

CHAPTER 1

*Saturday, July 15, 1967
Plainfield, Maine*

I like football best of all.

Not so much throwing it, but running with it, running faster than anyone else and faking so guys can't even put their fingertips on me in two-hand touch. That's the best of all.

That, and daring the quarterback to throw the ball so far that I can't catch up to it, then proving he can't. It doesn't get any better than that.

But our hick town is too small to have a football team. We're too small for everything.

I'm almost fourteen years old, going into the ninth grade, and I have to go to the next town over, Grainville, just to attend school or play sports. And even though Grainville High takes kids from Plainfield, Beaumont, Eagle Creek, Moose Junction, and Oxbow, it still isn't big enough for a football team.

Up here in Aroostook County in the northern tip of Maine, it's mostly just trees, farmland, and cows. More cows than people, in fact.

Plainfield is so small there isn't even a single stoplight. There's an Amoco gas station and Mabel's General Store on opposite sides of Main Street at the center of town, but that's pretty much it. I suppose

I shouldn't call it a hick town because that means I'm a hick, but geez, what else do you call it?

Heaven, I guess. At least that's what I'll be thinking a few months from now when I'm living in what feels like Hell, and football is the only thing that's keeping me sane. But for now, it's just a teeny, tiny hick town.

To be fair, though, at least Grainville has baseball, basketball, and track. Right now, our Babe Ruth team is playing against the Fort Fairfield Devils, one of the best teams in the league. I stride to the plate with the bases empty and one out.

"Now batting for the Grainville Mustangs, Rabbit Labelle," the PA system announces through static-filled, tinny speakers. "Rabbit Labelle."

I look out to the fence beyond the gap between left field and center where advertisements for Mabel's General Store and the Ashland Rotary Club are painted in white on the green background. I'm not going to hit the ball over that fence. I'm no Willie Mays or Carl Yastrzemski or Tony Conigliaro. But if I hit the ball in that gap, I'll get at least a double, maybe a triple. And every once in a while, the ball hits a warped board between the ad for Mabel's and the one for the Rotary and it caroms funny, right past the outfielder and by the time he's chased down the ball I've got an inside-the-park home run.

The pitcher for the Fort Fairfield Devils, a tall left-hander with lots of pimples and a mop of black hair sticking out from beneath his cap, has been tough on us the first time through the lineup. I led off with a single and stole two bases, but he struck out three guys straight to get out of it in the first inning and has allowed only a walk since. He's probably six inches taller than I am—everyone seems to be taller than I am, even most girls my age—but he's got no chance against me. Not to brag or anything, but I just *know* I'm going to get a hit and score.

"Come on, Rabbit," Coach Beaupre cheers, clapping his big meaty hands together and then slapping his enormous gut. "Get us going."

I hear more cheers from our side of the metal stands, including from my parents, but I tune them out. I push the blue, plastic batting helmet

OFFSIDE

down hard on my head, tap the far side of home plate with my bat, and take my stance.

It's just me and the lefty. Me and the ball.

I rip the first pitch, a fastball on the inside corner, on a line to left field, and race toward first base. The left fielder picks it up on two hops and quickly fires it in to second base as I take a wide turn. If he'd fumbled the ball or tossed in a lazy floater, I might have taken second, but it's a good throw, so I retreat to first.

Nothing wrong with a single. I'll get to second quickly enough.

"Way to go, Rabbit!" I hear my father yell above all the other cheers from the stands. He misses lots of my games because he's a really important executive in his company and has to work late and on the weekends. But I can tell he's really enjoying this one.

I smell the freshly cut infield grass. I slap my hands together, feeling the grit of dirt between my fingers. I adjust my cap.

This part is the fun. I'm going to steal two more bases on Lefty and there's nothing he or his catcher can do about it.

He can throw over to try to keep me close. He and the catcher can try a pitch out. But none of it is going to make any difference. I'm going to be on third base before Lefty can say Carl Yastrzemski.

I take my lead, bouncing on my toes.

Lefty throws over and I dive back. The first baseman, a tall, gangly kid, slaps the tag down hard on my hand. It's way too late, of course, but the hard tag didn't seem intended to try to get me out. On the next throw over, he ignores my entire outstretched arm and hand, instead slapping me across the face with his glove and the hard ball.

I wince, the left side of my face stinging, and lay there for a second. I smell the leather and oil of his glove and taste the grit of dirt on my lips. I ask for time from the umpire and brush myself off. A cloud of dirt surrounds me.

I look at the first baseman, who is grinning. None of it was an accident. A part of me wants to tell him that with teeth as crooked as his, he shouldn't be smiling or even opening his mouth. But I decide on a better revenge.

DAVID H. HENDRICKSON

I try to look intimidated and say, “Cut that out,” so softly that the first-base umpire doesn’t hear a thing. I hold my hand to the stinging side of my face, playing up how wounded I must be.

Inside, though, I’m grinning, and that inside grin grows even broader when The Jerk laughs and says, “Try to stop me, squirt.” He pounds his mitt with his fist. “The great Rabbit Labelle is just a baby.”

I take my lead, then add to it. I’ve got Lefty’s timing down and I’ve got The Jerk thinking about how hard he’s going to slap me this next time.

As Lefty starts his throw over, I take off. Not back to first base but for second.

I’m flying, my legs barely touching the ground, and I get ready to slide into second while the shortstop waits for a throw that he knows isn’t even going to be close. I can see it in his face.

