

1

SEVENTEEN YEARS OF EXISTENCE HAVE TAUGHT me many lessons—some relevant to survival, others not so much—but one that I have come to fully understand is that there are three kinds of idiocy.

The first is what I call Mundane Idiocy. This is the type of idiocy that happens when you, say, walk into a dark room thinking you can manage without the lights, and then you stub your toe on a table. It happens to the best of us.

The second kind is Voluntary Idiocy. Sticking your tongue to a frozen pole or prodding a beehive with a stick or eating fourteen brownies in one sitting would fall under this category. Discretion is advised.

And finally, the last level of idiocy has been achieved by only one person, and his name is Cody Kinski.

Here I am, in the bleachers of my high school baseball field on a brisk May night—crickets chirping in the darkness beyond the bright stadium lights, the smell of french fries hitching a ride on the gentle breeze. I'm on the tips of my toes, waiting in anticipation like all my fellow game goers. Usually the excitement at high school baseball games never gets higher than the occasional collective gasp after a great hit followed by an anticlimactic defensive play, but our team is far from what you'd call usual. And this particular game is miles from being typical.

It's the bottom of the seventh. The last inning. There are two outs and two strikes. Kyle's on first. Cody's at bat. We're down five to four, and even though our chances of turning it around are borderline zero, everyone seems to have an ounce of belief left in them.

The pitcher's given name is Santino Acardi, but in our neck of the woods, he is commonly known as Douche Face.

There are only two things you need to know about this olive-skinned, curly-haired, smarmy bastard: (1) no one on this planet knows how to wear a condescending, self-righteous smirk like he does, and (2) every time he and Cody get within two hundred feet of each other, the apocalypse seems imminent. I mean, they're two of the best

pitchers in our entire region. They have both been playing on varsity since freshman year, on teams with a notorious rivalry. It's the kind of clash that's going to put an end to the world as we know it.

Basically every time Cody has been up at bat during this game, Santino has thrown at least one brushback pitch past Cody's face. It is only thanks to Cody's lightning-fast reflexes that he hasn't been knocked unconscious. Santino has been pulling this stunt since freshman year. He suffers from an oversize ego. Jock stuff—you know the deal.

Standing behind home plate, bat raised over his shoulder, eyes focused on Santino, Cody looks beyond prepared. He's ready for anything. And he should be, considering Santino's brushbacks are consistent. Parents, classmates, and residents from around the neighborhood cheer for Cody all across the home-team bleachers. Iron-Arm Kinski, they call him. He was first dubbed that when he was eight by his Little League coach. His killer fastball got him that name, but Cody is one hell of a hitter too. He's not a god, but sometimes he doesn't seem to be entirely human.

On the mound, Santino winds up his pitch. Every part of his body, from his long legs to his muscular arms, displays his power.

Then it comes. The ball sails out of Santino's hand at Major League speed.

Right toward Cody's head.

But he must not be as prepared as he seemed.

Does he move out of the way?

No.

He stands there like a moron, like there's *not* some sadist on the mound. It's only at the very last second that his left arm flies up to shield his head.

The ball smashes into Cody's left forearm. His bat clatters to the ground, and it's like everyone from here to the moon and beyond gasps. Cody clutches his arm to his chest as his face twists in pain. It's a look I recognize to mean *I've broken a bone, and I'm in some real fucking pain.*

Fire from the pits of hell radiate from the glare Cody shoots Santino, and if I were Santino, I'd want to jump on the next flight out of the country. All of Cody's fury and hatred—three years in the making—engulfs his face, his whole body. Cody has never been the kind of guy to be provoked by cheap shots, which I've learned in the eleven years I've known him, but right now, not even I can predict his next move.

But even though he might want to react, Cody doesn't get the opportunity. Jack Chizz, our coach, runs out to home plate as the ump calls, "Time!"

Joey, our guy on deck and Cody's best friend, follows Chizz. The three of them—Chizz, the ump, and

Joey—gather around Cody, blocking my view of what’s happening.

Santino’s cronies in the outfield crowd together too, but unlike those huddled around home plate, they seem unconcerned about what their overlord Santino has done. And Santino, for all the emotion he’s showing, might as well be standing in line at a grocery store. I’m surprised he isn’t shooting off fireworks and confetti of triumph over his good aim.

The buzzing energy is gone, and it’s replaced by silent anticipation.

And then:

“WOOOO! WAY TO GO, CODY!”

This is Sara, who’s standing next to me. To everyone else, it probably sounds like a cheer of encouragement. But Sara is no overzealous cheerleader.

She’s teasing him.

“You’re an asshole,” I tell her, trying to keep a straight face.

Under the florescent lights, her normally tawny skin seems lighter. Her grin widens as she claps loudly. “Bringin’ ’em to state!”

