

The Bulldog Compact

By

Donald James Parker

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This is a work of fiction. The events and characters described here are imaginary and not intended to reflect any actual person, living or dead, though some of the last names will sound familiar to Madison residents. One exception is John Baker whose inspiring story and movie has been a motivation to the author of this book for many years.

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Chapter 1 – Eighth Grade 1968: A Scar Is Borne

The score was tied with only forty-two ticks remaining on the scoreboard clock. The Watertown Arrow guard dribbling the ball up the court waved one finger in the air to tell his teammates to hold the ball for one last shot. The Bulldogs of Madison tried to steal the ball, while at the same time attempting to avoid committing a foul which would send an Arrow to the charity stripe. They also had to be careful not to let an opponent get open for an easy basket. They were displaying the legendary determination of their Bulldog mascot by clinging to their men.

Up in the stands, Lance Masterson, better known to his friends as ‘Bambi’, watched with a pounding, racing heart, and noticeable trembling. *Close games sure are fun, but they’re also hard on the body.* Bambi was only in the eighth grade, but the varsity basketball games of Madison High School were about the most important thing in his life. He didn’t take the frequent losses lightly. The infrequent wins were cause for great celebration.

Bambi glanced at the scoreboard and back to the action. Only nine seconds remained. Watertown would make a move towards the basket soon. An Arrow forward flashed into the lane, received a pass, pivoted around, and fired up a soft jump shot with four seconds showing. The ball hit the rim before bouncing off the glass and off the rim one more time. Four players went up high for the rebound. One of the purple-clad Arrows batted the ball as if he were playing volleyball. The horn went off, ending regulation playing time while the ball was still in the air. It rolled along the edge of the rim once and then dropped through the cords, initiating a dance of joy among the Arrow players and fans.

Bambi, who had leaped to his feet when the jump shot had gone up along with every other spectator in the gym, kicked the bleacher. That act of frustration didn’t change the score, but it

did release a little of the anger that boiled inside of him.

"How lucky can they get?" he asked his best friend, Corky Calhoun.

"That was the pukiest tip-in I ever saw. He couldn't do that again in a thousand years."

Bambi smacked his hand against his thigh. "We might have had a chance in overtime with their big guy fouled out."

"We'll never know how it would have ended if that turkey hadn't been out of his gourd and made that unconscious tip-in."

"You're right. We'll be playing the 'what if' game the rest of our lives."

"Holy hand grenade, Bambi! Our whole lives? I won't even be thinking about it next year."

"I'm not gonna forget – ever!"

Several loud curses spilled out from nearby fans as the Bulldog team beat a hasty retreat to the locker room. The rows of disappointed Bulldog rooters began their usual journey to the exits, their long faces portraying their usual frustration at another loss this season, another in a series of losing seasons. Bambi remained in the bleachers, gazing at the scoreboard, which read 'HOME 58 VISITORS 60'.

He had to blink a few times to fight back the tears that pushed to escape. He thought of the many times he had sat in this same gym and witnessed the same scene of the home crowd filing out, let down again by their team. Bambi felt hopeless and empty. His mind flew back to some of the good memories, those of smiles and laughter when the scoreboard had indicated an advantage for the Bulldogs when the final horn had blown. *Why can't it always be like that? Why can't the fans always leave with their heads held high and that very special warm feeling inside? Well, maybe not always, but certainly more frequently.*

Bambi was abruptly removed from his trance by a sharp tug on his shirtsleeve. He looked up to see Corky sporting a look of impatience on his face. "Hey, are you planning on sleeping here tonight? Come on. The gang is on their way down to the bowling alley to grab a snack and play the jockboxes. Are you comin' or not?"

"I guess so," mumbled Bambi, without much enthusiasm.

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Corky and Bambi were classmates and teammates at Madison Junior High. The friends were almost inseparable, having almost identical interests. Both of their young lives revolved around sports, especially basketball. The two buddies strolled across the almost empty gym floor to the side exit. They quickened their pace to dodge their way through the snarl of cars that was slowly untangling. When they reached the safety of the sidewalk, they slowed down to a steady walk which would allow them to reach their destination in approximately eighteen cold minutes.

The bowling alley was the hangout for the younger kids. The high school kids always had a dance after the games, but junior high students weren't permitted to go. Since the pool hall didn't allow girls, they were left without much choice in the selection of a hangout. They had chosen Cherry Lanes. The boys usually drifted down there too since the scenery was much better there than at the pool hall.

After the long, brisk walk, Bambi and Corky pushed open the glass door, distinctly marked by children's fingerprints, and penetrated the warmth and bright lights inside. The gang had already arrived and was congregated around the row of noisy and brightly lit pinball machines they had nicknamed the 'jockboxes'.

"What took you guys so long?" yelled a masculine voice from over by the pop machine. "Did you get lost?"

"Yeah, we took a wrong left turn at the Grand Canyon," retorted Corky, who was never at a loss for a wisecrack. He turned to Bambi. "Let's get something to eat. I'm so hungry I could snarf down a brontosaurus and still have room for a big dessert."

Bambi shrugged his shoulders and followed his friend into the dining room. They slipped into the only booth that was empty. Bambi surveyed the room to see if the girl of his dreams was present. His eyes roved around the area until they made contact with a pair of chocolate brown ones across the aisle. He turned quickly away, feeling a small rush of heat into his cheeks. His heart made a little jump, but not like the usual earthquake that pounded his chest when he made such eye contact. Not even

Lisa Nielsen could totally snap him out of the cruddy feeling he had right then. His thoughts were interrupted by the arrival of an evidently flustered and tired waitress.

Although Bambi was in a quiet, reflective mood, the rest of the bubblegummers, as the waitress referred to them, were in a constant state of motion, laughing and yelling. The uproar they produced was enough to strain the sanity of all but the strongest or deafest of the adult generation. Bambi didn't usually notice the volume because he was a participant and not an observer. Tonight things were different, and the noise was getting on his nerves. After scribbling down Corky's order, the waitress turned to Bambi. "Just a root beer, please," he mumbled.

As the weary lady returned to the kitchen, Corky studied his companion. Finally he blurted out, "Bambi, what's the matter with you? You hardly said a word all the way down here, and now you don't order anything to eat. That's just not like you at all. Is there somethin' buggin' ya?"

Bambi made a gesture of uncertainty with his hands and heaved a loud sigh. "Yeah, there is. It's that stupid basketball game. I'm getting sick and tired of losing so much."

"But you can't do anything about that. It's not your fault that the Madison Choke Artists staged another classic come-from-ahead-defeat."

"I know, but it still bugs the snot out of me. Did you notice how tired those guys were in the fourth quarter? They aren't in very good shape at all. I've heard that some of them are smoking and drinking. I really think that some don't give a rip about the team."

"Holy hangnail, Bambi. You can't let that get you down. Wait until we get into high school; then we'll show them how it's done."

"Yeah, maybe." Suddenly Bambi's face lit up. "Yeah! Yeah!" he almost shouted the last one. "That's it! I've got it!"

"I hope it's not contagious."

"I've got an idea of something I can do, no...that *we* can do – now. A team needs to stick together, right?" Bambi didn't even wait for Corky to reply. "I think it's time we started preparing for our high school careers right now."

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"Say what?"

"Do you remember in *The Three Musketeers* and how the heroes always pledged themselves to each other saying, 'All for one, and one for all'?" His sidekick nodded. "Why can't we do it too? Let's make a pledge to stick together and to have a winning season." After a momentary pause, Bambi shook his head. "No, that's not good enough. Let's pledge to win the state A championship when we get into high school."

Corky looked at him with disbelief written all over his face. "Win the state championship? Holy hamburger! You sure like to dream big when you start those little wheels rollin' around in your noggin. I hope you know that Madison has never even made it to the state tournament!"

"You don't have to tell me. I know it too well already. But my dad once told me that it's better to shoot at the moon and miss than aim at a skunk and connect. My bull's eye is going to be the state A basketball championship." Bambi sat for a moment, lost in thought, before continuing. "I think I've got it all figured out how I can do it. I'm going to write up a contract and give everybody on the eighth grade team an opportunity to sign it. Anybody who puts his signature on it will be agreeing to give everything they've got to win. Heck, we can even let the seventh graders sign it too."

Bambi's normal enthusiasm had returned. He felt like a giant weight had been lifted from his back and a burlap bag had been removed from his stomach. He almost sprinted to the counter to ask the waitress to bring him two hamburgers and a large order of French fries. He was definitely back to normal. As he returned to his booth, he saw Lisa and her friends just preparing to go out the door. Lisa smiled at him as their eyes met again. He returned a shy smile.

WOW! Wait till I see that beautiful face smiling at me as I carry the championship trophy back to the team after we win the finals!

He sat down again, and his mind drifted off to the land of daydreams, where he was a frequent visitor. It was the smell of warm French fries placed in front of him which finally brought him back to the real world.

Bambi laid out his plans in between big and hastily chewed bites. "I'll draw up the contract and stuff, and you tell everybody to meet at my house tomorrow night at about 6:30. Tell everybody on the seventh and eighth grade teams. OK?"

"Do I have to tell everybody?" whined Corky. "You know what a bunch of squirrels some of those guys are. They'll just laugh at the whole thing."

Bambi sobered up for a minute. He hadn't thought of that. Some of the kids were starting to think they were pretty cool, and a couple were just plain troublemakers. "Maybe you're right," he finally admitted. "But let's give them a chance. You can explain to them what's going on and if they want to come, they'll be welcome. OK?"

"Well, all right. I'll let them know, but don't hold your breath waitin' on them to show up tomorrow."

"Good enough. I'm going home right now to start on the project. You can talk to some of the guys right here and save yourself some phone calls tomorrow." Bambi swallowed the last bite of his hamburger, washed it down with the last of his root beer, hastily wiped his mouth with a napkin, and grabbed his coat. "See you tomorrow night."

"Right on, big fella. Give me ten." The two slapped hands and exchanged farewells. Bambi pushed back into the cold outside while Corky sauntered over to the pinball machines to begin fulfilling his duty for the project.

* * *

Bambi was up early the next morning.

His mother was surprised to see him enter the kitchen at six a.m. on a Saturday morning. "What are you doing up so early? Going to watch cartoons?"

"I don't have time for that kids' stuff," he replied, with an obvious tone of disdain. In one night he had grown too old for Bugs Bunny and his friends. He gulped down three bowls of Captain Crunch while contemplating the requirements for his soon to be written document. Between spoonfuls of cereal he managed to scribble down a few of the many ideas circulating in

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his head.

After finishing breakfast, he went back to his room and turned on the stereo. He put on a mellow Bobby Vinton album that would allow him to think and still enjoy the music. Upon returning home the night before he had done a little research on some of the documents in his history book. He had read the Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, and the Mayflower Compact. He had decided to call his little masterpiece the 'Bulldog Compact.' He spent the whole morning jotting down, arranging, and scratching out the ingredients of his brainstorm.

The morning passed very quickly, as time seems to do when a person is concentrating and laboring on something that is truly interesting. He was surprised to hear his mom call him for lunch; it seemed to him that he had just finished breakfast. His mind, dedicated so completely to its task, was sure that four hours couldn't have passed by so rapidly. His stomach, however, was definitely ready to debate the issue.

After washing his hands, Bambi bounced down the stairs and into the kitchen to refuel for the completion of his project. His mother was just putting steaming bowls of vegetable soup onto the table to accompany the big platter filled with grilled cheese and cold meat sandwiches.

His father looked up from his newspaper. "Hello, Lance."

Hardly anyone used his real name except his parents and some of his teachers. He'd picked up the nickname 'Bambi' from one of his classmates who was an avid fan of the fleet wide receiver, Lance Alworth. The football player got his nickname of Bambi because he ran like a deer. Lance got his through name association only, though he was a pretty good athlete. "Hi, Dad."

His father looked up again, "What's your big hurry today? Got a ballgame lined up?"

Bambi swallowed before he answered to avoid another one of his mother's pet peeves, talking with a mouthful. "Not today. I have to do some writing."

"Writing?" his father asked with raised eyebrows. "Are you starting the great American novel?"

"Oh, no. Nothing like that. More like the Constitution or Declaration of Independence."

His father and mother both laughed. Their son was always amazing them with his ambitions and future plans. They were glad that he was that way. They both agreed that a boy of Lance's age without dreams for the future was on a dead-end road. Bambi wasn't even on a road but was in the clouds most of the time with his ideas.

"By the way, Dad, is it OK if some of the team comes over for a little while tonight after supper?"

"Your mother and I are going bowling tonight, but I guess it'll be all right – if they don't stay too late."

"No problem there. Thanks a lot."

Upon his return to his bedroom Bambi surveyed the output of his morning's work. He had three pages full of notes, but he needed to eliminate some of his ideas and reword the rest to make them sound just right and mean exactly what he wanted to say. This was much more important than any composition he had ever done for a grade in English class. He glanced at his alarm clock. It was 12:30. He had to finish by two in order to watch the Nebraska-Missouri basketball game on television. He began to scratch out his notes one by one until only the bare necessities remained. He had decided not to be overly specific with his final product. He got out the family typewriter, inserted a clean piece of paper, and began typing very carefully, painfully striving not to make a single error.

After a few moments of pecking at one key at a time, Bambi stopped and examined the paper critically before finally removing it from the machine. "All right!" he uttered. He placed the completed copy gingerly upon his desk as if it were fragile, bounded down the steps to the living room and flicked on the TV. *Perfect timing! They're just announcing the starting lineups.* Sprawled out on the floor, Bambi cheered on his team and occasionally jumped up to imitate a move he had just seen on the screen.

When the game reached its conclusion, the Cornhuskers had a five-point victory, much to the delight of Bambi, who was an avid Nebraska fan in both football and basketball. He looked at

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his watch. *It's time to do my homework for Monday.* He trudged up the stairs to his bedroom and located his history book among the others piled on his desk. He opened it to his assignment and began reading about the pioneers and the settling of the West. Math problems, a chapter of science, and three chapters from *To Kill a Mockingbird* completed all his assignments for the next school day. He would be free all Sunday afternoon and evening to watch TV or play.

Just as he was putting his books away, his mother called, "Lance, supper's ready." Bambi, like most growing boys of his age, needed no second invitation. Halfway down the staircase he remembered that he had neglected to wash his hands. *Mom will probably forget anyway since she's in a hurry to get ready to go out.* He continued on to the kitchen and pulled up a chair to his customary place at the table. As he sat down, he noticed that his mother was gazing at him with raised eyebrows.

"Did you wash your hands that fast?"

Bambi groaned inwardly and started the trek back up the stairs. *Boy, you have to get up mighty early in the morning to put anything past my mom.*

He turned on the hot water faucet and looked at himself in the mirror. His floppy brown hair threatened to spill over into his blue-green eyes. He glanced at his skin and sighed. His perfect complexion had become a thing of the past. He wasn't going to avoid the dreaded teenager disease, acne. He dipped his hand in the hot water, rubbed off the bacteria with soap and complained to the mirror. "Gee whiz. I bet the pioneers never washed their hands."

After finishing his evening meal Bambi excused himself from the table and planted himself in the big easy chair next to the front door to await the arrival of his teammates. He read through the 'Bulldog Compact' a couple of times to pass the time. At 6:15 the doorbell sounded for the first time. Bambi laid his document carefully on top of the television and ran to the door. It was Corky and Donnie Kern. Donnie was about the worst guy on the eighth grade team, but Bambi was glad to see him. *There is strength in numbers.*

"Well, I told them all," Corky announced as soon as he got

in the door. "But I don't know how many of them are coming. The seventh graders thought it was pretty silly, and besides, they don't want anything to do with the eighth graders anyway. Some of the eighth graders said it was just plain crazy."

Bambi glanced out the window. Mixed emotions of extreme disappointment and determination battled for the muscular control of his face. Finally determination won the struggle as Bambi gritted his teeth and vowed to himself that he would go through with this thing no matter how much people laughed at him and his idea. *If nobody else wants to do it, I'll just have to do it all by myself.*

"We're going to win that championship if I have to die trying. Anyone who doesn't want to be a part of this will have plenty of time to regret their decision after we bring home the honors."

Corky and Donnie looked at each other after listening to Bambi's statement.

Bambi's fierce look was softened by the ringing of the doorbell. Troy Miller had arrived, which lifted Bambi's spirits tremendously. Troy was the best player on the team and one of Bambi's closest friends. After the customary hand slapping, the boys sat down to converse, being interrupted from time to time by additional arrivals. After waiting ten minutes past the scheduled time, Bambi called for everybody's attention. He noticed that there were eleven members of the eighth grade team in addition to himself. Although pleased that many had showed up, he was a little disappointed in the failure of any seventh graders to show some interest. Just as he began his presentation, a loud knock sounded at the front door. Upon opening it Bambi discovered that the latecomers were Mike Bennett and Dan Brown. "Come on in," Bambi said, trying to act pleased to see them.

The newcomers were loudmouths and troublemakers, but they were also good basketball players. Bambi swallowed the contempt he felt for them and told them to make themselves at home. He knew he was going to need all the help in the world to fulfill this dream.

Bennett and Brown shuffled into the living room and

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scanned the faces of the group of boys already seated around the room. Bennett sat down on the arm of Mrs. Masterson's favorite easy chair. Brown decided to stand next to him with his arms folded, making like Joe Cool. Bambi noticed that Bennett had broken one of his mother's biggest no-nos by sitting on the chair arm, but he decided it was better not to say anything that could strain what little friendship did exist between himself and Bennett by trying to enforce Mom's house rules. He was hoping the chair wouldn't suffer any misfortune.

Bambi cleared his throat, and everybody looked up at him expectantly. "First of all, I'd like to thank you all for coming, and I just hope that the things we talk about tonight will be as important to you as they are to me. Well, getting right down to business, I want you all to know that I'm getting very sick and tired of seeing the Bulldogs lose year after year. Hopefully, all of you feel the same way. I'm pretty sure that the other schools in the conference don't take us seriously, and that they laugh about us. They don't have any respect for Madison. Maybe you're all wondering what this has to do with you. You are only eighth graders and have no effect upon the success or failure of the high school team. I'll agree with that to a certain extent now, but in three years we'll be the junior class, and in four years the senior class. Then the responsibility for winning or losing will fall right on our shoulders."

"Why don't you tell us somethin' we don't know, Masterson?" broke in Bennett. "We're all capable of. —"

"Why don't you let him finish before you start spouting off?" interrupted Troy Miller.

Bennett whirled quickly, an angry look on his face, until he saw who had spoken to him in that manner. His eyes dropped away from Miller's, and he shrugged his shoulders.

When it appeared that he once more had a captive audience, Bambi continued. "I've been asking myself why we always have a losing team. I realize that we're the smallest school in the conference in enrollment, but that shouldn't always make us the doormat in the standings. The opponents only put five men on the court at a time, same as us. What I really think is that we've developed a losing tradition here. Each year's team is resigned to

losing and thus is unwilling to make the required personal sacrifices in order to form a team that can win at least a majority of its games."

Bennett let out a long sigh and looked up at the ceiling as he shook his head. Corky, Troy, and a few others glared at him, but Bambi ignored him and continued. "I've studied the problem and decided that becoming good at something in this world requires practice and more practice, not only during the season but all year long. Being good is also a product of having a good attitude, and frankly, I think the attitude at Madison stinks. You all know the old Boy Scout motto, 'be prepared'. To be winners in high school we've got to start preparing now. To change the old expression about the worm, the early team gets the trophies. We really have to see the importance of training and keeping rules. We have to learn how to become a team and not a bunch of individuals. My proposal for all of you tonight is that we set a goal of winning the state A championship and that we start preparing to reach that goal as soon as possible."

"Bravo! Bravo!" yelled Bennett while clapping his hands. His shadow, Brown, threw back his head and gave a horselaugh.

"Wow, what a speech! It sounds like you stole it right off a locker room wall or from one of those slushy Walt Disney tear-jerking movies. So what in blazes do you want from us?"

"Maybe he wants we should grab our shovels and get the snow off the playground so we can get warmed up for the finals of the state tournament four years from now," Brown roared, slapping his knee. His joke raised a loud laugh from Bennett and a few chuckles from some of the other listeners around the room.

"OK, OK, that's enough already," Bambi broke through, keeping back his anger through tremendous effort. "My plan is this: I've drawn up a promise to be signed by all those who are willing to go along with me and dedicate themselves to making it to the top. That means they'll be ready to keep their bodies and attitudes in shape no matter how hard it may be. That means we have to decide now that we won't be smoking or drinking or any of that stuff, even if some people make fun of us for being squares or whatever name they come up with to describe us." Bambi held up the Bulldog Compact. "Here's the pledge I'm

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asking you all to take if you're willing and feel like I do about the whole situation."

"Let me see that thing," Bennett demanded, jumping up from the chair and grabbing the paper from Bambi's hand. He read it to the rest of the group, dramatically and mockingly. "The Bulldog Compact. I, the undersigned, do promise with all my heart and soul to give myself to the cause of winning the state A basketball tournament. I will obey all rules of training, do everything necessary to improve my personal skills, and strive to sacrifice myself for the benefit of the team."

"Where's a pen?" inquired Brown. "I want to sign it first," stated the red-haired youth emphatically. He had a trace of a mischievous grin on his face.

Bambi hesitatingly held up a ballpoint pen. He could hardly believe that Brown really wanted to sign it.

"Isn't our man Masterson here just another budding Thomas Jefferson or Abraham Lincoln or something?"

His friend Bennett replied, "Oh, yes indeedy. Maybe even another John F. Kennedy. Ask not what your team can do for you, but rather what you can do for your team."

Another laugh shook Brown's frame as he bent down to the paper. He wrote in large flowing letters and then handed the paper to Bennett for his inspection. Bennett's eyes lit up and his mouth dropped open into an expression of surprised amusement.

"Let's see if the old basketball coach can read that without his spectacles." He held his hand out to Brown, who promptly slapped it and reversed the position of his hand to receive the return slap. Bennett started towards the door. "Well, I guess we'd better run along. Things are getting a little too slushy in here for me. I might break down into tears and start huggin' people or somethin'. Besides, it's time for a little pool game. If any of you guys are interested in a little snooker, come on and shake the dust off your feet."

Bambi, who had been somewhat paralyzed by the behavior of the pair, finally broke out of his haze and intercepted Bennett before he got out the door. "I'll take that," he said as he reached for his blueprint of athletic success.

"Oh, yeah. Be my guest," Bennett replied, graciously

bowing as he waved his hand to the onlookers. "See ya, turkeys."

"Wait for us, Mike!" yelled one of the other spectators. He and two others ran out and joined the exiting troublemakers.

"Good riddance," said Corky as the door shut. "I told you we shouldn't have invited everybody. If brains were pure dynamite, Brown and Bennett wouldn't have enough to open a walnut."

"Or blow their nose," said Troy.

Bambi held his brainchild manuscript up to the light. Underneath the promise in giant letters were the words, 'John Hancock'. "At least those guys are learning something in history class," Bambi joked as he showed the paper to the rest of the small group.

Troy spoke through clenched teeth. "Somebody ought to knock those jerks' teeth out."

"I'll be there with a broom and a dustpan the day that somebody does," Corky said.

Bambi was extremely upset, but he fought down his emotion to a large extent before uttering, "We don't need those goofballs anyway." He took the pen and carefully signed his name right below the counterfeit signature of the famous American patriot. He placed the pen and paper on the coffee table and backed away, watching to see what would follow. Corky quickly reached for the pen and scribbled his acceptance of the pledge.

Butch Folsom walked up to Bambi and shook his head. "I'm sorry, but I can't make that promise. A kid's years in school are a time for having fun, not for working all the time and being a little goody-goody two-shoes. I think you have to do things with moderation. Play some ball part of the time and have some other fun the rest of the time." His friend nodded his agreement and the two zipped up their coats. As they came to the door, Folsom stopped and said, "I hope you understand that there are no hard feelings or anything, Bambi. I want to win too, but I don't think you have to knock yourself out to do it."

"It's all right, Butch. I understand. No hard feelings on this end either."

Boy, do I understand. This was exactly the attitude that's keeping the Bulldogs in the losing column. They won't knock themselves out just to win basketball games. I can't hold it

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against Folsom just because he's like the rest. "Good night, Butch."

When Bambi re-entered the living room, he saw Denny Prostrollo handing the pen to Brad Hanson. That made five signatures.

Everyone had either signed the oath or left the house now except for Troy Miller. He looked around at the other five anxious faces. Troy rested his gaze on Bambi, his playmate of several years. His eyes reflected the struggle going on in his mind. "Bambi, I don't know. I just don't know if I can live up to it."

Bambi's anxiety betrayed him. His voice cracked as he almost pleaded, "Please try, Troy. Give it a shot."

The two looked at one another for a moment, and finally a smile came to Troy's face. "OK, Bambi, I'll try."

He added his name to the others and then handed his friend the completed copy and the pen. Bambi felt a chill go up his spine. Maybe only six boys of the whole junior high had signed his pledge, and one of those was Donnie Kern, but Troy had signed it. The first step had now been taken. His dream was in motion.

"Where do we go from here?" Donnie asked. "This all sounds really great, but we have to be more specific and say exactly what we're going to do to reach this goal."

"You're right," Bambi agreed. "We need to make up a list of things we need to do and make up some kind of a schedule and performance charts and stuff like that."

"Right on," added Brad. "We could keep little charts like my mom makes us fill out at home. If we brush our teeth or floss them or other junk like that, we put an 'X' in the box for that category for that day. Then we know just exactly how consistent we're being."

"And we could measure our progress and make goals of improvement so we'd have something to keep us going," inserted Donnie, starting to show the enthusiasm he felt.

Troy spoke up on the subject. "It sounds to me like we'll need something to keep us going. Have you thought about how difficult it is to work as hard as what we're talking about?"

Human beings just aren't built that way. I think basically we're lazy and want to slide by with as little effort as possible."

The other boys glanced at one another. The size of the undertaking that they were discussing had not really struck them yet since they hadn't produced one drop of sweat or given up one minute of TV time, or sleep, or anything else they enjoyed.

Bambi finally broke the brief silence that followed Troy's disturbing remark. "I agree with you, Troy, to a certain extent, and I'm really counting on that very idea. Just think of those other poor saps around the state who will never develop their full potential because they won't give everything they've got. I know well, dang well, that it'll be hard, but we can do it together. When one of us gets tired or sick of the whole thing, the others will have to support him, urge him on. We need to feel like we have to prove ourselves to each other. You know, like in the army movies where the going is really tough, but nobody will give up because they don't want the other soldiers to think that they're pansies or chickens, so they keep right on going. Do you see what I mean?"

"I got ya," nodded Brad. "It's like the first few days of athletics practice when the coach works our tails off. There are always a few dudes who can't take it, and they drop out. It's got to be a terrible feeling to just quit."

A couple of the others chorused their agreement. Bambi said, "Boy, I guess we had a little taste of what's in store for us if we really carry this thing out." He hesitated. "Maybe some of you would like to reconsider and cross your name out now before we get started. I hope you can see that once we start, there is no turning back unless we want to bury our self-respect and feel like failures our whole lives."

Bambi looked at each of his friends. They all looked at each other. "Not me," rang out Corky's high-pitched voice. "I'm ready to taste the sweetness of, as they say on TV, the thrill of victory."

Smiles broke out across the faces of the group. "Me too."

"You betcha."

"I'm game!"

Everyone had spoken their support but Troy. Finally he

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broke his silence. "I still say it's not going to be easy." The others dropped their smiles. "But, things that are easy don't bring much satisfaction anyway, so what the heck. I'll give it the old college effort. I do have one request though."

"What's that?" inquired Bambi, noticing the smiles had returned to brighten up the room.

"I'd like to have a copy of the Bulldog Compact for my bedroom wall. I'm going to need something to remind me of what I've promised here tonight, and to help me keep trying."

"Sure, that's a good idea," said Corky. "Why not make a copy for each one of us?"

Bambi agreed wholeheartedly. "It's a deal. Now we have to figure out exactly what our plans will be. I've thought about it and decided that we should talk to Coach Wilbur and get his expert advice about workouts and practice and stuff. Then we can draw up a schedule and charts and whatever else we need. And I think we should have a motto or slogan or something for our little group."

"What did you have in mind?" questioned Donnie.

"You know, something like the motto of the three friends from the book *The Three Musketeers*, 'One for all and all for one'," Bambi's replied.

"What's the matter with that one? I don't think that Mr. Dumas will mind if we steal his expression," laughed Donnie.

"Makes no difference to me," Bambi said. "Let's vote on it. Anybody opposed?" Nobody answered. "Motion carried unanimously."

Donnie broke in excitedly, "We could do it like our huddle at a basketball game since we don't have swords. Hold your hands out to the huddle while saying 'One for all', and then lift your hands up and bring them down together while saying 'and all for one.'" He stuck out his hand with the palm down. Bambi put his on top. Denny, Corky, and Brad quickly followed. Finally Troy lifted his hand to the top of the stack.

"Ready?" asked Donnie.

"One for all, and all for one," they chimed in near unison. They looked at each other and then broke out in a succession of 'All rights' and 'Right ons' and a round of brisk hand slappings.

When they had finished their celebration, Bambi said, "All that talk about the sweet taste of victory has made me hungry. Anyone care for some popcorn and apple cider?"

Enthusiastic answers in the affirmative sent him hurrying to the kitchen. The others draped themselves in the chairs around the television and attempted to direct their attention to the John Wayne movie which filled the screen. As Bambi was waiting for the oil to heat, he picked up the thin piece of paper that he and his friends had signed, a piece of paper that would affect his entire future.

Wow! This thing is really happening, but how long can we keep it going and with what results? His temporary doubts were displaced quickly by a vision of himself stepping up to pick up his medal after the biggest victory of them all, the state championship. *How sweet it is going to be!*

Chapter 2 – No Pain No Gain

As soon as Bambi arrived at school on Monday, he headed for Coach Wilbur's homeroom with a notebook and pencil in his hand. The door was open. "Coach Wilbur."

"Good morning, Bambi. Come on in."

"Have you got a couple of minutes free for me to talk with you?"

"Sure. What's on your mind?"

"Well, you see, I need your help. I have some questions about conditioning and improvement drills for basketball."

"It's a little late in the season to do much good now, Bambi. We've only got two weeks left."

"I know, Coach, but I was thinking of the future. You know, in high school."

"Ahh! Never too soon to start. That's a good attitude to have. Not many people have the self-discipline to train for something in the present, much less something in the future. The ones who do though are usually winners."

"That's what I figured too, Coach, and we want so much to be winners."

"We? Who else are you talking about?"

"Um, there's six of us counting me. Corky, Troy, Donnie, Denny, and Brad are all involved in it too."

The coach blew out a long whistle. "And you six guys want to start getting ready for next year's basketball season now."

"That's about the size of it. Do you think that the whole thing is a stupid idea?"

"No way. I think it's great, but I'm just a little hesitant to congratulate you just yet. It's much easier to talk about training than it is to actually do it. I know how hard it is. I remember my days as an athlete and how easy it was to let up a little and let things slide."

"We're aware of that, Coach, but we're going to stick

together and beat the odds. Our trouble right now is that we don't know exactly how to get started. I was hoping you could give us some suggestions."

"Be glad to. Anything special you had in mind?"

"Yeah, I'd appreciate it if you could make up a list of all the characteristics that a basketball player must have in order to excel and some drills and exercises that would help us develop those skills. And we need to have some type of training guidance so we can get into good shape and stay that way."

"Wow, that's a pretty tall order. I'll have to do a bit of thinking about it. I'll tell you what. I'll make your list and have it all ready for you first thing tomorrow morning. How's that?"

"That's terrific, Mr. Wilbur," replied Bambi, heading toward the hallway to inform his friends. Before he reached the door, he remembered his manners had been somewhat lacking and stopped. "Thanks a lot, Coach. See you at practice."

"Good enough, Bambi. And you're more than welcome. It'll be a pleasure to help out kids with real excitement and guts. I really want to wish you the best of luck."

"Thanks again."

Bambi moved quickly through the hall, dodging the numerous bodies that were loitering all around, awaiting the first bell of the day. The words 'kids with real excitement and guts' rang through his head. *Yeah, that's a good description of me and my friends. Real gutsy.*

* * *

Watching Bambi pick his way through the crowd, Coach Wilbur smiled broadly and shook his head. His thoughts drifted back to his younger days. How quickly they had slipped away! Wouldn't it be nice to trade places with Bambi and do it all over again? This time though, he'd give it everything he had and be more successful. He sighed audibly. It wasn't possible, of course. His days of youth and glory were spent, and he could never recapture them. He could only share in the growth and success of his players now. He was certainly grateful to have kids like Bambi come along once in a while to re-light that spark

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of belief that dreams could come true. He felt as long as he kept to that idea, he could preserve a little of what it was to be a child. He snapped out of his nostalgic trance and went into action. He grabbed the notebook that Bambi had left for him and wrote across the top of the first page: 'SKILLS FOR SUCCESS'. He wrote a number one underneath that and then started the machinery of his mind in motion.

* * *

Early the next morning the enthused and smiling face of Bambi Masterson greeted Coach Wilbur when he arrived at his room. "Good morning, Mr. Wilbur. Did you get my list done?"

"You betcha I did. Couldn't let down the stars of Madison High School's future basketball teams. Here you go."

Bambi surveyed the list that his teacher handed him. It contained several familiar things like jumping rope, pushups, and other basic exercises. There were a few things that were new to him. The first thing that caught his eye was an instruction to read *Aerobics*. "What's this?" he asked as he pointed to the strange word.

"*Aerobics* is a book written all about endurance training and cardiovascular development. It explains several methods of obtaining and maintaining a well-conditioned body. You can choose from various programs to improve your overall stamina. Here, I'll let you borrow my copy. Just make sure I get it back. This is a brand-new book, just off the press. Besides it's a very good book, and I don't want to lose it."

"I'll guard it with my life. Thanks a bunch."

The coach explained some of the other things on the list to his eager listener. When Bambi was sure he understood all the drills that had been recommended, he thanked his mentor again and threaded his way through the throng outside. He had great difficulty avoiding collisions since he was trying to read from the book and walk a slalom course at the same time.

Bambi spent every free moment that day digging through his new discovery, which Mr. Wilbur had said was like a Bible to many athletes all over the world. He was told more than once

that day by teachers to put the book away and pay attention to the subject they were teaching. He set up a meeting with his friends for the next morning in the school library. He was going to read *Aerobics* that night and give them the full scoop on it at the meeting. He put off his homework until after he'd finished the book instead of the other way around. He just couldn't wait to digest all that information. After he had concluded his reading, he couldn't wait to get started on a training program that would do so many special things for his body.

The small group gathered around Bambi and listened very attentively when they met the next day. Bambi explained to them the 'training effect' which takes place in a person's body after six months or so of steady endurance training. He stated that it was his belief that jogging would be the best program for them, with occasional bike rides to break the monotony of doing the same thing all the time. They pretty much agreed with him up to that point. There was still one important question to be settled. Corky was the one who brought it up. "How long are we going to run and how often?"

"That's a good question," said Bambi. "It says that the minimum number of points needed each week to maintain the effect is thirty. It also says that young people of our age should earn fifty or more each week. Now, if we decide to run the least possible and still get enough points, we could do it by running one mile a day, six days a week, if our time was between six minutes and thirty seconds and eight minutes. But the longer and the faster we run the better. If we run two miles a day, six days a week, in under thirteen minutes, we'd earn seventy-two points. I think we should get more than usual because we don't want to be just usual athletes. We want to be super athletes. If we run at the thirteen-minute pace, it would require seventy-eight minutes of exercise each week, which, by the way, would put us in fantastic physical shape. Do you follow me?"

Most of the boys nodded. Corky let loose one of his watermelon grins. "Looks simple enough to me. Even if we miss one day, we'd still earn sixty points. Now, when are we going to do all of this running?"

