



A NOVEL BASED ON THE LIFE OF
VINCE LOMBARDI

**CHARACTER
IS WHAT COUNTS**

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THE
MENTORIS
PROJECT

Chapter One

OPENING KICKOFF

Young Vincent peeled off Avenue Z and rounded the corner at East Fourteenth Street in Sheepshead Bay, Brooklyn, a quiet fishing town that was beginning to attract tourists. He ran hard until he reached his home at 2542. He hauled open the gate of the white picket fence, then climbed the steps two at a time. The door was unlocked. He pushed it open, ran to his mother in the kitchen, plopping the groceries along with his mother's change on the counter beside the sink, then ran down the hall.

"Hey, Vincent?" she called.

"Yes, Mamma?"

"Did you get the parsley?"

"Yes, Mamma, and the ricotta, just like you asked."

"Okay. Now come back and give Mamma a kiss. Be a good boy."

Vincent spun on a dime and ran back to his mother. She kissed him on both cheeks, mussed his hair, and told him she was going to make her famous spinach pie that he loved.

“Yay!” Vince cheered. With a giggle, he asked, “Where’s Papà?”

“I’ll give you three guesses, but the first two don’t—”

“Oh, I know,” he said, tearing off toward the living room where his dad’s favorite lounge chair was.

“Papà!” Vince shouted, running then jumping onto his father’s lap.

“Oh boy, Vincent, you’re getting so heavy,” Harry said, hugging his son. “Did you remember the ricotta?”

Vincent nodded with a big laugh.

“What about the parsley?”

Vincent nodded again, laughing harder this time. He knew what was coming.

“Okay, what about the goat cheese?”

“No, Papà. Mamma never asked for goat cheese.”

“What? Mattie, did my firstborn forget the goat cheese again?”

“Oh, oh, I believe he did, Harry. Could you send him back out for me?” Mattie called.

“No,” Vincent protested, “Mamma never asked for goat cheese. You’re teasing me.”

“What? You would defy your mother?” Harry barked in mock outrage.

Vincent laughed hysterically and replied, “You would defy *your* mamma, Papà.”

Harry squeezed his son hard and tickled him. Vincent tried to wriggle away, but Harry kept up the routine. Vincent’s father’s

powerful fingers tickled and hurt at the same time. Vincent tried to protest between breaths, but barely got the words out.

“It’s okay!” Mattie called from the kitchen. “I found my list and goat cheese is not on it. You can let him out of tickle jail, Harry.”

Harry stopped the tickling and let his son off with a warning. As the laughter subsided, Vincent traced the tattooed letters on his father’s hands. Vincent’s dad was different from most of the other dads in the neighborhood in that his body was covered in tattoos. Ten-year-old Vincent often marveled at the artwork and wondered if he would one day paint his body with ink.

Harry had a letter on each finger. On one hand was the word WORK. Harry smiled as his son traced each letter on each finger.

“Why does your father have that there, Vincent?” Harry asked.

“Because we have to work hard in life,” Vincent answered.

“And why’s that?”

“So we can have food and clothes and, um, a roof over our heads.”

“Good, good. And what about the other hand?”

Vincent didn’t answer until he traced the letters: PLAY.

“Because if we work hard enough, then we get to play!” Vincent shouted.

Harry laughed and squeezed his son tight.

Harry Lombardi was actually born Enrico Lombardi in Vietri di Potenza, Italy, in 1890. By age two he was in New York,

and city records listed him as Harry. Due to his big round face, his mates nicknamed him Moon when he was young. As the years moved on, his body became more squat and muscular. At this time, and mostly behind his back, family and friends called him Five by Five—as if he were as wide as he was tall. It didn't matter that he was actually a few inches taller than five feet and not quite that wide, but nicknames were often exaggerated terms of endearment.

The following day was Sunday. Vincent sat in the living room in his church suit, waiting for his mother. They'd asked Harry to join them, but Vince knew his dad's response before he heard it: "Oh, uh, not this week, but maybe next week I'll come. You two have a nice time. Vincent, listen to your mother." The routine didn't bother Vincent. He was so devout and focused on Christianity that he didn't care who went to church or not. Vincent would attend even if his mother wouldn't go.

"Mamma," he said as they walked hand in hand to church.

