

DEAD BALL
A Novel of Murder and Passion

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Chapter 1

Forty games behind John McGraw's New York Giants with only a week left in the season. Humiliating.

Hal Gerecke shook his head. *Doesn't matter.*

Folks might write off the Cardinals, but he wasn't going to let them forget him. Rookie or not—playing for a next-to-dead ball club or not—he belonged in the Bigs, and he aimed to show it. Who knew? Maybe a team with a real shot at the pennant would offer him a contract for next year.

He waited atop the mound for the next batter. His team's opponents today, the hometown Boston Braves, were even worse off than the Cardinals—a jaw-dropping 50 games behind the league leaders and bound to finish the 1912 campaign dead last. As far as the standings went, this game was about as meaningless as they got.

Still doesn't matter.

Hal glanced up into the half-filled grandstand. Despite the pitiful performance of both clubs this year, faithful fans had come out to the ballpark. They paid good money to see baseball played by professionals. And professionals didn't quit. Professionals gave a good day's entertainment to the folks who buttered their bread. That's what Hal believed anyway.

Two and a half innings were in the books, and the game was scoreless. The Braves' number nine hitter was due up at the plate.

Late-September, late afternoon. The grandstand's shadows already covered more than half the infield at Boston's South End Grounds. Third base, home plate, and the pitcher's mound were in the shade, while first and second base and most of the outfield remained awash in early-autumn sunshine. The mixed aroma of popcorn and cigar smoke wafted from the bleachers.

Wearing his home-team whites with the red Indian chief patch on the sleeve, Boston second baseman Joe Doyle stepped into the batter's box. His uniform remained so tidy, he looked as if he'd just leapt off the cover of this week's *Sporting News* magazine.

Hal rotated the baseball in his hand. Nearly every player on both teams had already handled the thing, some halfheartedly picking at it with a thumbnail, others discreetly—and quite deliberately—nicking it on their belt buckles or even gouging it with their cleats. It happened every game.

Likewise, from early in the going, Cardinals and Braves players alike had contributed a douse or two of spit to the ball—flavored by either tobacco juice or licorice—and made sure it ended up in the dirt whenever possible before sending it along to the next ballplayer. Needless to say, even by the third inning, the ball's pristine color and condition were a thing of the past.

Hal turned it again. At least it still maintained its structural integrity. By the end of many a game, the ball was little more than a misshapen, mud-colored mess, erratic in its flight from the pitcher's hand to home plate. Some hurlers liked the ball that way. Hal didn't.

He eyed Doyle, who was a good bunter. Good speed, too. And since the Braves hadn't had much success swinging away today, Hal had a hunch the Boston second baseman just might try to bunt his way on.

A nice fastball, high and a little inside oughta fix that, he thought.

He began his windup.

Sure enough, Doyle squared around.

Hal let the pitch fly.

In the same instant, Doyle pulled the bat back.

A gratifying *pop* sounded – the kind a smoking-hot pitch makes on impact in the hollow of a catcher's leather mitt.

"Strike!" the umpire called.

The mind game between pitcher and batter was on once again, and Hal loved it.

He worked fast on the mound. Not a lot of scratching and adjusting and staring long and hard at his catcher. The instant Oris Grant flashed him the sign for the next pitch, Hal was into his windup. His second pitch to Doyle was another fastball. He threw this one even harder, but to the outside edge of the plate.

The pitch felt good coming out of his hand, and the ball behaved just as Hal had hoped. Nonetheless, Doyle managed to get the end of his bat around on it.

The ball came off the wood like a bullet – straight at Hal's first baseman, Swede Sorenson.

Swede snapped up his glove a split-second before the rocketing liner would have otherwise taken his cap off. His catch made an out, but when he tossed the ball back to Hal, the rangy first baseman gave a shake of the head as if to say, *Too dang close.*

Pausing a moment to give Swede a chance to gather himself, Hal took in the crowd's animated response to the bang-bang play. This is what people come out to see – moments that take your breath away. One second you think a man has hit safely, the next second you see he's been robbed. One minute a player is crouched, anticipating a hit that might come his way, the next he's taking deep breaths to steady himself because he's just come an inch from getting himself a hardball haircut.

