

Prologue

I pulled the 4Runner close to the broken chain-link fence. Setting the parking brake, I opened the door and stepped out into the hazy, early March dusk of Silas, Alabama.

Walking slowly, I reached the opening and stopped at the low outfield fence, hanging loose and separated from the poles set in the ground. The fence had once been tight as saplings during another early March.

How are you doing, Rafer? I'll be running those fields again with you. One day.

The years of our lives are not evenly weighted. Childhood is heaviest, sinking us deep in the space that will be our field of running, falling, and rising again. Middle age pushes the borders, straining the field's limits. Then come the later years, lighter than we had imagined, until the final seasons when we step like sparrows on the earth. In the end, we are without weight.

That was you, Rafer. I thought you and I were the same age. But you were almost weightless even then, when I saw you for the first time . . .

Chapter 1

I didn't set out to believe in miracles. Nobody does. That's what makes them miracles.

The events of 1971 would pick me up in a tornado of changes and set me down in an amazing place of grace. As with Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, it would be a kind of homecoming, except that I would be coming home for the first time.

Around the middle of March, about the time my hometown of Silas started to escape the gray Alabama winter, Little League baseball would crowd out everything else for my attention.

I wasn't alone. Those days, Little League in our county was akin to a small-town parade down Main Street. Everybody went, not really expecting to see the remarkable so much as the

familiar. Pretty near every boy in town played the game. And most every player's parents went to watch, clap, groan, and cheer.

Little League is a game played by Charlie Browns and Joe DiMaggios. Most children that age are Charlie Browns, still struggling with how to handle an oversized pencil, let alone how to grip a baseball and hurl it a particular direction. They are likely to throw the ball farther from their target than it was when they retrieved it. They even look like you imagine Charlie Brown would, running in preadolescent distress to recover the ball they just threw in the wrong direction. On the weaker Little League teams, Charlie Browns mosey around the outfield, and DiMaggios man the infield. Players who hit the ball over the infielders' heads usually have an easy double. Stronger teams have a DiMaggio anchoring center field, or maybe left. If anyone better than Charlie is in right, then either the team is stacked with talent or something magical is going on. Maybe both.

I don't remember ever not being able to hit the ball into the outfield. I didn't think much about it, really, except for the basics: relax, breathe, don't swing so hard, don't pull your head. Bring the bat to the ball and drive it on a line. I was a little tall for my twelve years, but I also had something much better than size. Confidence. I knew I could hit the ball, and hit it hard. Not every time, but most of the time. And batting over .500 with power will scorch any league.

I was the best hitter I had ever seen. Until 1971.

It was a cool Saturday in mid March. I called my best friend, Donnie White, and he called Batman Boatwright and Jimmy Yarnell. I really didn't spend a lot of time with Batman and Jimmy throughout the rest of the year. Just spring and early summer. When Little League season came into focus, so did Batman and Jimmy.

I always took the back way to the old field, cutting through woods so thick and dark it was like traveling and hiding at the same time. My wicked cool Sting-Ray, with butterfly handlebars and a fat banana seat covered in leopard spots, gave me an edge in races with the guys. But in woods that thick, I'd just get to pumping the pedals hard before I'd have to dismount and negotiate the bramble bushes and low hanging, cobwebbed pines that duped nature by growing

with so little sun.

Sawdust wasn't real keen on those woods. A hound-collie mix, he had followed me home two summers before and decided I needed him. Through these woods, along the rough path of moss and bracken, he got nervous when I had to stop the bike and walk. He looked back and forth and around, seemingly wary that something might sneak up on us. He barked his approval when we climbed the last ridge and tumbled out of the sun-spun shadows crisscrossing our wooded trek and into the sun's soaring shine over the ancient baseball field behind Mill Creek Fire Station.

It wasn't a real baseball diamond anymore, just a big space of worn-down grass. But it was enough of a practice field for us. There was even an outfield fence of sorts, a lot of chain no longer linked. A backstop someone put up years before helped us out. If the ball got by the hitter, it caromed off the chain links and dribbled in the general direction of the pitcher. If it didn't get a good enough carom to send it close to the mound, the batter picked it up and tossed it back to the pitcher. Who needed a catcher?

