



## INDIANA—1948

The dirt beneath the wheels of Arthur Murphy's car rose and swirled like the breath of angry giants, lingering in the heavy morning air even after his blue-and-white Plymouth Road King had disappeared around the bend like an apparition. He had been driving all night, with nothing for company but endless rows of cornstalks, a diamond-dotted sky, and a brown paper bag whose torn front exposed the worn words *Southern Comfort*. He rubbed his eyes with one hand—they burned from the firebrick sun that had slipped over the rolling hills of clover up ahead—and drummed the top of the steering wheel impatiently with his fingers on the other. He was getting too old for this. Twenty-six years with the Braves organization; he had played for them, coached, and was now in his third year as manager of their farm affiliate in Milwaukee. But there he was, still doing a job more commonly associated with guys half his age.

"I need you on this one, Murph," the club's owner explained. "Do yourself a favor and get your ass out there and find something to help that sorry lot you call a team or I'll be scouting for managers." He paused deliberately for effect. His forehead wrinkled. "You're a good man, Murph. But this is no time for pride, Arthur. We've lost our best prospects the last few years to Uncle Sam. Damned war. They say it's over now. Sure. It's over. But everyone wants to be a soldier

all of a sudden. The damned Japanese ruined everything. Feels like the whole world's against us."

Murph's stomach burned as he recalled the conversation. It may have been true, all that Dennison had said, but the owner's tone irked him. And that gratuitous line about him being a good man. Who was he kidding? Murph was inclined to consider the sentiment not so much a compliment but more as crap designed to cajole him into accepting another scouting trip that nobody else wanted. Warren Dennison, the owner of the minor-league-affiliate Brewers, didn't give a rat's ass about him. Never did.

Murph's eyelids were heavy and struggled beneath the weight of sleeplessness. The rows of fruit trees were endless and hypnotic. Many times during the drive he'd felt like a rat, negotiating a series of narrow corridors, searching for the elusive prize at the end. He rolled down the window and hit the knob on the radio. The cool air and Johnny Mercer's "Sweet Georgia Brown" got his left foot tapping.

Thoughts of his past returned as well. His life had tumbled well short of the aspirations he'd had during his playing days when he was touted as the best left-handed hitter since Ty Cobb. He recalled happily all of the attention he received those first few months. He and another young stud, Chip "Hollywood" McNally, had begun their careers in the American Association the same year. They were both lionized by everyone in the Braves organization as the finest prospects they had. Milwaukee was going to be just a brief stop en route to the big show in Boston. Both were exceptional outfielders; each could run like a deer and could hit every bag with a tracer from anywhere in the outfield. McNally was probably a little stronger, and Arthur's red hair and freckles were no match for Hollywood's square jaw and golden locks. Still, Arthur was the one that all of the real baseball people whispered about, especially around the batting cage. He was a natural. Could flat out hit. Turn on the fastball. Shoot the curve the opposite way. Had excellent power to all fields. Whitey Simpson, the manager of the Milwaukee Brewers the year he arrived, swore that Arthur was the best bad-ball hitter he had ever seen.

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Arthur was maybe five or six games away from being sent to Boston when the incident occurred. They were up by one with two outs in the top half of the ninth. The first two pitches were called balls. The batter, Clyde Simmons, stepped out and tapped his spikes with the knob of his bat and smiled at the crowd.

"What the hell is he doing?" McNally yelled to Arthur from right field. "Is he for real? He hasn't touched a ball all game."

