

CHAPTER THREE

Mom came into his room the next morning to wake him. He went through his usual daily routine of toast and shower. He then looked outside at the rain. It was going to be an awful rainy day. This was supposed to be spring and they were due to have training tonight. He stuffed his joggers and some spare kit in his bag in case the fields were too wet for practice. Through the front window he spotted Lucy, and ran to catch up with her for their short walk to school. They skipped along under the cover of the oak trees lining their path, chatting and trying not to get too wet. At school no one was out in the school grounds today due to the rain so it was straight off to class.

After a particularly dull morning dominated by a double period of physics in which the teacher seemed to spend most of his time dealing with class noise rather than with Newton's laws, Alex made his way to the cafeteria. He glanced around for some fellow Idols at the lunch tables and spotted his friend James Eade

chatting with Paul Cohen. James was munching on a sandwich as they both sat huddled suspiciously. As he got closer Alex could see they were looking at Paul's mobile phone, hoping none of the teachers would notice it was switched on as that was strictly forbidden during school hours.

"Hi guys," said Alex approaching them. James looked up excitedly.

"Take a look at this Alex," whispered James, moving out of Alex's way as Paul continued to surreptitiously hold out his mobile phone.

"Be quick if you must look," cautioned Paul, looking nervously around as one of the cafeteria monitors walked past them. "It's not that impressive anyway," added Paul looking as though he wished he hadn't shown whatever it was on the phone to James as it could land him in trouble. James laughed and beckoned Alex to look closer at the screen.

"Hero for the day, I think!" announced James, a little too loudly. Paul shot him a glare and nudged him in the ribs to be quieter. Alex gazed at the small screen and could see they were playing a YouTube clip of a baseball game. It was difficult to see it too clearly on the small screen but it looked familiar. As he watched more closely, he realized it was a clip from their game last weekend.

"Cool," said Alex. He'd never seen any video of their games before and it was focused on the moment he strode out to make the winning hit.

"My Dad thought he'd take a few clips for us," explained Paul in a hushed tone to avoid further notice in the cafeteria. "I think he was a bit bored or something. Anyway, he managed to catch your wonder strike in one of them." Alex could hear what Paul was saying but his eyes remained glued to the screen. He knew what was happening next as he'd relived the moment many times already in his mind. He could see the catcher mocking him, then how he had spoken to him, and Alex used that negative energy to channel his effort and narrow his focus. Looking at it from an external perspective was interesting. He could see how good his posture had been in preparation and just how sweetly he'd timed the swing. Mr. Cohen had even managed to follow the ball as it left the bat and flew out of play. It was a perfect strike as far as he could see.

"Classic!" said James, stealing another look at the clip.

Paul interrupted. "Anyway, my dad put it on YouTube and just wanted me to check you were okay with that?" Alex nodded very positively. "He meant to mention it in the car yesterday, apparently," said Paul.

"Okay?" said Alex excitedly and loudly, looking a little too animated and drawing attention from other lunch tables. "This is awesome!" Paul snatched his phone back before the hall monitors closed in on them and stuffed it in his pocket.

"Cool," repeated Alex, slouching back into his chair contentedly.

After school he and the other Idols made their way to the sports locker rooms as they were due to go straight to training tonight but they already knew that the constant rain meant they wouldn't be able to use the school fields today. Mr. Crampton liked routines, though, so he'd still expect them all to turn up and do something. They wondered what it would be today: skill practices or some deadly physical challenge to get them all fit.

"Right boys," said Mr. Crampton as they entered the locker room, "a conditioning road race this evening." They all groaned and one of the less regular players, David Rogers, tried to make a quick and undetected escape. He was Matty Rogers' cousin, although you'd never have known it from watching them play.

"Not so fast, Rogers," said Mr. Crampton and they all laughed while the rotund David Rogers begrudgingly made his way over to the benches to get changed. Nothing David Rogers seemed to do was fast...even escaping.

Alex was pleased with himself having thought ahead and brought a change of gear for the poor weather. He'd got his running sneakers and had a towel which he was sure would be welcome at the end of the run.

Stepping out into the rain, Mr. Crampton quickly started them off to avoid too much whining, and most of the squad immediately set off as a pack sprinting to

the end of the school grounds full of initial enthusiasm, ignoring the obvious fact it was an eight kilometer course. Alex hung back, knowing that the initial position didn't matter much and that most of the squad would soon lose steam. He was a confident runner even though he didn't specifically train for it. It just seemed to him to be a by-product of playing baseball, not to mention running to school when often late probably helped too. Watching the others sprint off in the distance, he wondered if he could properly time his run to finish first. It was possible, but he was already some way behind the main pack. David Rogers had also decided not to sprint off with the pack and was just in front of him as they left the school grounds and entered the first field. Alex ghosted past David with minimal effort, just accelerating his stride to break clear of him and noticing that David was already puffing.

