

Go Young Lions

J. Cutrone

Copyright 2023

ISBN: 978-1-387-15372-5

Imprint: Lulu.com



For GS

Prologue

Marin County, California
1973

The question came up again.

This time, it was Robert Stirrat, National Director of Public Relations for Little League Baseball, who denied the claim.

"Jenny Fulle's case is not about her sex but about safety," he said. "All the medical and physiological evidence indicates that baseball is a hazardous sport for girls to play on the same team with boys."

"A girl's reaction time to a thrown ball is considerably less than a boy's. Girls are vulnerable to being hit." He spoke with an expression of great care. "The long bones in their arms and legs are more vulnerable than boys."

This sentiment was upheld by research physiologist Dr. Creighton Hale, who served as League Vice President and Director at the time. In a separate hearing, Dr. Hale stated his position that girls are more likely to be injured due to the difference in bone length, muscle fiber and reaction time.

"In contact sports, it is a hazard. Our position is not a negative one," said Dr. Hale. "We're very much in favor of girls being on teams in sports like tennis and swimming."

With regard to the sport of baseball, Dr. Hale said, "It is not fair to the girls to let them play."

Little League Baseball's solution, at that time, was for girls to play softball.

Little League

1

It was unintentional, yet fitting, that the only baby book belonging to Cassidy Ellen Reynolds would start with five blank pages.

Sue Reynolds adjusted her sleeping baby more firmly into the crook of her arm and frowned down at the book, a stack of freshly printed photos pressed into her leg. How had she missed that?

The symmetry was not lost on her, that there were exactly five blank pages before she saw the photos from the first days of her daughter's life, almost six months ago now.

She sighed. It would be such a pain to shift all the photos forward, especially with just one free hand.

Sue rested her head back against the faded fabric of the couch and closed her eyes. As usual, she tried not to think about how thin the fabric felt behind her head or how many people had rested their heads in that same spot over the years. Instead, she tried to focus on her relief that her baby was actually asleep.

She could practically hear her mother's voice say, "She'll never want the crib now that she knows she can sleep in her mama's arms." Sue peered down at her daughter's face and decided she didn't care; Cassidy looked relieved in sleep.

The cold February nights had knocked their schedule out of whack and the full nights of sleep they'd enjoyed for the last two months had vanished. Late into the night, Cassidy let out pitched cries, and it seemed like there was nothing Sue could do to comfort her.

Now, she reached down and attempted to add a new photo to the book. It wobbled on her lap as she tried to press the picture onto the page and keep it remotely straight before maneuvering the tape out of its holder, all with her one free hand.

She gave up and glanced down, startled to see the baby's eyes were wide open, though she barely moved a muscle on Sue's chest. "Hello, my quiet baby."

She did not like to think about how quiet Cassidy was when she was awake, how rarely she smiled or cooed. Instead, she stared at Sue with such big eyes, her tiny brow creased into a thin line of concern.

Moments after she'd been born, Sue's mother had studied her only grandchild with a considering frown. "Let's hope," she'd mused to her daughter, "that she takes after us in looks and Jim in disposition."

Maybe you have to give a smile to get one back, Sue told herself as she ran a finger down the side of Cassidy's soft, round cheek. She tried to smile down at Cassidy, awkward as the angle was. Her daughter merely blinked.

Sue shifted the baby in her aching arms and rested her head back against the ancient couch. "Don't be like me on the inside," she whispered up into the air. "Be like Daddy." It was the closest Sue could come to a prayer.

"You get it all sorted out?"

"Yup." Jim Reynolds blinked through the sweat crowned over his forehead. "South wall's next. If we make it."

Tap grimaced. "Brutal out there."

They'd been onsite since dawn to beat the heat. It was after four now. Jim glanced over to where a third of the crew huddled under the thin line of shade afforded by a support beam. Tap followed his gaze. "I'm calling it."

"Yeah?"

Their foreman nodded. "Pack it in."

"Heat's supposed to break tonight," Jim said. "Tomorrow'll be better."

"You said that yesterday."

Jim shrugged. "I've gotta be right eventually."

"That's why I keep you around, Reynolds." Tap clapped him on the shoulder. He was half Jim's size and twice as bald. "Go on home to that baby of yours."

"Not a baby anymore," Jim replied. "Cass is two today."

Tap whistled. "It goes fast, doesn't it?"

Jim was usually the last one off the site. Today, he climbed into his truck and pulled out of the lot before the others even knew they could

leave. He rolled down the window of his ancient Ford, cranked up the radio and felt his back and legs settle into the cracked vinyl. He had a stop to make before heading home.

By the time the old truck chugged up the hill, he'd remembered how much he hated balloons. They knocked against his head as he put the truck in park. Jim shoved them back and studied his small house on the hill for signs of life.

He knew it would be a sauna when he made it inside. Sue would have every window open, every fan chugging. The summer's record heat had broken them both. Jim had already promised they'd have an air conditioner unit by next summer, even if it did drive their electric bill through the roof.

The lawn needed to be mowed. He thought about tackling it later, when the sun went down and the air got cooler, but the twin aches in his back and feet voiced their protest at the idea.

In their years on top of the hill, Jim had felt the most pride in that spare half acre of property behind the house. He'd even gone as far as to build a work station in the back. The shed was almost half the size of the house and situated in the corner of the now patchy yard.

He could've used the barn on the corner of their property, he supposed, but it legally belonged to the empty house beside them and he was wary to set up shop in a place that would eventually pass over to new owners, if there were ever new owners up on the hill. It seemed like the town of Baker, and most of the eagle-eyed realtors, had forgotten they were even there.

Jim adjusted his grip on the balloons and when he got to the screen door, there was a creature peering at him from the other side.

She didn't usually wait at the door, but, today, pressed her chubby hands up against the screen. "Oh, boy. Two years old today," Jim murmured. He knelt down, caught as he usually was, by how lovely and strange his baby looked. She had owlsh eyes and a wild crop of hair that sprouted over her ears.

When he revealed the balloons, he was rewarded for that troublesome drive home; her eyes grew even wider. She patted her hand against her chest. "Me me?"

"Yes, you, you."

Cassidy reached down and gripped the hem of her small, blue party dress, unable to take her eyes off the shiny balloons.

Sue appeared behind her. Cassidy wore the heat well enough, showing just some flush to her cheeks and dampness at her neck. Sue

lifted her own ponytail off her neck and fanned herself. "I can't believe you worked in this stupid heat. C'mon, Cass, let him inside."

"Hotter in here than it is outside." Jim shook his head. He handed her the bag from the dollar store and set about tying the balloons to the chair. "How're we supposed to celebrate if we all melt?" He watched Cassidy walk to the side of the table to stare soberly at her birthday cake, tall and slathered with white frosting.

"I set up the table." Sue nodded to the backyard. "It's nice in the shade."

There was a soft sigh of resignation in her voice as she attempted to remove the plastic around the small stack of party plates he'd brought home.

"How was today?" he asked.

"What?"

"How was today?" He took care to keep his tone even. "What did you do?"

She picked up a butter knife to try and pierce the taut plastic. "Do?"

Jim braced himself against the closet door and concentrated on toeing off his muddy boots. "That good, huh?" he murmured to the floor.

Still, she moved with enough energy, he noticed, as she hustled over to give the macaroni salad a final toss. "Cassidy, no!"

Jim glanced over in time to see their daughter had an iron grip on the tablecloth and had yanked it toward herself, taking the cake to the very edge of the table. "Whoa, hey." He put a hand out to stop the cake from toppling over and pried her hands from the cloth. She looked at him, affronted. "Now, if you'd succeeded, there'd be cake all over the floor and none to eat."