"Yes, son?"

"I'm gonna be an altar boy, okay?"

"I know, Vincent, you told me at least a hundred times already."

Vincent's mother, Matilda, whose maiden name was Izzo, was one of thirteen children. As a result, Vincent had plenty of cousins to not only play with, but also to keep in line, as Vincent took his maturity and life seriously. Besides, the Lord didn't

appreciate those who acted up. In truth, his parents and other moms and dads enjoyed having a young “cop” in the family to help keep an eye on their kids, and Vincent knew it. Sometimes the grown-ups would smile when he’d discipline a cousin, and every time that happened, Vincent felt emboldened. Becoming a grown-up couldn’t happen soon enough for young Vincent. Still, children will be children.

“Hey, what are you guys doing?” Vincent asked his cousins Rick and Frank.

“If we tell ya, ya can’t squeal on us—okay, Vincent?” Frank said, holding something behind his back.

“I make no promises,” Vincent said, raising his chin.

“Then go play somewhere else, why don’tcha?”

It was summertime and Vincent had finished reading Bible passages and didn’t have any homework. He was bored.

“Okay, okay, I won’t rat.”

With a sinister grin, Frank pulled a tin can from behind his back.

“What’s the big deal about that?” Vincent asked.

“We got gas in it,” Frank answered. “We’re gonna light it and put this here cap on it and watch it blow the lid off. Shy Pete did it with his brothers and said it was cool.”

“Shy Pete’s a liar.”

“Sure, but this story really happened,” Rick said. “In fact, I think Vincent should light it. Whadda ya say, Frank?”

“Yeah, come on, cousin, you should do it. What can happen? You don’t believe Shy Pete anyhow.”

Shy Pete was the biggest liar in school. Vincent would show these yahoos and then head back home—read a comic or something. He took the matchbox from Frank.

“Okay, you’re gonna light the match, drop it in, and close that lid super fast,” Frank instructed Vincent. “And don’t chicken out on us either.”

“You guys are the chickens here. Move aside, chumps.”

Vincent wanted to show his cousins how cool he was. He struck the match with exaggerated boredom and dropped it in the tin can. As he moved for the lid, a large flame shot straight up and caught Vincent on his forearm. He screamed and dropped the tin. The gas rolled out of the overturned tin, forcing Vincent to jump back as the flame nearly singed his sneakers. He took off running for home, not wanting to cry in front of his cousins, who called after him begging that he not tell on them.

He’d read about fire and brimstone in the Old Testament. The spent match odor made him think of brimstone and his throbbing forearm was more than enough fire for his liking. He was done with fire and doing stupid things, especially under God’s watchful eye.

Vincent never did end up crying and that made him proud. His dad was big on fighting pain—something he said was in people’s minds more than anything else. As Vincent burst through the front door, he was glad his parents were out. He ran his arm under cold water, then applied an ice pack to the burn the way he’d seen his mother do dozens of times when she’d burned herself cooking. Vincent wasn’t going to rat out his

cousins, but he'd probably sock them in their noses—and Shy Pete, too, for that matter. He'd have to pay, too, the no-good liar.

Vincent and his cousins played football in the street in front of the Izzo home every chance they got. It was a time when Vincent had only two loves: football and God. The teams were split more or less evenly, although Vincent's team was always slightly handicapped because Vincent was tough like his old man and just as competitive, often times to the vexation of his cousins. "Geez, Vincent, do ya gotta hit so hard?" they'd often complain. Cousin Mario caught a long bomb pass and headed for the makeshift end zone. Vincent gave pursuit and had him lined up perfectly, and Mario knew it. In the hope his cousin wouldn't notice, Mario stepped out of bounds, which were marked in chalk. This allowed Mario to score the winning touchdown—temporarily.

"No, no touchdown!" Vincent hollered. "You were out by a mile!"

"Like heck I was," Mario said, stepping to Vincent.

"You know how I feel about cheaters, Mario," Vincent said calmly, although his eyes blinked rapidly.

Mario backed down immediately. The gang was then called in for dinner. As the kids ran for the steps of the Izzo home, Vincent heard Mario's brother ask Mario why he hadn't stood up to Vincent.

