushed to Matty.

"At last," Harry exclaimed. "Our team's clinching piece of the puzzle has been rewarded!"

They buzzed around Matty like school children, until Harry realized what time it was. "We've gotta go," he said. They scrambled back into his car. Matty shouted out the window, "See you at the rally!" Lindsey and Joe waved, then triumphantly strolled inside.

"This is going to be some weekend," Joe remarked. "Better buckle up for a wild ride."

"I'm ready," Lindsey replied.

There was great anticipation for the pep rally. Students and supporters packed the gym, each furiously waving miniature green and gold flags. The marching band belted out one tune after another. The excitement was everywhere. Principal Camden addressed the students and parents, while the cheerleaders and players, waiting to be introduced, lingered in the hallway. Lindsey sat with her girlfriends and co-workers. Joe remained with the team.

"I want to welcome you all to what I consider a very special event. As you know," she reported, "we've had another great year. Seventy-five percent of our seniors are going off to college. However triumphant I consider this year academically, our success has been augmented by the incredible journey of our football team." Grand applause and cheering ensued. "There's an old saying: *behind every successful man, there's a good woman*. We feel that expression is antiquated. We want to recognize the wonderful girls who constantly encouraged the players and entertained our crowds. Not from behind, but side-by-side and shoulder-to-shoulder. Ladies and Gentlemen, I give you the cheerleading squad of the Chelsea High School Rams!"

Led by Maura, the cheerleaders burst through the doors and began waving their pom-poms and moving in sync. The squad performed breathtaking displays, including tall human pyramids, backflips, cartwheels, and simpatico rows of perfectly timed dances. Everything was flawlessly

choreographed and the audience ate it up. Amid the wild applause, the cheerleaders formed a line between themselves and a row of folding chairs, meant for the football team.

Principal Camden resumed. "To all who have gathered here tonight, it gives me great pleasure to introduce the man solely responsible for organizing and training this wagon, Coach Joe Donovan!" As Joe came through the doors and headed toward Gail, the crowd rose up and delivered a thunderous ovation! The cheering was heartfelt, and Joe found himself basking in the limelight. Once the uproar settled down, Mrs. Camden handed the microphone to him.

"I can't begin to thank you enough for that applause, and to thank Principal Camden for organizing our rally. I'm not sure I deserve all this praise but I'll gladly take it." The audience laughed in agreement and Joe relaxed. "Truth be told," he carried on, "any success enjoyed was accomplished through the hard work and endless practice hours endured by this team. I wanted to introduce them individually, but they insisted on coming out together. As requested, I give you the 2022 Chelsea High School Rams!"

The doors blew open as the players barreled onto the court. The crowd rose and greeted them with an endless show of affection, respect, and love. The band played their anthem, "Climb and Conquer Oh Chelsea's Rams," while the cheerleaders contributed another spectacular performance. The players, although somewhat overwhelmed, loved every second of it! Eventually, the clapping subsided and the boys took their seats. Joe continued.

"I want you all to know how proud I am of this team. After a rough beginning, rather than giving up, these players banded together and put on a dazzling display of football. Some of those endings nearly sent me to a cardiologist. Fortunately, they pulled through with flying colors." Applause and cheers rang throughout the gym. "I do want to mention a handful of players who

elevated their game when it mattered most. First up, I'd like to introduce the heart and soul of our defense and the man who contributed too many clutch plays to recount, Tony Kavanaugh!"

Amid the applause, Tony got up, blushed, nodded to the crowd then quickly took his seat. The audience shouted, "Big Bear! Big Bear! Big Bear!" and wouldn't stop until Tony stood again and waved.

"Next up," Joe continued, "I want to recognize the man who makes the offense click. Not only with his phenomenal ability but with intelligence and great instinct, especially during crunch time. Quarterback Brian Anderson!"

Another enormous roar, as Brian reluctantly rose and gave a modest wave. He attempted to sit down quickly as well, but the crowd wouldn't allow it. He smiled, acknowledged them again, and finally took his seat.

"Now I want you to meet the man we know as *Mr. Cool*. He's never looked worried or intimidated by the scope of any situation. Let's make some noise for our fantastic field goal kicker, Scotty Woodland!"

A huge reception from the crowd greeted Scotty, whose humor and good spirit shined in these situations. He bowed repeatedly, much to the delight of the audience. He blew kisses toward the cheerleaders and they responded in kind. He plopped down on his seat with the players tugging at him and pounding his arms.

"Also," Joe went on, "I want to mention some offensive personnel. I ask them to please stand as I call out their names. Running back Danny King. Wide receivers Johnny Watson, Tommy Benson, and Leo Mitchell. Ladies and Gentlemen, these players were our offensive standouts, and without their efforts, we wouldn't be in this position today. Let's hear it for our *Fab Four*! "

Everyone clapped wildly as the players acknowledged the gathering then hurriedly retreated to their chairs.

"And now," Joe declared, "I'd like to introduce the catalyst who changed our direction. I'm a little biased folks. Please welcome my son, Matthew Gordon Donovan!"

Matty stood up and the roar shook the rafters! He snuck a peek at the girls. Both Karen and Maura welled up, as they tried their best to hold back the tears. Matty winked and smiled, a gesture that soothed them greatly. He waved to the adoring masses and returned to his seat.