Cassidy studied him for a moment, eyes dark and narrowed on his. Her small mouth set in a thin line. Despite the pallor and heat of the kitchen, Jim wanted to laugh. "Come on, You You."

They ate dinner on the old picnic table in the backyard. Sue brought the balloons out and tied them to a low, sloping branch of the prettiest tree in the yard, and they used party plates and cups from the dollar store in place of the usual dishes. When the cold chicken and macaroni salad were all eaten up, Sue went inside to get the cake.

Jim placed a wrapped box onto the table. Cassidy sat up straighter and studied the box, her hands fisted in her lap.

When Sue reappeared, she gave a start at the gift. "Where'd that one come from?" They'd given Cassidy her presents that morning in her

tiny bedroom the moment she'd woken up, the three of them in their pajamas on the floor.

He nudged the box toward their daughter. "It's another one for you, Cass. There you go."

That morning, she'd been sleepy and slow over her presents. There were some clothes and a brand new pair of pink sneakers that she'd have to grow into, a little stroller, and a baby doll. Cassidy had studied each of her presents with serious eyes and then looked up at Sue as if bidding the next present to come forward. "What's that one, Cassidy?" Sue asked each time and Jim could tell she struggled to keep her voice light and upbeat, in her bid for Cassidy to talk more, to say what she opened. They both waited for her to exclaim over something, anything.

At two, Cassidy did not babble like other baby girls. Lately, Sue had started to fret over it, devoting more time to Cassidy's minute expressions, looking for other signs of trouble.

The doctor had looked over Cassidy multiple times and declared her to be perfectly healthy. But at their last visit, he'd frowned over her lack of words and bid them to come back the next month, just to be safe. Because Sue was determined to address the situation, Jim didn't say anything about the expensive doctor bill that was coming their way this month and the next.

He held his tongue because in the early morning, when Jim got up for work, Sue had voiced her fears into the dark. "What if something's wrong?" she'd whispered. Jim leaned over and kissed her on the cheek.

"We'll cross that bridge when we're on it."

Cassidy looked fine enough to him. She had dove into her cake and there was white frosting smeared over her cheeks. Now, she struggled with the tape on the box and Jim reached over and popped it open himself. He removed the small glove and baseball within and set them down on the table in front of her.

"Jim," Sue murmured. "Where-"

"I found it in the shed last weekend. Forgot I had it. I must've bought it for-" He stopped himself in time and avoided his wife's eyes, certain a familiar shadow had passed over them.

Instead, he looked down at his daughter who had reached out to touch the glove with one small hand.

Jim stepped out of his truck and looked at his dark house from the

road. Not a single light was on inside. His heart sank.

He'd suspected they were in for a very bad day when he left for work around lunchtime.

"Dust storm today, I think," he'd said as he stood up from the kitchen table. "Make sure you—" He had trailed off because he noticed Sue was at the counter. She was supposed to be cutting a sandwich for Cassidy but had frozen in place with the knife suspended over the bread.

"It's like getting stuck in a web," she'd tried to explain to him once, when a rough spell took her into the darkness the last time. He had asked what was happening behind her eyes when he caught her frozen like that, looking like a deer in the road.

It wasn't a good sign, when she got stuck in the web.

Now, Jim stepped into the house and flooded the small rooms with light. He placed his jacket on the doorknob to let the dust fall to the floor and toed off his dust-covered boots. He'd been right about the storm. Like anyone else born and bred in Baker, he could read it coming in the sky. There was a tint to the clouds when the sun came up, a very particular sort of purple along the edges.

Sue had once thought it beautiful before she learned what it carried behind it.

Nothing on the south side of Baker was immune to the dust when it hit, not even the bag of fast food Jim had carried in from the car. He swiped the golden powder from the bag where it had caked with grease and dropped it onto the counter so he could rinse off his hands.

He reminded himself to be grateful for the dust because, in a roundabout way, it was the reason work had been so steady through the last few years.

The dust storms of Baker had been an oddity since before he was born. His grandfather, who had moved to Florida from Oklahoma, had told him it had to do with the location of the town and where it was situated against the jet stream. The town of Baker was uniquely drier than other places in their part of the panhandle. Developers had taken advantage of the quirk years ago and claimed the highest hills on the north side of town. They built golf courses and big houses where the uncommon dryness provided relief from their state's crushing humidity while the south side received the unfortunate side affects. The swirling dust storms could kick up at any moment, at any time of year, rendering their corner of town still and silent, its residents hidden behind closed doors, as long as the air was enveloped in the

thick, golden dust.

Jim could never gripe the same way about the discrepancy of the neighborhoods, not when those rich developers still needed capable construction crews to do the work on the north side of town.

Sue hated the dust. On storm days, it coated the outside of the house, darkening the windows. If a window happened to be open when the storm hit, the room behind it required a hard cleaning. If she dared to go outside or go into town, which was a rare occurrence, and they got trapped in a storm, there was no choice but to seek shelter or hide in the car as the dust piled high against the windows.

It was an odd and unsettling feeling, he knew, to sit in the car and feel the world get steadily darker.

He wondered how hard the house had been hit that day but it was a fleeting thought. There was another, more pressing assessment to make.

Their bedroom door was closed. Jim approached it with caution. They'd been married thirteen years that July and he knew better than to knock if it was a dark day. Instead, he put his hand on the knob and pushed the door open a crack, wide enough to glimpse his wife asleep on the bed.

Jim closed the door quietly. He turned and met his daughter's eyes in the shadowed hall.

Cassidy must've been playing in the dark family room all this time. At five years old, she was still so quiet that Jim hadn't even noticed her presence as he'd moved through the house.

He sighed at the sight of her. He should put her in the bath, he knew, and get her into bed. He knew the deal.

Instead, he reached out a hand. The day had been long for him, too. "C'mon, You You."

He retrieved two wrapped cheeseburgers from the bags on the counter, the now cold fries, and a beer from the fridge. When he reached out with the cheeseburgers, she extended her thin arms to take them and silently followed him back into the family room.

The television went on and Jim arranged the food on the coffee table. He squirted ketchup into the carton of fries and turned to the game, grateful for the familiar drone of the announcer and how it punctured the air, mingling with the buzz of the air conditioner in the window. Together, they ate and watched the men on the field take their positions.

His daughter sat on the floor, her back against the couch. She

munched absently on a cold fry, her eyes drawn to the flickering screen.

“Cass,” he said between bites of his burger. “Come up here with me.”

When she failed to pull her eyes away from the television, Jim hauled her up onto the couch beside him, his arms and back muscles singing from the effort. She was skinny as a rail but tall for her age and there was something more solid about her now. When he picked her up, it felt like she was straining to keep her body down on the earth.

She leaned against his knee, and he pointed with the beer. “That’s the pitcher. Hough. Old-timer.” Together, they watched old Charlie send the ball over the plate and the announcer let out a yelp of approval. Jim whistled. “Curveball.”

At first, he wasn’t sure she was listening but then he noticed she’d leaned forward, mid-bite. He told her what a curveball was and she nodded, her eyes fixed on the screen. “Look at that!” Jim whistled low and pointed to the replay. “Knuckleball, Charlie’s specialty. You see that? Not many pitchers can do that. Only two in the league right now.”

She put a hand on his knee for balance. “What’s a knuckleball?” she asked.

Her voice was hoarse. It could’ve been the first thing she’d said all day.

Jim grinned and leaned forward to whisper the answer in her ear. “It’s a ball that dances.” He tickled her side and she laughed. “Watch. See if you can catch it.” Together, they watched old Charlie throw another one and then another.