Craig Gardner and Glyn Eton weren't too far ahead, having dropped off the large bunch of runners as Alex gradually closed on them over the next kilometer. Alex put his head down, took a deep breath and strode on a bit faster, still trying to conserve some energy in case he could eventually get close to the leaders. Craig and Glyn didn't seem to be taking the race too seriously—judging by their conversation—but they still quickened up when Alex approached. They stayed with him for a few moments but upon noticing Alex seemed intent on catching the

main pack, they quickly dropped off. Alex kicked on and could tell the main pack ahead of him was still in a reasonably jovial mood, or at least pretending to be, as the fitter runners engaged in kidology over who was least fatigued. As he got closer to them, conversations had been replaced with heavy, labored breathing and Alex could see that James was holding his right side in a familiar pose indicating a stitch. Mark and Matty were out at the front of the pack looking like they were locked in a personal duel, while Paul Cohen was further ahead on his own, obviously taking the event more seriously as a training run. James kept looking over his shoulder as Alex closed in on them fast. He eventually made a resigned gesture to Alex that he couldn't get enough air due to a stitch and started to drop back from the pack. He was giving up. Although they joked, none of the Idols liked to lose to one another so there was now a mood in the remaining group of steely determination to finish ahead of each other.

Alex tucked into the pack directly behind Matty and stayed there to judge the pace for the last part of the race. He looked ahead to see if Paul was in any way catchable. He was a long way off in the distance and they had now almost completed seven of the eight kilometer loop. Paul must still have been eighty meters ahead. With one kilometer to go, it could be just about possible to reach him, Alex thought, depending on how much energy Paul had left. Alex's

breathing felt good and his legs were relatively fresh after coasting in the pack for a while. This pace wasn't feeling too challenging for him at the moment and it was probably time for a now-or-never decision. *Okay*, he thought to himself, *time to go for it*.

Alex instantly pulled out wide of the pack and extended both his stride length and frequency, powering on and away from the group. As the rain was beating heavily, he dipped his head again and swung his arms more vigorously to propel himself forwards. Aside from some initial indignation from Mark at being overtaken, there was little mood or resistance from anyone to go with him in the chase for Paul; he quickly found himself on his own. Within 200 meters he'd roughly halved the gap to Paul; and with some further deep breaths and determination, by the time he passed the hedging on the outskirts of the school grounds he knew he only had about 600 meters left—still approximately 25 meters behind Paul. Had Paul been holding anything back? Alex wasn't sure, but Paul was starting to look over his shoulder occasionally now, which Alex took as an indication he was tiring. So Alex pushed on again. If he left it too late, Paul was sure to have enough energy remaining for a final sprint and Alex might not be able to match him. He could feel his legs beginning to burn and thought he wouldn't be able to sustain a sprint for long. So he pushed all the harder, hoping that the speed he was now running would be

enough to see him catch and pass Paul. With only 200 meters to go, he was breathing down Paul's neck. With all his remaining energy, Alex gave a final burst of power and drove his weary legs past Paul, who didn't seem to realize just how tired Alex was or didn't think it was a battle he could win. In any case, Paul decelerated as Alex thrust himself towards the school gates and the waiting Mr. Crampton who stood there holding his trusty stopwatch.

"Not bad Alex," said Mr. Crampton, stopping the clock as Alex crossed the line just ahead of Paul and then collapsed with him into a heap. "I think we might need to move you up the batting order," added Mr. Crampton, "with strength and power like that!"

Alex had often thought about playing in a more prominent position in the team and although he didn't have Matty's talent, he thought he could do well with a bigger role. The rest of the players started to pass through the gates now and when David Rogers eventually appeared as the last runner home, most had recovered sufficiently to manage an ironic cheer for him. He gave them all a mock bow.

The run had been quite enough for the training session, so after changing into their dry clothes, they all chatted about the upcoming weekend game. Matty and Mark would be available, but Paul was away for the weekend and therefore wouldn't be there for the Idols. This was a blow as they'd miss Paul's steady influence, particularly his 0.311 batting average and

tidy work on third base. But his absence was probably the easiest to cover against a weak Argonauts team, even if it meant David Rogers stepping into the starting nine. At least he'd be happier about it than he had been about cross-country running.