Donnie, Batman, and Jimmy were already there, tossing the ball in a triangular game of catch.

"It's about time, Pardner!" Donnie raised his arms in a "what's the deal?" gesture. "We're startin' to take root here." He dropped his arms and threw the ball too high in Jimmy's direction. Jimmy threw his glove after the ball, and then turned to look at Donnie like he couldn't believe he put up with a friend who threw that poorly.

"Sorry," said Donnie with a big smile. "Too high, I guess."

"Zack," Jimmy said, turning to me, "can you tell this guy about cool?"

"What do I know about cool?" I said, not really asking.

Sawdust barked at Jimmy and Batman, darting between the two. He made quick little circles around Jimmy, like they were old friends. They weren't.

"Whaddya always have to bring the mutt for?" Jimmy sounded seriously miffed.

"Sawdust likes chasing the balls," I said.

“I know *that*,” said Jimmy. “He gets ’em all slimy.”

Batman drawled, “He’s got your glove now, Hoss.”

Jimmy gave a squawk and bounded after Sawdust, who was running in large circles back and forth across the field.

“I’ll make a glove outta you, ya mutt!” Jimmy’s threat broke us up, and I laughed pretty hard until I saw the new kid. At first, I thought something was seriously wrong he was so still. He sat at the base of a tree, his back ramrod straight against the trunk, his legs straight out from his body, arms at his sides. He looked almost unreal, not moving his head, stock-still, eyes frozen. Not moving anything.

“Whatcha looking at, Pardner?” Donnie gave nicknames to people he really liked, and people he struggled to like. Come to think of it, that’s just about everybody. He once told me it was hard to call someone by a good nickname and still not like them. Donnie wanted to like everybody.

“That boy,” I said, “over there.”

“Oh man, he don’t look so good.” Donnie stared. “He even . . . is he alive?”

“What kind of a question is that?” I said, still staring at the kid under the tree, who still had not moved. “Of course he’s alive. I mean . . . don’t you think?”

Batman jogged up to us. “Are we gonna play or what?”

“Look at that kid over there.” Donnie pointed with his gloved hand.

“I see him,” Batman said. “So what?”

“Is he alive?”

“Whaddya mean?”

“I mean he doesn’t look alive.” Donnie said the words slowly, as if he were announcing something important, like the moral at the end of a story.

“Well he’s not dead,” said Batman.

“How do you know?” I asked.

“Because he sits there like that all the time. I’ve seen him before, when we come here to play.”

“Really?”

“Lots of times,” Batman said. “I think he’s a retard.”

“Come off it.” Donnie looked at Batman and shook his head, like he was disappointed in him.

“It’s the Forrester kid,” Batman said. “Everybody knows he’s touched.” Batman was blowing massive bubbles and struggling to move the gum to the side of his mouth so he could talk.

“Don’t tell me ya’ll haven’t seen him at school.”

“I seen him,” said Donnie.

“I don’t think I have,” I said. “How come, you reckon?”

“Maybe ’cause you’re always looking at Rebecca Carson,” Batman joshed. “Anyway, he’s touched.”

“Okay, he’s got some problems . . .,” Donnie started.

Batman decided to pluck the wad of gum out of his mouth and hold it in his free hand, a rare move he reserved for emergencies. “*Serious* problems,” said Batman.

“Okay,” said Donnie, “serious problems, but we don’t have to call him—”

“Hey guys,” I said. “Guys, I think he’s coming over here.”

The Forrester kid was on his feet, walking toward us.

“Holy metropolis,” Batman whistled. “Look alert, Batfans.”

Jimmy ran up, holding his glove away from his body, between a thumb and forefinger, the leather shiny with Sawdust drool.

“This is so foul, ya’ll. I can’t play with this nasty thing. Do ya’ll . . . do ya’ll know that fella is coming over here?”

“Yeah Jimmy, we know,” I said.

“Do ya’ll . . . do ya’ll know he’s a retard?”

“He’s *not* a retard. He has some problems, that’s all,” said Donnie, loudly.

“His problem is he’s a retard—and his dad’s a drunk, ’cording to my folks.”

I really don’t think Jimmy meant to say anything mean. That’s just the way he was. Shoot

from the lip and take no prisoners.