“Oh my gosh,” I mutter, but I can’t help but laugh a little. Sara, like me, has more than a decade of history with Cody, which entitles her to be a complete asshole to him in this very serious and stressful moment.

Cody, who has gotten some breathing room, takes off his batting helmet to reveal his disheveled dark brown hair. He then takes a moment out of the time-out to nonchalantly scratch his forehead with his middle finger in our direction. Those eleven years of friendship work in Cody's favor too—he gets a pass on being nice.

Cody drops his hand and listens intently to what Chizz is saying. At first, they both seem rather calm, given what's happened, but then Chizz says something else, and Cody goes ballistic. His eyes bulge in rage, and his uninjured arm flies in all directions. Cody points to first base. Chizz points a commanding finger toward the dugout.

“Don't be an idiot, Cody,” I mutter. “Go to the hospital.”

As if he can hear me, Cody kicks his bat to the side and stalks toward first. Chizz objects, but Cody shrugs him off. The interaction looks dramatic from here, which is so unlike Cody. He has always been a quiet, modest guy, but being on the field changes him. Out there, he's the confident jock everyone expects him to be.

Everyone cheers as Cody takes his base.

I wonder if they can see him wince in pain with every step. *Proud, stubborn bastard.*

As the game resumes, so does the crowd's excitement. They're pumped by Cody's perseverance (or, as I would call it, idiocy).

The count: two outs, zero strikes, with Kyle on second, Cody on first, and Joey at bat.

Tufts of Joey's blond hair stick out from under his batting helmet as he steps up to the plate and takes a few practice swings. This is a guy who walks into closed glass doors, trips on perfectly tied shoelaces, and is the most unpunctual person I have ever had the displeasure of knowing, but I swear he has magic powers when he's on the field. He will move mountains to catch a foul ball and has been known to belt homers at the exact moment they're needed. You'd never know it though, because he can be a real baby sometimes. A few months ago, he was reduced to an inconsolable teary mess after he found out his ex-girlfriend is a lesbian. No one would have guessed at the time that the crying weenie he was then is our best hope for bringing in a miraculous run to tie up the game now.

On the mound, Santino winds up again. One of his trademarks is his sidearm pitching style. That's why he's one of the best, he's unique. I feel like a traitor, but I must admit that I admire his skill.

He throws the first pitch against Joey: foul tip. Strike one.

Second pitch: the ball and bat connect, and the crowd gasps. It's a foul over the first baseline. There's a collective sigh. Strike two.

The count: two outs, two strikes, five to four. Last

chance for a run.

On the third pitch, Joey smacks the ball with an echoing *clink!* and he runs. Screams of excitement follow him.

The ball soars toward the fence. It looks like it will be a home run between left and center field. Unfortunately, that's the kind of luck you can only dream about.

The ball hits the back fence and bounces onto the grass where two fielders race to snatch it up.

Kyle's past third, on his way to home, and Cody's passing second.

The ball is sailing to the shortstop.

Kyle's foot lands on home plate. It's now five to five.

Cody's foot hits third.

From the dugout, Chizz shouts at Cody to stop where he is.

The ball is at the shortstop.

And Cody's going home.

"Idiot!" Sara and I both shout.

But it's no use. The ball and Cody race toward home.

The throw to the catcher is off by a foot. He steps away. Cody dives, headfirst, arms outstretched.

He collides with home plate and becomes buried under a plume of sand and the catcher.

"Safe!" the ump shouts. "Safe!"

The shouting and cheering intensify as our team hops

OUT OF LEFT FIELD

over the dugout wall and dog piles Joey, who brought in the runs. Santino and his team look like they're about to commit fifteen different types of manslaughter.

And there, still on the ground in the fetal position clutching his arm, ladies and gentlemen, is the third and final category of idiocy: Cody Kinski.

2

I HAVEN'T BEEN IN THE CORRINGTON FIELD dugouts since freshman year, back when I was on the softball team. It feels familiar, walking across the infield, past the pitcher's mound, the sand dusting my shoes. But it also feels unfamiliar, like it might have been a dream. Normally, unauthorized personnel are not allowed on the field or in the dugouts, but seeing as everyone is too busy freaking out about the team's win, no one notices us. And even if someone *did*, Sara and I would still march across the infield to see our injured, moronic friend.

On our way to the dugout, we catch snippets of conversations:

"I can't *believe* Cody got injured!"

"Who's going to pitch at sectionals now?"

“Santino will be watching his back for the rest of his life.”

“Did you see Cody flip off Sara Fox after he got hit?”

“Does Cody have a girlfriend?”

“He’s *so* hot.”

“Now we’ll never make it to state, let alone the semifinals.”

The same thoughts churn in my mind too. Well, the ones pertaining to baseball, not Cody’s relationship status. It was pretty much guaranteed that our team has a spot in the state finals. We’ve got one of the best high school coaches in the nation, a killer pitcher, some of the biggest hitters in the region, and four guys who were on the team three years ago when they won the state title.

