

It was the top of the fifth. Avis returned to the plate and put on her mask. A Belle with curly red hair came into the batter's box.

"Maybe you should ditch the mitt and try catching with your potholders," said the Belle in a low voice.

Avis held out her hand to take Nancy Beth's warm-up pitch. She returned the ball to Sandy at shortstop.

"I figured we'd beat you girls, but I had no idea it'd be this easy. Why don't you do yourself a favor and quit before you're dead?"

The ball criss-crossed the field, to first, to center, to left, to third, to right, to second where Evelyn dropped it, to first, to the mound, and back to Avis. The batter idly lifted her bat, swinging it in the air like a cavewoman.

"I'm starting to feel real sorry for you girls," said the Belle. "I'm starting to feel like an assassin."

Avis cupped the ball in her mitt and took a walk to the mound.

"What's up?" Nancy Beth was beginning to show signs of fatigue. Her thin face was crimped and pained. There was a dull look in her eyes but she smiled bravely.

Avis cocked her head to indicate the Belle at bat. "I want you to put some elbow grease in this one. She likes to go for the backspins. I want you to destroy her."

Nancy Beth shrugged and took the ball. "I'll see what I can do."

Back at the plate, Avis grinned through her mask at the Belle. Nancy Beth went into position. The two umpires crouched in readiness. The Belle took her stance.

"Too bad you called yourselves Spurs," said the Belle over her shoulder. "Unless you're planning to whip up a dead horse."

"Oh, eat it," said Avis. Nancy Beth's first pitch thumped neatly into the pocket of her mitt.

"Stee-rike!" cried Jake.

Avis returned the ball, buckled down, lifted her mitt.

"Stee-rike two!"

The next pitch met the bat in its center and shot out with a loud thud. Avis lifted her mask to watch it soar. The red-haired Belle was streaking down the baseline as tiny clouds of dust rose up behind her.

"It's all your, Birdey," prayed Avis.

Birdey moved back fast. The batter was inches from the bag. Avis felt her teeth gritting together. The crowd fell silent, and Birdey went up off the ground, plucking the ball out of the air with the ease of a woman reaching into a tree for a piece of fruit. Avis hugged herself, cheering. One out.

The Belle coming up had already singled and doubled. She was a solid woman with a rectangular body and short, boxy hands that gripped the bat the way stranglers grip throats in movies. Her name was Melinda. Avis was getting to know them all by now. She knew what this one would do: choke up and throttle the first decent high pitch, shut her eyes against the impact, and slam to center. Nancy Beth looked to the bench. Gussie's tongue was in the right corner of her mouth. Low arc. Avis approved. Nancy Beth stepped

into her windup, delivering the lowest legal pitch of her life. Jake called it a strike. Gussie kept her tongue to the right. In three more pitches they had her. Two down.

The next Belle was wide-bottomed and exceptionally slow on her feet, but she knew how to hit. It didn't matter how the ball came in and it didn't matter where she aimed. She'd hit anything. Pulling back, the outfield Spurs went into a solid line.

The pitch was low, inside. The Belle slammed it hard and the ball took off close to the ground, heading straight for the unguarded space where half the outfield would have been if they hadn't pulled back.

Patsy Griffin came flying forward. She fell to her knees, stopped the drive, and threw to second from a crouch. The big batter lumbered for the bag. Evelyn lowered her glove for the tag a long, awful moment before the ball was even in her hands. The Belle was safe at second.

Evelyn weakly picked up the ball and shot underhand to the mound. Avis felt a curse coming to her lips but she stopped it. Evelyn looked ready to cry.

The next Belle was chewing fruit-flavored gum, about seven sticks of it at once. She was tall and awkward, and she was desperately in need of an orthodontist. Her overbite was so bad, her teeth reached nearly to her chin. Avis called her Fang. Passionately working her jaws, Fang went up on tiptoes for a high pitch and sent it back, straight up, stiffly peaking above second base.

Evelyn tipped back her head. The ball started falling. The upturned glove started trembling. She took a small step forward, then a small step back again, and the ball

landed on the ground at her heels. Patsy moved in to retrieve it. She threw to first but the Belle was on.

“Damn,” said Avis.