

31. Playing with Fire

In the chapter titled "Playing with Fire," the narrative unfolds on a sunny Friday afternoon in Lake Balboa, California, as a yellow school bus transports the Riverside Cubs high school football team to their championship game at Birmingham Community Charter High School. Victory Boulevard, named for World War I soldiers, leads them to the larger venue, as Faith Baptist, their opponents, had won the right to host the championship but opted for Birmingham due to its capacity.

Birmingham High, a familiar backdrop for various media productions, boasts an illustrious list of alumni, setting an important stage for the Cubs, who have journeyed two hours from Riverside. The team received a warm send-off from their student body as they embarked on their mission, even with player Christian Jimenez nursing a fractured leg.

Upon arriving, the Cubs encounter curious Birmingham students, and they marvel at the stadium's modern facilities, a stark contrast to their own home field. Their wait before the game begins includes watching private jets take off, as affluent locals depart for holiday getaways. Tension builds as the Faith Baptist team arrives, met with intense stares from the Cubs—the visual embodiment of determination to win.

Faith Baptist is confident as they employ a strategy focusing on dominating the line of scrimmage and avoiding turnovers. In their locker room, a prayer underscores their quest for victory. Meanwhile, coach Keith Adams reminds the Cubs to play with heart and tenacity.

As the game begins, Faith Baptist's aggressive defense creates early opportunities for the Cubs, who leverage a unique offensive strategy aided by their players' deafness, allowing them to capitalize on Faith's penalties. The Cubs' driving performance makes them early leaders with a touchdown and two-point conversion. Faith responds quickly, staying within striking distance.

As the quarter proceeds, rising tensions reflect the precarious balance of championship stakes, culminating in mistakes that could cost either team dearly. With the scoreboard revealing a tight game, the question lingers: would this championship end in disappointment for the Cubs? Their resolve is tested as they navigate the frantic pace of the match, underscoring the desire for redemption amidst fierce competition.