Denny jumped into the conversation. "Since it's kind of cold

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outside yet, why not do it in the gym after basketball practice?"

"Sure, we could do it then," agreed Brad. "We'll already be dressed and everything so we'll save some time there."

"Fine with me," replied Bambi. "If it's all right with the coach, and you guys aren't too tired to do it then."

"Time for the good old democratic process to go into action again," broke in Donnie. "Let's vote on the thing and do what the majority want to do."

"Sounds good to me," Troy said. "I'll go for the one mile a day program. No sense killing ourselves."

"Come on, Troy! Don't be a wimp," prodded Corky. "If it's too hard for you to go two, just latch on to my trunks and I'll pull you along. I vote for Bambi's plan. What about you other animals?"

"I don't care. I guess I can handle two," Brad said.

Denny answered, "Makes no difference to me."

"I'll follow the crowd," added Donnie.

Corky had to rub it in just a little. "It looks like you're outvoted, Troy. Do you want to change your vote, so we can call it unanimous?"

"Man, I swear you dudes are trying to make an old man out of me at an early age," Troy ranted.

"Actually, Troy," broke in Bambi. "If what this book says is for real, exercise can keep a man young at an old age."

"All right. All right. I give in. I guess I can always get an electric wheelchair when my poor legs wear out."

"Good. Now, that takes care of the endurance training, but that is only the first part of our total fitness and conditioning project. From the list that Coach Wilbur gave me, I've made a schedule for the other ingredients. On all Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays we lift weights and jump rope. On Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays we do some isometric exercises, leaping over the board, and squeezing handgrips. If you don't have one, you can use a tennis ball. Everyday activities are stretching and quickness drills, stuff you can do while watching the boob tube. We should shoot, pass, and dribble a basketball whenever we get the chance. On Sundays—"

"Sundays?" a couple of the boys groaned in unison.

"On Sundays," Bambi paused for dramatic effect and then continued, "we rest up so we can do all that stuff during the next week," Bambi smiled. "How's that sound?"

"It sounds like I'm going to have to give up sleeping in order to fit all that stuff into my day," grumbled Corky.

"You won't have to give it up completely, Cork, but you won't be able to sack in twelve hours a night anymore," needled Denny.

"Twelve hours! Who sleeps twelve hours?"

"You do, you big bum. Why, you think breakfast is a nighttime snack," added Brad, joining in the fun.

"Yeah, and you think sunrise means when the sun gets straight overhead," chimed in Troy.

"Oh come on. Get serious. Troy, you're so lazy that whenever you get the urge to do something, you lie down till it goes away," retorted Corky, trying to shift the attack to a new target. Corky had often been kidded by his friends for his ability to sleep through the sounds of his alarm clock, people yelling at him, and even people shaking him. They often joked that the only thing that could effectively wake him up was the smell of food. He also got kidded for his abilities at the table with a knife and fork.

Donnie interrupted the verbal warfare with a serious thought. "I have one big question. Where are we going to do the weightlifting?"

"Holy buckets of mud! The dude's got a point.," exclaimed Corky.

Bambi frowned. "Why didn't I think of that before? That could be a bit of a hassle." He rolled his finger through his hair, trying to stimulate his thought processes. He snapped his fingers loudly. "They have a Universal weight machine up at the college."

"Yeah, but would they let us use it?" asked Denny. "Hey, Brad."

"Huh?"

"Don't you live right next door to the football coach from the college?"

"Sure do. Mr. Barker is his name."

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"Suppose you could ask him if it'd be possible for us to use that machine?"

"I guess I can give it a try. Can't hurt to ask."

Bambi was enthused. "Great, that's the spirit. Let's see. Tomorrow is Thursday. Let's begin everything then. I'll make up some copies of the schedule, performance charts, and of course, the Bulldog Compact. I'll drop them off tonight at your houses. I also decided to keep a master chart at my house showing our weekly performances and our records for each category, like the most pushups, etcetera. What do you think?"

"Frankly, Bambi, I was wondering why we have to wait till tomorrow to get started. I thought you were all fired up about beginning as soon as possible." Donnie posed the question that Troy was afraid he was going to ask. "Why can't we start tonight after practice with our first two-mile run?"

"Right on," agreed Corky. "Let's go for it with a PMA."

"What's that?" asked Troy.

"Positive Mental Attitude."

"Okey-dokey," agreed Bambi, feeling somewhat ashamed that someone else had a little more enthusiasm for his own project than he did. "Today is the magic day then. Two big ones."

"Far out!" squealed Donnie. "Lookout world, here we come!" The first bell rang just then and put an end to the conversation. The boys hurriedly placed their hands together and uttered their selected motto before scurrying off to their respective homerooms.

Basketball practice that afternoon wasn't particularly strenuous. With only ten days to go in the season, conditioning work was kept to a minimum. The team had to spend their time on more valuable things. After scrimmaging for an hour, the boys had some shooting practice. After twenty minutes of that the coach blew his whistle and said, "That's enough for today. Go shower if you want to." The coach always stayed late to allow anybody who wanted a little extra practice the chance to use the gym. He also liked to shoot or play a little pick-up game.

While the rest of the boys headed towards the locker room, Bambi and his little flock walked slowly over to the clock which

hung on the west wall, where Jeff, the student manager, was waiting.

"All right, this is it, boys," began their leader. "Anybody too tired to try?" Nobody answered. "Coach says that twenty laps around the outside of the gym, no cutting, make up one mile. So, we need to run forty laps in about thirteen minutes, which gives us about nineteen and a half seconds per lap. No slower than that. OK?" The other boys nodded. "Now, Jeff is going to yell out our lap times so we know if we have to speed up or we should slow down. We have to be careful not to burn ourselves out. Any questions?" Again nobody spoke up.

"OK, when the second hand hits twelve, give us the word, Jeff."

The boys all posed themselves for a quick start and when Bambi said to go, they took off. They all stayed together for the first lap. Corky was just in front, setting the pace. As they came around to complete the first lap, they heard the voice of their student manager call out, "Twenty-three seconds. Too slow, Corky."

"Pick up the speed a little," directed Bambi. Their time for the second lap was seventeen.

"That's too fast," puffed Brad.

Corky slowed down and finished the next lap in nineteen seconds. "Perfect!" exclaimed Bambi. "Now just keep it up."

As they continued around the gym, some began to fall back.

Donnie was bringing up the rear with Troy and Denny not very far in front of him. Brad and Bambi stayed right on Corky's heels. On the twelfth circuit they lapped Donnie. They yelled their encouragement to the skinny youngster as they passed by. On the eighteenth lap they passed Troy and Denny.

"Hang in there guys," said Bambi with all the breath that he had to spare.

It seemed to all of them that forever had passed when they came down the stretch of their twentieth lap. There was some good news and some bad news for them at the finish line. The good news was that they had finished the first mile in six minutes and forty seconds, almost on schedule. The bad news presented itself in the form of Mike Bennett and two

bodyguards.

Mike's irritating voice boomed out as the runners went by the clock. "What do we have here? Is it the baby elephant walk or the senior citizen's Olympics? If my great-grandma was here, she'd be kicking your butts."

Every time they passed the finish line, they received an insult of some type or advice on their running style. "Get your knees up. What are you doing, running in place? You should have taken that iron weight out of your shorts." Some of them could not be repeated in polite company.

Bambi had been getting very tired toward the end of the first mile, but the hecklers had unknowingly given him a much-needed shot in the arm. Instead of thinking about how tired he was and how far there was still to go, Bambi burned with anger and only thought about showing those creeps up. He passed Corky and kept his legs churning, one in front of the other. When he had only five laps left, Bambi discovered that Bennett and his pals had gotten tired of their little game and departed. When Bambi saw that they were gone, he suddenly realized just how tired he was. He felt like a balloon that had just been deflated. He really felt like quitting right then, but he knew he just had to gut it out. Only five laps to go. He had lost track of the time long ago, but he figured that he must have really improved his time for the second mile. It seemed as if he had been running like a rabbit. He came up behind Donnie once again. It really looked like young Kern was going to start walking. As Bambi went by he said emphatically, "Don't quit."

Finally his fortieth lap arrived. Bambi was so relieved to hit the finish line that he couldn't believe it. He walked around for a while, waiting for his breathing to return to normal and the strength in his legs to come back. When he was sufficiently recovered, he walked back to where Jeff was recording the times. "How'd I do, Jeff?"

"Thirteen, twenty-five."

"What? Are you sure?"

"Sure, I'm sure."

Bambi walked over to where Corky and Brad were trying to recuperate. They both look exhausted. They had finished in

13:40 and 13:43 respectively.

Bambi yelled encouragement to Troy and Denny as they came shuffling by at a pace much slower than what they had started with. Donnie came around again. Bambi was tired, but he didn't want Donnie to quit or get discouraged, so he jumped in beside his friend. "How many left?"

"Four," panted his weary companion.

"Hang on. We'll make it."

Bambi escorted him all the way to the finish. They all had disappointed looks on their faces when the times for everyone were revealed. "Man, I ran my butt off and it took me fifteen minutes," complained Troy.

"Don't feel like the Lone Ranger," said Denny. "You beat me across the finish line by eight seconds."

Donnie whined, "Geez, my time was sixteen minutes. I wanted to stop so badly I could taste it."

"Holy guacamole, Bambi, we're never going to make it. We are supposed to do this six days a week, and I don't know if I'll ever be able to do it again in my whole life," wailed Corky.

Bambi was also bummed out. He was starting to think that maybe they had bitten off more than they could chew. He felt a little guilty looking at his friends. At least he had come close to the desired goal. Some of them had missed it by a mile. Just as it looked like they might decide their first endurance workout was also their last, Coach Wilbur came strolling over. "How's it going fellas?"

"Not too good, Coach," Bambi's replied.

"Boy, that's an understatement," added Corky.

The coach scratched his head. "What's the big problem?"

"Just that none of us made it under thirteen minutes, and some of us almost quit and walked part way. And we were planning on doing this for four more years," stated Corky, rolling his eyes toward the ceiling. "We're not gonna make it."

"What in the world did you expect to do, break the world record? I think you guys did great! Get those chins off the floor. Criminy, first time I tried to run two miles, I made two laps around the track. I finished up by alternately walking and running the next six. I thought I was a candidate for the corpse of

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the year award."

A couple of the boys showed weak grins at the little joke, but the others were too worried about the future of their entire project. "It took me twenty minutes."

"So then what happened?" asked Donnie, who was beginning to feel a little better about himself because he hadn't quit.

"Well, the next day I ran four laps before I had to walk. On the next a funny thing happened. This girl that I really had a crush on happened to come out to watch track practice. When I saw her standing there watching me go by, it was like I'd just been supercharged with energy. The only thing on my mind was getting around to the side of the track where she was so I could run by her again. The first thing I knew, my eight laps were all done and I hadn't even thought once about quitting. I wasn't even real tired. From then on I always ran the whole way. I always pretended that she was still there, watching me in all my glory. And she really was there in the bleachers when I broke the school record for the mile during my senior year."

"Wow! That's neat!" squealed Donnie. "Maybe I can do it too, if I just stick to it and give it a little time."

"Yeah, me too. We can't give it up yet. We can't get licked without putting up a fight," said Brad.

"Besides, you got to remember that we'd just finished basketball practice. We weren't completely fresh," broke in Denny with a remark that cheered them all up.

"You're absolutely right," agreed Bambi. "I think we've made an important discovery today. I know just what Coach is talking about. I had a similar thing happen to me. I ran real good when Bennett was here to bother me. When he walked out, I was immediately burnt out. The difference in those few seconds could have only come from my mind. I didn't think I was tired and I wasn't. When I starting thinking about it again, I discovered I really was tired. It seems to me that our mind is the enemy we have to conquer. It tells us we can't do it. If we listen, we won't be able to do anything. We've got to convince ourselves that we're strong and that the pain is only a figment of our imagination."

"That sounds like self-hypnotism," inserted Donnie, who was without a doubt the worst athlete of the group but the best student. "Kind of like mind over matter."

"Whoa, slow down, professor. Don't get involved in one of your scientific lectures and leave us all in the dark again," said Corky as he chuckled.

Coach Wilbur spoke up again. "I tell you, boys, I'd really hate to see you hang it up. That's a bad habit to get into and the Madison athletic program already has enough bad habits. And don't forget that quitters never win. And winners never, never quit."

Those last words rang through Bambi's ears. Winners never quit. Winners never quit. His mind was made up. He was going to be a winner and no way would he quit, even if everyone else in the whole world did. "I've got to take off and get home. I have to make a performance chart and then fill in my X for today. Then I can rest up for tomorrow's run."

"That's the spirit, Bambi," said Coach Wilbur as he patted Bambi on the back. He jogged away from the group to retrieve some of the basketballs lying around the gym.

As Bambi turned to go to the showers, Donnie spoke out. "Aren't you forgetting something?" Bambi looked perplexed.

Donnie placed his right hand out in front of him with the palm down. Bambi smiled and slipped his over it.

Almost as soon as he made contact with Donnie's hand, he felt the pressure of one more hand on top of his. His eyes followed the hand up the arm until he reached the laughing face of Corky. The other three soon joined in the little ritual of dedication. They strode to the locker room together, making boasts about how well they would do on the next day. The stinging needles of the shower felt soothing to the weary boys. The buddies dressed quickly and walked home in a group. Bambi was the first one to leave the unit. As they bid him farewell, the other kids reminded him that he was supposed to make charts and other stuff for them too. They weren't going to quit either.

Bambi worked both before and after supper to finish the promised papers. He neatly printed up a workout checklist with a

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schedule of activities for the rest of February and all of March. He reproduced it for each one of his friends.

He also employed his hunt-and-peck typewriter skills to copy the Bulldog Compact five times. When he finished, he strolled into the living room, where his parents were reading. "Is it OK if I run over to see my friends for a second?"

"What for?" asked his father, looking over the top of the *Madison Daily Leader*.

He held up the duplicates of his masterpieces. "I have to deliver these things."

"What are they?" Rather than trying to explain them, Bambi held out the papers for his father's inspection. "Ahhh," droned Mr. Masterson. "So this is what you've been up to these past few days. Looks like quite an ambitious project you have in mind. Do you think you can carry it through?"

"Well, Dad, you always say that it's better to aim at the moon and...."

The elder Masterson male interrupted him, "OK, I know what I always say. You can go over to your friends', but make sure you're home by 8:30."

"Thanks a lot, Dad. You're the greatest!" Bambi grabbed his coat and gloves from the closet and started for the door.

"Make sure you button up all the way before you go out in the cold. I don't want you getting sick," demanded his mother.

"Sure, Mom. See? It's all buttoned. Bye."

"Goodbye, and be careful."

"Don't worry, Mom. I'm always careful." He closed the door quietly and walked down the sidewalk. *Moms are neat but sometime they're a pain in the neck with all their worrying.* Bambi reached the front walk before his parents spoke again.

"What's Lance up to now?" Mrs. Masterson asked.

Her husband chuckled. "He and some of his pals have signed a promise to win the state basketball championship when they reach high school. They've also arranged a workout schedule for getting themselves in tiptop shape."

"I wonder how long this is going to last. He's always got some wild dream and scheme of some type. I still haven't fully recovered from last year's edition when he decided to be a

fishing bait salesman. We had nightcrawlers and minnows and crawdads and everything else on earth all over the place for weeks till he got tired of it and gave it up."

"He's a boy, Jenny. Boys are made up of dreams. I well remember when I was thirteen, I wanted to be a cowboy and live on a big ranch. I started saving my money to buy a pony. I worked mowing lawns and hauling bales of hay and everything else a young boy could do then to make money. By the time I'd saved maybe enough to buy a quarter horse, meaning I only had twenty-five percent of the cost of a pony—"

"That's real punny," groaned Mrs. Masterson.

Her husband continued without showing any sign that he was hurt by his wife's interruption and lack of appreciation for his little pun. "My dad found out what I was doing and told me I couldn't get a pony anyway because we didn't have a place to keep it. My heart was almost broken, but I found a new dream to replace that one."

"What was that?"

"You."

They both laughed. "Sometimes, I bet you wish you'd gotten the pony instead." She smiled coyly at him, waiting for him to make a quick denial.

"Well, as a matter of fact," he began as she dropped her smile and pretended to look at him fiercely, "I never did." He finished his statement after pausing slightly to leave her hanging in suspense. "You don't eat half as much hay as a horse would." She grabbed the small pillow off of the couch and threw it at him. They laughed again.

"Seriously, Howard, you don't think we have anything to worry about with Bambi and this new project of his, do you?"

"No, Jenny. They'll play this game for a while till they get tired of it and then move on to something else. It's just part of growing up."

"I sure hope so. I wouldn't want him to get too involved in this thing. I wouldn't classify this target as the moon. It looks like he's trying to hit the stars this time."

While his parents were engaged in discussing him and his future, Bambi was knocking on Corky's front door. He

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explained his plans to Corky, who then asked permission from his parents to accompany Bambi on his errand. They stopped at Donnie's home just up the block and soon the three of them were on their way to the northwest side of town where the other three teammates lived. They stopped at Brad's and presented all of the copies of the Bulldog Compact for his signature. Next they moved on to Denny's to repeat the process.

Finally they trudged on to Troy's place for the conclusion of the process.

At this last stop Corky and Donnie added their signatures to the rest. Troy then signed them all, putting the finishing touch on them since Bambi had signed them at his house before leaving. Bambi gave Troy his copy as well as his performance charts. On the way back home they dropped off Denny's papers and then dropped by Brad's again to do the same.

As he was handing out the copies, Bambi suddenly remembered something. "Say, Brad, did you get a chance to ask Coach Barker about the weight machine?"

Brad clapped his hand to his forehead. "I forgot all about it. Shoot! Hey, why don't we go ask him now?"

"Sounds like a plan, Stan," Corky said.

"Let me grab my coat then, and we'll make like a banana and split. Give me two secs."

Brad pushed the bell and the boys waited. Coach Barker answered the door. "Hello, Brad. Hi boys. What's up?"

"Hello, Coach Barker. We're really sorry to bother you and all, but we were wondering if it would be possible to use the weight machine up at the college."

"I see. Well, to tell you the truth boys, the weight room is pretty busy all day long. The athletes of all the sports use it and some of the physical education classes also use it. They would definitely be using it after school, which I assume is when you would want to lift."

"Shoot a mile, or maybe a couple of 'em," groaned Corky. "Rats."

The boys' faces clearly showed their disappointment. The coach scratched his head. "I really didn't want to be the one to bear the bad tidings, but what can I do?" He brought a finger up

to his lips and looked like he was deep in thought. "Unless"

"Unless what?" Bambi asked.

"Unless you want to use it early in the morning. The gym and facilities are opened up early every school day for students and townspeople who want to get in a workout before school or work."

"Before school? Let me think." Bambi made a quick calculation. "We have to be at school by 8:30. With breakfast, shower, and everything else, I'd guess we'd have to get there about 6:30 or so."

"The gym opens up at six bells, so there's no problem with that," Barker assured them.

"I guess it all depends on if we want to get up that early or not, huh?" Corky asked the group.

"That's about the size of it," nodded Bambi. "Thanks a lot, Coach Barker. We really appreciate your help. Sorry to bother you."

"Oh, no bother. It's my pleasure. Glad to help you boys out. Maybe someday you can come up and play football for us at Dakota State."

"Yeah, maybe. Good night, Mr. Barker."

"See you later fellas and good luck to you."

His door was already shut before a feeble reply came back from Corky, "Thanks. We'll probably need it." The boys discussed the predicament as they marched back to Brad's. "Holy hotdish! We'd have to get out of bed about six o'clock."

"You'd never make it, would you, Cork? And how about Troy?"

"I don't know, Donnie. I just don't know. I don't think I've ever done it before."

Brad entered the discussion. "It's not so hard once you get used to it. I used to get up real early to go fishing or hunting lots of times. You can do it. Besides, it's only for three days a week."

"Maybe. What the heck. I'll try it if everybody else will."

"It looks like we four will do it. We can ask Denny and Troy at school tomorrow to find out their opinion." Bambi glanced at his watch. "I gotta scoot. It's 8:15 and I have to be in by 8:30."

"Me too," added Donnie. "See you tomorrow, Brad."

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"You bet. Take it easy, you guys, and sweet dreams."

The three friends began their homeward trek as Brad disappeared into his house. Corky spoke up. " I guess we better have sweet dreams while we can. Our dreaming time is in danger of being drastically reduced. I can see it all now. I'll have nightmares of going to bed and having the alarm clock go off just after I fall asleep. And then all of a sudden in the middle of the night, the alarm really goes off and interrupts my nightmare of the alarm clock going off. Then I'll have to get up out of a nice warm bed to go out into the cold so I can lift heavy bars of iron. I think, maybe, I need a psychiatrist. I can't be completely sane if I'm even thinking of really doing this crazy thing."

His two friends laughed and punched him in the arm from each side. They joked and laughed all the way home.

Chapter 3 – No Rest for the Dedicated

Bambi decided that he would get up early the next morning to try to get his body accustomed to an early wakeup and also to do his exercises for the day. He could see he wouldn't have the energy to do them at night after all the other things during the day. He set his alarm for six a.m., brushed his teeth, said his prayers, and jumped into bed. In what seemed like a very short time, he was dreaming that he was going to be late for school. He was running to get there on time, but his legs were moving in slow motion like they were carrying lead weights. He just didn't seem to be able to make himself go any faster. Finally the school bell rang, and he wanted to cry out from the frustration of not being able to get to where he wanted to go. *I'm late. I'm late* kept repeating in his head as the school bell kept ringing and ringing.

All of a sudden he awoke with a jerk. "I'm late," he said aloud. Then as his foggy mind started to clear, he figured out that it was just a dream. Then why did the bell keep ringing? Finally he determined that the noise was coming from his alarm clock. He pushed the alarm button back in and tried to focus his eyes on the lighted digits. It was 6:02. What in blazes was going on? Why in the world was his alarm going off at 6:02 a.m.? Slowly his consciousness returned and he remembered the night before. His eyes started to droop again as he sat there thinking. The next thing he knew was his mother shaking him and telling him that breakfast was ready. He looked over at the clock. It now read 7:30.

"Holy tapioca pudding!" He had to hurry. When he tried to throw his legs over the side of his bed, he discovered he was stiff all over. He dressed as quickly as possible under the circumstances. His eye caught the Bulldog Compact on his wall. He took the time to read it since he felt he needed a little boost in morale just then. His cheeks burned red as he came to the John

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Hancock signature and recalled the laughter of Brown and Bennett that night. He could have made a new copy, but he wanted this one to make him mad and spur him on to greater effort. "We'll see who's laughing when this whole thing is over."

He was mad enough now, after reading the pledge and thinking about his failure to arise and perform those required exercises, to almost bound down the steps as usual despite the soreness in his body. The soreness didn't affect his appetite, however. He tore into a platter of scrambled eggs with bacon pieces inside. Toast with honey and milk completed his first meal of the day. As he ate, he daydreamed that he was a pioneer, eating his final breakfast before starting down the Oregon Trail with a wagon train. He thought of how eager and fresh he was, but being an experienced trailblazer, he realized that the journey would be long and hard. He had to be prepared to face many dangers and obstacles.

When his mind returned to the present, he couldn't help but compare that make-believe journey with his present situation. Hadn't his group started a journey the day before? Didn't they have to face many obstacles and suffer physical pain and discomfort? He knew now that getting up early in the morning every day would not be easy. Other problems would face them along the way, but he was resolved to meet them all head on. He also couldn't help wondering where and how their journey would end. Only time would tell.

He took a quick shower and hurried as fast as his stiff legs would allow to Corky's house. Corky answered the door. He moaned as he bent down to pick up the morning newspaper off the porch. "Oh, man. I thought I was in pretty decent shape with basketball and football and all. Boy, was I wrong! I feel like death warmed over this morning."

"I know exactly what you mean. I was thinking I should have written down the license number of the truck that hit me," replied Bambi. The two boys talked about their miseries as they walked to school.

Corky and Bambi discovered that the other boys were sore too. They also discovered that Brad had told Denny about the early-morning weight-training schedule. He had agreed to go

along with the rest. Only Troy remained.

Troy's reaction to the possible schedule was predictable. "Six thirty! Are you guys missing a few marbles? Or have you been whiffin' that loco weed those hippies smoke down at the park?"

The other five failed to find his questions amusing. They were all counting heavily on Troy's approval. He was very important in their future plans.

Corky decided to throw him some bait wrapped around a subtle barb. "Look, Rip Van Winkle, you know how much I love my sleep, although the rumor that I send my pillow a valentine is completely false. If I can give up my beauty sleep, and heaven knows I need—"

Brad didn't let him finish the sentence. "You can say that again."

"That again," resumed Corky without batting an eyelash. He continued, trying to drown out the groans of his pals, "As I was saying, if I can hack it, you can pull your weary bones out of bed a little earlier too."

"A little! I usually don't get up till eight."

Corky shrugged. "Of course, if you can't take it, I can understand. Not everybody can rise above human weakness."

"Wait a minute. Are you saying that I can't take it? I can handle anything you can and a lot more too, Buster!"

Corky grinned. "You heard it, boys. Looks like I've got a little challenge. Shall we make it a date then? We meet tomorrow morning at 6:30 at the college armory. And don't forget, Troy. That's a.m."

"Don't worry, clown. I'll be there. And don't you forget to bring your jump rope – if you come. I might want to use it to tie that motor mouth of yours shut."

"Whoa, take it easy, guys," begged Bambi. "A little friendly rivalry is fine, but don't get carried away. And Troy brought up a good point. We all need to take our jump ropes if you have one. Try to save your energy today. We have a very important two-mile run this afternoon after practice."

"Don't remind me," wailed Corky.

The homeroom bell rang, sending them scurrying off to

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begin their school day. On the way to his homeroom, Bambi turned to yell a few words of greeting to a passing friend and bumped into somebody. He quickly turned to apologize and found himself looking into the big brown eyes of Lisa Nielsen.

"Good morning, Bambi."

Bambi started to say hello, but he also started to say good morning. His answer thus came out a mixture of the two and was an unintelligible garble. He felt the blood rushing into his face and quickly stepped around the puzzled girl and hastily retreated from the scene of his embarrassment. *Dad blast it! Why do I always get so nervous when I'm around Lisa?* He guessed he understood the expression, to choke. *Jeepers kraut! She must really think I'm a big drip, a real nobody.*

By the time basketball practice rolled around, the boys' bodies had loosened up some, but they were still sore and walking around like sailors who hadn't been on land for a long time. When the coach finally told the team to knock off for the day, the moment they had all waited for and dreaded at the same time arrived. They had, in a manner of speaking, fallen off their horse yesterday. Could they get right back on today? Could they run hard and still not get completely discouraged if they fell short of their goal? The moment of truth was at hand. The boys filed over to the clock like prisoners taking their last walk to the electric chair.

Mike Bennett and a couple of his cronies followed them. "Are you turkeys ready to trot again today? Isn't that amazing? I bet the coaches in the state are almost ready to concede the 1972 championship to the dumb, dynamic, dedicated dodo birds from Madison."

His sidekicks laughed.

"How'd you like to have your nose rerouted through your belly button?" threatened Corky.

"Ooh, very witty. Did you hear that boys? Aren't these new dodo dolls the most? They can walk and talk, probably cry and wet their diaper, and now they get mad and make funny remarks. They may even become violent if provoked enough."

Troy made a threatening move toward the loudmouths. "OK, OK, we're going. We can take a hint when we're not wanted."

Besides, we wouldn't want to interfere with the dance of the sugarplum fairies around the gym in eighty days." The three laughing smart alecks moved off quickly as Corky and Denny followed Troy's menacing lead toward the trio of clowns.

"Forget those jerks," ordered Bambi.

"Yeah," agreed Donnie. "Don't pay any attention to them. My mom taught me that sticks and stones can break my bones, but words can never hurt me. If you take creeps like that seriously, you'll be involved in pugilistic activities all the time. Those guys have got diarrhea of the mouth."

Corky broke in. "What are pulitigsic...or whatever you said, activities?"

Donnie let a long sigh escape before answering, "Must I always use fourth grade words for my peers that don't enjoy the same depth of vocabulary that I do? Pugilism refers to boxing. Do you understand that one, Cork?"

"Oh, I see," said the blind man as he picked up his hammer and saw."

Bambi interrupted the exchange. "I'd really love to stand around here all day and listen to you guys jabber, but we've got work to do, two more grueling miles. Ready, Jeff?"

"I'm all set if you guys are. When it gets back to the twelve, I'll say go."

About six steps after the signal to begin was given, Bambi was already feeling the pain. How could he keep on going for two miles? When he came around to finish the first lap, he saw a few girls just entering the door. He turned around to see what was going on. He determined that it had to be the eighth grade cheerleaders. Apparently they were going to have practice. His mind grabbed on to a new thought. Lisa was one of the cheerleaders. She had probably just come in the door also. He turned to look again. *Bingo!*

The girls, accompanied by their faculty advisor, made their way to the steps leading up to the stage. Bambi was just passing by when they reached the stairs. A couple of them greeted him as he flashed past. He held up his hand in response like a cool dude. On the inside he was anything but cool. He felt a tremendous energy surge through his body. He actually had to

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control his desire to sprint. He remembered the story that Coach Wilbur had told of the super energy he had received when he saw his girlfriend by the track. Wow! It was really true. His weariness and thoughts of pain had almost disappeared with the appearance of Lisa. The only thought that went through his mind was that Lisa was watching him. He had to show off his manliness for her benefit. Around and around he went. He even lapped Corky and Brad. He forgot all about the number of laps. After an incredibly short period of time had passed, Jeff yelled at him, "Last lap, Bambi."

"What? Already? I can't believe it. I still have gas in the tank." As Bambi came around for the finish, he saw Donnie just ahead of him and kept running and caught up with him, having to slow his pace to avoid running past him. The conquering hero just couldn't resist taking a few more laps past the stage, accompanying Donnie most of the way. At the end to impress anyone who was watching, he put on a burst of speed, leaving Donnie in the dust with his sprint.

As soon as Donnie reached the finish line, he asked for his time. "Fourteen minutes and thirty seconds," responded their official timer. "Aren't you interested in finding out your time, Bambi?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah." *I guess I was more interested in other things than my time today.* "What was it?"

"Fifty-eight seconds and . . . twelve minutes."

Bambi pumped his fist. "I did it! Wow!"

"All right! Give me some skin, big fella," demanded Corky. "We got one in on schedule anyway. Five to go."

"I took a whole minute and a half off my time today," said Donnie proudly. "I think I can go under thirteen by next Wednesday at this rate."

"You only need to cut off ninety more seconds," injected Jeff. "Boy, you guys ran better today than yesterday despite the fact that you were all stiff and sore from the first run. I can't figure it out."

"I can," smiled Bambi, looking up at the stage. The other boys followed the direction of his gaze and laughed.

"Now that's what I call real motivation," exclaimed Corky,

nodding his head toward the cheerleaders.

"You can say that again," agreed Troy.

"Now that's what I call—" Body punches from three sides ended his attempt at humor.

"Let's get out of here. Corky's jokes will make me lose the big appetite that all that running worked up," said Troy.

The little circle of friends went through their ritual of devotion once again and retreated to the showers. They discussed their plans for the next morning to meet at the Dakota State College field house and lift weights. Rendezvous time was set for 6:30 at the latest.

Bambi decided on the way home he had to do the daily exercises he had missed by oversleeping that morning. He didn't want to leave a blank space on his performance chart. When he arrived at home, he thought about how tired he was.

It would be all right if he missed one exercise session. After all, there were still three years till he was a junior. One little bit of relaxation wouldn't hurt anything. His conscience started to argue. If he let his weariness stop him now, why wouldn't it happen at other times? No. He had to learn to dominate his body completely. He had to do that before he would ever be able to dominate an opponent on the court. It was just mind over matter as Donnie had said. Starting right now his mind was the boss and his body would be a slave to it.

He grabbed an album and put it on the stereo. Gingerly he got down on the floor and started in with pushups. In twenty minutes he had finished all of the normal exercises. He then trudged down to the basement where he jumped back and forth across a board that he had elevated by using large tin cans.

He jumped back and forth for as long as he could. A quick check of his watch brought disappointment. It had seemed like an eternity to his pained body, but in reality he had only been jumping for two minutes. He vowed to do better next time as he lay on the floor trying to recover from all of his recent exertions. When his mother called him for supper, he hobbled up the stairs with rubbery legs.

Bambi was very glad to place his weary body in bed that evening. He fell asleep wondering how he was going to lift

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weights in the morning. Mind over matter was his only possible chance.

* * *

When Bambi's alarm went off at 6:00 the next day, he reached over and shut it off right away. He then lay back down on the bed. Just as he was about to drop off again, his mind warned him that he was letting his body get the better of him.

Almost angrily he fought off the stupefying mist of sleep that was trying to overcome his mind. He forced himself into an upright position and swung his legs over the side of the bed.

He was even stiffer and sorer than the morning before. He tried to get his body loosened up but without much of a result. *I'm too sore to lift weights. I can't do it.* A voice inside his head began to echo, *"Winners never quit." That does it. I'm not quitting.* He dressed in a warm sweat suit, grabbed his coat, picked up his jump rope, and started slowly down the long staircase. He didn't want to wake his parents, but that wasn't the excuse for his slowness. He simply couldn't move any faster. He had a long walk to get to the gym. He had twenty minutes to arrive, but in his condition that goal might be tough to achieve.

When Bambi arrived at 6:27, he found that only Donnie had arrived before him. Brad and Denny put in an appearance shortly afterward. They all did some warm-up exercises to try to rid the stiffness from their bodies. It helped a little.

At 6:35 they decided that they couldn't wait any longer for the other two members of the group. "They probably won't make it anyway," said Donnie. "We better get started or we'll be late for school. Now, what do we do?"

Brad was the resident expert. He had used the machine at his old school in Illinois. "There's nothin' to it. Just put this little pin in the slot with the number of pounds on it that you want to lift. Start out at a low weight and do about ten repetitions. Then add another ten pounds and do some more reps. Keep on going until you can't do ten reps. Then move on to the next station." He showed them the bench press, military press, lateral press, and the leg press. He pointed to another bench with weights on it.

"That's for the legs. I'm not exactly sure how to use it, but I think these four stations and rope jumping will give us enough of a workout. We should all be too pooped to pop when we finish."

Bambi spoke up. "I'm going to start with the jump rope. That way there will always be an open station for one of you guys to move to."

He grabbed his rope, checked the clock, and commenced jumping. To get his mind off the agony of it all and the time, he let his mind slide into a daydream of the Big Four basketball tournament coming up just a week from tomorrow.

When he finally looked back at the clock to see how he was doing, he saw that he had already gone past the five-minute mark. He decided to go to six and quit.

Just after Bambi hit the six-minute mark, Corky entered the room with a sheepish look on his face. "It's about time you got here, Goldilocks," jeered Denny.

"Hey, I'm really sorry I'm late." He looked around the room. "Didn't Troy boy make it?"

"Nope."

"Guess he's doing a different kind of exercise."

"What's that?" asked Donnie.

"Sawing a few logs."

The other boys groaned. "I should have known better than to ask," said Donnie, shaking his head.

Bambi threw the jump rope at Corky's feet. "There you go, Twinkle Toes. Let's see if you can jump rope better than you tell jokes. Show us your stuff." Bambi then fixed a weight on the leg press and began lifting as Corky began skipping rope. Corky was having his problems.

"Didn't anyone ever teach you that the object of the thing is to jump over and not on the rope?" inquired Brad.

Denny also took a minute to watch Corky. "It's a good thing you're counting time and not times that you make it all the way around. You'd never get done that way."

"Ah, stick it in your left ear, all you guys."

* * *

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The boys finally finished their workout and hustled home. They had to hurry. They just did manage to get to school on time after showering and eating breakfast. Corky and Bambi walked together that morning, just as they had done for many years. "Holy hemorrhoidal tissue! My arms sure are tight. They're not used to all that heavy stuff," complained Corky.

