

Keeping Score ... an excerpt

July, 1951 Brooklyn, NY

Chapter One: The New Guy

“How’s come you guys don’t bunt?”

Maggie was sitting on the stoop. On the sidewalk in front of their house, Joey-Mick finished tying his shoe with a double knot. He shrugged but didn’t answer. Then he picked up his glove and glared at it. He tightened the worn leather lace that was always coming undone, and prodded the hole in the top of one of the fingers. The glove was a hand-me-down from their Uncle Leo, and the only reason it was still in one piece, Maggie thought, was because it didn’t want to face her brother’s wrath if it fell apart.

“They bunt all the time in the majors,” Maggie said. “Well, not all the time, but when they need to. Nobody on your team bunts, hardly never. Don’t they teach you how?”

“We know how,” he said as he started plunking a ball into the pocket of the glove—thunk – thunk – thunk. “But it’s lots more important to get good at hitting.” He stopped plunking long enough to tug at the bill of his cap; Maggie thought that the cap over his new crewcut made him look like he didn’t have any hair at all. “If you played, you wouldn’t hafta ask that.”

Maggie pressed her lips together hard.

Whenever she tried to talk baseball with Joey-Mick, he always used that older-so-I-know-way-more-than-you voice and said she didn’t or wouldn’t or couldn’t understand because she didn’t play the game herself.

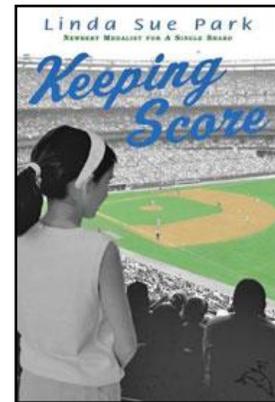
It wasn’t fair. She was nine-going-on-ten, and she knew plenty about baseball, and way more about the Dodgers than he did. Unless she was in school, she never missed a game on the radio. Joey-Mick might go out to play with his friends during a game, but not Maggie.

Like today. The Dodgers’ game against the Pittsburgh Pirates would be starting soon, and here was Joey-Mick waiting for his friend Davey; they were going to the park to have a catch.

Maggie stood up. She was leaving as well, to walk the two blocks to the firehouse and listen to the game with the guys.

“Gotta go,” she said. “Us real fans have a game to listen to.”

New York was the only city in the whole country with three baseball teams. The Yankees of the American League were the winningest team in all of baseball. They had



been World Series champions a whopping thirteen times. And the National League Giants had won the World Series seven times in their history.

The Brooklyn Dodgers, who were in the National League with the Giants, had never won the World Series.

Not ever.

Not even once.

It was what Maggie wanted more than anything in the world: for the Dodgers to win the World Series. It seemed like she had wanted it ever since she was born. Every year the Dodgers – whose nickname to Brooklynites was ‘Dem Bums’ – came close, either winning the National League pennant or finishing in the top three. But the biggest prize, the World Series championship, always seemed to slip away from them.

Although Maggie knew it wasn’t true, she felt like the first words she had learned when she was a baby were “Wait till next year!” – the unofficial official slogan of Dodgers fans.

Charcoal, the mostly-black firehouse dog, always knew when Maggie was coming, and she knew he knew, so even before she saw him, she took from her pocket a folded paper napkin that held a half-slice of salami. When he bounded down the street to meet her, she was ready.

She held out the salami, which he snapped down without chewing.

“Charky! Where are your manners?” she said, shaking her head and smiling at the same time.

The dog led the way to the firehouse, where the guys were sitting out front in folding chairs, boots and suspenders and toothpicks, with the radio already tuned to the broadcast of the game. As soon as George caught sight of her, he jumped to his feet and went and got another chair.

After greetings, they all settled in to listen, Charky flopping down at Maggie’s feet. A routine, but one she never got tired of.

The call came in at a crucial moment:

The Dodgers had just tied the game.

“Shouldn’t be long, Maggie-o,” George said as he opened the door on the driver’s side of the wagon and waited while Charky bounded onto the seat.

“Doesn’t sound like anything serious. You better get that lead and keep it for us.”

“I will,” Maggie promised, and stepped to the side of the bay to get out of the way. “Stay cool,” she called out as George hopped into the wagon.

Whenever Dad left the house to go to work, Maggie and Joey-Mick always told him to ‘stay cool’. It came from something he often said to them: “When things get hot, you gotta stay cool.”

During Dad’s firehouse days, Maggie would get sent home if an emergency call came in. But now she didn’t have to leave when the guys went out on a job.

