

That day, I arrived at softball practice with a sort of glowing feeling about me, all the way from my annoying corkscrew curls of brown hair to the tips of my grungy old cleats. Heck, the glow was even affecting my group of friends as I joined them on the bleachers—or maybe they were glowing, themselves. It wasn't just because our softball team was top of our league in everything we did, but of course, that didn't hurt any. For people who loved softball as much as much as my friends and I did, it meant a lot to be doing as well as we were.

Coach Daniels stood in front of the bleachers as she usually did before every practice, giving us what seemed to be the ordinary discussion of strategy, confidence, and tips on what we needed to work on. My teammates and I shaded our hands over the bills of our baseball hats against the harsh sun and squirmed on the uncomfortable bleachers. On that particular day, the coach's words seemed to go in one ear and out the other. I was happy to have a distraction when my friend Lyna nudged my shoulder.

"Alex, look over there," she said, pointing down the bleachers and to the right a ways.

I looked. There was a girl sitting there entirely alone, a girl I'd never seen before. She had long, shiny blond hair done up in a perfect ponytail through her baseball hat, and when she turned her head I took in at a glance her appearance. She had dusky greenish eyes, almost flawless skin, and she was wearing bright pink lipstick. And was that *mascara*? Mascara, when she was at softball practice? Her uniform and cleats were impeccably neat and clean, and her nails were long and painted the same shade as her lips. I almost snorted. Whoever the new girl was, she wasn't going to fit in here—that was obvious. She looked like she would've been afraid to dive and catch a ball just for the sake of avoiding the grass stains.

"Wonder why she joined," I muttered to Lyna, looking over at the girl again. People said you could never know a player's worth until they were out on the field, but she certainly wasn't softball material at first glance.

"Because we need another player," Lyna said in her usual practical way. "Preferably a power hitter, I'd think, since you're the only one we've got.

"Power hitter?" This girl didn't look like anything of the sort. "You think so?"

"No, but I don't *know* she isn't one."

I looked over at the girl again. Well, it wouldn't hurt to be nice to her at least. And come to think of it, nobody would have assumed I was a power hitter at first glance. I was on the small side and

wiry. You'd think I was built for speed. But as it turned out, I had a knack for hitting the ball high and far. It was a nice advantage on a softball team, in a game that tended to be more about the infield hits, and the bunts, and all that sort of thing--some people would refer to it as "small ball". It was good to have a couple hitters that could change things up a bit.

"Now," said Coach Daniels, "because Ella and Cara moved and dropped out, and Jessica is injured, I've held a little tryout and brought in another player to our team. Go ahead and give a warm welcome to our new left fielder, Elizabeth Burnell!"

There was a weak bout of applause and a murmur swept over the team when this new girl, Elizabeth, slowly walked up to Coach Daniel's side, her head a little ducked down. She frowned at the murmur and flipped her ponytail back to the side.

"Call me Lizzy," she said, in a quiet, clear voice. She pronounced every letter perfectly and precisely. It was as annoying as my relentlessly frizzy curls.

"I think you'll find that Lizzy'll be a good addition to our team," said Coach Daniels. "She'll be able to round off our lineup as we head for the championship."

She nodded to Lizzy, who hurried back to her seat on the bleachers, smoothing her uniform, which was hardly even ruffled.

"As you should all know, we're number one in the southeast league right now," Coach Daniels continued. "But I don't want it going to your heads. We should only be looking ahead to the next game. A lot could change in the five games we have left, so we'll be focusing on winning the games that are facing us right now."

I caught the new girl's eye and smiled at her. She gave me a quick smile back--so quick, in fact, that I hardly knew it had been there before she turned her head away. My smile faded and turned into a frown.

"Two weeks from now there will be the annual preliminary Junior Softball Home Run Derby, a prized tradition in our league and state," said Coach Daniels. "The southeast league will accept an entry of one player per team. It is up to the team members to nominate this player. We'll be deciding who should go a week from today, so start thinking!" Courtney, on my left, gave me a nudge and a smile. I'd taken home the state title last year, and it was obvious they were going to nominate me again.

I don't think many other states had home run derby competitions for softball, but it had always been something of a prided tradition for ours. If our team's player won the southeast preliminary contest, then they'd move on to state. My golden trophy from the year before was still sitting in a place of honor on my desk, and I was hoping to bring home another one.

"Alright, enough chatter, let's get out there and play some softball," said Coach Daniels

At first, I took back everything I'd thought when I saw Lyna's pitch go soaring through the air. It was definitely a home run, or would have been had we been playing a real game instead of a practice one, and Lizzy Burnell had hit it. She was a power hitter, and no mistake. I knew (hoping this didn't make me an arrogant idiot) that she wasn't as good as me--she wasn't quite there yet. I'd been playing all my life, though.

But my confidence in this new player deflated a little when I watched her run the bases. She trotted along them slowly and precisely, like a fairy walking on eggshells. I frowned as I went up to bat. Later, when Lizzy hit a single and was given the signal to steal second, I watched her run towards second—but she didn't so much as attempt a dive. When she was tagged out, she nervously rubbed the dirt from where the other girl's mitt had touched her arm, and quietly trotted off the field. Was this how this girl played softball all the time? Sure, inexperienced players had to learn, but they didn't have to learn on an elite team like ours.

