

## Chapter One

# THE BRONX BADGERS

Louie Cohen swung. With a crack of the bat, the ball flew upwards, rising higher and higher into the sky over the ballfield in the Bronx, pausing for a moment at the top of its arc, and then plummeting downwards in a blur. Just a moment before it hit the outfield grass, a set of jaws reached out, lunged for it, nabbed it, and hauled it in.

“Nice catch, boy,” Louie called to his white Labrador, Chester. The dog had a friendly face, a hard, athletic body, powerful legs, large paws that grabbed the turf as he ran, and quick eyes. “Okay, bring it in.”

Chester turned around and ran the ball in, stopping a few feet away and rolling it back to Louie. Since the day he was born eight years ago, Chester had been Louie’s dog. He went everywhere with Louie, especially to the ballfield every summer afternoon, where he shagged flies with the best of them.

“He could play first base for us,” said a girl’s voice behind Louie.

“What about third?” Louie said.

Sally smiled. “Yeah, right, we need a good third baseman.” She was kidding, of course, because Louie was their third baseman, and many said he had the strongest throw to first of any fifth grader in all of New York City. Sally lounged on the infield grass with her dog Marmalade, a lean grey Whippet who sniffed the grass with her long, spotted nose while making quick back and forth movements of her head.

“Grounder,” Louie said. Once he heard that, Chester ran out to shortstop and turned around. Louie hit a hard ground ball in the hole. Like a shot, Chester raced to the ball, got in front of it, knocked it down with his chest, and grabbed it in his mouth.

“Just like Dexter Archer,” said Sally.

“Oh, Chester could have taken Archer’s place when he retired,” said Louie. “They just don’t let dogs play baseball.”

“True that,” she said, as Marmalade rested her head on Sally’s legs. She and Louie had been friends for, well, since before either of them could remember—growing up in the same neighborhood, going to the same school, and playing on the Bronx Badgers together.

“Right here, boy,” Louie said. Chester ran the ball in, halting a few feet away. With the ball firmly held in his mouth, the dog dropped his head and flung the ball up in a perfect toss right into Louie’s outstretched hand.

“Nice flip,” said Sally. “Maybe he could pitch.”

“Yeah, we could sure use some pitching,” said Louie, chuckling because Sally was the star pitcher of their team.

“Okay, boy, Archer’s up,” Louie said. Chester instantly got into his dog crouch—legs ready to run, and he was off before Louie hit the ball.

Louie called it in his announcer voice. “*It’s a fly ball down the left field line off the bat of Dexter Archer. Archer rounds first and heads for second. Chester has a play on it. He’s back and back and back, to the wall. He leaps . . . He’s got it! Dexter Archer robbed of a home run after a great catch by Chester.*”

“Archer’s retired,” said Sally, matter-of-factly.

“Yeah, but he’s still Archer, he’ll always be Archer,” said Louie. Chester came barreling back, breathing hard, the ball in his mouth.

“You took a homer away from Dexter Archer,”

said Sally. “Way to go.” Chester dropped the ball and barked, a single loud bark.

“You can say that again,” said Louie and Sally together.

Louie yanked the brim of his Yankees cap. Since this was the Bronx, a borough of New York City, that meant it was Yankees country. *The New York Yankees*—the boys in pinstripes—with that world-renowned “NY” logo on the shirt. With the dark blue hats. And dark socks starting just below the knee, extending down to the blue-and-white cleats. These were not normal baseball players—they were the descendants of Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig, Mickey Mantle, Mariano Rivera, and the greatest Yankees shortstop ever—Dexter Archer. They were not just players. They were heroes.

And the stadium, not just any stadium, but the world-famous *Yankee Stadium*, was just a short bike ride away from where they were right now—just down Grand Concourse Avenue. It was the cathedral of baseball, the place where the gods resided, the field every boy and girl in New York wanted to play on. It was, in short, a field of glory. When you approached the outside of the stadium, the first thing you saw were the towering white walls with the curved arches. The magnificent white marble walls climbed to the heavens, and if you stood underneath, you could feel the power of the stadium. It spoke to you—saying, *you are standing in a place of honor, a place of baseball history, a place of magical moments, so don’t you forget it, kid. Don’t ever forget it.*

If you looked up at Gate Four, you could barely make out in yellow lettering YANKEE STADIUM at the top of the arches, below the flags flying at the top of the wall. Looking to the left and the right, the stadium curved away from you, as if it went on forever. You could not even stand in the shadow of the stadium without realizing that there was something going on here. For *here* they played the greatest game on earth, and if you could just get in past these massive walls, you could see the game in action. Because inside the stadium, it got even better.