"Really. It was even tougher than I thought it would be. It took longer too. I think we might have to get started a little earlier from now on."

"Earlier? You've gotta be kidding!"

Bambi looked at his watch. "We've only got about one minute till the bell rings. That's cutting it a bit too close for me. Those sprint for your desk entrances are just not my style. It's either start sooner or end sooner. I'm not going to slacken my program so I'm starting sooner."

The two chums didn't exchange any more words. When they strolled in the front door, they discovered Troy standing there along the wall. "Hi. I've been waiting for you guys." They didn't answer. "I didn't make it up this morning."

"We noticed," was the extent of Corky's sarcastic reply.

Bambi didn't know what to say. He was really disappointed with his friend's failure to show up, but after all, Troy was still his buddy, and he couldn't act snotty about the thing.

"I'm really sorry about that," continued Troy. "I'll be there Monday for sure."

The boys stood there in silence. Just then the bell rang and relieved the awkwardness of the situation. "OK, Troy," nodded Bambi. "It's no biggy this time." Bambi walked off to his homeroom. He had said it was no biggy, but he was very worried anyway. They couldn't afford to lose Troy. He was the star of the team and if he gave it up, they all might quit. He also had to wonder what would have happened to the morale of the other four if he had failed to rouse himself from bed and show up for the training session. He sure was thankful that he had found the strength to overcome his body that day.

He had done it once, but he knew he had to do it every day from now on. Somehow he just had to fire Troy up to do the same.

That day at basketball practice, the boys discovered an unforeseen problem. The first time Bambi took a shot, he threw up an air ball; his arms felt like lead. His next shot also failed to draw iron. After a few more shots Bambi mentioned to the others that his shooting was thrown completely off by the tightness in his arms. They were experiencing the same difficulty, with the exception of Troy. The coach noticed their little conference out on the floor. He sauntered over and said, "What's going on here, Ladies' Aid Society?"

Bambi gave him the answer. "We can't shoot worth beans, Coach. We lifted weights this morning and our arms are really tight and heavy."

"Oh-oh, I should have warned you when I gave you that list. Lifting weights can really interfere with a person's timing and range, especially when you're not used to it. A lot of basketball players only lift in the off season. I never dreamed you kids were actually going to get into that program this soon. It's really my fault."

"What are we going to do about it?" asked Corky with the anxiety showing in his voice. The others showed their worry by their facial expressions.

"To start with, don't lift again till the season is over. As far as your shooting goes, as soon as your arms get back to normal, your shooting should be all right. There shouldn't be any problem for the Big Four. I don't know about Monday's game. Time will tell."

The basketball season for the seventh, eighth, and ninth grade teams terminated every year with a tournament involving Madison, Huron, Watertown, and Mitchell. This year's games were to be held in Madison. The kids were pretty excited about their chances with a home court and home crowd advantage. This was a very important event for them. If their shooting was off for the tournament, it would be a catastrophe.

"I sure hope we're all right for the Brookings game. I really hate losing to those turkeys," stated Corky. The others voiced their agreement.

After practice was over, the six boys, stiff legged and five of them stiff-armed, lined up and ran two miles again. Bambi found

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it hard going that day with no one watching him, and he failed to break thirteen minutes. Only Troy improved his time from the day before.

"Boy, what a lucky dog!" complained Corky. "Troy not only got to have his sleep this morning but didn't mess up his shooting and now improves his time for the two-mile to boot. Oh, the injustice of it all."

Troy shrugged his shoulders. "What can I say?" He didn't feel guilty about missing the weightlifting session that morning since it had turned out to be a rather bad mistake. Now the others were glad that he hadn't made it. His shooting was vital to the team's hopes. "Just wait till a week from this Monday when we start the weight training again. I'll show you all how to pump that iron then."

Corky snorted, "You'll have to make it out of bed first."

Before Troy could retaliate with a smart remark, Donnie interrupted the impending verbal duel. "Say, I just thought of another problem. We don't have practice tomorrow since it's Saturday. Where are we going to run our two miles?"

"Good grief," said Bambi. "I never thought of that. I guess there are a lot of details I should have thought of a long time ago and planned for them. What are we going to do?"

"Why not run outside?" suggested Brad.

"Outside! Are you cracked? It's cold out there," snapped Troy.

"You ain't just a whistlin' Dixie," agreed Corky. "For once Troy and I see things the same way."

"What are you guys, a bunch of wimps? It's not that cold. By afternoon it could be around thirty-five according to the weatherman."

"Do you trust those idiots? I've been shoveling their ten-percent chance of precipitation off the sidewalk all winter long. And then twice they said we were going to get a blizzard and nothing happened. Besides, even if they did luck out and call one right, thirty-five isn't exactly sunbathing weather."

Donnie put in his two cents worth on the issue. "We are trying to get our bodies toughened up and conditioned, aren't we?" Nobody disagreed with that statement. "Well then, we have

to be able to withstand the elements, to a certain extent at least. Actually I think it will be good for us."

"Sounds good to me, Doctor Kern."

Donnie bowed to Bambi, who continued, "I'm going to do it. I'll see if my dad will measure off a two-mile course on the streets for us to run. Meet at my place at three if you are going to brave the cool temperatures and run. I'm not about to leave a blank space on my chart now after chalking up three straight X's."

The group seemed divided and undecided in their opinions. Bambi and Donnie, having already expressed their opinions and feeling a little contempt for those who could let a little cold scare them off, headed for the locker room. For the first time since they had begun running, they went to the showers without their fellowship rite. The laughter and good spirits were also left out. There was a possibility of a crack developing in the ranks that could split them apart and doom their project before it got very far off the ground.

Bambi decided to get up early the next morning, even though it was Saturday. It would be good to get his body accustomed to rising early. Besides, what did anybody accomplish in their sleep? Any amount of sleep over the minimum needed for health reasons was a waste of time. Bambi didn't have time to waste. Not if he was going to fulfill his fairytale goal successfully.

After some serious thinking, he came up with an idea on how to avoid falling back to sleep after shutting off his alarm. The solution was to place the clock as far away from the bed as he could. He figured that by the time he walked or crawled in the dark, groping for the noisemaker, he'd be awake. Also, he'd be out of bed already. Hopefully this plan would work exactly as planned. After setting the alarm for six, he dove under the covers.

In the morning when the alarm sent him from the warm bed in search of the irritating noise, Bambi discovered that his plan worked perfectly. After bumping his head against the wall, bashing his shin on the dresser, and stubbing his toe, how could he possibly have not been awake? He got dressed in gym clothes

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and began exercising. Pushups were omitted to give his arm muscles the chance to return to normal. He also decided that he better not leap the board until the basketball season was over. When he finally got his body in tiptop shape, maybe he could do that kind of thing during the season, but not yet.

When he finished his routine, his first inclination was to lie down, turn on the TV set, and watch cartoons while snarfing down some cereal. He reconsidered. First of all he would probably wake up his parents, and secondly he was getting too old for cartoons. Those were for people who only wanted entertainment out of life. He was going somewhere with his life. *I'm not going to turn into a boob-tube zombie.* He grabbed his history book and started working on his assignments.

He was just putting on the finishing touches when he mother appeared in the doorway. "I just made some fried eggs and pancakes. Are you interested in having some?"

"Are you kidding? Does the sun set in the west? Do ducks fly south for the winter? Is the Pope –"

"All right. All right," she laughed. "I get the picture. Wash your hands, and I'll put everything on the table."

After stuffing himself with his favorite breakfast, Bambi made his bed and cleaned his room. When those few duties were all done, he discovered all the required tasks had been completed. *I have over six hours until our two-mile run. What am I going to do until then?* He still could watch cartoons. *NO!* he almost screamed at himself inwardly. It was time that he put away childish things.

He decided to read a storybook. That way he could accomplish something, learn, and entertain himself all at the same time. He checked his watch. The library was scheduled to open in fifteen minutes. He grabbed his coat and began the fairly long walk to the Carnegie Public Library. He considered it the intellectual health food store in town. And it was all free if a person didn't lose the book or forget to take it back. It really was hard to believe. Another proof that the best things in life were free. Bambi arrived at the little brick structure at the same time the librarian did. She unlocked the door, turned on the lights, and went to put her coat away. When she returned, she found Bambi

waiting patiently by her desk. "Can I help you, young man?"

"Yes, please. Could you recommend a good novel about basketball?"

"As a matter of fact, I just put one back on the shelf last night. Look over there under the T's for a book written by John R. Tunis and called *Go Team Go*. It's an excellent novel for a boy your age."

"Thanks a lot."

Bambi made his way to the area indicated by the friendly, elderly lady. He looked at the shelf to see if he was in the right place. The name Stevenson caught his eye. He smiled. He had read both *Treasure Island* and *Kidnapped* last year for book reports. He moved down a ways. Twain was the name that grabbed his attention this time, one of his favorite authors. He had read Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer three times each. Who could ever forget those guys?

Bypassing a lot of tempting titles, he worked his way back the other direction until he came to Tunis. He found several books by Tunis before his eyes fell on *Go Team Go*. *Bingo!* He pulled it out and headed for the desk without looking for anything else. Without a doubt, he could spend a whole day browsing through the library, but he wanted to get his nose into this book.

To avoid wasting time on his way home, Bambi read as he walked. He didn't walk as fast as usual that way, but he seemed to get back sooner. When he entered the house, he flung his coat on the floor and settled onto the sofa in the living room. Before he got relaxed and then involved, he looked over at his coat. If his mother came in and saw it lying on the floor, she'd give him pet sermon number seventy-five. With a big sigh, he got up and hung it in the closet. Now he could, and did, dig into the contents of the novel in his hands.

Bambi didn't put it down until his mother called him for lunch. He tried to read while he was eating, but she delivered pet sermon number forty, and the book ended up under his chair until he had finished his lunch. *I can't wait to get back to the story*. Passing up his usual seconds of everything to get done sooner, he hurried back to the couch and continued reading until

he reached the end.

"Wow, what a book!" he cried out aloud. It really made him feel good inside. Not only did the happy ending make him feel good, but it gave his dreams a big boost. He was also proud of himself because he'd read another book. To him books were like mountain peaks are for mountain climbers. It always gave him a sense of success when he finished one.

The only problem with a good book was that when one finished, what could be done for an encore. There was a quotation he saw somewhere about finishing a good book being like losing a good friend. Bambi understood that perfectly. That was how he felt now. He turned on the TV, but there was nothing on that grabbed his interest. *Now what the heck am I going to do?*

Boredom would be the right word to describe what I feel. Might as well have a little snack. He grabbed some of his mom's special chocolate chip creations from the cookie jar and snarfed them down with a glass of milk. After wiping his white moustache, he checked the time. *Still half an hour until the run. Why didn't I get more than one book while I was at the library? I could go back now.* "Why not?" he asked aloud. None of the furniture in the room voiced any reasons why he shouldn't. He grabbed his coat and then hurried out the front door. *Gotta hurry!*

Walking at a fast pace, Bambi arrived at the library quicker than he had on his morning trip. Carefully he placed the recently finished work of juvenile literature on the desk and went back into the racks to find a new one, heading directly to the Tunis section without hesitation. He examined a few of them. They weren't about basketball, but he knew he didn't have time to waste being picky. Finally he grabbed *Iron Duke* and *Highpockets*. *At least they're about sports and hopefully about winners. I've found enough losers in real life without reading about them too.* Knowing it was necessary for him to hurry to prevent being late, he kept the books closed as he pumped his arms vigorously on the way home.

He entered his front door at three exactly. Donnie and Brad were already there, talking to Mrs. Masterson in the living room.

Donnie had a relieved look on his face when he saw Bambi come in. "Boy are we glad to see you! We were starting to think that you'd forgotten or—"

"Or chickened out?" Bambi finished the sentence for him. "No way. I just had to run to the library for a book."

"What did you pick up?" asked Donnie, the champion reader of the eighth grade.

"*Iron Duke and Highpockets.*"

"They're good. You'll like them," said Brad. "I think Tunis is one of the best sports writers."

"I've read most of his books," stated Donnie.

Just then the doorbell rang. Bambi ran to the door. It was Denny and Troy. Bambi's eyebrows lifted when he saw Troy. "Come on in. Glad to see you guys. I thought it was too cold for you, Troy."

"Heck no. I can take anything you guys can, especially Corky. By the way, where is the class wit, or should I say halfwit?"

"He's not here yet. Let's wait another five minutes for him and then take off if he hasn't showed up yet."

"Did you get a course marked off?" asked Denny.

"Didn't even have to. My dad used to ride a bike all the time for exercise. He kept track of the mileage to different places in town. He says it's exactly one mile to highway eighty-one if we take Ninth Street. Up there and back will be exactly two miles."

"That sounds like a good route. That street is wider than most in town," said Donnie, the expert on any subject.

At the end of five minutes Corky still hadn't put in an appearance. "Let's go," said Bambi. The five filed out the front door. Mrs. Masterson followed them to the doorway. She was going to start them and keep track of the time. The boys lined up in the street. Bambi waved at his mother.

She looked down at her watch. "On your marks. Get set." Before she could get to the last command, she was interrupted by a loud voice bellowing from down the street.

"Wait for me! Wait for me!"

The kids turned around to see Corky running along the street while trying to put on a sweatshirt at the same time. He finally

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managed to get the shirt over his head and pulled to a stop next to his waiting pals. "Just get out of bed?" inquired Troy, trying to swallow a giant grin.

"Real cute. Do you want to know if I've got my pajamas on under my sweat clothes?"

"Where have you been?" demanded Donnie.

"To tell you the truth, I just now decided that I didn't want to be left out. I grabbed my clothes and ran here, hoping that I wasn't too late."

"About ten seconds more and you would have missed us," Bambi informed him. "Are you ready again, Mom?"

She waved back that she was. This time she got them started without interference, and they soon disappeared around the corner. After they had covered about six blocks, Bambi began to feel a pain in his side. He hoped it would go away, but it didn't.

He couldn't keep up with Corky and Brad today. He decided he would be satisfied just to finish. He turned around and saw that the other three were right on his tail. As they made their way westward down Ninth Street, a green car passed by them. Bambi was sure he saw an obscene gesture from one of the occupants. The car turned at the corner and circled around the block. This time when it passed by, the car slowed down. Jeers poured out of the opened windows. "Suckers. Hey, your jock is on backwards. Are you tired of running? Then pee in your shoe and float awhile." The driver accelerated after the last one, but not before loud laughter met their ears.

"Who were those guys?" puffed Donnie, who was nearsighted and didn't have much success in recognizing people at a distance.

"Bennett and Brown. Who else could it be?"

"Who's driving?"

"That's Brown's big brother, a big troublemaker from way back. He rides around in that old junk heap like he's on a race track."

They reached the highway and turned around without further incident. "Half done," said Bambi as he made the turn. The pain in his side began to bother him even more. Troy and Denny soon passed him. He began to think of quitting. It felt like someone

was stabbing him with a knife. A normal person shouldn't be expected to perform under those conditions. The thought that he didn't want to be a normal person struck him. He would have to be able to perform under all kinds of adverse conditions. He had to get tough.

When Donnie passed and pulled away from him, Bambi's thoughts of quitting became more intense. He couldn't even run in an erect position now. Then that same voice and the same words came back to push him on, "*Winners never quit.*" He ran with closed eyes and tears, but he ran till the finish. He tried not to show the agony he had been feeling to his friends. Luckily the pain eased as soon as he quit running.

"Where you been, slowpoke? Did you take the scenic route or maybe stop to snap a few choice photographs of the beautiful countryside?" Corky asked.

Bambi was in no mood to joke around and didn't want to get mad at his friends. He just turned and walked away a short distance. His side was much better already.

"It seemed like we were going really slow today. I'll hate to find out what my time was."

"Really," was the unanimous response. They all walked up to the house to find out the bad news. Bambi was almost back to normal. He couldn't help but wonder what had caused the pain that had almost put him out of action.

Mrs. Masterson came outside and met them at the front steps. She held a piece of paper in her hand. She brought her hand up to her mouth and made a noise somewhat like a trumpet. "Ladies and gentlemen," she began, using the voice of a circus ringmaster or something. "Here are the results of the two-mile run. In first place, Corky Calhoun, with a time of 12:53."

The mouths of all the boys dropped and their eyes threatened to pop out of the heads. "You've got to be pulling my leg. Are you sure?"

She nodded at Corky and continued her announcement. "In second place was Brad Hanson in the time of 12:56."

"All right!" he yelled and jumped into the air with his fists held up toward the sky. Corky put out his hands and Brad slapped them. They reversed the process and then gave their

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attention back to Bambi's mother.

"We had a tie for third and fourth place between Denny Prostrollo and Troy Miller, both clocked in 13:10. Donnie Kern was fifth in 13:59 and Lance Masterson brought up the rear in 14:54."

"Did you hear that? 13:59! I broke fourteen minutes." Donnie was strutting around like he had just won the gold medal in the Olympics. Troy and Denny were also celebrating their times, having only missed the magic mark by ten seconds. Bambi was the only one not fired-up by his time. He wasn't totally unhappy though. Even though he had finished last with the worst time he had run yet, he was satisfied with the afternoon's activity. The others were now pretty fired up about the program. Bambi had been worried about them and their lack of success. His fear had been that one or even more of them would quit. There were no worries about himself. He knew he wasn't going to quit, ever.

One important lesson stuck out in Bambi's mind. It's a lot easier to be excited after success than failure. He sure hoped the success continued so he would never have to find out if his friends could keep going in the face of failure. It would also be nice if he didn't get any more side aches.

The boys walked out to the driveway and stood talking. They began to split for the journey back to their respective homes when Donnie called them back. "Forget something, team?" He put heavy emphasis on the word team.

Corky caught on and put his hand out. The others were right behind him. Bambi was last to lay his on top of the pile. They gave a rousing chorus of the motto and then exchanged some individual handshakes. They were united again. Right in the middle of their festivities a green car came along, slowed down, and then accelerated rapidly away, after the occupants had released a flurry of snowballs from the moving fortress. Two of the hunks of frozen water found their mark. Brad took a snowball in the knee and was fine. Donnie, however, took a shot right in the face. His glasses were knocked off, and he searched for them in a pile of snow while struggling hard to fight back tears. His friends ran over quickly to help him find his glasses

and to console him. After his glasses were found, Donnie wiped the snow off his face and his lenses.

He tried to recover his dignity with a joke. "I guess I should have ziggged when I zagged, huh?" Bambi patted him on the shoulder.

Troy looked down the street in the direction the sneak-attack artists had fled. "Someday I'm going to get my hands on that blasted Bennett and whale the stuffing out of him."

No one else spoke. Finally they decided that Donnie wasn't badly injured and said their goodbyes. Bambi walked Donnie home.

On his return he kept thinking of the incidents of that day and the past week. *Why can't Bennett just leave us alone? We didn't do anything to him. Maybe Troy is right. A couple of black eyes might teach him to keep his big mouth shut and leave other people alone.* Donnie had said that words could never hurt him, only sticks and stones. Now he could add snowballs to that list. Bennett had gone too far this time.

Bambi tried to remove the incident from his mind. He picked up *Iron Duke* and sent his mind off to Harvard University with the hero of the story. His mother interrupted him to tell him that supper would be served in one minute. After supper he did the dishes, thinking most of that time about Bennett and the problems he was causing. Why did he act that way? Bambi tried to be a friend to everybody, and he just couldn't understand someone who deliberately made people dislike him. If that was Bennett's purpose, he was certainly succeeding very well. Bambi was beginning to feel something just a little bit stronger than dislike. As he fell asleep that night, he was visualizing a snowball flashing through the air and smacking into Donnie's face.

The next morning Bambi awoke with a vivid memory of one of his dreams from the night before, a real crazy dream. Bennett and his buddies had gone by in the green jalopy and Bambi had chased after them on foot. He caught up with the car, grabbed it, and brought it to a stop. Instead of merely opening the door, he ripped it off the hinges and flung it across the street. Then he reached inside and grasped Bennett around the neck with one

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hand and lifted him up in the air. Bennett was wriggling and screaming while his face was filled with fear. Bambi was laughing at his discomfort as he started to bash his prisoner's head against the side of the motionless vehicle.

Just before contact was made by skull again metal, Bambi awoke with a start. He lay there thinking about the lunacy of his dream until sleep claimed him again. Hours later, the dream was still fresh in his mind. Bambi was quite ashamed of himself. He had learned way back in fourth grade that fighting was stupid and the wrong way to resolve problems. He always tried to break up squabbles on the playground. He had participated in a couple of minor wrestling contests where nobody was injured, but he had never been in a real fight before. He didn't bother anybody, and up to now, they had left him alone too. But now, what was he going to do?

Bambi felt very uncomfortable in church that day when the subject of forgiving those who do evil came up in the sermon. He knew what he was supposed to do, but it sure seemed like mission impossible. During the latter part of the church service his mind wandered off into visions of himself scoring last-second baskets to win big ball games with cheerleaders and fans piling out of the bleachers to lift him up on their shoulders. They were all reruns.

After the noontime meal he watched some NBA basketball and finished *Iron Duke*. It wasn't as good as *Go Team Go*, but he had enjoyed it. Another mountain had been climbed. He thought about starting the other Tunis book after supper, but he decided to watch TV instead.

Walt Disney was showing an episode from a series about the Revolutionary War called *The Swamp Fox*. His teacher had mentioned Francis Marion in history class, so Bambi already had an interest in the film. Bambi really enjoyed it and found material for a new role in his daydreams that evening. He pictured himself striking the British forces and then running away to hide in the swamps. Lying there in his bed, he suddenly became conscious of the fact that he was daydreaming. Reflecting on his daydreams of the past, Bambi remembered when he had first seen Zorro. For the next two weeks he had

fallen asleep with visions of himself in a black mask and black cape, mounted on a large black stallion. He would swoop down on small villages to rescue innocent people from the Spanish villains who specialized in cruelty and injustice. He usually pictured himself fighting ten guys at a time and receiving a serious wound. After disposing of the enemy soldiers, he would escape, despite his loss of blood and his weakness. A beautiful girl, bearing a remarkable resemblance to Lisa, would then find him and nurse him back to health. The warmth of those memories washed over him.

He suddenly came up with an alien and discomfoting thought. Why was he always wrapped up in daydreams? Why did he pretend to be a heroic figure that saved the day? That stuff was for kids, just like cartoons. *It's about time I quit dreaming about doing great deeds and simply go out and do them. Tomorrow is the Brookings game. I'll start being heroic then.*

Bambi was sitting in his first period class when Donnie walked in. The tardy bell had rung five minutes before that. Donnie handed Mrs. Kummer an excuse and sat down. Bambi waved at his friend. After class was over, Bambi hurried to the side of the latecomer. "What happened to you this morning?"

"I went up to lift weights and didn't quit in time."

"Lifting weights? I thought we weren't going to do that until after the Big Four."

"That's fine for you guys, Bambi, but I don't even get to play. It couldn't make my shooting any worse anyway. I couldn't hit the broad side of a barn if you locked me inside or hit water falling out of a boat."

Bambi didn't answer immediately. His friend was right about one thing. He didn't get to play unless the score was totally lopsided. He wasn't a bad shot though. His main problem was his physical weakness and meekness. Thus, he had no confidence in himself, which is another important ingredient of an athlete. After thinking it over, Bambi finally said, "Ah, quit cutting yourself down. You know you can give just about anybody on the team a run for their money in a horse game."

Donnie smiled at him. "Hey, I gotta go. I've already been late for one class today! See ya later." He motored down the

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hallway without waiting for Bambi's reply.

Bambi sure admired Donnie. If Bennett and Brown had Donnie's attitude, they'd be super ballplayers. It just didn't seem fair that people who received natural talent failed to make full use of it, while someone with very little talent went full bore to try to improve. *Maybe someday all the work will pay off. I sure hope so, for Donnie's sake. He really deserves all the success in the world.*

Like every day of a game, the school hours dragged by for Bambi. He was so keyed up about that day's game that he could hardly sit still, much less pay attention to his teachers. The lunch break finally arrived.

At the table Donnie brought up another complication in their schedule. "You know, we got so excited about tonight's game that we forgot to discuss whether we are going to run our two miles or not."

"Criminy, Kern, don't tell me you were thinking that we would run on the day of a game," snapped Troy.

"We could run afterwards. If you guys want to, that is."

"We can miss once in a while without hurting us," Brad reminded him.

Donnie said, "Yeah, but don't forget that we have the Big Four on Saturday. We probably won't run that day either. That's a lot of days to miss in one week."

"Ah, get off it," demanded Troy.

"Well excuse me for breathing. Forget I even mentioned the whole thing."

"I already have."

Bambi jumped to Donnie's defense. "Wait a second. He's got a point. There's no need to get huffy about it. Nobody said you had to run."

"That's good, because I'm not running."

Silence reigned over the table for the rest of the meal. Everyone concentrated on his food, although their appetites had been suddenly diminished by the ill feeling among the group. When Donnie finished, he immediately got up and headed for the disposal racks. Bambi got up and followed him. "Hey, Donnie, are you really going to run tonight?"

"After what just happened at the table? You dang betcha I'm going to run. I intend kicking Miller's butt in that two-mile by next week." Sparks flashed from Donnie's eyes.

"I'll go with you then. OK?"

"You mean it?"

"Sure I mean it. Outdoors or in the gym?"

"We'll look pretty dumb running inside after the game, but who cares. I don't want to go outside after working up a little sweat. It would be even worse for you, since you play almost the whole game. We don't need you to get sick for the Big Four."

"Fine with me. I've got to get the record back since Corky and Brad both beat my time on Saturday. I don't like being third best."

About two years later, or so it seemed to Bambi, school finally let out. He walked into the gym by himself. The seventh graders were in the locker room, and the Brookings team was already on the court. Bambi approached Coach Wilbur, who was waiting for his charges to make their appearance on the floor.

"Coach Wilbur, I have a question for you."

"Fire away."

"What causes a guy to get a side ache?"

"Do you have a side ache?" the coach responded.

"Not today. This was last Saturday during our two-mile run. A pretty bad one too."

"Usually they have something to do with digestion. How long before you ran did you have lunch, and how much did you eat?"

"Let me think. We ran at three, and I finished lunch about 12:15. I didn't eat much cause I wanted to get back to a great book I was reading." He paused. "Oh, wait a second. I did eat some cookies and milk about a half hour before we took off."

"I'd say that was your problem, Bambi. Try not to eat so soon before running and hopefully you won't have many more problems."

"Gee, thanks, Coach. I was kind of worried. I thought maybe something was wrong with me or something."

"I don't think so Bambi. Side aches are hazards of the profession for runners. They're comparable to blisters for

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basketball players."

"OK, I feel better now. See you later, and good luck today."

"Same to you, Bambi."

Bambi located his friends sitting a couple of rows above the seventh grade cheerleaders. He climbed up and sat next to Corky. The eighth grade cheerleaders, eating ice cream cones, came in just before the start of the game. They seated themselves right in front of another group of eighth grade players. Lisa was sitting in front of Bennett, who began talking to her. Bambi watched the two exchange conversation. He felt a strange feeling rising through his body. He didn't know exactly what the feeling was, but he did know that he didn't like it. It was kind of like anger and grief and embarrassment all mixed together. Luckily for Bambi, the game started and took his mind off his emotions.

At halftime Bambi did his best to avoid looking down at the group of talking and laughing kids that included Bennett and Lisa. His eyes turned toward his own friends, but he couldn't steer his mind away from the other section of bleachers. When the buzzer ending the third quarter went off, Bambi jumped up to go to the dressing room. Most of his teammates did the same.

Bambi couldn't keep himself from looking up to where Bennett had been sitting. He was still there and still talking to Lisa.

Bambi was completely dressed by the time Bennett and Brown finally came down the stairs. Some of the other players cracked jokes about their tardiness. They made some not so nice comments in regards to the reason for their lateness. Bambi felt his face burn. It bothered him some when they just talked about girls in general in that manner, but when they were talking about friends of his, especially Lisa, he became very angry.

Mike had to walk past Bambi to get to an open spot in which to dress. He decided he didn't want to walk around Bambi but instead move him out of the path. "Excuse me there, Tom. Make way for the superstar to get dressed."

Bambi stood still with his arms folded. "Are you having memory problems, Bennett? My name isn't Tom."

"Well I'll be darned. I thought all turkeys were named Tom."

"You're about as funny as a lifeboat with a hole in it."

"That's a good one, Masterson. I bet you were up all last night trying to think that one up. If you keep going at that pace, someday you might reach my level."

"I don't know if I can sink that low."

"Ooh, another goody. Well, I'd love to sit here and exchange verbal darts with you, but my fans await me."

"So what's stopping you?"

Bennett's face twisted into an angry grimace. "You are. Move!"

"I wish that I could, but I can't. I just washed my feet and I can't do a thing with them."

The two stood and glared at each other. The rest of the team watched in silence. It appeared that fireworks could go off at any moment. Finally Bennett walked around Bambi and began to undress. The other team members turned their attention back to their own affairs. When the tension was lifted, Bambi noticed that his heart was pounding. He suddenly realized that he had just come within a whisker of being in a fight. Luckily, his rival had decided not to push it.

Bambi had been so angry he wasn't thinking but just reacting. Now that the anger began to cool, fear rushed in to replace it. He didn't even know what to do in a fight. Bennett was in fights frequently, many of them with his two older brothers. *I better learn to control my temper, or someday I might do something that I'll regret.*

He didn't have any more time to think about the situation because the seventh graders came whooping into the locker room celebrating their narrow victory over the little Bobcats. It was time for the eighth graders to make their grand entrance. They had to delay it for a little while until Bennett got his shoes tied. They filed onto the floor.

Because of a few other things on his mind, Bambi hadn't worked up his usual pre-game jitters. He was loose and very confident in himself as he drove in for the warm-up lay-ups. He was a little worried about his outside shooting still, but his shooting touch seemed to be normal.

Bambi, Corky, Dan Brown, Mike Bennett, and Troy started

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the game for the Madison team. Bambi was a little hesitant about putting his hand in the same huddle with Bennett, but he knew that team unity was more important than carrying on the feud with his newly found rival. He would rather show up the Brookings team than snub Bennett. Apparently Bennett was not of the same opinion. He gave Bambi a dirty look as they lined up for the jump.

Troy tapped the opening tip to Bambi on the circle. Bambi drove the ball down the court, pulled up at the free throw line, launched his body straight into the air, and at the peak of his jump lofted a shot toward the basket. The ball swished cleanly through the cords. The quick Madison start was an indicator of the things to come in the game. Almost everything they threw up went in.

Bambi brought the crowd to its feet in the third quarter. He went up for a jump shot, but just as he went to release the ball, he saw that Troy's defender had dropped off to try to block the shot. Bambi quickly changed the trajectory of the ball and dropped a perfect pass underneath to Troy, who calmly banked it home for two more. Shortly afterward Coach Wilbur removed his starters from the game. The scrubs held on to bring home a 55-39 victory.

The locker room was jubilant, but Bambi wasn't there to share in the celebration. He and Donnie were up on the gym floor running their two miles. Corky soon noticed that Bambi wasn't in the locker room after he left the shower. "Hey, Jeff, where's Bambi?"

The student manager gave him the answer he should have guessed. "Upstairs. He and Donnie are running."

"Holy hockey puck!" Corky exclaimed. "I'm embarrassed. I should be up there too. This is the first time I won't be able to fill in the X on my running chart."

Denny said, "Don't feel like the Lone Ranger. It's the first time for Brad and me too."

* * *

None of them had any more open spaces for the week until

Saturday. They had good workouts and everybody ran under the target time of thirteen minutes except for Donnie. He vowed that he would do it the next week or drop in his tracks in the attempt. The group had decided not to run on Saturday since they had to play a morning and either an afternoon or evening game. Unknown to the others, Donnie ran two miles outdoors by himself before breakfast. He was still determined to beat Troy.

Chapter 4 – Walking the Talk

The Bullpups of Madison had drawn Mitchell in the first round, which was to be played at the high school. They watched Huron stomp Watertown for three quarters and then went to dress. Bambi felt a thrill as the home fans and cheerleaders stood and cheered their team as they filed off the playing area. He also felt the pre-game butterflies begin to do their dance in his stomach. He finished dressing quickly and started doing some stretching exercises to loosen up his body and try to get his mind off his nervousness. Finally they heard the Huron team enter the room that the two teams had to share. Bambi gave his congratulations to a couple of the Huron guys he knew. They wished him luck against Mitchell, and then the coach gave them the signal to depart. The Bullpups filed out noisily.

Mitchell was a big rival of Madison. Every game between the two was hard fought all the way, from seventh grade to the varsity level. This game proved to be no exception. The little Kernels from Mitchell jumped off to an early lead, but led by Troy's play inside and good outside shooting by Bennett and Corky, the Bullpups pulled even at halftime.

The second half was seesaw. Neither team went ahead by over three points. Mitchell held a two-point lead with forty-five seconds to go in the game. The Bullpups had possession. With both crowds on their feet and screaming at the top of their lungs, it was extremely hard to hear. It was also extremely difficult for young boys to keep their cool, especially being behind with time running out. Bambi was dribbling down the right side where he picked up a screen from Troy. After Bambi had passed by, Troy rolled back to the basket. Bambi's bounce pass went between the two defenders and Troy knotted up the score with the lay-up.

Mitchell called a time-out. The coach told them to go for one shot. They worked the ball around, until with fourteen seconds to play a bad bounce pass went off the leg of a Mitchell player and

out of bounds. It was Madison's turn to call a time-out. Coach Wilbur instructed Bambi to bring the ball up court. Corky was supposed to set a pick for him so Bambi could drive to the basket. If he didn't get the shot off, Bambi was going to try to hit the wing with a pass. They did it exactly as the coach had told them. Bambi got free on the pick and drove down the left side of the lane. One of the defenders switched off to cut him off from a lay-up. Bambi slammed on the brakes and went up with one of his floating jump shots. He didn't even come close.

The screaming was unbelievable. The referees had blown their whistles on Bambi's shot, but no one heard them. The timekeeper had stopped the clock on the ref's hand signal with five seconds showing. The fans suddenly realized that a foul had been called and Bambi would get to shoot two free throws. After another time-out, Bambi stepped nervously to the charity stripe. The Mitchell fans were yelling and pounding, while on the other side the Madison rooters were holding their breath.

Bambi's hands were sweating and shaking. He was afraid he wouldn't have the strength in his arms to get the shot to the basket. He overcompensated and banked the ball too high and hard off the backboard. His foot stomped the floor in frustration.

The ref handed him the ball for the second attempt. He dribbled twice, breathed deeply, and sent it arching toward the metal ring. Although the beautiful swishing noise was unheard because of the din of the crowd, the fans could plainly see the net ripple as the ball dropped through. The Kernels, being out of time-outs, put the ball immediately into play. The Madison team put on slight pressure in the backcourt. Mitchell advanced the ball within thirty-five feet before they had to make a last chance attempt. The shot hit the front of the rim but bounced harmlessly away. The happy Bullpup fans streamed onto the court. Bambi was basking in the glory of the victory and fan support when he saw Lisa. She was talking to Bennett and even shaking his hand. Bambi ran straight to the locker room; his celebratory mood had suddenly left him.

Corky asked him about his behavior afterwards. "Holy hot potato! You're acting like we lost the game. What's the matter?"

"Nothing. Let's go eat."

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"Ah. You just said the magic word." They rounded up the other four members of the gang and headed for the College Inn. It was almost full by the time they got there, but they got the last open booth. The cheerleaders were sitting on the other side of the room. Shortly afterward, Bennett and Brown arrived. They walked directly to the booth where the cheerleaders were seated. After a brief discussion two of the girls got up and went to another booth to sit with some friends. Bennett and his friend slid into the vacated spots. Bennett was right next to Lisa.