The rain had eased off by the time they left the locker room, so although James' dad offered Alex a lift home, he declined as it wasn't far to go home and he enjoyed the walk. It was also a good opportunity to let his legs loosen up a bit after the exertions of the run. He'd had enough energy remaining to laugh as David Rogers had flung himself to the ground upon finishing and laughed even louder with the others when the boy planted himself in a locker room chair, chomping his way through a bar of chocolate, a packet of chips and drinking a can of coke.

"You won't get fit like that," Hayden warned David, who didn't seem unduly concerned.

"Playing in the team will get me fit," said David, looking towards Mr. Crampton, but Mr. Crampton didn't seem impressed.

"You won't get to play much with an attitude and diet like that!" said Mr. Crampton.

When he got back home, Alex ran himself a bath. Mom and Dad had already eaten but Mom had left him a plate of cold chicken, salad and rice in the fridge. He'd freshen up first before eating and then tuck in. The warm bath water soothed his aching legs and he washed the remnants of splattered mud off his

body. School showers were always cold and whenever it was possible to skip a shower and take a comfortable bath at home, he—along with all the other boys—always chose the latter.

Sitting in the bath, Alex dreamed again about his plan to contact the different baseball clubs on his list but still wasn't sure how he could best go about this. He knew the Yankees, the Mets and the Phillies advertised general tryouts for wannabe players each year, but as a youth player it was a matter of getting a parent or guardian to take you along. His parents clearly weren't going to do that. The Yankees obviously had a strong local and national scouting system and apparently came to games from time to time but he'd never known of one coming to watch the Ithaca Idols. Matty had been picked up without attending a public tryout. His batting average and appearance for an inter-schools rep team had been enough. Matty had been a player of high repute since Little League so he could have been scouted anywhere really. No one seemed to be talking about Alex or scouting for him.

Yesterday when he'd glanced on the club websites for Trenton Thunder, New Jersey Jackals and the Lakewood BlueClaws, none of them had any open trials coming up in the near future. Surely they must have some mechanism for talent identification from surrounding areas? It was easy to see how the better, more obviously gifted players like Matty would be

spotted by the Yankees or Paul by the Mets, as they clearly stood out wherever they played. But how did the good, solid yet unspectacular players around New Jersey or Philadelphia ever get noticed? Or did that just mean they weren't good enough? There had to be trials somewhere to pick up other players and ones which he could attend without news leaking back to Dad. The most straightforward way of contacting the clubs was via email and he thought an introductory email to each the club might be the best starting point. He wondered how he could best promote himself to stand out from the crowd of other hopefuls and thought about what achievements he had to show. The Idols had finished fourth in the Ithaca and district 'Under 16 League' last year which, while acceptable, wasn't an amazing achievement. They'd also reached the League Cup which was alright, too, he supposed. It wasn't a list to set a club ablaze with excitement though. He thought his running ability could interest them and promote him as an athletic prospect: he'd won both the 800 meters and the javelin at the area inter-schools competition last year which had made it to the local Ithaca News back page, but that was about it.

Sinking back into the bath water for a final soak, he thought again about the winning home run he'd scored over the weekend and how impressive it'd looked on YouTube. It was this thought that immediately brought him up to the surface of the water. Of course! He could provide the hyperlink to

the YouTube clip when sending the clubs an email! Surely they'd get thousands of these sorts of things, but it couldn't hurt his chances to at least provide the link to his super strike. It had certainly appeared impressive enough to him when he'd looked at it on YouTube. He hopped out of the bath smartly and picked up his watch from the dresser table. It was 7:30 p.m. If he could eat his supper quickly there could still be time this evening to send an email to each club before bed.

After finishing the food on his plate with such speed it gave him hiccups, he helped Mom tidy the kitchen and then silently popped his head around the living room door to see that Dad was in there, reading the newspaper.

Mom gently brushed past him. "Not coming in?" she asked quizzically.

"Err, no. Not tonight Mom. Some research to get on with." She nodded. He wasn't lying, just not telling the whole truth.

"OKAY then, sweetheart," she said, opening the door. Mom and Dad would be settling down in there for the evening which presented a good opportunity for Alex to get on the computer. It was certainly best not to discuss what research he was doing with Dad, or he'd face the usual barrage of questions. So he stepped backwards slowly from the door, slipped through the kitchen as quietly as he could and crept up the stairs.

