

A photograph of football players in red helmets and jerseys on a field. The players are in a three-point stance, ready for the snap. The background is a green field with some shadows.

DISTRICT 13™

BEFORE THE SNAP

 SADDLEBACK™
EDUCATIONAL PUBLISHING

1

Taras got off the bus. Derrick followed. He was moving slowly. His leg was sore.

“You gonna make it?” Taras asked.

“Huh?” Derrick replied.

“My grandma gets off the bus faster than you.”

Derrick put his backpack on. “She a receiver? She after my JV spot?”

“Forget about grandma,” Taras said. “Worry about *Colton*. That fool wants blood. He’s trying to take you out, man.”

“For real,” Derrick said. He shook his head. “Cheap shots. All the time. He’s messing up my legs. I swear. Guess he’s sick of seeing me start.”

They walked down the block. It was a cool, fall day. School had just started. The boys had practice after school. They were on their way home.

“Know what gets to Colton more? Than seeing you start?” Taras asked.

“What’s that?”

“His girl staring at you,” Taras said.

Derrick tried not to smile. But he couldn’t help it. He had to! Taras

was right. Tasheka was eyeing him. Derrick didn't know why. She was cool and popular. He was always nervous. And he got bad grades. Still, he liked her attention.

“She's not his girl anymore. Right?”

“That's right! She's his *old* girl. So when you two gonna hook up? When you gonna ask her out?”

Derrick shook his head. “I just got done with one cheerleader. Remember? I don't need another one.”

Taras rolled his eyes. “Come on. That was kid stuff. Amber Linn was like a little sister. Not a hookup.”

Derrick didn't like talking about Amber Linn. “You don't get it, T.”

“Lose the nerves, Derrick.
Tasheka likes you. She’s single.
You’re single. She’s hot! Ask her out.
Enjoy it! What’s wrong with you?”
Derrick didn’t answer.

2

Derrick's leg hurt. Going up stairs was hard. Too bad he lived on the third floor. He took each step slowly. Colton really hit him hard.

Derrick's mom was home. She was putting on lipstick. Derrick rolled his eyes. "You seeing *him*?" he asked.

"*Him*?" she replied. She didn't like his comment. Not one bit. "You

mean *John*? The first man I've seen in five years? Since your father left? Then, yes. I am going to see *him*."

Derrick dropped his backpack on the floor. He walked to his room. He'd met John a couple of times. He wasn't impressed. He was too polished. What did he want from his mom?

Derrick sat on his bed. He had to look at his leg. He pulled his jeans down. Yep. There it was. One hell of a bruise.

Derrick heard the phone ring. His mom answered it. Derrick was sure it was John. John the bank teller.

His mom knocked. "Derrick? It's for you," she said. Derrick pulled up his pants. He opened the door.

“Who is it?” he asked.

Something was wrong. He could tell by his mom’s face.

“It’s Linny, baby.”

Derrick’s heart sank. Forget about his leg. Now his heart hurt.

“Want me to wait?” his mom whispered. “Until you get off the phone? I’m sure John wouldn’t mind ...”

Derrick held out his hand. “Go,” he said. His heart was racing. He hadn’t talked to Amber Linn since they broke up.

“Good luck, baby,” his mom said. She left. Derrick took a deep breath.

“Linny?”

“Hey, Derrick.”

“How are you?” he asked.

She was silent. Derrick couldn't take it.

“Linny?”

Amber Linn started to cry. Derrick felt terrible. He cared about Amber Linn. Always had. Always would.

“Linny, stop crying and ...”

“I have something to tell you,” she said. “It's big, Derrick. It happened right after we broke up.”

“What? What happened?”

“I swear Derrick. It was *after* we broke up. I ...”

Derrick heard her inhale.

“I'm pregnant. You don't know the guy.”

Now the pain moved to his stomach. It wasn't possible. How

could it be? With some other guy?
They just broke up a couple of
months ago.

Derrick sat on his bed. He felt
sick. He couldn't speak. He didn't
know what to say.

“Everyone will think it's your
baby, Derrick. If they find out it isn't,
then ...”

That didn't sound right. Derrick
was in shock. But he wasn't deaf. He
forced himself to focus. “What do you
mean, *if*?”

“I'm going to look like a huge slut.
Everyone will know.”

“Know what, Linny? What are
you getting at?”

“That I ... was with someone
right after you.”