Bambi immediately lost his appetite. He couldn't stand even being in the same room with the two people who had been occupying his thoughts sitting so close together. Since he hadn't placed his order yet, Bambi decided to make a hasty exit. He told his friends that he had to go home for something, and he would meet them at the game.

They were mystified by his sudden departure. "Bambi sure has been acting funny the last few days," observed Corky.

"I noticed that too," remarked Donnie. "I can't figure it out. Everything seems to be going real well."

Bambi didn't really understand what was eating him either. He walked aimlessly along the sidewalk, deep in thought and unconscious to the world around him. *What's happening to me? Why do I feel so cruddy?* They had won the game and Bambi had made the winning point, besides playing well throughout the game. His mind always came back to the same place. A picture of Bennett shaking hands with Lisa and sitting almost in her lap at the café filled his mental screen. He tried to shut off the projector but failed. *What the heck does she see in that creep?*

Finally he came to the decision that he mustn't let himself care. Why should he worry about girls anyway? He had more important things to think about. They had a tough game that night against Huron for the championship. That game was his priority in life. Having made his decision, Bambi was ready for lunch. He changed directions and headed directly for his home, where he munched on a couple of salami sandwiches. He still had some time to kill so he picked up a book. He had really gotten into the reading habit lately, spending every spare moment with a good book. Today he read until he had to leave

for the tournament.

The finals were being held in the college field house. Bambi made the familiar walk to the gym, arriving just as the two seventh grade teams were lining up for the tip. He saw his friends up in the bleachers and Corky waved at him. Without much enthusiasm, he nodded and began to thread his way up to where the others were sitting. He didn't say much during the game, but instead concentrated his thoughts on his own game. *I've got a lot of emotion inside me that needs to be let out, and I'm going to let it all loose.*

When the game began, Bambi did let it go. For the first two minutes of the game he was all over the court, running around like a wild man. He had three rebounds, two steals, two baskets, and one reach-in foul. Then the trouble started. He was playing with so much intensity that when he stole the ball from an opponent and got called for a foul, he failed to contain his emotion. "I never touched him!" he yelled angrily.

The whistle blew immediately. "Technical foul!" shouted the referee, pointing at Bambi.

Throwing his hands up in the air, Bambi stomped away in disgust. The horn buzzed, and Bambi felt a tap on the shoulder. "I'm in for you, Bambi. Who you guarding?"

Bambi whirled around to see who was speaking. It was Brad. If it hadn't been one of his friends replacing him, Bambi probably wouldn't have answered. He finally said through clenched teeth, "Number fifteen."

He stalked to the end of the bench, the end furthest away from the coach. He sat and stewed there until he became aware of the coach yelling for him. He walked slowly to the other end. The coach pointed to the seat beside him, and Bambi reluctantly sat down. "You've got to take it easy, Bambi. Don't get so dang upset. And don't forget that you don't have to win this thing all by yourself."

He didn't reply but sat and watched the action on the court. At least his eyes moved up and down the court. If he had been required to report on exactly what was happening, it would have been evident that he really wasn't seeing things. After Brad had lost a couple of passes and missed a lay-up, the coach inserted

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Bambi in the lineup once again.

Bambi was so tense from the anger, which had taken temporary control of him, and from the inaction of sitting on the bench, that he didn't play much better than Brad. He made two bad passes, traveled twice, and double-dribbled. He got even more upset with each violation. Shortly after the beginning of the second quarter he found himself back on the bench, and he didn't enter the game again in the first half. The Bullpups trailed by ten big ones when they went into the locker room at intermission.

Coach Wilbur gave them some instructions and a pep talk. "Keep your cool, fellas. You aren't out of this thing. If you just play up to your potential, I know we can come back and win this game. What do you say?"

They tried to yell their enthusiasm, but it was evident that the coach had failed to convince them of their chances. They trailed by ten to Huron; they couldn't perform miracles. Bambi sat in the corner and didn't even to pretend that he was fired up.

The coach continued, "OK, let's go back up there and show them what we're made of. Bambi, you stay here."

The team all tramped out of the dressing room, many of them turning back to look at their teammate, who was apparently going to get his butt chewed out. Bambi felt very awkward sitting there waiting for whatever it was the coach wanted to say.

Coach Wilbur walked over to him, slapped him on the back, and sat down beside him. "What's the problem, Bambi?"

Bambi just shrugged his shoulders.

"You have got to relax out there. Loosen up. You can't play basketball if your muscles and nerves are so tight you can play music on them. You follow?"

Bambi nodded slightly. His anger had mostly worn off to be replaced by shame and embarrassment. "OK, Bambi, go back up there and hang loose. We gotta have you out there to win."

Bambi ran back onto the court. Some of the others gave him a questioning look, but he didn't say a word. When the buzzer called them into the bench, Bambi looked over toward the cheerleaders. He saw Lisa and heard her yell encouragement to the Bullpups. *Was that for Bennett?* he thought.

Bambi was in the starting lineup for the second half, but the bad luck continued. On one play he stood his ground against his man, who was trying to drive to the hoop. Contact was made and both fell to the floor. Bambi got up, rubbing his elbow. He was sure they would call charging, but they called him for a blocking foul. He rolled his eyes toward the ceiling, but he kept his cool this time. The Huron Tigers put the ball back into play. Bambi's man broke down the lane and received a pass. Bambi had caught up with him by then and was in a perfect defensive position.

When the opponent went up for the shot, Bambi went up also and stuffed the ball right back into the shooter's face. The ref whistled him for a foul, but Bambi knew for sure that he hadn't touched him. How could he do anything right with these refs blowing it? He looked over to the bench. The coach tapped his finger against the side of his head and smiled. Bambi nodded and felt a little of the pressure drain away.

Things began going better after that, but after scoring a few baskets Bambi found himself the target of some physical abuse. They were trying to intimidate him. He got elbowed a few times, and the defensive man held him at every opportunity. He was starting to feel like he was in a cage. To top it off, the referees didn't call anything. Once Bambi got loose underneath and went up for a lay-up. His arm got smacked and the ball missed everything, but there was no call.

The Huron lead decreased slowly, but time eventually ran out on the Bullpups, who were the losers by five points. Bambi walked off dejectedly. Two of his Huron buddies ran over to him to shake his hand. He summoned up the courage to congratulate them on their victory and then shuffled off to the showers.

He made known his feelings about the refereeing as he removed his uniform. "Those refs screwed us so bad I can't even believe it. They lost that game for us."

Some of the others supported his opinion. One who didn't was Coach Wilbur, who had overheard Bambi's comment. "No, Bambi. You're wrong. Referees don't put the ball in the basket for the other team, and they don't prevent your team from putting the ball in the hoop either. I admit that refs do make some bad calls, but remember that those bad calls go both ways."

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Bambi was embarrassed. He hadn't meant to sound like a sore loser or complainer, but that was exactly what he had done. He also hadn't expected the coach to hear him. His cheeks were burning a little as he piled his uniform into his duffel bag. 'Strange' was the only word to describe his feelings when he suddenly realized that this was the last time he would ever wear this uniform. It was really kind of sad. But next year he'd have a new and better one. And in a few years more he'd have a varsity one.

Coach Wilbur came over to Bambi while he was putting his street clothes back on. "Can I see you for a minute, Bambi?"

Now what have I done? "Sure," he replied and then followed Mr. Wilbur into the coach's office.

"After today's game I'm a little worried about you."

"What do you mean, Coach?"

"To get right to the point, some guys get real bad attitudes about referees and stand around the whole game crying about the calls instead of playing basketball. You showed some signs of developing that attitude out there today. It could really be a handicap as far as your playing goes and would definitely be a handicap as far as your personality goes. You're a good kid, and I don't want to see you get spoiled like I've seen happen to some of my other ballplayers."

"What can I do about it?"

"Well, there's an old Indian expression – never judge a man until you've walked a mile in his moccasins. I think it's time you tried on some referee's moccasins."

"Me? Referee a game?"

"Why not? There's a fifth and sixth grade doubleheader at Washington elementary on Monday evening. You can ref the fifth grade game. Maybe you'll see a little bit of what it's like and why you should have a little understanding for refs. What do you say?"

"I...I guess so. If you really think I need it."

"OK, it's all set then. Be there Monday at 6:15."

* * *

Bambi felt more nervous about his debut as a referee than he did as a player. His partner was Tim Smith, one of the senior starters from the varsity team. Tim gave him a few pointers before the game, but Bambi still felt uncomfortable. As the two teams lined up for the opening tip, Bambi wished he'd told the coach he had no interest in wearing the black and white stripes. *Too late to back out now.*

It seemed to Bambi that every time someone took a shot, a mass of at least seven bodies bunched together fought for the rebound. It was impossible to tell who was pushing whom. Several shots were deflected off course underneath. He just couldn't decide whether or not the blocks were clean or fouls. He found it easier not to blow his whistle. When he did call a foul, he received complaints from the spectators and sometimes from a player. Often they yelled at him for not making a call of some kind. He was getting so flustered he didn't know what to do. How could those people expect him to see everything and then always interpret correctly what he saw?

Finally halftime arrived. Bambi walked directly over to Coach Wilbur's side and held out the whistle to him. He shook his head and said, "I don't have to walk a whole mile to see that refereeing has to be one of the hardest things in the world to do. How about you taking the moccasins back for the second half? They don't seem to fit me very well."

Coach Wilbur gave a hearty laugh and slapped Bambi on the back. "People in the stands think they can call the game pretty well from the sidelines. They forget that they don't have to call everything that happens. They can pick out times when they have a better view than the ref and point out the mistakes. It's a whole different ballgame when you're right out there amongst all the action, having to make every single call."

"Boy, I'll say it is!"

"I think you learned an important lesson tonight. Don't forget it, even when you get mad."

"Especially when I get mad. When those kids complained to me, I got mad and just waited for the opportunity to nail them with some violation. I never really realized how seriously the complaining to the referees could affect their judgments."

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"Exactly. That's a natural human reaction. If they get pushed, they might push back a little too. Don't forget, Bambi, that we are all human and subject to human weaknesses. We all make mistakes sometimes, teachers, coaches, lawyers, doctors, and referees. It doesn't give you the right to harass them. Learn to have a little sympathy for them. OK?"

Bambi had never stopped to think that grownups like Coach Wilbur needed his sympathy. Those words spoken to him that night by the coach he respected so much never left his memory. Years later when he lost patience with someone for an error, he would hear Coach Wilbur speaking them to him again across the bridge of time.

Bambi was to learn another important lesson in the same week. Things had been going pretty smoothly for him early in the week. Donnie had suggested that they give a name to their circle of dedicated athletes and friends. He came up with a spin-off from the Sons of Liberty, the 'Dogs of Victory'. Their group now had an official name. The Dogs of Victory had begun the weight-training program in earnest once again. Mr. Wilbur had agreed to supervise them in the gym on days of bad weather so they could run their two miles. On nice days they ran outside. Donnie had finally broken the thirteen-minute barrier. From that time on it was rare that any of them ran over thirteen minutes. They began to talk about lowering their target time to 12:30. Bambi was very happy to be engaged in a regular routine and also engaged in visions of future victories. Life was looking good.

On Friday morning things took a turn for the worse. Bambi was walking down the hallway at school while trying to read *The Call of the Wild* at the same time. Buck was involved in a battle with Spitz. It looked like a fight to the death. Just as Buck charged Spitz with a shoulder to knock him off balance – POW, Bambi banged into somebody. Actually it was the fault of the other person, who had seen Bambi coming and planted himself right in Bambi's path. Bambi's books went flying. "Oh, I'm sorry," he blurted out before he realized whom he had run into.

"Why don't you watch where you're going?"

Bambi looked up and saw who owned the shoes he had been

staring down at. "Look, Bennett, I said I'm sorry," Bambi replied in an apologetic tone.

"You think you're pretty hot stuff, don't you? You think you can do your baby elephant walk down the halls and everyone will step out of your way. Well, not me, sucker."

"Come on, Bennett. I got interested in my book and didn't watch where I was going. I apologized. Geez, what do you want me to do, get down on my knees and beg for your forgiveness as I kiss your feet?"

"Not a bad idea for a turkey. Go ahead. Do it!"

Bambi couldn't believe this was happening. Progress through the hall had almost stopped completely due to the curiosity of the students. Bambi noticed Lisa standing back among the crowd. His memories of the week before triggered the instant replay button on his video anger machine. He felt the anger rise in his body like mercury in a thermometer.

"Well, I'm waiting," said Bennett after a brief pause.

"For what?" The anger thermometer continued to rise.

"For you to beg for forgiveness. On your knees, turkey."

"Kiss mine!" The thermometer had reached the danger level

"What did you say?" Bennett asked, unable to hide his disbelief at what he had heard.

"Maybe you better turn up your hearing aid, Spitz. I said, and I don't think I stuttered, kiss mine!" Bambi spoke through clenched teeth. Bambi hadn't called him Spitz on purpose. Psychologists might call it a Freudian slip. The roles of the two dogs from London's book were very comparable to the roles played by these two real boys. Bambi had subconsciously identified himself with Buck. Bennett had to be the bully, Spitz.

Bennett was thrown off balance by Bambi's belligerence and puzzled by the name Bambi had called him. He obviously hadn't read *The Call of the Wild*. He didn't say anything so Bambi bent down to retrieve his books. Bennett kicked them away.

Bambi, from his stooped position, went straight after Bennett's legs without thinking. He pulled and drove straight ahead at the same time. Bennett tumbled to the floor, and Bambi was on top of him in an instant. His physical training, combined with his blind fury, gave him a strength that Bennett couldn't

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overcome; he didn't get the time to try to counteract it. Just seconds after the attack, Bambi felt strong hands latch on to one leg and to his belt and lift him off of Bennett. It was Coach Wilbur. The older man then grabbed Bennett by the shirt and pulled him up to his feet. "You two boys get your books and report to the principal's office right now."

Bambi felt the eyes of everyone on him as he made his way down the hall. He had never been sent to the principal's office in his whole school career. His anger had been very quickly traded in on a new emotion, fear.

Mr. Claire, the principal, talked to the two of them for fifteen minutes, trying to find out what and who had caused the whole incident. He decided that Bambi, by his own admission, was the one who had initiated the physical violence. He gave Bennett an hour of detention after school for provoking the fight. Bambi got a much stiffer sentence for his punishment. The automatic two-day suspension for fighting in school was applied to him.

Mr. Claire telephoned Mrs. Masterson and requested that she come to pick Bambi up at the school.

"Why, is he sick?" she asked anxiously.

"No, Mrs. Masterson. He's been involved in a fight and has been suspended from school until Tuesday."

There was silence on the other end. "I'll be right there, Mr. Claire," she finally managed to say.

The wait that followed was a period of agony for Bambi. Now he understood the expression about being on pins and needles. *Why did I lose my temper? Why didn't I just walk away from that moron? What are Mom and Dad going to do to me?*

The ride home was even worse. The only thing said between the two was, "I'll let your father handle this when he gets home. You can spend the rest of the day in your room."

She did relent a little and let him come to the kitchen for lunch. Like usual she gave him the silent treatment to show her anger. He couldn't stand having his mother mad at him. He wished she would yell at him or spank him or something. The silent treatment was a cruel and inhuman punishment in his eyes. He spent the whole day doing homework and reading. He

finished *The Call of the Wild*; feeling a little embarrassed to think that he, that morning, had answered the call and acted like a wild man.

He started another novel. One of the heroes in the book lost his temper and made a bad mistake for which he paid dearly. Bambi interrupted the book to think about the effects of anger. *Sometimes we're our own worst enemy. If we let emotions get control, we're going to wind up with a lot of grief. Maybe I better figure out a training program to develop emotional fitness.*

He couldn't figure out how he was going to condition himself emotionally, but he thought he had to try. One of the signs on his wall read, 'Where there's a will there's a way'. *I have the will, and I will find the way.* With that decision made he returned to his book. His reading was interrupted a short time later by the sound of his door opening. He looked up and discovered his father standing over him.

"What's this I hear about you engaging in a little extra-curricular activity?" Bambi was speechless. "Tell me what happened."

Bambi explained the whole affair. When he concluded, his father nodded his head. Bambi was waiting for the hollering to begin. He hadn't been in so much trouble since he had painted pictures on the bedroom mirror with his mom's lipstick. That had happened when he was six years old. He could still remember the feel of his rear end burning. "You know, Lance," Mr. Masterson began softly, "you did a pretty stupid thing today."

"Yeah, I know."

"What you did was let Mike Bennett control you. Do you remember in Pinocchio where they pulled on his strings and made him do all kinds of things?" Bambi nodded. "When you react to what other people do to you in a manner like you did today, it's like you have strings attached. Mike Bennett can pull your temper string anytime he wants to and get anger and violence from you. Do you see what I mean?"

"I think so, Dad."

"I hope so. It's time you learn to act and not react, as my old

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psychology teacher used to put it."

"Dad?"

"Yes, Lance."

"Do you mean to say that there's never a time when one should stand up and fight?"

"I didn't exactly say that. If good people didn't stand up and fight once in a while, the bad people on this planet would control it. And sometimes and in some places they do. But you can't fight every time someone calls you a name. If some loved one or innocent party is being physically hurt, you shouldn't turn and walk away or pretend you didn't see anything. Sometimes you have to defend yourself also. But the point I want to get across is that fighting is a serious thing and it should never be a result of uncontrolled temper. Are you reading me?"

"Loud and clear."

"OK, that takes care of the future, I hope. What are we going to do about the present? How am I going to punish you?"

Bambi wanted to suggest fifteen lashes with a wet noodle, but he kept his silence and shrugged his shoulders instead.

"How about this? You don't leave the house at night for the next two weeks. And for tomorrow I'll give you a reading assignment." He went out into the hall and came back in carrying a large book. He opened the book to a story named *A Quiet Man*. "Here, you read this by tomorrow. It might help you."

"OK." Mr. Masterson started for the door. "Dad," Bambi called out before he made his exit.

"Yes?"

"I'm really sorry about what happened and all."

"I'm sorry too, Lance, but sometimes we learn from our mistakes and avoid even more serious ones. See you at supper."

"Bye, Dad."

Bambi lay in his bed thinking about what his father had said. His punishment wasn't very severe. He would miss one Bulldog game but not much else. It could have been a lot worse. He thought about what could and did happen occasionally. What if someday he lost his temper so completely that he killed someone? He shuddered to even think it. *What a tragedy it*

would be to throw my life away because of one moment of weakness and stupidity. He thought about being confined to a prison cell instead of his room. The thought scared him into action. He reached for the book his father had given him and began to read.

* * *

The rest of Bambi's eighth grade year was mundane. He got a ten-speed bicycle for his birthday and made frequent long rides to Lake Herman State Park, where he could just lie in the grass and think about life, away from all the noise and bustle of the town and school. He went out for track and achieved a good deal of success. The most important thing of all was that the Dogs of Victory continued their program of preparation throughout the school year and the summer months. Bambi's summer was filled with activities. He played teener baseball, tennis, basketball, and touch football. When he wasn't playing sports he spent his time swimming, fishing, and camping. The months flew by quickly, and soon it was time for Bambi to tackle the somewhat frightening experience of entering high school as a lowly freshman.

Chapter 5 – Ninth Grade

The first day at high school was a little confusing and scary. Luckily Bambi had his friends around him to share in his feeling of being out of place. They supported each other. He soon became accustomed to the new building, new classes, new routine and began to feel at home in the new environment. He went out for football and continued to do well in the classroom. High school was just about like junior high, except he and his classmates were the pipsqueaks.

Bambi had his first bad experience as a high schooler at the first social of the year after a football game. He didn't know what to expect from a high school dance. He wasn't much of a dancer, but he went along because his friends wanted to go. The dance appeared much like a junior high dance. The boys just stood around the gym talking about the game and girls, while the girls sat in the bleachers talking about the boys and whatever else girls talk about.

The record player on the stage had played a dozen songs before one brave couple appeared on the dancing end of the floor. The ice was broken. Other couples appeared, and soon the number of people just talking had decreased by almost half. Bambi thought about asking Lisa to dance, but he was terrified just by the thought of it. *What if she said no? I'd have to dig a hole and crawl into it to escape the shame.* He did summon up enough courage to look over to the section of the bleachers where she was sitting. One of the senior football players was talking to her. Just then she arose and accompanied the boy out onto the floor.

Bambi turned away with a pain somewhere in his insides that he realized wasn't hunger pangs. He tried to get involved in a conversation with his friends. However, it was impossible to get his mind off of her and that football stud, no doubt locked in a tight embrace for this slow dance. His friends began to desert

him. Troy was the first to make his move. After Troy had successfully captured the attention of one of the female group, Corky, Brad, and Denny all strayed off to find a dance partner for themselves.

Only Donnie remained for him to talk to. Bambi couldn't help but notice the extremely happy looks on the faces of many of the kids. He couldn't take it any longer. *It's like standing at the window of the bakery looking at all the goodies without having any money to buy anything.* Bambi considered himself socially bankrupt. He had to take himself away from the display window where he was being cruelly tortured. "I'm getting out of here," he said to Donnie.

"Where you going?"

"I don't know, anywhere but here."

"Do you want me to go with you?"

"Up to you. Don't let me spoil your evening."

"Hey, I just wanted to make sure I wasn't tagging along where I wasn't welcome. I don't want to be a leech. And you couldn't spoil my evening. This isn't any fun."

"OK, I'm convinced. Let's go." They went over to the corner to pick up their coats. There were a couple of boys standing there. Bambi saw one quickly lift a bottle to his lips and then hide it away in his coat pocket. As Bambi and Donnie walked through the door, a trio of red-faced, loud-talking upper classmen staggered in.

"Can you believe that? If those idiots want to drink, why don't they do it out in the country or something and stay away from school activities?"

"I don't know, Bambi. Maybe they need a few drinks to give them the courage to put the hustle on one of the girls."

The two walked on in silence. Bambi thought of his own fear in that regard. *Would a few beers give me the bravery to ask Lisa to dance?* Almost as soon as he had that thought, he was ashamed of himself. *I don't need any liquid courage. To use booze as a crutch is a sign of weakness, and I'm not going to be a weakling in any sense or form. But aren't I being weak in not having the guts to take a chance on a rejection from a girl?* He had to admit he was, and that thought made him feel even worse.

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He felt himself getting bitter inside. Thoughts of how he could demonstrate to Lisa that he didn't care a bit if she liked him or not engulfed his brain.

I could display my indifference by being a cool dude. I could wear a black leather jacket, smoke, and swagger around like a tough guy. He pictured himself in that role. Suddenly he thought of the guys who did that very thing. *Maybe they act that way because they really want to be accepted but are afraid of being rejected, so they pretend like they want to be rejected. Maybe they had their Lisas, too.*

Maybe those guys that act so tough really want someone to love them, but are completely frustrated by the inability to cope with failure or even the possibility of it. What a pathetic situation that is. Wanting love but settling for scorn or fear because it's easier to obtain and doesn't expose tender feelings to the outside world. Bambi decided right then and there that he wouldn't play any games like that. *I am going to earn people's respect, even if I can't earn their love.*

He and Donnie had a snack at the College Inn and then went home. They talked about girl-boy relationships on the way.

Bambi said, "I just can't figure out what girls are interested in as far as boys are concerned. What do they want?"

"Don't look at me for answers. I have the same questions. Although I do know they aren't looking for a ninety-eight pound weakling wearing coke bottom glasses like me."

"This whole thing is just a big mess. I think I'm better off forgetting girls and sticking to sports."

"I agree completely, Bambi."

It hadn't been easy for Bambi to talk about his insecurities, but he discovered that he had rid himself of some of the bitterness by sharing his feelings with Donnie. The two were best buddies from that night on. Instead of going to the dances after the games, Bambi and Donnie went to Bambi's house to play chess, ping-pong or shoot baskets.

* * *

The second bad experience occurred the next week. The

freshmen football team was practicing in a scrimmage against the sophomores. Bambi caught a pass and began to run up field. He lost his balance as he made a cut and put his hand down to keep from going to the ground. At that very same moment two defenders hit him from opposite directions. He screamed in pain and lay writhing on the ground. The coach ran out and discovered that Bambi's left arm was lying at a grotesque angle. The diagnosis of a broken arm wasn't hard, even without x-rays. Bambi's left arm was in a cast when he returned to school a few days later.

The cast had to stay on for eight weeks. Bambi didn't stop his running program, but he couldn't do any of the weightlifting exercises involving two arms. Luckily it wasn't his shooting arm, so he was able to practice his shooting and keep his arm and wrist strong by squeezing a handgrip. When basketball practice finally arrived, he wasn't in great shape as he wanted, but he was still in better condition than many members of the team. Due to the cast, he missed parts of the first two days of practice. Sitting on the sidelines and watching his teammates scrimmage without him was extremely painful. He realized how much he loved the game and couldn't wait to get back.

When the cast came off, he soon got himself back in top physical condition. His basketball skills were a little rusty, but they also came back quickly. One thing that Bambi got out of the entire episode was a tremendous thankfulness for his healthy body. He would surely die if he were ever permanently disabled. Another tough decision was to quit playing football. He just couldn't afford to miss out on basketball, which was his true love. There were stories of football players who broke a leg and never returned to normal, some being paralyzed for life and some even getting killed. It was better to be safe than sorry. From then on he would spend those fall afternoons after school on his asphalt basketball court in the back yard.

* * *

Bambi had grown quite a bit since his eighth grade year, and he found that some of his athletic skills on the court had

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improved. He could now take a rebound out of the air and shoot it without coming back to the floor, he had perfected his behind the back dribble, and discovered over the head reverse lay-ups were now a powerful weapon in his arsenal of skills. His vision of the court had improved and he saw the open man much more easily. He was really fired up, and most of the rest of the team was too. Of course there were the usual few who didn't really care about the team and didn't put out any more than necessary. The other members of the Dogs of Victory had also improved. Brad and Donny got to play more as the season progressed. This was due not only to the fact that they were more dependable now, but also because the Bullpups blew a lot of teams off the court. They had compiled a 12-2 record going into the Big Four. Both losses were to Huron. They would get one more chance to avenge themselves against the Tigers in the tournament.

The Bullpups drew Watertown in the first round and defeated them soundly. Bambi scored fifteen points and snagged five rebounds. In the finals the Bullpups failed to get their revenge, falling to the Huron Tigers for the sixth straight time over the last three seasons. Bambi's first season of high school basketball was over, and it had ended on a sour note. The bitterness of that defeat made Bambi even more determined than before to bring glory to good old Madison High School. His determination increased again when the varsity fell in the section tournament to the Flandreau Indians, one of the weakest teams in the class A ranks.

In the spring Bambi, Corky, and Donnie went out for the tennis team. The track coach tried to convince them to turn out for his squad, but Bambi and Corky both figured they had a chance at a letter on the tennis team. In track they would just run on the freshmen team. Bambi had his heart set on earning a big felt M that he could one day display on a letter jacket. Donnie wasn't very good at tennis, but he loved to play and he wanted to be with Bambi and Corky.

Bambi was successful in his bid to make the tennis varsity team and managed to earn the sixth spot on the squad. He received his letter at a special athletic banquet, honoring all the athletes at Madison High. It was an honor to be the only

freshman to win such a prestigious award. He soaked up the atmosphere of the honors banquet. *How great is it going to be to have the state A tournament trophy sitting on the front table in a couple of years?*

* * *

The freshman year overall had been a good beginning of Bambi's high school career. Besides his athletic successes, he had done very well in his schoolwork, making the honor roll every quarter. He had gotten along well with all of his instructors, made several new friends, and completely avoided any further incidents with Bennett. The one big failure on his record was his inability to overcome his shyness around girls, especially ones he liked a lot. He tried to convince himself that he didn't care about Lisa anymore, but he found himself showing up in places where he knew she'd be just so he could look at her and get that special feeling that she never failed to inspire in him. He always acted really cool and never said anything unless Lisa spoke to him first. She was going steady with a junior who was one of the most popular kids in school.

With only that one problem, which he tried to deny even existed, Bambi was pleased with first year in high school. He was looking forward to another busy and happy summer. In addition he was already thinking about his sophomore year and even bigger and better things.

Bambi saw something that summer which would have a tremendous impact upon his life and would add fuel to his drive to succeed. Besides all his other usual summer activities, Bambi also got the opportunity to participate in a basketball camp in Brookings. He made many new friends from around the state and learned much about basketball in the week that he was there.

The most outstanding effect upon him was made emotionally by a movie shown to the participants of the camp. The title of it would never leave Bambi's memory – *John Baker's Last Race*. The movie deals with a young man who becomes a track star. After graduating from college, he accepts a job as an elementary school teacher. His goal is to make the

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Olympic team. In school he stresses to his students the need to strive for success and give it everything they've got. He gets all the kids involved in some way or another to give them all a sense of self-importance. He earns their love and respect while doing that.

Then he discovers he has cancer and only has a few months to live. He drives up into the mountains with the intention of driving his car off the cliff and killing himself. At the last moment, as he guns the accelerator to the floor with the clutch in, something that he said to one of his students rings in his ears. "Remember, you're never beat till you quit." He decides not to quit. Baker drives his car back home and spends the rest of his days living for his students. He develops a girls' track team that qualifies for the AAU national meet.

John Baker then finally falls victim to the disease which he has fought successfully for over a year. Two days later his team wins the national title with tears streaming down their faces. By this time Bambi also had tears trickling down his cheeks. He wiped his eyes so that no one would notice his embarrassing condition. Unknown to him, several other boys were going through the same motion of hiding the evidence of tenderness. This was hidden under the thick exteriors of boys who lived in a society where weeping wasn't considered manly. Boys are supposed to pride themselves on their toughness and crying doesn't exactly portray that toughness.

Bambi kept those special words in his mind and in his heart. When he returned home, the first thing he did was make a new poster which read 'You're Never Beat Till You Quit'. The new poster went up on his bedroom wall to accompany the others that Bambi had used in the past to urge himself on to greater heights.

Another sign was added that summer. Bambi still read whenever he got the chance. He read a book that July about the remarkable Helen Keller. In it he found a quotation that also gave him great inspiration. It read: 'One can never consent to creep when one feels the impulse to soar'. *I am going to soar. I'm going to do big things. All those other idiots can waste their time with their booze and cars and parties and all those other diversions that end up with nothing done which brings lasting*

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satisfaction. I am never going to creep through life like that.

The summer soon ended, as summers always do, and it was a bigger, stronger, and more determined Bambi who returned to the classroom for his sophomore year.

Chapter 6 – Tenth Grade

Summer was always fun, but coming back to school in the fall was a fantastic experience for Bambi. Having new classes, wearing new clothes, seeing old friends again, and all the other things that the start of school brings filled Bambi with an excitement he couldn't describe.

The Dogs of Victory showed up the first day of school decked out in brand-new T-shirts with a picture of a bulldog and the name of their club printed above it. They received a lot of kidding, some not quite harmless, from the jocks as well as the anti-jock group of hippies, as they were referred to by some of the kids. The boys didn't mind the razzing, at least not enough to deter them from wearing their shirts. They were proud of their goal, their lifestyle, their dedication, and even their T-shirts. They were the leaders of the good kids in their class and were looked up to by many of the freshmen. They set a good example for the other students. Parents would often refer to them when chastising their children for bad behavior. That didn't add to the popularity enjoyed by the Dogs of Victory. Their tendency to try to do their best and to do the right thing earned them the animosity of those kids who resented their goody-two-shoes image.

The animosity was mutual, but Bambi and his friends kept theirs bottled up inside them. Despite his more noble wishes, Bambi found himself wanting to rough up some of those dudes who had no respect for anything except disrespect. To his credit, he tried to understand what made them that way by trying to put on their moccasins. He decided that they despised everything because they were outside the mainstream of high school society. The only explanation that made sense to him was they weren't successful in the things that earned them the respect of teachers and ministers and other authority figures, so they became hateful of all those things that were cherished by society.

He discussed it with his father several times. His dad said that they were employing a defense mechanism. Mr. Masterson said he learned all about it in psychology class. It was kind of like the fable about the fox that couldn't jump up and grab the grapes hanging above him. These problem kids couldn't obtain those grapes of society, or didn't want to put forth the effort, so they called those grapes sour and said they didn't want anything to do with them.

Bambi decided he should feel sorry for them, but he found it hard to even try to get along with people who put down everything he loved and respected. He would try to have sympathy for them like Coach Wilbur and his father had suggested, but the problem of the conflict between right and wrong and good and evil would continue to plague him as he grew older, causing him a good deal of soul-searching in his relationships with other kids.

Bambi received a big surprise after supper on the night of the first home football game. After eating he excused himself and went upstairs to get his jacket. When he came back down, he said, "I'm leaving for the football game now, Mom."

"Is that coat going to be heavy enough?"

"Ah, Mom," he groaned. His mother was always worrying about his health and wanted to make sure he was snuggly dressed at all times. Bambi felt that her concern was flattering but not needed. "It won't get that cold tonight."

"You're sure you don't want a heavier coat?"

"I'm sure, Mom."

"OK, if you're sure, you're sure. Would you open this box for me before you leave, please?"

He couldn't figure out why she wanted to open up a box at a time like this when he was in a hurry to go, but he didn't argue. *It will take less time to open the dumb box.* He broke the string and the tape that kept the lid tied on. He lifted the lid off and then casually looked in to see what his mother was so anxious to have. Inside lay a maroon jacket with white leather sleeves. His mouth dropped open. He looked over at his mother.

"Go ahead. Try it on," she encouraged him. "It's your Christmas present a bit early. Your father and I thought maybe

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you'd like it now."

"You dang betcha!" he agreed heartily as he removed the jacket from the box. His mother had even sewn on his big white M, displaying the emblem of a tennis racket, on the front of it. He slipped it on and found that it was a little bit big.

"We figured you would grow a little more so we left some room for you to expand."

"Good thinking, Mom, and thanks a heap." He hugged her.

"You're not going to take it to the game, are you, since it's going to be so warm tonight?"

"What do you mean I'm—," he stopped and suddenly broke into a grin. "Now I see what you were doing. You set me up. You knew I'd wear this jacket even if it was eighty degrees." Both of them laughed.

The doorbell interrupted them. "That must be Corky and Donnie. I gotta go now. Bye."

"Goodbye, Lance, and be good."

"Always, Mom, always."

His friends were very impressed by his new letter jacket. He felt like he was seven feet tall when he finally put it on at the game. He had waited till it got a little chilly because he didn't want people to think he was showing off. Coming back from the concession stand at halftime, Bambi ran into Lisa.

"Love your jacket, Bambi." She was wearing one just like it. Hers belonged to John Page, her boyfriend, who was on the football team. Bambi didn't know how to answer that remark.

Finally he blurted out, "Yeah, me too," before walking away. *What a talented conversationalist I am! I can never think of anything intelligent to say, at least when Lisa is involved, until after a conversation is over.* In this situation, late was not better than never.

* * *

Bambi had a chance to see more of Lisa during his sophomore year. They were both in the same typing class. He always looked forward to third period so he could enjoy Lisa's presence, and because he really enjoyed typing class. Sometimes

when he was just thinking, his hands would move as if he was typing the words he was thinking. He was often guilty of typing on the top of his desk when he let his mind wander away from the lecture in biology class.

For the first time in his life, Bambi didn't participate in a school sport that fall. He thought about going out for cross-country but decided he'd rather practice basketball. It seemed very strange at first not to be going to practices like the other guys. Donnie also didn't play football, so Bambi and he spent a lot of time together, playing one on one or doing something else to improve their basketball talents.

The Dogs of Victory had to suspend their training program for a couple of weeks when the football team had its two-a-day workouts. When they did resume the usual routine, they decided to run in the mornings. The football players were too tired to run after a tough practice, but they were fresh in the morning. None of them wanted to give up the endurance training. They knew how much their running had helped them. The weightlifting had also produced great results. Their bodies had developed much more than their classmates who slid by doing only the minimum amount of training ordered and observed by the coaching staff.