Never in the history of the world has there been anything as green as That Field. The grass almost hurt your eyes, it was so green. The groundskeepers mowed it into perfect rows of grass, crossing diagonally. The infield had small rows, the outfield wider rows, every blade perfectly cut, and evenly topped off. It was as if someone had measured each blade of grass and cut it lovingly. The pitcher’s mound rose like a dirt wave rushing towards the shore. The infield between the bases cut a brown diamond into the grass. The infield between the bases had the finest brown dirt, raked smooth to stop bad hops. It was on this infield that the mighty Yankees fielded the ground balls and ran the bases.

Behind the batter's box was the high wire screen to catch foul balls, rising almost to the second level of seats. And in the outfield, past the warning track, rose the wall. And behind that, the bleachers, where the bums hung out—the guys with big stomachs who drank too much beer and hurled swear words down onto the field. It got rowdy up there, especially a few dozen rows back. Guys threw beer and bags of peanuts. Drunks hollered. To get the hot dogs to the customers, the vendors threw the hot dogs wrapped in silver foil over forty rows of spectators. It was a rough place to watch a game, and Louie and Sally loved every minute of it.

Louie and Sally had sat in the bleachers at games with Louie's dad maybe three hundred, four hundred times. They'd seen Archer dive for a ball in the hole, come up with it, and nail the runner at first by a step. They'd seen the greatest relief pitcher of all time, Mariano Rivera, strike out the side again and again. They'd seen the Yankees come from behind in the ninth and win with a walk-off home run. And on the way out of the park, their shirts stained with mustard from their hot dogs, they'd pass statues of Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig, and other Yankee greats. This was Yankee Stadium, right down the street from where they were right now.

You couldn't live here—not in this neighborhood, not around here—and be a Mets fan, or a Phillies fan, or worst of all, a Red Sox fan. You'd be taking your life into your hands. They'd run you out of town. They'd revoke your Bronx citizenship. They'd string you up. You had to be a Yankees fan—you had to be! And, so, they were.

But today the Yankees were on the road in Cleveland. So it was time for *their* game, the Bronx Badgers—Louie's and Sally's team. Sally started warming up, throwing the ball back and forth as Chester and Marmalade scampered around. Sally wore her Yankees cap turned backwards, so the back strip crossed her freckled forehead. She had the oldest, most raggedy mitt you ever saw; it looked like it would come apart at any minute. But Sally had used it for years to snag come-backers to the mound, and she wouldn't give it up.

Something about Louie and Sally said *baseball*. Even without their hats and beat-up gloves, their Louisville Sluggers with marks on the bat for every home run, and the raggedy baseballs, people knew they were baseball kids.

“What position do you play?” people would ask.

“Third,” said Louie.

“Pitcher,” said Sally.

Louie always wore his hat with the bill facing front. He was tall for his age, lean, with dark hair parted on the side, a strong right arm to throw runners out, strong legs to beat out a slow roller up the line, and good eyes to see a fastball on the inside corner. And though no one could see it, the strong beating heart of a baseball player.

Sally was tall, very tall. A tomboy, people said, with her hair in two braids all the time, sweet-faced, with loads of freckles, usually wearing jeans and tee-shirts. She had that athletic confidence scouts looked for. She moved gracefully, and her pitching arm was strong. Just what you needed to pitch for the Badgers in the Bronx Little League division.

“You still sleep with your glove under your pillow?” asked Louie, whipping back the ball.

“Yeah, I guess,” she replied, hauling it in.

“Me too, but don’t tell anyone. We’re in fifth grade, after all.”

Sally threw back high, Louie jumped, it sailed over his head, and Chester raced across the infield after it. Marmalade jumped up and beat Chester to it; they ran into right field together.

“Chester may be able to catch the ball, but he’ll never catch Marmalade,” said Sally.

The other players started to arrive. “They’re here, come on,” said Louie.

Sally and Louie made their way over to the dugout, where the rest of the team was pulling gear out of duffel bags, arranging the bats against the fence, wiping off the batting helmets caked with yesterday’s mud, and tossing out the hardballs for the warmup. The ballfield at Van Cortland Park had a rough grass infield and a spotty grass outfield with gopher holes every twenty yards or so that they had to watch out for. Behind home plate, the backstop teetered and swayed. There were two dirt-floor dugouts, beat-up bases, and the remnants of white lines running up both base lines, gradually disappearing in the outfield.