Arthur shook his head. He was tired. He scanned the grandstand from his position in center field. It had been a good game. Everyone was on his or her feet, anticipating the final out. Some were clapping, while others yelled out encouraging words through rolled-up newspapers. Most were screaming for McNally and waving signs, expressing undying affection for number nine, the handsome right fielder. He was their darling. Arthur hung his head. He was tired of that too. Hell, McNally hadn't done a damned thing all day either. Three whiffs and not one putout from the field. Arthur was three for four and had thrown out two runners at home. But that day was no different from any other. Hollywood McNally was the favorite at Borchert Field. The poster boy. Arthur never quite managed to endear himself to the crowd the way Hollywood did. The press loved him, sure; couldn't stop talking about his prowess and unlimited potential. But the hometown crowd—that was something else. They never warmed to him. So all he ever got was a smattering of placards displaying his name and number and the same group of elderly men who sat behind him each game, in suit coats and fedoras, smoking cigars and critiquing his every play. Even the diminutive second baseman, little Nat Riley, who barely broke .200 every season, had a better following—a group of fifteen scraggly kids who always sat in the same section and only cheered for him. They were a coterie of misfits, from their dirty faces and torn knees to the baseball caps each one wore askew. Lefty Wilkins used to kill Riley about his admirers.

"Hey, Nat," he always said shortly after their arrival. "The orphan-age just checked in." Arthur was still trying to reconcile the gross inequity in his mind when he heard the crack of the bat. It was a

screaming liner, earmarked for the right-center-field gap. He broke as soon as he saw the ball emerge from the faces of those seated behind home plate. "I got it! I got it!" he screamed, eating up the turf with each stride, galloping with the grace and dexterity of a gazelle. It was one of the things he did best.

Hollywood hadn't caught a ball all game. He had spent the majority of the afternoon tipping his hat, for no apparent reason, to the adoring crowd each time he made his way out to right or stepped to the plate. He was always smiling.

"Where's the camera, Hollywood?" the guys all teased the first day he arrived. The name stuck. He was always on. Nobody at Borchert Field would ever have known how frustrated he really was that day at not having had the chance to show off his stuff. Now, with the game in its later stages, opportunity had finally knocked.

He never broke stride. And he never heard Arthur calling for the ball. His spikes glistened in the high afternoon sun, leaving behind shards of grass that fell softly to the ground like confetti. He followed the trajectory of the little white sphere, wedded to the vision of a game-saving catch and the adulation that would follow.

Neither happened. They collided just as each arrived at the ball. The sound was loud and piercing, a crack of thunder that reverberated as if it were produced in a deep canyon of stone. Those in the little ballpark groaned and sighed, then all at once lapsed into an eerie silence as the two men crumpled helplessly to the turf. No one even noticed Clyde Simmons circling the bases.

The Brewers' dugout exhaled, and out poured Whitey, followed by a handful of coaches and a few of the players. A ring formed around their fallen teammates.

"You two idiots!" Whitey bawled. "How many times have we practiced this? Call for the ball! Call for the damned ball! Jesus, how many times—"

Arthur was the first to stagger to his feet. His eyes were glazed and his forehead split at the left temple. A thin line of crimson ran down his cheek and across his jaw, ultimately finding a resting place in the collar of his uniform top.

"I did call for it," he mumbled weakly.

"Where'd you get it, Murph?" one of the coaches asked.

Arthur pointed to his shoulder. Then he looked down at McNally, who lay motionless except for the grimacing.

"I'm okay," Arthur said. "I think McNally took it worse."

He was right. Chip "Hollywood" McNally's career ended that day at Borchert Field. There would be no more flashbulbs. No one would ever scream his name again or wave a sign professing undying affection for good old number nine. A fractured skull and busted knee had taken care of that.

Arthur did not escape unscathed. Sure, he recovered. But he was never the same. He went on to have a modest but successful career as a utility player. He played for nine seasons, ending his playing career with a .277 batting average and 108 home runs. But the numbers did not tell the whole story. Oh, what he might have accomplished had it not been for that arrogant bastard McNally. His ego destroyed two careers that day. It was a long time ago, but Arthur could not forget. He still heard the sound. At night sometimes, when the air outside his bedroom window was still, he could still hear it. *Crack*. That sound. It still made him shiver. And McNally's eyes as they carried him off the field. Arthur couldn't forget those either. Those eyes. Black and venomous. And those final words.