"Finally," Joe concluded, "I'd like the entire team to rise and be recognized. Let's have one more round of applause for all of the players. Gentleman, on your feet!"

The players stood united. The gymnasium shook as the crowd showered them with affection. These kids were rock stars!

Principal Camden returned to the mic. "Thank you one and all for coming," she remarked. "Now let's ready ourselves for tomorrow's big game." The crowd cheered one final time and slowly filed out of the gym.

Lindsay caught up to Joe and pulled him aside.

"Joe," she began, "I think you know how much I love you. Your mentioning the name Gordon in Matty's introduction was something I didn't expect but will never forget. You truly are a wonderful and thoughtful man."

Joe paused momentarily then replied, "You and Matty are my world. I realized what special parents you and Paul were and wanted to include his part in Matty's success."

"Sweetheart," Lindsey added, "just when I think I've figured you out, you go and raise the bar. You really are the love of my life!"

Once things settled down, Karen, Maura, and Harry joined Matty. The four of them had agreed to go to the beach to enjoy a bonfire, some marshmallows, and maybe a dip in the ocean. Before leaving, Matty lined them up and made this observation.

"Karen, you've inspired me to heights I didn't think I could reach. Unfortunately, we do have one problem. I accidentally received this today, when obviously it belongs to you." Catching her completely off guard, Matty slowly removed his varsity jacket and draped it over her shoulders. Karen's only reaction was to grab Matty and hug him tightly. Karen didn't care who was watching as she kissed him.

"Does that mean you'll wear it?" Matty quipped.

"Of course, silly," Karen responded as she branded another kiss on her beau.

Lindsey and Joe stood nearby enjoying the moment. Afterward, they excused themselves and reminded Matty to be home by 10:00.

"Couldn't it be eleven?" Matty pleaded. "Just this once?"

Joe and Lindsey relaxed their restriction with Joe issuing a firm reminder.

"We have a huge game tomorrow, so you'd better be in bed, lights out, by eleven."

"I promise," came Matty's grateful reply.

As they climbed into Harry's car and headed off to the beach, Karen said, "I can't believe you gave me your jacket. I'll treasure this forever."

"Who else would I give it to?" Matty asked. "You're my girl!"

Arriving at the beach, Harry, Maura, Karen, and Matty were greeted by a handful of bonfires. They passed a few before finding one with familiar faces. During their stroll an unusual thing occurred. Every one of the gatherings cheered for Matty. Cries of "Donovan Rules!" echoed

along the shoreline. Harry, who could have felt slighted, was thrilled for him. They walked down to the edge of the water and decided it was too cold for a dip. As they looked out over the ocean, Harry said, "Matty, you've come a long way from your water boy status. I want you to know how terrific I feel about your success, and I consider myself lucky to have you as my friend."

Matty was matter of fact. "Listen up," he replied. "Throughout my freshman year I was intimidated by everything about high school. I kept to myself and it was difficult to see how I'd ever feel happy here. Now, with all that has happened, I'm blown away. It's hard to wrap my head around this. When Joe came into my mom's life, we were blessed. Becoming the football team's water boy seemed like a really bad idea, and at first it was. As time passed I made a few friends who weren't so self-absorbed. One of them was you, Harry. You befriended me and that's something I'll never forget. You guided me on how to approach Maura, who eventually led me to Karen, and my life changed. I see the world differently now. I look down the road and imagine the possibilities. If I can face my fears and overcome them, who's to say what I could or couldn't do. I'm trying to thank the three of you for instilling in me the confidence to handle any obstacles. Wherever we go from here, I'll look back upon this as the happiest time of my life. I'll cherish your friendships forever."

All four embraced. They cruised over to a bonfire where high school in general, football in particular, and plenty of rumors ensued. As curfew approached, they waved goodnight to their classmates. Harry made sure Karen and Matty were home at their appointed times. Maura and Harry stayed out a little later, finding time for themselves.

CHAPTER THIRTY NINE

Game day! Playing at home, this was the last regular season game of the year. The locker room tension was thick. Everyone knew if they won, Chelsea would play Madison for the title. If they lost, it was over. Joe reminded them, "If you play a smart, disciplined game, you will prevail. Let's go out and show them what we're made of!"

As the team dashed onto the field, the fan's reaction was Beatlesque! The standing ovation drifted over the team. Matty's adrenaline rush was in overdrive, while Joe called the players together for one last briefing. "Play within yourselves," he cautioned, "stick to our plan."

As for Cumberland, they were definitely intimidated by the crowd. Cumberland's coach, Traci Conroy, reminded them, "Remember, we've got nothing to lose. Let's make these guys earn it."

Chelsea won the coin toss and chose to receive. Tommy Benson was stationed at the goal line. Cumberland's kicker boomed a long, high, penetrating kick and Tommy dropped back a few yards, then took off. Churning his way upfield, with great supportive blocking, Tommy broke into the clear. He buzzed past the Bulldogs and eased into the end zone. Touchdown! At last Chelsea had returned a rival's kickoff for a touchdown. The fans exploded as the players rushed Tommy, pounding on his shoulders with glee! Fifteen seconds in and it was 7-0. Joe settled the players and reminded everyone there was plenty of time for Cumberland to respond. "Stay focused," he said. "This is far from over."

Sound advice and usually accurate, it turned out not to be the case. Big Bear and the boys were super-hyped and dominated Cumberland's offense completely. By halftime the score had stretched to 19-3 and there was a sense of finality in the air.

