

Henry & the Flea

By Brian Falkner

For my dad,
who always has the time.

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Chapter One

Heads I Win, Tails I Win Too!

‘I want to be a Warrior.’ I looked straight at the large, balding man sitting behind the desk, as if daring him to laugh. He didn’t. But he didn’t understand either.

‘That’s wonderful, Danny,’ he said. ‘It’s good to have a goal. Not many kids nowadays have something to set their sights on, and if you practise very ...’

‘I’m sorry to interrupt,’ I said, ‘cos it is rude to interrupt adults when they are talking, but I was afraid that Frank Rickman wouldn’t let me get another word in. ‘But I don’t think you understand what I mean. I want to be a Warrior *now*. This season. I want to play in the NRL.’ I said NRL the way the commentators do on TV, running it all together so it sounds like ‘enerell’.

This time Frank did laugh, but that was OK ‘cos I had been expecting him to. Frank didn’t know my secret. Anyway, it wasn’t a nasty, sneery kind of laugh, just a chuckly, surprised kind of laugh. I carried on quickly. ‘I know it sounds strange. I know I’d be the youngest-ever player in the NRL, but I’d be the best young player you ever had. I play rugby league at school and I’m really good, and I’m really, really, really fast.’

Frank stopped chuckling and looked at me, but the chuckle was still there in his eyes. He was a huge bear of a man, a little bit plump now, but he still had most of the muscle that had made him a terrifying front-rower when he used to play. He was the coach of the New Zealand Warriors and was really good at the job, although, of course, the team had never won the premiership. Frank picked up a pencil from his desk and started sharpening it with a small, metal pencil sharpener that he pulled out from a drawer. I had a pencil sharpener like that last year at school, but I lost it.

‘How old are you, Danny?’

‘I’ll be thirteen in February. And would you mind very much calling me Daniel? I don’t like Danny because ... I just don’t like Danny.’

‘I think you’re serious, Daniel, and a serious question deserves a serious answer. But the answer is no. No, I can’t put you in the squad. I can’t even let you try out. You’re much too young. I don’t want to discourage you, and I hope you will be a Warrior one day. But not this year. Not at twelve.’

He put the pencil and the sharpener down. I smiled. I wasn’t upset with his answer. I’d been expecting it, waiting for it. Frank still didn’t know my secret.

I said, ‘I thought you’d say no. But there’s something you don’t know. If you knew it, this thing, you’d put me in the team. If you put me in the team, you’d win the premiership this season.

There's something very important that you don't know.'

Frank looked at me carefully. That was one of the good things about Frank, I found out later. He listened well, he thought carefully about what was said, and he always took people seriously. After a while he said, 'I can't imagine anything that would make me want to put you in the team, whether I knew it or not.' Then, because that sounded like an insult, he added quickly, 'Just because of your age, you understand. You could get very badly hurt.'

I said nothing. I just looked at Frank and kept my mouth tightly shut. Frank looked back at me. After a long moment Frank laughed again, but this was a different kind of laugh altogether. It was a huge, chesty laugh that made his belly wobble. It was the sort of laugh a bear would make if bears could laugh. Maybe they can laugh, I'm not really sure.

Frank said, 'There's more to you than meets the eye. It's hard to believe you're only twelve. OK, OK, I give up. I want to know. What is this thing that I don't know?'

I smiled again, 'cos that's what I'd been waiting for. 'I'll make you a bet.' I pointed to the pencil sharpener that was sitting just in front of Frank. 'You grab that sharpener. I'll try and beat you to it. If I win, you give me a try-out for the team. If you win, I'll go home and keep practising till I'm "old enough" to play.' That sounded a long way away!

Frank looked at me some more. I folded my arms. It was quite a big desk. The sharpener was just in front of Frank. I'd have to get out of my chair and reach right across the desk to get to it. It wasn't a fair contest.

'You think you're pretty quick don't you,' Frank said slowly. 'That's good. Are you as quick as Ricky Albany?' Ricky 'Road Runner' Albany was one of the Warriors' star wingers and everyone said he was one of the fastest players ever.