"Are you kiddin' me? His eyes did that blinking thing," he said. "And you know what comes next."

“A wrath something fierce—ya don’t need to tell me,” his brother replied.

All was forgotten by the time each Izzo and Lombardi child entered the Izzo home and took in the aroma wafting through the house. The gathering at the Izzos was something everyone looked forward to. Mattie and three of her sisters always prepared the meal. The gathering was so large that the meal was divided into separate seatings. While the children ate at the massive extended table, the men played billiards down in the basement. Several booms of laughter would penetrate the floorboards and seep upstairs. The women would shake their heads and comment on the grown men acting like boys, while the children carried on in their own raucous way—until Vincent would pound the table with a meaty fist and tell everyone to knock it off.

He wanted peace and quiet while he dug into the delicious feast before him. The antipasto consisted of cured meats, anchovies, mushrooms, and pepperoncini. Vincent thought his cousins went at the food like animals, but he kept his trap shut until the minestrone soup arrived. A chorus of slurping sounds carried up and down the great mahogany table. Vincent thought the scene looked like pigs at a trough, and he belly-laughed. Heads turned his way and inquired at the joke. When he told them, they joined in on the laugh. Vincent’s mouth gaped open as wide as a crocodile’s, and his head rocked back. This brought bigger laughs from his tablemates. The children took the cue to amp up the dialogue and once again Vincent was forced to bring down his meaty gavel.

“Shut up already!” he shouted. He was done with childhood. He couldn’t wait to be a grown-up.

“Okay, boys and girls,” his mother said as she and Vincent’s aunts placed heaping plates of stuffed ravioli at various spots on the table. The kids roiled up until Vincent fed them a stern look. Vincent’s Aunt Millie laughed at the kids’ reaction.

With the children gorging on the meal, Mattie and her sisters retreated to the piano, where Mattie played and sang popular songs. Every once in a while, when the men got excited downstairs, Mattie and her sisters would stomp on the floor and tell them to quiet down.

When the kids were done eating, Vincent ordered his cousins to clean up, then he went downstairs to the smoke-filled basement and told the men it was time to eat. Vincent was told they’d finish up the game, then make their way upstairs. With all of the adults seated at the extended table, Harry made sure everyone had a full glass of his homemade wine before anyone went at the antipasto. The meal would have several courses and would last up to five, sometimes six, hours. Vincent would bide his time in both camps—part-time downstairs playing pool or some made-up card game with the kids, but even more time hovering around the grown-ups in the dining room. So as not to be kicked out, he’d clear plates and help serve dishes, occasionally sipping the remains from spent wine glasses. He loved these family meals.

Chapter Two

GOD AND FOOTBALL

It was June of 1928 and Vincent had completed the eighth grade. One morning, he walked to the living room, where his parents had divided the newspaper, each reading their favorite section.

“Look at this, honey, that Earhart woman made it. She landed in Wales. How ’bout that?” Harry said, astonished.

“Hiya Ma, Pa,” Vincent said.

“Son, d’ya hear that Amelia Earhart is the first woman—”

“To fly over the Atlantic Ocean, yup, we talked about her at school. Quite a thing, huh Pop?”

“Sure is.” He leaned forward in his chair, allowing the pages to fall to the floor at his feet. “And it goes to show that anybody can do anything they want if they work hard at it. Remember that.”

“Yes sir. While I’ve got your attention, I’ve decided I want to go to Cathedral College of the Immaculate Conception.”

“You’ve made up your mind, have you?”

“Yes sir, I want to become a priest.” Vincent stood with his back erect and shoulders back as if he were a soldier reporting for duty. All that was missing was the salute. His mother’s eyes filled with tears.

“Oh, my boy’s gonna be a priest,” she said, leaping from her chair. She grabbed her son by the cheeks, the way his grandmother normally did, and kissed him several times on each cheek. “You’re gonna be a wonderful priest, Vincent. I’m so proud of you.”

“Thanks, Ma. What do you think, Pa?”

Harry picked up the newspaper and made busywork folding it. “Well, son, if that’s—are you sure you don’t want to come work for me and your Uncle Eddie at the meat market? It’ll not only make you a strong boy—you’ll have the finest steaks on your plate for the rest of your life.”

