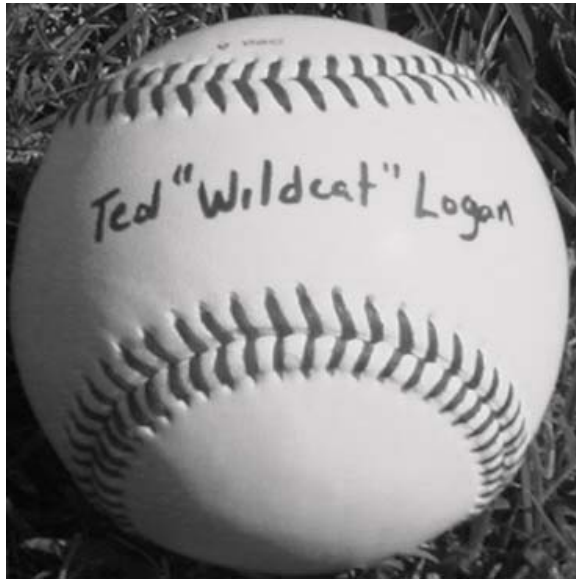


# Hangin' in There



**Brian Gotta**

To my parents. I hope you're as proud of me as I am of you.



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**Hanging**  
in  
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## Chapter One

Ted “Wildcat” Logan sat on the aluminum bleachers at Tigers Park watching a Youth League baseball game and thought about how his baseball career was going about as horribly as it possibly could.

And if that wasn't enough, now it looked like in a few weeks the rest of his life would be just as bad.

Ted had tried out for the Youth League when he was ten and when he was eleven. Both years he got cut and didn't get to play. This season was the last one he was eligible to play in the league and he had been sure he was going to make it. He was twelve, and he'd been practicing during the winter with his dad and big brother, Gary. But when the time came to find his name on a roster, he'd been disappointed again.

When Gary, who played high school ball, learned that Ted still hadn't made a team he got really mad. He decided to go talk to some of the coaches and see if there was an extra spot on a roster they could let Ted have, but their dad wouldn't let him.

“He needs to make the team on his own and prove he deserves to be there. It doesn't do him any good for us to come in and save the day,” Mr. Logan said.

Ted's best friend, Mickey Baker was a star shortstop in the league, and his dad coached Mickey's team, the Yankees. Coach Baker had explained to Ted that when you get older it's just harder to make the team.

“It's not that you weren't good,” he told him. “Most of the teams had nearly a full roster coming back from last season and it was hard for anyone to make it. But when coaches draft new players they usually want them to be ten or eleven so that they'll have them on the team at least two

years. If I hadn't had my whole squad back I'd have picked you up for sure."

So now, not only was Ted facing another summer without baseball, but in three weeks Gary would be leaving home and going off to college. And to top it all off, right about the same time that Gary would be going away, something else was going to happen. Ted, who was already one of the smallest boys in sixth grade, was going to have to leave the only school he'd ever gone to and move up to Wyatt Middle School where there would be a bunch of huge ninth graders.

But watching baseball took Ted's mind off Gary leaving and the new school he'd be in this fall, so even though he wasn't on a team, Ted still came to nearly every game at Tigers Park and brought a pack of baseball cards to look at between innings. If he couldn't play, Ted could at least imagine what it was like on the field and learn by watching. He knew that it would be against the rules for any of the teams to ever let him in a game without being officially on the roster. But he secretly hoped that maybe one day a team wouldn't have enough players show up and they'd ask him to fill in. You never know what could happen, so he always brought his mitt with him.

The game he was watching today was between Mickey's Yankees and the Mariners. When it was over Ted walked to the Yankees' dugout to congratulate Mickey. They'd won 6-4 and Mickey had gone two for three with a walk, and had three put outs and four assists in the field.

Mickey's dad, who everyone called Coach Jeff, was putting the gear away into the equipment bag. Most of the kids on the team had already left. When he looked up and saw Ted, he pulled the cap down over Ted's eyes.