Dad's PC really had to be the most frustratingly slow computer in the world! While he waited for it to once again splutter into life, he began to draft out in his mind the text for his e-mail letter. Being a gifted student had its advantages which meant he had a keen sense of grammatical correctness and a turn of phrase that could easily come from an educated parent. He decided the best perspective would be to keep things as closely factual as possible. So he wrote that his father, as an academic currently working at Cornell University, was shortly due to take up a new exciting role at—and here he inserted whichever was the local university in each district—near whichever baseball club he was writing to. He specified that he was trying to place his talented and baseball crazed son with a tryout for a professional team. How he wished this letter was actually true! The PC was now fully operational and after finishing writing the text material for each club, he added the hyperlink to YouTube and the clip of his home run.

After thirty minutes or so of some further tinkering around with the text, he was happy with it. There was still no sign of Dad stirring from downstairs. He decided to start alphabetically, addressing his first e-mail to the Chief Coach of the Lakewood BlueClaws. Adding some of the local knowledge he had gleaned about each area from his searches the previous evening to create some local interest, he proof read it several times more, added the contact e-mail address,

crossed his fingers for luck and clicked 'send' from a new Gmail account he created under his Dad's name.

There were quite a few Daniel Longfields with Gmail accounts so he opted for the address that seemed most professional with Dad's middle initial "H" for Harry, after Grandpa Longfield. He'd never actually met his Grandfather on Dad's side of the family as both Grandpa and Grandma had died when Dad was a boy. Additionally as Dad never liked to talk about it, it wasn't wise to push him on the subject or else his temper could flare.

In any case, the more pressing issue was that Dad would go crazy if he found out about all this. Alex would worry about that later. Looking at the clock, he could see it was already past his usual bed time and he was sure to get a call by Mom at any moment. By the time Mom eventually called his name from the base of the stairs he was just closing down the Gmail account and easing back into the chair with a relieved sigh. He hoped that the messages would find their way through to the club coaches.

The weather for the rest of the week was much as it had been for their cross-country race, but by the time Friday came along it seemed to be clearing up. Fridays were the happiest days of the week as not only would the Idols chatter enthusiastically as they looked forward to the game on Sunday but there was no school for two days! Alex wasn't quite so happy this Friday, though, as he had not yet heard anything

at all from any of the baseball clubs. He didn't take this as a good sign. One of the clubs at least could have gotten back to him, even if it was to say *no thanks*.

Although the rain had considerably slackened, at school there was another day of indoor activities; obviously no baseball or any sports during the break periods. As the end of the school day was gradually approaching at 3:30 p.m. he and the others were beginning to feel rather restless. He didn't like being confined indoors all day and although Dad had regularly told him being a doctor would be the best and most exciting career possible for him, it seemed so confining. Hospitals weren't exactly places for exercise. They always smelled sanitized, they were full of sick people and, as a doctor, everyone would expect him to solve their problems. He could understand the potential excitement of performing a complex operation which might save someone's life, but it didn't compare with the thrill of playing a baseball game in front of a cheering crowd, or the camaraderie he expected of being in a professional baseball team and doing something he really enjoyed. Playing baseball seemed something so natural that he couldn't understand why Dad didn't feel the same way. It seemed to Alex, at least, that he was born to play the game. For whatever reason, Dad just didn't get it...or he chose not to. He obviously preferred the academic world.

Alex sat in his last period class and, as usual, had finished the set work well before the others. So he drifted off into one of his dreams, vaguely staring out at the playing fields, looking at the marked diamonds and imagining he was in a game there and then. A few years ago when he'd first started school at Ithaca High School, the teachers would scold him for daydreaming in classes; but that was before they checked his books and saw the level he was quietly attaining. Some of them occasionally gave him some extension work, trying to academically stretch and challenge him; however, most teachers had now given up on that and just seemed to appreciate that Alex would sit quietly, happily contemplating life while waiting for others to catch up.

On these daydreaming occasions, he often imagined hitting a home run for the New York Yankees in the final innings of the World Series. He would look avidly and enviously through the classroom window to see which year group might be playing sport on the school fields while he was stuck in a classroom.

At the end of the school day, the rain had temporarily ceased and Matty had rounded up a few of the Idols for a quick ball game, using a ball he'd acquired from one of the younger kids. A couple of them stood watching, presumably waiting for Matty to return it, or perhaps be invited to join in. They didn't seem particularly upset, as it was Matty who'd

taken the ball and they all idolized him: it would be different if someone else had taken it. A few of the junior boys' baseballs had his signature on them anyway.

A sudden downpour of rain soon ended the game and it was a quick rush back home, sheltering from tree to tree to avoid a soaking. Mom was fussing around the kitchen as usual when he got there.

"How was your day?" she said without looking at him. It seemed such an automated routine that he felt like saying something different just to throw her. He opted for a grunted response instead. But something was different today.