At least going to state *was* guaranteed until about ten minutes ago when Cody got nailed in the arm.

I mean, sure, we’ve got relief pitchers, but none who can even begin to match Cody’s talent. This means that sectionals, which used to be an easy step to the top, is now as much as a mountain to climb as the semifinals and the state game.

In our team’s dugout, the guys are huddled in a tight bunch shouting over one another. Chizz is nowhere to be found. Neither is Cody. I’m so focused on finding out how Cody is that I don’t even see the Willow Heights team approaching until they cut right in front of me and Sara on their way to the buses.

Sara pulls my arm so I don’t walk right into their

cross-traffic. They death march past us, so close we can smell their sweat. In the presence of their tall, looming figures, I forget all about Cody. Instead, the scathing voice in my head says, *Screw you and you and you and you*, and I zero in on Santino and think, *Especially you, asshole*. But I keep my mouth shut because I know eighteen guys against me and Sara are not good odds.

But then this one really short guy looks over at us—or, more precisely, at Sara—and then he looks down to Sara's tank top and then down her long, tan legs, and then at her oblivious face.

I'm no stranger to assholes checking out Sara. Her Filipino and Hispanic parents gave her a melting-pot look that is difficult to walk past without noticing. She attracts guys and girls (and conveniently for her, she is attracted *to* guys and girls). Even the dogs at her mom's shelter seem to like her more than they like other people.

I give the perv the evil eye, but he doesn't notice. He nudges his friend, glances back at Sara, and then makes an extremely vulgar gesture involving his finger going through a hole he's made with his other hand.

When I was younger, I used to pick fights all the time. I'd find all sorts of reasons to have a go at someone. It's still a struggle to restrain myself, even though I'm supposedly more mature. But there's no way in hell this guy is taking

another step. Not without hearing a word from me first.

I catch his name on the back of his jacket and call, “Hey, Jonings!”

He and a couple of friends slow their walks, trying to figure out who’s calling.

“What’s it like to be the same height as your bat?” I say. “Go back to the Shire!”

Sara snaps her head toward me, her eyes wide in confusion and amusement. “Nice,” she says, “but kind of uncalled for?”

“Trust me. It wasn’t,” I say as Jonings marches over.

It’s only when my gaze meets Jonings’s that I realize I’ve probably made a very big mistake. *Good job, Marnie. Why the hell do you always have to open your big mouth?*

I can’t let him think he can scare me with those clenched fists and demonic eyes.

“What did you say?” he questions, two of his teammates flanking him. Up close, the top of his head hardly reaches my chin, which makes him slightly less intimidating.

“What?” I say. “Did Bilbo Baggins forget to teach you how to not be a dick wad?”

I mentally pat myself on the back. My arsenal of insults never ceases to amaze me.

But in a matter of seconds, I go from congratulating myself to anticipating a punch in the gut. I’m about to pull

Sara in front of me, because she's the one with the black belt in karate, when, seemingly out of nowhere, Santino Acardi yanks Jonings away from behind.

"Leave it, Alan," he says. He glares at me, dragging Jonings to where the rest of their team is loading onto the buses.

Sara and I stare silently after them. She's probably wondering what the hell is wrong with me, and I'm wondering the same thing.

"What the hell was that?"

Sara and I both turn, and I bump into Cody.

"A Lord of the Rings insult?" he says to me. "Really?"

I take in his tousled brown hair, his sand-covered red-and-black uniform, and the careful way he carries his very swollen left wrist. It's the semigrin on his face that throws me off. Here he is, nailed with a ninety-mile-per-hour pitch, and he sounds like it's any other day.

Then Joey appears, jumping Sara from behind, making her shout and punch him in the chest.

"So you picking fights again?" Joey asks me as he picks a fight with Sara, putting her in a loose headlock. She shoves him off, and Joey shakes his head at me. "It's like you're *looking* for an ass whooping."

"I could've handled it," I say.

"You know he only left you alone because he saw me

and Joey coming,” Cody adds, knowing as much as I do that I could not have handled it. “Who’d be scared by this scrawny thing anyway?” he says, flipping my long auburn hair in my face.

I push his hand away, about to remind him that his six-foot frame only has three inches on mine, but then I realize that he’s still *here* and not where he should be, which is at a hospital. “Don’t you have an injury to take care of or something?” I ask him.

In response, Cody glances back to the dugout, where Chizz and Mr. Kinski are in deep conversation, most likely about what to do with Cody. Since last summer, Cody’s been on track to play ball in college. He went to a bunch of baseball camps and has spent a lot of time working with professional pitching coaches. This postseason was supposed to prove his worth to the scouts. His dad and Chizz have been working relentlessly to get him scholarships and attract the eyes of college coaches. And now? Well, there won’t be much to see of Cody, except him sitting on the bench.