Sue wiped her hands on the towel and placed the bowl on the table. She glanced at the clock on the stove, though the fading light in the small kitchen told her enough about what time it was. Another day gone.

I made it to dinner, she thought. She walked to the back door and rested her head against the wood, just for a moment.

Just stay here, her insides begged. Just close your eyes and rest.

Instead, with terrific effort that was bound to be unnoticed, Sue slipped on her shoes and walked outside to take in the familiar sight of her husband standing in the backyard with their daughter.

Sue struggled against her reaction to the simmering heat. The house

was cooler now, thanks to the air conditioners in the living room and their bedroom, but the wall of heat still surrounded the house like prison bars. It made her throat feel like it was closing shut.

She would have to be sure that when she got pregnant again, it would not be during the summer. Five years ago, she had carried Cassidy inside her belly through the bulk of the summer months and the memory of those last two months were more interminable than the eleven and a half hours of grueling labor that followed.

In the yard, Cassidy wore a worn cap on her head and her jeans were too high at the ankles. She had started the summer as a baby and would leave it with knobby knees and narrow eyes, as a child.

Her father called out instruction and corrections. Cassidy planted her feet, her small hand clasped around the baseball. "Come on. Show Mom how you throw it."

The ball sailed and promptly dropped a foot in front of Jim. He stepped up to retrieve it. "That's okay. We'll get there." Sue glanced back to their daughter who looked disappointed and embarrassed. Sue tried to smile, to look encouraging, but Cassidy turned away from her with a frown.

"Dinner's ready." She stepped aside as they gathered their things, old gloves and bats and balls.

Cassidy trooped in, her face streaked with sweat and dirt and her clothes covered in a thin film of Baker's famous dust. "Wash your hands please," Sue called out to her as she headed for the table. She reached out and stopped Jim who was flushed from the heat, the sweat pooled under his own cap. "How much longer are these lessons going on for?"

"Why?" He frowned. "What's the problem?"

"Nothing," she said. "It's just- it's hot out there." Their daughter looked flushed and red, probably sunburned on the neck and arms, but there was something else that poked at Sue.

It was how they looked in the overgrown yard, trying to throw the ball back and forth. It made her feel sad. But she couldn't tell him that.

"I think she likes it." Jim shrugged. "I come home and she brings me my glove. What am I supposed to do, say no?" He dropped their things in the corner beside the door and kicked an errant baseball back into place. "It's nothing, Sue. Just something to pass the time."

2

Jim pulled the truck into a space and glanced behind him in the rearview. "We're here."

Cassidy stared past them, past the pile of wrappers and empty soda cups from their long day on the road. Jim watched her face, his arm perched on the steering wheel. Worth the drive, he thought. And already better than a day at the beach, where they'd spent most of their long-promised vacation already.

He helped Cassidy out of the truck and when she bobbed right and left to get a better look, he shut the door with his foot. "All right, c'mere, You You." He picked her up and onto his hip, despite the fact that her legs were already longer than most at five years old.

She gripped his shoulder hard and stared up at the massive arena. Jim smiled. "Joe Robbie Stadium, as promised." He hitched her up higher and studied the place too, the crowd of people milling past and around them like salmon in a stream. "The Dolphins play here too, you know," he said hopefully. "Football."

Cassidy shook her head. Jim laughed and set her down. "Okay, Miss One-Track Mind. Let's go find our seats."

"Cass, stay close to me." Sue reached out her hand. "It's very crowded here."

They made their way through the throng and Sue held on tightly as they were jostled at the entrance. Beside them, a group of men in teal blue jerseys crowed and clapped as they made their way under the arched sign. Jim and Sue steered Cassidy in the opposite direction.

The path to their seats up high in the rafters featured many fits and starts, stops and pauses, as people clamored up the stairs around them. Amidst the chaos, Jim felt Cassidy pull on his hand and realized that

she had stopped in the center of the aisle to stare at the field.

Behind them, there was a grunt from a man who looked like he could eat Jim for dinner.

Jim crouched down. "Cass. You've gotta move to the side, all right? People need to get through."

She took two tiny steps to allow the barrel of a man through, but her eyes were still locked onto the field.

They finally made it to their seats. Sue scanned the exits and muttered something about how long it would be before Cassidy would need the restroom or something to drink and they'd have to fight their way through the crowd again.

Jim flipped through the program he'd bought and fished out the small yellow pencil from his pocket. Cassidy sat between them, hands on her lap, all skinny legs and knobby knees in her yellow shorts, and watched patiently as they prepped the field.

He did what he did at home and bent down low to tell her what he saw. He pointed to the dugout and the bullpen. She listened to every word like he was telling her the gospel.

The music started and the energy in the air shifted. Cassidy looked around wildly and when Jim rested his hand on her small back, he discovered how hard her heart was pounding. The players emerged, so small in their crisp uniforms from where they sat, and the crowd roared.

Cassidy suddenly jumped to her feet and clapped hard with them. The crowd of men behind her had called out, "Go Marlins!" and Cassidy opened her mouth and let out a yell that matched theirs. Beside them, a couple noticed Cassidy's excitement and the man chuckled.

"Go Marlins go!" Cassidy hollered with the full force of her voice, her hands clenched into fists.

Around her back, Jim met Sue's wide eyes as the announcer made the call for the game that was about to begin.

"I think we should sign her up for Little League."

"What?" Sue looked over her shoulder and checked to make sure Cassidy was still asleep. It was late, almost midnight, and they still had another four hours until they reached Baker. "Little League?"

"Don't you think?" Jim said. He glanced at her, one hand on the wheel. "You saw how she was at the game. That was something."

It was more than something. It was like staring at a different child. Cassidy had clapped and chattered through the whole game. There was something almost feverish about it, so much so that Sue had pressed a hand to her daughter's forehead more than once. "Yeah."

"It'll get her out of the house, playing with other kids," he added. "Didn't the doctor say that would help? What was that word he used?"

"Socialization."

"Right. Before kindergarten. Socialization."

He said the word as if it was a brand new idea. For years, she'd taken Cassidy out to the library, to the park to play with other kids. They had even tried preschool at the church near their house, and it had been a disaster. Cassidy had refused to step foot inside after the first day and caused such a ruckus, grunting and wailing, that Sue had given up there and then.

Jim steered the truck around a semi that swerved in and out of their lane. Sue gasped and grabbed the dash. "Pull over, pal. Time for bed," he muttered to the driver. "So, what do you think? T-Ball's probably starting up soon. She can give that a try."

Sue shifted in her seat, feeling a cramp in her upper thigh. "I don't know," she said. He glanced over at her again. "I like the idea of signing her up for an activity," she admitted, "if we can afford it."

"It can't be that much money to sign up."

"What about her uniform and a glove?" she said. "Registration fees, all that. It adds up, Jim."

"Oh right. Well, I think we can probably swing that. I think it'd be worth it. Don't you?"

She bit her tongue from reminding him that they were driving home in the middle of the night instead of staying at a motel because they had spent the very last of their vacation dollars at the stadium, buying Cassidy an official hat and a jersey.

"She never asks for anything," he'd said to Sue through gritted teeth when she noted how much cash he handed over to the bored cashier.

Sue had flushed red and had to walk away, leaving them to their moment as he showed her the jersey and pulled the tags off the hat for her. She tried not to think about the world of two that they made.

"When I was her age, I took a ballet class," she murmured. "I loved it."