The parents were having none of it. "Don't get cocky," Courtney warned, "we're only a couple of touchdowns ahead."

"Of course you're right," Lindsey replied. "But I'm going to enjoy every second of this!"

In the locker room, Joe remained calm. "Great first half boys, absolutely great. Now stay committed and we'll secure our spot."

Chelsea's second-half kickoff held Cumberland to an insignificant return. The Bulldogs couldn't get out of their own way. Playing against a more talented and highly motivated opponent, the game was never in doubt. Scotty added a field goal early in the third quarter padding Chelsea's lead. Taking nothing for granted, Joe didn't want to substitute for the starters. Protecting a 22-3 lead heading into the fourth quarter, Joe wanted one more score to seal the deal. Brian was driving the offense with his usual efficiency, and once Chelsea reached Cumberland's two-yard line he called a time out. He jogged over to Joe for a brief consultation. Getting a nod from the coach, Brian returned to the huddle.

"Listen up," he instructed. "With everything this team has accomplished, it seems we've forgotten one thing, Matty doesn't have a touchdown." Matty looked puzzled as he'd never even *carried* the ball. "All right," Brian continued. "Danny, line up in front of Matty and open the kind of hole he's been creating all year."

"Not a problem," came Danny's confident reply.

Brian added. "Matty, I'm giving you the ball. I want you to find your way into the end zone. Got that?"

"For sure," an excited Matty promised.

As play resumed Brian handed off to Matty, but Danny accidentally slipped and fell in front of him. Determined to score, Matty took on two defensive linemen and plowed forward. Brian leap-frogged Danny and pushed Matty from behind. Their show of strength worked as Matty steamrolled his way into the end zone. Touchdown! Matthew Donovan had just scored!

His teammates mobbed him as he made his way to the bench. "Save that ball," Brian ordered. "It belongs to Matty!"

The cheerleaders ran out for their customary celebration, with Karen and Maura cheering wildly for Matty's score. Karen smiled throughout the remainder of the game.

It took Lindsey a few seconds to process what had happened. "Did Matty score? He did, didn't he? He scored, right?" Jennifer, along with the other parents, laughed and then congratulated her.

Summer added, "Now that's an exciting way to clinch a game."

It *was* over. Joe liberally sprinkled in the second stringers and benchwarmers. Everybody was on the field for at least one play. The game's end placed Joe at midfield shaking hands with Coach Conroy.

"Great game, Joe," Traci said. "Make sure you take advantage of this opportunity!"

"We'll try our best," Joe replied. "See you next season."

In the locker room, Joe was elated. "Boys," he announced, "you have no idea how incredibly proud I am. You remained united, practiced hard, and delivered a dominating performance right on time."

"You weren't bad either, Coach," came a voice from the back. The entire team cracked up.

Joe smiled. "We all know what's waiting for us, the championship game against Madison. For now, I want you to forget about it and enjoy yourselves. I'll see you all next Tuesday. Go and be with your family and friends. You've earned it."

Their cheers echoed outside the locker room as Joe headed into his office. *We're playing for the title*, he thought. *Amazing!*

CHAPTER FORTY

The big game would be played a week from Saturday at Madison, for a couple of reasons. First, the league's board of governors wanted both teams rested and ready on game day. Second, the senior prom was being held this Friday night. Harry and Maura were going, of course, but Maura came up with an idea which Harry quickly approved. You had to be one of Chelsea's seniors to attend the prom, however, you could invite anyone as your date. Karen would go as Harry's date, while Matty would accompany Maura. It would be a good opportunity for Matty to experience this unique social gathering. Karen might learn a thing or two as well.

Sunday morning, Harry and Maura broke the news. Karen and Matty couldn't believe it!

"The senior prom? How lucky are we," cried Karen.

Instantly, a daunting hurdle occurred to Matty. "I don't know how to dance," he muttered.

"Don't worry, Matty," Karen pledged. "I'll show you." A greatly relieved Matty agreed.

Later that afternoon, they got together to make some preliminary prom night arrangements. Karen and Matty couldn't contain their excitement! Naturally, the girls would have smashing gowns and the boys professionally fitted tuxedos. Next on the list was dancing. Matty had zero experience and was afraid of looking foolish.

"Relax, Matty," Maura assured him, "there are group dances we can use. Here, watch us. Come on, Karen." The boys stared while the girls ran through a few numbers. The most popular were: the cupid shuffle, cha-cha slide, cotton-eyed joe, the hustle and the wobble. Each was a group dance where a beginner could blend in. After initial missteps, Matty began to catch on. As for the slower numbers, Karen simply grabbed Matty by the waist and led him around.

"Perfect," Maura announced.

Karen teased, "Are you sure you've never tried this before?"

Matty innocently replied, "Not even once!" He loved being this close to Karen. They rehearsed a while longer. There'd be time for more practice sessions before the big night. They quit for the evening and Harry drove the girls home.

Lindsey and Joe were ecstatic about the prom. It was something they hadn't anticipated but eagerly endorsed. Leave it to Maura and Harry to suggest this. Joe was especially pleased. He wanted something to divert Matty's attention during this extended break. The prom would be a welcomed distraction.