For today’s game they had nine players, and everyone brought their dogs. There was hot-headed Chip with his Great Dane named Pal, nervous-Nellie Juan with his German Shepherd Oscar, sass-monster Cara with her mutt Donut, and stocky Ron with his Bernese Mountain Dog Bernie.

“Who’s ready to play some *baseball?*” yelled Sally.

There was chunky Chuck with his Bulldog named Bull, baby-faced Levar with his Collie named Champ, feisty Veronica with her Bassett Hound Gabby, and daffy Donna with her Scotty named Pearl. Together, along with Louie and Sally, and Chester and Marmalade, they made up the Bronx Badgers and their dogs who showed up at every game.

Today’s game was against the One Hundred Ninety-fifth Street Cougars, who were slowly taking up residence in the opposing dugout, in their white uniforms with *Cougars* on the front—although the printer had placed the name too far to one side of their shirts so only the “Coug” was showing. But no one cared. It was baseball that mattered.

“Look, it’s Mr. Park,” yelled the kids as a man approached. He had a round face, a great big smile, chubby arms, and an apron that bore the logo of MR. PARK’S MARKET. Across from the baseball field was a row of shops, and Mr. Park owned one, a Korean grocery market. He was carrying a brown bag, like he did most game days.

“Big game today,” he called out. “Big game needs big snack.” He reached into his bag and brought out oranges, cashews, almonds, raisins, and crackers—and handed them out to the kids, who dug in.

“Thank you, Mr. Park,” yelled the kids.

“Oh, very good, very good,” he replied.

Louie reached into his pocket and pulled out a ten-dollar bill. “My mother wanted you to have this,” he said. Mr. Park waved it away. “You no pay, you play, you play. Get it? No pay, you play,” he said with a laugh.

“Yes, we get it,” said Sally, rolling her eyes.

“Okay, now for dogs,” said Mr. Park. “Dogs line up.”

The kids knew just what to do. They formed a line on one side and lined the dogs up about five feet away across from them. The dogs, sensing a treat coming, kept perfectly still. Holding the

brown grocery bag, Mr. Park walked slowly between the two lines, handing out one dog biscuit to each kid. When he got to the end, he turned and yelled “Now.” The kids whipped their dog biscuits at the dogs, and the dogs, standing on their hind legs, expertly caught them in their mouths and chewed them up.

“Oh, dogs are good, dogs very good,” said Mr. Park, smiling broadly, very pleased with himself, as the dogs munched happily.

Mr. Park headed back to his store. “Good luck today.”

“Bye, Mr. Park. Thank you,” yelled the kids. “Thank you.”

“Okay, bring it in,” said Louie. The kids gathered around Sally and Louie, holding their dogs by their collars.

“Cara, how’s Donut’s paw?”

“Cut’s all better.” She held up Donut’s paw and they all crowded around. She was a funny-looking thing, a mutt’s mutt, with brown ears that pointed straight up and turned left and right when she thought she heard a cat; a thin, bony body, and a head that flitted back and forth.

“How about Oscar?”

“His leg’s still hurt,” said Juan. “I wrapped it again last night.”

“Okay, take it easy with him today,” ordered Louie. “And what about Pearl?”

Donna lifted Pearl up and put her down on the picnic table. “They pulled her tooth,” she said and the kids pushed forward to get a look. “I don’t think it hurts anymore, but it sure looks funny. See?” She pulled back her dog’s lip and the kids marveled at the missing tooth. “Whoaaaaaa,” they said, wide-eyed.

“Look what Bull can do.” Chuck carried Bull the Bulldog to third, put him down and whistled. Bull immediately raced for home. Chuck whistled again and Bull threw all four legs out and slid across home plate on his belly.

“I’d say *safe*,” said Sally. “Right? Safe.”

“Okay, put ‘em in the dugout,” said Louie.

The kids hustled their dogs into the dugout and put them in a *sit-stay* before heading out onto the field for the first inning. Pearl the Scotty whined, because she wanted to go out there with them, so Donna ran back and gave her a kiss.

“Sorry, dogs don’t play baseball,” she said, hugging her. “You know that.”

“Juan, aren’t you’re forgetting something?” said Louie.

“Oh, yeah.” Juan ran to his bag, pulled out a roll of tape, and climbed up the backstop fence to the sign ten feet up that read: NO DOGS ALLOWED. Pulling tape off the roll, he placed it in strips over the letter N and O until the NO disappeared. Then, it read: DOGS ALLOWED.

“Good, now we can play,” said Louie.