Nevertheless, I walked over to Lizzy a moment later as we were talking a break.

"That home run was great," I told her.

She laughed a short, snort of a laugh that was rather dismissive and flipped her ponytail back again.

"Thanks," she said quietly, but she didn't make eye contact with me--instead, she stared at the tips of her cleats.

I frowned. What was it with her?

"So, um, how long have you been playing softball?" I asked, feeling a little awkward.

"A year," she said, and her voice, which had previously been so quiet and calm, turned as prickly as a bush full of thorns.

I opened my mouth to say something, but I was at a loss for words, so I walked back to my friends.

"She's really stuck-up," I said to them, bewildered. "She wouldn't even look at me! And then she suddenly snapped at me like a ... a crocodile!"

We had to hurry off then to continue practicing. One of our routine warm-ups at practice was simply throwing the ball around the field, but when my friends and I tried to make a point of throwing the ball to Lizzy and giving her a shot at it, every time she just watched it land at her feet, or jumped out of the way to dodge it. My previous happy glow was fading fast. This girl was the worst news our softball team had had in years.

"Alexa, can I talk to you real quick?" said Coach Daniels after practice.

"Yeah, sure," I said. "But only if you start calling me Alex." Coach Daniels just smiled at me—she refused to call me anything but Alexa.

We stepped off to the side and she paused for a minute to scribble something down on her ever-present clipboard.

"I can tell you're expecting to go to the home run derby this year," she said with a half-smile. I blinked and nodded. Where was this going? "You're the obvious choice because you did so well last year. But I want you to think about something. I have the feeling Lizzy might have a hard time fitting in with the team."

I snorted softly. It was more like she was having a hard time bringing herself down to our level. All through practice, when anybody gave her a friendly word or shot her a welcoming smile, she returned the gesture as shortly and dismissively as possible, and then averted her gaze, flipping that impeccably glossy, neat ponytail of hers, or smoothing imaginary rumples in her unfailingly clean uniform. Heck, even her *gum* was better than ours—it was that fancy, layered kind. Why couldn't she settle for plain old bubblegum like the kind I was chewing now?

"It might not be easy to accept her," Coach Daniels said, giving me a sharp glance, "but I expect you all to try. And I think that the best thing you girls could do is to send Lizzy to the home run derby. I think it would be a wonderful chance for her—and a great way for her to feel like she's a true part of the team."

"But—" I began.

"All I'm asking is for you to have a talk with your friends about it before we decide who's going. You understand?"

I nodded glumly. But there was no way my friends would be up for that, unless Lizzy really, truly wanted to go. I paused for a moment on the edge of the softball field. In the bleachers, Lizzy was organizing the shiny blue bag that she'd brought with her to practice. Surely it couldn't hurt to talk to her? I walked over.

"Hey, Liz," I said a little hesitantly. "Can I talk to you about something?"

"Um, okay," she said in her quiet, precise voice, raising her eyebrows a little.

Again, her gaze kept flitting away from me, and she was still rummaging around in her bag. She pulled out a pack of her fancy gum and carefully selected a piece.

"Well, uh, Coach Daniels was just talking to me and well..." She finally turned her gaze to me, turning her gum over in her mouth. Her look was unreadable, and she certainly wasn't helping the conversation along any. She was making me stumble with my words.

"Well?" she said slowly after a moment, sounding bored.

"She was thinking that, uh, maybe—"

She turned her gaze away again, towards her bag, and I narrowed my eyebrows.

"That maybe you should—" I finally started to say with determination.

Just then there was a shout from the parking lot down below. Two girls, as neatly-dressed and well-groomed as Lizzy herself, were calling to her.

"I have to go," said Lizzy, sounding relieved. And with a flip of her ponytail, and not another glance in my direction, she walked down to the girls. I raised my eyebrows. What was it with her?

"She didn't even glance at me when she said goodbye," I said in a frustrated tone to my friends later that day. We were sitting outside our usual Dairy Queen devouring ice cream cones and venting to each other--a typical summer day after practice. "She wouldn't even listen to me!"

"She clearly thinks we're not worth her time," said Lyna in a practical tone, biting off a section of the chocolate shell that surrounded her ice cream. "If she were good at softball, then maybe we could put up with it, but when she's snobbish and a bad player at the same time? That's just insufferable."

"And Coach Daniels wants her going to the home run derby?" snorted Abigail, a tall, skinny girl with a thick braid of dark hair. She was our third baseman. "We were *nice* to her today! She

wouldn't *let* herself be welcomed. Maybe if she would we could help her learn how to play better. I mean, she has potential at least, even though she doesn't know how to catch a ball."

"I say, we prank her," said Kaitlyn through a mouthful of ice cream. This was typical--Kaitlyn always wanted to prank somebody. "We have to let her know her behavior isn't okay! Besides, if she's a good sport she'll take the joke. It might even make her feel more welcome—I know it would for me."