As I slide, I see the shortstop’s eyes widen. He dives toward right field, but the ball sails past him.

I pop up and race for third base, looking at Stevie Lafontaine, the kid in the third base coach’s box, for a sign of whether to take off for home. He’s just holding his hands high, telling me I don’t need to slide. But I knew that. I glance over my shoulder and see the center fielder firing in toward home. I round third in case the throw is wild, but the catcher fields it cleanly and I retreat back to the base.

I decide not to dust my uniform off. I kind of like the dirt. I kind of like everything. If baseball were always like this, I’d like it almost as much as football.

Lefty takes the ball from his catcher, looking rattled. I look over at The Jerk on first base. He’s staring at me, so I grin at him and then do something that maybe I shouldn’t.

I wink.

The first baseman flushes. I’ve embarrassed him.

Good. Maybe next time he’ll show better sportsmanship. I feel a little guilty, but not too much. I didn’t start this.

OFFSIDE

Rattled, Lefty gives up hits to the next five batters, including a home run by my best friend, Donnie Boudreau, that makes it a 6-1 game. We never look back.

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We get back home and Mom heads to the kitchen while Dad grabs the newspaper and plops in the tan lounge chair next to the sofa in the living room.

“Dad, let’s play catch,” I say, trying to stop him before he puts his feet up on the hassock and gets comfortable. “I’ll go get the football.”

To be honest, it’s more fun playing with Donnie, but I’m not sure he’s home and my parents don’t like me running up the phone bill calling my friends. Besides, it takes a couple minutes to bike over to his house and I’ve only got an hour before we have to leave.

But there’s another reason, too.

When I was little, my dad and I used to play catch in the backyard all the time. He wasn’t as pudgy then and could run around a little without getting all out of breath. We’d both throw touchdown passes to each other. We’d toss the baseball around, too, with him giving me grounders, pop flies, and line drives that I’d have to dive for.

These days, though, he’s working so much that we hardly play together at all. I suppose that’s normal for someone like me who’s about to turn fourteen. After all, I’m not eight anymore. It is more fun to play with my friends. A lot more.

But it still was nice when my dad and I did all that stuff together, and he wasn’t so serious all the time. This week, he worked late every night, then missed my cross-country race this morning.

I crossed the finish line more than a minute before everyone else in my age category, but he wasn’t there to see it.

So I figure maybe he wishes the two of us could be playing together more often. Tossing the football around in the backyard would at least let him make up for him missing my race this morning.

But I’m wrong about that.

“Aren’t you forgetting your Summer League basketball game?” he asks, looking up from his newspaper and pushing his dark-rimmed

glasses to the bridge of his nose. He looks at his watch. "We'll be leaving in an hour."

"Yeah, plenty of time to play."

He sighs heavily and shakes his head. "I don't have your energy, Rabbit." He runs a hand through his black hair. "I don't think anybody does. I just can't keep up with you."

I don't understand adults sometimes. How much energy does it take to throw a ball around? All he's done for the last three hours is sit in the stands at the baseball field and clap his hands every now and then. How hard is that?

But I'm not going to beg.

If he doesn't want to play catch, that's fine with me. I didn't really want to play that much with him anyway.

"There's more to life than sports," he says, sounding defensive, as if he feels guilty at turning me down. "Life isn't just one big game. I swear, sometimes it seems like you're thirteen going on three."

"I'll be fourteen next month."

"Okay, so you're fourteen going on three," my father says. "Or fourteen going on four. All you think about is sports. Sports, sports, sports."

"It's what I like," I say with a shrug.

"Maybe it's time to start liking some other things, things more important than sports," he says.

I'm tempted to say, "Like what?" but I don't fall for that trap, especially since my mother has appeared at the living room entrance. She's wearing a white apron over her light blue dress. I suppose she's kind of pretty in a mom kind of way, never wearing makeup or flashy jewelry and always wearing plain-looking clothes and tying her long, brown hair up in a bun. But right now, I'm not liking the look on her face. It's clear whose side she's on.

"I do well in school," I say. "Just about all A's. And I read lots of books."

"All of them about sports," my mother says, making it official. They've ganged up on me.

"Not all of them," I say.

OFFSIDE

“Just about.”

I still want to say, “Who cares?” and point out that lots of kids my age don’t read at all. Since when is it a bad thing to read about sports? Doesn’t she take me to the library every two weeks to get all those books?

I really don’t understand my parents.

But I understand them well enough to know that my mom is about to tell me to go clean my room. I can see it on her face. As if cleaning my room is supposed to stop me from being fourteen going on four. As if it’s supposed to stop me from being obsessed about sports. As if I’m going to fall in love with having a neat desk and having everything picked up off the floor and I’ll want to do that all day.

It doesn’t make any sense, but that’s how parents are sometimes. I think the room cleaning is just to keep me busy and out of my mom’s hair most of the time and my dad’s today.

But I see that look on her face and before she can say anything, I take off for the front door. Kind of like taking off for second base on Lefty.

I say over my shoulder, “I’m going over to Donnie’s,” and slam the door behind me. I add, not sure if they’ll hear me, “I’ll be back in an hour,” but I don’t stick around to be sure. I hop on my red Schwinn three-speed bike and pedal away as fast as I can.

And with that I’m gone. It’s my best stolen base of the day.