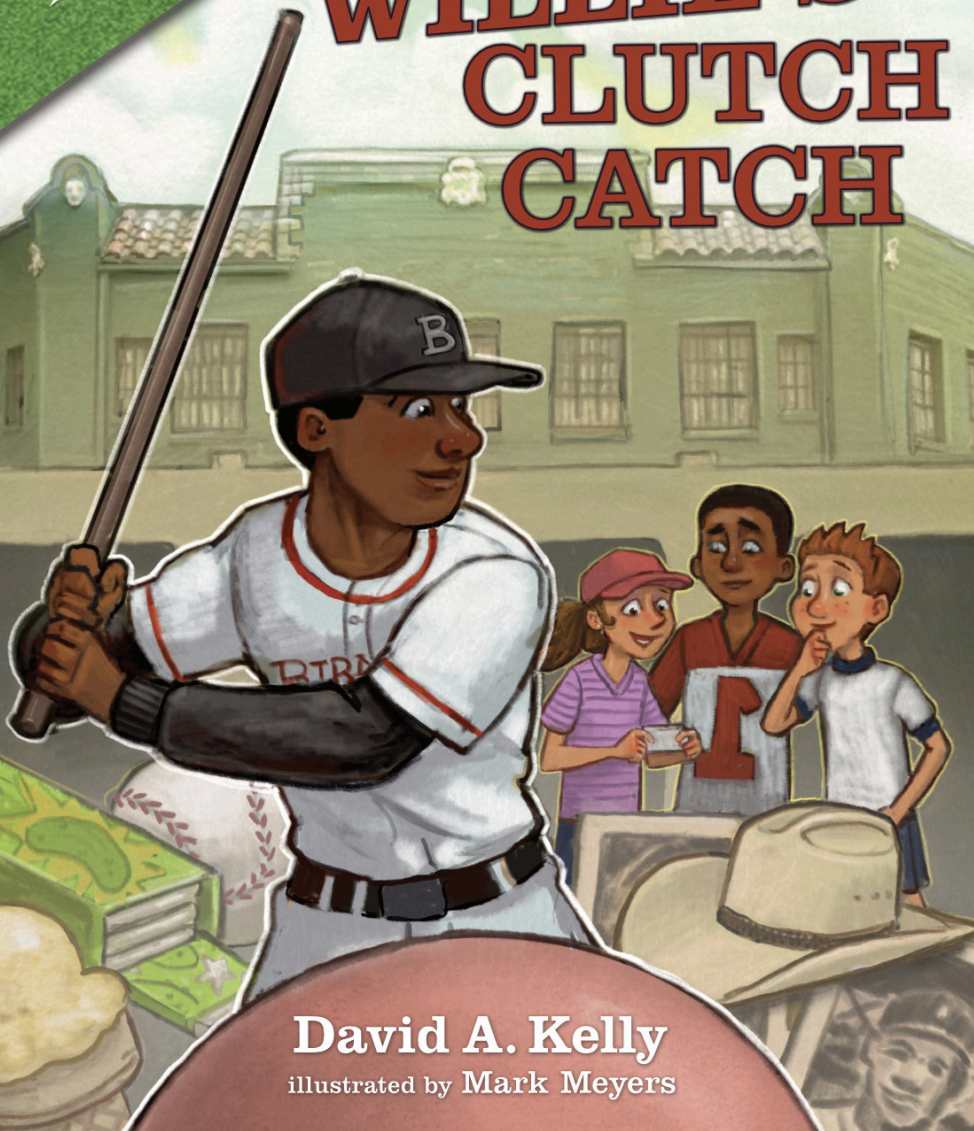


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Mysteries



WILLIE'S CLUTCH CATCH



David A. Kelly

illustrated by Mark Meyers

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WILLIE'S CLUTCH CATCH

by **David A. Kelly**

illustrated by **Mark Meyers**

Curveball Books  **Boston**

To the Say Hey Kid, with respect and awe for the joy and skill that Willie Mays brought to the game of baseball. May it inspire others to play the game of life the same way.

—David A. Kelly

“I like to play happy. Baseball is a fun game, and I love it.”

*—Willie Mays, Centerfielder, #24,
Birmingham Black Barons,
New York/San Francisco Giants,
and the New York Mets*

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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A Street Baseball MVP

“Hey, Andy, catch!” Mike Walsh said, tossing a baseball. His cousin, Kate Hopkins, reached up to snag the ball but missed it. While the ball arched over her head, their friend Andy scooted to his left a step. He cupped one hand palm up in front of his stomach as his eyes followed Mike’s baseball.

PLOP!

The ball dropped neatly into Andy’s up-turned hand.

“Whoa,” Mike exclaimed. “Nice basket catch! Willie Mays was famous for those, you know.”

“I know,” Andy said, throwing the ball back to Mike. “It’s hard to believe that Willie played his first year of professional baseball here in Birmingham, Alabama, at Rickwood Field.” Andy pointed to the minor-league baseball field in front of them. “Right down there. And he was only seventeen!”

