

Chapter 1: Roland Makes a Decision

COACH KALTENBACH SHOULDN'T HAVE SAID IT. He shouldn't have opened his big, fat, stupid mouth. Because if he hadn't said it, then I wouldn't have heard it. And I wouldn't have hit him so hard that his head left a dent on the lowest bleacher when he collapsed.

We were running laps in the gym — third straight day of April rain, so we couldn't practice outside. Mr. Kaltenbach, varsity baseball coach, was standing near the bleachers, yelling at us to “pick it up pick it up pick it up you goddamned girls!”

“Come on, move it, Lorenz!” he bellowed as Zik ran past him.

“Get the lead out!” he bawled when Jon Blevins ran by.

“Do I have to call the girls' softball team in here to show you how this is done?” he screamed to no one in particular.

As I approached Kaltenbach, his mouth opened and his eyes gleamed, and I waited for the insult.

And then he said it.

Truth be told, I don't even remember deciding to hit him. You'd think that hitting a coach and a teacher would be something that you'd ponder. You'd weigh the pros and cons. You'd really consider it before doing it. Especially if you're me, if you're praying for a scholarship, a scholarship to take you out of this little town that knows far, far too much.

But I didn't think about it. I just stopped dead in my tracks, pivoted on my right foot, and smashed my fist into his jaw.

Kaltenbach made a sound like "Hut!" and staggered backwards, arms pinwheeling, his clipboard dropping to the floor. There was no way he was going to keep his balance; he went over backwards, landed on his flabby ass (good news for him) and then the top half of his body kept on going, and he fetched up against the bottom bleacher with the back of his head. *Whonk! Crack!*

I wasn't sure what had cracked — the bleacher, or Coach's head. I didn't really care, either.

Behind me, the sound of running feet squeaked to a stop on the gym floor. Someone said, "Holy shit," loud enough for it to echo.

Zik was at my side in an instant.

"Dude. What the fuck?" He was breathing hard. On the other hand, I was breathing regularly. I touched my fingers to my neck; my pulse was normal.

Kaltenbach groaned from the floor and rolled to one side.

"Oh, man," Zik moaned. "Why did you *do* that?"

Kaltenbach winced as he sat up, probing the back of his head. I think he wanted to say something or get up and get tough with me, but I just stared at him and clenched my fists by my sides. He was *so* out of line and he knew it.

If it had just been the two of us, he would have let it slide. But there were witnesses.

"Office," he said, then hissed in a breath as he touched something tender where he'd fallen.



Which is how I ended up in the office of (according to his desk plaque) Roland A. Sperling, Assistant Principal. Known to students far and wide as “The Spermling.”

“Joshua, Joshua, Joshua,” he says, sighing as he squeezes into his chair. “Joshua.”

“Roland, Roland, Roland,” I mimic, right down to the sigh. “Roland.”

“We’ve talked about that before. You need to show proper respect.”

“Calling you Roland is better than what the other kids call you, isn’t it? And at least I do it to your face.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Sure he does. “If you say so, Roland.”

The Spermling is a fat slug of a man. He goes beyond obese and into “generates his own gravity” territory. I’d say he’s a black hole, but black holes are *small*. The Spermling is more like a Jupiter-class gas giant, bloated and round.

On his desk near one sausage-y hand lies my student file — I recognize it instantly from the sheer bulk. It’s at least twice as thick as any other I’ve ever seen. He taps it with his pen and looks at me thoughtfully. “I thought you liked baseball, Josh.”

“I do.”

“You won’t go very far in the game if you punch your coach.”

I bite my lip. It’s been twenty minutes since I decked Kaltenbach and my knuckles still hurt. They throb. But that’s OK. It’s a good kind of throbbing because I know where it came from. It’s a justice-throbbing.

“I won’t be playing my whole life. I’m not planning on going pro or anything. I just like the game.”