"Your Aunt Libby is coming tomorrow so I thought I'd make something nice," said Mom as she worked with some ingredients on the kitchen table. Alex's ears pricked up. It was always great when Aunt Libby came to visit; she at least liked baseball and would talk enthusiastically about it.

"Will she be staying long?" he asked eagerly. Mom carried on measuring things out and making what appeared to be dough. The dough looked didn't seem to want to fold despite her best efforts.

"She's staying over on Saturday night and then she's off home on Sunday morning," answered Mom. This perked him up no end. Aunt Libby visiting on Saturday and then a baseball game on Sunday. He wished he'd known this when he went off to school in the morning. It would have helped him through the day.

Feeling much brighter, Alex picked up his school books and carried them to his room. He thought he'd better make a start on his homework now before Dad got home. There was a math project, a book review and a history quiz to do tonight. The math project was to solve a series of equations, the solution to which contributed a number towards an overall answer to a meaningful question. Or so Mr. McCluskey, the math teacher, had stated. At least he tried to be fun, which was always a challenge for math teachers. The homework was to solve the equations, collect the clues and then use each number to answer the main question. Most people in the class just seemed perplexed as was often the case for math, but at least Mr. McCluskey was trying. Alex solved the first five equations in a couple of minutes and looked at the answers: 2, 18, 3, 6, 5.

The accumulative sum was thirty-four so far. He scanned down to the cryptic question which, when all the numbers were collated, would be solved: '*What is the numerical answer to the meaning of life, the universe and everything?*' This did actually sound vaguely interesting, he thought, so he ran through some options. He wondered if it was going to be something obscure based on Einstein's theory of relativity, but $E = MC^2$ had seemed an unlikely initial guess, certainly beyond their expected level of study. He remembered Mr. McCluskey had once mentioned his high regard for the author Douglas Adams, and

Alex had concurred at the time. He's read the *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* series himself and wondered if the question posed by Mr. McCluskey was a nod to these books. *Could it be that simple*, he thought? In the first book Douglas Adams had written about a super computer solving the ultimate question to life, the universe and everything and this answer had notoriously been the number 42. That would mean the total of the last five equations would contribute only another eight units to the accumulative sum thus far of thirty-four. He quickly worked through the next five questions: 6, 8, 3, 1, -10. He'd started to doubt himself for a moment after the penultimate equation, but the -10 answer had brought it all back on track to equal 42. *Very good, Mr. McCluskey*, he thought as he closed his book, chuckling to himself.

That just left a 1,000 word book review to complete for the English Literature class and a few dates to memorize for European History. He already knew all the key dates of the battle of Waterloo so that could really all just be ticked off as work completed. For the book review, he needed to finish reading the book in bed tonight; it was *David Copperfield* written by Charles Dickens. It wasn't the usual sort of book Alex liked to read and he hadn't enjoyed it so far but had stuck gamely at it. This was more than most of his classmates had done. He knew Mark had simply bought the notes version of the

book from the booksellers which neatly summarized each chapter's key features. This seemed a bit of a cheat to Alex and he didn't think Dad would be too happy if he took this approach. Anyway, he already had a good idea how he'd write the review from what he'd read so far and the last few pages wouldn't change his opinion too much. That was all the homework done for now that he could; he'd write the review in the morning. Dad wouldn't check up on a week night.

There was still time for some TV watching now before supper but he thought he'd have a quick check of his emails first before Dad got home just in case any of the clubs had gotten back to him. Fortunately, Mom had used the computer during the day so he didn't need to start it up. He logged in and first checked his school email account for homework updates and any baseball news from Mr. Crampton. He hoped the game would still go ahead despite the poor weather. There was one note waiting for him from Mr. Crampton which was just a reminder of the game-day car-sharing arrangements. On the roster, he was listed to get a lift with James' dad this week as Paul had gone off to train with the Mets' rookie team for a few days. It was a little embarrassing that his own Dad never volunteered to take anyone to games but no one ever said anything about it, thankfully. He scanned down the team sheet and saw that he was due to be playing at the same place on the roster. He

hadn't been promoted up the batting list and was doing his usual fielding in the center field. Hayden was supposed to be playing so he was obviously back from his tryout for this game. James had already seen Hayden apparently and it hadn't gone well.