I frowned and stared at the ground for a moment.

"I dunno," I said slowly. "It sounds kinda mean to me. She hasn't done anything that terrible."

"But she clearly thinks she's so much better than us," said my friend Eva, licking a smudge of ice cream off her upper lip. "Shouldn't we let her know she's not? Besides, it'd all be in fun, really. She should be able to take a joke."

Lyna, with a doubtful expression, opened her mouth to say something, but then we stopped our discussion short. Walking up to the Dairy Queen was Lizzy herself, of all people, with the two friends she'd run off to earlier. She caught a glimpse of us and instantly looked away, not responding to our waves. She and her friends hurried to get their ice cream and left as soon as they had it in their hands.

"Speaking of crocodiles" said Eva's twin, Anna, who'd heard my comment earlier in the day after I complimented Lizzy on her home run. "She's so cold! Why won't she even wave to us?" She shook her head.

"That settles it," said Courtney in a grim tone. "She has it coming to her."

I exchanged a glance with Lyna. Lizzy didn't seem like the kind of person who would enjoy a good prank. Maybe the other girls didn't understand that this girl just didn't speak our language.

That weekend, every year, my family held a party for the softball team. We invited everybody, and always had a great time. But four days after Lizzy had joined our team, my friends came to my party with a purpose--the purpose, that is, of pranking Lizzy.

When Lizzy arrived, almost everybody else was already there. Once again, Liz was flawlessly dressed, her hair as glossy as ever and her nails painted a bright blue color. Well, her flawless appearance was about to change. I felt a pang of anxiety about it--I was worried about a prank

for what had to be the first time in my life. I never worried about pranks. I tried to calm myself down by taking a deep breath.

"Hey, Liz, could you run and get something for me?" I asked her. "There's a bag of chips in the closet over there--I'd get it myself but I have to get pop for everybody."

"Okay," she said, walking over to the closet, entirely unaware of the fact that all of our eyes were following her every footstep.

She opened the closet door, and for a split second, nothing happened. Then Abigail charged out, holding a large bucket of water, and dumped it right on top of Lizzy's head. For another moment, Lizzy stood there gasping and sputtering, her hands flying to her glossy hair and her expression--hurt and angry. I was starting to feel a little sick to my stomach. What was the point of this prank, again?

"Why did you *do* this?" she shrieked, all the quiet precision that had made up her voice before vanishing.

"Well--I--you were so--stuck up," Courtney explained pathetically.

"*Stuck up?*" Lizzy sputtered. "Okay, maybe I wasn't very warm or friendly or bubbly! You wanna know the *truth*? I'm *shy*. I wasn't comfortable with you guys and your loudness and laughter and inside jokes! And I *know* I'm not a good softball player like you guys are! So I didn't know how to talk to you all! I was more comfortable with the friends I already *knew*! And apparently I had a good reason to be afraid of you because the slightest bit of reserve turns you into horrid monsters! You *drenched* me!"

I heard my mother's hurried footsteps on the stairs. I felt crappy now--really crappy. How *could* I have done that? What was I thinking?

"Lizzy, I'm sorry, we shouldn't have—" I began.

"You know what *I* shouldn't have done? I'm *sorry* I joined the softball team in the first place!" And with that, she turned on her heel, grabbed her purse, and stalked out of the house, leaving us all feeling like horrible people.

Half a week later, Lizzy was still sitting on the bleachers with our team. We were all sorry about what we'd done, and not just because we'd all been punished for the prank, but she hadn't listened to our many apologies, and whenever we talked to her, she deliberately ignored us or

walked away. We couldn't blame her, though, not after we'd been so dreadful. As Abigail had regretfully reminded us earlier, pranks were alright when they were on friends, people that you knew wouldn't mind—but we hadn't known Lizzy well enough to throw a bucket of water on her head. Come to think of it, at what point *do* you know someone well enough to throw a bucket of water on their head?

"We've been through some rough time lately as a team," said Coach Daniels, and my friends and I all just about hung our heads down in shame. "But we're not gonna let it stop us, will we? As you all know," she said, giving me a look, "we'll be nominating who goes to the preliminary home run derby today." My friends and I smiled at each other. "So I'll now ask you to give some nominations, and then you'll all vote. Who would you like to nominate?"

"I'd like to nominate Lizzy Burnell," I said, with no regret whatsoever.

"Does anybody have any other suggestions?" Coach Daniels asked, looking around the bleachers. Then she smiled at us for the first time since the "water bucket incident", as the prank had become known. I could see that she was proud of us—and of me. And Lizzy looked at the same time surprised, bewildered, and happy. Then she smiled at me, a real smile, for the first time. And that was enough to make me feel better about everything.

And so we sent Elizabeth Burnell to the home run derby. She took the preliminary round, and sure, she only ranked third when she went to state, but third was better than nothing at all. What was even better, Lizzy forgave us for what we did, and to this day, she's as much a part of my group of friends as anybody, despite the fact that she paints her nails and wears makeup and likes everything to be just so. We taught her how to play softball better, too. And okay, maybe we didn't win the championship that year. But at least we got there.