"Hey slugger!" he said with a big grin on his face. "How'd you like the game tonight?"

Ted smiled back. "Fine," he said. "I'd have liked it better if I was playing though."

"Hey," Coach Jeff said encouragingly. "Next season I'm coaching in the 13-15 year old league. If you work hard

between now and then, maybe I'll be able to pick you up for that."

"Thanks," Ted said quietly. He thought about *that* tryout. Not only was he small for his age but he wasn't really fast either, even though he tried to improve his speed. What would it be like trying out on a bigger field with 14 and 15 year-olds?

"Listen," Coach Jeff said, pausing from piling all the gear in his bag. "We ought to get started right now. Do you have to be home soon?"

Ted looked at his watch. It was 5:30 and his mother told him to be home for dinner by 6:00. "I've got a half-hour," he replied.

"Then get on out there at second. Mickey-take first."

"All right!" Ted shouted. He ran out to take his position and Mickey's dad picked up two baseballs and a bat.

"Take it to first!" Coach Jeff shouted as he hit a sharp grounder right at him.

Ted missed it. The ball hopped once and then scooted right under his mitt.

"Stay down on it!" Coach Jeff told him.

The next one bounced off his shin.

"You all right?" Mickey cried.

Mickey's dad asked, "O.K. buddy?"

"Yeah, I'm all right," Ted said, rubbing his shin. "Hit me another one please."

Ted missed three more in a row and each time Coach Jeff gave him some advice. Get your rear end down. Scoop some dirt up with that ball. Use two hands.

Nothing was working and Ted was getting frustrated. He looked over at the small stack of baseball cards he'd left on the bench. He bet none of the big leaguers on those cards were as terrible as he was when they were twelve.

"Come on, Ted-you can do it!" Mickey's dad said as he hit him another grounder.

The ball raced across the infield, up the middle to Ted's right. Ted scooted over with his mitt outstretched. Just as the ball arrived it took a bad hop.

Smack! Ted shot his glove hand up at the exact right instant and backhanded the grounder! He paused for a second and looked into his mitt in disbelief.

“You got it!” Mickey said. “Nice grab!”

“Throw it Teddy! Fire it to first!” Mickey’s dad yelled.

Ted took the ball out and heaved it as hard as he could towards Mickey. The ball bounced in front of him and scooted into foul territory.

“My fault Ted,” Mickey said. “Should have had it.”

Ted hardly heard him. He had just made the greatest play of his career. If he could make a play like that, maybe that Teen League tryout *wouldn't* be a waste of time.

Ted got home just after 6:00 and washed up for dinner. His dad and mom were already sitting at the table and when Ted's dad saw him he said, “Hey Wildcat!” Nobody else called him “Wildcat” (except for his brother), but when he was in second grade he'd noticed from his baseball card collection that lots of his favorite big league players had nicknames and “Wildcat” wasn't taken, so he grabbed it for himself.

One of his parents' favorite stories to tell around the dinner table was how for a couple months back then, Ted wouldn't answer you if you called him by his real name. The only way he'd look at you was if you called him "Wildcat." Even though Ted was older now and he rolled his eyes every time he heard that story, he still thought the nickname was kind of cool, so he didn't mind keeping a hold of it.

Gary came to the table and the family started dinner. Ted watched his brother carefully out of the corner of his eye, studying him. Ted tried to do everything the same as Gary, even eat dinner. Gary had just graduated from high school where he had been an All-Conference baseball star. This fall he was going to go to the university that was several hours drive away because he felt he had a chance to make the baseball team. He would be leaving home in a few weeks for tryouts. Ted knew for sure he'd make it.

After dinner Ted went upstairs and got out his baseball cards. He picked one of his four shoeboxes carefully and took the cards out one by one.

He looked at his Mark McGwire rookie card. Then he held up his best Griffey for inspection. Sammy Sosa smiled at him wearing a White Sox uniform and he scanned Derek Jeter making a backhand grab at shortstop.