Jim snorted. "Cassidy in a tutu? You think she'd go for that?" He must've noticed the way her chin was set in the flashing highway

lights because after the next silent mile, his tone softened a touch. "All right, I'll make you a deal. We try out T-Ball and if she doesn't like it, we'll try ballet next."

"You know she'll like T-Ball better."

"Okay, okay." Jim tapped the steering wheel. "How about this- if she does like T-Ball and does well with the other kids, she can try other things. Like ballet. Whatever you want." When she started to respond, he held up a hand. "Don't worry about the money. We'll tighten our belts, that's all. We know how to do that. I'll put in the overtime if you do the pick-ups and drop-offs at the classes." He raised his eyebrows at her. "Deal?"

She mulled it over for a few minutes, opting not to remark that this was the first time he offered to pay to do pretty much anything, other than this spontaneous vacation.

"I guess it's worth a try," Sue said. She glanced back over her shoulder where Cassidy slept, the hat still perched on her head, strands of her hair drooped over her eyes. Jim hit the indicator and moved the truck toward the freeway that would finally bring them home.

"If you don't like it," Sue said again from the driver's seat, "you don't have to do it."

They sat in the car at the edge of Sumner Park where Sue could see the baseball field. The T-Ball Titans had already gathered in a little clump by home plate and their coach looked like a kid himself, maybe from the high school or the community college in Lansing.

Despite her excitement when Jim told her they'd signed her up to play baseball, Cassidy now sat in the backseat of the car and stared out the window as if Sue had just taken her to the dentist. "Do you want me to walk you over?"

On the walk to the field, Cassidy reached out and grabbed Sue's hand and it felt like her nerves shot up Sue's own arm. "It's going to be fun," she murmured to Cassidy as they stepped through the grass.

The young coach flashed them both a big smile and told her to join her team. Cassidy nodded, her face pale and small under her big hat, and the coach went on with his short speech about what they'd be learning and what was coming up first.

Sue saw other parents on the sidelines. Some of them took pictures. Sue had picked the spot in the narrow parking lot because it would

allow her to watch the practice from the quiet and solitude of the car, but now Cassidy peered around the group, her eyes searching for her mother's face.

With a sigh, she walked over to the other parents. A small group of mothers spoke to each other in whispers and Sue stepped around them, opting instead for the nearest bench.

The sun was hot and emerging from behind some watery clouds. She checked her bag to see if she had brought any sunscreen but all she saw was her wallet, phone, keys and her pill case, tucked into the corner of her bag. She'd slathered thick sunscreen on Cassidy at home and hadn't thought to bring any with her.

"Do you need sunscreen?"

Sue hadn't really noticed the other woman on the bench when she sat down, but she must've been there for a while because she had a book open on her lap. She had a visor on her head and wore the strangest earrings. They looked like little purple eggplants in a cluster. "Here," the woman said as she handed over a small bottle. Fancy sunscreen, Sue noted, and she accepted it, wondering how much of it she was allowed to use.

"Thank you. I didn't realize the sun was coming out." She handed the bottle back to the woman, opting for a small amount for her bare shoulders.

"I know, right? Feels like it's going to be a hot afternoon." The woman sighed. "I'm Helen, by the way."

"Sue. Nice to meet you."

"Which one is yours?"

Sue pointed. "The girl in the Marlins hat with the white shirt. That's Cassidy." The one who looks pale and lost and afraid.

"Oh, she is cute. I love her hat."

"We took her to a game a few weeks ago. She hasn't taken it off since."

"Ha. Sounds like my son. That's Lit in the red shirt. See him? Same hat."

"He's tall." And he had found friends fast, she thought. He was already being silly with two other boys. "Do- do you have any other children?"

"No," Helen replied and there was an edge to the word. "Just Lit."

"Cassidy's an only child too." After a moment, Sue found herself adding, "We haven't been able to have any more. I don't know why. We should be able to, but we just can't for some reason. I lost so many

before Cassidy was born.”

The words had just flowed out of her in a rush.

“I’m sorry.” Helen let out a deep sigh and pulled down her sunglasses. She put them in her lap with the book. “That’s so hard.”

They watched the kids play for a few moments. “Lit’s an only child because I got diagnosed with cervical cancer while I was pregnant with him.” She caught Sue’s eye and waved it off. “Oh, I’m fine. It was aggressive, but they caught it early and it’s all right now. I’ve been in remission for years. But as soon as he was born, that was it. No more babies.” Helen stared out at the field. “What are you going to do, right?”

Sue felt a chill run through her. She tried to imagine being pregnant with Cassidy, her belly swollen, and being told she had cancer as well. “I’m sorry that happened.”

“Thank you.” To her surprise, Helen smiled a little.

“What?”

“Oh, nothing.” She shrugged. “Most people, when I tell them that story, they say, ‘Well, at least you have Lit.’ As if I haven’t thought that a million and a half times. Like I’m not grateful enough, or something, to survive cancer and give birth to a healthy baby.”

“Yeah.” Sue narrowed her eyes. “I hate when people say, ‘it’s just God’s plan.’”

“Oh, yeah, that one.” Helen smiled. “Everyone has something to say. Or they need something to say and that’s what we all settled on as acceptable.”

“Yeah,” Sue replied with a sigh.

Helen leaned back on the bench, her book closed now in her hands. “I’m sorry that happened to you, too.”

“Thank you.”

The two women said nothing more about it, in that uncomfortable space of not knowing each other well and sharing too much, too soon. They sat quietly and watched their children run around the field.

3

On the first day of summer, Cassidy rolled over in her bed and turned toward the sun that had just risen up through the trees. She let out a sigh of relief.

Third grade was officially over and done.

She rolled out of bed and, within seconds, her hair was pulled back and up into a ponytail, low enough so that it would fit through the hole in the back of her cap. "Made for ponytails," her father had once remarked.

She changed in a rush, careful to leave the dresser drawers slightly open so as to not slam them shut. She'd already looked out the front window and saw her father's truck was gone. It was too early for her mother to be awake yet.

She crept down the hall and through the kitchen to grab a banana on her way outside, trying to guess how hot it was outside by the level of steaminess in that part of the house. Not too bad, for now.

Outside in the cool morning air, Cassidy took a deep breath. She loved their yard. It was shaped like a T, like a giant had reached down and stretched it out sideways and then grabbed the middle and stretched it long. They kept the grass cut short in the back and when her father was too tired to push the rickety lawn mower, Cassidy did it herself, marking the bases in her mind. The edge of the shed was first base, the sad little prickly bush was second and the picnic table was third. It was much bigger than a real in-field, but that was okay because she could use the training.

Cassidy immediately picked up her dad's old metal bat. As soon as she did, the backyard disappeared. She heard the crowd start to chant her name.

She gripped the bat in her hands and gave it a few swings to warm up her shoulders. The bat was too heavy and her father had promised to buy her a lighter one, but then had told her to choose between that and a new glove. "You swing a heavy bat and you'll get strong fast," he'd advised. "But you can't catch in a glove that's too small." So, she swung the heavy bat and struggled mightily to keep it aloft instead of dropping her shoulders low. It was nearly impossible to toss the ball up into the air and then get both hands around the base of the bat and lift it for a good swing, but she could've sworn the bat got a little bit higher every day.

She felt a rush of anger whenever the ball hit the ground before she could get to it.

She carried the bat to the spot she'd marked as home base, the crowd's cheering getting louder and louder. Cassidy nodded to them, acknowledged the signs they carried that bore her name and the number seven. She adjusted her hat and narrowed her eyes toward the pitcher, and, with some effort, lifted the heavy bat off her shoulder. She could hear the crowd get quiet and imagined the people were sucking in their breath in anticipation. When the pitcher got into position during the World Series, she imagined, you could hear a pin drop in the stadium.

