

# Stumptown Kid

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*With love to my first writing teacher,  
my best friend, and husband,  
Ed Gorman*

—C. G.

*To my children, Jeff and Kris,  
and to my grandchildren—  
Ashley, Haley, Adam, Aubrey, and Hannah*

—R. J. F.

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# Chapter One

*Holden, Iowa, 1952*

**F**irst time I laid eyes on Luther Peale, I hardly noticed him. That was surprising right there, because there weren't any colored folks living in Holden, Iowa. Fact is, I could probably have counted on two hands the number of colored people I'd seen in my whole life.

He came walking into the park at the beginning of Wildcat tryouts. He looked about as old as my friend Will's brother, who's twenty-three, and he had on a baseball cap and clothes that seemed pretty wore out. He set a big sack down on the bleacher, leaned against the backstop, and watched.

His dark skin and his old gray clothes stood out against the bright green grass all around him. A lot of the guys looked over, curious about him being colored and all. But no one said nothing.

I didn't think much about him at the time. My mind was fixed on doing as good as I could so Coach Hennessey would pick me for the team.

The Wildcats are a baseball team for eleven and twelve year olds, sponsored by Gamble's Shoe Store. Every guy I know wants to play with them. They don't always win, but more often than not, they do.

The tall man holding a clipboard yelled at us guys to come over. "I'm Coach Hennessey," he said, like that was necessary. "This is my assistant coach, Harv Small. I take it all you boys put your name on the sign-up sheet, right?" Nobody said different, so he went on. "First thing we do is see how you run."

He stopped and looked us over, maybe twenty-five guys, like we were a bunch of horses he might buy. "Come on," he said finally.

My friend, Will Draft, was trying out, too. He slapped me on the back. "Good luck, Charlie," he said, squinting in the bright sunshine.

"Thanks," I said. "Same to you."

"Well, well, look who's here," a voice called out behind me. "The girls from Stumptown."

I didn't have to turn around to know who was talking. Brad Lobo's always nasty, especially to the guys from Stumptown. He's twelve but as big as most fourteen year olds. He always wears shirts kind of tight, and he's got some muscles in his arms that he seems real proud of. He's a year ahead of me in school and

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played for the Wildcats last year. He was already on the team, but he probably figured he'd strut around at tryouts, showing off those muscles, trying to make us more nervous than we already were.

Well, I'll tell you the truth, he was doing a good job.

Lobo thinks he's a hotshot, but I have to admit he's a good ball player—third baseman, usually—one of the best the Wildcats got. His mouth is even bigger than his talent, though, let's put it that way. And he has a mean streak as wide as a country road. You can almost see the nastiness boil up inside of him and shoot out of those shiny little eyes.

I might've had a few choice words for him right then, but I really wanted to get on the team. And besides, I wasn't partial to getting killed. So I kept my mouth shut and Will did, too.

I bet all of the guys' hearts were clomping hard like mine. Playing for the Wildcats had been in my head for two years. We went to every game, me, Will, and sometimes Eileen McNally. Last year I'd started dreaming about playing for them. I'd wake up in a sweat, real excited, and it would take me a long time to get back to sleep.

We followed Coach Hennessey to the outfield. Somebody had mowed the grass in the park, and it smelled sweet and summery. Coach plodded along ahead of us, and I watched him. He's a famous guy around here. He played ball at Holden High a while

back and everybody still talks about his games. He was that good. He got a baseball scholarship to the state university but hurt his leg and had to drop out. He still looks real strong, though. I heard he lifts weights a lot. He has a job at the meatpacking plant over at Cedar Rapids and got married to the mayor's daughter. Like I said, he's a winning coach, so he gets respect. He's treated almost like a movie star around Holden.

Coach Hennessey stopped in the outfield. "You guys'll start on the chalk line here," he told us. He kicked his foot at the white mark in the grass. "Harv and I are gonna stand a hundred and twenty foot away at another chalk line. I'll raise my arm. When I lower it, two of you'll start running. We'll give you your times and get your names down there. Got it?"

"If they didn't, they're too feeble-minded for the team, Coach," Lobo called out.

"You tell 'em, Lobo," Hennessey said. He and Lobo grinned at each other like they were buddies. Then Hennessey and Coach Small walked a ways out to the mark. Lobo strutted after them like a turkey who'd made it to the day after Thanksgiving. About halfway, he turned back to smirk at us.

