





# ONE

“Alex, stop looking out the window!” my teacher, Mrs. Fulmer, said.

“Sorry.” I pulled my eyes from the window and tried to aim them toward the board, but they flickered past it to the clock above the door. I needed to see how close we were to recess.

“Alex!” she said. “Pay attention, or you’ll get detention.” She tried to frown at me to show she was serious but ended up fighting against a smile. I guess she’d realized she’d accidentally made a rhyme.

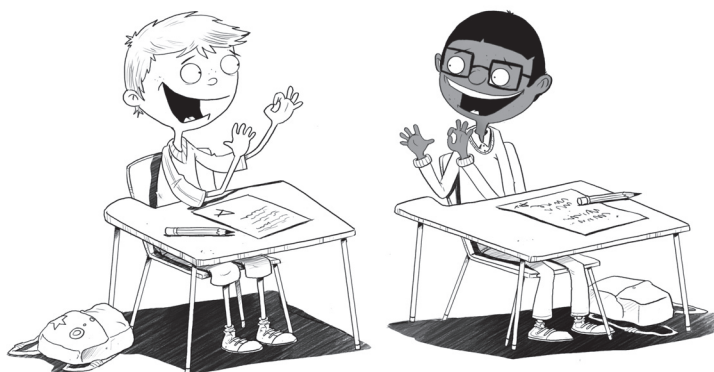
“Yes, Mrs. Fulmer.” I forced myself to look straight ahead at the vocabulary

words she'd written for the class. Detention would be just as bad as rain, since either one would keep me inside. And if I didn't get to go out, it would hurt my chance to do something amazing.

Luckily, my quick peek at the clock showed me we were only five minutes away from recess. And it didn't look like there'd be more rain, even though it rained last night and was still cloudy.

I glanced two rows over to my friend Stuart.

He held up five fingers with his right



hand and made a circle with his left thumb and forefinger. *Fifty*.

I flashed the signal back to him. *Fifty*.

The bell rang. I shot to my feet, along with everyone else.

“Wait,” Mrs. Fulmer said.

We all froze and stared at her like dogs desperately eager to hear “Let’s go for a walk.”

“Dismissed,” she said.

We rushed through the door and into the hallway, turning left for the exit that led to the playground.

“Fifty,” Stuart said.

“For sure,” I said. In all the years that kids had played kickball at Thomas Jefferson Elementary School, nobody had kicked fifty home runs in a single month. That’s why I was watching the sky. If it rained, we’d have indoor recess. Then I wouldn’t

get to play kickball. I loved kickball. And I was good at it. I'd kicked forty-seven home runs this month. Forty-seven! I was within striking distance of setting a record. I wasn't the first to get close. In the past, five kids had reached forty-eight, and three had reached forty-nine. But fifty just didn't seem to happen. Maybe they'd all choked under the pressure of reaching such a perfectly round number. But I wouldn't.

I loved to compete at anything and everything. Sports, games, contests. And I loved to win. That kickball record was going to be mine. There were eight more school days left to the month. Nothing was going to stop me.

As I moved with the mob toward the door to the playground, I bumped into my cousin Sarah.

“You’re always in such a rush,” she said.

“I like recess,” I said.

“We all do,” Sarah said.

“But you’ve always had recess,” I said.

“It’s still new for me.”

We burst outside, and I inhaled a deep breath of the still-damp air. I loved the fact that damp air didn’t make me cough. I really loved that my chest didn’t hurt when I breathed. Until near the end of last year, I didn’t get to go out for recess. I had really bad allergies. No matter what season, there was something that would make me cough, sneeze, itch, or wheeze. My mom—she’s an allergy doctor—wrote me an excuse to get out of recess, even though I didn’t want to be excused. I didn’t get to go outside much after school, either. When I was stuck in my room, I used to put my pillow on the floor and kick it hard at a

poster of a goalpost that I'd taped on the wall. I pretended I was scoring field goals. I guess all that kicking made a difference, since the first time I played kickball, I almost put one over the fence.

Happily, I was fine now. I no longer missed recess. I'd outgrown my allergies. Mom says that happens sometimes and that I was very fortunate.

As I stood there just beyond the door, thinking about how lucky I was, someone bumped into me from behind.

"Get out of my way, slowpoke," Herbert Clumpmeister said, running past me.

"He could catch you," Stuart said.

"No way." I tried to sound confident. But Herbert had scored forty-five home runs. If things went really badly for me, I could lose the record to him.

But that would never happen. I'd get to fifty before he did. That's what really mattered with records. It was *good* to reach fifty, but it was *great* to be the first one to do it.

"Have fun," Sarah said as she headed off toward the basketball courts.