She imagined a triple and then a single, but that time she ended up out on a fly. And then, in the bottom of the eighth when they were down by three, she clocked a grand slam. She'd hit it out of the park so she could take her time trotting from base to base. Which was a good thing because by then, the sun had now lifted into its midday perch and settled its rays directly over her head.

She was about to head to the mound to pitch when she heard the screen door swing open, its creak ringing out like a warning.

They ate lunch at third base. Her mother chugged a glass of lemonade, the ice already melted down in the glass, and set it down onto the dusty picnic table. "We should've eaten in the living room," she said in between bites of sandwich. "It's too hot out here."

It's too cold in the living room, Cassidy thought. It felt strange to go from the heat into that fake blast of cold air. She much preferred to sit at the table under the tree. When there was a rare breeze the branches seemed to shake and move as if the tree had a say in their conversation. "It's too hot to play outside this afternoon," her mother said and she met Cassidy's pleading eyes with a shake of her head. "You can come inside and do some of your summer reading in the

living room where it's nice and cool."

"Summer reading? Summer *just* started!"

"Well, you can get a good jump on it."

"But I'm going over to Lit's today," Cassidy said.

"Since when?"

She had forgotten to ask. "Dad said I could go."

"Really?" Her mother calmly pulled at the corners of her sandwich. "And when did Dad say you could go? I don't remember this coming up at dinner. Did you wake up at 4 and ask him before he left for work?"

The minutes stretched out between them, along with the lie. "Mom, please."

"No, Cassidy. You're staying here. For one thing, you just lied to me. For another, it's just too hot to go anywhere or do anything." Sue stood up and took her plate with her. "You can go to Lit's another time." Cassidy stayed where she was and felt her mother's eyes against her back. "And take off that dirty hat when you come inside."

Once Cassidy was in the house, she took off her hat and threw it on the floor. She put the dishes in the sink with the others and set off to get her library book when she felt her mother's hand on her back. "Help me with the dishes first. And put this away where it belongs." She handed her the filthy, dampened hat. "Stop acting like a baby."

Cassidy walked the hat to the hall closet and placed it on its hook behind the door. Then she stood stiffly at the sink and dried dishes, silence her only weapon.

Her mother's own face was set as she scrubbed the hardened grit off the surface of the plates and bowls and forks, picked at the dried bits, rinsed and handed them to her daughter, one after another.

When they were finally finished, Cassidy turned and stood there. She stared at her mother and waited, her face carefully blank.

Her mother stepped around her to put the silverware away. She wiped down the counters. She took her time cleaning the rest of the kitchen while Cassidy stood and waited.

After a few long minutes, her mother spoke, the words emerging like individual slaps. "You can go read now." Cassidy walked over to the table in the living room and picked up one of library books that sat in a pile on the floor. She didn't stay in the air-conditioned space, however. She walked down the hall to her bedroom which was almost as hot and stuffy as it was outside and slammed the door with a thunderous force that made the walls shake around them.

They didn't really speak for three days. The only noise Cassidy drummed up was whenever she let her anger be known, when she slammed her bedroom door. Both parents yelled at her about that but there was really no way to punish her further since she was already banned from baseball and stuck in her room with a book. "This is the loudest silent treatment in history," she heard her father muse down the hall after she slammed the door one more time.

On the fourth day, she heard the phone ring and knew from the softened tone of her mother's voice that it was Lit's mom on the other end. Cassidy crept out of her room and held her breath.

"You win," her mother said, her back to her. "I'll drop you off at Lit's this afternoon." The temperature was meant to climb into the hundreds that day which was the whole reason Cassidy had been kept home in the first place. But as her mother said, "No use trying to help you if you're going to treat me like a criminal."

Cassidy felt a pang of guilt but had to admit that it disappeared as soon as she was in Lit's bucolic, lovely backyard and she had slipped on her glove. Three whole days without baseball, she marveled.

"Let's play," he said as if no time had passed at all.

Lit's house was like baseball heaven.

He had tons of gear and all of his bats were the right heft for their small frames. The yard at the Grady's was a bit smaller than her own, but Mr. Grady had built a makeshift batting cage in the corner complete with a tall black net to gently catch the hit ball and roll it safely back to the mound.

Most importantly, there was no limit to how long they could play catch or practice in the batting cage. They could spend hours out there and often did, even in the scorching heat. During the school year, Cassidy had taken to jumping off the bus with Lit before the bus could make the next fourteen stops to her own road.

Lit lived in what Cassidy's mother called "a development." All of the houses similarly shaped and occupied rectangular lots with bright green grass. Cassidy often saw at least one neighbor outside with a lawn mower or tending to the flowers that lined the tidy sidewalk. If they ventured down the road toward the cul-de-sac in the center, they saw teams of men in hats and gloves hovered over bushes and shaking

bags of leaves.

Lit's house had one small difference than the others; the second floor boasted a turret in the corner of the house. It looked a little bit like a castle and made Lit's house stand out among the rest on the block. Cassidy knew that was Lit's room, small and shaped like an octagon with a tall, pitched roof.

If she ever thought about how nice his house was, how tidy and clean and new this neighborhood looked compared to her own, Cassidy would secretly remind herself that her backyard was bigger. It was quieter and surrounded by towering trees.

She rolled the ball over her palm and threw it across the grass where Lit caught it in his glove with a satisfying thwack. He tossed it back to her. The sound of the ball hitting their respective gloves had been the only noise in the yard for hours.

Lit's mother soon stepped out onto the porch. "You kids hungry yet?" She was a small woman who was round around the middle, with spiky hair that flipped over her ears. She almost always wore jeans that stopped mid-calf and a brightly colored T-shirt with something fun in her ears. Today, her earrings were fried eggs and Cassidy couldn't stop staring at them when she was near.

"No." Lit caught the ball and lobbed it back to Cassidy. "You?" She shook her head and sent the ball back.

"That wasn't really a question, Lit. It's dinner time." She put her hands on her hips and gave him a look. Lit saw it and sighed. He caught the ball next, but kept it in his glove and set it down beside his feet. Cassidy gamely set down her glove as well.

"You've been playing for hours. I bet you're starving and don't even know it," his mother told them as they trooped inside. Cassidy immediately made a beeline for the bathroom to wash her hands and behind her, she heard Lit's mother muse, "So, that's what it's like to have a girl. Lit! Can you wash your hands too, please? Yes, thank you very much. With soap."

The table in the kitchen was already set for four. Cassidy took her usual place opposite Lit and they waited until his father appeared. He'd been working out in the front of the house on the bushes and leaves were stuck to his cheek and collar. "Do you need to take a shower?" Lit's mother asked him, her eyebrows raised. "Should I put the food in the oven?"

"And make our pro-ballers wait?" Mr. Grady wiped his face and neck clean with a paper towel, and when they finally settled into their

meatloaf and french fries, Cassidy realized Lit's mom was right. She was starving.

"Cardinals are playing tonight," Mr. Grady mentioned from the head of the table.

Lit groaned in between bites. "Oh, please."

"Oh, please, what?"

"You know what." Lit looked at Cassidy and rolled his eyes. "Dad, you only like them because everyone says they're going to go all the way this year."

"So what?"

"So, you're from *Florida*. Not St. Louis."

"Hey, I can like whichever team I want," his father warned with his fork. "This is America."

"You didn't even like them last year!"