If the coach wasn't looking during calisthenics, some of them skipped part of the required exercises. Unfortunately, after a couple of weeks of getting up early to run and sometimes lift weights, Troy decided he was getting enough of a workout in football to keep him in good shape. He told the others his layoff would only be temporary. He would be back with them when football was over. The other Dogs of Victory didn't want him to drop out, but what could they do? They just hoped his absence would indeed be only temporary.

Time passed quickly for Bambi, despite the fact that he wasn't involved in a sport that fall. The footballs flying through bright autumn skies were put away for another season, and the basketballs were taken out of storage. Bambi really felt great putting on a new pair of basketball shoes and becoming part of a team once again. He had reached a height of 5 feet 11 inches. With his new size and strength he could touch the rim now and palm the ball.

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The sophomore coach was new that year, and the team found out in a hurry that he was very demanding. One day the team had to run line drills and finish within a certain time deadline. Anyone who failed to make it under that maximum time limit, which was only tough enough to keep them from loafing, had to run two more. Everyone made it under the allotted time except Mike Bennett.

"OK, Bennett, two more," yelled the coach. Bennett made a face and grudgingly began to run the lines again, even dogging it more this time than the first. "Step it up, Bennett," warned Mr. Thomas. Bennett mumbled something under his breath but not softly enough. Like an arrow shot out of a bow, Coach Thomas was on top of Bennett. "What did you say, you little smart aleck?" screamed the coach, shaking the belligerent player. Bennett snarled something in return. "Turn in your stuff, clown. You're all done around here."

The dismissed youngster walked to the locker room. Before entering he looked back to see that the coach had his back turned to him. Bennett raised his right hand in the form of a fist and then lifted the middle finger. He then turned, kicked the door open, and stomped through it. Bennett's athletic career was over as a sophomore. He would never again go out for a sport.

"Good riddance," whispered Corky to Bambi. Bambi nodded his agreement, as his feeling was that they now had one less troublemaker.

Bennett apparently got in the last word in his little conflict with Coach Thomas. Two days after the incident the coach discovered that the rear tires of his car had been slashed. There was no proof, of course, but it was pretty obvious who the culprit was. The matter was investigated but soon dropped.

A few more players left the team that year because of their dislike for the coach, or because they got the boot for failing to abide by the rules laid down firmly by their director. One of those invited to leave the squad was Dan Brown, Bennett's best friend.

Even Bambi wasn't immune to the coach's anger. When something went wrong, Coach Thomas read them all the riot act. Some of the players couldn't take it. Bambi got upset a few

times, but kept his anger bottled up. He had been working on his temper ever since his fight with Bennett and had it quite reasonably under control. Donnie was one who couldn't tolerate somebody yelling at him. He was going to quit one day after he'd been reduced almost to tears by a few angry comments directed at him by the coach. Bambi talked to him for an hour after practice and convinced him to stick it out. Donnie had enough of a problem with a lack of confidence without someone yelling at him for making mistakes, but he decided to hang in there.

The coach's anger wasn't restricted to practices and to his players. He also vented his frustrations on the referees. They were not going to take his verbal abuse, however. They called several technical fouls on Coach Thomas during the season.

One day Mr. Masterson asked Bambi how he liked his new coach. "He's all right, but...."

"But what?"

"Well, I know I shouldn't criticize people, Dad, but Coach Thomas has a mighty bad temper. Reminds me of me a couple of years ago before I started working to control my emotions."

"You know, Lance, you learned a very valuable lesson at an early age. Some people never learn how to control themselves. People who are ordinarily very nice can become screaming lunatics. You can't judge them too harshly though. Maybe the only thing Coach Thomas has in this life is that basketball team. He wants to succeed so much that he becomes really frustrated if things go wrong."

Bambi thought over what his father had told him. As he began to analyze things from a new point of view, he saw that his dad maybe had a point. Coach Thomas wasn't married and seemed to spend all of his spare time involved with basketball. The motivation for keeping a guy going in a situation like that is winning. To coach Thomas, the secret to winning was driving the kids as far and as hard as possible. He also drove himself. Bambi could understand that inner drive because he had it also. He didn't hate the coach as many of the kids did. He only wished that the coach would quit yelling at Donnie.

The team did very well again this season despite a tougher

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schedule that pitted them against all of the Eastern South Dakota conference teams twice. After thirteen games had been played, the Bulldog sophs had racked up a 10-3 record. They had lost close games to Huron, Yankton, and Aberdeen. At that point the coaching staff made a decision that caused the sophomore team to lose its top two players.

Bambi found out about the decision on the Monday morning after their tenth win. Coach Thomas came into study hall and asked to see Troy and Bambi outside in the hallway. The two boys were quite puzzled by the request but didn't hesitate in going to the unexpected meeting. They stood and looked at their coach, who seemed ill at ease. Finally he spoke, "You guys know that the varsity is having a poor year. They have four wins against nine losses. Now we have some new troubles. The results of the x-rays came in today. Jim Orton has a broken bone in his right arm and will be out for the rest of the season. Tom Taylor broke some training rules over the weekend and has been removed from the squad. Coach Ryan wants to bolster his lineup and also start preparing for the future. He wants you two to dress on the varsity team from now on. Turn your sophomore uniforms in to me sometime this week." He turned and walked stiffly away. Bambi could read the disappointment in his shoulders and neck. It would be very hard for Coach Thomas's team to win any games now.

Bambi was very excited as he returned to his seat in study hall. It was a great honor for a sophomore to hold a spot on the varsity. It didn't happen every year. His excitement dimmed as he thought about leaving his teammates behind. The bench wouldn't be the same without Corky and Donnie and all the others. He sure hoped that they could be competitive for their remaining games. Losing Troy and himself was more or less a crushing blow. Counting Brown and Bennett, four of last year's starters were no longer on the team. Somebody would have to pick up a lot of slack.

The two sophomore flashes weren't exactly given the red carpet treatment by the members of the varsity team. The upper classmen were quite upset because their domain had been penetrated by a couple of sophs. Bambi and Troy were very

often on the receiving end of pushes, elbows, and insults, all done behind the coach's back, of course. Bambi took the punishment without saying a word or fighting back. He was angry, but he took out his frustrations by working hard on the court. Troy, however, had not developed the patience that Bambi possessed and also hadn't formed an attitude of trying to get along with everybody. He traded wisecrack for wisecrack and elbow for elbow. Now standing at 6 foot 2 inches and well developed by the Dogs of Victory training program, Troy soon taught the upper classmen that they had to respect him, at least physically. They soon accepted him and ceased in their efforts to harass the newcomer. Bambi received his acceptance through his patient suffering and evident good nature. The basketball skills of the two younger boys also contributed to their becoming accepted as part of the team.

Troy and Bambi didn't start in any of the remaining regular season games, but they did come off the bench and play in all of them. In their first varsity game, the Bulldogs hosted their archrivals from Brookings. Bambi felt strange sitting in the bleachers watching his classmates play the sophomore game without him. Those feelings went away quickly when he took the floor in his new uniform. He felt great warming up even if it was the first game in his life that he'd be riding the bench when the opening tip went up. Troy was the first substitute to be called to the coach's side and inserted into the lineup. He quickly blocked a shot, got two rebounds, stole a pass, and scored two baskets. He sparked the sagging Bulldogs to a first quarter lead of 16-13. Brookings fought back. Troy's man scored three times, and the coach pulled him out of the game. With three minutes left in the half, one of the starting guards for Madison drew his third foul.

"Masterson!"

Bambi looked around to see who called his name and suddenly realized it was the coach calling him. He jumped up and hustled to the other end of the bench. "Get in there for Page. Tight man to man."

Bambi reported in at the scorer's table. As he was sitting there waiting for a stop in the action, Bambi discovered that he

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had forgotten to take off his warm-up jacket. As he nervously pulled it over his head, it got stuck. The buzzer blew while it was still covering his face. The refs had to wait for him to get it off and throw it to the student manager. *What a way to start my varsity career.* His face was red as he ran toward Page, who was already heading for the bench after anticipating the substitution.

"I got number twenty-three," he said and patted Bambi on the back. Bambi found the man he was supposed to guard, and the ref handed the ball to the Brookings Bobcat standing out of bounds.

Bambi's nervousness soon disappeared as his mind shifted into super concentration. His thoughts outside of the actual action were simply blotted out. Bambi shuffled back and forth, denying the drive to his opponent, who then passed off. Bambi sagged back off his man a little, making it appear that man was open for a return pass. Bambi anticipated the pass and was on the move the same instant that the ball was released. Bambi intercepted the ball in full stride and laid the ball up against the bangboard before the defender reached the free throw line. Bambi didn't even hear the screams of the crowd when he made the steal. He was only vaguely conscious of the uproar that followed his basket. He did allow one thought to break his concentration momentarily: he had sunk the first shot of his varsity career.

Bambi played the rest of the half. He made a beautiful assist underneath to Derrill Saufley, who promptly stuck it in the hole. He also picked up a loose ball and rebounded one errant shot. The man he was guarding didn't score at all. Bambi was very satisfied with his play. The coaches were too.

Page went back into the lineup for the start of the second half. He picked up his fourth foul with two minutes left in the third quarter. Bambi immediately replaced him. He had an open shot from about eighteen feet the first time he touched the ball, but he didn't shoot. He tried to force it into the middle instead. It was intercepted, and Bambi had committed his first varsity turnover. He dove at the man who had stolen it, trying to get back the ball he had lost, but he was whistled down for his first foul.

As he came back up the floor he heard the coach yell, "If you're open, shoot the dang ball." Bambi nodded. He would have taken that same shot in a soph game, but this was different. He didn't want to be a gunner, and he was also scared he might miss. The next time down the floor Bambi got the same opportunity. His man sagged off him, inviting him to pump the outside shot. Bambi took one dribble forward and went straight up. At the peak of his jump he released the ball in a high arching shot. The net rippled and the crowd went wild again. The next time down, the defensive man was still sagging, so Bambi popped it in again and made believers out of the Brookings team.

When Madison had the ball again, the Brookings defender was hanging fairly close to Bambi as a pass zipped into young Masterson's hands. He faked like he was going up again for the long jumper, and his defensive man sprung off his feet, which was exactly what Bambi was hoping for. He planted his foot on the side and drove hard past the faked-out Bobcat. A large defender loomed up in his path to the basket. Bambi drove straight at him and just before contact scooped the ball to the right without even looking in the direction of the open man. Saufley took the pass and put it away for two more. Bambi had just caused hundred of fans to rise from their seats and yell, but the most important thing to him was the reaction from his teammate. On the way back up the court, Saufley raised his hand and slapped Bambi's while saying, "Nice pass, kid."

The third quarter horn blew, and the teams retreated to their respective benches to prepare for the final stanza. Bambi saw Page checking in at the scorer's table, so he ran to the bench.

"Masterson, get out here!" Bambi heard Page yell just after he sat down. Page had reported in for the other Bulldog guard. Bambi was still in the game. He hustled to the huddle and listened to the coach's instructions for the last quarter of play. Bambi hurried to his assigned position for the jump ball. He looked up at the scoreboard quickly – 44-44. The crowd rose and stomped their feet on the bleachers while yelling, "GO! GO! GO!"

Brookings controlled the tip and set up their offense. They worked the ball around patiently. Bambi's man made a break for

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the basket. Bambi was partially screened off and couldn't get back in time to stop the pass from coming in. He jumped to try to block the shot, but the ball had already been released. It went off the board and in for two.

Bambi was upset with himself for letting his man score. He grabbed the ball and threw it inbounds without even thinking about what he was doing. As soon as he released the pass his mouth and eyes opened suddenly in horror. A Brookings defender had hung back, waiting for an opportunity for a steal. He stepped right in front of Page and took the ball without breaking stride. Bambi knew he couldn't let him have a lay-up. He threw his body at the approaching Bobcat. Both boys hit the floor. Bambi's dismay increased when he discovered that the shot had gone in. The lead increased by one more point when the fouled player completed the three-point play with the free throw. In four seconds the score had gone from tied to a five-point cushion for the Bobcats. The Madison fans were stunned and the noise level diminished noticeably. Madison called time-out and Sullivan came back into the game for Bambi.

Bambi steamed as he sat on the bench and thought of what he'd just done. One of the biggest sins in the game was to throw an inbounds pass without surveying the area for a possible sneak press. He had made a very stupid mistake which could cost Madison the ball game. *How could I have blown it so badly?* He sat on the far end of the bench, watching the furious action in front of him. The Bulldogs didn't give up. The score stayed close throughout the fourth quarter.

Troy went back in and scored an important basket. With a minute and a half left to go and the home team trailing by one, John Page fouled out. Bambi received the nod again to be the replacement. Both foul shots connected and Brookings led by three again. Bambi threw the ball into Sullivan, and the offense set up their offensive pattern. Bambi had just broken down the lane when he saw a shot go up from the other side. The ball came straight off the side where Bambi had just entered. He had inside rebounding position and timed his leap perfectly. He caught the ball and put it back up and into the basket before falling back to the playing surface. Now they were down by one

with one minute to go.

Brookings went into their stalling pattern. The Madison team chased the ball without success until the clock wound down to eighteen seconds. Bambi knew they had to get the ball, but he didn't want to commit an intentional foul. He lunged for a pass, knowing that he probably would hit the Brookings man in the attempt. He did, making solid contact and picked up his second foul. The Brookings player would have a one and one with only thirteen seconds showing now. The free throw went high off the rim and several players battled for the rebound. The ball squirted out of the pack to an open area. The race was on.

Bambi won it, grabbing the ball on the dead run. He dribbled down the court at full speed with two defenders in his path. The coach was trying to call for a time-out but no one saw him and the Bulldogs continued their fast break. Bambi drove hard at the first defender, who was going to try cutting him off right away. He faked hard right and then went around the stumbling Bobcat on the left. The last defender between Bambi and the go ahead score had retreated to the basket to stop him. Bambi made the same move on this man and got to the baseline. He wanted to take the ball right up, but he sensed that the defender, who stood six foot five, had recovered and was in position to cram the ball down his throat. Bambi drove all the way to the basket, went slightly past the basket and then launched himself upward and forward. As he sailed past the rim, he brought the ball back over his head and banked it home. The auditorium erupted into sheer bedlam.

Only four seconds remained. Brookings called time-out and set up a last ditch attempt. Bambi's man took the last shot from thirty feet away. The buzzer went off before the ball came down on top of the bangboard and bounced out of bounds. Some of the fans, mostly sophomores, ran onto the court to congratulate the hero of the game. He had scored ten points, including the winning basket in his first varsity effort.

"Not too shabby," he said aloud as he gazed at the scoreboard which still read: 'HOME 63 VISITORS 62'. He wished he had a camera so he could capture that moment and preserve it forever. He remembered that night two years earlier

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when he had sat in the bleachers and stared at the clock in all his bitterness. He glanced over at the very spot where he had been sitting that evening. His eye caught a familiar face. Lisa was talking with her boyfriend, the same guy who had given him his chance by getting in foul trouble and finally fouling out. She waved her hand in his direction, but he didn't respond in similar fashion. He turned to see if there was somebody behind him who was really the person that she was waving to. He then jogged to the locker room thinking to himself that there hadn't been anyone behind him. Was Lisa waving at him, or was it all his imagination?

Bambi's parents were very excited about his performance. His father was also a bit worried about it. For the second time since Bambi had shown great potential as an athlete, Mr. Masterson decided to have a father-son chat about snobbishness and pride. He didn't want Bambi to fall into the trap that captures so many athletes and other successful people. Bambi and his father often had talks about Bambi growing up into a good, decent human being. One of his father's talks had led to the raising of a new poster in Bambi's bedroom, bearing these words composed by Mark Twain, "Live your life in such a way that even the undertaker will be sad when you die."

Including the books that Bambi had read and his father, Bambi possessed some fine teachers in the art of becoming a man. He had made some great strides in that direction already. He assured his father that he realized the potential danger of his newest success. He said he would work at not getting a big head like some of the other jocks and rich kids.

The Bulldogs split the last four games of the regular season and ended with seven wins and eleven losses. Bambi averaged seven points a game as a varsity player. That average was much below his accomplishments of the last four years, but he was very pleased with it. He wasn't playing as much and he was playing against older guys. Besides, he was supposed to worry about how the team did and not how he did. Bambi really tried to live by that attitude, but he found out it was extremely difficult not to be interested in his personal success also.

In the sectional tournament the Bulldogs drew the Miller

Rustlers. They played mostly class B teams, so there were very few comparative scores between the two. They had a good record and the scouting reports stated that they would be tough to beat. The Bulldogs would definitely have their hands full.

The tournament was to be held in Huron. On the bus ride to the home of the Tigers, Bambi was very quiet. He spent most of the journey deep in thought. This was his chance. He had pledged himself to the cause of winning the state tourney. This was the first step on the road. He found himself somewhat divided in his feelings about the whole thing. He hadn't expected to be having a chance to fulfill his dream as a sophomore. The goal had been to do it with his buddies, all together like always. It was important that he remembered the original goal of winning the trophy and not take into consideration the circumstances. It wouldn't seem right to win without Corky and the rest of the Dogs of Victory, but Bambi had to give it all he had to try. Besides, with the team they had there wasn't much of a chance of winning anyway. He decided it was better for him just to play and quit thinking.

He got his chance and did fairly well, but it didn't make much difference to the outcome of the game. Miller used a fast break to blow the Bulldogs right out of the arena. The final score was 68-50. Bambi was somewhat disturbed by the attitude of the team in the locker room afterward. They weren't particularly upset by their loss. They were conditioned to losing, in Bambi's opinion. Even a tournament loss didn't bother them. Bambi vowed to always remember this night and the way defeat made him feel like he was getting his face rubbed in the mud. He even clipped out the newspaper article and put it away as a reminder.

He also wanted to remember the feeling of the next night. In the almost meaningless consolation game of the four-team tourney, Coach Ryan decided to start his sophomores for the first time. The present was quite dead, but the future was looking rosy. He wanted to give his youngsters as much experience as possible. They both responded with outstanding performances. Bambi scored fifteen and Troy had fourteen as the Bulldogs tipped over the Brookings squad by six points. They had finished the 1970 season with a victory.

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"Perhaps now we've turned the corner, and it's full speed ahead for the Dogs of Victory," Bambi said to Troy on the way home. "Next year we'll make everyone fear and respect the name Madison."

"Right on!" the big guy replied. "How you getting home when we get back?"

"Walking, I guess."

Troy tapped the shoulder of Sullivan, who was sitting ahead of them. "Hey, Sullie. Could you give us a lift when we get back to town?"

"Sure. Remind me when we get there. I've got places to go and girls to meet."

* * *

When the bus arrived back in Madison, Bambi and Troy followed Sullivan to his car. After they got in, their driver said, "Tomorrow there's a little party over at Page's to celebrate the end of the basketball season. Maybe you guys want to come?"

Troy responded immediately. "You betcha."

"What time is the party?" Bambi asked.

"Starts at eight p.m. for the basketball players only. Other kids are coming in at nine to liven it up."

"That's pretty late for me," Bambi said.

"When's your curfew?" Sullivan asked.

"I don't have one. I never go to stuff late at night."

"Sheesh. Get a life, man! If you don't have a curfew, then late is no problem, right?"

"I don't know. I've never asked to stay out late. I almost always go to bed by ten. On Friday nights after games I'm home by eleven."

"You can at least come until ten."

I don't really want to do this, but maybe this is a chance to bond with the juniors for next season. It might help us win that championship. "I'll stop by, for a little while."

"That's the spirit. It'll be a blast."

"Are Page's parent's going to be home?" Troy asked.

"Nope. Out of town for the weekend. Ooh, la la."

Sullivan dropped Bambi off first. "Hey, Masterson! Good season! How about I pick you up for the party tomorrow night?"

Bambi shrugged.

"Looks like a yes to me. I'll be here shortly before eight and don't be late because I've got a date with a beautiful fate."

Troy laughed. "Hopefully your mate won't show you the gate. I should work 'hate' and 'great' in there somewhere, too."

Bambi shook his head, waved goodbye and walked up to the house. *Looks like I'm stuck going now – with two bad poets no less.*

* * *

Sullivan arrived the next evening as he promised, and Troy was already with him. They arrived at the Page residence, where several cars were already parked. They parked on the street and hiked up a fairly steep driveway to the house.

As soon as they entered, Bambi noticed a big silver barrel sitting on the kitchen floor. The activity seemed to center around that barrel. *What the heck is that?*

"Well, well, well, if it isn't the super sophomores," said one of the guys sitting around the room.

Sullivan grabbed a plastic glass and poured something from the barrel. He held it out in Bambi's direction. "Here, have a beer."

"B...b...beer?" stammered Bambi. "Oh, I don't drink. Thanks anyway." He felt the blood run into his cheeks.

"Don't drink? What's the matter with you, boy? Come on. Take it!"

"No, really. I don't want it."

"Basketball is over now. It's OK."

Yeah, it's over for you, but it has just begun for me. "Tennis starts Monday."

"OK, be a party pooper then, but don't blame us if you don't have any fun. How about you, Troy?"

Bambi looked at Troy. Troy looked into Bambi's eyes and his face reddened. "I guess not."

"How do you like that, guys? Two teetotalers at one beer

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party. Might be a world record."

The rest of the group sat around and emptied glass after glass of beer. Some mixed pop and alcohol together and drank that instead of beer. Topics of discussion included the past season, girls, school, teachers, and parents. The majority of the comments were scornful and jeering. The talking and the laughter became louder.

The party had started out with basketball players only, but after a half-hour the other guests started to arrive. The pace of the activity really picked up when the girls showed up. Bambi had never seen people act so crazy. *Why did I come here? If an Eskimo took a trip to the equator, he couldn't feel any more uncomfortable than I do right now.* He kept trying to work up the courage to just walk out, but he couldn't seem to do it, until two other sophomores put in an appearance. One was his old buddy Mike Bennett, and the other one was Lisa.

The sight of Lisa sent shockwaves through Bambi's body. Some of the old feelings were there, mixed with something new. It took him a little while to realize that he was ashamed to have her see him there. He was out of his element, and it was time to exit the scene.

He leaned over to Troy. "I'm going to leave now."

"OK. I'll see you tomorrow for our big workout."

"Yeah. Take it easy."

"Don't worry about me. I always take it easy."

The two slapped hands and Bambi headed for the door, passing Lisa, who was involved in a seemingly serious conversation with Page. He also passed one kid who was vomiting in a corner, right on the carpet. Bambi shuddered and continued walking. As he swung open the door, he heard a familiar voice call out to him. He turned around to discover it was indeed Bennett who had hailed him.

"It must be about midnight, boys. Cinderella is just going home. Don't go away mad," continued the voice as Bambi reached the door. "Just go away, turkey."

Bambi ignored the taunting and continued his exit.

Now what do I do? Should I go home? Maybe I should check out the bowling alley. I feel the need to talk to some of my real

friends.

On the walk downtown, Bambi felt like he had just woken up from a nightmare. *So that's what a beer party is like. How can those kids drink stuff that makes them vomit, act goofy, and sometimes do things that get them into serious trouble?*

Bambi well remembered what had happened last year. Two seniors had been at a big party out in the country and had tried to drive back to town. Their car had left the road and hit a tree. School was let out for the double funeral.

Why do they do it? If they were required to do it like school or church or something, I bet they wouldn't find it so entertaining. I think half the fun is in doing something they're not supposed to be doing. Human beings are peculiar creatures. Similar thoughts on the foolishness of mankind kept coming as he trudged to the bowling alley.

The rest of the Dogs of Victory were lined up at the pinball machines. "Hey," they all yelled when Bambi made his entrance.

"His majesty the king has lowered himself to join the lowly sophomores," said Corky as he made a mocking bow. "I thought you went to a party for the royal upperclassmen?"

"I did."

"Is it over already?"

"For me it is."

"How come?"

"I'll explain it to you someday. I don't feel like talking about it right now. I'm going to eat." He took off in the direction of the booths.

"I wonder what happened," said Donnie.

The others shrugged their shoulders as they all turned to follow their departed leader.

* * *

There were two things that happened that night that Bambi didn't find out about until later. After Bambi had left the party, Troy broke his pledge. He ended up drunk as a bear in a fermented berry patch that night and sicker than a giraffe with the mumps the next day. He failed to show up for the scheduled

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workout.

The other thing that happened had a very profound effect on Bambi's attitude; Lisa broke up with her steady boyfriend. She had also felt uncomfortable at the party and had told Page. They had a disagreement over the situation, and Lisa had handed him back his ring and his letter jacket. She had walked home without a coat.

The news of the split spread quickly at school on Monday. Bambi felt something stir in his stomach when he heard about it. It felt very much like the pre-game butterflies he always got before the action began. He couldn't figure out why he reacted that way. *What difference did it make to me? I can't go after her. Or can I? No, I'm too much of a klutz.* He started to daydream about popping the big question to her for a date. In his vision, she smiled as she said yes, and the two of them strolled together to the Pizza Hut after a great movie, sharing conversation and laughter. The picture faded. *Can I really do it? After a couple of minutes of thought he arrived at a decision. Yes, I can, and I will.*

* * *

He discussed the topic of dating and girls with Corky and Brad, who had quite a bit of experience in that area. He wanted to know what to expect and how to go about it.

"Girls have some strange habits," Corky told him. "They never come right out and tell you they don't want to go out with you. They always invent an excuse like they were going to be out of town or babysitting or something."

"This romance thing sounds pretty complicated." Corky couldn't disagree with Bambi's statement.

Bambi tried to psyche himself up to make the attempt. "I just have to make myself do it. But how?" The mirror that Bambi had spoken to didn't offer any suggestions. He didn't really know what to say, since this was his first attempt at getting a date. This was no small thing that he was going to undertake. This would be one of the most important things he had ever done in his life.

Two weeks dragged by as Bambi attempted to work up the courage needed to make the big phone call. He had decided that

it had to be done over the phone because there was no way he could say it to her face. He had enough trouble just talking to her about unimportant things. Finally, he decided that he was ready. He had written down exactly what words he wanted to use, and Tuesday after school was the target. All during school that day he suffered from butterfly stomach syndrome. It was much worse than the day of a basketball game.

When he arrived home after working out, Bambi went immediately to the phone. He took his written speech out of his pocket and started dialing the number that was written on the top of the paper. With one digit left to dial he hung up the phone. His heart was thumping like crazy. He noticed that his hands were sweating as he walked around the room and finally back to the telephone. His finger halted momentarily over the phone, and then he began dialing again. This time he actually half dialed the last number but didn't allow the rotary to return to the original position to complete the number. His mind started working again, doubts raining down upon him like a summer storm. Accompanied by a shout of frustration, he slammed the receiver back on the cradle without completing the call and began pacing around the room again.

I can't do it! I'm such a chicken I make the Cowardly Lion look like a superhero. The shame tactics didn't work. He got down on the floor and started doing pushups, continuing until he couldn't do one more. It didn't register in his mind until later that he had broken his individual record for the most consecutive pushups. All he knew was that the exercising had reduced his nervousness and boosted his confidence. He jumped up and boldly dialed her number as if he was still fighting to do one last, agonizing pushup. He fought right through the barrier with that extra push and heard the phone begin to ring.

"Nielsen's residence, Mrs. Nielsen speaking."

His mind raced around the track without finding solid footing. *It's her mother. What am I going to say?*

"Hello?" the woman's voice repeated with more volume.

"Hi," Bambi finally squeezed out. "Is Lisa there?"

"She ran uptown for a minute, but she might be back. Just a moment, I'll go check."

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Bambi's mind sprinted in circles again. *What if she's not at home? I can never work up the courage to call back a second time. And what if Mrs. Nielsen asks who's calling? What would I say? I can still hang up, and they'd never know who it was.* His thoughts were interrupted by a melodic voice on the other end that caused his heart to almost jump through his shirt.

"Hello, Lisa," he replied in a voice that sounded foreign to him. His throat felt like it was all tied up. *Now I know where the slang term 'choking' originates.* "How are you?" *Brilliant conversation here, Bambi. How can she turn down such a charming guy?*

"I'm just fine."

"Your mother said you'd gone uptown. You must be back, huh?" As soon as the words left his lips, he realized how klutzy that remark was.

"Just came in the door. By the way, who is this?"

Heavens to Mergatroid. I forgot to tell her who's calling. What a grade A zero! "Oh, I'm sorry. This is Lance. Lance Masterson. Bambi." *Why didn't I write down the introduction?*

"Oh, hi, Bambi." He tried to read her voice. *Was she disappointed? Pleased? Surprised? Who knows what thoughts lurk in the hearts of womankind? Not even the Shadow knows that.*

Bambi couldn't bring himself to start on his script, so he began a small talk conversation about their upcoming test in typing class and other things at school. He really felt awkward, but he didn't know how to get to the point and pop the big question. Finally, there was a lull in the conversation, and Bambi went for it. "By the way Lisa, I was wondering if you would like to accompany me to a movie on Friday night?" He held his breath.

"Friday night," she repeated. "Oh, I'm sorry, Bambi. I have a babysitting job that night."

Bambi felt as if a knife had penetrated his trembling body. *It's the old babysitting excuse.* "Oh, I see. Well, I'm sorry I bothered you and everything. Don't study too hard for the typing test. OK?"

"OK, Bambi, I—"

"See you in class tomorrow." Bambi didn't hear what Lisa had begun to explain. He had already replaced the receiver. He had to sit down before he fell down. He was completely drained of energy. *Now I've really gone and done it. I've made a fool out of myself. How can I face the world? How can I face Lisa?*

Never again will I subject myself to this humiliation and embarrassment that I am feeling now. There'll be a snowstorm in July before I ask a girl for a date. He wondered what his dad would tell him if the topic was ever mentioned in one of their chats. *No, that's never going to happen because I am not telling anybody about this big failure.* He almost laughed. His father was always worried about him being too proud. *There is no reason in the world to worry about me losing my humility as long as girls inhabit the planet Earth.*

* * *

After the big disappointment of being turned down by Lisa, Bambi threw himself into his other activities with even more zeal than before. The pain of that failure acted like a spur, driving him on to successes in other fields of endeavor. He had a fairly successful tennis season, received straight A's on his report card for the final quarter, and improved nearly all of his personal records in the training program. His sixteenth birthday arrived and with it the chance to get his driver's license. Drivers training had prepared him for the big test.

His parents, trusting that he would pass, let him drive the car to the courthouse, where the exams were administered. It was only two blocks from his house. He navigated the two blocks without a problem and parked along the curb. Butterflies started fluttering as he approached the door of the government building. The nervousness went away once he had the test booklet in his hand and was coloring in the little circles with the pencil they gave him. *This isn't so bad. What was I all bent out of shape about?*

After finishing the test, he handed in the materials. The woman at the desk gave him a number.

"Take a seat and we'll call your number when we're ready

for you to test drive."

"What if I flunk the written test?"

"Then we'll call your number to tell you the bad news."

Bambi nodded and sat down. *I should have brought a book to read.* Since he had none, the only thing he could find to amuse himself was to read people. The crowd here was pretty small, but he found it fun to analyze people and try to figure out what they were like. His informal studies were interrupted by another woman calling his number. He stood up and followed her to the front door.

"Where's your car parked?"

"Out in front."

They walked along the sidewalk and reached the 1955 Buick Special that was the Masterson's second car. Bambi had been too nervous to talk, and the examiner had not initiated any conversation either.

"It's that green Buick ahead of us." He quickened his step and opened the door for the woman. She didn't say a word as she slid into the seat and Bambi closed the door. *Friendly isn't a word that I'd pull out of my hat to describe this lady. She might have iced tea in her veins instead of blood.*

Bambi got in behind the wheel and fastened his seat belt. He looked over at the woman who would determine whether he got a driver's license on this go-round or not. One of his best smiles received no acknowledgement.

"Start the car, please."

Bambi did as directed.

"Now pull into traffic when it's safe and go straight until Main Street. Take a right turn there."

He made it into his lane without a problem and half a block later came to an intersection. There were no stop signs on any of the four sides. A car was approaching from his left. Bambi hit the brakes and waited for the car to go.

"There is no stop sign at that intersection. The car on the right side has the right-of-way."

Her frosty rebuke threw Bambi off his game. At the next intersection, he needed to stop, but almost didn't. It was necessary to slam on the brakes to get stopped in time. Bambi

was afraid to look at the woman, who barked at him again.

He managed to perform all the rest of the commands without major problems, but his biggest fear was that he choked so bad in the beginning that he flunked before he got started. The job he did with the parallel parking came up far short of perfection. When he finally parked the car next to the curb at the courthouse at the end of the ordeal, he turned off the car and listened to a lecture.

Does this mean I flunked or what?

When the woman's spiel was delivered, she wrote something on a small piece of paper, tore it out of a book, and handed it to Bambi.

"What's this?" *Maybe a citizen's arrest.*

"Your temporary driver's license. Your real one will arrive in a few days. You'll need to go back in and get your photo taken." She exited the car and slammed the door without saying goodbye.

Bambi looked down at the chicken scratches in his hand. *I'm a licensed driver. Unbelievable!*

After getting his picture taken, Bambi took the car straight home. Just as he was preparing to enter the family driveway, he noticed that one of his friends was driving down the street toward him. He took his eye off the road and his driveway and tried to wave to his buddy. The other driver never saw him. Bambi saw that no one else was coming from the other way, so he cranked the wheel to the left and made the turn into his driveway. To his chagrin he saw he had gone too far past the opening. A car was now coming at him from the other way, so he couldn't stop and back up and work his way into the driveway correctly. He took it right over the curb with the wheels on the right side making a loud thumping noise, which scared him even more. *I'm probably taking out some of Mom's prized grass as well.*

After getting the car lined up on the narrow strips of cement, he put the car in park and blew out a sigh of relief as he turned the engine off. *Boy, was that dumb! I really hope my buddy didn't see me now. I'd be embarrassed to kingdom come if anyone saw this. I think I learned a lesson here today. Driving is*

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not a game. If I don't concentrate on taking care of business, I'm going to end up sorry.

Later that spring he used that little plastic permit to drive himself to the athletic banquet. At the awards ceremony, he received a gold basketball pin and a bar for tennis to add to the 'M' on his letterman jacket.

Among all the other good things happening in his life, another disappointment arose. Bambi finally found out about the fall of Troy, as Donnie put it, at Page's party. The news caused Bambi to be angry and sad at the same time. He approached the Bulldog Compact on his wall with a pen in his hand and the intention of crossing Troy's name out. After putting the pen to the paper, he stopped.

I just can't erase a friend of many years in one swoop of a pen. The best thing to do is to talk to Troy about it, although it might be an unbelievably painful experience. But, I gotta give it a shot.

Dialing the telephone this time was distressful but nothing like calling Lisa.

"Troy, Bambi here."

"What's goin' on, Bambi?"

After a bit of small-talk, Bambi got to the point. "Troy, I heard a rumor that you got drunk at the party at Page's house after I left."

"Ah...I was afraid you were going to find out."

"I'm not sure what to say here, Troy. We go back a long way. I'm not here to point a finger of accusation at you, but I have to remind you what you signed in the Bulldog Compact."

"I know."

"I want you to know that I understand that all people make mistakes, and you're still a member of the Dogs of Victory, if you want and are willing to keep your promises in the future."

"I'd like to remain a member of the Dogs of Victory."

"That's good news."

"Unfortunately, I'm afraid I can't keep the promises anymore. It wasn't just that one time. I'm having too much fun to give it up. I'll still work out with you guys, if I can and when I can. I just took a job at Jack and Jill supermarket, so I won't

have a lot of free time to train."

"Troy, if we let you be a part without you doing your part, you'll become a cancer in the group. You'll drag us down to your level instead of the other way around. I'm sorry it has to come to this, but I'll have to scratch your name off the list."

"I understand. It's probably for the better. Sorry I let you down, Bambi, but I do have my own life to lead."

More like follow than lead from what I hear. "We all make choices, Troy. If you ever reconsider, let me know. Bye."