Sally headed to the mound, Louie to third base, and the rest of the players to their positions. The Cougars came up to bat. “Easy out,” said Louie from third as the lead-off hitter stepped into the batter’s box. Sally looked in for the sign from the catcher, straightened, wound up, and threw a fastball.

“Ball,” yelled the umpire.

“Caught the corner,” Sally yelled back.

“Ball,” grumbled the ump.

“Chester?” yelled Sally.

Chester barked.

“See?” said Sally.

Her next pitch hung over the plate. Waiting on it, the Cougar batter hit a screaming line drive over the first baseman’s head into right field, and it rolled all the way to the fence. Juan, in right field, went for it, but the dogs, watching the ball go by, couldn’t stop themselves and took off into right field after it.

“Oh, brother,” wailed Louie. “Get them off the field.”

Juan managed to wrestle the ball from Gabby and threw to second. The Cougar slid into second just ahead of the tag. Then the game had to stop while Louie and his teammates rounded up the dogs and yanked them back to the dugout.

“Sorry,” said Louie to the Cougars.

“Louie, look.”

Louie turned to see. Walking towards them was a whole team of kids, older kids. Carrying bats and catcher’s gear, they were tossing balls up and slapping their gloves. At the head of the gang was a red-haired kid. His big mouth, over floppy lips, barely covered his jagged teeth.

“It’s Froggy,” said Sally.

“What does *he* want?”

Froggy’s real name wasn’t Froggy. It was Frank or Fran or something like that. Everyone just called him Froggy, though, even his friends. Even his *mother*. Froggy had a face that his mother could love, but nobody else. When he scrunched it up, he looked like one of those mirrors at the amusement park, which might be why people called him Froggy. Nobody knew.

“What do you want, Froggy?”

“Off,” ordered Froggy, waving his arm.

“This is our field,” said Louie. “We’ve got it.”

“Yeah, well, we want it.”

“Didn’t you hear? We got it,” said Sally.

“You *had* it. And now we got it,” said Froggy.

“Look, Froggy,” said Sally, “I know you have limited intelligence, and I don’t mind, really I don’t, because somebody has to be at the low end of the IQ scale, but as even you can see, we got the field.”

“So get off.”

“We’re getting off, like you’re getting pretty,” she snapped back.

“Okay, if you don’t get off, we’re gonna take it, so I’m going to count to ten and—”

“You can count?” exclaimed Sally. “I had no idea.”

“One, two, three—”

“Four is next,” said Sally, “in case you forgot.”

“Four, five, six—”

“You’ve done a lot of good work, Froggy. You should be very proud,” she said.

“Seven, eight—”

“All the way to eight. My, my.”

“Nine, ten. Okay, take it,” said Froggy, and with that his team rushed the Badgers. Froggy reached for Louie’s neck. And in no time Froggy and his team had all of them on the ground or up against the backstop.

And then—Chester growled. And all the other dogs growled, low and mean. Froggy stopped, frozen in his tracks.

“Good move, Einstein,” sneered Sally.

“They won’t do anything,” said Froggy to his friends, and he wrapped his hands around Louie’s throat and raised his fist. Chester lunged forward until he was inches from Froggy’s leg, barking ferociously and baring his teeth.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” warned Sally. “If I give the command...”

“You wouldn’t.”

“Try me,” said Sally.

The dogs, showing teeth, waited for the command to attack. Froggy looked at Chester, then at the other dogs—all growling, ready to pounce.

“Take a walk,” yelled Sally.

Froggy looked around at the growling dogs, then snuck a look at his nervous teammates, shook his head, let go of Louie, stepped back, and said, “Oh, forget it.” His teammates let go of the Badgers. He led them off the field.

“And don’t come back,” yelled Sally after them.

Froggy whipped around and shook his fist.

“Whoaaaaa,” yelled back the Badgers.

“This isn’t over, you know. We’ll be back,” said Froggy.

“Come back, and we’ll work on your numbers,” said Sally. “Eleven is next.”

Froggy fumed, his face red as a St. Louis Cardinals hat.

“Get off our field,” yelled Cara.

“Yeah, and stay off,” everyone yelled at once.

Froggy turned his back on them and walked away. Sally watched them leave the field. “He’ll be back, you know,” she said. Louie just shrugged. “Okay, who’s up?”

They played a good seven-inning game before they had to give up the field at four o’clock to the local high school team, the Red Cats of Bronx P.S. 171. Having gathered up their dogs—Donut and Pearl and Bull and all the others—they slapped gloves with the arriving high schoolers, threw all their equipment, the bats and ragged hardballs, catcher’s gear, and the bases, into duffel bags and headed out, a caravan of kids and dogs and bags and bats and gloves. They walked past Mr. Park’s market.

