

Chapter

Jake Daley and Ryan Duckett stood at the edge of a large field to watch dozens of players try out for the Woodside Baseball League. Jake and Ryan had brought their baseball gloves to the park even though they weren't trying out. The two friends were already on the Red Sox. They were spending this cool spring Saturday morning on the lookout for good players who might help their team.

Together they scanned the players at the four different stations: running, batting, pitching, and fielding. Jake's eyes settled on ten kids getting ready for a 30-yard dash at the running station. At the sound of the

whistle, they took off. One boy pulled ahead quickly and flashed across the finish line, two full strides ahead of the pack.

"Hey, who's that kid?" Jake asked.

Ryan had seen him, too. "I don't know," he said. "But he sure is fast. He won that race easy."

Jake studied the winner as the boy picked up his glove and moved to the pitching station. He was tall and slender with long arms and legs. His dark hair was tucked under a blue baseball cap.

"I think I've seen that kid around," Jake said, squinting into the sun. "He looks familiar."

Ryan shrugged. "I've never seen him."

"He might be a guy who could really help us," Jake said. "Let's go talk to him."

Jake and Ryan moved toward the line of players where the mystery kid was waiting to pitch. As Jake got closer to the line, he noticed the red "B" for Boston on the boy's baseball hat.

"Hey, nice hat!" Jake called out.

The boy turned and smiled. "Yeah, my mom's a big Red Sox fan," he said.

“My dad is too,” Jake said, tapping the same red “B” on his own hat. “I’m Jake. Jake Daley.” He turned and pointed his thumb at Ryan. “This is Ryan Duckett. We’re both on the Red Sox. Hey, maybe you’ll make our team.”

“Yeah, that would be cool,” the boy said, as he looked at the pitching hopefuls waiting in line. “But I just want to make a team. I really don’t care which one.”

“What’s your name?” asked Jake.

“Oh, yeah. I’m Adam Hull.”

Jake took the baseball out of his glove and held it up. “You want to warm up?” he asked Adam.

“Yeah, but I don’t want to lose my place in line.”

“I’ll hold your spot,” Ryan said.

Adam stepped out of line and jogged a few yards away from Jake. The two boys started throwing the ball back and forth, softly at first and then harder as they moved farther away from each other.

“Do you go to Whitman?” Jake asked.

“Yeah,” Adam answered. “I just started last month.”

"I thought I'd seen you around."

"Probably. You live on Warren Street, right?" Adam asked.

"Yeah, 17 Warren." Jake threw the ball harder.

Adam caught it easily. "My mom lives on Lewis. I've seen you on the bus in the morning. You're a couple of stops after mine." He went into his easy pitching motion and uncorked a fastball. *Ssssssmack!* The ball sizzled through the air and whacked into Jake's glove.

"Watch out," Jake warned. "You don't want to throw too hard so early in the season. You'll hurt your arm."

"You mean, I'll hurt your hand!" Adam laughed. "Don't worry, I'm not throwing that hard."

Not throwing that hard? Jake tried not to notice the stinging in his hand. Ignoring his own advice, Jake threw his hardest fastball to Adam. With a casual flick of his glove, Adam caught the ball inches from his left ear.

Wow, my best fastball didn't even faze this guy, Jake thought.

Ryan waved from the front of the pitching station line. "You'd better get over here," he called.

"Gotta go," Adam said, flipping the ball to Jake. "Thanks."

"Good luck," Jake said. "See you on the bus. Or maybe on the Red Sox."

Jake and Ryan moved to the side of the field and sat down in the cool grass. "That Adam guy looks pretty good," Ryan said.

"Pretty good?" Jake blurted out. "He's great. He can throw...and catch...and run...." He looked across the field. "I wonder if he can hit," he said.

"Want to bet?" Ryan laughed.

Jake definitely didn't want to bet against Adam. "Yeah, you're right. He's a player. Wouldn't it be cool if we got him for the team?"

"Yeah. With you at shortstop and a couple of new kids like Adam, we'll be a lot better than last year," Ryan said.

Jake smiled. He was twelve years old and this was his third year with the Red Sox. When he was ten, Jake had spent most of his time on the bench. At 11, he started

every game at second base. At the end of the season, the coaches had given Jake the trophy for The Team's Best 11-Year-Old. Jake put the trophy on his dresser where he could see it every day.

Now that he was 12, Jake was looking forward to playing shortstop every inning. He'd be the leader of the Red Sox. This year was going to be his best year ever.

"Hey, here's a couple of Red Sox," a familiar voice said from behind the boys. "How are you guys doing?"

"Hey, Coach Sanders."

The Red Sox coach pushed his hat back on his head as he surveyed the field. "You boys see anybody I should try to get for the team?"

"Yeah," Jake and Ryan blurted out together. "Adam Hull."

At the pitching area, Adam toed the rubber, went into his windup and blistered a fastball across the center of the plate.

Coach Sanders looked down at his clipboard. "Oh, yeah, I noticed this kid right away," he said, reviewing his notes. "Real

good infielder.... Could field anything...terrific arm."

"He won his race, easy," Ryan added.

"Maybe he could pitch or play center-field," Jake suggested. He wanted to keep shortstop for himself.

All three watched Adam whistle another pitch smack into the catcher's mitt.

"Sure looks like he can pitch, too. Maybe I can figure out a way to get him on the Red Sox." Coach Sanders patted Jake on the shoulder and walked away. "See you boys next week at practice," he said with a wave.

Out on the field, Adam fired one last pitch. Another strike. Jake and Ryan exchanged grins and a quick fist bump. "We could have a *really* good team this year," Ryan said.

Jake agreed. Sitting in the soft grass and looking out over the field, he felt certain that this would be a great year, all right. That this was going to be *his* year.