“Hey, Marnie,” Sara says. “Maybe you should take Cody’s place. Chizz would love that.” She says this with a straight face, but she must be joking. No way in hell Chizz—not to mention the guys—would let me on the team.

Case in point: “Hell, no,” Joey says. “Over my dead body.”

“Gladly,” Sara says, grinning. She starts fake-boxing

him, and he fake-boxes back. Cody and I exchange the same look we always do when Sara and Joey, well, do this. We don't call it flirting because that ship sunk sometime last year. No one knows what actually happened between them, but we do know this: (1) We don't talk about it. (2) They didn't speak to—or even look at—each other for almost six months after it happened. (3) Even now, sometimes it gets weird between them, and we don't know why, so basically... (4) Hooking up with someone you've known for eleven years is a Bad Idea™.

Sara stops play-punching Joey in the gut and points over my shoulder. "Here he comes. Let's ask him."

Before any of us can object, Sara calls, "Hey, Chizz!" She waves him over to us.

Chizz and Mr. Kinski approach, both looking tired and defeated, despite the regional game win. Mr. Kinski looks like Cody—tall with messy, dark hair and pin-straight posture—only he has a goatee. He and I are on pretty good terms, considering all the trouble I've gotten Cody into. It's Chizz that I've got to look out for. He has some sort of vendetta against me, and I've got no idea why. I've had him as my gym teacher two years in a row, and I have been nothing but a model student. I always get the fastest mile times, always participate, always help put the equipment away when everyone else rushes to the locker rooms...

Okay, so *maybe* I clobbered Joey in the head with a tennis racket once. I swear it was an accident. And *maybe* I can be *slightly* aggressive and mouth off at times. But I really am an ideal student.

“So, Chizz,” Sara says. “What do you think about letting Marnie on the mound for postseason, eh?”

“I think it’s time for you to go home,” Chizz says with a sigh, clearly in no mood for dealing with the four of us.

I play along with Sara. “Aw, come on, Chizz. We all know I’m a better pitcher than Cody.”

“Ha!” Joey shouts. “You wish. You’ve got nothing on my boy.”

“Well, since *your boy* is now an invalid, who’s gonna pitch for you at the sandlot tomorrow?” I taunt. “Right. Me. So *shh*.”

Chizz shakes his head and starts walking away. Normally, he’d at least *try* and be an authoritative figure when we start acting like twelve-year-olds, but I guess the burden of losing his star pitcher is too much for him.

“Come on, Cody,” Mr. Kinski says, offering to take his duffel bag. “We have to get you to the hospital.”

It’s only then that Cody’s carefree demeanor falters. His body stiffens, and the amused grin on his face—put there by Sara, Joey, and me bickering—falls as the crinkles around his eyes disappear. That’s how it is with Cody.

He's the quiet one. You can't wait for him to say what he's thinking or feeling. You have to watch his face or the way he walks or stands or looks at his surroundings. It took me almost ten years to figure out how to read him, but I've got it down now.

In the next moment, his look of dread is replaced by a crooked grin. Before following his dad to the car, he says to me, "I suppose telling you not to pick fights won't do any good, so try not to get your ass kicked while I'm not here to defend you."

I know he's joking around to cover his disappointment over his injury, and because it's easier to play along than to be serious, I go, "I told you. I could've handled it."

"Whatever you say." He flips my hair in my face again, even though he knows I hate it when he does that.

I slap his hand away. "Hey, when you're at the hospital, tell the doctor to surgically remove the ass hat on your head."

"I appreciate your concern," he says with a grin, taking a few steps back.

I blow him a kiss as he starts following his dad to their car. To anyone else, it might seem endearing, perhaps even romantic, but Cody has known me a long time and understands that any kiss I blow his way is only out of irony. He returns my kiss with his middle finger. So it goes in our relationship.

When I turn around, I find Sara and Joey staring at me, eyebrows raised, condescending smirks on their faces.

“What?”

At the same time, they both go, “Nothing.” Joey brushes some residual sand off his uniform and picks up his gym bag. “Sandlot tomorrow,” he reminds us both. “Be late, and I’ll bury you alive.” He waves down a couple of other guys from the team and jogs over to them.

Sara and I head off on our own. Even though we’ve both got our licenses, we still like to walk between our houses and to school. On a night like this, there’s no reason to contribute to air pollution.

Much like I don’t ask her what the hell happened between her and Joey, she doesn’t try playing cupid with me. Recently Sara has decided that Cody likes me, and even more ludicrously, that I return those feelings. First of all, Cody would rather have his eyes clawed out by rabid werewolves than like me. And second of all, I would not only rather have my eyes clawed out by rabid werewolves, I would also rather be stung to death by rabid jellyfish. There is only one rule for having a ten-year friendship with someone: *like*-liking is strictly prohibited. *Liking* will ruin a friendship because *liking* always leads to heartache. Exhibit A: Joey and Sara.

