

Chapter 1

"Hey, you knuckleheads! Stop goofin' off! You comin' in, or what?"

Bobby was just inside the right field fence at Ebbets Field, looking out at Finn and James on Bedford Avenue.

"Get a load of this," Bobby said. "A fella gettin' the chance to sneak into the stadium where the Dodgers play when nobody's around don't come along every day. We don't wanna go wastin' it."

Finn and James looked scared. They were Dodger fans, but nothing like Bobby. He was the biggest Dodger fan in the whole Flatbush area of Brooklyn. He was the one who talked Finn and James into leaving their Irish-filled neighborhood to walk through Flatbush and down to Ebbets Field today. He was the one who found a space just big enough to squeeze through between two boards in the right field fence.

"We might get caught," Finn said, "and then we's done for. They'll put our names on a list tellin' the ushers not to let us into no more games. I'm only 12. I don't wanna go the rest of my life without no Dodger games."

James nodded and said, "Don't go breakin' the Devil's dishes. This could turn into a weasel deal if we get caught."

Bobby knew he had to keep talking. He pointed to the outfield grass and said, "Holy cow! That's the greenest grass you ever seen! That grass is just beginn' you to come run on it! Besides, the new Dodgers season starts next week. Once it gets goin' this place is always gonna be full of people. Come on! What's-a-matta?"

"It's the first sunny day in forever and everythin's back the way it's supposed to be. We's gonna play stickball every day, and the team we call 'Da Bums' is gonna win the World Series in 1947. Before all that happens, we got our one-and-only chance to run around on Ebbets Field like we's really on the Dodgers."

Finn and James still looked scared. Bobby had one last idea. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a ring. He stuck his arm through the crack in the fence to show it to Finn and James.

"Just to make sure we got good luck, I'm gonna let you guys touch this lucky Claddagh ring. It was my grandpa's from over in County Waterford. He gave it to my Ma when she left Ireland to come live in America so she'd always have a bit of Irish luck with her. It's too big for me to wear, so I keep it in my pocket. See the heart that's below the crown and being held between the two hands? All you do is rub the heart and it gives you a bit of luck."

Bobby shook the ring in front of Finn's face.

"C'mon. Try it."

"Fine, if it'll shut your yap," Finn said and rubbed the heart on the ring followed by James.

The two boys took turns working their way through the space between the boards in the right field fence that divided Ebbets Field from Bedford Avenue. Once all three friends were in, they turned to look at the stadium rising up around them. It was their first time looking up from the field instead of down from the stands.

"Wow!" Finn gasped. "The seats just keep goin' up and up 'til they hit the sky."

"I remember this one day in math class," James said, "we talked about this thing called infinity. It's when somethin' just keeps goin' and goin' forever. That's what all these seats feels like."

After staring at everything above, the friends looked down at the thick, green, outfield grass and reached down to touch it.

"There's more grass in this one spot than our whole neighborhood put together," Finn said.

James picked a few blades, put them in his pocket, and said, "If anybody asks if we really walked on Ebbets Field, I got proof."

Bobby looked over to the infield.

"Look how far that is," he said.

"Sure is a long way," Finn said.

"Let's see how long," Bobby said and took off running with Finn and James following.

Bobby ran all the way from right field to home plate, jumped on it with two feet, then turned and started running down the line to first base. Finn and James did the same. Bobby knew he should stay quiet so they wouldn't get caught, but as he rounded first and headed to second, he couldn't help himself. He lifted his arms above his head and yelled, "Home run for Bobby Kelly, and the crowd goes wild."

He could hear Finn and James laughing behind him and couldn't help laughing himself. Bobby kept going past second, around third and slid into home. He jumped up and yelled, "Dodgers win! Dodgers win!"

Finn came in, slid and jumped up and James slid in and just sat laughing on home plate. They were all tired from running and sat down to catch their breath.

Bobby closed his eyes and listened to how quiet the stadium was without a crowd.

He stood up and said, "It's so quiet in here, it feels like we's in church. Let's go play the infield. Who you wanna be?"

Whenever he played stickball, if Bobby got first choice, he always picked to have his team be the Dodgers so he could pretend to be one of his favorite Brooklyn players.

"I call Pee Wee Reese at shortstop!" James called out.

"I'll play second and be Eddie Stanky," Finn said.

"I usually pick to be Dixie Walker in the outfield," Bobby said, "but today I'll play first base so we can turn some double plays. I ain't heard yet who's on first for Brooklyn this season."

"I ain't so sure Eddie Stanky and Pee Wee Reese is gonna be at second and short this year," Finn said. "I been readin' about this Negro the Dodgers signed. His name's Robinson or somethin' like that. He played second base in Triple-A Montreal last year and shortstop when he was in the Negro Leagues."

"Stop flappin' your lips!" Bobby yelled. "You tryin' to tell me some colored boy's as good as Pee Wee or Eddie?"

"Fuggetaboutit," James said. "No way is the Dodgers gonna let some Negro be in the startin' lineup. My dad says the coloreds ain't good enough to play with Major Leaguers."

"Ease up," Finn said. "I'm just sayin' what's in the papers."

Bobby didn't read the newspapers during the winter. There were no baseball box scores to go over with Dad, so he didn't bother.

"How can there be a Negro on the Dodgers when there ain't never been any coloreds in the Major Leagues?" Bobby asked. "A lotta people's gonna blow a fuse if this Robinson takes away a startin' job from a fella who already earned it fair and square."

"C'mon guys," James said. "We's playin' the infield at Ebbets Field. We got no time to waste yakkin' about stuff that probably ain't gonna happen anyways."

They all ran out to their positions. Bobby started calling out in his best Red Barber radio announcer voice.

"The Dodgers are up by one in the top of the ninth. The Giants are threatening with one out and a runner on first, but Brooklyn can win the game with a double play. Here's the pitch! It's a sharp grounder up the middle. Can Reese get to it?"

James ran over behind second and dove like he was going for a ground ball.

"Reese nabs it! He turns and gets it to Stanky covering second!"

Finn ran to where second base would be, and James made a throwing motion to him. Finn acted like he was catching it.

"Stanky turns and makes the relay throw to first base. Do they have time to turn two?"

Finn turned and pretended to throw to Bobby, who ran over and put his left foot where he thought first base should be. Even though Bobby was in the play now, he still kept being the announcer.

"It's gonna be a close one, folks! Oh no! The throw is a little up the line towards right field! The first baseman has to dive to catch it while still keeping one foot on the bag!"

Bobby dove into the dirt to catch Finn's pretend throw while still keeping his left foot down.

"He got it! That's three outs and the end of the game! Dodgers win!"

Bobby had real Ebbets Field dirt all over his clothes. It was a badge of honor. He rolled over onto his back and looked up at the blue sky while trying to think of a way to make it so Ma could never wash these clothes.

Then he heard a booming voice. A real voice. An adult voice.

"Nice play, kid!"