“How did these guys get so good?” he wondered to himself. “Did they just practice every minute they were awake when they were kids?” Ted thought about how much he practiced. Maybe it wasn’t enough.

He looked at Tony Gwynn. Tony had his eyes locked on the ball as he started his famous swing. Man that guy could hit. Ted turned the card over. 5’11” 199 lbs. Bats left, throws left. Lifetime batting average .332. “If I could just hit half that good...” he thought.

Ted picked up his autographed baseball. From far away anyone would think it was just an average, signed ball. But it wasn’t autographed with any big leaguer’s signatures. In fact, Ted had never even been to a big league ball game yet. Scribbled all over the ball was the name, Ted “Wildcat” Logan. Ted hoped that someday he’d be asked to autograph a ball for real, and if he ever were, he’d be ready.

All the walls in his room were covered with baseball posters, and Ted’s bedspread was made up of the logos from each of the American and National League teams. Ted didn’t really have a favorite team, although he kind of liked the Pirates ever since he read a book about the former Buc’s star Roberto Clemente. He put his baseball cards back in the box and got ready for bed.

Ted lay in bed with his mitt on and tossed the autograph ball up to the ceiling. He had caught ten in a row when his mom and dad came in his room to say goodnight. His dad put the ball in the glove and laid them on his bookcase.

Mrs. Logan turned on his reading light. “Why don’t you read some before you go to sleep honey,” she said giving his hair a little stroke.

“OK,” Ted agreed. He reached over to his nightstand and opened his new library book. *Little League Baseball-Hitting Tips*.

His mom shook her head.

“Ted,” she said. “All you think about is hitting a baseball! You’ve got hitting a baseball on the brain. Isn’t there anything else you think about?”

“Sure,” said Ted. “Lot’s of things!”

His mother brightened up. “Wonderful! Like what?”

“Like catching a baseball!” Ted exclaimed.

His dad laughed and tousled Ted’s hair. “Goodnight, Wildcat buddy,” he said with a grin. Ted’s mom just smiled and shook her head. His parents both gave him a small kiss on the forehead and went down the hall.

He called after them. “Fielding a baseball too!” he said loudly from his bed. “And I think about throwing a baseball. Um, bunting a baseball..”

That night Ted had a dream. He was playing second base for the Yankees’ Youth League Team and Mickey was on the mound. The league’s best hitter Duncan Shaffer was up with the bases loaded and no outs. Mickey pitched it and Duncan lined a shot up the middle that looked like it would score the winning runs. But Ted snared the liner with an outstretched backhand and his momentum carried him straight into second where he doubled off the runner. Then in one fluid motion he jumped into the air and fired the ball to first where the baserunner was diving back. The throw got there in time for the incredible, game-ending triple play! Mickey and the rest of the Yankees mobbed Wildcat and he saw Duncan throw his bat against the screen. Gary was cheering in the stands.

The dream felt so good Ted didn’t want it to end. “Wildcat! Wildcat!” he heard voices cheering. He could feel someone on the Yankees shaking his arm and others patting him on the back. Ted squeezed his eyes tighter. He was slipping out of the dream.

“Wildcat! Wildcat! Teddy!” It was his dad. He was shaking Ted’s arm. “Get up Ted, breakfast is ready! Ted sat

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up and rubbed his eyes. He blinked at the sun coming through his curtains. Then slowly, but as clearly as if it had really happened, he remembered his dream and he smiled. "Someday," he said to himself. "Someday I'll make that play but it won't just be a dream!"

## Chapter Two

That summer Ted spent most of his days practicing baseball, and two evenings each week watching Youth League games over at Tigers Park. Gary played in a summer league and had his games on Friday nights at the high school stadium. Some of the 9:30 games lasted until nearly midnight and were too late for Ted to watch, but whenever Gary played in the early game at 7:00, Ted went with his mom and dad.

Gary played centerfield and had a great arm. He usually batted seventh, but sometimes the coach would have him bat second. Ted always heard rumors that there were pro scouts at these Friday night games. He studied everyone in the stands carefully trying to see a scout, but he didn't exactly know what he was looking for.