CHAPTER FORTY ONE

Monday was another victory lap for the football team. Students congratulated Matty for his fine play overall *and* his touchdown in particular. These encouragements, while welcomed, only reinforced Joe's message: *once the fans have tasted success, they'll expect nothing less*. Matty gratefully acknowledged this approval, but understood it's nature.

Tuesday's practice was quite different. Joe was less demanding. There were no pads or heavy contact, merely some walk-thru of plays designed to use against Madison. Afterward, Joe gathered the team at midfield.

"Gentlemen, we've had a fantastic season. Winning our last seven games was something I couldn't anticipate. You were outstanding! We're going to coast for now then hit the ground running next week. No practice tomorrow so I'll see you all Thursday." The team was surprised and delighted as they dispersed.

Both couples agreed to meet at Matty's house for another dance session. While Maura and Karen picked out some songs, Matty and Harry moved the living room furniture. Matty remained

self-conscious. Maura downplayed it, assuring him most seniors were faking their way around the dance floor. "Not many will even notice us," she explained. "They're caught up in their own world."

Lindsey and Joe arrived and walked in on the rehearsal. Catching a glimpse, Lindsey asked if they could watch. Before Matty had the chance to decline, Maura replied, "Of course!" Joe and Lindsey sat off near a corner. Karen whispered in Matty's ear, "If you can handle your nerves here, the prom will be a piece of cake." Matty understood Karen's logic and, for better or worse, he agreed.

During the next half hour, the foursome showed off their moves while Joe and Lindsey nodded appreciatively. As Matty's comfort level climbed, the smile on his face widened. Lindsey loved seeing this. After rehearsal she invited the group to stay for dinner. When the evening ended, Harry, once again, would be the cabman. With Maura and Karen alongside, Harry motored away.

Thursday's practice caused quite a stir. After another series of non-contact drills, Joe gathered his team and made this surprising announcement. "Guys, I know next week is going to bring plenty of excitement and lots of nervous energy. For this reason, I'm cancelling tomorrow's practice and will see you next Tuesday. For those attending the prom, enjoy yourselves. Everyone else have a relaxed, safe weekend." The players cheered and darted off the field. "Rest up!" Joe called after them. "I'll need all hands on deck next Saturday."

Harry and Matty drove to Mr. Reid's World of Tuxedos. Harry knew the type of suit he wanted, with Matty following his lead. Employing the school's colors, Harry requested two black tuxedos augmented with a gold pocket square and a dark green cummerbund. The boys would be

absolutely stylin'. The girls were excited too. They selected lemon chiffon gowns and verdant-heeled sandals. Prom eminence, for sure!

Everyone agreed to meet at Karen's house for one last rehearsal. Her parents would provide a new audience. Matty's nerves were rock steady. The Austins applauded and cheered him on as he sailed through the dances. Over dinner, Max and Jan provided a pleasant surprise, they'd rented a Hansom Cab to handle the transportation! No one had experienced a horse-drawn carriage, they'd only seen one in *The Wizard of Oz*. This night was going to be amazing!

CHAPTER FORTY TWO

Prom day! Principal Camden scheduled a half day of school. This way prom attendees could finalize their plans, while the remaining student body could enjoy an extended weekend. At noon, the four of them gathered to reinforce their preparations. All would rendezvous at Karen's house around five o'clock. Harry would bring Maura. Lindsey and Joe would drive Matty, taking the opportunity to introduce themselves to Karen's parents. Harry dropped the girls off to get manicures and pedicures. He and Matty headed off to pick up their tuxedos. Afterward, Harry whisked them all to their various destinations and hurried home to ready himself.

Matty was as nervous as anyone would be. Lindsey reminded him of the social hoops he'd already jumped through, which was the boost his confidence needed. Joe helped Matty with his bow tie and cummerbund. Joe sported a fine suit while Lindsey modeled her loveliest dress. They wanted some pre-prom photos together and all had to look their Sunday best. As Joe joined Lindsey waiting in the foyer, Matty came down the stairs *dressed to the nines*.

Lindsey was thrilled. "Oh my handsome boy. You look spectacular!"

"Oh, Mom," an embarrassed Matty replied.

They headed out to the car for the fifteen-minute drive to the Austin's house. Arriving promptly at 5:00, the Donovans knocked on the front door. They were greeted by Karen. She welcomed them and introduced Jan and Max, who served a wonderful display of crackers, appetizers and beverages.

"We're so glad to finally meet," Jan offered. "Karen has told us so much about you."

"An absolute pleasure," Joe replied. "You have a wonderful daughter here. We think the world of Karen."

Matty told Karen he couldn't believe his luck.

"Not only am I going to the senior prom, but I get to escort the prettiest girl of all!"

After a few more pleasantries, a calmness settled in. Matty and Karen held hands, both acting like the young teenagers they were. The doorbell rang. In came Harry and Maura, a remarkable pairing. They were clearly enjoying themselves and that feeling carried the room. Both couples exchanged corsages and boutonnieres. Everyone looked fabulous! With all present and accounted for, Joe suggested some pictures. A dazzling array was created and quick downloads sent everyone a digital album of their own.

What's this? An unfamiliar sound from outside. Horse hooves? The Hansom Cab had arrived! They all wandered out to see the magnificent, horse-drawn carriage garnished with gold and green bouquets.

"Oh, Mom and Dad," Karen declared, "thank you so much. This is awesome!"

