

WALTER STEPS UP TO THE PLATE



SUE HOUSER

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By

Sue Houser

Illustrated By
Ian Bristow



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info@kinkajoupress.com

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Chapter 1

Rooting for Root

WALTER LEANED AGAINST THE red brick wall under the sign that read “Chicago National League Baseball Club.” Dad had said to meet him here. Walter couldn’t believe Dad splurged for tickets to today’s game—the 1927 Chicago Cubs’ season opener. Usually, they watched games from the rooftop of their house a few blocks away.

School dismissed early on game days, and Walter recognized Mr. Simmons, his seventh-grade math teacher, standing in the ticket line. *I wish my buddies, Henry and Bugsy, were here. But we’ll get to watch plenty of games this summer.*

A fancy black car caught Walter’s attention. It rolled to a stop at the curb. The driver got out and opened the back passenger door. A stocky man wearing an elec-

tric blue suit got out along with two burly, well-dressed men. People moved aside as the three rushed toward the entrance.

Where have I've seen that man? He looks familiar. Walter caught his breath. *The newspaper! That man is the famous gangster, Al Capone! His picture had been in the paper.* Walter shifted from one foot to the other. *Dad said he would leave work early. But where is he? I want to be there before the game starts, but he's got the tickets.*

Dixieland music, brassy and loud, spilled over the wall, adding to Walter's excitement. Across the street, ball hawks scrambled to grab fly balls. He itched to join them, but this is the spot he and Dad had planned to meet.

Just then, a gust of wind blew up. Walter clapped his hand onto his well-worn newsboy cap. He shivered in the cool wind coming off Lake Michigan and slipped on his jacket over his sweater vest.

Dad came running up, waving the tickets. "Sorry I'm late."

Walter grinned. Then he looked around and frowned. "Where's Mom?"

"She stayed home. The cool, damp air makes her cough worse. You know, she seems to be getting more frail." Dad sighed. "Come on, let's go." They headed toward the entrance.

"It's not fair that Mom is sick," said Walter. He thought of his kind, loving mother at home. "Not fair at all!"

But once inside the gate, Walter was overcome with the buttery, salty aroma that filled the air as popcorn machines spewed out white, puffy kernels. Hundreds of people streamed past toward the bleachers. The air buzzed with the low murmur of people talking, punctuated by the sharp cries of vendors selling programs.

Walter's dad abruptly stopped. "I'll take one." He

handed the vendor some change, then passed the program to Walter. "I thought you'd like a souvenir."

"Thanks, Dad." Walter had a good feeling about tonight's game. "Let's find our seats. I don't want to miss the first pitch."

Walter and his father wormed their way through the crowd to the bleachers behind third base. "Excuse me, excuse me," they mumbled as peanut shells crunched beneath their feet. They settled into their seats with a clear view of the bullpen where Charlie Root was warming up. *I can't wait to tell Henry and Bugsy about this!* "These are great seats, Dad!"

The band began playing "O beautiful for spacious skies," and a hush fell over the crowd. They stood and turned toward the stars and stripes fluttering in the breeze. The fans sang with enthusiasm and with a sense of pride. Walter joined in, "America! America!" *I love America. I love baseball.* He looked at Dad. *And I love my family.* The crowd bellowed, "From sea to shining sea!" A group of cheerful chaps added, "And God bless... the Chicago Cubs!"

Then Chicago Mayor William Thompson jogged onto the pitcher's mound. He threw out the first pitch as the crowd yelled, "Big Bill, Big Bill!" The mayor headed back to the stands, first stopping to shake hands with Al Capone.

That's interesting, thought Walter. But his attention turned to the players as they took their positions on the field amidst the fans' boisterous cheers.

The man next to Walter cracked a couple of peanut shells and shouted toward the players. "You boys are looking jim-dandy in those uniforms."

"They're wearing the colors of the flag," Walter said. *Blue and white stripes with a red "C" on their caps and shirts.*

Trumpets blasted. *Toot. Toot. Toot-toot.* Charlie Root

jogged out to the field and onto the pitcher's mound. Walter joined with the crowd, shouting, "Root, Root, Root!"

The first batter, Taylor Douthit, walked toward the plate, wearing a gray uniform with red pinstripes. On the left side of his jersey, the wording "World Champions" encircled a cardinal perched on a bat. He took a few practice swings. *The Cardinals look pretty spiffy, too*, thought Walter.

A minute later, the umpire squatted and whisked off the dusty home plate. "Play ball!"

Taylor Douthit stepped up.

Root fired a pitch, and Douthit whacked the ball down the first baseline and the ball bounced into the stands. He ran to second base, where he had to stop for the ground-rule double.