He figured a big league scout would be wearing a big league ball cap and would have a notepad, maybe binoculars. Ted never saw anyone who fit that description but he did see plenty of fans in the stands he didn't recognize. The scout could be any one of them.

Ted wore his brother's high school jersey to most of the games. It was number 21 and said, "Logan" on the back. It hung down almost to his knees but he didn't tuck it in because if he did, the 21 would disappear.

The nights at the high school were some of Ted's favorites of the whole summer. The family would usually make a picnic out of it, buying hot dogs and sodas at the concession stand. Ted brought his mitt and tossed himself fly balls between innings. Whenever he made a great catch he would always look into the dugout to see if Gary had seen it. Once in awhile Gary would smile and give him the thumbs up. Ted was careful not to give himself any really hard

catches near the bleachers just in case he missed one and a scout was watching.

Some nights Gary would get one or two hits, make a couple of nice catches in the field and maybe even throw out a runner at the plate. Other nights Gary didn't get any hits but he always played great in the outfield. Most of the players in the league knew about his great arm and wouldn't test it by trying to take the extra base.

When the team won and Gary had a good night at the plate he was always really happy after the game. Sometimes he would come home in his car but usually he'd go out to the Burger-n-More with the other guys on the team.

But if his team lost or Gary didn't get any hits he'd always come home right after the game in a bad mood. Ted's dad would try to help him change his attitude.

"Son," Larry Logan would say, "You can't let this one game get you down."

"It does get me down," Gary would say gloomily, "Because I let the team down and should have played better."

"How did *you* let the team down?" Dad would ask. "You played great in center and you weren't the only one who didn't get any hits."

"Yeah but I shouldn't have been one of ones who didn't get any hits-I could hit that guy."

Ted usually listened but didn't say much. This was all a world he didn't understand. Ted thought how nice it would be to just get to play, even if he didn't get any hits. Gary was such a "perfectionist" (his dad called him), that he was miserable if he didn't go 4 for 4 with four home runs.

By Saturday morning though, Gary was his old self and those were the best days. Gary would eat breakfast while reading the sports page and then, instead of hanging out with his friends during the morning, he'd take Ted down to the park and pitch to him.

Ted loved lacing up his cleats along side Gary and helping him get the baseball bag out of the trunk of the old

car. Gary would usually throw him 100 pitches and they'd count how many Ted hit.

"Hey, you're getting a lot better," Gary would say after number 100. "37 out of 100! What did you have last time?"

Ted always remembered, and it did seem like he was improving. Still, he figured anyone who was going to make the Teen League needed to hit 100 out of 100.

Next, Gary put Ted at second and hit him 40 or 50 ground balls. Gary never got frustrated when Ted missed them, and he always said things like, "Atta baby!" or "Oh yeah!" on the ones Ted caught.

Then on the way home, they would stop off at the Burger-n-More and Gary always bought Ted a big vanilla milkshake, burger and fries. Gary usually laughed and talked with his buddies there, and munched a fish sandwich for lunch.

Gary seemed like he had a lot of friends who were always glad to see him. All of Gary's buddies were super-nice to Ted too, and Ted was pretty sure Gary was proud to have him along.

It was great being Gary Logan's little brother. Whenever someone found out who Ted was they were always impressed, and complimented him that he looked just like Gary. Teachers in school who had taught Gary still mixed up their names. Ted didn't mind. It was flattering when they did it.

Gary had his own room in the house, which had been the guestroom until he turned 16 and asked to move in there. Yet there were many evenings that summer when Gary was home, and not out with some friends or on a date, that he would come lie down on the floor next to Ted at bedtime. Usually Gary would turn on the radio and they'd find a baseball game. Both guys would talk strategy and try to outguess each other about which pitch was going to be next and whether runners would steal or bunt. Other nights, they just talked about all sorts of things until Ted fell asleep.

“You know Teddy,” Gary said to him one night, “If you don’t make the Teen League next summer it won’t be the end of the world.”