“I think what you do is great, Pa, but I want to do this. I think God wants me to do this,” Vincent said, pouring it on thick.

Vincent had to work God into the answer because the Lombardi Brothers Wholesale Meat Market was the absolute last place he wanted to work. He’d busted his hump at the market for his father and Uncle Eddie part-time for a few summers and found it to be the most brutal work he’d ever experienced. Unloading huge slabs of beef from a truck and then hauling it into an ice-cold freezer—no thanks. It was easy work for old Five by Five because he was strong as an ox. Stronger, probably. Some of those slabs pushed upward of 220 pounds. On top of that, Vincent wasn’t paid very much. His dad insisted the hard

work was character building. Vincent understood the concept, but was fairly certain being a student of God would be an even bigger character builder. Throwing God into the equation was meant to move Five by Five off the meat-market talk.

“Speaking of the market,” Mattie jumped in to rescue her son, “why don’t you take a shower already, Harry? Ya smell like a side o’ sirloin.”

Harry wagged a finger at his wife as he got up from the lounge. “I know what you’re doing here, Mattie.” He stood and turned to Vincent. “Son, you’ve made a choice and you’re making a move. I’m proud o’ ya.” He regarded his wife and son for a moment before turning toward the hall.

As he walked away, he said over his shoulder, “Now don’t nobody bother me. I’m gonna go take a shower. I’ve been workin’ all day.”

Vincent stood in front of the massive building that would be his conduit to the priesthood and marveled at the gray three-story building. His eyes traveled floor by floor and from east to west. The ancient arched windows were a sight to see. He took in the spires and gargoyles and inhaled deeply when suddenly he felt a presence beside him.

“Amazing, isn’t it?”

Vincent turned toward the man with the clerical collar who’d addressed him.

“Yes sir, it has the feel of a church,” Vincent smiled.

“Indeed,” the priest said, putting a gentle hand on Vincent’s back while offering an upturned palm for him to proceed.

“Welcome to Cathedral College of the Immaculate Conception, Mr. Lombardi.”

Vincent felt warmth in his chest that the father knew his name and that Vincent’s next step would change his life forever.

“Vincent,” he told the father gently. “You probably know that, too, but nice to meet you, Father, ah—”

“Father James Smith.” He shook Vincent’s hand. “Soon we’ll only speak Latin to one another.”

“Ah, so you’re the Latin teacher.”

“*Etiam*,” the father responded with a gentle smile.

By the second week of school, Vincent was settled in his “second home.” He worked diligently at his studies, and although his grades were not near the top of his class, he focused on the word his father had tattooed on his right hand: *WORK*. The grades didn’t discourage him, nor did he compare himself to the smarter students around him. That would be a total waste of time. Early on he noticed a phenomenon similar to one he experienced at home: The priests appreciated his conduct among the other students. In particular, they appreciated Vincent’s penchant for helping maintain order and authority, specifically with the students prone to goofing off.

“Boys,” Father Rankin announced from the blackboard, “I must head to the office for a moment. Continue with your reading. And Mr. Lombardi . . . you’re in charge.”

Vincent, sitting ramrod straight, gave a curt nod from his

knitted brow. He accepted the job with pride. He knew the other students whispered about his being a teacher's pet and all of the other nonsense they said about him, but Vincent would not falter—he literally had a higher calling. Within minutes of Father Rankin's departure, desk legs scraped along the floor, voices ticked up, and book covers were slammed closed. Vince didn't appreciate the insubordination, especially when he was charged with keeping order. Some of the students even had the nerve to loosen their neckties. Vincent turned to the student beside him.

“Don't these dummies know that just because the priest ain't here, God's still watching?”

“Take it easy, Vincent, it'll be all right. Father Rankin will be back soon and—”

Vincent stood so abruptly he knocked his desk over. “Shut up, you morons! Shut! Up!”

The room became so quiet that everyone could hear the lone horsefly buzzing by the window. Vincent had minor outbursts all the time, but this was the first time he yelled at an entire class full of presumed wannabe priests. He even surprised himself. Then, rocking backward with his mouth wide and big teeth gleaming, he burst into hysterical laughter. Within seconds the room erupted right along with him. This went on for a full minute before Vincent remembered his assignment and that Father Rankin would soon walk through the door. He hurriedly righted his desk and gathered the spilled contents.