Chapter 2

Jake and Ryan dashed up the steps of the afternoon bus waiting at Whitman Middle School. They walked to the back amid the shouts of students and the rumble of the idling motor, and grabbed their usual seats.

“I can’t believe it’s only Monday,” Ryan complained. “I don’t think I can make it through a whole week.”

“Tomorrow’s our first practice. That’ll be cool,” Jake reminded him.

“Yeah, for you,” Ryan said. “Coach Sanders will put you at shortstop. He’ll probably stick me in right field...or on the bench.”

Jake looked up and saw a tall boy in a battered Red Sox hat board the bus and slip into a seat near the front. "Hey, there's that kid Adam," he said to Ryan. Then he called out: "Go, Red Sox!"

A kid in the middle of the bus popped up from his seat and yelled, "Red Sox stink. Go, Yankees!" The bus erupted into boos and cheers.

"Go, Red Sox!"

"Yankees rock!"

"Yankees stink!"

The bus driver, Mrs. Dedeo, stood up. "Everybody quiet down and get into your seats. We're about to go."

"Hey, Adam! Adam Hull!," Jake shouted above the noise.

Adam turned around and Jake waved. "Come on back here."

Adam started walking down the aisle, but not quick enough for Mrs. Dedeo. Looking into the big rearview mirror, she told him, "Get in your seat right now, young man. I'm not moving this bus until everyone is in his or her seat."

Adam quickly slid into the last seat with Jake and Ryan. “Man, that lady is mean,” he said in a low voice.

“Don’t worry about her,” Jake said. “She’s always in a bad mood.”

He moved farther down the seat to make more room for Adam. “Hey, now that you’re on the team,” he said, “you get to sit with your teammates.”

“I’m on the Red Sox?” Adam asked. “Awesome. I have to text my mom.” He pulled his phone from his back pocket.

“Didn’t Coach Sanders call you last night?” Ryan asked, sounding surprised.

Adam started tapping the keys on his phone. “Maybe he called my dad. I was at my mom’s last night,” he said, still tapping.

Jake reached into his backpack and pulled out a piece of paper. “You’re definitely on the team,” he said. “Here’s the roster. They posted it on the league web site this morning.”

The boys checked out the list of names as the bus pulled away from the school.

“I don’t know these kids,” Adam said. “Can any of them play?”

“Sure,” Jake said. “Isaiah Slater is a really good hitter and he can pitch, too. Evan Sherman can catch. Hannah’s good, Sam pitches—”

“And Jake will play shortstop,” Ryan interrupted.

“What was your record last year?” Adam asked.

“Five wins and nine losses.”

Adam gave Jake a look that showed he wasn’t very impressed.

“We lost a lot of close games,” Jake added quickly. “We’ll be tons better this year.”

He looked out the window. The bus was getting closer to Adam’s stop. “Hey, Adam, why don’t you come over to my house? Ryan will be there too. We can play wiffle ball in my backyard.”

“Um, sure. Let me text my mom again.”

A few minutes later, the three teammates were dashing through the Daleys’ front door. “Hey, Dad, I’m home!” Jake shouted as he entered.

“I’m in my office,” Mr. Daley called back. The boys dumped their backpacks on the living room floor and headed downstairs.

Jake's father was at his computer, typing quickly. "I left you some chips and dip on the kitchen counter," he said, without looking up.

"Me, Ryan, and Adam are going to play wiffle ball in the backyard."

With that, Mr. Daley looked up from his computer and laughed. "Sorry about my bad manners. I just was finishing up an email. How are you, Ryan?" Then he turned toward Adam. "I don't think we've met."

"I'm Adam."

"He lives over on Lewis," Jake said. "He's gonna be on the Red Sox this season."

"Oh, right. I saw your name on the roster this morning."

Jake looked over at Adam. "My dad's one of the assistant coaches," he said.

"I hear that you are quite a player, Adam," Mr. Daley said. "Maybe you can help the Red Sox win a few more games."

"Oh, he'll help," Ryan said. "A lot."

"Do your parents know you are here?" Mr. Daley asked as the boys started back upstairs.

“Yeah, my mom said it was okay,” Adam said over his shoulder.

Outside in the bright afternoon sunshine, Jake explained to Adam how he and Ryan played wiffle ball in his backyard. “A grounder that gets past both fielders is a single; fly ball that lands past the bush is a double; anything over the fence is a home run.”

“Let’s hit with a regular bat,” Adam suggested as he picked up a metal bat from a pile of sports equipment.

“It’s a lot easier to hit with the plastic bat,” Ryan said.

“That’s why the metal bat is better practice,” Adam said. “We won’t hit with a plastic bat during the season, right?”

“Okay, we can hit with the regular bat,” Jake agreed. “I’ll pitch first. Adam, you hit. Ryan you’re out in the field. We’ll switch after every three outs.”

The boys took their positions, with Adam standing in the batter’s box near the back of the house. A Frisbee was home plate.

Jake’s first pitch broke low and away.

Adam didn't swing and tossed the ball back.

"C'mon, Jake. No batter, no batter," Ryan called from the outfield.

Jake fixed his fingers along the holes in the white plastic ball to throw a big, sweeping curveball. He went into his windup and threw hard. The ball curved sharply toward the strike zone.

Adam whipped the metal bat around in a blur. *Whack!* The ball rocketed straight back. Jake ducked to get out of the way, slipped backwards, and ended up sprawled on the grass.

"Are you okay?" Adam asked, moving toward Jake.

"Yeah," Jake said, still lying on his back. "I'm fine."

"I think that's a double," Adam said. He returned to the batter's box.

Ryan jogged in with the ball, barely able to keep himself from laughing. He stood above Jake and dropped the ball on his chest. "I told you he could hit," he said with a wide grin.