You can never be sure what'll come next in baseball.

Hal stepped back to the crown of the pitcher's mound.

Up for Boston now was Rube Wannamaker, the Braves' popular shortstop. Dark-haired and dark-featured, Rube was a good-natured character. Probably didn't have an enemy in the world. His teammates loved him, fans loved him, the newspapers loved him. Dry sense of humor, and an easy smile.

And if Joe Doyle was the star pupil of bunting, Wannamaker was the schoolmaster. Despite the Braves' lowly record this season, Wannamaker—laying down bunts this way and that—had made many an infielder look like a rank amateur.

Hal had met him. Found him to be everything folks said he was. But he didn't like pitching against him. Not simply because the gregarious shortstop very rarely struck out. Not because he was among the very best at finding a way to get on base. He didn't like it because Wannamaker crowded the plate like nobody else in the league.

You had to give it to him—the compact ballplayer was nimble. If you pitched him inside, he would dance back or even drop to the ground to get out of the way. Sometimes, his theatrics persuaded the umpire to call a strike a ball. That could sure enough get a pitcher's goat.

Other times, Wannamaker would pull back only enough to convince the umpire he was trying to get out of the way, when all the while he fully intended to take the pitch on the shoulder or in the back—just one more way to make it to first.

And if a hurler decided he wasn't going to play that game with him, if the pitcher decided he'd keep the ball toward the outside of the plate, why, he was playing right into Rube's hands. Although Wannamaker rarely hit anything more than singles—boy, howdy—he could chop, poke, or slap an outside pitch nine different ways to put it in play.

Yes, sir, pitching to Rube Wannamaker is a real test of a hurler's control.

Hal's catcher scooped inside just a smidgeon, made a target of his mitt, and signaled for a fastball.

Hal didn't like the target—too high for his tastes. With no Braves on base, he decided to pitch Wannamaker low and inside instead of high and inside, where Grant was holding his mitt.

The pitch was true, and Wannamaker danced back a hair but didn't swing.

"Ball," the umpire intoned, which was all right with Hal, because that's what it was.

As far as Hal could tell, Grant was equally unperturbed. The catcher tossed the ball back to him, resumed his squat, and issued a new signal.

An early-autumn breeze blustered in from center field.

Wannamaker looked as calm in the batter's box as if he'd been born and raised there.

A nod to Grant, then Hal went into his windup again. He came around a little more side-armed this time and let the ball fly. Thrown this way, his fastball tended to drop and tail away from right-handed batters.

Maybe it was the gusting wind. Maybe it was a scuff or nick in the ball's horsehide cover. Maybe Hal unwittingly put a little more zip on the pitch than he'd intended to. Whatever the reason, the fastball neither dropped nor tailed away as it should've.

And Rube Wannamaker didn't budge.

The sound was almost identical to the familiar sweet crack of a wooden bat kissing an incoming pitch.

The ball bounded sharply back onto the infield grass.

But Rube didn't start for first. As if in a motion picture run too slow, the shortstop sank to his knees, his bat falling from his hands.

Hal's catcher lunged forward to cradle the toppling Braves batter in his arms.

Heart pounding, breath catching in his chest, Hal raced toward home plate. Before he could get there, the umpire was already calling out for a doctor.

Wannamaker, eyes open, head lolling to the side, was bleeding profusely from his scalp and left ear.

Chapter 2

By the time they got Rube into Boston Braves owner W.B. Gillespie's motorcar, the shortstop had been unconscious and unresponsive a quarter-hour or more. Nobody – Hal included – had any idea whether Wannamaker would reach the nearby Boston City Hospital alive, let alone make a full recovery.

So much blood.

"It was as though he never saw the pitch coming," the black-suited umpire said to Braves manager Earl Cooper. "He just stood there, held his stance – never budged."