“All right, guys, all right, settle down, settle down,” he said,

but his classmates were not complying fast enough for Vincent's liking.

"Hey! Did you hear what I said?!"

This time there were no teeth to the sky or rollicking head. Instead Vincent challenged each and every student with a look that promised retribution. The room quieted down.

"Now put those desks back where they were. Open those books and fix your uniforms. I want ties knotted and cinched. And for the love of—well, just keep quiet, will ya?"

As the room settled like dust on a windowsill, the horsefly could be heard once more. And at that moment, the door latch clicked and Father Rankin reappeared.

"Ah, very good, lads. Thank you, Mr. Lombardi," he said.

For all of the animosity some of the students had toward Vincent for his authoritative personality, it was all shelved the moment he and his buddies hit the sandlot and played football. Vincent wasn't the fastest or strongest, but he was the most tenacious, and when it came to picking teams, Vincent was always scooped up first or second. Vincent was always made de facto captain of whatever team he played on. It seemed the guys wanted to follow his lead and let him call the plays.

The game was all tied up, and the lads had to get back to school soon. The boys agreed that the next team to score would win. Vincent's team huddled up. Vincent gave the receivers their route patterns and told the quarterback to call for the ball on the third hike. The fastest wide receiver was going to run flat out for the long bomb. But first the QB was going to pump fake a pass

to Vincent, who was running back in the flat. It was a good play; it had to work.

The ball was hiked on three, which drew two defenders offside, but they played on. The pump fake worked, causing two guys to pursue Vincent. The quarterback chucked the ball, but underthrew the pigskin and it was intercepted. The defender was Jordy Jones, a super-quick runner from Boston. He weaved through Vincent's players and had only Vincent to beat. Vincent knew he was nowhere near as fast as the kid, but Vincent was great at negotiating angles. He gave a little space for Jordy to take it down the sideline. Jordy bought; he took the bait. Vincent closed the distance and made the big tackle. Both he and Jordy were slow in getting to their feet and gave each other a high-five hand slap of sportsmanship when the fun ground to a halt.

"Game over!" someone hollered.

"What? Nuts to that—" Vincent began to protest until he saw Father McGowan standing in the middle of the field. Father McGowan was the staunchest disciplinarian priest at the school. Vincent could have sworn steam was escaping his ears.

That afternoon twelve players were hauled into McGowan's office one by one. As Vincent waited his turn, he could hear his buddy Jimmy Mack getting seriously bawled out. McGowan's office door was no match for the father's booming voice. The door eventually opened and Mack came out with eyes downcast.

"Lombardi! Get in here!"

Vincent entered the office and sat up straight in the chair opposite the angry father and steeled himself, ready to take his medicine. He knew an explosion was coming because McGowan,

of all the priests, despised football more than any of the other staff members.

“So, young Vincent, did you enjoy mocking the Lord this afternoon?”

Vincent was about to respond when Father McGowan held up a hand.

“Don’t answer that, Lombardi,” he said, folding his hands on the desk and interlocking his fingers. “I’ll get right to the point,” he said quietly, which made Vincent nervous.

Where was the blow-up already?

“You’ve got the makings of a real fine priest, young man. And that’s even with your mediocre grades. It’s faith and character that make for a good priest. But this sport . . .,” he sneered with disdain, “this *football*, is a sin, Mr. Lombardi. It is not God’s will. I’m surprised you don’t know that.”

“With all due respect, sir, I disagree,” Vincent said, noting the anger on the father’s face. “What I mean is, maybe I don’t get it, ya know? Football is just a game, but not only a game . . . it takes teamwork and requires skill and sportsmanship, uh, camaraderie and—”

“Spare me the radio advertisement, son—that game of yours is violence. God did not give us beautiful bodies so that we would simply hurl them at other men, breaking bones and cracking skulls, oh no, no, no.”

“But sir, violence presumes the intent of hurting someone. Football is physical, yes, but not violent. I mean there’s contact, yes, but like I said, sportsman—”

“Sportsmanship, yes, I heard you,” the father said, leaning back in his chair and gazing out the large window.

Vincent, although stammering his way through his plea, felt he had the father on the ropes. Camaraderie and fellowship were often preached at the school and Vincent felt confident he’d get to a compromise with the priest.