'Quicker,' I said, keeping my face really still, although I blinked a couple of times.

'You'd need to be very fast to outrun Ricky. He could have been a world class sprinter if he hadn't ...' In the middle of his sentence Frank suddenly slammed his hand down on top of the sharpener. '...taken up league instead.'

He looked sadly at me. At the brave twelve-year-old with the messy black hair and freckles, sitting in the big chair opposite him. He said, 'I know what you're going to say. You're going to say I cheated. But I didn't. I surprised you, and that's a very important part of the game. Don't do what the opposition expects you to do. You'll learn that as you get older.'

I blinked slowly. Twice. I smiled a small, secret smile to myself, (I didn't need to get a day older to learn that lesson.) I looked up at the big man and said, 'Lift up your hand.'

Frank raised a big, grizzly bear eyebrow. Then his other eyebrow followed as I opened up my hand to show him the pencil sharpener. Frank snatched his hand away from the desk as if it was burning hot. The desk was empty.

I grinned. Frank leaned back in his chair, so far that I was afraid it was going to fall over backwards. He folded his arms, thinking about what had just happened.

‘That’s a pretty good magic trick you just showed me. How did you do it?’

‘It wasn’t a trick. I told you I was fast. Do I get my try-out? We had a deal.’

‘Sorry, Danny, Daniel.’ Frank was just a little bit thrown. ‘Magic tricks won’t get you into the team. Anyway, I never accepted your bet.’

‘You accepted my bet the moment you banged your hand down on the desk,’ I said simply. ‘Even if you didn’t say so.’

Frank sat forward quickly. The suggestion of cheating brought a quick response. I just prayed it would be the right response.

‘You’re right, Daniel, I’m sorry. And you are far too clever for a twelve-year-old. But I still think it was a magic trick. Do it again and I’ll see if I can spot how you do it.’

I put the sharpener back on the desk. ‘If I get the sharpener, do I get the try-out?’

‘We’re not going to use the sharpener this time, we’ll use a coin. My coin.’ Frank looked carefully at me to see if there would be a reaction. I kept my face blank.

‘That’s fine. Shall we make it harder this time?’

‘Harder!?’

‘You put the coin in the palm of your hand. When you’re ready, just close your hand and grab the coin. Where would you like me to stand?’

Frank said, with one of those funny grown-ups’ smiles, ‘Outside?’

I shook my head. ‘I’ll just stay in my chair then.’

Frank rummaged in his pocket and produced a twenty cent coin. He placed it in the centre of his palm, just below the big fleshy bump at the base of his thumb. He nodded.

‘Do I get my try-out?’ I asked.

‘If you can snatch this coin out of my hand, from where you’re sitting, before I can grab it, then you win your bet. I won’t renege.’

I had never heard the word ‘renege’ before, but it was easy to work out what it meant. ‘OK then,’ I said, ‘whenever you’re ready.’ I blinked twice.

Frank held my gaze for a few seconds then simply closed his hand. He did it quickly, as if he was afraid that I could do what I’d said I could, and even moved his hand a bit away from me, probably without meaning to. That would have been cheating.

I sat back in my chair and flipped the coin in the air, catching it and slapping it down on my wrist. 'Heads I win. Tails ... I win too!'

Frank opened his hand slowly. I could see in his eyes that he couldn't believe it. His palm was bare. 'But you didn't even move!' He protested.

'Yes I did,' I said. 'You didn't believe me when I said I was fast.'

I said nothing more. I wanted to, but I didn't. Somehow I knew when to stop talking. Most kids don't. Frank looked at me, then smiled and shook his head.

'I wouldn't have believed it if someone had told me about it. We're giving a couple of our second graders a run with the first grade squad this Saturday. Bring your boots.'

I stood up and reached out my hand. It was totally lost in the huge paw of the big, ex-front rower.

'We're going to win the premiership this year,' I said seriously.

Frank shook his head again. 'It's a try-out, Daniel. You're not in the squad, yet.'

'We're going to win the premiership,' I said again, without a trace of humour. 'This year.'