“Discipline and respect aren’t just about baseball,” he tells me. “Or even just about assistant principals. When you’re out there in college or in the real world—”

“I know. I won’t be allowed to punch people.”

He starts tapping his pen again, this time against the plastic Rolodex. “Did he say something to upset you? It’s been a while since you’ve lashed out so...physically. He tells me he was goading you boys to run faster.”

For a moment, I’m back in the gym. Been like this for years — I get these weird, full-body flashbacks that last maybe a second, maybe two. I call them “flickers.” So for a second, I’m back in the gym, just as Kaltenbach says *it*.

And then back in the Spermling’s office.

“I don’t want to talk about it. Just go ahead and punish me.”

The Spermling leans back in his chair, finding a new target for his pen-tapping: the computer keyboard. “Josh, I don’t like punishing you. You’re a bright kid, and I think you’ve got a bright future waiting for you, if you settle down long enough to take it. I’ve cut you a lot of slack because of your history and because your grades are, quite frankly, better than any other three students’ combined.”

“I appreciate the vote of confidence, Roland.” I get up to leave. “I’ll be seeing you, then.”

“Sit down.” His chair howls in protest as he leans forward against the desk. “We’re not finished. Assaulting a teacher is serious business. You could get in a lot of trouble. *Legal* trouble. I don’t think you want to be in a courtroom—” He cuts himself off here, as if something caught in his throat. What the hell—?

Oh, I get it. “Again.” He was about to say, “I don’t think you want to be in a courtroom *again*,” but he stopped himself.

I say it for him. “You’re right. I don’t want to be in a courtroom again. Wasn’t much fun the first time.”

Tap-tap-taptaptaptap. The pen goes crazy on the desk. “Mr. Kaltenbach doesn’t want to press charges. Says he knows how things can get heated during a practice.”

Goddamn *right* he doesn’t want to press charges. Because then I would tell everyone what he said.

“Given your history, I think the best thing is for you to talk to Dr. Pierce.”

The school shrink? “Aw, Christ, no! Come on, Roland!”

He spreads his hands in front of him as if to encompass the panoply of options in the world. “What would you prefer? What would *you* do in my situation?”

What would I do, Roland? I’d ask the question you don’t want to ask: Not “Did Coach Kaltenbach say something to make you upset?” but “What did he say?” But no. Not you, Roland. You’d rather just avoid that and play “Bad Boy” with me, wouldn’t you?

“I sure as hell wouldn’t send me to Pierce. She doesn’t know what she’s talking about. Let me call Dr. Kennedy instead.”

He considers that. Dr. Kennedy is my usual shrink, the guy I used to see twice a week. Now I’m down to once a month.

The Spermling nods slowly, as if this whole idea was his, as if he somehow manipulated me into this. He doesn’t realize I was going to see Kennedy this week anyway.

“That’s acceptable,” he announces with all the import and gravity of Moses handing down the Commandments. “Make the call here.”

I go ahead and call Dr. Kennedy's office. The receptionist recognizes my voice right off the bat and says, "Confirming tomorrow's four o'clock?"

"Tomorrow at four o'clock." I make it sound like I'm requesting, not confirming.

As she hangs up, I vamp a bit — "Tell Dr. Kennedy I appreciate him fitting me in." — before hanging up.

The Spermling grunts. "It's almost last bell, so I want you to get ready and go home. I have to suspend you for a couple of days." Before I can protest, he holds up a hand to stop me. "I know, I know. And I really *don't* want to punish you, but I can't let you hit a teacher and get away with it. Don't worry — I'll make sure your teachers let you make up the work. Come back on Monday. Things should be smoothed over by then."

"This sucks, Roland." I get up to leave. The Spermling is putting my file away, replacing it on his desk with one that's even bigger. I've never seen *that* before.

"Well, suck or not, it's what is," he says without sympathy. "You've got six weeks of school left, Josh. Try to get by. And try to respect me."

"I'll work on it, Roland."