"My ball," McNally said bitterly. "My ball."

McNally kicked around the minors for a while, refusing to believe his career was finished. People said it was one of the most pathetic things they'd ever seen. He could barely run, could not reach the cutoff man from his position, and, as the old joke goes, could not hit water if he fell out of a boat.

Then, with virtually nothing left of his pride and self-respect, he finally resigned himself to coaching jobs whenever he could get one. The million-dollar smile was gone, replaced by a bitter scowl and an irrational hatred for Arthur Murphy that just continued to fester.

The radio cut out momentarily and brought Murph back to matters at hand. He was on his way to check out some hotshot first

baseman from Bargersville, Indiana. One of Dennison's cousins had spotted him during a pickup game.

"Murph, you've got to see this kid," Dennison told him. "I hear he's a real god!"

Arthur was unimpressed. He had heard it all before. If he had a dollar for every "sure thing" he was told about, he'd be somewhere else right now.

He looked down next to him at the papers on the seat and shuffled them around. "Thirty-seven twenty-one Marbury Lane," he read off one of the sheets. Without a map, the address was really of little use. "Where the hell is Marbury Lane?"

He was shaking his head, thinking about the pot roast his mom used to make for him back home. God, he loved her cooking. She could bake too. Won first prize every year in the Ladies' Auxillary bake-off at the church. Nothing warmed his insides like a half hour at the dinner table. His hunger and frustration made him miss it even more. The thought of tender meat, potatoes, and gravy-soaked biscuits was comforting. He had just closed his eyes, lost in the sweet recollection, when the reminiscence was violently shattered by a sudden jolt and then the sound of breaking glass. His arms tensed as he struggled to control the car. It swerved back and forth across the road, taking out several small trees that lined the shoulder. The blue-and-white roadster careened helplessly out of control, tossing Arthur from side to side before finally coming to rest in a shallow ditch.

With tears in his eyes, a sore neck, and a faint trickle of blood coming from his nose, he stumbled out of the car. The day was new and fresh, alive with a wind full of dust and the smell of lilies. He placed his hands on his hips and surveyed the damage. He looked the car up and down.

"Son of a bitch!" he screamed, dabbing his nose with his thumb and forefinger. Then he fired his foot against the back tire. "Jesus Christ!"

The car was a mess. His eyes scraped the dusty road behind and found the cause of the mishap. It was some sort of animal, large and

lifeless, lying off to the side. He ran his hands, still trembling, through his hair.

"Perfect!" he screamed. "Just perfect!"

Up ahead, just around a bend in the road, stood a modest farmhouse. Arthur's eyes found the red silo hovering just above the arching oaks blocking his vision and his feet began to shuffle in that direction. He was thinking about all he still had to do—find Marbury Lane and get a look at this kid—as he stumbled down the road. For some reason, he suddenly perceived how dissatisfied he was with the course of his career. He had been a young man once, full of hope and promise. The next Ty Cobb. He could still hear the scouts talking about him behind the cage as he took batting practice. He was so sure that his life was going to thrive under the warm glow of baseball stardom. But all he had become was the middle-aged manager of a minor league team that had struggled the past few years just to break .500. And if that weren't intolerable enough, now he was lumbering down some godforsaken road in the middle of the sticks praying that someone could help him get where he needed to be.

The mailbox outside the farmhouse was beaten and weathered, a gray wood container nailed to a crooked stake with the name Tussler barely visible through all of the chips and cracks. He followed a narrow, winding path that led him past a tiny field with slanted gravestones overrun with cucumber vines and crabgrass that eventually gave way to a small stable.

"Hello," he called out. "Anyone home?"

He stepped forward and opened the door, looking curiously at the scene inside. Two horses, a couple of chickens nesting in the corner, and a few pigs eating quietly from a trough.

Not much of a farm, he thought.