Sara doesn’t have to say anything for me to know what she’s thinking. The look she and Joey exchanged was

enough for me to read between the lines. Instead of forcing her to spit it out, I ignore the cupid vibes she's emitting and stare out at the field.

The lights are still on, bathing the vacant infield in a fluorescent glow. I imagine Santino on the mound, the sheer power behind his windup, and the ninety-mile-per-hour pitch that no doubt amazed the college scouts in the bleachers. Until it nailed Cody in the arm.

For a moment, I picture myself out there on the mound. I haven't played competitively since freshman year when I was on the varsity softball team. Back then, I used to imagine being the star pitcher of the team. Sometimes I liked to think of Cody and me as king and queen of the pitcher's mound—him in baseball, me in softball. And who knows, maybe we would have reigned. But then I quit. The pressure got to be too much. I don't like to talk about it. So Cody's the last one standing, as he should be, considering he would never let his team down the way I did.

Sure, when Sara jokingly suggested I take Cody's place, I had a brief moment of *Eureka!* Like, *Yeah, let me do it.*

But the thought of stepping foot on that field is even more ridiculous than the thought of Cody liking me. More ridiculous than the thought of me liking Cody.

In short, me playing on the guys' team would no doubt fall under a new category of idiocy.

3

I'M SURE THERE WAS A TIME BEFORE THE sandlot, before Cody and Joey and Sara, before our weekend pickup games at the park, before I was a fight-picking, loudmouthed, baseball-obsessed jock, but hell if I can remember it. It's as if some other me in some alternate reality lived through those five years. But not *this* me.

Almost like clockwork, I wake up Saturday morning, pull on a pair of running shorts and a faded old Cubs T-shirt, and tie my hair back in a messy French braid. I pass Nick's closed bedroom door, behind which he'll sleep until noon (perks of being on summer break from college), and head downstairs for a quick breakfast of toast before I grab my mitt and head out.

Or at least, that's the plan until I find a note stuffed

in my gym shoes. My parents know it's the only place I'll notice their messages. I bend down and pull out the wrinkled sheet of paper.

Dinner with Abram @ 6 tonight.—Mom.

p.s. DRESS!!!!

Even though she's not around to hear me, I let out a frustrated groan. For fourteen consecutive days, Mom has been reminding me that Uncle Abram's wedding is coming up and that I need to get a dress. She knows that on my list of least favorite things to do, dress shopping is in the top five. I need at least six months' notice for events requiring a dress, and Abram's invite came in with three weeks' prep.

First of all, who proposes to a woman he's been going out with for only four months? And how serious are we supposed to take it all when he hasn't even introduced his family to her yet?

Sure, that's what this dinner is for, but still...we're only meeting the fiancée and her son one week before the wedding? How dressed up do I need to be for an event that seems so poorly executed?

I toss the note in the trash and shove my feet in my shoes. On my way out the door, I text Sara that I'm on my way. By the time I get to her house—four down from

mine—she’s already at the foot of her driveway waiting for me, her hair tied back, her mitt on her left hand, a dog leash in the other. Our canine companion today is Moriarty, one of Sara’s three Jack Russell terriers.

“Greetings, friend,” Sara says as Moriarty jumps up to say hello. “You get the panic message?”

“What panic message?”

She pulls out her phone and shows me a collection of angry text messages from Joey, all including the word *sandlot* in varying degrees of uppercase letters and exclamation marks.

“He’s desperate for a pitcher,” Sara says.

“Clearly.”

As we start toward the park, I glance across the street at Cody’s house, where Mrs. Kinski’s overflowing garden is bursting in an assortment of vivid reds and purples and yellows. Seeing her flowers always makes me feel happy, and I wonder if they did anything to make Cody feel better after what happened last night. I contemplate texting to ask about his diagnosis, but I suspect he’ll be at the park, even though he won’t be able to play with us. We’re all hopeless, us four, when it comes to the sandlot. It’s like a black hole, sucking us in.

It takes only about five minutes to walk to the park. This place is my proof that God exists. I pass it every day, both to and from school, and whenever I step on the brick

path that winds through the park, it's like coming home. Shrieks of laughter from the playground surround me and Sara as we pass on our way to the sandlot. I swear, that playground is the Mother of All Playgrounds, sitting at the end of the path like Emerald City at the end of the Yellow Brick Road. I can recount my entire childhood through the bruises I got from horsing around there.

A couple of years ago, the park district decided to spiff up the space, making it new again to match all the modern houses going up on the other side of the subdivision. They repainted the playground blue and yellow, repaved the brick walkway, replaced the nets on the tennis courts, built a sleek pavilion with picnic tables, put a fountain at the center of the pond behind the sandlot, and built another path around the pond. The best additions were the lights they installed in the fountain, along the walkways and around the playground, so people (and by people I mean Sara, Cody, Joey, and I) could continue their park shenanigans after dark.

