

CHAPTER ONE

In every baseball movie ever, it's the same.

Bottom of the ninth. Bases loaded. Two out.

The crowd breathless at the batter's back. The players in the dugout on their feet. The opposing pitcher staring daggers from the mound with steam pouring from flared nostrils.

At the plate: the team's star, bat pointed toward the wall, challenge clear.

In real life—in softball—it doesn't exactly work out that way.

It's close.

But not as if penned by a writer's hand.

It's the bottom of the seventh—there aren't nine innings in high school softball. But the bases are loaded. And there are two out.

The crowd is breathless, the players in the dugout are on their feet, and the opposing pitcher has got the raging-bull thing going on from the mound.

But the team's star isn't at the plate.

She's on it.

Wilted in the dirt after taking a seventy-mile-per-hour fastball to the back. Motionless. Eyes stunned open. All senses on pause, a rolling clap of pain drowning out everything else.

As the crowd holds its collective breath, I search for mine. My lungs don't seem to be working, and the catcher and umpire both loom over me, outlines blurry with the same fuzzy energy as a 3-D movie left to the naked eye.

I blink a few times. First at the lights. Then at the catcher and ump. And, finally, at the upside-down eagles name scrawled across my chest, willing my rib cage to nudge my lungs into action.

Up. Down. Up. Down. In. Out. In. Out.

The sound comes flooding in as my chest finally rises. The shouts of my teammates, the sweet girls of Windsor Prep, will me up. My coach's voice—my sister's voice—above them all.

“Stand, Liv! Stand!”

I make it to my feet, back hot and lungs still warming up.

Brows pulled together, I shoot my game-day glare at the mound. Kelly Cleary's red hair clashes horribly with her stupid orange-and-white uniform; her cat-eye liquid liner is so thick it hides the fact that she has actual eyes. And they must not be able to see worth crap, because she just hit a batter with the bases loaded and one down.

Which means that if I can walk over to first base, everyone advances and we score a run to tie it. Not exactly the walk-off grand slam of my dreams, but it's one way to move out of this round and into the Kansas state championship game.

Or at least get one run from doing that.

Again, another true-life technicality.

Both sides of the crowd are clapping, because that's just what you do when someone gets hit by a pitch. My parents, brother, and Heather are on their feet. My teammates are a rowdy block of purple, crowding the dugout rail, ribbons and ponytails kissing their cheeks in the breeze, clapping me to first.

"Nice job, O-Rod!" There's my best friend, Addie, cheering even though she's about to bat.

My sister, Danielle, has her arms crossed over the eagles scrawled on her chest, the wedding ring Heather gave her two years ago glinting in the stadium lights. She does her stern-coach nod. It's a look I first saw at age three, when she was twelve and egging me on as I threw her the ball for the millionth time. She was a hell of a player, but she's always—always—been a coach.

On the other end of the stadium, I spy my boyfriend, Jake. Dreads to his shoulders, he's dressed out in his orange football jersey, number thirty-two, clapping along with a few teammates in Northland's section of the crowd. Wearing their jerseys out of season to big games is a tradition, or so he says. But while he looks the part of a good, supportive student athlete from the rival school, I know that even though we've only been dating since the Spring Prep Preview photo shoot at the Kansas City Star in February, he's totally here for me.

Below the Northland section is its dugout where the Tigers' veteran coach, Trudi Kitterage, observes from the steps. Coach Kitt looks like the burnt-bacon version of a head cheerleader—all hard curves and tan lines. But her talent is real. And her team is good. Too good for Kelly's mistake. Meaning, if I sawed Kelly in half with my own glare, Coach Kitt's stare is roasting the pieces of her in a bonfire of why-the-hell-did-you-do-that.

Because in ten of my shuffling steps, we'll be tied.

Eight more steps. Six. Four. Two.

And then I'm on the bag at first, squeezing in next to Stacey Sanderson. Who, up until a minute ago, was my least favorite player on the Northland team.

She can hit. She can run. And she's Jake's gorgeous ex-girlfriend.

From, like, two years ago. Or something. Whatever. I'm not sure—but there's a history there. And she's been reminding me of it the whole game. Giving me side-mouthed sass every time I've gotten on base. Which, let's be honest, has been a lot.

This time, I strike first. Shaking my head as I clap home our third-base runner, Rosemary, for the tying score. "One away, Sanderson. All because your girl Cleary can't hit the broad side of a barn."

The corners of Stacey's mouth quirk up but her eyes stay at home, where Addie is settling into her mega-erect stance. The girl can dunk and hit the three, but she's a praying mantis in cleats. "I'd say she hit the broad side of something, all right."

I snort and roll my eyes. "Jake loves my curves."

"Jake also runs headfirst into a pack of bodies for three months a year. Brain cells aren't his forte, Rodinsky."