“I’m going to make it,” Ted said rolling over onto his shoulder so he could look at Gary.

“I know,” Gary replied. “I’m just saying, if you don’t I’ll still be really proud of you for hanging in there and trying. Most kids would have given up by now.”

“Don’t you think I’m going to make it?” Ted asked.

Gary was quiet for a second. “Of course I do. The way you’ve been practicing you’re a cinch,” he said. Ted looked hard at Gary in the darkness, examining his face. He was trying to decide if Gary was just saying that to make him feel better. It was too dark in the room to tell.

Gary’s baseball season ended sooner than any of the Logans expected. On the last game of the regular season his team needed a win to get into the city playoffs. Even though it was a late game, since so much was riding on it Ted had been allowed to go with the family. This game was important and there were definitely scouts all over the place.

Gary went 2 for 3 with two RBI and made a spectacular catch in the field, but it wasn’t enough as his team lost 7-6 in extra innings.

When Gary got up the next morning, he was still taking the loss really hard, and instead of trying to talk to him about it, this time Dad just stayed quiet. Gary sat out in the back yard most of the morning, and when Ted opened the back door to run out and ask him if he wanted to go to the park, his dad caught his arm and stopped him.

“Let’s let Gary have some time alone,” he said quietly. “He’s really hurting now that baseball is over.”

“But he’s going to get to play on his college team next, why was this so important?” Ted asked his dad.

“You’ll understand someday,” was all he could say.

Ted only had one goal in mind the rest of the summer. And that was to get as much baseball practice in as

possible before Wyatt Middle School started. Ted was sure that once he went there he'd have no time for anything fun anymore. Every morning he got up and ate breakfast, then he was down at the park. Gary had to work during the day so Ted carried the ball bag, his bat and his mitt on his bike.

First Ted would throw 50 balls up in the air and hit them as hard as he could. Next he would practice throwing from second into home to improve his arm strength and accuracy. Finally he would toss himself as many pop flies as his arm could stand. Then he would load everything up and ride back home.

Since Gary didn't have evening practice anymore, many times he'd throw some catch with Ted in the street, and roll him some grounders.

The Youth League season was coming to a close as well, and Mickey's Yankees were in the championship game. The day of the game Ted brought his autograph ball and mitt, and had a new pack of baseball cards in his back pocket.

It was a hot muggy afternoon at Tigers Park and Ted watched the Yankees take infield practice. He smelled the fresh cut grass from the outfield and heard the popcorn popping at the concession stand. There was already a pretty good crowd on hand and the coaches were still chalking the lines.

The Yankees were playing the Blue Jays, Duncan Shaffer's team. Duncan went to the same school as Mickey and Ted, but was a head taller than everyone else and a lot meaner. He was the school's best baseball and basketball player and he knew it. Ted always did his best to stay away from him. Usually at recess Ted just sat on a stone bench and looked at his baseball cards rather than try to get involved in the playground basketball game Duncan always organized.

Once though, they had needed one more player to make five on five and Ted was the only one around, so he agreed to play. He was on Duncan's team and every time Ted double-dribbled or made a bad pass Duncan yelled at him. Finally another boy came by and Duncan kicked Ted

off the team. Ted really hoped the Yankees smoked the Blue Jays tonight.

The first three innings were a pitchers' duel. Neither team could mount a threat beyond Mickey's leadoff double in the second. In the fourth inning, with the score tied at zero, Duncan Shaffer stroked a triple down the right field line and then scored on his teammate's sacrifice fly. After the inning Ted went over to the drinking fountain to have a drink of water. Up walked Duncan with the team's catcher.

Not only was Duncan tall for his age, he was big. His uniform was soaked with sweat and looked as if it had half the infield dirt on it. His head was so big the band on the back of his cap was snapped in the last two holes.

Ted had finished his drink when Duncan approached. He hoped Duncan didn't spot him, but the giant kid looked right his way so Ted felt he had to say something.