Alex glanced at the rest of the team on the list; it was pretty strong except for Paul being absent. As predicted, David Rogers had been slotted into the team of nine. He'd be pleased, but hadn't impressed anyone with his performance in the road race; it was a sure thing that he'd be a weak link. The reserves weren't strong either. Rob Lashford and Andrew MacLaren. Rob could play a bit but was a bit weak for a boy of seventeen, but Andrew 'Mac' was hopeless. It seemed that he had no real sense of coordination. Alex really couldn't understand why he continued to play or bother coming to games as a reserve. Still, it meant they had a squad and some cover in case of injury. Mr. Crampton usually gave both Rob and Mac a bit of hitting practice if nothing else. MacLaren certainly needed it.

After closing down his school email account, Alex listened for noise downstairs in case he'd missed Dad arriving home. There was no sound of conversation so he reasoned that it was safe to log into the fake Gmail account he'd set up under Dad's name. He typed in the e-mail username and the password he'd set up: 'longshot'. The screen changed to upload the e-mail account and he eagerly scanned his folders. He could

see there were three new messages listed in his inbox. His face lit with excitement; this was positive! Without delay, he clicked open the inbox. The first message was from a company selling advertising space, which message he quickly deleted; the next was for a dating website that from the title looked more than a little pornographic. He got rid of that without opening it. Dad's filters would pick this up, too, and questions would be asked if he'd taken a look. The third message was from E. Storey, Lakewood BlueClaws. His heart almost missed a beat with excitement.

This was amazing he thought—a real email from someone at the BlueClaws. His mind raced ahead to the practicalities of how he'd get to Lakewood for his tryout... it was so far away! Sitting there staring at the unopened email, he wasn't sure whether he dared move the cursor to open this message. It could either make his dreams come true or shatter them. Eventually though, he crossed his fingers for luck and summoned up the courage to click his mouse over the message.

The computer seemed to think about opening the email for longer than was necessary as it was often prone to do. It was a spiteful computer. But after a few anxious moments it revealed the message. He read it excitedly:

Dear Mr. Longfield:

Thank you for your interest in Lakewood BlueClaws. Your son sounds like a promising player and we wish you

well for your move to Lakewood. Unfortunately we do not hold open trials for youth team players at the present time as we take the majority of our players directly from the roll of the Philadelphia Phillies. We will be unable to offer Alex an immediate opportunity to display his skills. However, the Phillies have a strong scouting system in the local area and will be delighted to see Alex join a local team, from which he may be selected for tryouts in the future. Once again we wish you all the best for your move to Lakewood and hope to see you at a home game as soon as you are settled.

Yours sincerely

Emily Storey, Lakewood BlueClaws

Alex flopped back, deflated, into the swivel chair and cursed under his breath. Of course the Phillies would have a scouting system set up locally. They must get loads of requests like his all the time and if he'd researched the BlueClaws enough beforehand he'd have known that a tryout for them would be unlikely. All he really wanted was an opportunity to grow as a player at a good (ish) team in any of the Minor Leagues over the next few years to see if he couldn't eventually catch a coach's attention to maybe make the grade for a team like the Yankees or the Mets. This seemed an extreme longshot at the moment; he wasn't even regularly standing out from the crowd in the Idols' team.

No one at school much talked about the Phillies as this seemed disloyal to their more local and popular New York teams. Still, if he ever got good enough to play for the Phillies, would he turn down the opportunity? Not likely, he thought to himself.

Later that evening as he sat in bed reading the final passages of *David Copperfield*, he tried to put his disappointment out of his mind and thought how he'd structure the 1,000 word summary review. He was supposed to have done this already but the baseball research he was conducting had put him behind schedule. His English teacher was a big admirer of Dickens for some reason so he reasoned he'd better not be too negative about the book in his review. He could perhaps just point out a few things like the total absence of reality and relevance to modern society in New York, coupled with Dickens annoying propensity to dramatize the conclusion of each chapter. This was presumably as Dickens had written it for serialization in a newspaper. In a slightly classier way it was like the old black and white TV shows like *Flash Gordon* that always finished with some dramatic moment so people would come back for the next episode. Alex thought he'd better not mention that but would think of some way of putting a positive spin on the review.

Finishing the first draft promptly and with a few things still to say on the subject of *David Copperfield*, he closed his book. He felt tired. The message from

the BlueClaws had been a disheartening email to receive but at least Emily Storey, whoever she was, had bothered to reply to him. He switched off his bedside lamp and went to sleep.

The next morning he felt much brighter about things. Aunt Libby would be visiting today and he had the Idols game to look forward to on Sunday as well. He stretched and walked downstairs. Mom was already up and had made him a cup of tea.

"Morning, sleepy head," she said, popping some bread in the toaster for him. Alex observed the clock in the kitchen: it was 9:30 a.m.

"Wow," he said. He hadn't realized it was so late. He sat down at the table and took a sip of his drink.