"You're in charge," George had said the first time she stayed. Which had made her feel quite important.

She watched until the wagon was out of sight, then walked over to the radio at the side of the bay and turned up the volume so she could hear it while she worked.

George was very strict about keeping the firehouse tidy. He had learned it from Maggie's dad, how keeping the whole place neat and organized could save precious time in an emergency. Most days at the firehouse when there weren't any calls, the guys spent a lot of time cleaning. Today Maggie planned to surprise them by sweeping up while they were out.

Dad had been a fireman at this station until three years ago. One afternoon when Maggie was six, Mom answered a knock at the door. Two cops were on the stoop. There had been a fire, and Dad was hurt. They didn't know how bad.

Maggie could still remember every detail of that ride to the hospital, the dome light flashing and the siren shrieking and Mom holding her hand tight enough that it hurt. They saw Dad for a few moments before the operation to fix his leg, his face so black with soot that you couldn't tell where the soot ended and his hair and mustache began, and when he smiled at them his teeth looked the whitest they had ever been — smiled even though the pain must have been too awful to imagine. And he said, "You weren't none of yous worried, were ya?"

Maggie had seen the tears tracking down her mother's face as she cleared her throat and answered, "Pish, I couldn't be bothered. I was getting the dinner, and it'll be gone cold now, thank you very much."

They were clustered around his hospital bed when he woke up from the operation.

"Everybody staying cool?" he asked groggily, the first words out of his mouth.

Later he told them a little more about what had happened. "I went crashin' through the floor, right? And when I got my wits back, I got down low, where the air was a little better, and I started crawling. Every inch I crawled I tried to think about something cool. Maggie eating ice cream, Joey-Mick hosing down the wagon, your mom on our honeymoon at Jones Beach —"

"What's so cool about that?" Joey-Mick asked.

Dad winked. " — in her bathing suit —"

"Joseph!" Maggie's mom put one hand to her mouth, half annoyed and half laughing.

"Can't help it, Rosie, it's the truth."

And staying cool had helped Dad save his own life, and maybe George's and Vince's too, for even with a shattered leg he managed to crawl as far as the door where the other guys found him and dragged him out just as the whole roof collapsed. If he hadn't made it to the door on his own, all three of them might have died inside. "Some

guys would hate it," George had said to Maggie when Dad was reassigned to a desk job. "They couldn't stand being at a desk, they'd sorta dry up and – and shrivel away. But not your pop. 'Cause he loves the department, see. Really loves it."

Maggie knew without asking that Mom was glad not to have to worry about Dad on the job anymore. But she also knew that he missed being at the firehouse. It was one of the reasons she still went there. "Told ya," George said to Terry. "Told ya she'd get the lead for us."

The guys were back. As George had predicted, the call had been an easy one, nothing but smolder by the time they got there. Garbage in an alley had caught fire from a carelessly-tossed cigarette butt. The owner of the shop next door had telephoned for help first,

and then gone out with a bucket of water and doused the fire himself. The guys had helped clean up the alley and cautioned the shop owner not to let trash pile up like that again.

Maggie made a tiny gesture that no one else could see, moving her forefinger against her thumb in the Sign of the Cross. She always did that when the guys came back safe.

George took off his helmet. He ran his hand over his head the way he often did; the other guys always said he was making sure he still had some hair left. It might have been true, but Maggie liked how his hair receded in a curve; it looked like a smile.

"Terry said we were gonna lose the game," George said. "He said sure, we got it tied up, but that would be it for us, and the Pirates would come back and score."

"Hey, it was a good guess," Terry said. "Happened twice in the past week." Blond and stocky, he stood in front of Maggie so she could snap his suspender straps against his ample belly. She didn't remember how this ritual had gotten started, but she had been snapping his straps for ages now. Whenever he got back from a call.

"Yeah, but you know what I said,"

George answered. "I said, we left Maggie-o in charge, she's gonna take care of everything. And look –" he waved his arm broadly – "she got the place swept up too!"

"So what happened?" Terry asked eagerly. "How'd they do it?"

Maggie explained: how Brooklyn had scored three runs in the top of the sixth inning to go ahead 7-4 and one more in the top of the ninth, and how the Pirates had been held scoreless for the whole rest of the game.

"How many'd he strike out?" Terry asked. "He got six before we left – he get any more?"

Maggie knew who Terry was asking about: Preacher Roe, the pitcher.

"Yep," she said. "He got –"

She stopped, frowning. At least one more, she knew that for sure. But had there been another one? Or maybe even two? Or was she getting it mixed up with the earlier innings?

