



THE GAME CHANGER

JENNIFER BROWN

I SAT ON THE TOP BLEACHER, eating the surprisingly delicious hot dog Evangeline had given me and idly writing my story while watching the stadium clear out. Eventually, I saw a slumped figure down in the bottom corner of the bleachers. I sighed, gobbled the rest of the frank, and clunked my way down.

“Hey, Ernie,” I said. I jostled his shoulder and he woke with a snort.

“What? Huh?” He blinked at the scoreboard. “Aw, rats. I’ll have to change all the *wons* to *losts* again.” He shook his head. “Inconsistent team.”

“I’m sure they would rather you didn’t have to change anything. So what did you make of the big halftime show?”

Yes, this was a test. Yes, he failed it. He cleared his throat, thumbed through a timeworn reporter’s notebook, and said, “I would say the girls have a good chance at the state competition this year. That, uh, number in the middle, that, uh, was something else.”

Something else. Like nonexistent. “You’re talking about the...” I trailed off to let him finish.

“The cheerleaders, of course.”

“I thought it was the dance team that did the halftime shows,” I said.

He rubbed one eye with his finger and yawned. “That’s what I meant. They look like cheerleaders.” This, of course, I couldn’t argue. It was true.

“Ernie,” I said. “You mean to tell me you missed the fight?”

He looked confused. “The girls had a fight?”

“The girls never got to come out. The teams had a fight. Don’t worry, I’ve got you covered. I got the story. With quotes.” I opened my own notebook and flipped through the pages, even though I didn’t really need to. “The boys fighting were—”

A screech of tires, a revving engine, and a long, loud scream from the lower parking lot interrupted me.

Ernie and I glanced at each other and then took off toward it.

Well, I took off toward it. Ernie was staggering around behind me, cursing about his leg being asleep after sitting in one position for all that time and why didn’t they spring for cushioned seats for the press already. I raced down the rest of the bleachers and out the stadium gate toward the scream, which died off and then started up again.

By the time I reached the source of the shriek, there was a crowd. They seemed to be circled around something—reminding me of the field brawl.

“It just came out of nowhere and...*thump-thump*...and was gone,” a woman’s voice said. She hiccupped twice and burst into loud tears. “And I can’t feel a heartbe-e-eat.”

“Excuse me,” I said, pushing and prodding my way through the crowd, my Chicago reporter instincts kicking in. “Excuse me, I—oh.”

In the center of the crowd, at the feet of the crying woman, was an unmoving, crumpled body, facedown, his head turned to the side, his eyes open.

The back of his T-shirt read COACH.
The body was definitely Coach Farley's.
And he was definitely dead.