The next batter, Billy Southworth, smacked a hard grounder to the shortstop Jimmy Cooney who zinged the ball to the third baseman Riggs Stephenson to nab Douthit. Southworth made it to first base.

With his fist clenched like a hammer, the umpire shouted: "Out!"

Root tried to pick Southworth off first base, but he threw wild and Southworth advanced to second.

The next batter, Frankie Frisch, popped a fly ball high to centerfield.

"Can of corn!" yelled Walter as Hack Wilson glided toward the easy catch. The umpire signaled "Out."

Then, Slugger Bottomley stepped into the batter's box.

Walter held his breath and leaned forward.

Root threw. Too high. Too low. Inside. Low and outside. "Walk!" yelled the ump, pointing to first base.

Walter cupped his hands around his mouth. "One more out, Root! One more!"

But the next batter, Les Ball, slammed the ball bringing Southworth home.

Catcher Gonzalez yanked off his mask and walked out to the pitcher's mound. He and Root put their heads together.

Walter nudged his father. "What do you suppose they are saying?"

But Dad appeared lost in his thoughts and didn't reply.

Then Chick Hafey stepped up to the plate. He swung. *Thwump*. The ball hit the catcher's glove. Strike one. Strike two. Strike three. "Out!" yelled the ump and thrust his clenched fist into the air.

The crowd jumped up, yelling at the top of their lungs.

Walter elbowed his unusually quiet father. "Dad, did you see that?"

"Huh?" Dad straightened. "Go Cubs!"

The Cardinals took the field. When Alexander, a former Cubs player, stepped onto the pitcher's mound, the Cubs' fans booed and yelled, "Turncoat!"

Why would anyone leave the Cubs? Walter asked himself. "Alexander, you turncoat!"

Alexander struck out the first two hitters.

Then the Cubs' Earl Webb took a few practice swings. Their left-handed newcomer stepped up to the plate. Walter scooted to the edge of his seat as Alexander drew his arm back and fired the ball right down the middle. Webb's wooden bat cracked. The ball sailed over the fence and disappeared. Webb loped around the bases with an easy gait.

The fans roared and stomped their feet, sounding like thunder.

The score was tied and remained tied at the end of the second inning.

However, in the third inning, the Cubs scored five runs, giving them a 6-1 lead.

Walter stood and stretched. He took a deep breath, catching a whiff of hot dogs. His stomach rumbled, reminding him he hadn't eaten since breakfast. When his stomach rumbled even louder, Dad smiled and handed Walter a dollar bill. "You'd better get something to eat. I'll just take a bag of peanuts."

Walter crunched his way to the food cart. "Two dogs, please," Walter said, "and a bag of peanuts." The vendor handed him hot dogs loaded with onions, peppers, mustard, tomatoes, bright green relish, and a dill pickle spear. Walter returned to his seat and handed Dad the roasted peanuts and his change. "I wish Mom were here. It's more fun when we watch games together."

Dad sighed. "I know. But—never mind. We'll talk later."

"Before you got here, I think I saw Al Capone," Walter said.

Dad popped a couple peanuts in his mouth. "You're probably right. He does like baseball."

The next innings went by quickly. In the bottom of the 8th inning the Cubs scored four more runs. They swept the Cardinals 10-1.

Walter stuck close to Dad as they inched their way toward the gate along with the other 40,000 fans. "Maybe I can get Root's autograph," Walter said.

Dad frowned. "Your mother's waiting for us." Then he stopped. "Oh, why not?"

They stepped away from the crowd and onto the field.

The players collected their gear from the dugout and headed toward the exit. When Root walked in Walter's direction, Walter took a deep breath, trying to calm the butterflies in his stomach. Dad gave Walter a nudge, and Walter stepped forward. His mouth felt as dry as an old

sock. "R-r-root," he stammered, "that was a great game." Walter's face reddened. Even his scalp under his dusty brown hair warmed. "C-could I have your autograph?" With a shaky hand, he held out his program and a pen.

Root smiled at Walter. "What's your name, kid?"

"W-Walter."

Root signed the program with a flourish of the pen. "Well, Walter, I'll leave a ticket at the box office for tomorrow's game with your name on it."

Walter's grin stretched almost to third base. "Gee, thanks, Root. That'd be swell!"

Afterwards, Walter and Dad headed down Waveland Avenue towards home. Even the biting wind coming off Lake Michigan couldn't cool Walter's excitement.

"That's the best game I've ever seen," Walter said. "Root pitched seven strike-outs!"

Dad sighed and put his arm on Walter's shoulder. "This'll be a night to remember."

Walter bounded up the front steps and pushed open the door. Mom rose from the couch and smiled.

Walter waved the program in the air. "I got Root's autograph! And he gave me a ticket for tomorrow's game. I can go, can't I?"