But the funny thing is, when they redid the park, they didn't use any of the resources to fix up the sandlot. The other funny thing is, I don't mind.

It's only a patch of sand and grass and a beat-up, old backstop, but it's my home away from home, and I wouldn't trade it for any fancy field—not even if the entire Chicago Cubs team came to my house and offered me Wrigley Field.

As Sara and I approach the sandlot, I spot Joey lying in the outfield tossing a baseball up and down. Carrot and Jiro, two other guys from the team who also live in our neighborhood, are there playing catch. Cody sits in the grass behind first base. It's not hard to miss the bright blue cast on his left forearm.

"Finally!" Joey shouts, getting to his feet. "What the hell took you so long?!" He points at Moriarty, who stares up at him. "And why the hell d'you bring this thing? You know all he does is get in the way."

Sara gestures to where Joey had been lying down. "Down, dog. Sit. Stay." She finds the bat by Cody and picks it up on her way to home plate.

"Who said you get to bat first?" Joey demands and marches over to take the bat from her. He's very possessive when it comes to baseball. And he, like me, will look for any reason to start an argument, especially with Sara. After ten years, we've all absorbed pieces one another's personalities. It's inevitable.

I go over to Cody to examine his cast up close. He looks up at me with bloodshot eyes. They complement the frown on his face.

"I must say, you look great today," I tell him.

"Shut up."

"Party at the hospital?"

“Would you like to hear the story?” he asks in a tone that makes me think I don’t want to hear the story.

“I’m sure you’ll tell me anyway.”

“Well, first my dad decided it would be better to go to an urgent care center instead of the ER, because it would be less expensive. But he couldn’t remember where it was, so we drove around looking for it for half an hour, and then we had to wait, because the doctor was with another patient. And then, since I’m a wuss and wanted pain meds, we had to go to the pharmacy, where for some reason there was a *line* in the middle of the night. Then when I finally got home, frigging Reilly Shwartz next door is throwing a party, so at two o’clock in the morning, all I could hear were pounding music and shouting drunk people. Then they decide to *barbecue* in the middle of the night, and since they’re all shit-housed, they burn everything, so it smells like burned hot dogs and hamburgers for the next hour. I spent all night thinking about how I’m going to exact my revenge on Santino. I might egg his house. Then fork his lawn. Then saw his arms off.”

I stare at him.

This is a lot for Cody to say in one breath.

I’m about to ask why he’s here if he’s in such a bad mood, but something hits the small of my back. I turn to see a stick on the ground. I know without asking that Joey threw it at me.

“Pitch!” he shouts, waving his arms impatiently.

“If you need to punch something,” I tell Cody, “I invite you to use Joey.” I put on my mitt and head over to the mound, waving at the two sane people standing in the outfield, Carrot and Jiro. They wave back.

Carrot’s real name is Garrett, but he’s got fiery red hair, which is how he earned his nickname. He’s a senior and works at Gilman’s Sports House with my brother, Nick.

Jiro is this badass Japanese kid with spiky black hair. He’s a little short, but he’s one hell of a speed demon. We expect him to break the sound barrier any day now.

The six of us are the sandlot regulars. For the guys, being on the school team isn’t enough. They want to play all day every day, and you can’t play a pickup game with only four people. So Sara and I play with them. It took some convincing on Joey’s part because, like I said, he’s very possessive when it comes to baseball, and having me and Sara—the perpetual pains in his ass, like two sisters he never wanted—encroach on his space was too much for him. But once Carrot, Cody, and Jiro made him realize he couldn’t make the rest of the baseball team move to our neighborhood, Joey gave in. And besides, he knows Sara and I can keep up with him. He’ll just never admit it.

It’s rare to find people who love what you love as much as you love it. I mean, if it was up to us, we’d spend our

lives at one giant sandlot with a baseball and a bat, and we would play until the sun went out and the earth ceased to exist.

At the plate, Joey is ready—bat lifted, knees bent, eyes trained on me. He’s probably trying to read my mind to see what I’m going to throw. I try confusing his telepathic skills by thinking, *Curve ball, changeup, fastball.*

I throw a fastball first. He foul-tips it over the backstop, where it lands with a *splash!* in the pond.

Over by third base, Carrot slow claps for Joey.

“Good hit,” I tell Joey.

“You pitched it,” he says, pulling the bat back over his shoulder.

Carrot tosses me another ball. This time I throw a slider. He fouls it over the first baseline, nearly taking out Cody’s head.

“Dude, you trying to sabotage my entire baseball career?” Cody calls.

“Yeah, I thought that was Santino’s job,” Sara says.

Joey points the bat at me. “She pitched it.”

“You know, instead of trying to blame everything on me, you could apologize,” I suggest.

“What does *apologize* mean?” Joey asks.