DISTRICT 13™

HIT
JUST RIGHT

 SADDLEBACK™
EDUCATIONAL PUBLISHING

1

The large, black garbage bag was almost full. Carlos added a dustpan of popcorn. Then he tied off the bag. The theater was almost clean.

His best friend Esteban swept the last aisle. Esteban was telling a story about a pitching machine. Carlos didn't believe it.

“Get off it, Esteban!” Carlos laughed. “They're set at low speeds.

Only 50 miles per hour for Little League. That's not fast enough to kill a kid."

Esteban stopped sweeping. "Try 80 miles per hour," he said.

"Yeah, right! The pitches aren't that fast at the cages!" Carlos said.

"Look, it was unusual. *Very* unusual. But it did happen. One time," Esteban said. "I read it online. The kid turned too quick. His chest was wide open. The pitch hit him just right. Stopped his heart."

"That's what Jose needs," Carlos said.

"Forget that punk," Esteban said. "You'll show him this year, Carlos. I know it. All those hours at the cages? They'll pay off. You're twice

the hitter he is. This year, you'll have no problems."

"I hope so," Carlos said. He wheeled the second garbage can toward Esteban. "If he starts with that 'Tubby' crap. I swear. I'll knock him out."

Esteban emptied his dustpan. "He won't," Esteban said. Then Carlos tied off the bag.

"Can you believe we start tomorrow? I can't wait to hit outside. On a real field," Carlos said.

"You tell Samson yet? That you're quitting the theater?" Esteban asked.

"No," Carlos admitted. "I was hoping you would. You know. Tell him for both of us."

“Don’t you think you should? Tell him yourself?”

“I can’t, Esteban. You’re better at that stuff,” Carlos said. “Come on. Please?”

Esteban exhaled. “Take these bags out to the alley. I’ll tell Samson.”

“Cool,” Carlos said. “Meet me at the bus stop. I don’t want to see Samson after.”

Carlos pushed both garbage cans out the back. He was done! No more theater cleaning! The wheels were loud on the asphalt. Carlos lifted the first bag.

It had a leak. A nasty mixture of soda and butter dripped onto his pants. “Damn!” he yelled. He really

hated working here. He only did it so he'd have money for the cages.

Carlos rolled the garbage cans back inside. He pushed them into the storage room. Then he ran to the bus stop. Esteban was already there.

“So? How'd he take it?” Carlos asked.

“Fine,” Esteban replied. “No problem.”

2

The next day, Carlos and Esteban went to school. They had study hall second period. It was in the library. They had to wait for a computer. As usual.

“What a joke,” Esteban complained. “This school sucks. We need more computers.”

Carlos nodded. But he wasn’t worried about that. Practice started

that night! The library windows were open. A cool breeze blew in. It would warm up later. Perfect for baseball!

All winter long, Carlos went to the cages. He never missed a Saturday. This year he would show up. He was a lot stronger now too. Last year he was soft and round. But this year, he was solid.

“Hey,” Esteban said quickly. “Alicia is leaving. Let’s get her computer.”

Carlos grabbed his things. He followed Esteban. They stood by the row of computer desks. They had to let Alicia through.

Alicia moved slowly. She was wearing tight, black jeans and a

tank top. Her black, lacy bra strap hung down her arm. She lifted it up as she passed them.

“Damn,” Esteban said. “That girl *kills* me. She is so fine.”

Carlos shook his head. She was too small for him. Plus, she was Jose’s little sister. Trouble all the way around.

“Too skinny,” Carlos said.

“You’re crazy,” Esteban replied.

Esteban sat in front of the computer. Carlos sat next to him. He leaned toward the screen. Esteban typed quickly. “What you looking for?” Carlos asked.

“A used phone,” Esteban said. “Check it out. Not too bad. I could afford this!”

Carlos shrugged. “What about the monthly payment? How you gonna pay that? While you’re playin’ ball?”

Esteban stopped clicking. He rarely looked nervous. But he did now. He turned toward Carlos.

“What’s up?” Carlos asked.

“I didn’t quit last night, Carlos. At the theater. I just couldn’t. I told Samson you were quitting. Just like I said I would. But I didn’t quit.”

Carlos leaned away from him.

“What? Why?”

“I like having money, Carlos. A man’s gotta earn. You feel me?”

“You’re not playing *baseball* this year?”

“Carlos, you don’t need *me!*”

Esteban said. “All that practicing we