"I expect you needed the sleep," said Mom. "You've been working really hard recently." It was true; he'd had so many assignments that life had become a matter of school, homework and baseball whenever he could fit the latter in.

"Dad up yet?" asked Alex. Mom looked up from buttering his toast.

"Up, dressed and gone out fishing over an hour ago," she said. Alex nodded his acknowledgement. He might not like fishing, but he did know that if you didn't get out early to get one of the best spots then there wasn't much point in going at all. Mom presented him his plate of strawberry jelly and toast and sat down next to him, which was unusual for her.

"What's up Mom?" he asked, immediately sensing a break to their usual routine.

"Oh nothing," she lied and sipped her cup of tea, before she continued with what was really on her mind. She studied him quite intently, which was unusual.

"I had a visit this morning from Mrs. Cartwright," she began. "It seems as though Lucy is falling behind with her school work." This was news to him, although he was aware Lucy struggled on a few things and he had only recently offered to help her out. He'd assumed she must have been okay.

"Really?" he asked. It seemed strange that Mrs. Cartwright should bring this up with his Mom.

"I know how busy you are with your own work and with that Idles' baseball team," she said.

"The *Idols*, Mom," Alex corrected her. "They're called the *Ithaca Idols*, not the *Idles*. *Idles* would imply we're lazy." Honestly, he'd lost track of how many times he told her about the Idols and he'd been playing for them for years now.

"Yes dear, whatever you think. But anyway, Mrs. Cartwright asked whether you might be able to help Lucy with her study...only if you can fit it in, of course?" Alex wasn't sure this was a good idea; he suspected Lucy wouldn't have known much about this request and would be sure to be highly embarrassed to have her Mom ask for his help. He'd want to chat it over with her first.

"Does Lucy know about it?"

"I understand it was a hot topic of discussion last night at their house," she said. That would have been an interesting conversation to witness as a fly on the wall. They'd had a few assignments back from their teachers recently and Lucy didn't seem interested in sharing her grades with him. "It seems the science teacher telephoned the Cartwrights on Friday about some recent exam where Lucy did extremely poorly." The results from the recent chemistry exam hadn't been returned yet and Alex could remember how quiet Lucy been about it.

"Really?" he asked. Plenty of people had seemed a bit lost in that exam.

"Anyway," Mom continued, "do you think you might be able to help her?"

"Have you run that past Dad?" asked Alex. Dad wouldn't be keen, he thought...not if it meant getting in the way of Alex's own work.

"Dad was here when she came around earlier this morning and he thought it was a great idea." Alex didn't think that sounded much like Dad. Perhaps he was distracted while getting ready for fishing. Although if Dad was saying this was a good idea he'd probably be strategizing that something else would have to give in Alex's schedule. He strongly suspected Dad would imagine this to be the Idols' baseball team.

"I don't know Mom," he said, fearing that Dad might just have seized on this as an opportunity to

out-maneuver him and force him to leave the baseball club.

It was strange to see Mom look so passionate about something and he didn't like to disappoint her. "Alex, I think she really needs your help," said Mom.

"Alright. He liked Lucy and wouldn't want her to fall behind, but it wasn't quite the circumstance he'd envisaged when offering to help her with her work on their way to school recently. It was never good having parents involved.

After showering, he dressed and was in his room, just starting to think of some good things to say about the book *David Copperfield*, when he could hear a loud female voice at the door talking to Mom. It was Aunt Libby.

Aunt Libby was Dad's sister. She was everything he was not. She was friendly, loud, bags of fun and although a little large now that she'd reached her forties, he supposed many people would consider her an attractive woman. She'd been married once but that was a long time ago and Alex didn't remember her husband much. Not a lot had been said about it then or since, to him anyway, but he'd once overheard Dad tell Mom that her husband had run off with someone else. Since then she seemed to have been on her own; except of course for her cat, about whom she talked endlessly.

"Alex!" cried out Aunt Libby as he came downstairs to greet her. She held out her arms and

before he could escape she'd wrapped herself around him in a bear hug. It wasn't too bad really, but as a teenager he felt like he should make some sort of a protest. Mom laughed and told him not to be so silly about it and to stop wriggling, while Aunt Libby showed no immediate sign of letting go. It was nice, despite his protests.

They had a lovely day. Mom and Libby always seemed to get on well and shared cooking duties between occasional, yet regular, glasses of Chardonnay. It was nice to see Mom so happy. By the time Dad got home, they were both quite merry. Dad frowned and kept them both at arm's length as he was certainly not a hugger and Aunt Libby was maneuvering to give her brother a bear hug, too. He did look happy to see her though.