I reposition the ball in my hand for a curve ball. “Ready to be struck out?”

“You wish.”

Curve balls are my pitch. Every pitcher’s got one—the pitch they throw better than the rest. Most pitchers’ curves have an 11–5 trajectory, like on the hands of a clock, because it’s difficult to get a perfectly vertical 12–6 drop. Thanks to Nick, I’ve got the 12–6 nailed. Back in his pitching days, Nick could throw his curve so it looked like it was going to be a straight shot down the middle of the plate, but at the last second, it would drop. It was his pitch, and consequently it became mine.

I like to save this pitch for special occasions, like striking Joey out. I align my feet, wind up, and throw.

Joey doesn’t swing.

“Strike three!” I shout. “Suck it.”

“That was a ball!”

“It was a strike!”

“Nuh-uh!”

“Uh-huh!”

“Looked like a strike from over here,” Jiro says from the outfield.

“Thank you,” I say. I look at Joey. “Jiro says it was a strike. So it was a strike.”

“Cody!” Joey calls, seeking confirmation.

“Sorry, man, I think it was a strike.”

I point at him. “I always knew I liked you.”

Cody salutes me with a grin, and Joey throws the bat on the ground and sulks to the outfield.

“Someone call the waaambulance,” Sara calls after him. “We’ve got a crybaby on the field.”

“Shut up, Fox.”

“Maybe I *should* ask Chizz for a spot on the team,” I tease him. It comes out as a joke, but as soon as the words are out of my mouth, I realize how much I actually want to. I mean, I *did* strike out Joey.

Joey scoffs. “Like I said, gonna have to kill me first.”

Despite his protests, I continue pitching, racking up strike after strike (although if you ask him for his account of the day, he’ll likely say otherwise). We hardly notice that two hours pass until after Carrot runs a victory lap around the bases for hitting a home run and says, “Did anyone else hear the earthquake in my stomach?”

That draws all our attention to how hungry and thirsty we are. The sun is up high, beating down on us. Sweat drips down my neck and back. Time to call it quits.

Joey, Carrot, and Jiro, who live on the other side of the subdivision, leave together, singing “Bohemian Rhapsody” at the top of their lungs.

I tell Sara and Moriarty to go on without me, because I’m going to try and find that ball Joey hit into the pond. I’m pretty sure it landed toward the edge of the water, and

I'm not one to let a perfectly good baseball sink into a pile of mud. It takes a good five minutes of wrestling some surprisingly ferocious cattails and getting a mixture of muck and pond water in my shoes for me to retrieve it.

It also gives me a moment to dwell on who's going to take Cody's spot in the sectionals game. Since Sara jokingly nominated me for the position, I can't help but wonder what that would be like.

I was four the first time I played ball at the sandlot. Nick, who was six at the time, was starting Little League, and my dad wanted him to be the pitcher. Nick, even then, wasn't the kind of person who liked to be the center of attention. He'd rather be in the bleachers cheering for his friends. But, as it turned out, Nick was a natural.

I don't know what it was about seeing my big brother on the mound that inspired me. I do know, in those first couple of years of him owning the Little League strike zone, I wanted to be like him. He had a pitching arm gifted to him by God, but he dragged his feet to every game, threw tantrums before practices, and often bargained to clean the entire house twice a week if he could quit baseball.

Sure, he grew out of the reluctance eventually, but he never loved baseball as much as I do, which is ironic, considering he led the Corrington baseball team to the state title his senior year. Even though I love baseball in a way he

never did, I lack the guts it takes to carry the responsibility of being a pitcher. Hence, the only place I ever pitch is at the sandlot, where my only real responsibility is to show up. And even then, showing up is optional.

I trudge out of the murky pond with the muddied baseball in my hand.

“Thought you might have drowned.”

I’m surprised to find that Cody is waiting for me.

“Was that fun for you?” I ask, kicking some pondweed off my left shoe. “Watching me struggle? Thanks for the help by the way. I really appreciate it.”

He lifts his casted arm a few inches. “Sorry. Out of order.”

I frown at him. “What happened to getting that ass hat removed?”

“Doctor said he could only fix the fractured wrist. Couldn’t do anything about the ass hat. Sorry.”

I sigh and shake my head. “Why are you even still here?”

He holds out a clean baseball. He tosses it to me, making me drop the other ball to catch it. “I wanna show you something.”

I narrow my eyes. “Show me what?”

He gives me a sly grin that makes me even more suspicious but also curious. Then he grabs my hand with his good one, which catches my heart off guard. It skips about ten beats before my brain reminds it to start pumping again.

I hardly register him pulling me to the pitcher's mound, too focused on the warmth of his calloused hand. My hand is all like, *Boy hand. Boy fingers. BOY.* And my frontal lobe is like, *Don't be stupid, hand. It's just Cody.*

Okay, so maybe when I said I'd rather be stung to death by rabid jellyfish than like him, I kind of lied. Ninety-nine percent of the time, I'm down with the jellyfish. But the other one percent of the time, when my hormones betray me like this, getting cozy with him seems so much more comfortable.