We were going to have to run right past him. I took a big breath, wishing the butterflies in my stomach would settle down. Why did Lobo have to show up? I tried to take some breaths, deep and slow, to calm

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myself. But it didn't work. I was starting to sweat, and it wasn't just because it was a hot day. My armpits were damp, and my shirt grabbed on to my skin.

I wanted to get the running part over with. Maybe it would help my nerves. So I stepped up to the chalk line first. Will came up, too.

I'd brought my dad's old glove with me. I wore it at my waist like the other guys, my belt looped through it. I slid the glove around to the back so it wouldn't get in the way of my arms when I ran.

My dad was a real good runner in high school, Mom says. Grandma Nebraska has some pictures of him from when he was sixteen. In one of them he's standing on the pitcher's mound. He's thin and has brown hair like mine, and he's looking real intense, winding up for the pitch. Mom says I look more like him every day.

Dad was a hero in Korea. The Army says he died there almost two years ago. Mom didn't open the casket that was sent from Korea, so I wasn't so sure he was really dead. But I'd changed my mind about that a hundred times.

Today I didn't have an opinion. If Dad *was* dead, maybe he was watching me, seeing how I looked like him. Maybe he'd help me do good at the tryouts.

*Help me run fast, Dad, I told him in my head. If you're dead, I hope you're allowed to do things like that.*

Me and Will looked at each other and nodded. Will isn't a big talker, but his eyes are the blue of a shallow pool, and you can see everything that's going on inside him. Right now he was feeling nervous. Will's usually real steady, though, so he was in control.

"Try hard not to trip!" Lobo yelled at us. He wore a big sneer on his face.

Coach Hennessey put his arm up and sliced it down through the air. We took off.

Lobo hooted. "Look at 'em! They run like a couple o' sissies!" he hollered as we passed him. I tried to block out his words.

Will's a fast runner, and I'm not bad. He crossed the line just ahead of me. We gave the coaches our names and they wrote down our times.

I didn't feel like walking back past Lobo. I jerked my head sideways, signaling Will to move off a ways with me.

We watched the rest of the runners. Lobo shouted more mean stuff to some of the slower guys.

"I really wish Lobo hadn't shown up," I said to Will.

"Block him out of your mind," Will said. "Put up a wall between you and him."

Like I said, Will's real steady.

Me and Will's times were about average with the others.

Next Coach Hennessey divided us into two groups. "Boys on the right go with Coach Small. Rest come with me."

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Will was in the other group. He held up an index finger in a little wave and moved off with Coach Small and about a dozen of the guys.

Of course Lobo hung back with his pal, Coach Hennessey. Coach said he was going to test our catching and throwing. I took my glove off my belt so I'd be ready. He had gloves for the guys who hadn't brought their own.

"We'll see how you do with fly balls," Coach said. "I'll go back to home plate and hit you some fungoes. You," he said, pointing at me, "take left field." He pointed at two other boys. "You guys, center and right."

Coach Hennessey strode back to home. That's when I noticed the colored man again. He was sitting in the bleachers behind the backstop now, his elbows resting on his knees, watching us. The big sack lay on the seat next to him.

Coach took a long, slender bat and threw the ball in the air. The first hit was to me. I saw the ball arc into the sky and fly right for me.

"Here it comes, Stumptown!" Lobo hollered from behind the guy at center field. "Don't blow it!"

I took a few steps forward and reached up to pluck it out of the air. The ball landed right behind me.

Lobo roared. "Good one, Stumptown! Your mother would be proud."

My face went hot. I was so mad at Lobo. But I was even madder at myself. How could I let him get to me like that? I usually do okay at fielding fly balls.

Coach Hennessey only hit two other balls to me. I caught them both with no trouble, but he didn't seem too impressed.

Lobo kept yelling insults, mostly at the kids from Stumptown and the guys who dropped balls.

After everybody caught a few fly balls, we had to throw from the outfield to guys at second base, third base, and home.

I have a pretty strong arm, but I didn't volunteer to throw right away. I was getting shakier, and the reason was Lobo. Nerves and anger are a real bad combination when you're playing ball. So I held back till last, which probably wasn't a great idea. Lobo was yelling insults after all the bad throws. That made me even more nervous about taking my turn.

Finally everybody had thrown but me. "This oughta be good," Lobo called when I put on the glove.

I smacked the ball into my glove, pretending I was smacking it into Lobo's face. I threw to Bob Matthews on second. The ball zoomed right in, just perfect. But I threw high to third, and the throw to home went left a little. The kid squatting with the catcher's mitt couldn't reach it and he toppled over.

Lobo laughed real loud. "Hey, Stumptown!" he yelled. "My little *sister* throws better than you!"

