

SOME
KIND
OF
HATE

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DECLAN

The pop of the glove is my favorite sound in the world—especially when it's followed by an umpire calling a strike after I've thrown the pitch.

I could listen to it all day.

We're warming up for the most important game of the season. The Stafford's Corner Sabres are about to play the Tilbury Tigers for the New York State high school baseball championship.

"That's it, Declan, give that arm a rest," Coach Kriscoli shouts out.

"Just a few more, Coach, please?" I beg him.

"A few," Coach K says. "But don't push it."

"I won't," I promise. I have to protect my pitching arm, because baseball is life.

Not only that, it's the ticket out of my town, where if you drive not too far in any direction you'll find a house or a barn with peeling paint and a caved-in roof about to fall down and not much else.

I make one more warm-up toss. My best friend and practice partner, Jake Lehrer, catches it effortlessly.

If anyone on this team knows me, it's him. We met playing T-ball, and we've spent more hours playing together than I can count.

He rushes over, throws an arm around my neck, and pulls the brim of my baseball cap down over my face. "Nice job, Dec. Keep it up during the game."

"I will, if Coach puts me in," I say in a low voice, taking off my cap and running a hand through my hair. My parents have been after me to get a haircut, but I'm superstitious and won't cut it until after the championship.

“Come on, Dec. You know he will,” Jake says, detangling from me to wipe the sweat off his face with his arm.

“Mateo Molina is a sophomore. He’s got seniority.”

“Yeah, but you’re the closer,” Jake says. “You’re the guy with the golden arm—and hair.”

He reaches his hand out to mess with my hair, but I bat it away. It’s not even worth trying to retaliate, because his dark curls are definitely a matted mess under his own hat. Before he can open his mouth, I say, “If you call me Goldilocks, I’m going to beat the crap out of you, Jake.”

He flashes me a grin. “Oh, no you won’t,” he says. “Because you want us to win, and for that to happen, we need me at first base . . . Goldilocks.”

I try to punch his arm, but he’s too quick for me. He’s already taken off running, his laughter floating back to me on the breeze.

“Yo, Goldilocks, is Jake being an idiot again?” one of my other friends, Cody Miller, asks as he walks over. You can smell the sunscreen on him from like a mile away. He’s got that seriously pale ginger look going on, so it doesn’t take much to turn him into a lobster.

I grit my teeth. “Stop calling me that!”

Cody grins and says, “I’ll stop if you win us the championship.”

“You know I’m gonna try.”

“Yo, Declan! Over here!” It’s hard to miss my twin sister Kayleigh’s voice from the stands. I see her waving like the weirdo she is, next to my parents, who have actually taken the day off work to watch me play in the championship. June is one of my mom’s busiest times as a hairstylist, what with proms and weddings. And Dad’s been taking all the shifts he can at Pinnacle Metalworks because there’s a new general manager being transferred in from out of state to “streamline production,” which apparently

is corporate speak for layoffs. My parents have been even more stressed out about money than usual. They missed the quarterfinal and semifinal games, but at least they're here now. Mom waves, and Dad shouts, "Knock 'em dead, Dec!"

Coach has to put me in. Otherwise, they took off work for nothing.

Jeff Seale pitches the first three innings and gives up two runs—but so does the Tilbury pitcher. Coach and Mr. Morrison are conferring about who to put in to relieve him. I'm gutted when Coach calls out, "Molina! You're up!"

By the bottom of the fifth, we're ahead by one run, and I'm starting to feel sick to my stomach as I pace the dugout. Is Coach going to let Mateo pitch for the rest of the game without even giving me a chance? I might be a freshman, but I proved myself in the quarterfinal and semifinals.

We're still ahead by the time Mateo's struck out two batters. But I can tell he's flagging, and the bases are loaded. It's my turn. It's gotta be.

Coach doesn't even look at me.

I hold my breath as Mateo winds up for the pitch. As soon as the ball leaves his hand, I know we're in trouble. Sure enough, instead of the pop of the ball in the catcher's glove, there's the loud ping of it hitting the aluminum bat. It sails over the outfield for a homer.

I kick a helmet, but even the satisfying thunk of it hitting the wall doesn't make me feel any better. We're going to lose, and I'm just standing around on the sidelines when I could win this for us.

By the time Mateo strikes out the next batter, our dugout is like a wake. Mateo comes in from the mound, pulling his cap down lower over his face. Coach squeezes his shoulder, then shouts the five glorious words I've been waiting to hear: "Taylor, you're up next inning."