But then I remember how painfully awful it was when Joey and Sara weren't talking to each other, and how when they finally started talking to each other again, their interactions were filled with passive-aggressive gestures and angry stares.

Besides, I've held hands with Cody before. We've touched before. You can't see someone basically every day for eleven years and *not* have touched at least once.

But this is different! my hand protests.

Shut up, my brain says.

Cody drops my hand. He gestures for me to stand at the center of the mound.

I try to get a read for what he's thinking, but his face is neutral.

"Pretend you're going to pitch."

"Why?"

"Just do it, okay? I'm trying to help you."

Deciding to trust him, I position the ball in my hand, set my feet into the mound, and bring the ball to my chest. I'm about to pivot my foot when Cody grabs my right shoulder with his good hand.

"You have the worst posture I've ever seen on a pitcher."

I relax my muscles and let my hands drop to my side as I frown at him. "Do what I say," he said. "I'm trying to help you," he said," I mimic.

He laughs. "I'm getting there." He walks around to stand behind me, his hand still resting on me. My brain preemptively tells my shoulder to shut up. He pulls back, showing me how badly I was slouching. Then he moves his hand to my left shoulder and does the same.

"Big difference, right?" Before I can answer, he continues, "And when you lift your leg, keep your spine straight. You're always slouching like an old lady."

I suddenly feel really self-conscious about pitching—which hasn't happened in recent memory. Why is he doing this? To be patronizing? To make himself feel better about his fractured wrist?

"It's basic Pitching 101," he says. "That's the first thing they teach you at pitching camp." He lets go of my shoulder and circles around to my front. "Okay, now pretend you're going to throw."

I don't say any of the sarcastic remarks or ask any of the

very valid questions going through my mind. I just do what he says. I get into the stance, pivot my foot, bring up my knee and elbows, take my stride—

“Okay, stop,” he says, grabbing my pitching arm to keep me from throwing.

Now we’re in the very awkward position of me mid-pitch, with my leg outstretched, my left arm in front, my right arm in back, and him standing next to me with his hand on my bicep.

What the hell is going on?

He moves my elbow back so it’s aligned with my shoulder. Then he takes my left arm in front and aligns it with home plate. “Elbow alignment. Important. It’ll help your control.”

This is all too much. Cody keeps his pitching secrets under a Fort Knox–level lockdown. If he starts telling me how he throws a killer changeup, I might have to tell his parents that the aliens have replaced their son with a doppelganger.

I retract my limbs and stare at him dumbfounded.

He laughs. “Nick taught you well, but you’ve never had an actual coach. You’ve got all sorts of bad habits.”

“But why did you...?”

He shrugs.

I backhand his shoulder. “Don’t shrug. Why are you giving me a pitching lesson?”

“Isn’t it obvious?”

“Obviously not obvious if I’m asking you why.”

“I thought you’d like some pointers before you try out to be my replacement.”

My heart slams to a stop. Did *Cody Kinski* just suggest I *take his place*? Hell.

I must have disbelief slapped all over my face because Cody laughs a little and says, “I know you want to.”

“I was joking,” I say totally unconvincingly.

He smiles. “I’ve known you for forever. You wouldn’t give up the chance to show up a bunch of guys. And I also know that this”—he gestures to the sandlot—“isn’t enough for you.”

This is all true. But taking his spot on the team is daunting. He’s Cody Kinski. Iron-Arm Kinski. Me pitching in his wake is laughable. Sure, I play ball recreationally way more than the average person, but no way have I logged enough competitive hours or gone to nearly enough training camps to play on Chizz’s team. No matter how the scene might play out in my imagination, in reality, I’d walk onto the field at tryouts, and every last person alive will die of laughter.

Would it be nice to be standing on the mound, smack in the center of the infield, taking down the patriarchy with my killer arm, crowd cheering as I pitch us to victory? Yeah, probably.

But then there's the *other* possibility: choking. Completely screwing up. That's too much pressure.

I mean, I know I'm good. But I'm not *Iron-Arm Kinski* good. Not good enough to carry the weight of expectation that comes with playing at sectionals. Maybe for a regular season game that doesn't have much consequence (and let me emphasize *maybe*), but this is asking too much.

The hypothetical idea of playing on Chizz's team might be alluring, but in reality, I couldn't do it. The proof of that reality is in the scoreboard of the last softball game I ever played. I will never get the image of that scoreboard out of my mind.

"That is all...very...ridiculous," I tell Cody unconvincingly.

The corners of his lips turn up. He starts off the field. "Not *that* ridiculous."

I stand on the mound for a moment, taking all this in, before following him.

I don't want to believe him.

But even more than that, I do.