“It’s the priesthood or the sin of football, son, you cannot have both,” Father McGowan said, still gazing out the window. “Think hard on it, son.” He turned toward Vince slowly. “And don’t test God . . . or me,” the father added, peering over his wire-rimmed glasses.

“Yes, yes sir,” Vincent said. He rose from his chair. His legs suddenly seemed to weigh 200 pounds each. He wasn’t being expelled, but this was darn close to it. Vincent had huge respect for authority and would never go against the priests. But what if they were wrong? What if God didn’t care if you played football, so long as it was played by the rules with respect for your neighbor?

Vincent felt as though a boulder were on his shoulders as he left the father’s office. There were no other students waiting to go in after Vincent; he was the last. He stood outside the door a moment and began to think hard as instructed by Father McGowan. Football was one of the main things he and old Five by Five bonded over. They loved the game. And he loved God, too. Vincent had a serious problem.

It’s time to pray.



Vincent did his best to avoid the sandlot and instead dove into baseball and basketball. The basketball guys nicknamed him Two-Points Lombardi because he'd be lucky if he scored that many points in a game. Still, he saw decent playing time because he hustled like no other and was fierce on defense. When it came to baseball, he carried the same enthusiasm, and what he lacked in talent, he made up for in competitiveness. His only problem in both sports were injuries: He was injury prone, which not only held him back physically, but also drove him crazy mentally because he believed in the tough-guy code handed down by his father. *Pain is all in the mind.*

Although Vincent managed to stay off the football pitch, he often persuaded his classmates to hop the train and take in the professional New York Giants football games. He loved the game, plain and simple.

Four years into the six-year program at the school, Vincent sat down with his mother for a serious talk.

“Read this, Ma, it’s from the *Cathedral Annual*.”

“Okay, what is it?” his mother asked, taking the paper.

“It’s an essay on athletics. It essentially rips football apart.”

His mother sat on the edge of a footstool and quietly read the article. When she was done, she looked up at her son. “Well, they certainly aren’t fans of the sport, are they? But why the long face, son?”

“I’m not gonna be a priest, Ma. I’m sorry to disappoint you. And this isn’t the only reason . . . it’s just that I don’t think the priesthood is for me.”

His mother's face dropped briefly. Tears filled her eyes as her face broke into a weak smile.

"I'm not disappointed, son. Better you know now than later. I don't have to ask if you've thought it through because you always think things through. Too much sometimes," she chuckled and hugged her son. As they pulled apart, she wiped at her tears.

"So what's next? Cathedral is a six-year run and you've only done four."

"I got something workin', Ma, don't you worry," Vincent grinned.

"Uh-uh, there's that look. Your father gets the same look. Just promise me you'll let me know what you're up to before you do anything rash."

"You got it, Ma."

"That's my boy. Are you hungry?"

"Almost constantly, Ma," Vincent smiled in anticipation.

Chapter Three

ST. FRANCIS PREP SCHOOL

“Come on, Priesty, ya gotta come play with us.”
“Call me that again and you’re gonna get a sock in the kisser, and that goes for the rest o’ you mugs,” Vincent warned the group gathered on the front steps of his buddy Dave’s walk-up.

“Okay, okay, calm down, Lombardi. I’m just sayin’ ya left Cathedral Prep for football, didn’t you? You’re tailor-made for this.”

“I don’t know, fellas. I heard the school was thinking o’ scrapping the whole football program over there. I can just see gettin’ there and there’s no team.”

Louis got up from the step and stood beside Vincent. “What if I told you there was scholarship dough in it? Uh-huh, I got your attention now, don’t I, Vincent?”

“I’m listening,” Vincent said, guarded.

“I’m talking 150 bones, all for you. Old Five by Five would like them apples.”

“Yeah, he would—but don’t let him hear you call him that.”

“I wouldn’t dare,” Louis said, putting a hand on Vincent’s shoulder. “Take it from me—being nineteen years old and with your secret sandlot experience, you’ll murder those guys. What do ya say, are we talking to the next recruit of St. Francis Prep School?”

Dave and Stevie-boy joined Vince and Louis on the sidewalk.