Cooper eyed Hal.

"I'm – I'm sorry. I really am." Hal heard himself, and his words seemed contemptibly inadequate.

"The pitch was a strike," the umpire added. "Clearly over the plate. From where I stood, it didn't look like Gerecke was throwing at him."

Hal wanted to affirm what the official had just said – that he hadn't thrown *at* Wannamaker – but he was sure anything he might say would simply fall flat.

After a pause, the Braves manager clutched Hal's shoulder. Deathly solemn, but showing no hint of suspicion or indignation, it seemed as though Cooper wanted to say something, too. In the end, however, he simply turned and trooped back to the home-team dugout.

Whitey LaSalle, Hal's own manager, approached the umpire. "What now?" he asked.

The umpire, thick-jowled without his protective mask on, peered at the evening sky and then out over the playing field. "You've still got a good crowd in the bleachers. Up in the grandstand, too," he said. "If you and Earl are amenable to the idea, I think we can get the rest of the game in before dark."

Before LaSalle could answer, Hal said, "I'm not pitching."

The manager glowered. "Wha'd'you mean you're not pitching? You blow out your arm or something? Is that why you lost control?"

The knot in Hal's belly tightened. "I didn't lose control."

"Then what's the problem?"

"What's the problem? Rube Wannamaker's blood is all over the plate." Hal motioned toward the grim mess at home base. "How can you ask, 'What's the problem?' I'm taking myself out of the game."

"Look, you come outta the game when I take you outta the game. This team pays you to pitch."

Hal shook his head.

“What?”

“You do what you’ve got to,” Hal said. “I’m gonna change clothes and go down to the hospital.”

Hands on his hips and face reddening, LaSalle closed to within a foot of Hal. “You can go wherever you like once this game is over. Meanwhile, you’re gonna pitch, and you’re gonna pitch your heart out, because I’m not gonna stand by and watch this team sink even one stinking game closer to the piss-poor last-place Boston Braves. No, sir. And if you decide different, then you’re finished for good, you hear me?”

A stew of emotions had already been boiling in Hal’s chest. His manager’s indifference to what had just happened was about to blow the lid off the pot.

“A greenhorn like you gets booted from a team,” LaSalle went on, “and you’re done in the Big Leagues. Done! Is that what you want?”

The umpire’s chin dipped. “Give the kid a break, Whitey.”

LaSalle jabbed his finger at the umpire’s chest. “You keep outta this, Bill.”

Lips pursed, the umpire shook his head, turned, and walked away.

Oris Grant remained, looking on sheepishly. Rube’s blood was still wet on the forearm of the catcher’s long-sleeved undershirt, as well as on the thigh of his uniform trousers.

Hal again met his manager’s fierce gaze. “Like I said, you do what you’ve got to. I’m going down to the hospital to find out how bad off Rube is.”

“In that case, you can leave your uniform in the clubhouse and pick up your stuff from the hotel. You’re no longer part of this ball club, you snot-nosed weak-kneed quitter.”

The smell of rubbing alcohol or maybe some sort of antiseptic permeated the air in the hospital waiting room—a scent that belonged to the world of the disease-riddled, the maimed, and the dying, an odor that reinforced in Hal’s mind the gravity of Rube Wannamaker’s condition.

By the time Hal had arrived, the hospital staff already had the poor guy in surgery. That was three hours ago—three seemingly endless hours ago.

Seated in the opposite corner of the sparsely decorated room, absently turning his Homburg hat in his hands, Mr. Gillespie talked in low tones with some associate to whom Hal hadn’t been introduced. Gillespie, who must have been approaching sixty, was perfectly

barbered—not a silvering hair out of place. His shoes shone with a high gloss, and his navy pinstriped trousers held a sharp crease.

Mrs. Gillespie, meanwhile—matronly in dress and behavior—sat holding the hands of Rube Wannamaker’s tearful young wife, Alene.