"Hi Duncan, nice hit."

Duncan grinned. It didn't look to Ted like a particularly friendly smile.

"Hey, it's the basketball star!" he sneered. The other boy with him laughed too. "Are you on a team in this league?"

"No," Ted said quietly. "I just like to come out."

"Why don't you play on any team?" Duncan knew why. He was just being mean.

Ted looked at him. "I didn't make it," he said.

"You didn't make Youth League?" Duncan asked with an amazed look on his face. "Anyone can make Youth League!"

Ted turned to go back to his seat on the bleachers. He heard the other kid with Duncan say something about Ted always being at the games even though he wasn't on a team. His ears were burning.

Then something terrible happened. As he walked past the stone drinking fountain his mitt brushed against it and his autograph ball fell out. Not only did it fall out, but it bounced off Ted's foot in such a way that it rolled right up to Duncan's cleats and came to a stop.

Duncan picked up the autograph ball. He looked at it as if trying to understand some foreign language, turning it around and around in his hand. Then a smile slowly spread across his face.

“Give it to me,” Ted said.

Duncan held it up out of Ted’s reach. “Wildcat?” he asked. “Ted, WILDCAT Logan?” He threw back his head and laughed.

“Look at this Steve,” he said showing it to the catcher. “Logan here thinks he’s a pro ballplayer-he’s the WILDCAT!”

Ted’s face was burning. There was nothing he could do, but he wanted the ball back. He wasn’t going to let Duncan see him cry but he had to blink hard to keep the tears back.

Just then Mickey jogged up. “What’s going on?” he asked Duncan.

“Maybe you should ask autograph boy here,” Duncan said. “Here you go, Wildcat!” He tossed the ball to Ted who caught it with his bare hand.

“What’s that all about?” Mickey asked as they watched the two Blue Jays jog back to their dugout.

“Nothing.” Ted murmured.

“Don’t let them bother you,” Mickey said. “Hey, I got to get back to the game. Wish us luck so we can shut that guy up.”

Mickey was on his way back to the dugout and didn’t hear Ted mumble good luck. It was just as well. Ted’s heart wasn’t in it anyway. Right now, Ted’s heart wasn’t in anything anymore.

### Chapter Three

Mickey did all he could to help the Yankees win but they couldn't pull it off. Even though Mickey had two more hits after his second inning double, and played spectacularly in the field, Duncan Shaffer and the Blue Jays were just too powerful.

Duncan pitched the last two innings and, compared to the other kids on the field, looked like he was about eighteen, not twelve. He struck out the last three batters he faced to preserve a 3-0 victory for the Blue Jays. Ted watched him celebrate on the field with his teammates.

The Yankee players looked like they were taking it pretty hard, especially Mickey who had his cap pulled down over his eyes as the two teams lined up to slap hands and say 'good game.'

Duncan was being especially rowdy, taking soda and spraying it all over himself and his teammates and letting out loud "whoops" every few minutes. Ted didn't know how he'd act if he won the championship but it didn't seem that Duncan was being a particularly good sport.

Ted decided not to bother Mickey or his dad afterwards because he didn't figure they'd feel much like talking, and besides, after what happened at the drinking fountain, Ted didn't want to talk to anyone either.

He gathered up his things and headed towards his bike. He was thinking about how now at school he'd even be more puny than usual since he'd be the youngest instead of the oldest. He figured there would probably be a whole classroom full of Duncans at the new place.

"Hey Ted!" he heard a voice call behind him. "Wait up!"

It was Mickey. He was jogging up to Ted with a ball in his hand.

“Ted!” Mickey said. “What’s this?” When Mickey got up next to him Ted could see he had the autograph ball.

Ted looked around anxiously to see if anyone was watching. “That’s nothing-what are you doing with it?” he asked

“It was in the trash can. I found it when I was throwing away some garbage the Blue Jays left on the field. Why did you want to throw this great ball out?”

“It’s a long story,” Ted answered.

“Is this what Duncan was teasing you about?”

Ted said nothing and looked down.