“Looks like I’m goin’ to St. Francis, boys!” Vincent bellowed and rocked his head back in laughter. The boys patted his back and high-fived him.

“Just make sure I get that scholarship money for books and tuition,” Vincent said, “or I’m telling Pops ya called him old Five by Five!”

Harry Kane was a no-nonsense bulldog of a coach. Vincent stood in line with his teammates and kept his eyes forward as the ominous man who’d once coached the famous Lou Gehrig—who went on to play for the New York Yankees—marched up and down the line. Vincent’s belly knotted with excitement. The feeling made him think he’d joined a military platoon.

“Men, I want your undivided attention at all times. Daydreamers need not apply to play on this team. Our goal is to win, period, and the only way to do that is for you ladies to listen to me and follow my orders. *My* word is the *only* word. Is that clear?”

“Yes sir,” the team responded in chorus.

“You will carry out your assignments, period, and for that you will not get pats on the head or receive ‘attaboys.’ If you need

that, get 'em from your mamas. But" He stopped, pausing for effect. "You will win games. Understood?" he barked.

"Yes sir," the team replied.

"I said, 'Understood?', damn it!"

"Yes sir!" the young men roared.

Vincent, now called Vinnie on and off the field, loved the football life. He lived, breathed, slept, and dreamt football. He followed Coach Kane's words to the letter. Anytime he heard his teammates bellyache about the coach's toughness, Vinnie hauled them into line with a "Get tough" or a "Don't be a sissy, bud." He became very popular and a sort of unofficial captain on the field, even though he wasn't the most skilled player on the gridiron.

When the team had a winning record of 3 and 0, assistant coach Tut Maggio pulled Vinnie aside after practice on a Friday.

"Lombardi, I'm liking what I see out there—in particular, the way you hit. You don't just hit hard, but you hit in a punishing manner like the other guy owes you money, and that's when you're blocking, no less!"

Vinnie was the second most talented fullback on offense, which meant he was occasionally given the ball on short yardage, but mostly he blocked for the tailback. As much as he enjoyed the praise, he wasn't sure he liked where the conversation was going because Maggio was the interior lineman coach, and Vinnie, at five feet eight inches and 175 pounds, had no desire to play on the line, even if that wasn't considered too undersized for the position.

"Ah, thanks, Coach Maggio," Vinnie replied nervously.

“I’m considering adding you to my line. Like I said, it’s the way you hit. You’re good with angles, and you don’t quit. Course, I gotta talk to Coach Kane.”

Please don’t, Vinnie thought.

“Keep doin’ what yer doin’, Vinnie,” Maggio said and slammed a big fist down on Vinnie’s shoulder pad.

“Yes sir,” Vinnie replied and trotted toward the locker room.

In the end Vinnie caught a break. Although not as skilled as the regular fullback, he played with more intensity and showed more enthusiasm than the starter. For this reason he became the starting fullback and avoided joining the line.

Bullet dodged.

The team put out an impressive 5 and 1 record during Vinnie’s first season with St. Francis. The impressive record got them to the big game: the Catholic school title game. A convoy of vehicles snaked into the parking lot at Brooklyn Tech, finding spots side by side. The Izzos and the Lombardis had arrived and surrounding patrons heard the booming voices the second the car doors opened. Harry Lombardi could not be contained. He boomed and boasted that his son was going to have a hell of a game and take his team to victory. Everyone was in good spirits. As the family made their way to the entrance, Harry kissed Mattie on the cheek.

“I’ll see ya inside, honey,” he said with a big grin.

“Oh, not today, Harry, please.”

“Hey, it’s tradition. I don’t pay.” He winked and moved to the east side of the stadium.

Mattie shook her head as she watched her husband walk away. Her sister hooked an arm in hers.

“Old Five by Five hopping the fence again?” she laughed.

“Uh-huh. You know Harry’s just a big kid,” Mattie answered. They turned and caught up with the rest of the clan heading into the stadium.

Harry was over the fence, down a back stairwell, and onto the grounds before his family arrived. He didn’t go to his seat right away. Instead, he walked right down to the field level. He dug a Lucky Strike out of the pack and rolled it between his fingers. The ritual was that he lit it up during opening kickoff, smoked it, and then went back to his seat.

