

CAL RIPKEN, JR.

with Kevin Cowherd

SUPER-SIZED SLUGGER



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Cody braced himself for the usual reaction. It was the first day of practice for the Orioles of the Dulaney Babe Ruth League, and Coach Ray Hammond was going down the line, asking each kid to say his name and the position he wanted to play.

“Cody Parker. Third base,” he said when it was his turn. From somewhere behind him, he heard snickers.

Here we go, he thought.

“Third base, eh?” Coach Hammond said. He studied Cody for a moment.

Cody knew what was coming next. Coach would try to break it to him gently. *Why not try the outfield, son? You’re a little, um, big for third base. In fact, I’m thinking right field would be perfect for you.*

Everyone knew the unspoken rule: right field was for fat guys. And slow guys. And guys with thick glasses and big ears and bad haircuts. If you smacked of dorkiness at all, or if you looked the least bit unathletic, they stuck you in right field, baseball’s equivalent of the slow class. Then they got down on their knees and prayed to the baseball

gods that no one would ever hit a ball your way in a real game.

That's why Cody hated right field. Hated it almost as much as he hated his new life here in Dullsville, Maryland, also known as Baltimore, where the major league team stunk and people talked funny, saying "WARSH-ington" instead of "Washington" and "POH-leece" instead of "police."

No thanks, he thought. Give me Wisconsin, any day.

Immediately he felt a stab of homesickness as he thought about his old house on leafy Otter Trail. He pictured his corner bedroom on the second floor with the wall-to-wall Milwaukee Brewers posters, especially the giant one of his hero, Prince Fielder, following through on a mighty swing to hit another majestic home run. He saw the big tree house in his backyard, and the basketball hoop over the garage, and the trails in the nearby woods, where he used to—

"Cody?" Coach was saying now.

Cody shook his head and refocused.

"Okay," Coach said. "Let's see how you do at third."

Hallelujah! For an instant, Cody thought of giving Coach a big hug. But Coach didn't seem like the hugging type. He was a big man with a short, no-nonsense crew cut and an old-fashioned walrus mustache. He looked more like the hearty-handshake type. Except his hearty handshake could probably crush walnuts.

Minutes later, the Orioles broke into groups for infield practice. Trotting out to third base, Cody was surprised to see he was the only one trying out for the position.

Then he heard the sound of heavy footsteps behind him and felt a sharp elbow in the ribs.

"Out of the way, fat boy," a voice growled.

Wonderful, Cody thought. The welcoming committee is here. Looking up, he saw a tall, broad-shouldered boy he recognized as Dante Rizzo.

"Instead of 'fat,' could we agree on *burly*?" Cody said, smiling.

That's it, turn on the charm, he thought. Kill 'em with laughter.

"Shut up and stay out of my way," Dante said, spitting into his glove and scowling.

So much for trying the charm, Cody thought. But the truth was, he *didn't* consider himself fat—not in your classic Doritos-scarfing, Big Mac-inhaling, look-at-the-butt-on-this-kid sort of way.

His mother said he was big-boned. It was his dad who called him burly. To Cody, burly was preferable to big-boned, which sounded like he had some kind of freak skeletal disorder. Cody thought he was built along the lines of the great Prince Fielder, if you could picture the Brewers' first baseman as a thirteen-year-old with a thick mop of red hair and freckles.

Big, sure. Even chunky. But nothing that made you wrinkle your nose and go, "Ewww."

On the other hand, Dante obviously didn't share this assessment of Cody's body type, which came as no great surprise. Cody thought back to the first time he had met Dante—although *met* might not be the right word—on his first day at his new school, York Middle.

Cody had been eating lunch, sitting in the back of the cafeteria with a few other kids, mostly nerds and misfits who seemed just as lonely as he was. Suddenly, something warm and moist smacked him in the back of the neck. It turned out to be a soggy pizza crust.

Whipping around, Cody had seen a tall boy with long dark hair smirking at him and nudging his buddies.

"Congratulations," the kid sitting next to Cody had said. "You've just been introduced to Dante the Terrible."

"Yeah," another kid had added. "He's in eighth grade and he's fifteen—draw your own conclusions. His hobby is pounding people. And if you mess with him, he's got two older brothers who'll mess with *you*."

"Vincent and Nick. We call them the Rottweiler Twins," a third kid had chimed in. "On account of they're so warm and cuddly."

Remembering the pizza incident now, Cody shot a nervous glance at Dante. Just my luck he plays baseball too, Cody thought. Why can't he play lacrosse like every other kid in Maryland?

And what are the odds we'd both end up on the Orioles? And be trying out for the same position?

About the same as the odds of me being confused with Prince Fielder, he decided.