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1

“Ready?” Kara asked me.

“Go for it,” I said, stooping forward and holding the baseball bat over my shoulder. “I’m going to knock this one into next week!”

It was Saturday, and my friend Kara Haynes and I were practicing hitting a softball. Actually, *I* was the one working on my hitting. I think I’m a pretty good player, but the coach wanted me to work on my swings. He said I could be really good if I could hit the ball a little farther.

As for Kara? She didn’t need to work on her hitting or pitching. She’s the only girl on the team,

and she's really good. When it comes to softball, she can hit, run, and pitch. In fact, she's the team's starting pitcher. She's ten times better than any of the guys, and that makes some of them jealous.

Not me, though. I'm just glad she's my friend, and she's willing to help me.

Midnight, my black Labrador, sat in the grass near the side of the road. We adopted him from an animal shelter last year, and he's the best dog in the whole world. He's really smart, and I include him as one of my best friends. Everywhere I go, Midnight goes. Except for school, of course.

Kara let the ball fly. As usual, her pitch was perfect. I swung as hard as I could . . . but the bat only skimmed the bottom of the ball, causing it to pop up into the air and arc down behind me. It bounced a couple of times, then rolled down the street.

"Midnight!" I shouted. Without saying anything more, Midnight leapt into action, chasing after the softball.

"You need to loosen up, Brandon," Kara called out. "You're too stiff. Let the bat flow with your body."

Easy for *her* to say.

The softball took a bounce over a curb and into the grass. Midnight snapped it up in his jaws while it was still rolling. He trotted back to me, dropped the ball into my hand, and sat.

“Good boy,” I said, patting his head. “Go lay down.” Midnight stood and walked to the side of the road where he laid down again, ready to chase the ball.

I paused for a moment to look around. Here, near the end of our block, there weren't very many houses. That's why it was a good place to practice hitting: there wasn't much danger of hitting anything or anyone. Sure, it would be a lot better if we could practice at the softball field, but the closest one was ten miles away. Kara lived on the same block I did, so it was a lot easier and more convenient to hike to the end of the block and practice.

She was still standing in the middle of the road with her right hand on her hip. Her left hand, covered by a worn, leather softball glove, hung at her side. Her glossy black hair shined in the late morning sun, and she was squinting as she

watched me.

“Did you hear what I said?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I replied. “You said I need to loosen up.”

“You can still swing hard,” she said, “just try not to be so tense. And be sure to follow through with your swing.” She grasped an invisible bat and demonstrated by making a slow swing.

“Let’s try again,” I said, tossing the ball to her. She snapped it out of the air with her glove.

“You’ll get it,” she said. “Just keep your eyes focused on the ball, and stay loose.”

I pulled the bat over my right shoulder and spread my feet.

“Loosen up your shoulders,” Kara said. “You need to be comfortable.”

Now that Kara mentioned it, I noticed my shoulder muscles were really tight. I relaxed a little and took a deep breath.

“That’s it,” Kara said, winding up. “Here it comes.”

And here it goes, I thought. I’m going to really nail this one.

She threw the softball, and I swung. The bat

connected with a solid *thwack!* and the softball went flying.

“That’s the way!” Kara shouted as the ball soared high over her head. I don’t think I’d ever hit a ball so hard or so high. It sailed over the treetops and vanished.

“Holy crow!” I shouted. *“That’s a home run if I ever saw one!”*

My elation and excitement, however, were short lived. Seconds later, we heard the distant, piercing sound of shattering glass. Midnight flinched and let out a single, startled bark.

I dropped the bat, and it clunked to the pavement.

Oh, no, I thought. *This isn’t just bad. This is terrible. A disaster.*

You see, it was bad enough I’d broken a window . . . but what made matters worse was the fact that the only home in that direction belonged to none other than Dr. Joseph Wentmeyer.

And everyone knew that not only was Dr. Wentmeyer a mean person, he was also crazy as a loon.

I had broken his window, and I would have

to face him. I was scared to even get *close* to his house, let alone have to speak with him.

Now, however, as I look back, facing Dr. Wentmeyer wasn't the worst part. Oh, it was bad, all right. You see, if I hadn't broken the window, I wouldn't have had to face Dr. Wentmeyer . . . and I wouldn't have had to face the velociraptors.

2

Breaking a window was bad enough.

Breaking Dr. Wentmeyer's window made it much worse. Sure, it was an accident. I never imagined I would have been able to hit the ball far enough to reach his house. His home wasn't even visible from where we were, because there was a line of thick trees that grew all around it. It was as if they were planted on purpose, to hide the house from the outside world.

"Uh-oh," Kara said. "That's not good."

"You can say that again," I said. I felt like

crawling into a hole. Once, I accidentally broke a window in our house. Dad and Mom were mad, but it had been an accident, and I didn't get into too much trouble.

Breaking someone else's window, however, was a different story.

