



BOBBY'S STORY



Bobby Franklin hardly noticed the cheers rising from the bleachers as he approached the plate, bat in hand.

His parents were in the crowd. So was Ashley, who had been his steady girlfriend since they were both sophomores. A lot of friends from church were here too. As much as he loved these people and wanted them here, Bobby's focus was on the game. Win or lose, it was his last baseball game at Kennedy

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High School, and he was not about to lose his focus now. The ability to keep his head in the game and consistently make contact at the plate was a major reason why Bobby was the front-runner for the regional high-school player of the year award.

The game and the regional championship were on the line. Digging into the batter's box, Bobby waved his bat methodically through the strike zone four or five times. He knew exactly what he had to do. With runners on first and third and only one out, he had to get the ball out of the infield. A solid single or a sacrifice fly would tie the game. An extra-base hit could possibly win the game. But a double play would end the game—and Bobby's three-year career at Kennedy—with a loss.

He will pitch you low and away; they all do, Bobby coached himself, eyeing the lanky pitcher. Watch for a mistake, something up and on the outer edge of the plate. Then wait on it and drive it out of here.

As the pitcher started into his motion, Bobby cocked the bat behind his ear and prayed silently, Lord, help me do my best for You. Bobby loved baseball, but he was also determined to use his great talent to glorify God.

The first two pitches were tempting but low and outside the strike zone, just as he'd expected. The third pitch started closer to the plate, then broke down and away. Bobby timed it and swung, fouling



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it back. The next one was wild, bouncing in front of the plate. Only a good stop by the catcher prevented the runner on third from attempting to score.

You're going to throw my pitch now, buddy, Bobby thought, glaring at the pitcher. You don't want to walk me and load the bases. So you will try to hit a corner of the strike zone, the outside corner. And I'll be waiting for it.

The pitch was outside and about belt high. Bobby kept his eye on it until the bat made contact. It was a fly ball deep to left, but was it deep enough? Sprinting toward first base, he watched the left fielder back-pedal with his focus on the ball. Rounding first, Bobby saw the ball settle into the fielder's glove for the out.

At the same instant, Mike Bryan tagged third and took off for the plate. The fielder quickly launched a rocket shot toward home. Bobby stood still to watch, wishing he had hit the ball deeper, willing Mike to beat the throw and score the tying run.

The ball and the sliding runner seemed to arrive at the plate simultaneously. Amid a cloud of dust, the umpire's right hand shot into the air as he bellowed, "Out!" Bobby's head dropped to his chest. The championship was lost. The season and Bobby's high-school baseball career were over.

As the opposing team leaped and cheered in jubilation, Bobby and his glum teammates lined up to



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offer their congratulations. "Great game, great game, great game," he said to the victors passing by, and he meant it. The stinging defeat was a disappointment. But the better team had won today, and Bobby was not about to sulk and dampen the winners' celebration.

Moments later, a sports reporter and video camera person from the local television station cornered him. The media in Bobby's hometown had touted him as a local sports hero, a title he tried to ignore. Although he'd been interviewed for the sports news a few times before, Bobby still felt uncomfortable in front of the camera.




As the camera zoomed in on him, the reporter began, "I'm standing with Bobby Franklin, Kennedy's third baseman and the favorite to win player-of-the-year honors. Bobby, you led the league in hitting and fielding. How does it feel to lose the championship after such a successful season?"

"We're disappointed to lose today. But it was a great season, and I'll never forget it."

After a few more questions about the title game, the reporter turned to Bobby's future. "There is a lot of speculation about what you plan to do next year, Bobby. Have you decided yet if you will go on to play college baseball?"

Bobby had heard questions like this a lot in the last two months. He tried not to show it, but he



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was struggling over his future. "I'm not sure yet," he answered, just as he had so many times before. He didn't like being "not sure," but he didn't know how to be sure about what God had in store for his future.

"You have been offered a number of baseball scholarships, right?"

"A few," Bobby corrected, "and I'm flattered by the interest shown in me. I think going to college is a good idea, if that's what I'm supposed to do." If that's what God wants me to do, he added silently. That was the issue for Bobby. Since trusting Christ as a child, he had tried to discover and obey God's will at every stage of his life. The obeying part had been rather simple. It was the discovering part that was often difficult. And it had never been more difficult than now, when he was about to graduate from high school and take the next step. Right now, Bobby still didn't know what that step would be.

"What about turning pro?" the reporter continued. "I know there have been major-league scouts attending your high-school games this year."

Bobby pushed up the bill of his cap and absently scratched at his forehead. The thought of playing in the majors someday had captivated him ever since Little League. Was he good enough? Would he be offered a contract? If so, was it God's will for him to sign it? Bobby didn't have a clue.

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"Every kid who puts on a baseball uniform dreams of playing in the World Series some day, and I'm no exception," Bobby said with a grin. "I've seen the scouts, but they haven't talked to me yet. If they do, I'll have to think about it." He had been thinking about it and praying about it a lot since early spring. But, like the handful of scouts who charted his every move on the field, God hadn't talked to him yet about pro baseball.


"I hear there's a chance you may not play baseball at all next year," the reporter went on.

"It's possible," Bobby replied. "One of my options is to attend a small Bible college that has no baseball program."

"Could you really hang up your cleats after such an outstanding three years on the Kennedy diamond?"

The idea still made Bobby wince. He didn't want to quit playing baseball. But if God directed him to his church's Bible college next year, there would be no baseball. "Yes, I could give up baseball," he answered, hoping his disappointment didn't show, "if that's what God wants me to do."

The reporter thanked Bobby for the interview and then hurried off with the camera person to find the winning pitcher. Bobby's parents had been patiently waiting for him. Beaming with pride, they hugged him and congratulated him on his good game, even though the team had lost.



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Then Bobby was face to face with Ashley Shepherd. He didn't know if Ashley was the girl God had picked out for him to marry any more than he knew if he was supposed to continue to play baseball. But he definitely wanted Ashley and baseball in his life for as long as possible. As for the future, Ashley was part of the mystery God had not yet revealed to him. And since Bobby didn't know where Ashley fit into God's plans for him, he had stayed mum about their future.

Ashley gave him a hug and a kiss on the cheek. "I'm sorry you didn't win, Bobby. You played a great game. But it really doesn't matter to me because you will always be my champion."

Then, as Bobby watched, Ashley's face suddenly clouded over. She buried her face in his jersey and started crying. Surprised at Ashley's unexplained tears, Bobby just held her. The game isn't that big a deal, so what is she crying about? he wondered.