"Well played," Joe whispered to Max. "That's what I call class."

Max smiled and nodded. "I'm glad you approve."

Ever the gentlemen, Harry and Matty helped the girls step up and into the cab. As the carriage pulled away, with encouraging shouts and waves from one and all, Lindsey and Joe headed back

indoors with Jan and Max. They enjoyed a few hours of light conversation over the appetizers and refreshments, with both couples agreeing to meet up again.

Mother Nature supplied a perfect evening. The carriage excursion was sensational. Harry and Matty couldn't stop complimenting their dates. Finally, Maura joked, "We get it. You think we're pretty. You gentlemen clean up very nicely as well." They spent the rest of their journey holding hands, with an occasional kiss or two along the way.

The prom was held at the Teacher's Union Hall, a sprawling venue that could easily handle crowds of up to a thousand. With a senior class of four hundred students, plus their dates, this was a natural fit. The prom committee had hired Dave Martin, the best disc jockey in town and a seasoned pro at these types of functions. Weeks earlier, secret ballots had been passed out to the graduating class to elect a king and queen.

As parents and rented limousines dropped off attendees, the Hansom Cab arrived creating quite a stir. With a huge smile on his face Matty turned to Karen and thanked her for being his date. "Thank me?" she answered. "Thank you! This is wonderful, Matty."

The boys hopped down from the carriage to lend a helping hand. Harry and Maura recognized many classmates and greeted them enthusiastically. Karen and Matty were less familiar, although they did see some football players and cheerleaders they knew. Brian and his date, Jocelyn Turner, traded compliments with Maura and Harry then walked over toward Karen and Matty.

"Welcome to the big time, sophomores," Brian joked as he happily greeted the couple. After meeting Jocelyn for the first time, Harry and Maura, along with Jocey and Brian, escorted Matty and Karen into the prom.

Once inside, the open doors revealed a spectacular setting. The school colors were on display everywhere, with gold linen cloths and green napkins adorning the tables of eight. Unreserved

seating ruled the event. Matty, Karen, Harry, and Maura followed Brian and Jocey to a table where Big Bear Kavanaugh and his date, Amanda Foley were seated. While DJ Dave spun one hit after another, the other guests gradually settled in. The crowd was buzzing. This was a special night!

The conversations were light-hearted with one topic dominating the narrative, next Saturday's championship game.

"I don't know how you guys can handle the pressure," Amanda stated. "I'm already a wreck."

"We're not sure we can," Tony teased. He boomed a bellowing cackle, which caught everyone off guard.

"He sounds pretty mellow to me," Brian added, and the table couldn't stop laughing.

Class president Luke Parker ambled onto the stage and addressed the assembly.

"May I have your attention please," he requested. The room quickly turned silent. "I want to welcome everyone to the senior prom, Class of '22! For many of us this will be a fond farewell, as we head off to higher education and career opportunities. Let's enjoy ourselves tonight. After dinner, we'll announce the king and queen!" Resounding applause and chants of "Luke, Luke," filled the air as he left the podium.

DJ Dave was back on the clock. He could download and play any request. As it turned out, most of the songs were perfect for the group dances Matty had practiced. He was having a ball! He loved the slow dances with Karen. The two talked, laughed, and looked every bit the part of teenagers consumed by puppy love. Harry and Maura danced with a maturity only time and experience brings. Their plan was to keep seeing each other throughout the summer, then assess where they were when college beckoned.

DJ Dave kept the atmosphere light while salads and entrees were served. By the end of dessert, Luke returned to the lectern.

"All right, everyone, listen up. The moment we've all been waiting for is here. It's time to announce our king and queen." The lights were dimmed with a spotlight solely on Luke. "The results are as follows: Our King is Brian Anderson and the lovely Maura Thompson is our Queen!" A wild standing ovation followed. There couldn't have been two more popular choices. Luke summoned them for the ceremonial first dance. Brian took Maura's hand and headed for the dance floor.

While swaying to a ballad, Brian leaned in and whispered, "Maura, I want you to know the riot act you read me, regarding Matty, didn't fall on deaf ears. It took me some time to understand, but I do look at people differently now. I realize everyone has a purpose in life and I'm forever grateful for your wisdom."

"I'm happy for you, Brian," came Maura's reply. "I think you have the potential to become a great man, and I'd like to see that happen."

As the music ended, Brian bowed to his queen and led her back to their table where a royal reception awaited. With the evening drawing to a close, groups divided, heading for various house parties. These were of no interest to Harry or Maura who gladly joined Karen and Matty for their Carriage ride home.

The Coachman delivered them safely to Karen's house where Harry's car was waiting. Maura and Harry climbed in and relaxed while Matty walked Karen to her front door. With a proper parting kiss, Matty said good night and traipsed back to Harry's car. After dropping him off, Maura and Harry recapped the prom.

"I think Matty and Karen will learn a lot from this night, ' Maura said.

"Absolutely, my queen," Harry responded.

They both laughed and Maura remarked, "I'll take a jester over the king any day. By the way," she clarified, "the jester, my dear, would be you!"

Breakfast the following morning saw Matty fully animated. He recited every recollection while Lindsey and Joe sat mesmerized. Lindsey suggested meeting with the Austins for dinner on Sunday. Matty phoned and they happily agreed. Joe made reservations at a favorite high-end restaurant. All six enjoyed a wonderful meal, capping a glorious weekend.