The animals seemed just as unimpressed with him. They barely stirred and would probably have remained completely still had it not been for the sudden thumping from behind the far wall. He followed the sound around the stable until he found its origin. He stood, with his back and left foot flat against the side of the stable, watching in amazement at the young farm boy, standing next to a

curious pattern of crab apples in the dirt—six rows across, five apples deep—firing one at a time from one hundred feet away into a wine barrel turned on its side.

Thud. Thud. Thud.

Stunned, Arthur watched as the boy shifted his weight back, cocked his right arm, then exploded forward, splitting the center of the barrel every time. He didn't have much of a windup, and the mechanics were awkward, but it was the most astounding display of power and accuracy he had ever witnessed.

Thud. Thud. Thud.

He was about to walk a little closer when he stopped suddenly, taken aback by an unusual, spastic motion the boy was performing. His throwing hand, curled into a fist, was buried inside his other, and he was rolling his arms violently. Arthur watched as each elbow rose and fell rhythmically, over and over, until at last the boy stopped just long enough to reach down in front of him to resume the awesome exhibition.

Thud. Thud. Thud.

Three more strikes. Then came the rolling of the arms. Arthur stared as the powerful young man repeated the process, time and again.

Arthur was captivated. Once the pristine rows of projectiles had vanished, he walked over to the boy. The kid was bigger up close. His face was youthful, round and fleshy, with sandy brown strands of hair that barely concealed a dark purplish line under his right eye. He must have been at least six foot five. His legs looked like two oak trees, and he had the biggest hands Arthur had ever seen.

"Excuse me," Arthur said. "Hello. I had a little accident with my car. Do you live here?"

The young giant was startled and tense. He began to chew his lower lip. His eyes darted wildly.

"I live here," he answered.

"Is there someone who can help me with my car? I mean, your parents. Is your dad around?"

The boy didn't answer. He was just standing before him, his

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glance shifting from Arthur's hat to his shoes and all points in between.

"I didn't mean to bother you, son." Murph held out his hand. "I'm Arthur Murphy. My friends call me Murph."

The boy's expression softened. He pushed away the wisps of brown hair that hung carelessly in his eyes.

"Michael James Tussler, sir," he answered, pulling awkwardly at one of the straps of his overalls. "Folks round here just call me Mickey."

"Mickey, huh? Say, that's quite a shiner you got there." Murph pointed to the boy's eye.

"How's that?"

"Your eye. I was talking about your eye. How'd you get that?"

The boy fidgeted. "Aw, don't reckon Mickey remembers."

Arthur smiled softly. "Well, that's all right now. It's nice to meet you, Mickey. You've got quite an arm there. Really. I was watching you from over there. How old are you?"

The boy was biting the inside of his cheek. "I got me some pigs, sir. Want to see my pigs?"

"Uh, sure. Maybe later."

"I got six of 'em. My favorite one is named Oscar."

Arthur studied the boy. He was certainly in amazing shape. A fine athletic specimen. But there was something about him. A vacancy behind his eyes that seemed to overshadow everything else.

"Well, that sounds very nice, son. Say, how old did you say you are, Mickey?"

"Seventeen."

"Ever play baseball?"

Mickey just looked at him.

Murph thought again about Dennison's ominous admonition and how desperately grave his situation with the ball club had become.

"You, know. Baseball. Three strikes. Home run. All that good stuff."

"I don't reckon I have. I'll show you my pigs now. I got six of

'em." Then Mickey placed his hands together and began rolling his elbows once again.

"Yeah, yeah. Okay, Mickey. In a minute. But first, how's about waiting here while I run to my car. Then maybe you can show me that neat trick of yours again—you know, throwing those apples in the barrel?"

Mickey nodded blankly. Murph was gone and back in a flash, fearful that the boy might change his mind. With his breath short and erratic, Murph reached down to pick up one of the wormy specimens that had fallen outside the original makeshift grid. He tossed it in the air a couple of times. Then he reached into his pocket with his other hand and presented to Mickey a beautiful new baseball.