I swear I could've knocked his head off. My nerves were shot. The tryout wasn't even over, but my dream of playing for the Wildcats had disappeared like smoke on a breeze.

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The rest of the tryout didn't get any better. Coach asked us what position we wanted to play. I said "pitcher" in a low voice so Lobo wouldn't hear. But Coach Hennessey didn't let me pitch more than three balls. They weren't great pitches, I guess. The rest of the afternoon was a blur.

At the end of the tryout, Coach Hennessey read off the names of the guys who'd made the team. I didn't make it. Shame heated up and bubbled in my chest. I blinked hard, looking at the ground. I was scared that little-kid tears would work their way out of my eyes and down my face.

Will made the team. I tried to make room in my head for some happiness about that. I'd wanted him to make the team as much as I'd wanted to get picked. But there was so much embarrassment crowding into my brain right then, there wasn't much room for anything else. I shook Will's hand, and his eyes had a guilty look. I think he was feeling bad for feeling good when I didn't make the team with him.

"Hey, Will, you did good," I said. "Even with Lobo yelling out there. I guess I couldn't block him out like you told me."

Will thumped me on the back, but I turned away toward home. I rounded the backstop.

"The big kid didn't give you much of a break, huh?"

The voice was big and deep. I looked up and saw the colored man watching me. He was still sitting on the bleacher.

The sun was in my face, so I had to squint at him. “Yeah, that’s Brad Lobo. He’s pretty mean.”

“What’d he call you? Stumptown? That your name?”

I looked at the grass. “No. Stumptown’s what they call a part of Holden down by the river. That’s where I live.” I looked up at him. “It’s a nice place.”

The guy nodded. “I bet it is,” he said.

I started walking again.

“Don’t feel too bad about the tryout,” he said, and I stopped. “You just need to practice catching and learning how to control the ball.”

I squinted at him some more. He wasn’t as big as his voice sounded, but he looked real strong. Maybe even as strong as Coach Hennessey. “Yeah, I guess,” I said.

“I’ve, uh, played some ball myself.” He watched me a second and it looked like his mind was working on something. Then he said, “That pitch that went left? If you throw the ball across the seams, you’ll have better control. It won’t likely sink or sail, either.”

The burn in my chest grew when I remembered that wild pitch.

“Want to try one?” he asked.

“A pitch, you mean? Now?” I asked.

“Sure.”

I didn’t want to. I wanted to go home and not think about baseball for a while.

“I don’t know,” I said. I looked around. Everybody

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from the tryouts was leaving the park. Will was walking away with one of the other guys who'd made the team. Coach Hennessey and Lobo headed toward the parking lot, loaded down with bags of equipment. I shrugged. "I can't. I don't have a ball."

A big smile spread across the man's face, and his eyes shone. "Got me one right here," he said. He leaned over and opened the sack sitting next to him. His right arm looked hurt or something. It moved funny, kind of stiff. He used his left hand to reach inside the bag and pull out the ball and a catcher's glove.

"There you go," he said. He tossed me the ball with his left hand, then put on the glove. "Try it now. Index and third finger across the seams." He backed off a ways. "Put the ball right here." He held his glove in front of his stomach.

I didn't want to hurt his feelings. He was just trying to be nice. But I didn't feel like pitching a ball, to him or anybody else.

He kept looking at me like he really wanted me to try it. So I laid my fingers across the seams like he told me, wound up, and pitched him one. It went past his right side, about a foot away. He went to get the ball.

"Follow through, now," he said. "Don't stop in the middle of your pitch. In fact, I want to see you pick some grass after the ball leaves your hand. Move your arm all the way down to the ground in one motion."

I frowned. "Pick some *grass*?"

"Yeah. Pick me a handful." He tossed the ball back to me with his good arm.

He said he'd played some ball, but it must have been some weird kind of baseball. I've never heard of a pitcher picking grass at the end of a pitch.

I didn't want to argue with him, though, because he was just trying to help. So I shrugged. "Okay."

"Right here." He held the glove in front of his stomach again.

This time, I put my fingers over the seams, wound up, and threw right at his stomach. In the same motion, my hand reached down and pulled up the grass like he told me. The ball went right to him.

He laughed. "What'd I tell you? Perfect."

I put my hands on my hips. "I'll be darned, it worked."

He just stood there and smiled.

"What's your name, anyway?" I asked him.

"Luther Peale," he said.

"Well, I'm Charlie Nebraska," I said, "and I sure do wish I'd met you a week ago."