Mrs. Grady snorted. She'd grown up in Wisconsin and at a young age had sworn an oath to support the Chicago Cubs forever, rain or shine. Mostly rain, she'd say with a sigh. "Bandwagon Betty," she teased.

"Hey, now!"

They all laughed.

Cassidy was deep into her meatloaf when Lit's father nodded over to her. "You excited about the rest of summer vacation, Cass?" She shrugged.

"You doing baseball camp in July?" he asked her between bites. "I keep meaning to ask your dad at practice if you're signed up yet."

"Oh. I don't know," she replied and that was a lie. Lit had mentioned baseball camp weeks ago. Two whole weeks to play baseball all day, every day. "They're getting Tommy Rollins to come out and show us stuff," he'd crowed. "Tommy Rollins!"

Hearing that the Marlins shortstop would be at the camp was more than she could bear. Cassidy immediately asked her father about it when she climbed into the truck after practice, even though she knew in her bones it was the wrong time. He looked tired and gripped his dirty hands on the steering wheel, letting her go on and on. Finally, he said they'd talk about it later.

When he didn't bring it up again, she kept asking. When she asked again at dinner, a few days later, her father got up and left the room for a few minutes.

"We can't afford that camp, Cass," her mother told her quietly. "Don't bring it up again."

Now, Cassidy looked back down at her plate at the Grady's house and pushed food around with her fork.

"Well," Lit's father said into the silence with a chipper smile. "Little League's been fun this year, hasn't it?" Mr. Grady beamed at both of them. "I've got a good feeling about next year's team. You guys keep practicing like you do, and you'll be in great shape. They'll be knocking down doors for both of you at this rate." Cassidy felt herself sit up a little taller.

She already knew Lit was good. Everyone knew how good Lit was at baseball. He was far and away the best one on their team last year. Cassidy had long wondered where she stood in comparison.

Her own father told her she was good, but she always wondered if he was just being nice because she was his daughter and he had to say that.

"This is where it all starts." Mr. Grady whistled and clapped his hands together. "You get in with a good team early, play up, get the right sort of training, and who knows where it can take you."

Lit continued to eat his food with a tired intensity, having heard the speech before, but Cassidy set her fork down. "Play up?" she asked.

"He means playing on a travel team," Lit said with his mouth full. His mother reached over and nudged him in the shoulder and he swallowed hastily. "You play with kids older than you. You get more games and more tournaments and it makes you better, faster."

"Oh." Cassidy picked up her fork again and tried to make her voice sound like she didn't care as much as she did. "Is there a travel team in Baker?"

"There's a few decent teams in this county. There are some really good ones in Florida," Mr. Grady said, waving his fork. "We build good ball players in Florida."

"There's only one travel team that's worth a crap though," Lit said with his mouth full again.

"Lit," his mother said with a frown. "Chew your food and watch your language, please."

Cassidy looked at them blankly. "Only one team?"

"He's talking about the Lions," Mr. Grady replied to Cassidy. "They're based over in Shoreland. Major-level."

"Major?"

"Yeah, there's different, like, rankings," Lit said. "AA or AAA, just like real baseball. Shoreland's one of the best. They've got a deep bench."

Cassidy tried not to look as lost as she felt. Lit's father must have noticed because he added, "Lit just means the team has a lot of really good players. Lot of bigs players have played for the Lions over the years. Great college ball players. Even some major leaguers."

"Really?" They regularly passed Shoreland on their way to the beach.

"Dale Blake was a Lion and he plays for the Diamondbacks' farm team. And Jason Bellen," Lit added with a grin.

Cassidy's jaw dropped. "Really?" They both loved Jason Bellen.

"Yeah. They're both from Destin, came up together. And Kyle Hasbro was a Lion, obviously."

"Oh yeah," his father mused. "That kid's got the goods, for sure."

Lit straightened up with pride as if Kyle Hasbro was his older brother instead of Scotty Hasbro's older brother. They played Little League with Scotty and he was one of Lit's best friends. Cassidy had long thought that Lit and the others hung around Scotty's house so much just because Kyle was sometimes there, too.

Kyle Hasbro was a big deal in Baker. A lot of people thought he was going to end up playing professionally one day. Even Cassidy and her parents had been to games at the high school to see him in the playoffs last season; it had felt like the whole town was there.

Mr. Grady frowned. "There are other good teams in the area, though. What about Bomington, that's not far from here. They're not too shabby. You must've heard of them." The name sounded vaguely familiar, but Cassidy shook her head.

"That's just a Little League team," Lit said derisively.

"So?"

"So, it's not a travel team," he said to his mother's question. She rolled her eyes at him. "What? It's true."

"Lit has a point," Mr. Grady said with his fork. "Competitively, there's no comparison between Little League and these year-round tournament teams."

"When Bomington makes a bid for the Little League World Series, it's certainly talked about in this house," Mrs. Grady pointed out. "And can you stop waving that fork? There's pieces of meatloaf flying everywhere." Cassidy stifled a smile as Mrs. Grady reached over to pick a tiny piece of meatloaf off Lit's shoulder.

"Yeah, well, Bomington's still not the Lions," Lit said finally, with his mouth full again. His mother nudged him with her wrist again and gave him an exasperated look. "What? I can't help it, I'm really

hungry!"

"When can we try out for the Lions?" Cassidy asked.

Mrs. Grady concentrated on cutting another slice of meatloaf with a small frown. She gave her husband a look and said, "The Lions are older, aren't they? Eleven and twelve-year-olds?"

"I've talked to a few guys and Steve Jamison occasionally takes on a nine or ten-year-old to play up if he's got the goods. So, you kids keep up the practice and who knows what might happen?" he said cheerfully as Mrs. Grady loudly cleared her throat. He held the water pitcher out to her and she told him, pointedly, that she didn't need any water.

Cassidy wanted to ask more questions, but the mood at the table had shifted and anyway, the words wouldn't come. That happened sometimes, and she didn't know why. When they changed the subject and dove into the next conversation, it felt like Cassidy was standing in a parking lot, unable to move, as the cars pulled away without her.

After dinner, she went up to Lit's room to hang out for a bit until her father could pick her up on his way home from the construction site.

She sat on the floor by Lit's bed and flipped through an old program she'd found. Cassidy stared at the cover and into the face of a young, tan boy who stood mid-pitch on the mound.

Lit came over and sat next to her, peered over her shoulder. "That's Joey Davidson. He's ten. He's really good."

Cassidy frowned. "The boy from Connecticut?"

"Yeah. He's awesome. He was just down in Texas for a tournament a few weeks ago."

"How can he play in Texas? Aren't you supposed to play in your own state?"

"I dunno. I think on some travel teams, you can just fly and play wherever." Cassidy flipped through the glossy pages, not really taking in what she was skimming though. The thought of asking her parents to let her fly to Texas to play baseball sounded insane when it was hard enough just to get a ride over to Lit's house.

Lit pointed to the Southeast Division. "Tennessee. They beat Georgia last year. And Georgia beat us in the early rounds."

"Us?"

"Florida, yeah. Some team from Miami."

Cassidy scanned the rosters in the program. "Do the Lions play in a World Series?"

"Eh, kinda. There's a ton of big tournaments. NTIS is a big one. But it's not on TV like the Little League World Series. Or at least not that I've seen. But that doesn't matter. The Lions are just crazy good. And they're so close!"

Cassidy glanced up at Lit's poster of Jason Bellen from his short stint with the Marlins. He'd been named Rookie of the Year and was snatched up shortly after by the Phillies. "I didn't know Bellen was from Destin." She wondered what school he went to, what kind of house he grew up in. She wondered if it looked like hers or Lit's. How had she missed that Jason Bellen was from Destin?