"What do ya say, kid?" Murph prompted, holding out both his hands. "They're almost the same exact size. Except mine is real clean and smooth. Go on. Have a feel for yourself." Murph watched as the boy's hand swallowed the ball. "Pretty neat, huh?"

Mickey ran his fingers over the laces. "Mickey likes it, sir."

Murph smiled. His heart beat on. "How about giving it a toss, Mickey? You know, right over in that barrel. Just for laughs."

The boy nodded. "Can I show you my pigs now?"

"Well, sure you can, son. But first, I'd love to see you toss that baseball into that barrel."

The monotony of the conversation sank into a vague haze through which Murph's glittering visions persisted. He placed his hand on the boy's back and nudged him gently. "What do you say, son?" he prodded. "Will you do that for me?"

"Okay, Mr. Murphy. Mickey will do it."

Murph watched with immeasurable fascination as the boy held the ball, brought his hands together, and rolled his arms. Then, like a bolt of lightning released from the heavens, the ball took flight, a streak of white radiance that cut the air with a whizzing sound before landing directly in the center of the barrel, splintering the wood. Murph's eyes widened like saucers. His breath was gone again. Then, in the flatness that followed the euphoria, Murph knew, just knew, that he had stumbled on something special.

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"How's that, Mr. Murphy?"

"That's terrific kid. Terrific. Now, what do ya say I go get that ball and you do it one more time. Then we'll check on those pigs."

Mickey looked right past Arthur. His face twitched ever so slightly and his gaze was off in the distance, focused on the raucous noise at the side door of the barn.

"Godammit!" a man thundered, incensed by a baby chick that would not stay in its pen with the others. "Git back here."

Arthur turned around. An elderly man in dirty overalls and a straw hat had come through the door and was sidling over to them. He had a pitchfork in one hand and a metal bucket in the other.

"What can I do for ya, stranger? I reckon ya's lost or sumpin like that."

The appearance of the farmer altered the boy's demeanor. He became stiff and distant and rocked nervously while muttering words that Arthur could not understand.

Slowly, silently, now the moon,  
Walks the night in her silver shoon;  
This way, and that, she peers and sees,  
Silver fruit upon silver trees.

The old farmer had a hardened look to him. He was strong too, but not like the boy. His salt-and-pepper beard was dirty and snarled and his voice strained and raspy.

"Hello," Arthur said, extending his hand to the farmer. "I'm sorry. Arthur Murphy's the name. I was just explaining to your son here—"

"Don't bother splaining nothing to him. Wasting your time." The old farmer smelled of tobacco. He had a wad of chew squirreled in his cheek and was working on a thin piece of straw that danced across his lip and in the gap between his stained teeth when he spoke.

"Well, my car is sort of banged up," Arthur continued. "I was hoping to make a phone call, if it's all right."

"Clarence Tussler. You in need of assist?" the man responded, shaking Arthur's hand.

The boy just stood nervously, cowering behind his father. "Slowly, silently, now the moon . . .," he repeated, almost catatonic.

"Knock that off, boy, ya hear!" Clarence chided. "Sorry 'bout that, Mr. Murphy. He does that sometimes when he gets nervous. Some cockamamy poem his ma learned him."

"That's okay," Arthur answered. "And, yeah. Your help would be great." He was still staring at the boy. "That would be great. I could sure use a telephone. And maybe some directions."

The farmer was about to say something when out of the corner of his eye he observed a tiny ball of gossamer yellow feather, vocal and wayward.

"Son of a—!" He flew into a rage, raising his boot high above the chick until a cold shadow enveloped the helpless creature. Then, with an inescapable vengeance, he lowered his foot hard, grinding his heel into the ground with curious delight.

"Annoying little bastard," he mumbled. "That'll learn ya."

