

Chapter 28

The Boys and Girls of Summer

"It's almost over," Joey Mitchell said and sighed. Joey, Tank Arbuster and I were sitting at the soda fountain of Glickman's Drug Store. Joey and I were sipping vanilla cherry cokes. Tank was inhaling a hot fudge sundae, a bag of cheese curls, a roll of Necco wafers, and a Chunky candy bar.

"What's almost over?" Tank asked in between bites. There was a smear of fudge sauce on his chin and cheese curl crumbs on his Gap cap.

"Summer," Joey said. "In less than two weeks we'll be back in school, back in prison. The end of summer has got to be the saddest two weeks of the year."

"Wouldn't the first two weeks of school be even sadder?" I asked.

"No way," Joey said. "When you start a school year you forget the summer, just leave it behind. When summer is over, it's over. It's knowing it's going to be over soon, that is the sad part. Really sad."

Tank seemed to be considering the depth of that thought. "Either of you guys want a bite of my Chunky bar?" he added. "It's real good."

"You kids will be starting junior high school this year, right?" Mr. Glickman asked.

"Yes sir. Seventh grade." Joey was always polite to adults. "When I'm working at the filling station," he once confided in me, "I get better tips when I'm polite."

Mr. Glickman left the soda fountain to answer the telephone in the pharmacy section of his store.

"Are you excited about going to the junior high?" I asked Joey.

"Are you kidding? No way!"

"I heard it's a cool place," Tank said. "The eighth grade girls wear mini-skirts and the cafeteria serves way bigger portions than the elementary school."

"Look," Joey said. "We've all been in the same class for about a thousand years, right? In two weeks Eileen will be in classes with the brainiacs and we'll be with the meatheads. Everything, I mean everything will be different."

"Well, if you did your school work in Old Man Enright's class instead of writing love notes to Paula O'Connor, you might not be such a meathead." I had to say it.

"Lookey here, lookey here. If it isn't the boys and the one who would like to be a boy making the soda fountain scene." Speed Miller always made his presence felt immediately. I hadn't said a word to Speed since he called the Series "spictacular". "Still on a diet, huh Tankster?" Speed said. "And Eileen, I almost didn't recognize you. Wait, what's happening to your chest? Are you turning into a girl or something?"

"You want to get beaten up by a girl, Wally?" I thought I certainly wouldn't mind not being in his class in junior high school. "I mean, is there something you want or are you just being your usual friendly self?"

"Actually, I got an idea, okay?" he answered.

"An idea! Would you like me to see if Mr. Glickman can get you some medicine for that? A couple of pills and you'll be back to normal." Wally and I had been sparring with each other like this since the first time I struck him out on a curveball in one of our pick-up games.

"Hey, if you're not nice to me, Eileen, I won't let you play in the Labor Day Weekend World Series of West Holyoke."

"Boy, that just rolls off the tongue," Joey said. "The Labor Day Weekend World Series of West Holyoke? What exactly is it?"

"It's an absolutely great idea is what it is," Speed said. "A truly great idea. Here's the way I see it. Listen closely. We split the neighborhood in half. We take Edward Drive and Elton Avenue and then all of the streets up to the vet hospital and we make one team, okay? And then Edbert Road and all the streets below, down here to Glickman's, that's the other team. Two teams stocked with ballplayers. And we play a world series of pick-up baseball over Labor Day weekend."

"That is a great idea, Wally." It was hard for me to admit it.

"How'd you come up with it?" Tank asked.

"Well, ah, it was actually Ray Flanagan's idea," he answered. "But I'm in charge of recruiting the players."

"Wait a minute, Speed. Wait one minute. If I am right your team will have you, Tank, Ray and Jimmy Flanagan, Catfish Reynolds, Wee Willie Wintergreen, Bobby Harty and Jeff Baker." Joey obviously didn't think the sides were even. "And let me see, our team would be me, Eileen and Pat, my little brother Timmy, Crazy Arm Dunn, the Microphone, Duane Bennett and his brother Bubba, and that new kid who just moved into the Sipowitz's house. That kid who skips around the bases instead of running."

"That's about it," Speed said. "Except that Biggie Bob will be over at Tank's house that whole weekend so we automatically get him, too."

"Yeah? And who do we automatically get, huh?" Joey asked.

"There's a whole bunch of third and fourth graders who live on Nutmeg Circle," Speed laughed. "That's one of your streets."

"Don't worry about it, Joey," I said. "We have never lost the Labor Day Weekend World Series of West Holyoke before, have we? Besides, it will help you deal with your little depression. It'll be a great way to end the summer."