He hung up the phone and wondered what he would tell the rest of the group. *We're so close to actually going after our dream. We can't crumble now. I won't let it happen.*

The next time they got together, Bambi gathered everyone around him before their workout. "I've got some bad news, guys. Troy is no longer one of us."

"It's about time," Corky said. "I don't think he's every truly been one of us in spirit."

"That might be a little harsh, but maybe you're right. In any case, we're losing a good player. Hopefully he'll still give enough to the team to help us get to our goal. You guys are all still with me, right?"

"You dang betcha," Corky said. "We come too far to give up just because one of the members no longer can hack it."

"I agree with Corky," Donnie said. "We need to crank up our spirit to make up for our loss, and not hold any pity parties. This dream is bigger than any of us individually."

Everyone looked around at their teammates' response to that statement.

"He's right!" Bambi said. "Let's get fired up but not burnt out. In about eight months, we'll all be on the varsity, hopefully." *Except for Donnie. I'm afraid he'll be stuck on the JV's next season.*

"The way I see it," Brad said, "is that this is like a mile run. We've run the first two laps already and we're nearing the finish line. We need to reach the finish line with a strong kick."

* * *

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The Dogs of Victory all went to basketball camp that summer. In order to raise money for the camp, they mowed lawns, washed cars, and hauled bales of hay. The summer passed by quickly, and the five dedicated friends entered the doors of the high school on a warm August morning as juniors, ready to take on the challenges that would face them in their third year of high school. The window of opportunity was approaching quickly. Their determination to reach the goal was reaching a zenith.

Chapter 7 – Eleventh Grade

Within a couple of weeks of the new school year, The Dogs of Victory had a pizza party.

"I don't know if you guys have noticed this or not, but I think we have a social problem," Donnie said.

"What kind of problem," Brad asked.

"Actually it's not a new problem, but it just keeps getting worse every year. As the other kids are getting older and bigger, they're getting rebellious and rude."

"Holy Hasenpfeffer," Corky said. "I bet we're about the only kids in school that aren't part of the party scene now. Everybody's interested in getting boozed up."

"Not everyone, but I understand what you mean," Denny said. "Beer parties seem to be the main amusement. Lots of kids don't even bother coming to the dances anymore. They just go straight to a party and stay there."

"I heard some of the kids are messing with drugs," Corky said.

Bambi was shocked. "Why would people around here mess with drugs. I can almost understand in the big cities where kids are just a number and their parents are never home and stuff. But why would someone that's grown up in this laid back environment risk their future to get a temporary buzz?"

"I have no clue," Donnie said. "All I know is that it makes me mad sometimes just thinking about it. Why don't those losers get excited about life and their futures and fight off Old Man Boredom by accomplishing things of real value? It certainly doesn't take any talent or effort to get high on some substance."

"Yeah. Why can't they get high on life – like we do?" Brad asked.

"What really bugs me is that some of these turkeys look down on us, like we're the ones that are screwed up."

"I know," Denny said. "Somebody told me he thought we

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were crazy."

Bambi wiped some root beer foam off his mouth. "Everyone's entitled to an opinion. That doesn't mean they're right. In a way, maybe it's good that people are giving us guff. It gives us a feeling that it's the Dogs of Victory against the world."

"Exactly," Corky said. "It causes us to depend on each other for friendship, so we can actually get closer than we might otherwise. My motto is: When life hands you lemons, make the best lemonade anyone ever tasted."

Donnie laughed. "It's not that big of deal for some of you. Corky and Brad have girlfriends and Denny has a job. Bambi and I are the only ones that don't have someone or something else in our lives besides the DOV."

"DOV?" Brad asked.

"Dogs of Victory. It's a lot easier saying just the first letters."

"Gotcha. In any case, we don't need any of the squirrels to be our pals."

* * *

During the fall, Bambi and Donnie spent a lot of time together playing chess, discussing the many books they read, and studying. They both enrolled in the Spanish 1 class and spent a lot of time practicing their speaking and learning new vocabulary. They also spent a lot of time talking about things like religion, world problems, and their own problems in the school's mini-culture. They both agreed that it was a tremendous struggle to fight against peer pressure. One night after an altercation at school where Donnie was made fun of, they had a long talk about that very issue.

"You know," Bambi said, "what really ticks me off is that all these people are always talking about doing your own thing. Then when we do our own thing, we get badmouthed because we play it straight. We do it like the adults want us to, and so we're the enemies of the other kids as a result."

"You're right. I don't know when this war between adults

and teenagers began, but it sure is stupid. Think of how much time the teenagers spend trying to avoid thinking or acting like an adult and cutting down adults just to impress each other. Sometimes I'd like to take a baseball bat and make a real impression on some of those stooges. I'd wave that old bat right over their empty heads and yell, 'You blind idiots! Can't you see that you are going to be an adult in just a few years? You should be trying to get a head start for that day instead of trying to put it off. You should be trying to impress those people who may be able to help you advance in this world to better jobs or whatever, instead of alienating them against you by your idiotic behavior.'"

Donnie's teeth unclenched and the hand that would have held the baseball bat relaxed. "I'd just love to ask them what kind of jobs they're going to find with letters of recommendation from old drinking and shoplifting chums. Shoot. It would be funny if it weren't so tragic. Those guys do so many stupid things now that they are going to regret in the future. But they won't listen to advice. They won't learn their lesson until it's too late. They just won't believe people who have been through the same situation and want to help them out."

Bambi nodded. "I hear you."

"I'm sorry I got carried away," Donnie said. "That's one of my pet peeves. My big brother and I discuss it a lot. John wishes he could go back and undo a lot of those things that he did. He'd love to start all over again in high school with a clean slate and the knowledge he has now. He would definitely work harder to improve his chances of getting a better job."

Bambi rubbed his forehead. "What I really think is sad and ironic is that it seems that kids reject all the advice from their parents and teachers and go ahead and do it their way. Then when they grow up, they see the errors of their ways and decide to help the new generation avoid those same pitfalls. That new group of kids won't listen to them and grow up doing the same thing. It's just one vicious cycle. Why can't we learn from other people's experiences instead of having to do it ourselves or having it done to us? It's enough to make you want to pull your hair out by the roots, if you think about it enough."

"It seems to me that every generation believes the world is

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going to the dogs because of the attitude and behavior of the younger generation. Somehow they always seem to grow up and take on their share of the responsibilities for maintaining freedom and civilization."

"You're right. What's going to happen if one generation comes along and doesn't grow up?"

Donnie shook his head. "That's too depressing to think about. I don't think it will ever happen though, unless the older people give up trying to teach the kids the importance of being good citizens and decent human beings."

"It sure has to be frustrating to work with kids, trying to get them to reach their full potential and be an asset to the world and all its inhabitants. How would you like to be one of Bennett's teachers?"

"No thanks, but I wouldn't write Bennett off as a complete loss yet. My brother says that people really change after they leave school. It seems like the peer groups keep everybody down to their level, but when someone gets out on his own, he realizes that he has an identity of his own to develop instead of being content with the group image and identity. He says that one rowdy kid in his class became a minister and another one joined the Peace Corps."

"That must be what they call turning over a new leaf."

"I guess so. You have to admit, Bambi, we're really very fortunate. We're aware of the peer pressure while most kids don't realize that they are being dragged along by an unseen enemy. We can fight against it and avoid many of the mistakes they're going to make."

Bambi nodded as he thought of Troy.

* * *

The Dogs of Victory were braced for a struggle. They knew they would have to be strong to avoid giving up their ideals to win the acceptance and friendship of their classmates. They continued to ignore the taunts that were flung at them all the time. Goody-goodies, pansies, pusses, and other names were applied to them. They were considered weaklings because they

wouldn't stand up and fight. The abusers couldn't appreciate the strength that was needed to swim upstream against the teenage current of thought. The five friends got discouraged, but they managed to hang tough. One day they got a bit of aid from an unexpected source. Four sophomore boys stopped Bambi and Donnie in the hall.

"What do we have to do to become Dogs of Victory?" one of the boys asked.

Bambi turned to his companion with surprise written all over his face. Donnie's surprise was also evident. These were some of those same kids who had decided not to show up at Bambi's house almost three long years ago. Apparently they had changed their minds about the project. They apparently didn't think it was silly anymore.

Bambi explained exactly what it meant to belong to their club. He also pointed out the fact that if these sophomores became members, they would be hassled by people who resented dedication and clean living, as Bambi termed it. He tried to impress upon those underclassmen the difficulty of the whole arrangement. They said they weren't worried about any of the problems that Bambi mentioned.

The newcomers added a new dimension to the Dogs of Victory in addition to their signatures on the Bulldog Compact. After three years of constant training, the procedure was getting quite boring. Now the juniors had to impress these rookies and also be teachers and counselors for them. The group met often to play cards or other games. They played pickup basketball whenever they got the chance.

It seemed like it took an eternity to arrive, but finally the football pads and helmets were put away for another year and the basketball practice jerseys came out of mothballs. The Dogs of Victory were pumped. Their turn had arrived to wear the maroon and white and represent their town and school. This is what they had dreamed about for three years.

Troy worked at night and weekends to allow him to practice after school. It seemed to Bambi that a gulf had opened up between himself and Troy. They had been close friends since kindergarten, but now they were almost like strangers.

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There were only twelve spots on the varsity team. Some of the people who tried out for the team would have to be cut. The Dogs of Victory were all worried that not everyone from their group would make the squad. Donnie especially was sweating it. He had been the worst guy out of thirty in the eighth grade. Now he had to beat out not only his classmates but seniors as well. His game had improved a lot, helped out by a growth spurt, but the question was, had he improved enough.

After the eighth day of practice, the coach gathered them around him. "This is a painful situation, but this is the way life works. We have too many players or not enough slots on the team, depending on how you look at it. Either way, some of you seniors have just gone through your last practice. All of you juniors will still be on a team. Those that don't make the varsity cut will make up the junior varsity team, and Coach Sterling will be your new coach. I'll post the roster on the bulletin board in the morning. If you're a junior, and you're not on the list, check in with Coach Sterling concerning practice times and other stuff."

The locker room buzzed with the conversation concerning the upcoming cut. The juniors were more laid back about the situation, but they knew they would face the same grim reaper a year from now, so they had sympathy for the seniors who would no longer be a Bulldog.

* * *

Donnie was at school the next day before most of the teachers arrived. As soon as the janitor unlocked the doors, Donnie zoomed through on his way to the locker room to see the list of the boys who would be issued uniforms and allowed to continue as part of the varsity team. He tried to contain his excitement and brace himself for a possible disappointment. The seniors were listed first. There were six of them named, leaving six places for the juniors.

Troy's name headed the list of juniors. Next came Bambi, Brad, Corky, Denny, and last on the paper, Donnie Kern. They all were on the team. He let out a war whoop that would have

sent a shiver up the spine of a Comanche brave. He quickly looked up and down the hall to see if anybody had witnessed his excessive display of joy. Nobody was in sight, but if anyone was found in the vicinity dead of a heart attack, Donnie would know what had caused it. He was so happy he couldn't sit down and wait for his friends to come to school. Instead he walked over to Bambi's and announced the big news.

Three days later the Bulldogs opened their season against the Knights from Sioux Falls O'Gorman. In the past, the Knights had usually beaten the Madison team by a comfortable margin. Things turned out much differently this year. With a starting lineup composed of Corky, Troy, Bambi, and two seniors, the Bulldogs crushed their rivals from the big city by fifteen points. Brad and Denny played well coming off the bench. They had improved tremendously since the year before. Donnie got in for the last two minutes of the game, but he played poorly. He was really bummed out about his performance, but the rest of the team was sky high. They were off to a great start.

Vermillion was their next opponent. The Tanagers also usually managed to beat Madison in their yearly tussle. Once again the under-Bulldogs prevailed over the favorite. The Bulldogs were on top by a score of 72-60 when all of the fireworks were over. They were now 2-0 and scoring at a record pace.

There was no letting up once the conference season started. The first round of the ESD double round robin schedule advanced toward its completion with two teams at the top of the standings. The Bulldogs had won their first six conference games to bring their record to 8-0. A non-conference victory over Pipestone, Minnesota ran their mark to 9-0 going into the big showdown with Huron, who were also undefeated in conference play. When the smoke had cleared after the big duel, Huron sported a 7-0 record, and Madison had its first defeat of the year.

Besides losing the game at Huron, the team also suffered from a small amount of dissension on the team, a feud between two old friends, Troy and Bambi. The trouble occurred in the third quarter. One of the players on the Huron team was a good

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friend of Bambi. They had met at basketball camp and developed a neat friendship. Bambi's friendly rival got an opportunity for a breakaway lay-up with Troy trailing the play. Troy smashed him into the wall, quite obviously, deliberately, and needlessly. The fallen Tiger lay on the floor, stunned and unaware of the fact that Bambi had entered the scene.

Bambi grabbed Troy's jersey firmly and started shaking. "What the hell are you doing?" Bambi didn't usually cuss, but he also didn't usually grab friends or anyone else and attempt to shake their teeth loose. "You did that on purpose."

At first Troy was so surprised he didn't know what to do. Then he got mad and knocked Bambi's arms away. "Get your grubby paws off of me." The two glared at each other.

Finally, Bambi turned away to see how his friend from Huron was. He made it to his feet and staggered toward the bench. The man who replaced him shot the free throws. After the first one went in, the buzzer blew. Bambi was sure that someone was coming in to replace Troy, the headhunter, before he killed somebody.

Bambi about died when he realized the new man had come into the game to take his place. He walked off shaking his head and took a seat on the far end of the bench. The coach yelled his name and pointed to the spot beside him. Bambi thought bitterly about ignoring the coach. He hadn't been so mad since the eighth grade, but he wasn't mad enough to disobey his coach.

"What are you trying to prove out there?" The coach's harsh tone indicated that someone besides Bambi was upset over the incident.

"He gave my friend a cheap shot. He could have hurt him really bad."

"So what are you, the avenging angel or something? You just play ball and let me worry about handing out any needed discipline, OK?"

You sure take real good care of things. Troy almost kills a guy deliberately, and you take me out of the game. He looked down toward the Huron bench. It appeared that his friend was all right, no thanks to Troy.

Bambi was sent back into the game a little later, but he

didn't play with his usual concentration and intensity. Huron pulled away to win by ten. The locker room was quite tense after the game. Bambi and Troy didn't speak to each other. In fact, they didn't speak to each other for the whole next week. Bambi wasn't going to initiate the conversation. He wasn't the one who was wrong.

It was his wish that Troy would straighten things out. It seemed that the team was now pulling in two different directions. The seniors seemed to back Troy, and the juniors were on Bambi's side. The split provoked some strange feelings in Bambi; he liked to be happy and get along with everybody, especially old friends.

Luckily, the Bulldogs played a non-conference opponent in their next game. They had almost always beaten Flandreau quite easily in the past. It was the only school on their schedule that had fewer students than Madison High School. This time, however, the Fliers gave the Bulldogs a scare, losing by only five points. Troy and Bambi both played as if they had boxing gloves on their hands and balls and chains around their legs.

In the next practice session, Coach Ryan turned the practice over to Coach Reidburn.

"Bambi. Troy. I want you two in my office – now."

Bambi looked up in shock. He was totally surprised by the request. From the look on Troy's face, he was suffering from the same surprise.

Bambi found it hard to make his feet move. He dreaded what was to come. After the trio were shut up in the office, the coach said, "Sit down, boys." He paced the room for a minute before taking a seat at his desk and looking at the two boys. Their eyes remained glued to the floor. He didn't say a word for a couple of minutes. The silence seemed to weigh heavily upon both boys' minds. Finally, the instructor said, "Do you want to win the ESD title, Troy?"

"Of course I do, Coach."

"Bambi, it's well known that you want to win the state tournament. Right?"

Bambi only nodded. His mouth felt too dry to talk at all.

"Fellas, you're not going to get anything accomplished until

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you settle this little difference between yourselves and start playing together. Like a team. Am I coming in loud and clear?" His voice indicated that he was running out of patience.

Both boys looked up but didn't speak.

"Well?"

"Exactly what do you propose?" Bambi asked softly.

"I want the two of you to shake hands and apologize."

If he does it first. I bet you a million dollars Troy is thinking the same thing right now.

They all waited. And waited. Many thoughts went through Bambi's head. *I'm right. I have nothing to apologize for. But, on the other hand, Coach has a point. We won't be able to win anything if we don't play as a unit. We have to settle this thing now. He remembered the Bulldog Compact. He had promised to give everything he had to win that state tourney. Even my pride? Will I rub my own nose in the dirt in order to have a chance at that state championship? I've sacrificed my time, my sleep, my comfort. All of it might be wasted if I don't sacrifice my pride as well.*

He forced himself to bring his hand out toward Troy. "I'm really sorry about the other night. I guess I just lost my head."

Troy's hand came up slowly to grasp Bambi's. "That's OK. I guess maybe you had some reason to get mad. I hear he's a good friend of yours."

"Yeah."

"I apologize for what I did."

"Are you guys ready to play basketball?"

They nodded.

"All right then. Let's go. And show some spirit. I've had the feeling that maybe I should have worn an undertaker's suit to practice the last few nights. Bring your teammates back to life."

The two ran back onto the court. Bambi felt much better. It was much like the time he began to run his two miles one night and discovered he had a rock in his shoe. He didn't want to stop, but he knew he had a long way to go and the pain would only worsen. He had stopped, removed the rock, and continued. Despite his stop, he had still beaten the other guys. It seemed that he and Troy had just removed an obstacle that would have

given them a good deal of pain. That was a good thing because they still had a long, long way to go.

The team got back on track and bumped off three more ESD teams to raise their record to 13-1 overall and 9-1 in the conference. They stumbled and fell at Aberdeen. Fortunately, Huron also lost that night, keeping Madison only one game out of first place. The Bulldogs then polished off Watertown and Yankton to bring their record to 11-2 in the ESD standings with only Huron left. Bambi's group hurried home after the Yankton game in order to hear the sports show and find out how Huron had done. They gave a big cheer when the Madison score was flashed across the screen. They gave even a bigger yell and did a little dancing when the next score came into view: ABERDEEN 57 HURON 54.

The stage was now set. The winner of the Huron-Madison game would be the ESD champion. The game was to be held in Madison, giving the Bulldogs an important home court advantage. The town and the school whooped it up all week long. They were making up for the many years when there had been nothing to cheer about. Posters appeared in the windows of all the stores urging the Bulldogs to beat Huron. There was chanting in the halls between classes. On Friday afternoon there was a big pep rally in the auditorium. Bambi had never heard so much noise at a Madison pep rally. He remembered that the pep rallies in his freshman year had seemed more like funerals than anything else. Those days were long gone; the Madison Bulldogs had come to life.

The college field house was jam-packed by halftime of the B game. Bambi had never been so nervous before a game. He just couldn't sit there watching the sophomores play. He walked around and up and down and to the bathroom several times. He went down to dress early and do some stretching and exercising to get some of the tightness worked out of his muscles. He could feel the tension drain away as he rolled his shoulders.

Finally it was time. The sophs shuffled in with long faces. They had dropped a three-point decision. The varsity could hear the fans chanting as they lined up for the grand entrance. "We want the Bulldogs. We want the Bulldogs."

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The coach gave Bambi the signal. Tonight was his turn to lead the team onto the court. Coach Ryan didn't have to tell Bambi twice. He ran down the hall and turned to go through the big door leading to the gym floor. The crowd roared when they saw their team, and the band broke into the school song.

Bambi felt as if he could touch the top of the bangboard. He drove down the lane, pushed off into the air, and laid the ball off of the board and into the basket. He looked up into the crowd as he warmed up. It was a thrill to see the bleachers completely filled. They used to be lucky to draw enough fans to fill half of the place. *It sure makes a difference if the team is a winner or a loser when it comes to attendance. Well, all these people won't go away disappointed tonight if I have anything to do with it – except the Huron fans.*

The game started out slowly with both teams playing tight. It was only 2-2 after three minutes of play. As the players loosened up, the scoring pace increased. At the first quarter break the Tigers held a 14-12 lead. At halftime the Bulldogs had pulled one point closer to trail 28-27. The lead seesawed back and forth in the next quarter, which ended with the Bulldogs up by a point at 42-41.

The crowd was definitely getting its money's worth. Bambi had been having a little trouble during the game. The man guarding him had been hammering and harassing him at every chance. Apparently he was trying to ignite Bambi's temper. They had seen what had happened at Huron when he'd become angry. Bambi knew what was going on so he didn't pay any attention to his opponent's taunts or the physical abuse in the form of elbows, pushing, and holding. He kept his cool although he hated cheap shot artists and always had the temptation to haul off and clobber that type of opponent.

Finally in the fourth quarter his opponent gave him an elbow at the wrong time and the referee caught him. He awarded Bambi two shots for a flagrant foul and warned the Huron player that he would be kicked out of the game if he pulled a stunt like that again. Bambi sunk both shots to put the Bulldogs on top again. The ref had apparently decided to keep an eye on the mad elbower. The next time Madison brought the ball up the court,

the whistle blew, and the Tiger was informed that he had been detected holding. It was a one and one situation and Bambi calmly racked up two more points.

From then on Bambi only had to deal with legal defensive maneuvers. He went on a scoring binge and dropped in three quick field goals. The problem was that Huron answered with baskets of their own. With one minute to go in the game, the Bulldogs trailed by two. Troy hit an eight-foot jump shot from the side to knot the score with fifty-six seconds left. The Tigers went into a four-corner offense and played keep-away. They were going for the last shot. Time ticked away. With five seconds to go Bambi's man made the attempt. Bambi went up high and got his fingers on the ball. He didn't get enough of the ball, however, as the ball passed through the net with only two seconds showing. The Bulldogs called time-out. Bambi looked at the clock. Two seconds left. *We've got as much chance as a grasshopper in the chicken house. Winners never quit.*

Coach Ryan directed everyone to line up at the far end. Corky would throw the ball in, high and all the way down the court. If they caught the pass, they would be in good range for a shot. Maybe there would even be a foul in the contest for the pass. Corky wound up and fired. Bambi went up high and grabbed the ball. He turned as he was falling and lobbed up a shot. It hit the board, went in, and spun out again. Huron had beaten the Bulldogs again.

* * *

It took four days for Bambi to get over that disappointment. He dreamed about the game when asleep and thought about it when he was awake. He used the memory like a prod to keep him going on. He added that newspaper clipping to his collection and started getting psyched up for the sectional tournament. That was more important than the ESD championship anyway. The big difficulty was that Huron was in their section. Bambi had never played on a team that had beaten Huron in his whole career, and he was getting sick of that fact.

Madison drew the host, Brookings Bobcats, in the first

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round. It was a good battle for the first three quarters but then the superior conditioning of Bambi and Corky made its impact. They led a Bulldog charge, which blitzed the nets for twenty-three fourth quarter points. The final score was 67-54. Huron got by Miller to set up the big rematch in the finals.

In the championship game Huron got two quick buckets to open the game. From then on the two teams played evenly. The Bulldogs just couldn't make up that four-point difference. Bambi chased the ball like a man possessed, trying to take the ball away as the clock began to tick down to the last minute. Huron refused to give the ball up despite the tight defense, and Madison was forced to foul. Huron cashed in on their free throws three different times. The Bulldogs retaliated each time, but time ran out on them. Bambi picked up his fifth foul with eight seconds left. He shuffled dejectedly to the bench with his head almost dragging on the floor. He had failed again. His junior season was history. Only one chance remained to fulfill his dream.

It was really hard for Bambi to get up and workout the day after the disappointing loss. Donnie talked to him and tried to rekindle Bambi's spirit.

"Donnie, the next season is a year away. Can't I have a day off?"

"We've gone too far, Bambi. We can't quit now."

The magic word had just been uttered. 'Winners never quit' rolled through Bambi's brain. He gritted his teeth and forced himself through workouts until his zeal returned, and he began to dream once more of the glory that would be his in the next year.

* * *

Bambi and Corky did well in tennis that spring. They placed first in the conference and second in the state in the second flight of doubles. Bambi also placed second in the conference in the third flight singles. He wasn't a classic ground stroker on the tennis court. He hustled at all times and returned almost everything. Others made fun of his style but he didn't care. The rules only said the ball had to be hit over the net. They didn't say the player had to look good doing it. Besides, he had been called

too many names to let 'hacker' bother him.

The relationship between Troy and Bambi hadn't returned to normal. Troy was now keeping company with a whole new set of buddies, including Mike Bennett. Bambi wanted to plead with him to take a look at what he was doing. In Bambi's opinion Troy was ruining his life by hanging around with a bunch of bums. He discussed the situation with his father.

"You've got to face up to the facts, Lance. You can't ask Troy to live his life the way you want him to, especially when you have a very selfish reason for desiring it. You've got to be honest, son. Are you worried about Troy's future, or are you worried about yours? Are you only afraid you won't win the basketball championship because of his goofing off? Think about it."

Bambi had to admit his father was right. The desire to win that title was so strong that it pushed out his other concerns. How could he worry about Troy's life when nothing would matter if they failed to win next year? He tried to reason his way out of it. "But he owes it to the school. He has the talent. If he wastes it, he cheats me, the rest of the team, the rest of the students, and even the townspeople."

"I understand how you feel, Lance, but I also understand one other thing. Troy owes something to himself. He needs to be the one to make his own decisions. He may regret those decisions in the future, but at least he has no one to blame but himself. Besides, that's what growing up is, making a mistake and then learning from it. Just remember that you can't judge him harshly if he decides to live for himself and not for you and your friends."

"But I don't see why he can't do what we want him to do for himself. How could he not want to be a winner? Nothing that he can do with those jerks could ever approach the importance of winning that state tourney."

"Remember, Lance, that other people look at the world through different eyes than you do."

Bambi nodded. *Why is life so cotton-picking complicated?*

* * *

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One other important thing happened to Bambi that spring. With three days left before the Prom, Lisa still didn't have a date. Bambi overheard some of the girls at school talking about it in the morning. He thought about it all day long. He remembered with shame the other time that he had asked her out. He hadn't even thought of asking a girl out since then. Why was he thinking about it now? They hadn't had any July snowstorms. Bambi had been keeping tabs on Lisa's romantic life, although he didn't know what good it did. Lisa had gone out with several boys since breaking up with Page, but she hadn't accepted anyone's class ring. She was still unattached, but he was still a social klutz.

When Bambi got home from school, he walked directly to the telephone without even thinking about it and dialed Lisa's number. He blocked everything out of his mind. He didn't think about the fact that he couldn't really dance, and that he didn't know what to do on a date since he had never been on one. He was actually acting out a daydream. It wasn't real so there was no reason to be nervous.

"Nielsen residence, Lisa speaking."

"Hello, Lisa. This is Bambi Masterson, and I was wondering if you would like to go with me to the Prom." He hadn't even written it down. Everything came out perfect – except Lisa's answer.

"I'm sorry, Bambi, but Jeff Kirkeby asked me to the Prom this afternoon at school. I said yes."

The daydream short-circuited and reality returned. "Oh, I see. Well, I hope you have a good time. Bye."

Once again he hung up before Lisa had time to say goodbye or anything else that she might have wanted to say. *Why did I call her? I broke my vow and made a fool of myself again.* He plopped down on the floor and started doing pushups with a vengeance, as if that would restore his wounded pride. When he was exhausted, he lay on the floor thinking about how he could always depend on exercise to make him feel better. *What would I do without it?*

He jumped on his bicycle and rode to Lake Herman. He had a favorite spot there with a fantastic view of the lake and privacy at the same time. This was the place where he did his deepest thinking. When he had a problem, he could go there and work it

out in his mind. He wondered what it would be like to live in a big city and not have the opportunity to enjoy all of nature's gifts and get away from the hustle and bustle. Not having a place to go to be alone would be a tragedy. No wonder so many of the city kids were running in gangs. Bambi had a hard time believing that kids and an environment like that really existed. He had only read about them.

Those kids in the city would probably have just as much trouble believing that a place like Madison existed, not to mention kids like him and his friends. Bambi was thankful that he hadn't been born in the jungle of a metropolitan area. He wished he could help those poor kids discover some of the beautiful things in life. He looked around him at the big blue sky, the freshly sprouted foliage, and the various animals grazing in the area. The sweet balm of spring penetrated deep into his soul and soothed the pain inside him. The therapy had worked. Rejuvenated in spirit, he mounted his bicycle again and returned to his home, ready to face life again.

Lisa went to the Prom with Jeff Kirkeby while Bambi stayed at home, shooting hoops and reading a book. His big regret was that he hadn't asked Lisa that morning before Kirkeby got the chance. But at least this way he didn't have to feel like he had been rejected.

Summertime rolled around again. Bambi couldn't go to basketball camp that year. He had a job working in the city recreation program. He taught tennis and softball to the young kids. He had a good time, developed a good suntan, and stashed away some dollars in his college savings account.

Donnie went to camp along with Brad and Denny. Bambi had noticed that Donnie was starting to shoot up. He was now quite a bit bigger than Bambi. He had been concentrating on a new weight program suggested by Coach Ryan. The results were already starting to show. He was far from the little pipsqueak bookworm of the past.

Almost as soon as it started, vacation was over, at least as far as Bambi was concerned. Time was passing too quickly for him. He wanted to savor those days of his youth, but he couldn't slow down the clock. He was now on the last lap and was one of the

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kings on the mountain. He was finally a senior and his destiny was drawing nearer by the day.

Chapter 8 – Twelfth Grade Regular Season

Most of the seniors were glad they were in their final year. Bambi, however, was sad. Every day as he walked the halls, he was reminded that next year at this time he wouldn't be there. Those halls, rooms, and teachers would no longer belong to him. The younger kids would go right on as if he had never existed. It had been his home for four years, a place he had loved, despite not being part of the in-crowd, and now they were going to kick him out of it and let a new bunch of runny-nosed eighth graders take the place of Corky and Donnie and himself. Somehow it just didn't seem fair. Maybe if they won that state championship, they'd have pictures in the trophy case so that future generations of Bulldogs would at least know who he was.

Bambi thought about getting a job after school. The bucks would come in handy, but he had witnessed the effect that Troy's job had had on his athletic career. Money wasn't that important. The final gasp was drawing near. If he missed this year, there would be no more next season to try again. He decided to devote even more time to getting ready for basketball season.

Donnie was the one who kept Bambi on his toes. He had now shot up to six foot three inches and 190 pounds. He had gained a lot of confidence in himself. Bambi was amazed at the change in his friend. He now had his work cut out to beat young Kern at anything. He couldn't compete with him in the strength category at all. The competition between the two kept Bambi at the grindstone. The other Dogs of Victory also put out even more effort than before to avoid being left in the dust. Brad and Denny had both come a long way also. They, like Donnie, hadn't matured until recently.

Bambi had to face the fact that, except for Corky, he was now the smallest member of the group. He had enjoyed the benefits of early maturity, but now he had to rely on all his

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talents to surpass his pals. They had caught up with him. Bambi was almost sure that the starting five for this year's team would all come from the ranks of the Dogs of Victory, except for Troy. The two best juniors were also members of the group. Things were looking promising for the DOV.

Bambi began to get more and more excited as basketball season drew closer. His daydreams became stronger as he spent more time playing his favorite game. He pretended that he was at the state tournament and played all three games by himself. He shot for both teams, adjusting his angle or shooting too hard when he shot for the opposition, just to lower the shooting percentage a little, so Madison would always win. When his team shot, they often got offensive rebounds and another attempt at the bucket. The Bulldogs always cleared the defensive boards. He would go on pretending like that for hours. He even announced the games. When he was in grade school, he always pretended to be the current high school star. Now he played the role of himself.

When the varsity dressed for their first practice, Bambi got a severe jolt to his system. Troy did not turn out. Bambi had seen him in school that day and thus knew that he wasn't absent. The team worked out vigorously, but the spirit was somewhat subdued due to the absence of Troy Miller. He had led the team in rebounds and been second in scoring last year. He would not, perhaps, reach his full potential without training with the Dogs of Victory, but his presence was still vital to the team's success. One of the boys had heard Troy say that he might go out this year if the coach came and begged him to, but he really had more important things to do than play basketball.

"Sure," said Bambi sarcastically. "He has to go out and party every night. That's much more important than having a winning basketball team."

Donnie smacked his fist into his other hand. "He's got his whole life to party and have a good time, but this is the only chance he will ever have to play high school basketball and help his team win."

Bambi thought about going to Troy and pleading with him. *Maybe if he explained everything, Troy would realize that he*

was tilting Bambi's dream machine and come back to the team. Finally, he decided against that. Troy would probably only laugh at him. They'd be better off without him. His attitude would only be an anchor to weigh them down. *No, I'm not going to beg; and I'm still going to complete my dream. I'm not going to let a bum stand in the way of my goal. I don't need Troy Miller.*

Bambi had reached a point where his goal had become an obsession with him. He no longer laughed and joked but was serious in whatever he did. There wasn't an idle moment in his day. In every task he drove himself to succeed, acting as if every chore in front of him was a barrier to his dreams and had to be knocked down. One day a different kind of barrier presented itself.

Bambi was just about to emerge from the bathroom when two of the tough guys in the school planted themselves in front of the door. They obviously weren't going to move. A year ago Bambi would have waited for them to get out of his way. Not this year. He didn't say a word. He simply moved straight at the two. They watched with amusement. Bambi's reputation as a peaceful guy, or a pansy, depending on the point of view taken, was well known in the school. Bambi had taken flack from morons he could have handled with one arm. They had mistaken his lack of action for cowardice. They had never read *A Quiet Man*. They couldn't understand someone who wouldn't fight because he didn't believe in it.

The two clowns were waiting for Bambi to politely ask them to please move. He didn't. Just like the other barriers in his life Bambi pushed right through them. One bumped into the wall. Bambi mockingly uttered, "Oh, excuse me. I didn't smell you." The two were so surprised that they didn't do anything. They had seen the look of cold fury on Bambi's face. Bullies often have a tendency to pick on people who they know won't fight back. These two were no exception. They saw that Bambi wasn't about to take guff from them, at least today. He was just in a bad mood was their reasoning. They decided that they would pay their respects another day when he was back to normal.

Bambi's father had noticed the change that had taken place in his son. He decided it was time for another father-son chat.

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"You're taking things much too seriously. You act as if you're in a war or something. Ease up just a little. OK?"

"Sure, Dad. Don't worry about me." He forced a smile that was worthy of an academy award.

"Remember, it won't be the end of the world if you don't reach your goal."

You're wrong! It would be the end of the world. "I know that, Dad."

Normally Bambi opened up to his father and communicated just exactly what was on his mind, but he just couldn't do that today. These chats with his father had done wonders for Bambi's emotional maturity. They had given him many insights into life and its problems. It was great to have the opportunity to talk to an adult and be treated like one. His father had helped him overcome many teenage problems. But this one was different. *I can't let my father stand in the way of this dream, but I can't push him out of my way like I do with other obstacles in my path. I simply have to go around him by telling him what he wants to hear instead of what I really want to say.*

Bambi didn't like dishonesty, but he really believed it was better in this case than the truth. *I'm sure I'm right, and I'm not going to back down. However, I don't want to have a conflict with my dad.* He now threw some of his energy at home into convincing his parents that they didn't have anything to worry about.

* * *

The starting lineup for the first game of the season wasn't revealed to anyone until the team went into the locker room after preliminary warm-ups. The coach was either still in doubt, or he wanted it to be a surprise. The team sat in suspense, waiting for the big news. They didn't have to wait long. "OK, Bambi and Corky at the guards, Brad and Denny at forwards, and at center – Donnie Kern."

Donnie was stunned. He had finally made it to the top. He had started at the very bottom, and now he was a starter. The Dogs of Victory had arrived in full force. All five starters were

dedicated to the winning of the state championship. They had all sacrificed for four long years. How could they lose now?

They didn't lose that first night. They blew O'Gorman off the court. Other easy victories followed in the next two games. Then they won three close ones. They were 6-0 when they ran into their archrivals from Huron. After that they were no longer undefeated and the Huron jinx weighed even heavier on Bambi's heart.