Then the irascible farmer spit out his chew, took a cigarette from his outer pocket, and lit it, his deliberate motions noticeably slower from the effort he was making to calm himself.

Murph winced. He gazed briefly at the farmer in disbelief, appearing to abandon his search for something that he suddenly felt could not possibly exist.

"Why don't ya follow me up to the house, fella," Clarence said from behind a cloud of smoke. He scratched his beard. Then he shot his son a look.

"What ya looking so stupid about, boy. Go on. Go on now. Finish with them apples, then git yer keister over to them troughs. Pigs got to eat soon."

Murph looked at Mickey, not knowing what to think. "Say, you've got some arm there, kid. It was sure nice meeting you, Mickey."

The boy just hung his head.

Clarence frowned and exhaled loudly while tapping his boot on the ground. "Well, go on, boy. You heard me."

Arthur walked alongside Clarence. Once or twice he turned

back to look at Mickey, sad and defeated, his head hanging between his massive shoulders. Clarence didn't give his son a second thought. Just rambled on about his property and the Tussler family history.

"So, what brings you out this here way, Mr. Murphy?" he asked, pulling on the handle of the aluminum screen door.

"Clarence, is that you?" a voice called from inside the house.

"Yeah, Molly, it's me. Get out here. We got us company."

The abrasive farmer tossed a sleeping cat from the chair closest to the door and motioned for Arthur to sit down.

The room was dark and oppressive. The walls were splashed with a mahogany paneling that drowned out the little light that squeezed through the heavy draperies across the windows. Papers and cartons and other random objects were strewn about the room. Clarence stood leaning against a gray stone mantel, adorned with a yellowing lace doily held in place by an old brass lantern. Next to that was a family portrait in a tarnished frame and a dusty clarinet. Arthur's eyes hurt, as if something acerbic were in the air. It smelled like cat urine or perhaps it was just mold spores. Either way, he could not stop rubbing his eyes.

"Well?" Clarence asked. "What did you say you were doing in these here parts?"

"Baseball," Arthur replied, wiping the moisture from his right eye on his shirtsleeve. "I work for the Milwaukee Brewers. I'm here to scout a local kid."

"No kidding? Hey, Molly," Clarence bellowed. "Did you hear that?"

A tiny woman with long brown hair and a faint smile entered the room, carrying a tray on which rested a sweating pitcher of lemonade. She was much younger than Clarence. She walked with her shoulders slightly hunched, as if each step were a painful deliberation. He recognized the look in her eyes—it was Mickey's. She moved carefully around her husband, like a frightened puppy negotiating a dangerous intersection. Her gentleness and timidity were incongruous with everything else he had experienced thus far.

"Pardon the intrusion, ma'am," Arthur said, removing his hat. "I had a little car trouble."

"Not at all, sir." She placed a glass on the cluttered table in front of him. "Guests are always welcome in our home." She poured the lemonade and stood uneasily next to her husband.

"Say, before I use your telephone, do you mind if I ask you a question?"

"Well, I reckon that ought to be all right. Shoot, Mr. Murphy. What's eating at you?"

"Mickey's got quite an arm. I was watching him hurl those crab apples across your property. He ever play any baseball?"

Clarence laughed incredulously. His voice became louder and even more overbearing. "Baseball?" he mocked. "You want Mickey to play baseball? Now, what in tarnation is a baseball team gonna do with a retard? Huh?"

"I don't understand."

The farmer was scratching his beard. His amusement brought forth a smile, foul and yellow.

"What my husband meant to say, Mr. Murphy, is that Mickey is a little—"

"I said exactly what I meant to say, woman," Clarence barked, raising his hand in mock attack. "Don't you be correcting me. He's a retard. Ain't much use to us on the farm and probably would be even less useful to you. Teats on a bull. That's what that boy is."

Molly frowned.

"Look, Mr. Tussler, I mean no disrespect, but I think your son has an extraordinary talent. I watched him out there."