Upon her arrival at the hospital, shortly after he himself had gotten there, Hal had made sincere apologies to the understandably distraught young woman. He’d promised to do anything in his power to help, and she’d answered as graciously as anyone might. Even if Mrs. Gillespie was better suited to offer her the comfort she needed just now, he meant what he said and he remained at her disposal.

Presently, no one was paying him any direct attention. That was all right. He sat quietly, a few chairs away from the others, waiting as they were for news from the surgeons.

As he waited, he found himself thinking about Rube and Alene as a couple. They’d been married only seven months, he’d overheard. He wondered whether they still considered themselves honeymooners and whether Rube doted on his bride. The dress she wore this evening, for instance—beige with subtle blue trim, very flattering—had Rube bought it for her, wanting all the world to agree that his sweetheart was the belle of the ballpark? Hal hoped the shortstop would be around a good long time—happy, fit, and able to shower his lovely bride with many an unexpected gift like that.

The longer the surgeons took, however, the dimmer his hopes grew for a cheerful outcome.

He’d just noticed through the open drapes how dark it had gotten outside when an exchange at the door drew the attention of everyone in the room. A middle-aged nurse had come in and was attempting to get the door closed behind her without letting a cluster of business-suited men press their way from the corridor into the waiting room along with her.

“Gentlemen, I *will* ask.” The nurse’s tone was firm. “But you *must* respect the fact that this is a hospital, and not a ballpark or a neighborhood bar.”

A thick fellow in a brown suit insisted, “The public deserves to know how Wannamaker’s doing.”

“And they *will* be informed as soon as—”

“Say, is that Gerecke in there?” A long-faced fellow wearing a bowler pointed at Hal through the half-open door.

“Yeah, that’s him,” the thick one said. “Hal, come give us a word, will ya?”

“Gentlemen!” the nurse scolded.

Sportswriters. The last thing Hal wanted was to talk to them. Same for the garden-variety newshounds who might be out there with them. Besides asking how Rube was doing—which, of course, he didn’t know—they’d be asking whether or not he threw at the popular shortstop on

purpose. Regardless of his answer, some of them would tell the story however they wanted it to go.

Much as he wanted to hop up and run the other way, he instead pushed himself to his feet, made himself cross the room to where the nurse was, and helped her coerce the reporters back out into the hallway. There were five newsmen in all.

"This is no time to bother Mrs. Wannamaker," Hal said. "They don't know anything yet anyway."

"Why'd you take yourself out of the ballgame even after Whitey LaSalle told you your job was on the line?" asked a reporter with a prominent mole just below the corner of his mouth.

Hal swallowed. "How do you know what went on between me and Whitey?"

"I asked him."

"When?"

"As soon as the game was over." The reporter's gaze shot from Hal to the nurse and back. "Course I asked about Rube first." He cleared his throat. "So, why'd you do it?"

Before Hal could answer, the thick reporter in the brown suit asked, "Did you throw at Wannamaker on purpose?"

There it was.

"Show some respect, gentlemen," the nurse demanded. "You *must* keep your voices down."

In a stage whisper, the reporter in brown repeated the question about whether Hal had intentionally thrown at Wannamaker.

"Or did you lose control of the ball?" The question came from a balding reporter with wire spectacles.

Hal showed his palms. "I didn't lose control, and I didn't throw *at* Rube Wannamaker."

"Are you sure? Or are you just trying to establish *your* side of the story?"

The insinuation hit Hal hard. He bit his tongue.

"Pitchers that throw as hard as you, especially young ones, they're often wild," the long-faced newsmen wearing the bowler said.

"That's right," Brown Suit agreed. "Mathewson was wild early on—hit a lot batters."

"Walter Johnson, too," the balding reporter said.

Shaking his head, Hal answered, "Listen, I'm not saying I'm better than Mathewson or Johnson. But I had good control today."

"Then you threw at him on purpose," Brown Suit insisted.

"No, I didn't."

"Well, what happened, then?"