"You too," I said. I cut over toward the ball field. There were puddles all over the place, including a huge one right near home plate, but the field was dry enough for us to play on.

"Hey, who's that?" Stuart asked as we lined up to reach into the bag that held the field positions. He pointed behind the backstop.

There was a young woman, or maybe she was an older girl, standing under the tree behind the backstop. I hadn't even



noticed her. In her long black coat, floppy hat, and black pants, she sort of blended into the dark bark of the walnut tree. And it was hard to tell her age with her face hidden behind thick-framed sunglasses and droopy black hair. The little bit of her face that I could see was very pale, and she didn't look very happy.

“New monitor, I guess.” Students from the local college earned extra money by helping keep an eye on things at the playground. Some retired people did that, too. They're all really nice, and they make sure nobody gets hurt.



I reached into the bag and plucked out one of the old tennis balls that was inside of it. THIRD BASE was written on it in permanent marker. That would be my starting position. We don't play two teams—we play a game where you rotate through all the field positions. Then you line up to wait for your turn to kick after you play right field. If the batter kicks a pop fly and someone catches it, they swap positions. And if the batter is out any other way—through a tag, a force, or being hit by the ball (everyone's favorite method)—he becomes the pitcher.

We took our positions. Herbert was up to bat first. He's pretty competitive, too. He pointed at me and said, "Watch out. I'm about to crush your chances for the record."

He didn't. Not this time.

As I moved through the outfield positions, from left to center to right, I watched

the new monitor. Most of the monitors get interested in the games, and even clap and cheer when someone makes a good play, or say comforting words when things go wrong, but Gloomy Girl just stood there, staring straight ahead as if we were no more interesting than stalks of corn or specks of dust.

Glancing over my shoulder, I saw a monitor by the basketball court clapping for Sarah as she sank a jump shot from beyond the foul line. Another monitor was helping swing a jump rope for three kids. But I turned my attention away from them as I heard the unmistakable sound of the ball getting a solid kick. It was a grounder to second and an easy out. Which meant I was back in the batting line. Soon after that I was up.

As I jogged to the plate, I flashed the *fifty* sign to Stuart, who was now at short-stop. He flashed it back. After I took my position in the batter's box, I looked at the new monitor. She still stared straight ahead, as if I didn't even exist. Well, she'd get more interested when I kicked the ball into orbit.

Lindsay Waller, who was pitching, rolled the ball toward the plate. I took a step back. And another step. And another. And—well, I took five steps back in all. That's my patented hyper-special fool-proof kickball home run technique. Five steps back as the ball is rolling and then a dash forward to meet it perfectly at the plate with a super-duper kick.

As I took my fifth step, my nose started to itch. I couldn't worry about that. I had

a ball to blast for a home run. It was a perfect pitch, traveling with just the right amount of speed for me to clobber it. That would put me at forty-eight!

I dashed forward. The itch filled my whole nose. *Ignore it*, I told myself. I reached the plate, planted my left foot firmly at the same time as I swung my right foot back. (I'm a lefty when I write or throw, but I kick righty.) The big secret to kickball is that you don't just kick with your foot, or even your leg. You kick with your whole body working together. I put my shoulder into it, and then my hip, followed by my knee. With the force of all my moving parts behind it, I unleashed a mighty kick. At the same instant, I sneezed so hard I thought my head would leave my neck.

When your head is sneezing and your foot is swinging, and the dirt around home

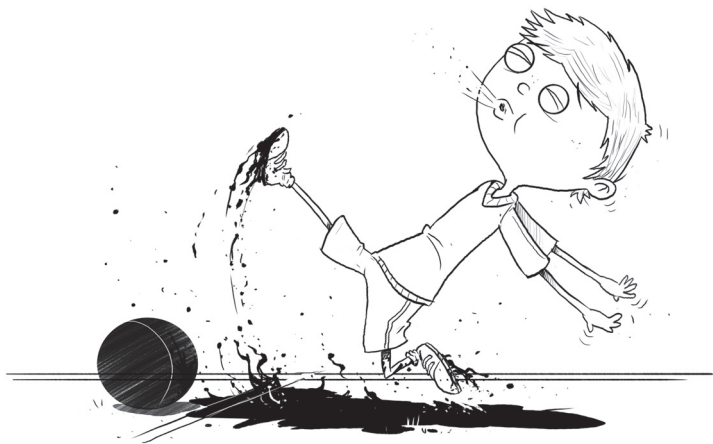


plate is just a little bit wet and slippery, things don't always go as planned. I missed the ball. I'd totally muffed the kick. Worse, I swung my leg so hard, I sent myself sailing through the air. And even worse than that, I was sailing right toward the huge mud puddle.