



Sliding into Home

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*For Lisa,
because this book is a first for both of us*

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Chapter One

You're up, Joelle!"

Thirteen-year-old Joelle Cunningham wiped her damp palms on her gym pants and walked over to the plate. The brisk March wind was cold. She shouldn't be sweating. But she was. Every girl in the entire gym class was staring at her. Joelle could feel their eyes boring holes into her back.

She couldn't blame them. After all, they didn't know her. They had no idea whether she'd slam the ball into left field or strike out.

She was the New Girl. Was there anything worse than changing schools in the middle of the year?

Joelle took a deep breath and picked up the aluminum bat. She tapped it against home plate a couple of times and brought it up over her shoulder. It was a bigger bat than she was used to. Heavier, too.

She carefully adjusted her grip. Then she changed her position a bit. Closer to the plate. No, a little further away.

The girl on the pitcher's mound tossed the ball from one hand to another, her wispy brown hair blowing in the breeze. "You ready?"

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Joelle nodded. She bent her knees and squeezed her fingers tighter around the unfamiliar bat.

The pitcher took a step forward and released a fast pitch underhand.

It wasn't the angle Joelle was used to, but it came in at the height she liked. She pulled her bat back and swung hard.

Whack!

"Whoa," said one of the girls on the bench.

The ball sailed between first and second base and all the way to the street, where it dropped to the ground and rolled along the curb. *Not bad*, Joelle thought, as two outfielders took off after it.

Joelle dropped the bat and sprinted toward first base. She glanced over her shoulder as she rounded second and saw one of the fielders, a tall, gangly girl, bend down and scoop up the ball. *Yikes. Better get moving.*

"Come on, Kate!" the shortstop yelled. "Throw it here!" She waved her glove.

Should I stop at third or go for home? Joelle wondered. But Kate had only gotten the ball about halfway to the shortstop. The ball rolled on the ground and several girls ran toward it.

Home, Joelle decided, and poured on the steam.

"All right!" A girl with a bouncy blond ponytail cheered as Joelle crossed home plate.

"Way to go!" Another girl slapped her on the back.

"Thanks," Joelle said. She was a little out of breath, but she felt good.

The gym teacher, Ms. Fenner, tossed Joelle a towel. "That was some hit," she said.

“Thanks,” Joelle said again, patting the towel against her damp forehead.

She was disappointed when the bell rang a few moments later, ending P.E. Most of the girls took off for the school building, but a few hung back to walk with Joelle.

“Hey, I knew you were good, but I didn’t know you were that good!” Elizabeth Shaw said. Elizabeth lived in the house behind Joelle’s. She and her dad had been out tossing a baseball around on Saturday, the day Joelle’s family moved to Greendale. Joelle went over and threw a few with them until her mom made her come back and help unpack. Then this morning, Elizabeth had turned up on Joelle’s doorstep to walk with her to school.

Joelle grinned. “I’m okay, I guess.”

The girl with the blond ponytail wedged herself in between Joelle and Elizabeth as they headed toward the school. “You mean you always hit like that?” she asked.

Joelle hesitated. What could she say? She didn’t usually play softball. But yeah, she was a decent hitter. Not a bad fielder, either. Her older brother Jason, who was now playing baseball for the University of Minnesota, had taught her everything she knew. “I do have a pretty good batting average,” she admitted.

“Looks like our softball team just got lucky, then,” said a girl with straight brown hair and a splash of freckles across her nose. “And hey, we’re having tryouts after school today. Perfect timing, huh?”

“That’s right,” Ms. Fenner said, coming up behind the group. “They’ll be at the same field where we just had class. Hope you can make it, Joelle.”

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“Can you?” the blond girl wanted to know.

Joelle glanced at Elizabeth. Her new friend had already tried to talk her into going out for softball. *It’ll be a great way to meet people*, Elizabeth had said. Which was true. Except softball wasn’t Joelle’s game.

“Well...” Joelle began. She had to admit, she was kind of enjoying all this attention. But she was going to have to tell these girls the truth. “Actually, I play baseball,” she said.

“Baseball?” The blond girl frowned.

“But only boys play on the Hoover baseball team,” Freckle Girl put in.

“Hey, you saw Joelle hit.” Elizabeth leaned forward. “She’s really good. Definitely good enough to play with the guys!”

Joelle cringed. It wasn’t a matter of being “good enough” to play with a bunch of guys. Baseball was just her sport.

“I played at my old school in Minneapolis,” Joelle said.

“Didn’t you have a softball team?” Freckle Girl asked.

Joelle nodded. “Sure. But I always played baseball.”

“Unfortunately, I don’t think baseball is going to be an option for you here,” Ms. Fenner said quietly.

“Not an option?” Joelle repeated. “Why not?”

“Because there’s a rule in this district that says schools have to offer the same number of boys’ sports as they do girls’ sports,” Ms. Fenner explained.

What does that have to do with my playing baseball? Joelle wondered.

“Baseball,” Ms. Fenner went on, “is considered a boys’ sport here in Greendale and softball is considered a girls’ sport.”

Joelle still didn't get it. "You mean I can't play baseball because I'm a girl?" she asked.

"But Ms. Fenner, what about that girl Tracy who played on the football team a few years ago?" the blond girl asked. "Football isn't exactly a girls' sport."