Mom and Dad exchanged a worried look. Tension hung in the air—like a batter with a full count. Dad ran his fingers through his hair. "Walter, sit down. We need to talk."



Chapter 2

Saying Goodbye

FROM HIS ARMCHAIR, DAD leaned forward. “Your mother...” He cleared his throat. “You know your mother hasn’t been feeling well for quite some time.”

Walter glanced at his mom. She looked pale and sickly. “But I thought the doctor gave you some medicine.”

Dad continued. “The doctor says she has some early symptoms of TB—tuberculosis. She has difficulty breathing, tiredness, and coughing.”

Tuberculosis? No! Not my mom. A few months ago, a man down the block had been wheeled off to the hospital. Someone had mentioned TB. Walter tried to recall if the man had returned home but couldn’t remember.

He flashed back over the past months. Mom did have a cough. But the smoke over the city caused people to cough. Tree pollen caused people to cough. *Doesn’t every-*

one have a cough sometimes? She still does the cooking and takes care of the house. The doctor must be wrong.

Dad cleared his throat. "The doctor says the best treatment for tuberculosis is a lot of rest, a dry climate, and clean, fresh air." He paused. "My brother Ernie and his wife Edith live in New Mexico. They invited your mom to come and stay with them. A lot of people with TB go there to recover."

Walter watched Dad's lips form words, but the words sounded distant, as if in a tunnel. Suddenly, Walter felt light-headed. His heart pounded.

"They have a son a couple years older than you. Sherwood, Sherman..." He turned to Mom. "Do you remember his name?"

Mom shook her head. She turned to Walter and smiled faintly. "You'll get to know your cousin. Maybe you'll be good friends."

Dad took a deep breath and forged ahead. "I have to stay here and work. Because it's near the end of the school year, you can go with your mother." Again, Dad paused and leaned in closer. "Walter, I need you to step up to the plate. It will be a lot of responsibility, but I know you can do it. Be her assistant. Help her with whatever she needs. Showing her that *you* are brave will give her the courage to fight this disease."

Walter's chest hurt like he had been hit with a fast pitch. He wanted to bolt out the door and find a world where no one was ever sick.

Dad continued, "The doctor said the sooner she leaves, the sooner she gets well. I told Ernie that both of you would leave tomorrow."

Walter glanced at his mother sitting beside him.

She dabbed her eyes with her handkerchief. "I'm sorry, Walter. I'm sorry this is happening." Then she coughed.

And coughed. And coughed again.

“Tomorrow?” Walter stammered.

That night, Walter tossed and turned. *Mom has TB!* Tears sprang to his eyes. He was leaving his friends, his house, his neighborhood, his school, his dad, his baseball buddies, *and* the ticket Root left for him. Walter buried his face in his pillow. Of course, he wanted Mom to get well, but he would have to leave everything—*everything!* Walter punched his pillow. It wasn’t fair!

The next day, Dad walked with Walter to the junior high school. They arrived early. His homeroom teacher, Miss Corbett, had her back to the door while applying a glossy red lipstick. Dad cleared his throat. Miss Corbett glanced toward them and then finished painting her lips. She stepped forward. “Mr. Hammond, Walter. Is everything okay?”

Walter hung back, his hands in his pockets, and grimaced.

Dad explained to Miss Corbett why Walter could not finish the school year and asked for assignments that Walter could take with him.

Miss Corbett rummaged through her desk. She handed Walter a used teacher’s manual. “This book will help explain some of the math equations and you have your workbook. For English,” she tapped her pencil, “send me a book report. Any book, whatever you can find out there.” Her face brightened, and she pointed her finger at Walter. “I know. Write a letter to the class and tell us about New Mexico. It will be a learning experience for you and for us.” She dropped her chin like an exclamation point. “But watch your spelling and your grammar.”

Walter groaned inside. He couldn’t believe she was giving him homework. “I probably won’t have time for schoolwork,” he mumbled.

Just then, noisy students burst into the room and stomped their way to their desks. Buggy and Henry jostled their way through the door, then stopped, casting curious looks in Walter's direction.

"Settle down, everyone," Miss Corbett said. "Walter has an announcement."

A flush started at Walter's feet and rose to the top of his head. He looked at Dad, but Dad just stood against the wall. "Walter?" Miss Corbett said.

Walter swallowed. He looked around the room. He might not see his classmates until next year. He took a deep breath. "This is my last day of school." That caught everyone's full attention. "I'm going to New Mexico, to a town called Albuquerque."

A few snickers spread around the room. "Alba-turkey? Alba-quirky? Twerky-quirky?"

Miss Corbett snapped a ruler against her desk. The crack of wood on wood caused several students to jump. "Listen, students." She put her hands on her hips. "Walter's mother is ill, and the climate in Albuquerque will be healing for her." She gave Walter a sympathetic look. "Walter is a courageous young man to look after his mother."