CHAPTER FORTY THREE

The atmosphere at school Monday was exhilarating! Reports from the prom and anticipation of Saturday's huge game had electrified the students. Throughout the week, the players received multitudes of greetings and encouragement from their peers. Harry and Matty were determined to remain focused. There'd be no extracurricular activities this week. Maura and Karen agreed. Football workouts and cheerleading sessions would dominate their schedules.

Joe's practices were strict and precise, with a mandate following Friday's scrimmage. "All right, boys," he began, "tomorrow's going to be a remembered day. I've played in a handful of these clashes and recall each one as if it was yesterday. I want you to relax tonight and ready yourselves for a topsy-turvy experience. I'll see you here at noon. Let's bring our 'A' game." The players roared and cheered their coach, a man they trusted and admired.

Championship Day! A game which had been nothing more than a pipe dream when the season began. Madison (9-1) vs Chelsea (8-2). Madison's Giants had clinched the home field advantage

when they defeated Hyannis to improve to 9-0. They shockingly lost to Marblehead in their final outing, a meaningless game but kept Madison from an undefeated season. The Giants were not happy and looked forward to punishing the Rams. Madison had easily handled them in the season's opener. Surely they would whip them again.

Meanwhile, Chelsea, a dark horse when the season began, finished with a remarkable seven-game winning streak. Joe's coaching debut was impressive. Matty's presence stabilized the offense. This was not the same team who lost two of their first three games. Brian had an outstanding year and showed real brilliance. Danny benefitted from openings created by Matty, while Brian's extra time helped him litter the field with passes to Johnny, Tommy, and Leo. Scotty had an excellent season, making every routine kick and more than his fair share of outstanding ones. Big Bear, impressive from the start, anchored their superb defense. This had the makings of a classic battle!

In the locker room before kickoff, Joe repeated how proud he was of his players. He had prepped them the best he could and now it was a matter of execution.

"Try not to be overwhelmed," he advised. "We all know this game is for the title. Anything can and will happen out there. All I ask is an honest effort from everyone. If I get that, win or lose, you'll have no problem with me." With the sound of cheers resonating in the background, Joe retired to his office.

Brian felt the need to speak. "Listen, guys, I know Madison beat us early on, but do any of you think we're overmatched now? I know I don't. I'm confident in this team's ability to overcome anything. Let's go out and show them who the real champions are!" The team cheered wildly and followed Brian out onto the field.

In the stands Lindsey was a wreck. She chatted nervously with the other moms who confirmed similar feelings. There's a saying: *It's much more difficult to watch a game than actually play in it.* This has some validity. While Matty would be concentrating on what he needed to do, Lindsey had the unfortunate luxury of letting her mind wander. So many scenarios presented themselves, she could actually feel herself shaking. All of the parents were primed and anxiously awaited the opening kickoff.

The teams charged out to the sound of the stadium rocking! Once again the adrenaline high consumed the players. The cheerleaders and marching bands were in full modus operandi, creating a fully charged atmosphere. This game was momentous, no doubt about it!

The team's captains met at midfield for the pre-game coin toss. The Giants won and chose to receive the ball. Chelsea would kickoff and defend against the wind. They'd be upwind for the first and third quarters, downwind during the second and fourth.

Scotty's fine kickoff was returned to Madison's fifteen-yard line. Big Bear had leveled a couple of Madison players before ultimately making the tackle. He was fired up! From the onset it was apparent this was going to be a tug-of-war. Both defenses were solid and yards gained were hard-fought. Matty was playing well. In spite of this, the Giants were able to put some pressure on Brian, who remained unfazed. He knew the offense was giving everything they could. He was content to handoff to Danny and, with Matty leading the way, made consistent progress. Brian had enough time to toss some pinpoint passes which were gobbled up by Johnny, Tommy and Leo. Joe substituted Harry occasionally, but no throws headed in his direction. Not today. This game was far too important. Harry was a solid blocker and that would be his contribution.

Both teams had trouble scoring with Chelsea's latest drive stalling at Madison's thirty-yard line, close enough for a field goal attempt. Per usual, Scotty's kick was long and right down the middle. Chelsea 3 Madison 0. A successful start and the Rams were fired up!

Play was difficult during the first two quarters, with smothering defense from both sides. The half ended with Chelsea's field goal being the only score.

During intermission Joe urged his players to remain engaged. The Giants were sure to take more chances the rest of the way. He expounded on the fine play of the defense yet knew this lead wasn't safe. "Twenty-four minutes," Joe reminded them. "Heck, we can do that standing on our heads." The players burst into laughter, easing the tension. "Now let's end this!" The team sprinted out for the second half--a half which would define their season.

As the third quarter progressed, Lindsey tried her best to cope. Each play seemed more intense than the last. At certain points the game would fly-- other times it crawled. The spectators felt whichever team scored a touchdown would probably win. Lindsey's eyes darted back and forth from Matty to Joe. She could never tell how Joe felt, as he remained emotionless on the sideline. She was proud of Matty, who was giving maximum effort on every play. The other parents would hug Lindsey and applaud every punishing block Matty administered. He was, without a doubt, a warrior.