"Man." Lit took the program from her and flipped through it. "I can't wait to go again this year. Dad said I can bring a friend this time."

"Oh, really?" Cassidy looked up. "That'll be so fun!"

"Yeah, Nick's really excited to go." Lit was looking through the pages and didn't notice the excitement disappear from Cassidy's face. "We were talking about it at the movies yesterday. Nick's dad is going to lend us his camper so we can sleep in the stadium lot overnight. It's going to be so awesome."

"Yeah. That does sound awesome."

She was able to swallow the hurt when Lit brought up another player they both liked. They talked about that and argued over his better plays until Cassidy got up to go to the bathroom. On her way back to the room, she suddenly heard Mrs. Grady's low voice punch through the air. "I just don't think it's wise to get their hopes up. Especially Cassidy."

Cassidy stopped and pressed herself against the wall in the hallway.

"What do you mean?"

"Come on," Lit's mother said. "You know how crazy competitive it is to get on the Lions. I thought we talked about this."

"We did," Mr. Grady replied. "But that was before I talked to--"

"I know you've been talking to Steve Jamison about Lit, but Cassidy is different. For one thing, the costs to play travel ball are astronomical. You know that."

"Well, but--"

"Besides that, Paul, the Lions have never had a girl on that team, not ever." There was an edge to her voice that Cassidy hadn't heard before. "This is exactly the kind of thing Sue was afraid of."

"Oh, please, we were just talking."

"She was tracking every word you said like a hawk. She wants so

badly to keep up with Lit and the others and what happens when they don't let her on their team? What happens then?"

"You're exaggerating. She's good! She could play for years more--"

"It's fine and good to say that now, but Cassidy isn't exactly like other girls." Cassidy gripped the wall. "You know the issues they've been having with her. This isn't just about baseball. It's complicated, Paul."

"Okay, okay, fine. I won't bring it up again."

"Good." Mrs. Grady's voice was as firm as Cassidy had ever heard it. "Let the kids play together and have their fun now," she said. "While they still can."

4

Cassidy had always been quietly on the lookout for girls that were like her. This year, there were three girls and twelve boys on her Little League team. Last year, there had been six girls on the team. She hadn't noticed how many girls were on the team in T-Ball but at least four or five of their small faces came to mind.

When she had flipped through Lit's Little League World Series program, she'd automatically scanned the pages for a glimpse of long hair or her own narrow face, without really realizing that she was searching at all.

There had been a picture of a girl in the back of the program, but she was the younger sister of one of the star players. She sat in the stands with a soft, pink bunny in her lap while her brother posed with his bat.

Last year, a boy on their Little League team told Cassidy during recess that she was really more like half boy, half girl. "I'm a girl," she'd replied.

"Yeah, but you don't wear dresses. And you can play sports so you're really, like, half boy."

At recess, the girls played together and the boys played together in their separate corners. Sometimes, Cassidy joined the boys because she wanted to play what they were playing. Mostly she kept to herself, willing recess to end early.

There was something about the way Lit talked and joked with his friends that made her keep her distance from him until after school was over. She knew to keep to herself until the bus stopped and she'd follow him down the steps with her glove tucked away in her backpack.

"Cass." Her father looked at her from the driver's seat. "We're here,

honey.”

Usually, when they arrived in their usual parking spot for Little League, she jumped out as soon as the truck came to a halt. Today, she just sat there, her hand on the door handle.

“Cass, you hear me? You okay?”

“Yeah.”

“You sure? You’re doing that thing where you look like you’re talking to yourself.” Cassidy reached up and touched her mouth. “You nervous about the game today?” he asked, a frown appearing on his face.

“No.” She shook her head. That was it but it wasn’t quite it, either.

Jim tapped the steering wheel and studied his daughter’s expression in the rearview mirror.

She was usually her most hyper, most excitable self on a game day. She’d put on her uniform hours before they had to leave and head out to the yard to warm up. This morning, she’d changed into her uniform but instead of playing, he found her sitting at the picnic table by their tree, toying with the laces of her cleats. He had to call her name three times before she heard him and looked up.

He would’ve wondered if her love of baseball was finally starting to wane but the night before, she’d talked rabidly during the Yankees game, citing stats that even Jim didn’t know.

He felt a clutch of guilt as he thought of the fight he’d had with Sue in the kitchen that morning. Hadn’t she told him to lower his voice, that Cassidy could hear them. That must’ve been the reason she was so unsettled now.

They had been fighting more since he found the small collection of pills in the back recesses of the cabinet under the sink. Jim had taken everything out to repair a dripping pipe and instead found a stash of medication that Sue’s mother had mailed the month before.

He left it on their bed, determined to talk about it that night. It was even worse than when they’d argued over having another baby.

“I don’t like how they make me feel,” Sue told him. “And you cannot make me take them.”

He had pleaded and begged. That haunted look was starting to come back over her eyes. Surely, she could see that. Surely, she’d noticed that it was getting harder and harder for her to climb out of bed in the morning.

“Cassidy,” he said. “Hey, You You. Can you look at me, please?” He turned the truck off and she met his eyes in the mirror. “I’m sorry if you heard me and Mom fighting this morning. But I don’t want you to worry. It’ll pass, it always does. Okay? Cass?”

She poked at the rubber that ran across the bottom of the window. “Okay.”

Jim looked around at the bustling park. “You know what the best part of baseball is?”

“What?”

“No matter what’s going on or what’s bothering you, the second the game starts, you can put everything else aside and just play. Forget about all the other stuff.” He met her eyes in the mirror. “That’s why baseball’s the best, isn’t it?”

A tiny smile appeared on her face. “Yeah.”

“There’s my girl.” He reached out and patted her on the knee. “Come on, let’s go.”

Her father was right. When it was their turn to take the field, Cassidy found it easy to keep her focus on the ball and she manned second base as if she were defending it in war. When they were at bat, she took a seat on the bench. And when Lit stepped up to the plate, she watched him with fresh eyes.

For the first time, she noticed that when Lit went up to bat, some of the fathers gathered at the sidelines to watch him and point and talk. He was far and away their best hitter and everyone knew it. That day, he stepped up and immediately hit a triple. Instead of watching him round the bases, Cassidy watched the men clap, their conversation intensified. One of the fathers stuck his fingers in his mouth and let out a piercing whistle.

When it was her turn to hit, Cassidy swallowed her nerves. She stepped up to the plate and gripped the bat with both hands, settling into her stance. She would no longer look at the men lining the fence. She’d keep her eyes locked onto the ball, as she’d been taught.

She was good with a bat. Not as good as Lit maybe, but she had always been able to make the bat connect with the ball. She played catch with Lit after school, but when her father had some time to spare, they always worked on her swing.

Now, she minded her stance and kept her eyes fixed on the ball. A few pitches went by, most of them balls, but then came a perfect pitch,

right down the center of the plate.

She bore down and swung as hard as she ever had, the power building in her legs and arms, her grip tightening, some foreign force propelling her into the spin. The bat hit the ball, dead center, and she heard the crack as her bat hit her shoulder. Follow through, her father had chanted over and over.

Cassidy took off for first base without seeing where the ball went, though her instinct was to watch it fly. She kept her eyes on the base and was directed to second, then to third and then to home. Only on her way home, amidst the cheers and clapping, did she glance back and see the other team's right fielder still scrambling from where he'd picked up the ball at the corner of the fence. He chucked it as far as he could and the ball bounced to second base, but it was too late. She was already home.

Cassidy walked on wobbly legs to the bench and sat down, dazed from the victory. The congratulations and high-fives from the boys felt like they were given to someone else.