“Do you know what I autograph?” Mickey asked.

Ted looked at him.

“I like to take my mom’s old magazines and pretend they’re baseball programs and autograph all over ‘em. I bet I’ve got a thousand pages with my name all over it.”

Ted smiled. “Really?” he asked.

“Yeah but I’ve never thought about practicing on a baseball-this is cool!”

“You don’t think it’s stupid-especially with that nickname and all?” Ted asked.

“No way. But if you don’t tell anyone about my magazines, I won’t tell anyone about your ball,” Mickey lowered his voice to a whisper, “Wildcat.”

“Thanks Mickey,” Ted said taking the ball back.

“I had to wipe a little ketchup off it but you can hardly tell. Hey, we’re having our team party over here-why don’t you come over and have some hot dogs?”

“No thanks, I have to get home,” Ted said. “But thanks again for getting the ball.”

“No problem.”

“Oh, and sorry about the game,”

“That’s OK, there’s always next year,” Mickey turned to go back to the field. “Hey Ted,” he said over his shoulder. “See you in a few weeks at school!”

Ted got on his bike and popped up the kickstand. He looked down at the autograph ball. The red ketchup stain was about the size of a quarter and covered the last name on one

of his signatures. Ted smiled. He liked the way the stain looked on the ball. He decided he wouldn't wash it off even if he could.

He looked over at the Yankees sitting with their parents on the park picnic tables. They were eating hot dogs and it looked like there was a big cake with a dark blue Yankees cap frosted on top. Ted remembered what Mickey had said about there always being next year. If he kept working on his game, Ted would be there with them next season as part of his first baseball team.

Ted's baseball card collection was getting bigger as the summer wore on. He had 827 cards when school let out in June and now, at the end of August he was up to 1043.

Gary had a really nice collection that he kept in his room. Every now and then they'd have a "trade session." Lately it seemed like Gary was letting Ted have some of his best without getting much in return.

Ted knew that his brother would be going off to college soon. He wasn't sure exactly when, but it was before Ted's own new school started. He sure wished Gary could be home for that. Ted was really nervous about starting at Wyatt Middle School and it would be great knowing Gary was going to be around to tell him what to do if he ran into problems.

Gary's summer job was over, so now he was spending most of his time putting things from his room into boxes for school, and other things into bags for their mom to take to Goodwill.

Every time another bag went out in the hall, Ted was there. He went through all of the stuff that Gary was willing to part with and ended up grabbing most of it before it left the house. None of it was stuff that Ted had ever really wanted, but for some reason he couldn't stand to think of Gary's old things getting thrown away. Whenever Gary would come out with a new sack, he'd look into the old one and laugh because there was hardly anything left.

One afternoon Gary came into Ted's room while Ted was going through his cards, organizing them by team. He had a big shoebox with a coat draped over it.

"I've got some things for you buddy," Gary said.

"What's that?" Ted asked.

"I want you to have these since I won't be needing them anymore."

It was Gary's letter jacket and, Ted couldn't believe it, his baseball card collection.

"Why are you giving me these?" Ted asked.

"I'm not going to have time to look at these cards while I'm at school, and I'm going to get a new letter jacket when I make the college baseball team," Gary said.

"But you can still keep the cards in your room," Ted cried. "And look at them when you come home!" Ted didn't like this. Taking the letter jacket was one thing, but he didn't want Gary to give his cards away. Not even to him.

"OK," Gary said putting an arm on Ted's shoulder. "I'll tell you what. How about you just hold on to them for me? There's no sense having them collect dust in my closet, and this way while I'm gone you can look at them as much as you want. But whenever I come home we'll have a trade session. Deal?"

Ted felt better. He breathed in a small sob and nodded his head. He tried on the letter jacket. The sleeves hung down a foot over his arms.

"Looks like you have some growing to do!" Gary said. They both laughed.

One morning Mickey called and asked Ted if he wanted to go down to the park with him and his dad and play a little ball. At first Ted said "Sure!" but then he thought about Gary and told Mickey he'd call him back.