Walter relaxed. At least, Miss Corbett had stopped the teasing.

"We wish you a safe trip. And Walter, remember your assignment to write to us." Miss Corbett opened her arms to give him a hug. Walter froze. Then, Buggy and Henry rushed up in time to save him.

Henry, always the talker, said, "Hey, Walter, you're going on an adventure." He patted Walter on the back. "Go West, young man!"

"But I don't want you to go," Buggy said.

Walter took a breath. *Time to step up and help Buggy.* He put his arm around his friend. "Someone has to watch

out for Henry. Don't let him get into any trouble."

Bugsy managed a crooked smile.

Walter put one hand on each of his friends' shoulders. "Remember me when you cheer for the Cubs, all right?"

"You know we will," they said in unison.

Walter stepped to the doorway and looked back. "Go, Cubs!"

His classmates waved their fists. "Go, Cubs!"

Walter walked out of the classroom.

* * *

Back home, Walter stared at the empty suitcase lying on the bed.

Dad walked past and stopped. "The temperature won't be as cold in Albuquerque. You won't need heavy clothes or a raincoat. But take a jacket." He opened the closet door, shuffling through the contents. "I'll help you. You still have time to pick up the ticket Root left for you." He wrinkled his forehead. "But you'll have to leave the game early to catch the train."

Walter swallowed. "That's okay, Dad. I'd rather be here with you and Mom. I can watch the game from the roof." He felt an ache inside. *Maybe Henry or Bugsy could use my name and pick up my ticket?* Walter shook his head. *But the ticket has my name on it. If they pretended to be me, that would be dishonest.*

He started to close his suitcase, then slid his Cubs program between the pages of the math workbook. *I wonder if Sherman ... Sherwood ... whoever is a baseball fan? I'll show him Root's autograph.*

Dad looked at his watch. "Almost time for the game."

Walter rested the ladder against the roof and climbed up. Neighbors waved. Shouts of "Go, Cubs!" rippled across the rooftops.

A cold wind blew off the lake. Walter huddled beside the dormer even though the view wasn't as good. He had trouble concentrating on the game. The scorekeeper posted the score: CHC - 0, STL - 5. Walter's heart sank. *What else could go wrong?*

One of their neighbors brought over meatloaf and mashed potatoes for their supper. Walter stabbed at his food with his fork. He could barely swallow. His father tried to make conversation, but the words hung in the air like a foul ball waiting to drop.

After supper, a taxi stopped at the curb and whisked Walter and his parents away. A short time later, the driver pulled up in front of Dearborn Station.

Walter and his parents scrambled out of the vehicle. Dad handed the driver a folded bill. "I'll buy the tickets and meet you at Train 19."

Walter looked up at the stately twelve-story clock tower. The big hands read twenty minutes to eight. *Only twenty minutes until I have to leave Dad and all my friends and the Cubs!*

Just then, a gusty wind snatched Dad's bowler off his head, sending it twirling down the sidewalk. Luckily, a gentleman in the crowd stuck out his cane and stopped it.

Walter ran to retrieve the hat. "Thank you, sir," he said.

Dad waved his appreciation to the man and disappeared into a rush of people.

Walter, carrying the suitcases, escorted Mom through the station. Once outside, Walter spotted the massive black locomotive bearing the letters AT&SF painted in white on the cab. The olive green passenger cars had SANTA FE on the letter board above the windows.

"There's our train," Walter said, pointing to the string of cars. They headed to the platform, surrounded

by screeching rail car brakes and belching puffs of steam. Dad soon joined them and led them to a first-class car decorated in maroon and trimmed in carved mahogany.

"Oh, Fred," Mom said, "these seats are too expensive." She shook her head.

Dad put his hand on Mom's shoulder. "Lil," he said, "I want you to be comfortable. It's not a Pullman, but the seats do recline."

Then, Dad turned to Walter. "I'm depending on you, son." Dad's voice tightened as he choked on his words. "Look after your mother," he added, and hugged Walter so tight Walter could hardly breathe.

"All aboard!" The conductor began barking orders. "Passengers only. Only ticketed passengers on the train."

Dad drew Mom in for one last embrace. When he turned to leave, Walter grabbed his arm. "I promise to take care of Mom." *But who's going to take care of me?*

The train whistle blew twice. Puffs of black smoke billowed upward. Wheels scraped against the steel rails. The train chugged forward.

Walter pressed his face against the window. Gradually, the platform emptied until one lone person was left standing—Dad.

Walter settled back next to Mom. He blinked back tears. *My family is broken apart. My buddies will forget me. This isn't my fault!*