Terry waved away her hesitation. "S'ok, Maggie-o. I can find out tomorrow."

"I think maybe two," Maggie said. "Anyway, he was pitching really good."

"Musta been, seeing how they didn't score any more."

The talk about the game continued until it became talk about the season and the team, other teams, other players, and especially, dreams of future glory, the way it always did.

On the walk home, Maggie went over the game again in her head. Why couldn't she remember how many strikeouts Preacher Roe had gotten? She knew he was Terry's favorite player; she should have been paying more attention. But no matter what Joey-Mick thought, she didn't believe that playing the game herself would make any difference – would help her remember any better.

The thing was, Maggie didn't want to play baseball. Not because it was a boy thing – it wasn't anymore. There had been a real league for women during the war and Maggie's best friend, Treecie, had once said that if they had the chance, girls could do anything boys could do – "except pee standing up." Maggie had laughed in both shock and admiration; she couldn't even think of things like that, much less bring herself to say them.

To Maggie, being a fan was a whole separate thing from playing the game yourself. Joey-Mick might be able to tell you that Carl Furillo's batting average was around .300 and that Don Newcombe had won most of his games so far. But Maggie had it down cold: Furillo was batting .304 and the Newk had six wins.

It was like the movies. You could go to the pictures every week, know all about the stars, read everything in the magazines – and still not want to be an actress yourself. Maggie's mother, Rose, was like that. She had told Maggie that when she first came to New York from Ireland, she went to the pictures every chance she got, "sometimes three or four in a week!"

Mom was kind of solid around her middle now, with a few streaks of gray in her hair that Dad sometimes teased her about – his own hair being jet black – but her eyes were as blue as a calm sky, and her skin so clear that her face always looked like she had just washed it. Maggie could imagine a much younger Rose getting dressed up and going out for a good time.

Baseball and the Dodgers were even bigger than the movies. You had to go to the movie theater to see a picture, but the radio, with announcer Red Barber, brought the Bums right into Maggie's home. Into her street too, so Maggie didn't mind running errands during a game. She would walk past the row of houses that looked just like hers, all built of dull brownish-yellow brick, one window downstairs, two windows

up – to Pinky the butcher, or Mr. and Mrs. Floyd at the bakery, or the drugstore, and she wouldn't miss a single pitch. Everyone would have their radios on, the sound of the game trailing in and out of each doorway like a long thread that tied the whole neighborhood together.

The thread almost always led Maggie to the firehouse, her second home. When she and Joey-Mick were younger, they would stop by often to visit Dad. He would give them little jobs to do. And with all the guys there, it was like having a bunch of favorite uncles to joke around with anytime you wanted. They had spoiled her with piggyback rides and Hershey bars and George gave her a bite of his sandwich, so that over the years, Maggie had developed a ferocious love for horseradish.

He would hold out the sandwich; she would lean over and bite into it. Sometimes it was messy, like when her bite dislodged a whole slice of tomato and it sort of dangled from her mouth until she managed to wolf it down. One time she even pulled out all the ham, leaving behind two empty pieces of bread. George had pretended to be mad at her that time; she was only six then, and for a few moments she had been scared that he really was mad – until he laughed.

But best of all were the Dodgers games. Listening to the games and talking to the guys about baseball, it never mattered one bit that she was a girl who didn't play ball herself.

A few days after the Pirates game, Maggie headed for the firehouse again.

As she drew near, she cocked her head a little. She could hear the radio as usual, but Red Barber's voice was being drowned out by the sound of boos and jeering. What was going on? Had Philadelphia scored? That couldn't be, it was Brooklyn's turn to bat ...

Terry and Vince and George were up out of their chairs, booing and hissing and jostling a fourth man, someone she didn't know. "New guy?" Maggie murmured to Charky, who had loped out to meet her.

"Hey, Maggie-o!" George called out. "You're just in time – you're not gonna believe this –" He pointed in a big exaggerated motion at the new guy.

Maggie saw that the new guy was built like her dad. Maybe not big all over the way her dad was, but tall and not skinny – lots of muscles. A flat-top haircut. Dressed like the rest of them in blue. Younger than George, nice brown eyes.

Then Maggie saw what George was really pointing at: the radio at the new guy's feet. Not the firehouse's usual radio, which stood where it always did, at one side of the bay doors, but a smaller, newer one.

"What's he need another –?" Maggie started to ask, but the two radios themselves answered her. Red Barber's voice was all mixed up with someone else's – a different voice coming from the second radio.