Everyone was always talking about how good they'd be this year if Troy were playing. Bambi was sick of that topic. He was almost as sick of hearing that as he was of losing to Huron. He knew that Donnie at a hundred percent was better than Troy at seventy-five percent dedication. Donnie was improving every game. His confidence was growing stronger all the time.

Troy, on the other hand, had won himself a little notoriety at a basketball game. He had come in drunk and proceeded to start a fight with some fans from Mitchell. The police broke it up and escorted Troy and a couple of others out of the gym.

The Bulldogs buzzsawed through the rest of their opponents. They sported a 14-1 record when they met Huron again. The Sioux Falls Lincoln Patriots were ranked first in the state with a 14-0 mark. Huron had been picked second with Madison in the third spot.

The rankings remained the same after the usual Madison-Huron scrap. The Bulldogs failed again to break the stronghold that the Tigers held over them. In the next game, Yankton succeeded where Madison had failed and dumped the Tigers by two points. Madison stomped Watertown the same night to climb back into a tie for the ESD lead with a 10-2 conference mark. Both teams picked up wins the next week. In the regular season finale Madison hosted a tough Aberdeen team while Huron had to travel to the Corn Palace to play the always-dangerous Mitchell Kernels with their ace guard, Tom Young.

Periodically during the Madison contest the announcer would give scores from the Huron game. Someone in the stands with a transistor radio was following the action of the Huron team. The scores given at various times indicated a close game. The Bulldogs were also locked in a fierce struggle with the

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Golden Eagles. With thirty-eight seconds left in the game the score was tied. Madison had the ball and a time-out. During the time-out the announcer said, "If I may have your attention, ladies and gentlemen, I have a final score on the Huron game. The score was Huron 61."

Bambi was disappointed. *Oh rats! They always give the winning score first. Huron has lucked out again.*

"And Mitchell 63!"

The crowd went absolutely bananas. Madison had at least a tie for the ESD crown. Bambi was now happy too, but he wasn't thinking about a tie. He was bent on a victory and sole ownership of the title. The Bulldogs put the ball back into play and began winding down the clock. With ten seconds left in the game, Bambi saw his big chance. He faked a pass, faked to the right, and then drove to the left. He squeezed by his defender and then dodged another one as the bangboard loomed in front of him. He launched himself into the air and scooped the ball underhanded toward the basket. The whistle blew, but no one heard it. The crowd was screaming so loudly that even the players couldn't hear. The man keeping the clock was on his toes and had stopped the clock when he saw the referee's hand go up. There were still four seconds showing.

The ref ran over to the scorer's table. "We have a foul on number forty-three yellow. The basket is good." He made a downward motion with one hand and the Madison fans roared their approval. Bambi would get to shoot one free throw after the time-out was over. He could put the game out of reach.

Coach Ryan got his team calmed down and gave them important directions. "OK, if Bambi makes this shot, let Aberdeen score. They can't call a time-out. Hold on to your pants or something so you can't foul them. Do not foul!" They all showed that they understood that command. "And after they score, don't throw the ball in bounds. If Bambi misses, that changes everything. You have to play tight prevent defense but don't foul. Keep them from getting in close. Corky and Brad stay back. Denny and Donnie do not go after the ball unless it comes to you. No risks. OK?"

"Let's go," they yelled in unison and broke from the huddle.

Bambi calmly stepped up to the line and drilled the ball through the center of the hoop. He and Denny ran back to the half court line. The others retreated to the other end of the floor. They blocked passing lanes but didn't contest any passes. The Eagles worked the ball down court and shot an uncontested lay-up. They could only stand and watch the Bulldogs waiting for the horn to sound. The Bulldogs stood on the court with their arms raised in a victory salute. They were the Eastern South Dakota champs for the first time in the school's history.

Chapter 9 – the Sectional Tournament

Basketball fever was burning in the city of Madison. The sectional tournament was to be played on the Bulldogs' home court. People were jubilant over their newly won championship and waiting expectantly for the chance to win admission into the state A tournament. Bambi was pleased by the success so far, but his goal was still in the future. None of the games they had played so far really counted. They had five more big ones in front of them. The big obstacle in their path right now was their old nemesis, the Huron Tigers. Bambi's team had lost twelve straight to that Huron bunch since seventh grade. They couldn't go to state unless they broke the big jinx.

Madison drew Miller in the first round and got revenge for the Bulldog loss during Bambi's sophomore year. Huron got by Brookings again to set up the big shootout. This was the game that everybody all over the state was talking about. It featured the number-two team in the state, Madison, against the number-three team. The papers were predicting yet another Tiger victory.

Early the morning of the big game, Bambi went up to the college armory and jogged slowly around the gym. He found it hard to believe this same quiet, empty gym would soon be the scene of emotional bedlam. It would be the place where his dream would either come to a crashing halt or continue on toward the finish.

The game was supposed to start at 8:30. Brookings and Miller tangled at 6:30. At 6:15 the doors of the auditorium were already shut because the place was full. Spectators arriving at what they thought was an early time were stunned to hear that they couldn't enter. Many of them had driven many miles and were furious. They stood outside, impatiently awaiting some development. Meanwhile in the building the announcer was asking people to squeeze to the middle. The officials at the doors then began to allow small groups of fans, grateful and relieved at

their good luck, in the door.

Finally the buzzer blew to end the first game and the two teams that had just finished their seasons trotted off to make room for the contenders. Some of the fans from Brookings and Miller left after their game, allowing the rest of the fans outside to be given seating. There was no spare room at all. People were almost sitting on top of one another. Most had sat and suffered through the unimportant third place game. They were hot and very impatient for the main event to begin.

"WE WANT THE BULLDOGS!" echoed from every corner. After a minute of steady chanting a roar went up as the maroon clad Bulldogs appeared on the court. A roar went up from the other side as the Tigers came out, dressed in white jerseys. The Bulldogs were really whooping it up in their warm-ups, except for Bambi. He had already gone into deep concentration and was coldly determined. He would participate in noisemaking after the victory was obtained. Donnie led the spirit chatter of the others. The Bulldogs went down into the locker room for the last pep talk. When they returned, the band broke into *Loyalty*. Bambi's heart leaped and a shiver went up his spine as the crowd sang that song he had heard since he was knee high to a jackrabbit.

"Loyal we'll ever be, Madison High School.

We'll praise and honor thee, alma mater dear. RAH RAH

May glory and fame be yours, wherever you may go.

We'll love you, yes, we'll cheer you, M.H.S."

It suddenly occurred to Bambi that this was the last time he would ever hear this song again in this gym while he was wearing a Madison uniform; next year he would be just one of the fans up there in the bleachers. It wasn't a very comforting thought. *I don't want to leave – ever.*

He also thought about the origin of his dream. This was the place it had all started. Was it going to end right here? Bambi began to really psyche himself up with that question. *No way. I am not going to have my nose rubbed in the manure once more by Huron. I am not going to let the sectional jinx stop us this year.* He continued to work himself up to fever pitch. He was like a soldier getting ready to make a charge against enemy lines

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– to win or die in the attempt. The buzzer called the teams to the bench. After what seemed like an eternity to the fans, vacuum packed in a huge sauna, the game was underway.

Huron drew first blood. Donnie retaliated with a tip in. The duel had begun for real. The first quarter ended with the score tied at fifteen. Huron pulled away in the second quarter, but the Bulldogs roared back just before halftime to tie it again at thirty-one. Bambi had ten and Donnie had nine. Bambi also had two fouls.

In the third quarter the lead changed hands back and forth. Madison was on top 39-38 when Bambi drew his third personal foul while blocking a shot. Bambi knew he hadn't even touched the guy. Luckily he had trained himself so thoroughly he was able to accept the call without any protest or even thoughts of protest. The ref could have said that Bambi's mother made the Wicked Witch of the West look like Miss Universe, and Bambi wouldn't have disagreed. But he now was in foul trouble.

The coach yelled at him to be careful. Bambi didn't need to be told. He nodded to the coach to show that he understood. The next time Huron had the ball, the disaster occurred. Bambi was hawking his man as closely as he could without risking a foul. The Huron guard dribbled to the right. With all the crowd noise Bambi didn't hear Corky yell out, "Watch the screen!" Bambi plowed right into the screening player, and the board above the scorer's table lit up the number four. Bambi was removed from the game immediately. The coach kicked the bench and then sat down with his head in his hands. The one point Madison lead didn't hold long with Bambi gone. At the end of the third quarter Huron had pulled away to a seven-point cushion.

Coach Ryan had no other choice at this point. He had to put Bambi back in now. "You be careful, Bambi. Don't do anything stupid. And the rest of you help back Bambi up on defense."

The fourth quarter was played evenly between the two rivals. Time was in Huron's favor. At the four-minute mark, the Bulldogs still trailed by seven. They were playing well, but the Tigers were matching them. Bambi was really discouraged. He thought about giving it up. Madison never had and never could beat these guys. He wanted to self-destruct right on the court.

Then Coach Wilbur's words snapped him out his doldrums. 'Winners never quit.' Those three words spun their magic once more and drove Bambi on.

They pulled within five with three minutes left. With two minutes left the margin was reduced to three. Huron then went into their deadly stall. The Bulldogs began to chase the ball, knowing that time was draining away. Almost a minute ticked off the brightly lit scoreboard. At that point Donnie took charge. He anticipated a pass and broke into the passing lane. He had guessed right. He was five feet in front of his nearest pursuer. He leaped high into the air when he reached the basket and slammed it through. The crowd went completely crazy. A slam dunk! And Madison had now pulled within one point with a minute and two seconds left in the contest..

The Tigers resumed their stall. They were a little shaken but the real pressure was still on Madison. The clock wound down to fifteen. Corky then committed a foul, sending a Huron man to the line for a crucial one and one situation that could put the Tigers almost out of reach. The shot bounded high off the rim, and Donnie was there to snare it. The Bulldogs called a time-out.

Bambi was selected to bring the ball up the court. His man clung to him like a shadow. The clock was ticking, eleven – ten – nine. Bambi faked a drive to the right and then to the left. Then he made the real drive back to the right again. He left his man behind him. Eight – seven – six. He dodged another Tiger who stepped up to help his teammate. Five – four Bambi was at the basket, but a tall defender standing there made it difficult for him to shoot. As he started to scoop the ball underhanded, he saw Donnie alone on the other side of the hoop. He scooped the ball toward Donnie while hanging and twisting in the air. He had twisted his body out of position, preventing himself from landing on his feet. When gravity pulled him back to earth, he landed on his side with his head away from the basket. He never saw Donnie's shot until the next day on the videotape. He did hear the crowd roar and see the lights on the scoreboard blink twice.

The horn went off as a Huron player was hurling a last prayer shot the full length of the court. It hit the wall. The Huron

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jinx was history. Madison was in the state A tournament for the first time ever.

Bambi and Donnie were mobbed by their teammates. The cheerleaders were the first non-players onto the court. Every one of them hugged Bambi, except Lisa, but he didn't have time to worry about that fact. The rest of the Bulldog fans took turns congratulating him. The fans and team milled around the floor for almost an hour after the game, singing along with celebration music piped over the loudspeaker. They wanted to really enjoy the moment while it lasted. No one knew how many years it might be before Madison would return to the state tournament.

Bambi allowed himself to celebrate a little bit that night and more the next night. The Dogs of Victory had a dinner party at the Masterson house. They read the sports page from the Sioux Falls Argus and a special edition of the Madison Daily Leader aloud at the table. They replayed the big game over in their conversation. Between bites of pizza and salad, they discussed the state tournament. They had to play against Spearfish in the first game. They were a west river team, so the boys didn't know much about them except their record, which was only 12-8 for the year. They were confident that they could get past the Spearfish five and advance into the semifinals.

After his friends left, Bambi felt a bit guilty about feeling so good. He didn't want to rest on his laurels now and be satisfied with the sectional title. He had to keep his concentration on the games ahead. He dug out his old newspaper clippings from the bottom of his dresser. The headlines glared at him. 'TIGERS DROP BULLDOGS AGAIN'. 'BULLDOGS STUMBLE IN SECTIONAL'. He felt the old anger and humiliation pour through his body. He was starting to get pumped up for the final stretch. The old news clippings never failed to do the trick when he needed stimulation. He thought ahead. *Less than one week from tonight, we'll be on the Sioux Falls Arena floor and on TV in a battle with the team from Spearfish. Unbelievable!*

It was almost impossible for Bambi to concentrate in his classes from the time of the win over Huron till state tournament time. His body and mind were focused on one thing. He was not going to let his intensity diminish.

Chapter 10 – Finishing a Dream

On Wednesday the team got out of school to travel to Sioux Falls to practice on the arena floor. It was awesome, even when it was empty. Bambi had been in the arena but had never played on the floor. He had trouble judging distances with the walls so far away from the baskets. He hoped he could adjust to the difference by the next day.

The team got out of school at noon on the Thursday to go see the first round games that afternoon. Sioux Falls Lincoln and Aberdeen were the victors in those first two games. In the evening session Rapid City Stevens bumped off Pierre in the first contest. It was the Bulldogs' turn to show what they could do. The good-sized following of Madison rooters voiced their pride in their team as the squad appeared on the arena floor.

The Bulldogs got the opening tip and scored quickly. They then slapped on a full court press, and Bambi made a steal and scored. The Maroon Machine was in full motion. The Spearfish team never recovered from the quick start by their opponents. At the final horn the score stood 67-52 in favor of the Bulldogs. The locker room was again jubilant, but Bambi was already thinking about the next obstacle in their path. The Raiders from Rapid City would be tough to handle. The Bulldogs had one down, but the two biggest ones still remained.

* * *

As a result of their advancement to the semis, school was called off for the next day, and the players got some much-needed extra sleep. The bus left at noon again for the consolation round that afternoon. Bambi had a lot of fun wandering around the lobby of the arena wearing his letter jacket. Often someone would point at Bambi and his friends and say, 'There's Madison' or 'there's Lance Masterson'. Bambi wanted to drink in every

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moment of this exciting event. This was a once in a lifetime experience for him and his senior teammates.

Bambi and his buddies watched the undefeated Sioux Falls squad work over a good Aberdeen team. At the end of three quarters the Bulldogs went down to dress. The Lincoln Patriots led by twelve at that point, and Bambi was wondering if anyone could beat those guys. The final margin of victory was seventeen points. Lincoln had to be the favorite to carry away the first place trophy the following night.

Madison was about the same size physically as the Rapid City starting five, except for their six foot six pivot man. Donnie had the tough job of stopping him. The teams were both a little tight at the beginning but not for long. Bambi found himself unable to drive against his man, who sagged off him quite a ways. The coach told him to pop the outside shot. He took a twenty-footer and missed. Coach Ryan said to keep on pumping. He did and hit three in a row before his defender tightened up the coverage. Then Bambi put his moves on and drove to the hole. Once he got the lay-up himself and twice he fed off underneath for Donnie and Brad to register the field goals. Rapid City called time-out and sent in a new man to stop Bambi. He didn't do much better. Bambi was unstoppable that night. He had racked up twenty-six points and seven assists when the affair was concluded. The Bulldogs were in the finals. Two down and one to go.

* * *

The town had a community pep rally and a car caravan to Sioux Falls on Saturday. The members of the team were called upon to give short speeches at the rally. There were over a thousand people assembled in the DSC field house for the event. If Bambi thought he was nervous about the game, he soon changed his mind. He had been as cool as Frostbite Falls, Minnesota compared to the condition he now found himself in, having to speak in front of a large crowd.

Sitting in front and waiting for his turn to talk, Bambi decided that the only time he had ever been close to being this

nervous was the first time he had called Lisa for a date. He looked over to where the cheerleaders were sitting. Lisa was even more beautiful than she had been in eighth grade. Bambi thought of that night in the bowling alley when he had formulated his plan and daydreamed of seeing Lisa's gorgeous smile when he picked up the giant trophy.

Funny how things change and yet stay the same. He was just as infatuated with her now as he had been then, but his hopes of her liking him had died away. He didn't see any chance for himself. She had been dating college boys lately, boys with good looks, money, and charm. *I'm just a stay at home type who has the social life of a skunk with rabies. What's the use of even hoping?* He changed the direction of his thought. This whole thing was like a dream. Four long years ago he had started a journey towards a mountain far in the distance. Little by little the trip had progressed until he had reached that mountain. Then he had started to climb. Tonight he would either reach the summit of the mountain or fall off it. He looked back down the long road he had come. Memories of two-mile runs, weightlifting sessions, successes and failures, and happiness and sadness flooded his mind. *Did all that stuff really happen?* Bambi didn't have time to decide. Someone poked him with an elbow and said, "Your turn."

He walked up to the microphone without any swagger in his step. He was so stiff he felt like a big chunk of cardboard. His voice cracked a bit in starting, "A long time ago, I made a promise to myself and some of my teammates here that we were going to win the state championship. We took a lot of razzing from other people and ran into a lot of problems along the way. We also learned a lot. One important lesson I learned is that winners never quit and quitters never win. Tonight we are not going to quit! Tonight we are not going to lose!"

The crowd screamed their agreement.

He began to loosen up as he gave voice to his feelings from deep inside. He had to wait for the cheering to die down after his last statement to continue. "This will be my last game as a Bulldog. I want you all to know how proud I've been to wear the maroon and white. I really think we've changed the attitudes of a

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lot of people around here. Madison *can* field teams that are winners. But you have to work for it. You have to pay the price of success. I want to address you young boys in the audience that will be wearing the uniforms that my friends and I must give up. Build your dreams to the sky, keep up your hope, and keep up the tradition that we have started here in the last two years. And above all, don't ever quit. Thank you."

As Bambi walked back to his seat, the crowd rose to their feet, clapped, yelled, and whistled. Bambi was afraid he wasn't going to be able to check the flow of tears that he felt inside. The band ended the rally by playing the school song, and Bambi got all choked up again. He decided that it was going to be really hard to go back to regular everyday life after the emotional ten-day period he had gone through. *I might have become an excitement addict.*

As the Dogs of Victory filed out of the gym, Donnie said, "I just thought of something."

"Holy horseradish! Here we go again. Just like old times," said Corky. "Speak, professor."

"Tonight we either make it or break it. It'll be all over for us."

"What else is new?"

"Let me finish. Are we going to give up the workouts? The reason for those workouts was this tournament. Why should we keep training so hard?"

"Can you even fathom the thought of taking a vacation from exercise and not feeling guilty about it?" Corky asked. "I've forgotten what it's like."

"Really! You've got that right, Cork," agreed Brad. "What do you think, Bambi? This was your creation."

"I really haven't thought about the future. It's not important to me right now. The only thing in my life is this game tonight. We've got lots of time to discuss the future – in the future."

The others nodded. They held their silence for a few moments. It was hard to believe that they had put in so much time and effort for one game, which would last less than two hours. That game was now less than eight hours away and counting down.

Bambi was really getting wound up for this one. All of his eggs were in one basket. What if *that basket got smashed tonight*? He hated to think about it. Besides, they were going to win. To keep his mind from dwelling on the possibility of a loss, he turned on the stereo and sang along, pretending to be a music star.

* * *

The Bulldogs spent the afternoon watching the final consolation round of the tourney. Afterward they went out for the pre-game meal which was provided by some of the appreciative fans in Madison. The food was terrific, but Coach Ryan had given strict orders that no one stuff himself. The game was too near. Bambi didn't eat much at all. He was too excited to be hungry.

The arena was nearly full. It was a record crowd for a state A tournament. Almost the entire populace of Madison was there, even people who weren't normally sports fans. The newspapers were anticipating an exciting contest. There were only two losses on the Bulldog record and the Patriots didn't have any. They were the number one and two teams in the state. It was a dream match-up. Lincoln had a height advantage, but Madison was used to playing bigger teams. They relied on quickness, stamina, positioning, and shooting ability for their success. The Patriots had the advantage of having played on the arena floor several times. They also had more tournament experience than the Bulldogs. Madison would have to play up to their full potential to upset Lincoln. Even that might not be enough.

The starting lineups were announced before the start of the big contest. The reaction of the fans during the introduction made it fairly evident that it was the Sioux Falls fans against the rest of the arena. This was another version of the David and Goliath story, and the fans not directly involved with either team usually chose to cheer for David. The yelling was a bit stronger when Lance Masterson was introduced. He'd had a good tournament so far and had won the respect of many with his constant hustle on both ends of the court. He ran out to center

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court to join his teammates and raised his arms in a giant V for victory.

The referees and players lined up for the opening tip. The big Patriot center batted it back to one of his guards. The last game of Bambi's high school career had begun. Both teams started slowly. There were a few turnovers and cold shooting, and the defenses were both playing tight man to man. Lincoln led 12-9 after one quarter of play.

When the second quarter tip went up, Bambi broke hard for the area where the ball had been tipped to begin the game. He anticipated correctly as the Patriot center hadn't seen him streak into position to intercept the ball. The big man batted the ball to the exact spot where Bambi had just arrived. He grabbed it and drove around the lone defender for a lay-up. Lincoln maintained a slim lead throughout the first half until just before the intermission. They scored two quick baskets, including one right at the buzzer, to stretch their lead to five points.

The Madison locker room was quiet. That last shot from thirty feet had taken a lot of starch out of them. They weren't down by large margin, but five points was a lot to make up against a team like Lincoln. They definitely weren't going to roll over and play dead Bulldog though.

The Bulldogs rallied a little in the third quarter. Brad and Corky worked a perfect give and go for one basket. Donnie and Bambi used Bambi's specialty, the pick and roll, for another score. Twice Bambi canned jumpers from twenty feet. They were trailing by only three at the end of the third quarter. Bambi could tell the Patriot players were definitely worried.

They were even more worried when the Bulldogs took their first lead of the game with five minutes left to play. The lead then began to change hands. The Bulldogs led by one with two minutes left when Bambi drove under for one of his leaping reverse lay-ups from the baseline. They were up by three big ones. If they could just hold on, they would be the state champs.

Lincoln passed the ball inside to the big man. Donnie tried to stop him and got called for a foul for his efforts. The thing that really hurt was that the shot had gone in. Lincoln had a chance to tie the score. The big center dropped in the free throw to knot it

up at 54.

Madison worked the ball around patiently. Bambi spotted Brad break to the basket on a back-door cut. He lobbed the ball up by the basket. Brad took it and laid it in before coming back to the ground. A perfect alley-oop assist from Bambi: 56-54.

Sioux Falls also worked patiently for the good shot. They finally took an eight footer which rolled off. Denny grabbed the ball and pivoted towards his own basket. A Patriot bumped him, and the ball fell out of his hands and bounced back towards the Lincoln goal. A Patriot player was there all alone. He put in the cripple, and the game was all tied up again.

Coach Ryan called for a time-out and told his charges to work for the last good shot. Bambi knew this situation well. He had come through in the clutch twice before in identical situations. If he could just do it one more time, his dream would be realized. He was seconds away from success.

He waited for the clock to wind down to ten seconds before he made his big move. He lost his man just like he'd planned and drove hard at the basket. It loomed up in front of him. Bambi had total concentration on that orange metal ring and glass bangboard. He released the ball towards the rim and then made sudden contact with another body that brought him crashing to the ground. He turned his head quickly as he was falling to see the results of his shot. The ball spun off the rim and fell away. Bambi slapped the floor in disgust. The referee's whistle had stopped play with five ticks of the clock left.

The referee pointed at Bambi and put one hand on the back of his head. He was calling Bambi for charging. The ref conferred for a second with his partner, and they decided that Bambi had already shot the ball when he made contact. It wasn't a player possession foul, and shots on a one and one basis were going to be awarded to the man Bambi had collided with.

Bambi lay on the floor, still stunned by the call. *How could this have happened? I've made a mistake that could cost us the game and me my dream.* The players made the long walk to the other end of the court and then Madison called time-out just before the refs gave the shooter the ball. Coach Ryan wanted the shooter to think about the importance of what he was about to

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do. He hoped it would shake him up enough to miss.

The coach gave his players their last-minute instructions and sent them back onto the floor. The teams lined up again. The shot arched toward the hoop and caught the lip of the rim. The ball bounded up against the glass and then dropped through the cords. Bambi felt like an arrow had just hit him in the back. The second shot bounced off. There was a mad scramble for the ball. It was knocked to the floor and rolled away to a Lincoln player. Bambi grabbed another Patriot to get a foul call, but he was behind the refs and they didn't see him. By the time Corky pushed the man with the ball, the game was already over.

Bambi stumbled directly to the locker room like a blind man. He didn't notice the eyes of some of the fans following him. In fact, he didn't notice anything. He undressed mechanically, walked into the shower, and stood there for a moment before he turned the water on. It was almost like he had forgotten why he had gone in there.

Meanwhile, out on the court, the team members were receiving their individual medals for second place. The announcer called off the names and each player went up to receive his. When Lance Masterson was called, the other Bulldogs discovered that Bambi wasn't there. The coach quickly went out and picked it up. "Lance got sick to his stomach," he explained to the man handing out the medals.

After all the medals were passed out, the big second place trophy was awarded to the Bulldog squad. They then stayed on the court for the presentations to the Lincoln team. They also shook hands and congratulated the winners once more before departing for the locker room. Bambi was still standing in the shower when they entered. Nobody spoke to him. They knew he felt bad and didn't want to make things worse. It was like his father had died or something. What could a person say in a situation like that? This was a time when silence was golden, perhaps.

The rest of the team showered quickly and began to dress. Bambi finally walked out of the shower, looking neither to the left or right. He partially dried himself off and put his clothes on. He walked out the door, leaving his uniform lying on the bench.

Donnie picked it up and stuffed it in his own duffel bag.

Donnie felt worse about what was happening to Bambi than he did about losing the game. What was he going to do? He couldn't quote some cliché and make everything all better. Or tell a joke. 'Remember, Bambi, it's not if you win or lose. It's if you remember to put your trunks on before you go out on the court.' Something like that at this time would be about as welcome as a porcupine in a balloon factory. It would be better to wait for Bambi to speak first.

Bambi was already in the bus when Donnie came out. Donnie slid in beside him and put his hand on Bambi's shoulder. He didn't even look up. Donnie dropped his hand and kept his silence. The rest of the team did the same all the way home. They acted as if they were at a funeral; and in a way, they were.

When they arrived home, Bambi went directly to his car. He got in, started the engine, and drove slowly away. He kept on going past his normal turnoff and took the highway going south. Then he turned off on the Lake Herman road and followed it to the State Park. He was doing everything like he had planned underneath the warm spray of the shower. Without noticing it, Bambi had put his foot down a little heavily on the accelerator. He was going eighty miles an hour. His mind recorded the fact although he wasn't a bit worried about having an accident. It would have been really ironic for him to get killed in a car accident on the way to commit suicide.

He could have simply driven his car into something at a high speed, but he was afraid of only crippling himself for life. He'd decided to drive his car onto the thin ice of the lake and take the drowning route. He really didn't want it to look like a suicide on account of his parents. He thought of his mother and father. *They will never understand, will they?* He slowed down and halted at the stop sign at the entrance to the lake. He sat there for a moment trying to figure the best place to drive on. He didn't want the car to break through in shallow water.

He thought of the water seeping through the cracks in the car doors and windows. It would climb in depth until his breath was cut off and the fire of life within him would be extinguished. Then his nightmare would be all over. He decided where the

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deepest water was located and drove to the place where he could make an entrance. When he arrived he pulled the car off the road and onto the frozen sand. He halted to take one last look at the world. He put the transmission in neutral and gunned the engine as he looked across the expanse of moonlit ice in front of him.

His gaze went up to the sky and the canopy of stars over him. *What was out there? God, are you really there? Maybe I'll find out in a few minutes.*

As he sat there his subconscious pushed a thought into his conscious mind. He saw a vision of another young man, poised at the wheel of a red sports car and rodding the engine before he drove it off a cliff. Words hammered at Bambi. 'You're never beat till you quit, till you quit, till you quit.' John Baker had come back to haunt him. Deep inside he really wanted to live. That desire was fighting right now for possession of his body and mind. He felt the internal struggle pulling him like he was the rope in a tug of war.

The battle ended with Bambi breaking into deep sobs. His love and respect of life had won at least a temporary victory. He let out some of the bottled emotion before driving back to town and his house. He drove home at twenty-five miles per hour, looking straight ahead at all times. He almost got hit by a car at an intersection, the other driver slamming on his brakes to avoid the collision. Bambi didn't even see him. He pulled into the driveway, walked straight up the stairs, and entered his room. The only evidence that he wasn't a zombie demonstrated itself as Bambi mechanically undressed for bed.

Before lying down, he pulled his copy of the Bulldog Compact off the wall and ripped it into a half-dozen pieces, which he threw in his trash bin. He then lay down on the bed. His body, perhaps as a protection against allowing the mind to linger on unhealthy thoughts, dropped off to sleep almost immediately.

Chapter 11 – The Final Battle

Sunday morning arrived, and Bambi's mother yelled up the stairs that breakfast was ready. He didn't answer so she went up the steps and knocked on his door. A feeble voice sounded from the other side. She opened the door and peered into the semi-darkness where Bambi was lying in bed.

"Breakfast is ready, honey. And you better hustle to get ready for church."

"I'm not hungry, and I'm not going to church."

"Are you sick?"

"Yeah, that's it. I'm sick."

"What's the matter?"

"I just don't feel well. That's all."

"Is there anything I can get you? Aspirin? Seven-up?"

"No thanks."

"Well, if you need anything, holler. We'll be going to church in a little while, but we'll back around eleven. OK?"

"OK." Bambi didn't notice the very concerned look on his mother's face since he hadn't even looked at her. His eyes had remained fixed to a point on the ceiling. Mrs. Masterson made her way quickly to the kitchen, where her husband had just sat down at the table.

"Lance is sick."

His eyebrows went up slightly. "What's the problem?"

"He just says that he doesn't feel well."

"I can understand that. There are a lot of people that don't feel well after that basketball game last night. The loss was a pretty rough blow to Lance. You know how badly he wanted to win. I guess you could say he's in mourning. It's like someone really close to him died."

"Howard, I'm worried about him. He spoke just like a robot."

"Don't start worrying yet. Things like this take a little time."

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"Maybe you should go up and talk to him."

Mr. Masterson nodded. "OK, dear. After church I'll run up and chat with him. Maybe he'll be up waiting for us when we get home."

* * *

When the noise of the front door closing got Bambi's attention, he was still lying in bed staring at the same spot on the ceiling. He had gone back to sleep for a while but had woken up shortly before the return of his parents. Mr. Masterson made his promised trip up to Bambi's room.

The door was open so he simply called, "Lance?"

A grunt came back from the bed.

"Can I come in and talk to you?"

Another grunt.

"How are you feeling now?"

"Like a truck ran over me, and I never got the license plate number."

"That bad, huh?"

"Probably worse."

"Got a headache, upset stomach, fever?"

"I don't think so. I just don't have any strength or energy. I feel like a wet dishcloth."

"Does it have anything to do with the game last night?"

"Dad," Bambi's voice showed some human quality finally, and also a little impatience. "I haven't been sick in over four years. Isn't it OK if I break down and get sick once in a while? I mean, I'm not Superman or anything."

"Sure, sure, just forget I said that. Anything I can do for you? Do you want your lunch up here?"

"I'm not hungry."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm positively sure."

"Can I turn the light on so you can read?"

"I don't feel like reading."

Mr. Masterson shrugged. "OK, see you later, champ."

Champ? He hadn't called Lance that since he was a little

league baseball player almost eight years before. Eight years! Could time have flown by so rapidly? It seemed incredible. It seemed like only yesterday that Lance had come running into the house yelling that the coach was going to let him play 'shortstuff' in their first game. Mr. and Mrs. Masterson had laughed for five minutes. Then Mr. Masterson had given Bambi a baseball vocabulary lesson. By the time all those thoughts had run through his head, Bambi's father had reached the bottom of the staircase. Mrs. Masterson was waiting for him there.

"Well?"

Her husband shook his head. "He doesn't want to eat or read, and I gathered that he really didn't want to talk either."

"What should we do?"

"How about eating lunch?"

"But—"

"But nothing. Time heals all wounds. Just give him a chance. He'll be fine." He took his wife by the hand and marched her off to the kitchen. They went about their Sunday activities as usual, but things were much different without their only child there.

"Doesn't it seem strange, eating by ourselves?" asked Mrs. Masterson.

Her spouse nodded. "Better get used to it though. It won't be long before he'll be flying out of the nest. He's almost a man now."

An almost pained expression crossed her face. They both reflected quietly on what the absence of their son would do to their lives.

At about two p.m. the phone rang and Bambi's mother answered. The caller was Corky. She began to explain that Lance didn't feel well, but then got an idea. Maybe talking to Corky would do some good for her son. She ran up the stairs. "Corky is on the phone. Do you want to talk with him a little while?"

"Tell him I'm sick."

"OK." She was clearly disappointed. "Sorry to bother you."

"No biggy."

On the way down the steps she considered the possibility

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that he was really under the weather. He was about due for an illness. He hadn't been sick for a long time.

"Corky, I'm really sorry, but he's just not feeling up to talking to anybody."

"I see, Mrs. Masterson. Thanks for trying. Bye."

"Goodbye."

When suppertime rolled around, she didn't bother asking her sick boy if he was hungry. She simply prepared a plate and took it up to his room. "Fixed you a little snack, Lance. I'll just set it down on the table."

Bambi didn't reply. He also didn't eat a bite. When his mother finally returned to get the dirty dishes, she found his plate untouched. She picked up the tray and walked out without a word. Down in the kitchen, she showed her husband the full plate.

"He didn't eat a mouthful and hasn't all day. Maybe we should call the doctor."

"Ah, come on, Jenny. You're just making a cannonball out of a beebee. You worry too much."

"Oh, I know, but I just can't help it. He is my own only son you know."

"Ours, dear. Our only son."

She nodded.

* * *

The next morning she climbed up to Bambi's room, anxious to see what a night's sleep had done for her patient. He was awake and his eyes were still glued to the ceiling. "Good morning, Lance. How are you this morning?"

He grunted.

"Are you planning on going to school today?"

"No way."

"OK. What do you want for breakfast?"

"Nothing."

"Lance, you have to eat something! You need to build your strength back up."

"What for?"

She was really puzzled by his response. It sounded like he didn't want to get well. "Lance, I think I should take you to the doctor."

"No way, Mom."

"Can I at least take your temperature?"

Another grunt.

She didn't know whether that meant yes or no, but she got her thermometer anyway. He grudgingly opened his mouth without removing his eyes from the ceiling. When she took it from him and read it, she found that it registered just over ninety-eight degrees. He didn't have a fever. She was perplexed by this strange illness which seemed to have no symptoms except loss of appetite and weakness.

She was beginning to suspect that any sickness Lance was suffering wasn't coming from his body, which worried her even more. She thought of calling her husband at his dental office but decided to wait. As soon as he came home that evening, she ran out to meet him. "Lance still hasn't eaten a thing, Howard; we've got to do something!"

"What do you suggest, force-feed him?"

"I don't know what to suggest. Maybe we should get a psychiatrist. That boy hasn't left his bed in two days except to go to the bathroom. He doesn't read, doesn't watch TV, and doesn't even look at me when I talk to him. I can't take much more of this."

The phone rang and she sprinted to it as if the solution to her big problem was waiting on the other end of that black box. It was Donnie Kern this time. Corky had called again earlier that afternoon, but Lance hadn't wanted to talk again. She informed Donnie that Lance was sick.

"I know, Mrs. Masterson. Corky told me. I was just calling to see how he was, what the matter is, and if I could be of any help."

She began to think of a good story she could tell Donnie to satisfy his curiosity. Then she decided to reveal the truth to him, as she saw it at least. "Donnie, I know you and Lance are very good friends so I'm going to tell you something confidential that I maybe shouldn't tell you. But maybe you can help."

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"I'll do anything I can."