Both offenses were stymied. Big Bear and his teammates were playing the game of their lives knowing one mistake could prove costly. Ultimately, it did. Near the end of the third quarter, Madison had the ball on Chelsea's forty-yard line. Third down and seven, surely a pass was coming. It was. As Madison snapped the ball, one of the Giants' receivers made a clever move on the Ram's defensive cornerback, who promptly tripped trying to adjust. Down he went. It was the kind of break Madison needed. A completed pass followed and the uncovered receiver took off!

Chelsea's defenders weren't going to catch him. Touchdown! Madison's fans went wild as the stadium shook. Suddenly, Chelsea trailed for the first time all game, 7-3.

The Ram's fans bemoaned the bad luck. One trip, one score, and the game was slipping away. Lindsey saw things differently. "Come on," she pleaded. "This team needs our support now more than ever." The group nodded but weren't confident.

Maura encouraged the cheerleaders. "This is why we're here!" she reminded them. She led the squad through another cheer; "Let's Go, Let's Go, Let's go, *LET'S GO!*" and the band played as if *Chelsea* had just scored. This rallied the crowd!

As the fourth quarter began it appeared the Rams had discovered some offensive footing. Whether or not it was caused by the Giants' defense growing weary, Chelsea started moving the ball. Time and again Matty created space for Danny, who rattled off runs of twenty and twenty-five yards, carrying Chelsea to Madison's thirty-nine yard line. First and ten for the Rams. As they felt the momentum shifting, the Chelsea fans were invigorated! The Giants took a timeout, giving themselves a much-needed break. They were definitely tired but decided to take a chance and called for an all-out blitz. Joe countered with his most effective play, the quick pass to Leo. As the ball was snapped, the defense surged. Madison's strength in numbers overwhelmed Matty's superb blocking, along with the rest of Brian's protection. Brian reacted quickly and threw the ball away, avoiding a devastating sack. While throwing, two of Madison's defenders slammed Brian into the turf, landing on top of him. Suddenly, he was writhing in pain and grabbing his left arm. The players waved frantically at the sideline. Joe raced onto the field, his only concern being Brian's health. He was clearly injured and was lifted onto a stretcher. Sympathetic applause finally broke the crowd's silence as Brian was carried off the field.

Chelsea's fans were devastated as word leaked out concerning Brian. While not permanently damaged, he had suffered a separated shoulder and was unavailable for the rest of the game. Joe knew he'd lost his only irreplaceable player and would have to figure out a way to win with Mike O'Brien. The consensus was Mike, a decent backup but no starter, would be unable to lead Chelsea to the touchdown they desperately needed. Everyone felt he'd give it his best effort, although they were skeptical of his ability to actually deliver.

Never expecting to play, Mike was extremely nervous and intimidated. Joe sensed it but had no choice. Trying to ease him into this pressure-cooker, Joe called for two running plays which modestly placed Chelsea on Madison's thirty-six yard line. The likelihood of a successful fourth down gamble at this point was remote. It might be a tad long for a field goal, Joe thought, but he believed it was the right call.

Scotty jogged into position and was confident he could narrow the gap. Ball snapped, the kick solid and...blocked! Madison unleashed a flood of players and one had made it through. The Giants recovered the ball at the fifty-yard line. Madison's patrons were in a frenzy! The score remained 7-3.

Big Bear and his teammates didn't flinch. They stopped Madison's offense cold and forced a punt, with Chelsea receiving the ball at their fifteen-yard line. Six minutes remained.

Remarkably, Mike made a couple of clutch third-down passes, however the drive fizzled and Chelsea punted. Three minutes to go. The Giants were on their twenty-seven yard line.

Remaining conservative, they ran time-consuming plays, causing Chelsea to take two timeouts.

Madison was finally forced to punt with Chelsea receiving the ball on their twenty-yard line.

Nineteen seconds to go. The Rams had to travel eighty yards for a touchdown or this was all

over. The Giants' defense had played exceptionally well the entire game. If 7-3 was the final score, their efforts, all told, would be the deciding factor.

All of a sudden, there was a low murmur from the crowd. It grew louder and louder until the reason appeared for all to see, Brian was back! He conferred with Joe at great length then trotted onto the field. Although clearly injured, Brian was brave enough to try. True leadership. As he reached the huddle, he regained command.

"Listen up," he ordered. "The way I see it, we have one chance to win. I can throw the ball to around their thirty-yard line, if I get the time. I want Johnny, Tommy and Leo to run in unison. I'm flinging it up for grabs like a jump ball. With the three of you together and their defense converging, the congestion might allow us to catch or tip the ball toward one another. We have one timeout left, so don't worry about getting out of bounds. If this works, I can reach the end zone from there." He turned to Matty. "Ironman," he joked, "I need you to buy me some extra time so the receivers can get downfield." The other players looked at each other. How can he joke at a time like this? Brian smiled. "Think you can handle that?"

"You've got it, Brian," Matty replied. "I'll hold them off for as long as it takes."

Lindsey, Jennifer, Courtney, and Summer held hands and waited.

"What can they possibly do?" Lindsey asked.

"They can try a Hail Mary pass," Eddie reported. "You throw the ball as far as you can and hope one of your receivers grabs it. The situation is so dire, divine intervention is warranted."

"Oh, I see," Lindsey answered.

"If that's not bad enough," Eddie continued, "they'll need to repeat it in order to score. The Giants will be ready and waiting. It's gonna take a miracle."

"Okay, I get it!" Lindsey bristled, and turned her attention back to the field.