"No, Brooke, not usually," Ms. Fenner agreed. "That's why Tracy was able to play on the boys' team. The district rule says that if there isn't an alternative sport available, coaches have to give girls a chance to play that sport. There is no girls' alternative to football. In the case of baseball, however..." She turned to Joelle and her voice trailed away.

Joelle stopped in her tracks. "But softball isn't the same as baseball!" she protested. "You play with a bigger ball in softball. A bigger bat, too. You have to pitch underhand. And you can't slide. At least not in slowpitch." That was the kind of softball the girls played at her old school.

Ms. Fenner touched Joelle's shoulder, urging her to keep walking. "I know what you're saying, Joelle. And for the record, I agree with you. But I've been teaching in Greendale for twenty years. I've seen a few girls like you, who wanted to play baseball instead of softball. I'm afraid none of them was even given a tryout."

Joelle couldn't believe it. "Why not?"

Ms. Fenner shrugged. "Like I said, district policy."

Well, this policy is about to be broken, Joelle told herself. Once the Hoover baseball coach sees what I can do, he'll have to let me play. Last year she'd batted almost .375. And Coach Perry said she was one of the best first basemen he'd ever had. She was tall and thin and

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she had good instincts. She was also left-handed, which meant she could catch throws that other first basemen often missed.

"Don't worry. We have a pretty good softball team," Brooke said, looking over at Freckle Girl. "Right, Amy?"

"Tons better than our baseball team," Amy snorted.

"We would've gone on to the district championship last year if it wasn't for Greendale Academy," Brooke added.

"That's a private school on the other side of town," Elizabeth whispered to Joelle.

"Pretty bad, huh? We were beaten by our own town," Amy said.

"They always beat us." Elizabeth sighed.

"Well, if Joelle plays on our team this year, we might beat them." Brooke flashed a mouthful of perfect teeth. "She'll be our secret weapon!"

Joelle shook her head. "Sorry. I really do want to play baseball."

"But you heard Ms. Fenner," Elizabeth said as she pulled open the door to the school. "They won't let you."

"Mmmm," Joelle said. "We'll see about that."

She wasn't going to let anyone talk her out of baseball.

No way.

* * *

Right after school, Elizabeth and Joelle headed out to the practice fields together. "See that guy over there with the blue cap?" Elizabeth pointed to a man with gray hair and a gut that spilled over his pants.

“That’s the baseball coach?” Joelle asked. The man didn’t look like he could run even one lap. But she could tell by the way he was yelling at the runner on first that he was clearly in charge.

“Yup. That’s good ol’ Coach Carlyle,” Elizabeth said. “He’s also the boys’ gym teacher. And he’s pretty tough. If any of them forget their gym shorts, he makes them do a hundred push-ups.”

“Wow,” Joelle said. He sounded a lot tougher than Coach Perry back in Minneapolis.

Joelle watched the boy who’d just gotten chewed out. He picked up the bat and got into position. When the ball came whizzing toward him, he swung. But the pitch was high, so he just nicked the ball. It ricocheted out of bounds.

Coach Carlyle threw up his hands in disgust. The kid tossed the bat on the ground and went to the end of the line.

“Are you sure you don’t want to come with me to softball tryouts instead?” Elizabeth asked, squinting in the bright sun.

Joelle shook her head. “I don’t mind a tough coach. Tough coaches make you work harder.”

“Well,” Elizabeth said, “good luck then.”

“Good luck to you, too. See you later.” Joelle took a deep breath and headed toward the baseball field.

The next batter hit a grounder straight between first and second. The shortstop reached down, but he didn’t get his glove to the ground. The ball rolled right between his legs.

The first baseman looked a little better. A ball was hit in his direction, but it was high and way to the right. He managed to snag it easily while still keeping one foot on base. *That guy can*

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stretch like a really tall rubber band, Joelle thought. She could stretch well, too, but not like that. And he was going to be her competition for first base.

“Hey, you!” a gruff voice yelled.

Joelle jumped, a bit startled.

The coach was waving at her. “Softball tryouts are over on the other diamond,” he said, pointing. Then he turned his attention back to the boys.

Joelle swallowed hard. Her heart pounded, but she continued walking toward the coach.

“I’m, uh, here to try out for baseball,” she said when she reached him. She held out her hand. It shook a little. “I’m Joelle Cunningham.”

The coach looked down at her hand and frowned. “This is a boys’ team,” he said. “You want to play, you go play softball. On the girls’ field.”

Some of the boys were staring at her now. One of them even snickered.

Joelle let her hand drop. “Actually, I’m a baseball player,” she said. “I played first base at my old school in Minneapolis.”

Coach Carlyle didn’t answer. He just kept frowning.

“I’d just like a tryout,” Joelle said, trying to stay cool. She couldn’t wait to show this guy what she could do. The coach shook his head. “Sorry, young lady. Boys only on this team.”

“But—” Joelle began.

The coach sighed. “Look, I’m sorry,” he said again. “I really am. But I don’t have time for this discussion. I’ve got a team to run. You want to play ball, you go see Ms. Fenner.”

chapter one

Joelle stood in shocked silence as the man strode away. *This is the twenty-first century*, she said to herself. *Girls can play whatever sport they want.*

What kind of backward place had her parents brought her to?