"The umpire himself said the pitch was a strike. He said it was as if Wannamaker never saw the ball coming."

"Is that the way *you* saw it?" The balding newsman pointed his fountain pen at Hal.

Hal made sure to choose his words carefully. "You all know a baseball gets pretty dirty during the course of a game. Well, by the third inning, today's ball was already filthier than most ever get. And the shadows out there on the diamond were pretty deep."

"You saying he lost the ball in the shadows?" Long Face asked.

"You asked me—"

"You batted in the third, didn't you? Did *you* have trouble seeing the ball?"

"I did bat in the third. And I know what I saw. I can't tell you what Rube Wannamaker did or didn't see, though."

"So, you don't take any responsibility for what happened to him?" Again, this sounded like an accusation, not a question.

Hal drew a steadying breath. "The honest truth is this—I pray that Rube Wannamaker comes out of this scare with nothing worse than a bad headache. Whether that's the case, or it's something worse . . ." His voice faltered, but he forced himself to go on. "That pitch will haunt me if I live to be a hundred."

The reporter with the mole by his mouth said, "Do you think Whitey LaSalle firing you was an overreaction? You think he'll change his mind and take you back?"

Hal stared at the man's starched white collar and perfectly knotted necktie. Expensive. Out of a job, he wouldn't be buying anything like that for a while. But what did money matter if Rube Wannamaker didn't come through all right, if he ruined Rube's baseball career, if he ruined life in general for Rube and his young bride?

He shook his head. "I can't answer that. I don't know."

The rising sound of many footsteps drew Hal and the reporters' attention to the far end of the hall. From the stairwell emerged a lengthy file of young men wearing suit jackets and ties, boaters, bowlers, and flat caps. Hal recognized a number of the faces. It looked as though the full Boston Braves roster had shown up, led by their manager, Earl Cooper.

As they drew nearer, Cooper's expression remained solemn . . . and, thankfully, still devoid of bitterness. Meanwhile, the postures and expressions of the various players reflected a range of sentiments from apprehension to smoldering outrage. When their gazes landed on Hal, more than one curled a lip in apparent anger or disgust.

Square-jawed third baseman, Sam Laughlin, stepped in close to Hal, Chick Olsen and Bill Hires flanking him. Shoulders back, the three glared menacingly.

"You've got nerve being here," Laughlin muttered.

Hal met the third baseman's gaze but was sure nothing he could say would cool the incensed infielder's animosity.

Mercifully, Earl Cooper wedged himself between Hal and Laughlin and backed his players away a few steps.

The newspaperman with the mole near his mouth followed the Braves manager, "Do you have any comment for us, Earl?"

Cooper shook his head. "Obviously, I'm just getting here. The boys are concerned about their teammate. We're all concerned." He shot a glance at Hal. "And I'm confident young Mr. Gerecke here is just as concerned as any of us."

Laughlin scoffed. "He *better* be."

Pointing at his third baseman, Cooper said, "I'm telling you boys to cool off. And I mean it."

Laughlin, Olsen, Hires, and a few others kept their mouths shut but continued to cast harsh glares at Hal.

For a long second, no one said anything. Not even the newsmen.

Then Hal heard the waiting room door right behind him open. When he looked back, a nurse—a younger one he hadn't seen before—was standing in the narrow opening, surveying the gathered crowd. Her eyes widened.

"I . . . didn't expect so many of you." Her gaze met Hal's and lingered a moment.

"Any update on the patient?" Cooper asked her.

She nodded. "He's just been wheeled into the recovery room. I—"

The door opened farther, and Mr. Gillespie appeared at the nurse's shoulder. "Please allow me, Nurse McGuire."

She hesitated. "Of course."

Gillespie kept his voice low and even. "I know all of you are interested in finding out how Rube is doing. And you will find out—all of you. But first, I'd like to speak with Mr. Cooper and Mr. Gerecke."

"Why Gerecke?" Laughlin raised his jaw.

Gillespie met and held Laughlin's glower. "The rest of you wait here."