“You win today?” asked Mr. Park, outside sweeping.

“Five to three,” said Louie.

“That good, that very good. See you tomorrow,” Mr. Park said, holding his broom to his chest. “Bye, Louie. Bye, Sally. Bye, Chester.” Chester barked. Mr. Park laughed. “Chester say goodbye, too. Bye, Chester.”

On the way home, as they always did, they rode their bikes past Yankee Stadium and stopped in front of the main entrance, on Babe Ruth Plaza. They didn’t actually have to pass right by, but they made a detour to ride in the shadow of the stadium. Louie said a prayer, as he always did. “May we play here one day,” he said, and Sally nodded.

“Mariano’s retired, so they need a reliever,” said Sally.

“Maybe you,” said Louie.

They rode their bikes in the summer sun along the six-lane Grand Concourse, with their dogs on leashes trailing behind, to One Hundred Sixty-fifth Street and then onto Louie’s street, Sheridan Avenue. They skidded their bikes to a stop on the sidewalk outside his house, a small two-story residence with a pointy roof and shutters on the windows.

“You staying for dinner?” Louie asked.

“What are you having?”

“Oh, brother,” he said, shaking his head and going inside.

Chasing after him, Sally called out, “Sorry, sorry, it doesn’t matter what you’re having. Really, it doesn’t.”

What they were having that night, at the Cohen residence, was roasted chicken, mashed potatoes with gravy, asparagus with butter, green salad with big summer tomatoes, and warm, just-baked bread straight from the oven, all served in the dining room around an oval table.

“You’re there, Sally, your usual seat,” said Louie’s father, Albert. Everyone called him Al. He was fifty, with thinning hair, a strong frame, and rough hands that had seen a construction site more than once. He tended to nod when you spoke, as if to make you feel better about what you were saying. He had deep-set brown eyes and a high forehead.

“Thanks, Mr. Cohen,” Sally said. It was true she came to dinner maybe two or three times a week, maybe because her homelife wasn’t so good. Louie never asked. She just came to dinner.

“Mimi, can we help?” yelled Al to his wife in the kitchen.

“No, I’m coming,” yelled back Louie’s mom.

A moment later, carrying the breadbasket in her lap, she wheeled herself into the dining room in her wheelchair right up to her seat at the table. Sally jumped up to help.

“It’s all right, dear. I have it,” said Mimi. She was a young mom, way too young to be in a wheelchair, but there she was—pretty, with straight brown hair, hazel eyes, soft features, strong arms from pushing the wheelchair, and a lean strong body, at least from the waist up. Her legs dangled off the wheelchair. Mimi pulled herself up to the end of the table, opposite Al. Sally sat back down and surveyed the heaping platters of chicken, potatoes, salad, and asparagus. It all smelled soooo good.

“Wow,” said Sally, “my mother can’t cook like this ever, and she’s not in a—” She drew in a fast breath. “Sorry,” she blurted out.

“It’s all right, dear,” said Mimi calmly. “I don’t mind.”



“I’m so sorry,” Sally blathered on. “Really I am.”

“Sally, it’s okay. She knows she’s in a wheelchair,” said Louie. “Don’t you, Mom?”

“Know it?” said Mimi breezily. “I’ve been in a wheelchair for seven years, so I ought to know it.” She turned to the young girl. “But, Sally, I won’t tell your mother you said that about her cooking.”

“Noooooooooooo,” protested Sally, and everyone chuckled.

“Okay, phones away,” ordered Mimi, and they slid their phones into their pockets; even Al hid his. “And dogs under the table.” Louie lifted the tablecloth and Chester and Marmalade slid under.

“Who wants mashed potatoes?” said Al, passing them to Sally.

They piled their plates, ate, passed the platters, ate some more, and Louie went into the kitchen for more bread and came back, and they passed the platters and ate even more.

“It’s so good,” said Sally. “Thank you, Mrs. Cohen.”

“You don’t have to thank me, Sally,” said Mimi. “You’re part of the family.”

“I heard you had a little trouble at the park today,” said Al.

Louie put down his fork. “Just Froggy.”

“Anything I can do?” asked his dad.

“Yeah, you can call his father and tell him what a jerk his son is,” said Sally.

Both parents raised their eyebrows. “Or not,” she said, shrugging.

“It’s all right, Dad,” said Louie. “We got this.”