Maggie stared at the radio for a moment, just to be sure. Then she looked at George because she couldn't quite bring herself to look at the new guy.

"That's right, Mags. A Giants fan!" George jeered.

"All right, all right," New Guy said. "I'll turn it down, see?" He turned a black knob on his radio. The words of Russ Hodges, the radio voice of the New York Giants, faded away, and Maggie could hear Red again, declaring Don Newcombe out on a slow roller to first.

Then the new guy lay down right there on the drive, on his back with his head next to his radio. He put his hands behind his head and grinned up at George. "I can hear just fine, but it won't mess up your game, see?"

George slapped one hand against the other in disgust. "That's not the point, Junior. There's never been a Giants fan in this house – this here is a Bums house."

"George –" Maggie hesitated, not wanting to contradict him. "My dad –"

"Yeah, yeah, your dad's a Yankees fan, but at least they're not in the National League," George said. "And besides, he's not at this house no more, so –"

He stopped and glanced at Maggie quickly, and she knew he was thinking about Dad's accident, maybe wondering if the reminder would bother her. She bobbed her head at him; it was okay because Dad was okay.

New Guy raised himself up on one elbow and looked at Maggie. "You Joe's kid?" he asked. "Teeny Joe?"

Maggie nodded, wondering. Dad's name was Joe Fortini. There were a lot of Joes around, so ages ago he'd gotten the nickname Teeny Joe, which was funny because he was a big guy with a big voice and a big mustache and nothing about him was teeny. Only his good friends called him Teeny Joe.

The new guy sat up and extended his hand. "Pleased to meet you, miss."

Maggie shook his hand. "Who are you?" Probably sounded rude, but curiosity won out over manners. "And how come you know my dad?"

"Got me the job, didn't he," he said. "Name's Jim Maine."

So that was it. Dad interviewed guys who wanted to be firemen. He talked about his work a lot; he was proud of picking out the ones who would stick, who would make it through the training and then do good on the job, and he called them his boys.

"Hello, Mr. Maine," she said politely.

Jim grinned up at her. "Jim'll do," he said. "And if you're Maggie-o, then it's true about your name."

Maggie knew what he was thinking; Dad must have told him. She blushed; it was odd to think that they had talked about her.

Her father had grown up in the Bronx, just a few blocks away from Yankee Stadium, a Yanks fan from the guts out.

When Maggie's brother was born, he was named Joseph Michael – Joseph for his dad, sure, but also for Joe DiMaggio.

Maggie had heard Dad tell the story a hundred times. "And when a girl come along two years later, I knew just what I was gonna call her," he would say whenever the subject came up. "Maggie-o! Don't matter that they're not exactly the same. Di-Maggio – Maggie-o, get it?"

But Maggie's mother had refused to let him put 'Maggie-o' on the birth certificate. It read 'Margaret Olivia.'

Maggie's great-grandmother in Ireland had been a Margaret, and Olivia de Havilland was Mom's favorite actress;

Gone with the Wind had come out just a year or two before Maggie was born, with Miss de Havilland playing that nice girl Melanie, and "if Scarlett had been more like Melanie there wouldn't have been nearly the trouble, so you're Margaret Olivia after your great-grandmother and Olivia de Havilland, never mind what your father says" – was how Mom always finished the story.

Now Jim put his hands back behind his head and chuckled. "Good ol' Teeny Joe," he said. "Your old man's really something, y'know? Even if you don't like the Yankees, you gotta give him credit. Naming both your kids after your favorite player – that's class."

Maggie tilted her head and half-shrugged, half-smiled. She was pretty sure she liked this new guy.

"So how's come you're not a Yankees fan like your dad?" Jim asked.

Maggie frowned – the idea that she could be a fan of any team other than the Dodgers! But it wasn't a dumb question. The Yankees and Giants fans in her neighborhood were, as Mom might say, as rare as peaches in winter, but they were usually whole families following the same team.

"Dunno," she said. "Guess it's 'cause I was born here. I mean, I knew my dad was a Yankees fan, but me and my brother, we always listened to the Dodgers games."

"Yeah, and you know what else?" George growled. "Teeny Joe never listened to the Yanks here. Nosirree, he knew we were a Dodgers house and we – we respected him for respectin' that. Not like some."

And George ran his hand over his head and turned away. Jim and Maggie grinned at each other behind his back.

"Gotta go," Maggie said.

"Be seeing you," Jim said.

And she heard the last out of the game while she was in Mr. Aldo's shop getting a box of sugar for Mom. 2-0, a close one, but the Dodgers won, and Maggie skipped home.