“Shut up, Jimmy,” Donnie’s voice was a sharp whisper now. “There’s nothing wrong with his ears.”

Rafer Forrester walked straight up to me, stepping up close, his face no more than a foot from mine. The other kids instinctively took half-steps back, clumsily trying to give me more space. Sawdust sauntered into the picture, sat down razor close to Rafer and put a paw on the boy’s shoe. Without looking, Rafer put his hand on the dog’s head and stroked it.

“Hey,” I said quietly. “How’s it going?”

I guess I hadn’t really expected an answer. But I did expect him to say *something*. After some long seconds he did.

“Hit.”

“You wanna hit?” I asked.

Silence.

“You wanna hit?” I said again.

“Hit. Rafer hit.” His face was still devoid of expression.

I heard Jimmy’s voice behind me. “I think the fella wants to try to hit the baseball.”

“You mean the ball?” I held it up in front of me, about six inches from his eyes.

“I don’t think he’s blind, Zack-man,” Batman said, his voice joining Jimmy’s in a nervous flutter of laughs.

“All right, guys,” said Donnie. “Hey, Pardner, why don’t you let him try?”

“Oh, come on, Donnie,” Batman said. “Jimmy and me gotta go in about thirty minutes. We don’t have time.”

“Let him try, Pardner. Just a couple of tosses.” Donnie was already walking toward home plate. “I’ll catch so we don’t have to keep fetching the balls.”

I looked right in Rafer’s eyes. “You want to hit the baseball a little?”

“Rafer hit.”

“Okay, Rafer. Do you wanna take the ball yourself?”—I pressed the ball gently in his hand—

“and just toss it up in the air and hit it?” I figured he could do that. Hitting a pitched ball didn’t seem plausible, no matter how slow I tossed it.

“Rafer hit.” He pushed the ball back at me.

Batman moaned and sat down on the ground. “C’mon guys, we’re wasting time.”

“Okay, I can pitch it,” I said.

Rafer walked slowly toward home plate and picked up the bat. Donnie was already crouched behind the plate calling to me. “Okay, Pardner. Toss it in, and Rafe here is gonna knock the cover off the ball. Here we go, Pardner.”

Rafer stopped in front of Donnie and said, loud enough for everyone to hear, “Zack pitch. No Pardner.”

Behind me I heard Jimmy’s chuckle. Batman, sitting on the ground behind the pitcher’s mound, laughed so hard his gum started slipping down the back of his throat. “Oh . . . oh, my gosh. I almost swallowed it, ya’ll,” he managed to say.

Donnie just smiled real big at Rafer. “That’s right, Rafer, my buddy. He is Zack.” Then, rocking back and forth in a low catcher’s crouch, he called to me. “Okay, Zack, just toss it in gentle-like.”

So I did. I tossed the ball underhand, as slow as I could, across the plate. As fat a pitch as I could make it.

Rafer didn’t swing. He watched the pitch the whole way and the bat never left his shoulder. Donnie threw the ball back to me, and I tossed it again. Again, no swing.

From his spot now reclining on the ground, his head resting on his glove, Batman’s groans were like a sick boy’s. “Oh, guys. We’re gonna be here all day. And we gotta go home soon.”

“Batman,” said Jimmy, “if we gotta go home soon, then we can’t be here all day.”

Jimmy crashed on the ground next to Batman, resting his head on his glove. Then an odd expression invaded his face. He bolted upright, frantically wiping dog spit from the back of his head. “Oh, that’s stinking! Oh, that’s so raw!”

Batman just groaned again.

Donnie called to me, “Maybe you need to get closer, Pardner . . . I mean Zack. You know, toss it from a shorter distance.”

As I started to step off the mound, Rafer bellowed, “No!”

I froze.

“No!” he said again. “Zack pitch. Rafer hit.”

“Okay, okay.” I got back on the mound. I tossed it again, underhanded, only this time as the ball was crossing home plate, Rafer caught it with his right hand. He dropped the bat. For several seconds he did not move. “Zack pitch,” he said again as he started moving through an elaborate windup, turning his body like Tom Seaver and kicking his leg high like Juan Marichal, coming down with his throwing hand over the top. The ball rocketed from his hand to my glove, which I reflexively raised to protect my face.