It took her a moment to realize that when she'd sat down, Lit had stood up and moved to the other end of the bench.

Lit's father let out a soft whistle as they walked off the field. "Did great out there."

"Thanks, Dad."

He clasped his son on the shoulder and then threw his hands up in the air as Cassidy joined them. "And you! What a game you played today. What a show." He held up his hand and she slapped it hard with a grin on her quiet face. "You guys going to Pat's?"

Cassidy glanced up at her father. "I think a kid who hits a homer and a game-winning double deserves a pizza party," he remarked with a grin.

"Oh, absolutely," Lit's father said. He gave her a wink. "We'll see you there."

"Cass, you want to ride with Lit?" Mrs. Grady asked as they started toward their cars. Cassidy glanced over just in time to see Lit roll his eyes at the suggestion.

Cassidy followed her father to the truck.

As they were walking away, she heard Mr. Grady teasing his son. "Cass really gave you a run for your money today. Better step up your game, big guy."

“Whatever.”

It was the same scene at the pizza place. She took a seat at the long table with the team and watched with a sinking heart as Lit moved all the way to the other end and motioned for Nick and Scotty to go with him. Nick poked one of the other girls, Ashley, in the shoulder and pointed down the table toward Cassidy. “Girls sit down there,” he told her and Ashley shrugged. She picked up her plate and moved down the table to sit opposite Cassidy even though they’d never really spoken to each other before.

Cassidy ate her pizza fast as everyone talked around her and shot straw wrappers at each other. As soon as she was done, she pushed back her chair and walked over to where her father sat with the other parents. The happiness she’d felt when Coach gave her the game ball had now fully faded away.

She took the empty seat next to her father and waited for a break in their conversation so she could whisper to him that she was ready to go home. But when she got there, she discovered they were talking about her.

“I’m just saying,” Mr. Grady said between sips of beer. “Make the transition now, get her settled. Then some travel teams, get her all set up for high school.” He whistled. “Watch those scholarships come pouring in, man.”

“All the money we spend, hoping for a scholarship,” she heard Matt’s father muse in response. “I might as well create my own scholarship.”

“Truth.”

“Hey, we gotta do what we gotta do for the kids, right?”

“I don’t know, Paul.” Matt’s father shook his head. “It wasn’t like this when we were their age, you know? Have you seen the price of those travel teams?” He let out a low whistle. “Our kids will be doing drills with semi pro-athletes and we’ll all be eating cereal for dinner for the next five years.”

Mr. Grady waved his pizza at him. “It’s competitive out there and we have to keep up. That’s why we’re putting Lit in front of Steve Jamison in September,” he said.

“Jesus, already?” Matt’s father replied, echoing Cassidy’s response as she stared at Mr. Grady.

“Do the Lions even take nine-year-olds?” her own father mused. She looked up at him in surprise that he knew about the Lions at all.

“They take exceptional nines, sure.” Mr. Grady looked confident. He

crumpled up his oily napkin and left it on the plate. "Plus, I've got insurance."

"Of course you do," Matt's father said with a snort. At the same time, Cassidy's father asked, "What does that mean?"

"Oh, just met a guy at the club a few weeks back, a very important new friend. Let's just call him my secret weapon." Mr. Grady caught Cassidy's eye and flashed her a smile.

When they were finally back in the truck and ready to head home, Cassidy asked her father what they'd been talking about when she sat down.

"Oh, Mr. Grady has it in his head to make Lit try out for the Lions. It's this team down in—"

"No, I know," she said quickly. "I know who the Lions are."

"You do?" He glanced back at her in surprise. "Lit talking about it with you?" She shrugged. "Well, I don't know much about them. They weren't around when I played ball in Baker. But Lit's dad has mentioned it before. He thinks if Lit can get on the team this young, it'll give him a good head start."

She felt a pang of pain at the words and surged ahead. "What were you talking about when I came over?" She poked at the rubber alongside the bottom of the window.

"When you came over?"

"Something about a 'transition.'"

"Oh, that." Her father had looked blank for a moment. "Lit's dad was trying to talk me into some softball clinic in Fremont. For you. But I already told you," he added quickly, "we can't do anything like that. No camps this summer."

She narrowed her eyes. "Softball?"

"Yeah, softball. It's kind of like the girl version of baseball. I mean, in terms of high school and college sports. You've seen those teams practicing at the park."

Because she looked confused, he described it to her, how the ball was bigger, the way they pitched, and how some of the rules were different.

"Oh." Cassidy shifted in her seat. "Are the games ever on TV?"

"Hmmm?" She repeated her question and her father frowned. "Sometimes, I think. Maybe on the cable channels, like for a championship. Sometimes."

"But do they play in big stadiums? Like the MLB?"

"No, honey." He shook his head. "Not as big as that."

"And why is the ball bigger?" she asked. She poked at the rubber in the window again.

"I don't know." He shrugged. "I guess it's easier to hit if it's bigger. They do pitch pretty fast in softball, though. It's no joke."

"But I can hit a baseball." She'd just hit a home run, she wanted to remind him, as if he'd forgotten already. She'd won the game ball.

"Right. Sure, you can hit a baseball." He glanced back in the rearview again. "You did great today."

"So, if I can play baseball," she continued slowly, "then I want to play baseball."

"Cass, hey." He must've heard the panic in her voice because he glanced back at her. "Don't worry. You can still play baseball. It was just Lit's dad talking. You know how he likes to talk. You'd think Lit was minutes away from signing with the Yankees or something." She must've still looked worried because he added, "You can play baseball as long as you want. There's plenty of time to talk about softball. You know, maybe for high school." He patted her knee. "Don't worry about it right now, okay?"

Cassidy tried to do as her father said and she tried not to worry about it. When they got home, she helped him in the backyard, cleaning it up and cutting the grass. When they went inside for dinner, Cassidy was careful not to mention baseball or the day's game. Her mother had shadows under her eyes that seemed to get darker if Cassidy and her father went on about the sport for too long.

That night, they waited for her mother to go to bed and then her father turned on the game. Cassidy took her usual spot on the floor, her back against the couch, her long legs stretched under the coffee table. The Tampa Bay Rays were three innings deep in their second game against the Tigers and her father walked her through some of his commentary even though she was more than capable of making her own comments by now.

He was fond of the general manager for the Tigers, who had been an all-star for the Orioles when her father was young. Cassidy let him talk, his voice merging and blending with the announcers' voices on the television, while her eyes scanned the screen. For a second night in a row, she looked at the players' faces, their bodies, their hands, their muscles.

She watched them move across the field and wondered.

Deep in the the sixth inning, the phone rang and her father reached over to answer. "Oh, hey, Paul." They chatted for a minute as Cassidy

tried to figure out why Lit's father was calling them so late. Probably to convince her father again that she should give softball a try. She directed her scowl at the screen.

"I'll ask her. Cass." He waited for her to look up over her shoulder at him. "Lit wants to know if you want to go over tomorrow and practice?"

"Oh." He must've stopped sulking after her home run. Cassidy wrapped her arms around her knees and wondered how he'd feel if she said no.

Instead, she turned her attention to the sudden roar of the crowd from the screen. The batter had smashed the ball with a resounding crack and surged toward third base.

Lit had hit a triple, she thought. She'd hit a home run.

All she had to do was keep up with Lit. And sometimes, maybe even play a little bit better than him, like today. If she did, the Lions would have to take her too, no matter how many "secret weapons" Lit's father threw his son's way.

Maybe, she thought, it was as simple as that.

"Sure," she said. "I'll play."