



District 13

HIT JUST RIGHT

K. HENGEL



CHAPTER 1

The giant garbage bag was nearly stuffed. Hugo Siroy added a dustpan full of popcorn. Then he tied off the bag. The movie theater was almost clean.

Hugo's best friend, Eli, swept the last aisle. Eli was telling a story about a nationwide recall on a pitching machine. It was called the ReadyPitch 3000. The machine had been launching baseballs at dangerously high speeds. Apparently, one pitch had knocked a child unconscious.

Hugo shook his head. “Stop lying, Eli. The machines are set at low speeds for little league players. It wouldn’t be fast enough to hurt a kid.”

Eli stopped sweeping. “A ball flying at 80 miles per hour could do some damage.”

“What?” Hugo chuckled. “The pitches aren’t even that fast at the cages!”

“The kid turned too quick. His chest was wide open. The pitch knocked him out.”

“That’s what Ben needs,” Hugo said.

Shrugging, Eli continued sweeping. “Forget about Ben. You’ll show him this year, Hugo. I know it. You spend hours at the cages. All that work will pay off. Plus, you’re twice the hitter he is. This year, you’ll have no problem.”

“I hope so,” Hugo said. He wheeled the second garbage can toward Eli. “If Ben starts

with that name-calling stuff, I'll knock him out."

"He won't," Eli said, emptying his dustpan into the can.

Hugo tied off the garbage bag. "Can you believe school starts tomorrow? I can't wait to hit outside on a real field."

"Have you told Sam that you're quitting this job?" Eli asked.

"No," Hugo admitted. "Have you?"

Eli shook his head.

"Let's do this," Hugo suggested. "You talk to Sam first. I'll take these bags out to the alley. Then I'll talk to him."

"Cool," Eli said. "Meet me at the bus stop after."

Hugo pushed both garbage cans out the back door. The wheels rumbled on the asphalt.

He was done after today. *No more cleaning the theater.*

He lifted the first bag. It had a leak. A mixture of soda and butter dripped onto his pants. “Gross!” Hugo really disliked his job. But he’d done it to have money for the batting cages.

Hugo rolled the garbage cans back inside. He pushed them into the storage room. Then he went to Sam’s office to quit. Sam was disappointed. But he also understood. Hugo wanted to focus on baseball.

Relieved, Hugo thanked Sam and headed to the bus stop. Eli was already there.

“How did it go with Sam?” Hugo asked.

“It was fine,” Eli replied. “I feel a little guilty though.”

Hugo shrugged. “But now we have so much more time for baseball. That’s what really matters.”



CHAPTER 2

The next day, Hugo and Eli went to school. They had study hall second period. It was in the library. The teens had to wait for an open computer. This was typical.

“What a joke,” Eli complained. “This school stinks. We need more computers.”

Hugo nodded. But he wasn’t worried about that. Practice started after school. A cool breeze blew in the library’s open windows. It would warm up later. The weather was perfect for baseball.

All summer, Hugo had gone to the cages. He was a lot stronger now.

Baseball was popular in the Siroy family. Hugo's dad had played in the Philippines. When Hugo's parents had moved to the U.S. 20 years ago, Mr. Siroy brought the love of the game with him.

"Hey," Eli said. "Alicia is leaving. Let's get her computer."

Hugo grabbed his notebook and pencil. He followed Eli. The teens stood by the row of computer desks. They had to let Alicia pass by.

"Wow," Eli whispered. "I wonder if she has a boyfriend."

Alicia wasn't Hugo's type. Plus, she was Ben's little sister. She was trouble all the way around. Hugo shook his head.

Eli sat down at a computer. He started typing quickly.

Hugo sat next to him. “What are you looking for?”

“A used phone,” Eli said, clicking on an image. He pointed to the screen. “Check it out. This one isn’t too bad. I could afford it.”

Hugo frowned. “What about the monthly payment? How are you going to pay that? We quit our jobs, remember? We’ll be busy playing ball.”

Eli stopped clicking. He rarely looked nervous. But he was now. Gathering courage, he turned to Hugo.

“What’s up?” Hugo asked.

“I didn’t quit last night. I’m sorry. But I just couldn’t.”

Hugo leaned away from Eli. “What? Why?”

“I like having money.” Eli sighed. “It’s more than that though. My family—”

“You’re not playing baseball this year?”

Eli shook his head. “No, man. I can’t do both.”

“What about Ben?”

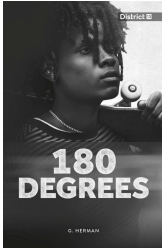
“Forget Ben,” Eli said.

“Unbelievable,” Hugo spat. “Thanks for punking out. You gave up on baseball so you could buy junk.”

Eli looked hurt. “I have four sisters, Hugo. You’re an only child. We have it harder than you. But you don’t get that.”

Hugo was furious. “You waited until the last minute to tell me. That’s so messed up.” He snatched his notebook and pencil off the computer desk and stormed out of the library.

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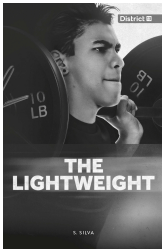
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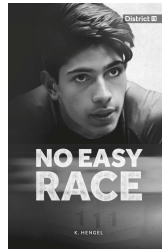
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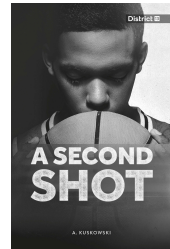
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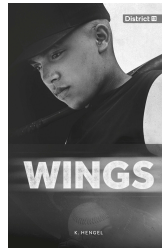
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All summer, Hugo had practiced at the batting cages. He can't wait for practice to start at school. But he's shaken when he learns his best friend, Eli, won't be playing. Does Hugo have the confidence to make it through the season alone? Will wanting to fit in change him?