Dead silence.

Then Jimmy drawled, “Well, good night, ya’ll.”

Donnie, barely audible, said, “He wants you to pitch it fast, I guess. God help us.” I wasn’t sure what to do. I had a strong arm from playing third base.

“Come on, Zack. Fire it in here.” Donnie was suddenly confident about the situation.

“Can you catch it?” I asked him.

“Oh, come on, of course I can catch it. You’re not *that* fast, you know.”

That was all my adolescent ears needed to hear. I wound up and released, letting the ball spring naturally out of my grip. The ball crossed the heart of the plate in a white blur.

At least it would have.

Rafer dropped the head of the bat, quick like a cat, just in front of the ball. Coaches tell hitters to focus on getting the barrel of the bat on the ball, and let the pitched ball do all the real work, ricocheting off the bat. That’s what Rafer did. And my perfect strike was now a perfect line drive, streaking into the gap in left center field. It had just started to drop when it banged off the old outfield fence.

“Throw him another one, Pardner!” yelled Donnie.

“He Zack,” said Rafer.

“I know, I know, he Zack! I mean, he’s Zack. Throw him another one, Pardner! And put some real zip on it this time.”

I wound up and put everything I had into the pitch. Again, Rafer swung as if he were simply dropping the bat onto the ball in one quick, measured motion. The ball left his bat and left no doubt. It cleared the fence in left field, disappearing in trees ten or fifteen feet past the fence. We had never seen a ball travel that far off this field. Not even when Jimmy’s brother, a starter on the high school JV team, had tossed a few in the air and socked them as far as he could.

“Don’t throw him any more,” Jimmy hollered, climbing over the fence with Batman after the ball. “These are my brother’s balls, and he’ll kill me if I don’t bring ’em all back.”

Donnie ran out to me at the mound. “Are you thinking what I’m thinking? We can get him. I bet he ain’t on a team . . . I bet my silver dollar he ain’t. We can get him.”

I walked up to Rafer, still standing in the batter’s box, expressionless. “Rafer, how old are you?”

“Rafer twelve.”

Donnie went into a silent victory dance, a kind of jump and twirl.

“Do you wanna play on our team, on our Little League team, the Robins?”

“Yeah. I play.”

“Great,” I said, trying to stay calm. “Great, Rafer. We’re going to have tryouts, right across the street, at McInerney Elementary School. I pointed in the direction. Right on that field, this coming Monday after school. Can you be there?”

He didn’t seem to get what I said. Just when I thought he wasn’t going to say any words, he said three.

“Mack . . . and Ernie.”

“Who are they?” said Donnie. “No, no, you tell him we just want him.”

Donnie was standing right next to both of us. I didn’t know why he thought I was Rafer’s interpreter, except that I kind of felt that way too. Like I was a bridge between Rafer and Donnie

and whomever.

“Who are Mack and Ernie, Rafer?” I asked.

“Mack and Ernie School.”

“Oh.” I smiled. “I get it. Hey, that’s pretty funny, Rafer.”

Only Rafer wasn’t smiling, and I worried about him not showing up for the tryouts.

“Rafer, can you be here”—I pointed to the ground—“next Saturday?” I figured I could walk across the street with him to the actual tryouts.

“Mack and Ernie,” he said without expression.

Donnie started to laugh and I gave him a sharp look. I was trying to get something important done.

“Rafer, I will meet you right here, next Saturday, by your tree.” I pointed. “Then you and me will go to tryouts . . . I mean, play some baseball together. All right? Saturday morning. Is that okay?”

“Rafer hit.”

“That’s right. Saturday morning, you’ll hit.”

“I hit Saturday.” I probably imagined it, but it looked like his mouth was turning at the corners in a small smile. Then he turned and started to walk. He passed his tree.

Watching Rafer disappear into the woods, I heard Donnie’s anxious voice. “We can’t let the other coaches see him bat. We gotta find a way to make him a Robin without, you know, without the others seeing him bat.”

“I know,” I said. “I’ll think of something.”

From a long ways off we heard Jimmy, sounding like someone you hear hollering when you’re in your house with the windows closed.

“I found it. Hey guys, I . . . found . . . it.”