Mike, Kate, and their friend Andy from Kansas City were standing on top of Rickwood’s flat grandstand roof, right behind home plate. As a special treat, they had been allowed to come up to the old viewing area on the roof to eat the hot dogs they had bought for dinner. They had earned those hot dogs by finding a valuable Satchel Paige baseball that had been stolen earlier that day!

The hot dogs were long gone, as were the baseball players who had previously been warming up on the field below them. Dusk had settled on the hand-painted advertisements on the wooden outfield wall. The colorful signs were fading to black with the oncoming night. In the stands below the grandstand roof, a few workers finished preparations for the next day's game.

The San Francisco Giants and St. Louis Cardinals would face off on the very field that baseball great Willie Mays had started on. The game was in celebration of Juneteenth. It was also honoring all the great Negro Leagues baseball players that had once played at Rickwood Field. In fact, 182 future Hall of Famers, both Black and white, had played games at Rickwood Field.

Kate held up a hand and scanned the

darkening field. “Hold on,” she whispered. “I thought I heard something funny.”

Mike and Andy froze. They glanced at Kate as they listened.

Nobody heard anything for a few seconds.

Then, a sharp crack split the night.

THWACK!

Mike, Kate, and Andy all looked at each other.

“That’s it!” Kate whispered. They continued listening.

The sound was followed by a muffled *POING*.

“What *was* that?” Andy asked. “It sure didn’t sound like any of the workers.”

“No, it didn’t.” Kate pointed to the lengthening shadows in right field. “It sounded like it came from over there. But I don’t see anything.”

“I know what it is,” Mike said, bubbling with excitement. He seemed unable to stand still. A wide grin crossed his face as he bounced up and down on his toes. “It’s space aliens! They’ve come to see tomorrow’s game and wanted to get good seats tonight.” Mike dropped his shoulders and let his arms dangle loosely at his sides.

“POING! POING! POING!” Mike shimmed around in a circle on the roof.

“Sorry, Mike, but the only space alien here is you,” Kate said.

Mike stopped. “I don’t know about that,” he said. “Something just made that funny noise, and I think it was a space alien. That reminds me—do you know how space aliens keep their pants up?”

Kate sighed and nodded at Andy.

“No, Mike,” Andy said. “How do space

aliens hold their pants up?”

Mike pointed to his waist. “With an asteroid belt!” he said. He was so pleased with his joke that he let out a little snort. “Get it? An asteroid belt? Like a belt made out of asteroids.”

Andy smiled. “Yes, Mike, we get it,” he said. “But I really don’t think a space alien with pants—or without—made that noise out there.”

Kate held her hand up again for silence. Everyone stood still for a moment. Then they heard it.

THWACK!

“There it is again!” she said.

POING!

“That’s not nothing,” Kate said. “It sounds like it’s coming from just outside the ballpark behind the right-field fence. We’ve got to investigate. Come on!”

Kate hurried for the exit from Rickwood's roof. The three friends rushed down the stairs to the seating area. Nearby, a light was on in the press area. They could see Kate's Mom, Mrs. Hopkins, still working on that day's story. Mrs. Hopkins was a sportswriter for *American Sports*. She had brought Mike and Kate along for the trip from their home in Cooperstown, New York. Andy had come from Kansas City with his superstar father, Josh Robinson, an All-Star catcher for the Kansas City Royals.

Kate zipped down to the main walkway. Milling around in the outfield was a large group of college-age kids taking videos and pictures of the ballpark. They each had special Rickwood Field backpacks with their social media usernames printed on them in red, white, and blue.

Mike paused for a moment and pointed to a college-age boy in a blue plaid shirt wearing a white cowboy hat. “Hey, I know that guy,” he said. “That’s Hootin’ Hank. He’s got like a million followers on SnapPop. I watch his crazy sports videos all the time.”

“Oh yeah, that’s him!” Andy called out while running past. “I saw him do one on extreme office chair racing. It was crazy. And



look, there's Jaxon Lee. He's called CurveBall-King on SnapPop. He did a really silly slow-motion baseball video on there once."

Mike glanced over at Jaxon. He had streaks of gold in his hair. Then Mike followed Kate and Andy down the first-base line. They veered under the stands and then through a side exit to the outside of the ballpark. Andy and Mike worked to keep up as Kate zipped around the ballpark's corner and then stopped.

In front of them, the back of Rickwood's outfield fence curved away to their left while a tall concrete wall about twenty feet to their right followed a similar curve. In between were a few cars and a lot of open space.

"Whoa!" Mike said. "Where are we? What's the deal with that concrete wall?"

THWACK!

“I don’t know,” Andy said. “But there’s the noise again!”

POING!

As the three ran forward, a figure emerged from the darkness. It was a man of medium height. He seemed to be dressed in an old-fashioned white-and-black Birmingham Black Barons baseball uniform. He held a long stick in his hand and was running for the wall. As he ran, his black baseball cap flew off his head.

Andy stopped. Mike and Kate skidded to a halt next to him, panting. “You’re never going to believe this,” Andy said. “But I know who that is. I’d know that move anywhere.”

“You do?” Mike said.

“Who?” Kate asked.

“It’s Willie Mays playing stickball!”