A fresh-faced kid in a security jacket joined Harry. “Afternoon, Mr. Lombardi, how’re ya doin’?”

“Oh, hey Sid, I’m good, I’m good. How’re your parents?”

“They’re good, sir, thanks for asking.”

“Good, that’s good,” Harry said, gazing at the field.

“You hop the fence again, Mr. Lombardi?”

“Fence? I don’t know nothing about no fence. I haven’t hopped a fence in over twenty years,” Harry said, overselling his innocence.

Sid grinned. “Yeah, I’m sure you have a ticket, what with your son Vinnie playing and all.”

“That’s right, Sid, and today my boy’s gonna knock them other kids all over this rotten field,” he said with a big laugh.

“Well, I’ve gotta do my rounds. Good luck today, Mr. Lombardi, and enjoy your smoke.”

“Good boy, Sid. You take care.”

The team hit the field to warm up. All thirty boys were buoyed by Coach Kane’s pregame speech, the gist of it being that St. Francis’ glowing record wouldn’t amount to anything if they lost today’s game. The quarterback ran them as a unit through warm-up calisthenics. After that, the team branched off according to position and ran drills to amp up the body while each player psyched himself up in his mind. This was it, the big game—the final.

Coach Kane blew his whistle, calling everyone in. The guys ran back from the coin toss. The guys made way for Paulie, the captain, to reach the center of the huddle.

“We’re receiving the ball, Coach,” he said.

“Okay, kick return team, you know who you are and what to do,” said Kane. “Heads on swivels, fight for the guy next to you, and knock the crap outta somebody. But do it fair, no dumb penalties. We’ve come this far because we’re the best. Now let’s get that trophy. Hands in the middle!”

The players thrust their hands in, some taped up, some with fingers busted, others scarred and bloody—no violinist hands in this pile.

“One, two, three!” Kane roared.

“Win!” the team belted out.

St. Francis Prep played like men possessed. They’d lost one game this season and they vowed that would be the last time. Between the Lombardis and Izzos, Vinnie’s cheering section seduced more fans into the fray. Vinnie heard the chants

from time to time, but for the most part he was focused on his assignments. He played both ways, offense and defense, and some special teams. This meant he barely got a single minute of rest while the game clock ran. He was exhausted, battered, and bruised—and wouldn't trade the feeling for anything on the planet. He looked forward to two things: hoisting the trophy over his head and sitting down to the biggest plate of spaghetti his mother would ever make. Maybe two plates.

When the final whistle blew, St. Francis Prep was crowned the victor. Harry ran onto the field and grabbed his son and hoisted him up in a big bear hug. Mattie sent one of Vinnie's cousins down to the field with two messages.

"First, congratulate my son, and second, tell old Five by Five to settle down before he has a friggin' heart attack!"

"Yes, Aunt Mattie."

"But hey," she said, grabbing his arm, and the boy turned. "Don't call him old Five by Five if ya know what's good for ya."

"Like ya need to tell me that," her nephew laughed, trotting down the bleacher steps.

The St. Francis boys cheered and celebrated. Hugs, high-fives, and helmet smacks were traded from player to player. A reporter from a small city newspaper managed to get Vinnie's attention.

"Son? Mr. Lombardi, have ya got a few words for the *Journal*?"

"Who, me? I ain't the coach. Hell, I ain't even the quarter-back. I think he's—"

“We’ll get to them. Jeez, you played a hell of game out there. Ya practically played the whole game. Ya blocked darn near every player and tackled almost as many. How does it feel?”

“Feels like a million bucks, mister!” Vinnie boomed.

Just then, a teammate leapt on his back from behind in celebration, causing Vinnie to bump into the reporter.

“Whoops, sorry about that, pal!” Vinnie said. “Say, can we pick this up later? I gotta get this animal off my back.”

“Sure, sure, enjoy the celebration, Vinnie, ya deserve it!” the reporter said.

Vinnie spun around. “Dobler, is that you? Get off me, ya big dumb dope!” Vinnie laughed, tackling his buddy to the ground.

Some of the other guys joined in on the wrestling until it became a pile—a dog pile. Coach Kane told them to knock it off and hit the showers and stop being a bunch of goofballs. They did as instructed, still savoring their victory.