The teams lined up for this telling drive. Danny, left, and Matty, right, positioned themselves in front of Brian. The ball was snapped, and Brian faded to his right. Matty flattened one defensive linebacker and took on another while Johnny, Leo, and Tommy flew down the right side. This might work! Suddenly, Brian started drifting toward his left.

"Where is he going?" Troy shouted from the stands.

"He's trying to get a better angle," Eddie replied.

Madison sniffed this out and was in hot pursuit.

"Throw it," Troy pleaded. "Throw the ball!"

That's precisely what Brian did. Not to Leo, Tommy, or Johnny. Much to everyone's surprise, Brian threw it straight back to Matty! He clearly understood Brian was injured, and now it was up to *him* to throw into the cluster. At least that's what Joe and Brian assumed. While the Giants tried futilely to pressure him, another opportunity appeared. Unnoticed, except by Matty, and uncovered was Harry! Racing down the left sideline, he was streaking toward the end zone. He eased up at the Madison twenty and was wide open. One problem: Harry was way too deep downfield for *any* quarterback to reach. This did not deter Matty, who wound up and heaved the football as far as he could. The ball soared while the crowd gasped. No one could believe the magnitude of its flight! Realizing their mistake, the Giants' defense took off in Harry's direction. Late. Much too late. For his teammates, the idea of throwing to Harry *now* was alarming! He wasn't clutch. This wasn't the play. The entire championship was on his shoulders! Once Harry saw the ball's arc, he began running all-out again, not sure if he could even reach it! He had never seen Matty's powerful arm, which dominated Joe and Brian's pre-play discussion. As Harry neared the goal line, he extended his arms and made a desperate dive to snatch the ball. In what would later be described as the greatest play in the history of Chelsea's high school sports,

Harry corralled the football while tumbling into the end zone. Touchdown! The air horn blared ending the game. Final score: Chelsea 9 Madison 7. The Rams had won the Championship!

Chelsea's fans were dumbstruck. Did they actually see a fifteen-year-old boy throw a football eighty yards downfield? They quickly recovered and erupted!

Brian and Matty exchanged fist pumps. "Unbelievable throw," Brian shouted as they raced toward paydirt. "Unbelievable!" Everyone mobbed Harry. "Great catch, Harry!" Brian exclaimed. "Best I've ever seen."

After distancing himself from his teammates, Brian looked into the stands to find his girlfriend, Jocelyn. He was having trouble locating her as the steady flow of players and fans swirled by. Finally, he heard Jocey shouting his name and turned to see her coming. As she jumped into his arms, a wincing Brian looked over her shoulder and couldn't believe his eyes--his parents were there! Jocey whispered, "I knew they were coming, Brian, but I couldn't spoil the surprise." After a few kisses she released him, as his mother and father approached.

"Brian," Patrice started, "you were incredible. Absolutely amazing!" She hugged and kissed him like mothers do and he started to tear up. Finally, she let go and Brian saw his father. Not knowing what to expect, Brian steeled himself.

"I've never been more proud of you in my life," Bob stated. "I know I haven't always shown it, but I love you and am forever grateful you're my boy." Brian experienced no pain from his father's bear hug. "Thanks, Dad," Brian responded. "Thanks so much for being here. It means the world to me."

Joe was fist pumping everyone, looking to reach Matty. When the two met, Joe hugged him as hard as any parent could while acknowledging Harry with a thumb's-up. "That was the greatest

pass I've ever seen!" Joe cried. "You are truly a hero, son!" Matty beamed. This feeling was magical!

Meanwhile, out of the corner of his eye, Joe noticed Maura and Karen bolting toward their sweethearts. He managed to escape seconds before the girls assaulted their boyfriends, hugging and kissing them relentlessly.

"You know, Harry, I said you were an all-star on my team," Maura declared. "But that catch makes you an all-star on any team!" Harry simply nodded and said, "I get it, Maura," you really like me and"--Maura silenced him with a kiss.

Karen was astonished. "Matty, how did you manage to throw the ball so far?"

"I'm not really sure," Matty replied. "Maybe I don't know my own strength!" They laughed and embraced, reveling in the excitement.

Harry roamed over to Matty. "I can't believe you saw me out there." Harry shook his head. "You hurled that football like a javelin!"

"Well," Matty joked, "I squinted my eyes real tight and thought I spotted someone in the distance." They laughed and hugged, knowing they had shared a moment never to be forgotten.

In the stands, Lindsey was floored. She hugged Jennifer, Summer, Courtney, and anyone else in reach. She vaulted onto the field and headed toward her boys. Lindsey wrapped her arms around Joe and exclaimed, "You're amazing, Matty's amazing, and this game was amazing!" Lindsey kissed Joe and wouldn't let go.

As they continued to celebrate, a voice in the crowd cried out, "That's quite a boy you have there, folks. He's one in a million!" Lindsey and Joe gazed at each other and smiled. One in a million indeed.

SEND THE ALL-OUT

(The End)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Garrett M. Stapleton was a Boston Firefighter for twenty-three years from 1978 until 2001. He is the third son of Former Boston Fire Commissioner Leo D. Stapleton and his wife, Doris. He was born and raised in the town of South Boston, Massachusetts, with two older brothers and two younger sisters. In 2002, he relocated to the Massachusetts suburbs.