"Now, what kind of a country fool you take me for? Huh? You watched him? What, for two minutes? He was smashing apples to mix in with the pig slop. That boy ain't got no talent. He can't find his own behind with two hands."

Arthur stood up. His eyes were bothering him again. "May I use your telephone?"

Molly led Arthur into the small kitchen. Off to the side, next to

the pantry, was a kerosene heater. It was old and, by the looks of it, barely functioning. The smell ran together with the pungent odor of cabbage cooking on the stove.

"Here you are, Mr. Murphy," the woman said softly. "I'll leave you to your business."

Arthur dialed Dennison's office and explained the mishap. As he detailed the events, he could hear Molly and Clarence exchanging words in the other room.

"Why do you have to talk about him like that Clarence? Why?"

"Don't you question me now, woman," he fired back. "We got to face what we got here. I don't got to sugarcoat nothin' for nobody."

"The man says Mickey's got talent."

"Mr. Murphy is a city boy. Don't know shit from Shinola."

"But, Clarence, why can't we just—"

"Hush up, woman, ya hear? That's enough lip from you. Get back in the kitchen and finish fixing what it is you're fixing."

Arthur had finished talking to Dennison when Molly returned to the kitchen. "Thank you, ma'am," he said. "Much obliged." She would not look at him, just passed by, head down, chin resting on her chest.

He put his hat back on his head and started for the door. Clarence had taken a seat in the rocker and was whittling a piece of wood with a small knife.

"Did ya get through all right to your friend there, Mr. Murphy?"

"Yes, yes, I did. They're sending someone for me right away."

"Well, you can set yourself down here for a spell until they come for ya." Murph cringed at the thought. "If it's all the same, Mr. Tussler, I'd just as soon wait outside. But before I go, I'd like to make you an offer."

"How's that?"

"An offer. You know, money."

"Mr. Murphy, a phone call ain't but just a couple of pennies. That's all right."

Murph glanced to the side and smiled. "Well, Clarence, I'd be happy to pay for the call. I insist. But you misunderstood me. I'm talking about Mickey."

The farmer stood up. Molly came back quietly and listened by the doorway, out of view.

"Come again?"

Hell, what did he have to lose? Murph had no idea if this kid could really cut it on the diamond, but given the situation, how bad could it be?

"I'll pay you—thirty-five dollars—if you will let me sign Mickey up for a tryout. Just a tryout. No big deal. It's just a formality, really. He'll come with me, back to Milwaukee, and stay with the rest of the fellas on the team. We'll be able to give him a real good look."

Clarence was smiling. All at once the abrasive farmer was juggling crowding thoughts.

"I can assure you both, it won't be a big deal," Murph continued. "He'll be with me the entire time and should be back in a few days."

A loud sound, something like pots and pans crashing against each other, dashed the air.

"Now hold here, Mr. Murphy," Molly interrupted, as she emerged out of hiding. "You don't know anything about Mickey. He's not what you think. He's special. You don't know him. At all. You can't take him with you."

Clarence looked as though he would explode. "Pipe down, Molly," he thundered. "Don't go starting a row. Let the man finish. He was talking money with me."

"I'm not trying to start a row, Clarence. I appreciate the offer, Mr. Murphy. Really. It's nice that you like our boy. But it is just out of the question." Molly continued to duck the menacing looks Clarence was shooting.

"Please don't worry, Mrs. Tussler," Murph interrupted. "Really. It's all legit. I have papers, and everything."

"Pay her no mind, Mr. Murphy," Clarence demanded, shooting Molly a piercing look. "I'll fix her later."

She frowned again and left the room, defeated and bothered by

the transparent reversal of her husband's mood. Arthur watched the conquered woman, her hands in her pockets, feet shuffling quietly, as her silhouette vanished around the corner. Then he turned to face the room once again. The slovenly farmer was smiling at him.

"Now, Mr. Murphy," he asked through narrowed lids, "you was saying?"