"Thanks. It's kind of hard to explain. Actually it's very painful to explain." There was a pause in her speaking as she groped for words. "I think Lance is having a mental problem of some kind, depression or something like that. He hasn't done a thing, including eat, for two days."

"To tell you the truth, Mrs. Masterson, I half suspected that. I'm kind of an amateur psychologist. I've been watching Lance's behavior lately. He's been acting a little strangely, especially after the game last Saturday. He wanted to win that championship so badly and had worked so hard for it for so long that he was shattered by what happened. He probably blames himself as well. I think that depression may be a very accurate diagnosis. It really is a common problem in the world and all of us have to cope with it at certain times to a certain degree. We just can't let it progress to a serious stage."

"What do you think we should do?"

"Will he talk to me if I come over?"

"I don't know. Hold on and I'll find out." She took the stairs two at a time, uttering a brief prayer as she went. "Lance, Donnie wants to come over and talk to you. OK?"

"No, Mom, not OK. I don't want to see anybody."

"He would really like to see you."

"Tell him I'm too sick."

She was almost crushed by this new setback. She could barely keep from bursting into tears as she broke the news to Donnie. "Now what?"

"I have a plan. It might take a while, but then again, I might be over to your house in a few minutes. It all depends on if and when I can get the special medicine."

"I don't know what you have in mind, but it can't hurt. I'll be expecting you."

"I'll give you a call if things don't work out. And, Mrs. Masterson, take it easy. Everything is going to be all right."

"Thanks, Donnie. I needed that." She hung up and walked to the couch where her husband was sitting. "You don't suppose Lance would do anything rash like...like—"

"Like commit suicide?"

"Yes. Do you think we should watch him?"

"Honey, you can't watch someone twenty-four hours a day. It's impossible. You've just got to have faith in Lance. He's a good boy, Jenny, and a strong boy."

"I pray that you're right."

"Then maybe you can literally pray he'll be all right."

"Yeah. I'll do that." She hurried off to the bedroom.

* * *

Just after his conversation with Bambi's mother, Donnie made another phone call. This one was to Lisa Nielsen. "Hello, is Lisa there?"

"This is Lisa."

"Hi, Lisa. This is Donnie Kern."

"Hi, Donnie. What's up?"

"Well, I was wondering if you would do me a big favor?"

"Favor? Like what?"

"You know that Bambi Masterson is sick, don't you?"

"Yes, Corky's girlfriend told me."

"Well, it's a special kind of sickness."

"What do you mean, exactly?"

"What I mean is that he apparently is suffering from a mental problem and not a physical problem."

"What? You're kidding?"

"No, I wish I was. Anyhow, I know that Bambi really really likes and respects you. You follow me?"

"I'm not sure, but I don't see what all this has to do with anything. I'm sure that Bambi likes and respects lots of people. Why did you pick me out?"

"Maybe I'd better use more precise language and be frank about it. Bambi is in love with you. Has been ever since eighth grade. He hardly even looks at other girls."

Donnie heard a sharp gasp on the other end of the line. "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure."

"Then...what do you want me to do?"

"I want you to go over to Bambi's house and talk to him. He

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won't talk to any of us boys, but he might talk to you. We have to snap him out of his depression. He hasn't eaten or done anything else for the last two days. Will you do it?"

"When?"

"As soon as possible. I'll drive you over."

"Give me ten minutes."

"Will do, and thanks. See you in ten."

"Bye, Donnie." Lisa hung up the phone and stood there for a moment, deep in thought. Suddenly she shook herself out of the trance she was in and began to get ready for the trip to Bambi's. Eight minutes later Donnie arrived in his father's new car. In two more minutes he and Lisa pulled into Bambi's driveway. Mrs. Masterson answered the doorbell and stopped short when she saw Lisa.

"Hello, Mrs. Masterson."

"Hello, Lisa. Come on in, you two. OK, Donnie, what's your big plan?"

Donnie pointed at Lisa. "There's my secret weapon. You take her upstairs, without asking Bambi if he wants to see her, and then leave her alone with him. I have an idea you could busy yourself getting Bambi something to eat because he may suddenly find out that he's hungry after Lisa's through with him."

Bambi's mother shrugged and smiled weakly. "What can I say? Come on, Lisa. Right this way and good luck to you."

When they reached the top of the steps, Mrs. Masterson tiptoed lightly to the door to make sure Lance was in bed. He was and still staring at the ceiling. She motioned Lisa to her side. Mrs. Masterson flicked on the light as they entered. Bambi didn't look up. "Lance, you've got company."

"Mom, I told you I don't want to see anybody. Send him away."

"Hello, Bambi. I'm not a him."

The sound of another female voice and one that sounded very familiar caused Bambi to blink his eyes, but he never moved them from the ceiling.

"How are you feeling?" Lisa asked.

Bambi couldn't believe his ears so he asked his eyes to get a

second opinion. He turned his head to the side for the first time in two days. His eyes came to the same conclusion as his ears had. Lisa Nielsen *was* standing in his bedroom with a smile as wide as the Grand Canyon and as bright as the summer sun. This was the same smile he had often dreamed of seeing when they won the state tourney. *But we lost.*

"OK," he muttered. *This has to be some kind of dream. I'm starting to suffer hallucinations.*

Bambi's mother touched Lisa on the shoulder. "Excuse me, Lisa. I really have to get some dinner on the stove." Her face had brightened considerably at seeing Lance's reaction to his visitor. "I'll see you a little later." She smiled warmly and winked at Lisa on her way out.

"Lisa, what are you doing here?"

"I just dropped in to see an old friend who's been in bed for two days and has me worried." She moved closer to the bed.

He turned away from her. "Don't get too close! I must really look and smell great. I haven't showered since Saturday night. My hair should probably have an oil change by now."

"You look just fine, Bambi. It's not your hair that I'm worried about. It's what's under it. Will you tell me what's going on with you?"

"I'm not sure I can, Lisa. Not so you'd understand, anyway."

"Try me."

"But I don't—"

"Please, Bambi."

"OK. It's going to sound pretty stupid to you, but you asked for it. I just simply don't want to go on with this thing that we call life. There's no reason for me to get out of this bed or eat or anything else. I'm just sick and tired of the whole mess."

"How could this have happened to you?"

"I don't know. Maybe I just got burnt out. Maybe each of us is given so much energy at birth, and I've already used mine up."

"That's nonsense, and you know it. Bambi, you've been the most alive person I've ever known. Your enthusiasm, determination, and dedication have been an inspiration to almost all of us at school. You've always acted like life was wonderful and not a pain in the neck like a lot of other people do."

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He shrugged. "I really don't see what difference that makes. What difference does anything make?"

Lisa was up against a stone wall. She couldn't think of anything to say. She looked around the room searching for words. Her eyes came in contact with some of the posters hanging on the wall. She quickly decided her plan of action. "So you're going to quit, huh?"

Bambi felt a spark of anger go through his body, but the spark failed to ignite the rest of him. "What do you mean? I never ever quit!"

"No, you didn't. You always found the strength and the zeal to overcome the problems and stumbling blocks. You kept the desire to keep on trying. Why? Because your goal was always out in front of you – like a carrot in front of a donkey to keep him pulling the wagon. You had a target to shoot for, and you weren't going to settle for a miss. Am I right?"

"That sums it up pretty accurately."

"But now the Lincoln Patriots ate your carrot. Your goal just disappeared in a Sioux Falls gymnasium, and now you have nothing left to live for. The thing is that your carrot was going to be gone last Saturday one way or another. Either Lincoln ate it or you did. What difference did it really make who won or lost?"

"If we'd won, I'd have known that I accomplished what I set out to do and hadn't wasted all my efforts. I would have been a winner. To continue your analogy, the carrot would have given me sufficient nourishment to go on."

"I think that maybe you're right. If we'd won, you wouldn't be sitting in bed now. You'd be out telling the world that you'd come out on top, that you were a winner."

"But we lost and what's the use of talking about it?"

"Just wait a second. Your life would have been over for all practical purposes. You would have basked in the glory of your one accomplishment for the rest of your life. But what about the future? You might have let your life stop right there and then spent the rest of your existence talking about the good old days when you used to be alive – when you used to be a winner. But winners never quit."

Bambi looked up, somewhat surprised and puzzled by her

words and the sharpness of her voice. How often had those words pushed him on when he wanted to stop running, stop lifting weights, or stop getting up so early? They had spurred him on when he got tired or disappointed, but that was a long, long time ago – back in his foolish days when he thought that something mattered.

"Do you understand that, Bambi? Winners never quit."

"Why, sure I—"

"No, you don't. You don't even know what a winner is. A winner is not a person on the side who has the most points. Winners are defined not by the outcome of the game but by their attitude, by them simply never quitting. Win or lose they find a new challenge to keep testing them. How about that quote from *John Baker's Last Race*? 'You're never beat till you quit.' The Patriots didn't beat you, Bambi. You aren't beat unless you say you are and hang it up. I'm not talking about silly games. Basketball is fun and everything, but it's still just a game. I'm talking about the important game – life. There are winners and losers in this world. Losers give up, Bambi. They give up their dreams of success and happiness and of a better world to come. The winners fight through all kinds of problems – sickness, death, financial failures."

"But—"

"You name it, and they go through it. But they don't quit. Maybe it looks like they have nothing for their efforts, but they have the knowledge they have taken on life and not quit. And they have expectations that they will be rewarded for playing the game to the end and by all the rules. People quit in different ways. Some people simply commit suicide. Others think it's too hard to live by the rules and start cheating, and others simply stop swimming and float through the rest of their lives. They aren't losers because they are poor or ugly or sick or untalented or anything like that. They can only become a loser by quitting. Oh, it's so hard to say what I really mean. Maybe I'm not talking sense. Do you see what I'm trying to say, Bambi?"

She shook her head and buried her face in her hands in a gesture of pure frustration.

Bambi sat up. "I think I understand, Lisa."

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"You do?" She looked up in surprise.

"I've thought about a lot of things while I've been lying here the last couple days. I touched on a few of the things you mentioned. The thing that's strongest in my mind right now is that I worked my tail off for four years and got nothing for it. I failed. Why should I keep on banging my head against the wall?"

"You can't say that, Bambi. You've done a whole lot. Not only for yourself but also for the team, the town, and your fellow students. You set an almost impossible goal and then came within an eyelash of fulfilling it. You took Madison to the state A for the first time and brought home second place. You won an ESD title and were ranked in the top three in the state for two years in a row. You started a new tradition at Madison High and gave us pride in ourselves. Doesn't any of that count for something?"

"I don't know. I just don't seem to care, I guess."

"And, Bambi, you've been an inspiration for many kids, including. . . ."

"Including what?"

Lisa hesitated. Finally she looked Bambi straight in the eye and uttered, "Including me."

"What? What do you mean? How could I inspire you?"

"That's rather hard to explain, but I'll try. I've known lots of boys in my life, but none of them has measured up to my idea of what a boy should be like. None of them had the same view of the world as I saw it – a world where peace and love could reign if only people would make an effort and sacrifice a little of themselves. I try to picture a world of goodness where people try to get along with each other, without wars and prejudice, without booze and drugs, without all of those rotten things that happen in our present world."

"I never really got a chance to know you or your friends very well, but I saw what you were doing. You were striving to do something you considered good. You sacrificed yourself and didn't give up when the going got tough. You gave me the hope that the kind of people that I wanted to find in this world really do exist and that maybe there are lots of them out there

somewhere. Maybe someday, with determined people like you, man could make the world a really nice place to live. I'm sure I've got you all mixed up now. Anyhow, you were a living model for my dream and gave me inspiration to hang on to my idealism."

"You didn't mix me up. I can relate to what you're saying. Where did you develop all of those heavy thoughts?"

"Lots of places. From the books I read, movies, church, and of course from my parents. I've done a lot of studying about life and the possibilities. I've studied how people live their lives. I want to know the best way to spend my years here on Earth. There are so many alternatives. I really believe I understand some of the secrets to true happiness. You seem to be living proof of one of my theories."

"What do you mean?"

"For the past four years you've been a super specimen of the human race. You've been incredible in your will to succeed – until now. It was your chance to complete your goal that made you tick. That chance is now gone, and you've quit ticking. What I was trying to explain to you earlier is that you still couldn't have been happy if you'd won the tournament. Humans aren't happy with having something. They soon take that thing for granted and need something else. It's wanting something you haven't got but could get that keeps us going. I saw that movie about John Baker too, and I remember him saying that we need to set a goal and then work to achieve that goal. Do you see what I mean?"

"You have me a little confused, especially when you say that I couldn't have been happy about winning the state tourney."

"You'd have been happy for a while, but people can't be content with past successes. You would have needed something else to maintain that happiness. Without it you soon would have suffered a letdown. Anyhow, your goal ended Saturday night. You don't have a reason to get out of bed because you don't have an objective in mind. As far as you're concerned, there is nothing in life that you really want now. Does that have any ring of truth?"

"Partially. The things that are worth it in this life are just not

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within my reach, that's all."

"Hah. So you admit it. You're quitting. You've lost the courage to go out and try to accomplish something hard. Bambi, the best goals I can see appear to be ones that look impossible. Jesus said, 'I wish all you were perfect as my Father in heaven is perfect.' So, I've set a goal of making myself a perfect person. Nobody is perfect though. So I'll always have my goal in front of me. I'll always have work to do. Another good goal is to never quit. That's another one you will never complete until you die. But there are thousands of other goals that you can choose that are worthwhile, ones that you can accomplish if you try."

"But what do you get out of it?"

"What would you have gotten out of winning the state A? The world wouldn't have changed its orbit. You'd still have to eat and sleep and do all the other mundane things that comprise everyday life. The only change would have taken place in your head. You would have gotten joy out of winning because you told yourself that it made you happy. The happiness or sadness that comes from succeeding or failing is all in your mind. You now lie there in bed, convinced that you're unhappy and that things could never improve. You've lost that old Bambi Masterson that would have said that life wasn't going to keep you down for long and you would be a winner eventually. Oh, Bambi!" she wailed and broke into tears. "What am I going to do now? How can I do it?"

"What are you talking about? What do you mean? Why are you crying?"

"What I mean is you've almost talked me into quitting too. Every day I see this cruddy world and hear people make excuses that man just can't help being the way he is and that the evil in the world can never be overcome. I'm told there is no sense in hoping for something that is unrealistic and could never exist. So we should all settle to live like animals because everyone says that's the way the world is. Bambi, I saw the goal and the fight. I was going to keep fighting for the beautiful things in life no matter how much they were scorned by man. I was going to believe that I am something special and everyone is something special if we'd just lift our faces to Heaven and see the reality

that transcends the petty existence viewed by most humans.

"You helped give me the strength to set that goal and work at it, Bambi. You showed me that someone can take on the cynics and succeed with sheer determination and hard work. Now you've given up the struggle, and I've got doubts. Maybe I'm all wrong. Maybe man can't overcome his weaknesses. I don't know anymore. You were so strong, and yet you've given up. How can I, being so weak, keep up the struggle? Surely, you must know the struggle I mean. The struggle to live, not just to exist. The struggle to be nice to people when you feel like screaming at them or worse. The struggle to go to work or school when you feel like going to the beach or staying in bed or even running away. The struggle to keep trying to improve life while people around you are trying to drag you down to their level. In short, Bambi, the struggle to keep from quitting.

"I don't know what your religious beliefs are, Bambi, but I believe that someday in the future we are all going to meet God face to face. I can just picture that event if I give up. He'll say, 'I've given you directions on how to play the game of life. Did you play by the rules and did you play till the end?' And I'll say, 'But, Lord, it was so hard.' I don't want that to happen, Bambi! I want to look into that glorious face and say, 'Yes, Lord, it was really hard, but I didn't quit.'"

"Lisa, this isn't fair. You're making me feel guilty for ruining your life. My actions shouldn't have such a profound impact on you. Don't use me for your model. There are others who are better than me. Why don't you use Donnie as an example? He's struggled much harder than I have."

"Because I don't have special feelings for Donnie."

Bambi sat up straight. "What did you say?"

"I said that I don't have special feelings for Donnie."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Oh, Bambi! Do I have to spell it out for you? Can't you see what I'm trying to say without saying it?"

Bambi had a suspicion, but he was sure that he was just doing some wishful thinking. "As a matter of fact, Lisa, I think you'd better spell it out. I'm having a little trouble understanding all the complicated things you're trying to say."

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"You asked for it, Bambi. What I'm trying to say is that I've had a crush on you for years, since eighth grade in fact. You hardly even seemed to notice that I was alive – except for those two times you asked me out. While your goal for the past four years has been winning the state tournament, my goal has been to win the heart of Bambi Masterson. Now, does that register?"

"About 19.2 on the Richter scale." Then he laughed. *I actually laughed. Maybe laughter really is the best medicine. Of course the nurse that had provoked it was a vital component of the cure.* "But what about those college guys you've been seeing?"

"Just dates, Bambi. Nothing serious has developed. Most of them are after one thing, and I'm not interested in being someone's plaything."

"Lisa, I can't believe this is happening. I've daydreamed about you for years. In fact, the night I dreamed up the Bulldog Compact, you inspired me. This is simply unreal. You reached your goal a long time ago and just never knew it!"

They gazed into each other's eyes for a moment. Bambi finally broke the silence "Why don't you go downstairs and wait for me. I don't think I can discuss these things any further while I'm feeling grubby, and don't have any grub inside me. Tell my mother I'll be down as soon as I shower. And tell her you'll be staying for dinner – if you want to that is. Then we can discuss this very interesting situation in more depth. I'm much more fun to talk to when I'm not worrying about having a bad hair day."

"Of course I want to stay for dinner."

"Then run along so I can get to bathing. If I don't get some food in me soon, I may eat the shower curtain."

"OK. *Hasta luego.*"

"*Hasta muy pronto.*"

Before Bambi hit the shower, he gathered all of the pieces of the Bulldog Compact together and put them on his desk with a roll of scotch tape over them as a paperweight. He'd use the tape to repair the damage later.

Lisa informed Mrs. Masterson of Bambi's plan to arrive showered and ready to eat anything and everything. Mrs. Masterson threw her arms around the younger woman and

hugged her. She offered a fervent thank you and then asked Lisa to stay to supper.

"Bambi already gave me one invitation. I wouldn't miss it for the world. Can I use your phone to let my mom know?"

"Of course. It's right over there on the wall." Mrs. Masterson turned to Donnie. "How about you, Dr. Kern?"

"No thanks, Mrs. Masterson. I'd better just ride off into the sunset in my white Impala as people ask, 'Who was that masked man?'"

They all laughed, and then the females escorted Donnie to the door. They both thanked him for the part he had played in Bambi's recovery.

"Believe me, ladies, it was my pleasure."

"Mrs. Masterson, could I talk to Donnie alone for a second?" Lisa asked.

"Of course! Bye, Donnie." Mrs. Masterson walked away towards her waiting kitchen.

"Donnie, What made you think that I'd be willing to come over here? I mean, how"

Donnie laughed. "Lisa, I had no idea at all that you'd come. All I knew was that you have always inspired Bambi and that you appeared to be the only one who might get him out of his funk. I just prayed that you'd consider trying to cheer him up."

"I can assure you that no divine intervention was needed in this case. Thank you for giving me this opportunity! I'm sure Bambi will fill you in on all the juicy details later."

"Juicy? Now you've gotten my curiosity." Donnie started getting into his car. "All this gratitude is making me hungry. I better go home and see what my mom is conjuring up on the stove. Take care, Lisa!"

He drove away and Lisa went back to the Masterson house, where she made her phone call. Then she helped Mrs. Masterson get things ready for the meal while Bambi was getting himself ready upstairs.

He couldn't believe how terrific he felt. It was like on a warm spring day after a long and hard winter when the sun comes out and the birds sing. He sang in the shower. *"Then I saw her face. Now I'm a believer. And there's not a trace of doubt in*

my mind."

The rebirth process of spring has to be one of the most beautiful and overlooked miracles in our world. That's why I feel so different. It's almost like I've been reborn. That old Bambi, living only to win that championship, is dead. A newer, and hopefully better, Bambi had sprung out of the ashes. Or maybe more correctly phrased, pulled out of the ashes by a beautiful and wonderful girl.

Ironically that girl had actually contributed to his total obsession with winning. Her apparent rejection of him, combined with his own feelings of social inferiority, had caused him to withdraw into that other existence.

I'm going to have to ask her about those rejections. And another thing – what am I supposed to do now? I've never had a girlfriend before, and I don't know what to do with one. Oh, well, I can let Lisa handle that. She's done just fine so far. Or maybe she's not my girlfriend yet. He kept replaying her beautiful sweet words in his head. Winning the heart of a girl was much better than winning a trophy made of wood and metal.

When Bambi came downstairs, his mother handed him a stack of mail. "Here are some letters that arrived today."

He had more mail than he got at Christmas. He glanced at the return addresses – SDSU, DSC, Yankton College, Sioux Falls College, Northern, University of South Dakota, and Tech. "Holy guacamole!" *My gosh, now I'm quoting Corky. I need to call him and apologize for my refusal to talk to him.* He just looked at the envelopes in his hand.

"Aren't you going to open them?" asked Lisa.

"Why not?" He tore open the one from State. He read it aloud for the benefit of the other two. "Dear Lance, We coaches at SDSU congratulate you on a fine performance at the state A tourney and a fine career at Madison High School. We would be pleased if you could come to Brookings to allow us to show you our fine campus and discuss the possibility of your becoming part of our athletic program. We may be able to offer you a scholarship. Please consider us before you sign at another school. Sincerely yours, John Morris, head basketball coach, South Dakota State University." Bambi let out a long whistle.

"All those other letters must be about the same thing."

"Here's something in the paper that might interest you," said Mrs. Masterson as she held out the sports page of the Madison paper. She went back to the kitchen.

He flinched when the headlines leapt to his eyes. 'BULLDOGS FALL TO PATRIOTS IN FINALS'. *How could Mom do this to me? Is she trying to rub salt into my wounds?* Then another headline caught his eye: 'Masterson and Kern Named to All Tourney Team'. "How about that? Good old Donnie. From scrub to state A tourney team. Not too shabby. Not too shabby at all."

"Dinner is served. Come and get it."

"You don't have to tell me twice." They sat down to the table, where Bambi discovered one of his favorite foods, goulash. He also discovered there were only three place settings. "Where's Dad?"

"He has a toastmasters dinner tonight."

"Oh, yeah, that's right." Bambi dug into the goulash right after the food was blessed. He made a couple of return trips before he decided he better quit eating to avoid getting sick – really sick. After the three of them had combined to do the dishes, Bambi walked Lisa home. It was his chance to find out the answers to his burning questions. "Lisa, did you say that you've had a crush on me since the eighth grade?"

"That's what I said."

"Then why did you tell me you had to baby-sit that time I called you for a date?"

"Because I had to baby-sit, you silly. Did you think I was giving you the run around?"

"I sure did."

"I tried to explain that I'd have been glad to go out with you some other time, but you hung up before I could say anything. And then you did the same thing the day you called about the Prom. I was really miserable that day, but what could I do? I'd already told Jeff that I would go with him. I couldn't break a date with him just to go with you, no matter how badly I wanted to."

"Isn't it funny, Lisa?"

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"Isn't what funny?"

"I had a crush on you and you had a crush on me ever since the eighth grade and neither of us knew. I was too scared to ever tell you. I couldn't have risked the hurt that I might have received afterwards. You know how kids are."

Lisa nodded. "And I couldn't tell you because our society demands that the male is the one who initiates a relationship. I understand and agree with most rules of our society but not that one. I even get a little angry when I think about it."

"Me too. I just wonder how many people that loved each other never found out. It's really sad to think about it." Lisa placed her hand in Bambi's. He looked over at her with surprise. She flashed that magic smile at him again. He was learning. The smile that broke out on his own face was stretching his face to the point of hurting, but he didn't mind. Holding her little hand in his strong one felt even better than a fork did after a two-day fast.

The joy that seemed to fill his insides was even better than the thrill of beating Huron in the sectional tournament. He was so happy he didn't know what to say. Thoughts about what he had almost done to himself that Saturday night washed over him, causing him to shudder. He had almost quit. But he hadn't. He was a winner – at least for now.

"I guess I was pretty dumb setting my sights on that state title and letting that goal take possession of me."

"Setting the goal was fine, Bambi. People have to set goals that are hard to keep them from getting bored and living for the moment like so many do. The problem was that you had the wrong attitude toward the outcome. What you needed to do was take the failure like a man and set a new goal. You've learned some valuable lessons in life, including one on work. If you want something, you have to work for it. Too many people stand around waiting for it to be given to them. Usually it's a long wait and with no results."

Bambi thought of the future. *What new goal or goals can I set? There is the chance to play on a college basketball team. That goal would only last a few years. It will come to an end and leave me without a carrot, as Lisa would put it. What else do I*

want? A quick glance at Lisa reminded him what he wanted more than anything in the world right now. He could set a goal of making her his wife. "Do you think marriage is a good goal for a person to set?" He hoped she didn't think he was proposing. He wasn't ready for anything like that yet.

"To tell you the truth, Bambi, I think marriage is a wonderful goal, but—"

"But what?"

"But too many people stop with the wedding ceremony. They don't continue setting goals such as keeping their marriage strong and growing. Their marriages become boring and meaningless. It's just like I told you before. We humans need to have a purpose for us to really be alive. If we don't have a purpose, we begin to exist like zombies or something. Do you see what I mean?"

"Yeah." Bambi could understand that one very easily. He had been a zombie for two whole days. He remembered John Baker's advice to his students – set a goal and then work to achieve that goal. Was that the secret to human happiness? *Have I made a key discovery, with Lisa's help of course, at the age of eighteen that many people will never find in a whole lifetime of trying to avoid doing things?* As he and Lisa continued down the sidewalk hand in hand, a small group of youngsters came up to them.

"Excuse me, Mr. Masterson," one of them started nervously. "We're in the eighth grade this year and we were wondering if we could join your Dogs of Victory group. We want to be winners too."

Bambi looked at Lisa, who was smiling at him. "You sure can, Tiger. What's your name?"

"Troy."

Bambi felt the smile on his face become brittle. That name was painful to him still. "Well, Troy, why don't you and your friends meet my group at the high school at four p.m. tomorrow? How's that sound?"

"That's just great! Thanks, Mr. Masterson!"

"Call me Bambi."

"OK. Thanks, Bambi. See you tomorrow." The group of

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excited youngsters walked noisily away from them. Maybe his former dream wasn't completely dead. Maybe he could work with kids and help them develop their skills to where they could win that state tournament. He could pass on what he knew to these children, who were soon to become adults. He could help put meaning in their lives. And they could do the same to kids coming up behind them. It was like a chain reaction. He just realized that he had found another goal.

Life is just chockfull of things to accomplish. He and Lisa discussed that until their conversation shifted to occupational goals. They considered the many possibilities. The list was almost endless. He could be almost anything he wanted to be if he set his mind to it and gave it all he had. Life was really rosy if you looked at it from the right angle. It helped to have an angel like Lisa to uncover the angle. He wanted to yell, 'Look out world! Here I come!'

They finally reached Lisa's door. *What do I do for an encore?*

Lisa came to his rescue. "I sure have a lot of books to carry to school tomorrow. Do you know of any strong young man who would volunteer to carry them for me and help relieve the loneliness of the walk?"

Bambi smiled. "About any boy in school would be glad to do it, but I know just the right man for the job. What time do you want me to drop by?"

"Let's say eight a.m. sharp."

"*Esta bien.* I'll be here *a las ocho.*"

"Good night, Bambi." She climbed up one step so her face was on the same level as his and kissed him on the cheek.

He finally managed to squeeze out, "Good night, Lisa," just as she was disappearing through the door.

Wowee! Bambi found himself skipping down the sidewalk. He forced himself to walk, but he really felt like flying. Everything was just too good to be true. How could he have thought that everything was all over? *Life is like that I guess. It puts you down in a hole one day and up on the top of the mountain the next. You just have to learn to keep on trucking through the good and the bad. If you don't, you might remain in*

that hole forever. Loss of hope for the future might be life's greatest tragedy.

He wasn't going to let it happen to him again. He made plans for the future and thought about the many goals he would set. His thoughts were interrupted by the loud engine of a noisy old car going by. A beer can came flying through the darkness, landing behind him and then rolling to the curb.

Bambi heard a voice say, "Well, if it isn't Tom Turkey." He thought he saw Troy in the back seat, but it was hard to tell by streetlight. He thought about what had happened to Troy. They had been such good friends for so long, but now they were strangers. It was as if they had never shared all those great times together. *People can't live in the past and on yesterday's friendships. We went in opposite directions. It's sad, but what can I do? A man has to choose for himself which road he walks down in life. Troy has detoured down the wrong road.*

He heard the car come back from the other direction. This time it stopped, and Mike Bennett and Dan Brown jumped out of the front seat. Troy Miller got slowly out of the back seat. The other two had already reached Bambi before Troy was completely out of the car.

"Well, well, well, if it isn't the golden boy. Or should I say 'girl'? What do you think, Brownie?"

"Looks like a tossup question to me. Could be a combination."

Oh, no, Just when things are going so well these two clowns have to come along and spoil my newfound happiness. He tried to walk away, but Bennett grabbed him.

"Whoa, Masterson. We haven't finished talking to you yet, boy. We haven't had a chance to thank you for blowing the state A finals the other night. And I didn't get time to buy you a get well card either. Personally I think you were just afraid to show your ugly face at school and feel ashamed about choking."

Brown jumped in. "We thought maybe we should give you a little help with that problem. We decided we can rearrange your face for you so nobody will recognize you. Then you can go out in public again without people yelling at you for screwing up."

"Where do you think we should put his nose, Brown?"

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"I don't know. How about in his ear?"

"You know, Masterson, if you want to walk the streets at night, you better have your ninety-eight-pound weakling turned King Kong friend of yours along for protection. You never know when you're going to run into a couple of guys who hate your guts – like me and Brownie. Right, Dan?"

"You said it, Mike."

Despite his predicament Bambi almost laughed. Who would ever have thought that Donnie would have been accused of being Bambi's bodyguard? At least not a few years back when Donnie still looked like the before picture on the Charles Atlas muscleman advertisements. His humorous view of the situation didn't last very long. He had to think of a way out of this thing. Fighting wasn't on the top of his alternative list, especially now when he was feeling so much love inside. And it appeared they were going to gang up on him. Not good odds. However, it appeared that these two might not give him any choice. Troy approached. Maybe it would be three on one. He could run. They would never catch him. *No, I'm not going to give them that satisfaction. They might be bluffing just so they can laugh when I bail out.*

He wondered what he could say to Lisa in the morning when he appeared on her doorstep with two black eyes, a crooked nose, and several empty spots where teeth used to be. Bambi had never hit anyone in his life, but he was strong and quick. He might go down, but he wouldn't go down easily.

Brown circled to one side of him while Bennett was on the other. Troy stood in the back, apparently content to just watch the action.

Bambi thought of the story *A Quiet man*. It looked like everyone got backed up to the wall sometime or other and had to stand up and fight. It was just so stupid that people couldn't leave each other alone. He maneuvered for better position.

"Oh, looky here, Buck. Looks like we got us a little scrap. Dancing Bear isn't going to run home to Mommy this time."

"What have I ever done to you, Bennett? What's it going to prove if you and Brown do a hammer job on me?"

"You make me sick, Masterson. Always doing what's right."

Always obeying the rules, respect the teachers, go to church, be a jock, be polite and all that other garbage. I'm just sick to death of that crap. Why can't you be like other kids? You're a traitor, Masterson. You deserted your generation to kiss the butts of the old fogies. It's time you learn a lesson."

"That's funny, Mike. I've always felt the same way. I really despised you and your way of life, but I never got my friends to come beat you up because of it. You know what you are, Bennett? You're a loser – not to mention a coward. You know that compared to your smell, skunk odor could be considered a perfume."

"Famous last words, Masterson. Get him, Brownie."

Brown started to move in on Bambi. It looked like they would try to wrestle him to the ground and then inflict some blows while they had him down. Bambi made a countermove to prepare himself.

Just then he heard a voice yell out, "What the hell do you think you're doing, Miller?" Bambi looked back. Troy was holding Bennett by the jacket.

Troy shouted angrily, "You get in that car and you drive out of here, or so help me, I'm gonna break every flipping bone in your ugly body."

"You can't do this to me, Troy. We're buddies. What do you want to help this puss out for? He's not worth nothin'."

"He's worth ten times more than you could even think of becoming, Bennett. You're not even worth bruising my knuckles on. Now get!" He shoved Bennett toward the street. Brown didn't want to press the situation since the odds now looked to be against them. He started for the car.

"Come on, Mike. Let's split."

"I'm never gonna forget this, Miller," threatened Bennett as he too started moving toward the parked automobile.

"I didn't think you would. I heard that rats have terrific memories."

Bennett lifted his middle finger as he entered the car, which quickly squealed away. Bambi and Troy stood there in silence for a moment. Finally Bambi said softly, "Thanks, Troy."

"Forget it. It was strictly my pleasure."

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"Why did you do it?"

"I've changed a lot, Bambi, but not enough for me to allow an old friend to get roughed up by two guys while I stand around and watch. Besides, I was getting sick of Bennett and his crowd. I'm also tired of being like them. I lost my job last week, and I've been fighting with my parents for a long time. I've been on probation since that night I was drunk at the game. I'm just fed up with not having friends I can rely on. It would be nice to have some fun without getting into trouble."

Bambi didn't say anything so Troy changed the subject.

"I haven't talked to you for a long time. So how ya been?"

"Well, Troy, I had a little rough sledding for a while, but things are really fantastic now."

"Glad to hear it. At least one of us is happy."

Bambi didn't know what to say to that. "Come on, I'll walk you home." The two walked and talked of old times. They laughed over some of the silly things they had done in the past and the fun they had enjoyed together. It was almost like the old days.

"By the way, Bambi, the new track coach talked to me today. He said that he thought that Madison could do real well this year in track if he could get the Dogs of Victory to go out. He was really enthusiastic about the whole thing. I'm even thinking of going out. I've really missed sports. It was a part of my life that nothing could replace. I waited, Bambi, for somebody to come ask me to come out for basketball. If someone had begged me, I know I would've played. But nobody did. Bennett kept telling me that I didn't need you guys anyway, and I was better off with him and his friends. I know it's too late for basketball and to help you do what you wanted to so badly. I'm really sorry I let you down, but maybe it isn't too late for me to help myself. I've made a decision to go to Dakota State next year and try out for the team. I've got to start getting back in shape. It's been a long time since I've done anything in the line of exercise except fighting and bending my elbow to get a beer can up to my mouth."

Bambi was really surprised by Troy's statements. He was also very pleased. "Say, Troy, I've decided to keep on working

out for tennis and for basketball next year. I don't know if the others are going to continue or not, but you're welcome to join me. I'll be in the weight room right after school."

"Sounds good, Bambi. I'll be there with bells on my tennis shoes, as my mom always says."

The two clasped hands. Bambi couldn't resist saying, "One for all."

"And all for one." Troy broke into a laugh. "I'll see you tomorrow, old buddy."

"Take it easy, Troy."

Bambi walked up the sidewalk that led to his front door. He stood for a moment and gazed up at the stars. He couldn't help but feel guilty about Troy. *I might have been able to keep him from quitting, just like Lisa did for me. I have a new goal in life to help others keep up the struggle. In order to keep up the good fight, everybody needs a little support sometimes. Maybe someday I can give someone the inspiration to keep trying.*

Bambi thought about the track team. Maybe he could play tennis and run track. He had heard about special situations like that. And maybe the Dogs of Victory could all go to DSC and be teammates again. Thinking of all the possibilities made him feel good all over. He knew things wouldn't always go so well, and he wouldn't always feel this good. There was no doubt in his mind that he could face anything that came if he put his mind to it. Sooner or later, the good times would return.

I'm going to be a winner. I'm never going to quit.

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