

# 1

**The ball was scorched**—Connor Sullivan saw that right away.

It shot past the pitcher on one hop, then headed for the outfield as Connor broke to his left from his shortstop position.

With three strides he was there, lunging at the last minute to glove the ball behind second base. He spun, going with his momentum, and fired a bullet to first.

It beat the Braves runner by a step.

“He’s out!” the umpire shouted, pumping his fist.

The packed stands behind home plate exploded with cheers and shouts of “Way to go, Connor!” and “Now let’s get some hits, Orioles!”

The Orioles hustled off the field and smacked gloves with Connor near the dugout, the way the big leaguers did after a great play.

“Where base hits go to die!” second baseman Willie Pitts said, grabbing Connor’s glove and holding it over his head like a trophy.

“Someone call ESPN!” first baseman Jordy Marsh said.

“Highlights at eleven! Too bad you can’t stay up that late, C!”

The rest of the Orioles laughed. This one was all but over. They led the Braves 10–3 in the fifth inning, and the great Connor Sullivan was putting on another show.

He was already 3-for-3 at the plate, including a soaring three-run homer that was probably still being tracked by radar at BWI-Marshall Airport. And he’d made an earlier sparkling play in the field, too, backhanding a line drive in the hole to rob the Braves of another hit.

There was no doubt about it: the Orioles were thankful to have Connor on their team. He was their best player, their all-star shortstop, and a beast of a cleanup hitter.

Tall and broad-shouldered, with a thick mop of brown hair that spilled out from under his cap, he was also their meal ticket if the Orioles planned to win the Dulaney Babe Ruth League championship. And they definitely did, seeing as how they had a perfect 10–0 record with five games to go.

All this could give a kid a big head. But Connor was not that sort of kid.

Sure, he made jokes about having his own posse as a twelve-year-old baseball phenom.

“Jordy, you can be my limo driver,” he’d say. “The rest of you, make yourselves useful. Open some doors and keep the paparazzi away.”

And he did show up for a game wearing dark, movie-star shades and silver stud earrings—the magnetic kind you get at the dollar store. It cracked up everyone, including his coach, Ray Hammond.

But the rest of the Orioles knew Connor was really the most humble player on the team. He was even more humble than reserve player Marty Loopus, who had a lot to be humble about, seeing as how he couldn't hit, couldn't catch, and couldn't throw.

"He doesn't run too well, either," Willie Pitts pointed out helpfully whenever Marty grounded out weakly to the pitcher, his usual at bat.

The Orioles also knew no one loved baseball more than Connor Sullivan. No one worked harder at the game, either.

The bounce-back net in the Sullivans' backyard was worn and frayed from use. Connor practiced catching fly balls and grounders for hours, all the while ferociously chewing gum and blowing bubbles like one of his idols, Adam Jones, of the big-league Orioles.

On weekends, Connor could always be found at Sports, the big amusement arcade near his home, taking endless cuts in the batting cages.

Lately, in fact, he'd begun to wonder if he wasn't practicing too much.

"Don't try to be perfect, Connor," his dad always said. "Baseball isn't about perfection. Just enjoy the game."

But sometimes that was hard, especially with what was going on at home. These days he'd been feeling more and more frustrated during games.

If I just work harder, Connor found himself thinking, at least I can make Mom and Dad proud, take their minds off their worries.

All this was running through his head in the sixth inning, when the Braves had runners on first and second

with two outs. The next batter lifted a lazy fly ball that drifted behind third base.

Connor circled to his right. He had the better angle on the ball and called off third baseman Carlos Molina. "I got it!" Connor yelled, tapping his glove with his fist, wondering if he should do the Adam Jones bubble-blow as the ball floated out of the bright blue May sky.

Then he watched in disbelief as the ball kicked off the heel of his glove and rolled harmlessly to the grass. Carlos hustled to retrieve it, but not before two runs scored.

Instantly, Connor felt something welling up inside him. *How did I blow an easy fly ball like that? I can't even blame the stupid sun!*

Before he could stop himself, he slammed his glove to the ground in disgust. Then, convinced the glove hadn't absorbed enough punishment, he kicked it as hard as he could.

Connor didn't think a battered Wilson glove could travel that far. But this one sailed past the pitcher's mound, where Jordy, his best friend, picked it up with a shocked grin.

"That little act might make *SportsCenter*, bro," Jordy said, handing over the glove. "Good thing the ump had his back turned."

By now, Connor's anger had vanished, replaced by a major case of embarrassment. "With my luck, it'll be all over YouTube, too," he muttered.

Then they heard it.

"CONNOR!"

Coach Hammond's voice cut the air like a whip. He stood

on the dugout steps and glared at his shortstop. “Bring it in, son,” he said. Turning to Marty Loopus on the bench, he said, “Marty, you’re in for Connor.”

Feeling his face redden, Connor trudged to the dugout as a hush fell over the crowd. It was a silence he had never heard before at a baseball game, the kind of silence you felt in a doctor’s office right before he gave you a shot.

“Connor, you’re better than that,” Coach Hammond said gruffly. “And I’m not talking about the error. We don’t lose our temper like that. Not on this team.”

The rest of the game seemed to take forever. The Orioles held on for a 10–6 win, even with Marty booting a ground ball with a runner on second and air-mailing the throw in the direction of the hot dog stand, allowing another Braves run.

Connor was still thinking about the botched fly ball—he’d never had a meltdown like that in his life—when the two teams lined up to slap hands. And he was still thinking about it when Jordy draped an arm over his shoulder.

“Hey, hothead, we’re going for ice cream,” Jordy said. “The great Connor Sullivan needs to cool off.”

Connor shook his head wearily. He sat down and took off his spikes. “No, I better not,” he said. “Same old story: no money.”

Jordy smiled and pulled a crumpled five-dollar bill from the top of his sock. “Ta-daaa!” he said. “This’ll take care of both of us.”

“No, I’ve been mooching off you guys for weeks,” Connor said. “Besides, I have a ton of homework.”

Jordy pretended to be astonished. “The great Connor

Sullivan does homework?" he said. "Can't get your posse to do it for you?"

"Gave 'em the night off," Connor said. He managed a weak smile. "Besides, they stink at math."

Jordy shrugged and ran off to join the other Orioles. Connor tossed his spikes, bat, and glove in his equipment bag and slung it over his shoulder. He didn't have a ride, because neither of his parents had come to the game today—which was probably just as well, considering. It would be a long walk home. And he was in no great hurry to get there.

He pictured his mom and dad sitting at the kitchen table, the mail stacked high in front of them. They would open envelopes one by one, punch numbers into the calculator, then sigh and moan, their worried voices muffled for the sake of the kids.

No, bill-paying day was never a fun time in the Sullivan household.