"Whatever, Skeletor."

Addie dusts Kelly's curveball, but it falls straight into the catcher's mitt. Strike one.

Come on, McAndry. Just a base hit. No extra innings. Just a straight seven-inning pass to the championship.

Stacey sniffs. "I have a lot of admirers of my ass, thankyouverymuch."

I don't even miss a beat. "They're just trying to figure out how you sit comfortably on something so flat."

Addie squares her shoulders and waits for another pitch, looking very bad ass. Kelly is taking forfreakingever, so I start to inch off base and away from Stacey's fish lips. But then Cleary actually does something right and whips the ball to first. I hit the dirt just in time, fingertips grazing the base before Stacey gets the tag.

Called safe, I stand, not bothering to wipe off the dust streaking across my chest and the Eagles logo.

"Nice skunk streaks, Rodinsky."

Whatever. I keep watching Addie, willing her to mow down whatever-the-hell pitch Cleary finally comes out with.

"I think they highlight my assets much better than my uniform on its own," I shoot back.

"I'm not so sure about that"—here comes the pitch, fast and straight, and square in the batter's box—"better ask your sister."

Addie's bat rockets forward and connects, sending the ball straight into the gap between second and third, dropping short of the outfielder at left.

My body knows it's supposed to run—it's been trained to run at the crack of the bat for the past thirteen years—but my mind is reeling. Did she just imply what I think she implied?

Stunned, I stutter-step, weighed down by her voice in my ears. Somehow, I move forward enough to make it to second, giving Addie room at first so Christy can score the walk-off run. But my brain is back at first. Where Stacey is standing, punching her free hand into her glove, pissed that Northland's state run is now officially over. She's a senior, so it's really the end of her road. We've won and she's ended her high school career with a loss.

I should smile. Collapse in relief. Cheer about going to the championship game. But I can't—not until I respond. I have to say something. I can't just let her say something like that and then go home like it didn't happen.

Sanderson is moping at first, so I jog back down the first-to-second line. My teammates are all celebrating at home base with Christy, but there's no way I can go straight there. I drop in next to Stacey, now walking in the direction of her dugout.

"What did you say?" My voice is clipped.

She doesn't even look in my direction. "Nothing."

"No, I think you did. And I think you meant something very specific."

Stacey's eyes roll my way. They're a muddy shade of brown, made worse by the fact that her eyebrows are on the endangered species list. "Doesn't it bother you? Your sister being paid to check out your teammates?"

"Excuse me?"

She purses her lips and says, slowly, “You heard me. Your sister. Is paid. To check out. Your teammates.”

The knuckles of my right hand smack her straight across the ski jump of her obnoxiously pert nose, and we tumble to the infield dirt. I have her pinned, my butt across her kidneys, knees on either side of her squirming stomach.

“Don’t talk about my sister like that!”

At the taste of infield, she bucks wildly and we both land on our sides. She scrambles on top of me but I get her hard across the nose again. She yelps, blood leaking onto her lips.

“You owe me a new nose!”

Her right hand goes back, fingers pulled into a fist. I see a heavy caking of dirt across her knuckles before she misses my nose and lands a blow square to my right eye.

Tears immediately begin to pool at my lash line. We’re upended again, and I’m on top of her long enough to score one more open palm to her cheekbone before I’m finally yanked away by at least two teammates. Maybe three or four.

I vaguely hear Addie’s voice. “Be cool, O-Rod! Cool! Liv. OLIVE.”

It seems to come almost from the inside of my head rather than outside, where the crowd has gone for a collective gasp.

Her words and hands carry me—I’m tall, but Addie’s taller and stronger, using all her leverage to pull me away. More hands come. More voices, too. Above the din, I hear Danielle, her coach voice turned up to eleven. “Hey, hey, hey! Stop! Stop!”

Three of Stacey’s teammates have a hold on her—two at her shoulders, Kelly Cleary at her waist. The girl’s still swinging, though, blood dripping down her chin and onto the stylized Tigers logo scrawled across her boobs.

Coach Kitt strolls over and calmly fills Sanderson’s line of sight just as I’m wrenched in the opposite direction of Stacey and right into the arms of Danielle, who can’t quit it with the “Hey, stop!”

She hooks one of her arms around my shoulders and hauls me toward the dugout. The move effectively turns both our backs on the celebration happening at home plate, delayed initially when everyone stopped to watch us fight. On Danielle’s word, the assistant coaches run out to get our team set to shake hands with Northland. My good eye tries to look up at her, but all I see is her lips quiver.

When she speaks, it’s at a disappointed whisper—one I hear over the crowd, over my teammates hesitantly going back to celebrating our state championship berth, over the pounding of my heart that’s doing a drum solo for my ears.

“Olive Rodinsky, how could you.”