Ted asked Gary what he was going to do and that Mickey had invited him to the park.

"Well go then buddy," Gary smiled. "Why 'ya asking me?"

“Because if you’re not doing anything I’d rather hang out with you,” Ted answered.

“No, you go on down there and play, Wildcat. I’ve got a lot of things to do around here today and it’ll do you some good to take some cuts and field a few.”

Ted and Mickey had a great time at the field. Mickey’s dad pitched to each boy until they’d both had enough. Then they worked on double plays with Mickey at shortstop and Ted at second.

“Ted, you’ve been practicing haven’t you?” Coach Jeff asked.

“A little,” Ted answered. “Can you really tell?”

“Oh absolutely,” Mickey’s dad replied. “You’ve really made a lot of progress.

“You’re going to try out for the Teen League next year aren’t you?” Mickey asked.

“You bet!” Ted exclaimed.

Coach Jeff just used the bat to wipe some dirt from the top of his shoe. “Guys we better be going,” he finally said.

On the way home Coach Jeff took both boys for a couple big scoops of ice cream. Ted had Butter Brickle and Mickey had Coconut. They both tasted a spoonful of each other’s. Mickey goofed around and put his nose in the ice cream and so Ted did too. Mickey’s dad told them not to do it again but you could tell he sort of thought it was funny.

Ted was surprised to learn that Mickey was a little nervous about going to Wyatt Middle School too. Mickey always seemed so sure of everything and Ted spent a lot of time wishing he were more like him. For some reason, knowing that Mickey was also nervous made Ted feel less upset about the whole thing.

It had been a great day and Ted thanked Coach Jeff and Mickey when he got out of the car in front of his house. The sun was beginning to go down, Ted was starving, and it was almost time for supper.

The first thing Ted saw when he walked in the front door were Gary’s suitcases and a big duffel bag. All of a

sudden, Ted realized that Gary was leaving for college tomorrow.

He had known of course that this day was going to come, but he'd driven it out of his mind because he didn't want it to be true. He had kind of hoped that if he didn't ever think about it, maybe it wouldn't happen, and the summer would just never end. Now Ted knew that it was all going to end tomorrow.

He went into the kitchen and the only one there was his mother, who had her back to him cooking dinner. She turned when she heard him come in and said, "Oh hi sweetie, go wash your hands for dinner." She turned back around quickly, but not before Ted noticed she'd been crying.

Gary and their dad came in from the back laughing and talking loudly. When Ted saw Gary he ran out of the kitchen and into his room. Gary followed him.

"What's wrong Wildcat?" Gary asked when he found Ted face down on his bed.

"You're leaving!" Ted cried.

"Yeah but you've known that all summer." Gary said. "Besides, I'm just down the road a couple of hours, I'll be back all the time."

"It's not going to be the same," Ted sobbed. "I'm going to a new school and I have to try out for a new league where I'll be the youngest, and I'm the worst ball player in history..."

"Hey," Gary said. "Slow down. You're not the worst player in history. Everybody comes along at a different pace. You just haven't reached your potential yet. It'll happen. As much as you practice you know it will. You've got to just hang in there. And listen, you know they *do* have phones where I'm going. Do you think you could learn a new phone number to dial?"

Ted cheered up a little. "You probably won't want me calling every day," he sniffed.

"You better!" Gary said, play-punching him.

"Stop!"

“Get up and let’s have dinner,” Gary said. “We’ve got a big trading session to get to tonight!”

That night Ted dreamed that Gary came into the house with his suitcases and announced that there had been a mistake at the high school. For some reason he had to go back for one more year before he could go on to college. Gary was really happy about it too because he was going to get to play on the high school team again. Ted brought him his letter jacket and baseball card box and put them both back in his closet. The dream would have gone on longer but somebody was shaking Ted and telling him to wake up.

It was his dad.

“Come on, buddy,” he said quietly. “We’re all packed and ready to go. It’s time to get your brother down to school.”