Libby was her usual bubbly self all day and also through the evening. It was such a shame the next morning when she appeared in the kitchen with her bags ready to go home. Her visits seemed to go by in a flash and the house was always a much more serious place when she wasn't there. Alex tried to picture her and Dad as kids in Little Falls, New Jersey but really couldn't. He'd rarely seen any pictures of them as children. Once a few years ago he'd found a picture of Dad as a small boy in one of the family photo albums and he was actually wearing a Phillies' baseball cap, still looking a little serious but it was definitely him. He was standing next to a tall, muscular man who had a

hand resting on his shoulder. Alex had asked Dad about it but he didn't say much and simply took the picture from Alex. He thought the man might perhaps be Grandpa and he fantasized that maybe Grandpa had taken him to watch a professional ball game, but knew this was a 'no go' topic. It probably wasn't Grandpa at all and if he asked Dad about it, it would just shatter the dream anyway.

By mid-morning Aunt Libby was in her car, making her way up the highway back home. Alex had managed to plug her with a few questions about New Jersey throughout the previous evening so at least for the first time knew precisely whereabouts she lived. She was very close to Montclair University in Little Falls in the old Longfield family home. Dad didn't talk about it, but since Montclair wasn't exactly Ivy League, he probably wouldn't have mentioned it to his sophisticated lecturing friends at Cornell University. Libby also had a slight regional New Jersey accent, and Alex liked it. It was a friendly, warm and informal voice; it may just have been her mannerisms rather than the accent, he supposed, but he knew he liked her.

Aunt Libby had been quite forthcoming about Little Falls when he asked her about it. Little Falls apparently wasn't too far from the main New Jersey bus depot, if he ever wanted to visit she'd said. While the mood was so relaxed, he tracked down the old photo of Dad as a boy wearing a Phillies' baseball cap in a photo album and had shown it to her.

"Ahhh," she smiled. "Happy days! Us Longfields have history with the Phillies, you know," she'd said, still quaffing Chardonnay.

"Libby!" Dad had shouted across the living room at his sister.

"Oh, that's right," she'd apologized, a little tipsy from the alcohol, "we don't mention that, do we?" Dad did his best to change the subject.

"That was all a long time ago," finished Dad. His brow was furrowed as he'd tried to stare down his sister. Still, Alex thought it was interesting to know. She was gone now and Alex wished he could see her more regularly.

It was almost time to be picked up for his ride to the Idols' game. Alex had finished off his report on *David Copperfield* and was quite pleased at compiling a well-rounded review that highlighted some negatives, but put them across in such a way as to be sufficiently subtle that the teacher might not pick up his contempt for the book.

Alex took his homework to Dad for inspection before his lift arrived for the journey to the game. Dad skimmed over the math questions Alex had completed a few days earlier. He chuckled ever so slightly when he read the question and the answer to the meaning of life. He appeared to appreciate the math teacher's humor. For most people they'd need to read Douglas Adams or watch the *Hitchhikers* movie to understand that 42 was the correct answer. It

was an academic's idea of humor, really. An acquired taste.

"Okay Alex, that looks good enough," said Dad. Praise indeed he thought. The bell rang and Alex collected his kit bag, kissed Mom on the cheek and answered the door.

"Hello Alex." It wasn't James Eade, but a rather red-faced Lucy Cartwright.

"Oh, hi Lucy," said Alex. "What's up?" Her face reddened a bit further and she gestured for him to look at the books she was carrying.

"Oh, right," winced Alex, realizing at once the purpose for her visit. He'd forgotten all about the study help he was supposed to be giving her. He tried to look sympathetic to her plight as she didn't give him the impression of wanting to be there at his door.

"Mom's idea," she said, eventually with little evidence of enthusiasm. "Can I come in then?" Alex glanced at his watch; his ride would be here at any moment.

"Not a good time, just off to the game," he informed her. Surprisingly, she actually looked a bit disappointed. "Could you come around later maybe?" he asked. She nodded.

"Mom will be pleased," she responded. "But I really don't need any help and can't understand why she's being so fussy. It was just one bad test result."

"Sure, I understand. Parents, huh?" he shrugged supportively while also getting a little agitated as he

could see the Volvo of James' dad pull up outside the house. "We'll just run through some general science and math stuff, I suppose?" She nodded. He closed the door after him and walked down the driveway with her. "Speaking of math," he said, "What did you make of the meaning-of-life question?" he asked. "Funny, you think?"

"Funny? I don't see how the number 56 has anything much to do with anything!" she stated.

Oh dear, thought Alex, this might take some work after all.