"I've got to tell Dr. Wentmeyer I was the one who broke his window," I said glumly. I picked up the bat. "Come on, Midnight."

Midnight got to his feet, shook, and trotted up to me with his tail wagging.

"I'll go with you," Kara said. "After all, it's my fault, too. If I wasn't such a good pitcher, you would never have hit the ball as hard as you did."

I smiled. Kara wasn't bragging; she was only being funny. Besides: she really was a great pitcher.

We walked down the street, and I must say I wasn't in any hurry. I wasn't looking forward to confronting Dr. Wentmeyer. I'd never spoken to him before, and the only things I knew about him were what my friends and classmates had told me.

At his driveway, we stopped. His three-story house loomed up, and it seemed to become part of

the sky and trees. A black iron gate was open, but the fence continued around the property to keep people out. There were signs posted that read 'KEEP OUT!' and 'NO TRESPASSING!'

"Looks like Dr. Wentmeyer is a real friendly guy," Kara said.

"Yeah," I said. "And he's going to be even friendlier when he finds out I broke one of his windows."

"I don't see anything broken," Kara said. "Maybe you didn't break a window."

"Oh, I'm sure it was a window," I said. "But the ball would have dropped over there." I pointed. "It probably hit a window on the other side of his house. Come on." I started up the driveway.

"But his signs say he doesn't want anyone trespassing," Kara said.

"Yeah, but this is different," I said. "We're not trespassing. We're coming to tell him we broke one of his windows. It would be worse just to leave and not say anything about it."

I walked up the driveway with Midnight at my side. Kara followed.

“It sure looks like a lonely place,” Kara said.
“And it doesn’t look like he’s home.”

We stepped onto the porch. The front door was solid wood, with a brass doorknob and knocker. I reached out and rapped several times. We listened for any sounds from within the house, but there were none.

I rapped several more times.

Still, Dr. Wentmeyer didn’t come to the door.

“He’s probably not home,” Kara said.

“Let’s walk around to the other side of the house,” I said as I stepped off the porch. “Let’s see if we can find the broken window. If Dr. Wentmeyer isn’t home, we can leave him a note.”

We strode around to the other side of the house. Sure enough, we found a broken window. It was on the first floor, and there was a distinct hole in the glass where the softball had hit. Pieces of the window had broken out, and a few of them had fallen to the grass.

“Sit, Midnight,” I said, and he obeyed. I didn’t want him stepping on glass and cutting his paws.

I walked to the window, mindful of the glass at my feet.

“I think the ball must have gone into the house,” I said. “I don’t see it anywhere.”

There were no curtains on the window, and I decided to peer inside to see if I could spot my softball. I knew I shouldn’t, because it was like spying or something. But I had to know. Maybe the ball had hit Dr. Wentmeyer. That would be awful. Or the ball might’ve broken something inside. That would be bad, too.

I stood on my tiptoes and looked inside.

I didn’t see my softball . . . but what I *did* see made me gasp.

“*Kara!*” I exclaimed. “*Come here! You’ve got to see this!*”

3

Kara came to my side and peered through the window.

“Be careful,” I said. “Some of the broken glass is loose.”

“What is all that stuff?” she asked.

“It looks like a laboratory or something,” I replied.

There were no lights on in the room, but we could see all sorts of electrical equipment, test tubes, and beakers on several desks. Papers and books were stacked in disheveled piles on the floor

and on tables. My bedroom gets messy once in a while, but nothing like this. This place was a pig pen.

“This must be where he does his experiments,” Kara whispered. *“What kind of doctor is he?”*

“A mad doctor,” I said. “At least that’s what all my friends say.”

“He must be some sort of inventor or scientist,” Kara said. “My dad is a doctor, and he doesn’t have anything like this in our house. My mom would have a fit if we had a mess in our house like this.”

I spotted my softball.

“There’s the ball, right over there,” I said. “On the floor, by that table over there.”

“At least it didn’t break anything in the room,” Kara said. “The window is bad enough, but some of this stuff looks really expensive.”

“Dr. Wentmeyer?” I called out. “Are you home?”

We listened, but the only things we heard were a whisper of wind in the trees and a few birds chirping.

“Dr. Wentmeyer?”

Still nothing.

“He’s not home,” Kara said.

I was relieved. I didn’t want to have to face Dr. Wentmeyer and tell him we broke his window. Sure, I’d have to confront him sooner or later. But I was able to put it off for the time being.

“Let’s leave him a note,” I said. “We’ll have to go home first and get some paper.”

I stepped back from the window, and Kara did the same.

“Well,” she said as she patted my back. “Look on the bright side. You *really* smacked that ball. You’re getting better.”

“We’re going to have to find somewhere else to practice,” I said. “I never thought I’d be able to hit the ball that far.”

Midnight saw us walking away and stood.

“Come on, bud,” I said. He shook, wagged his tail, and followed us as we walked around to the front of the house.

Suddenly, we heard the sound of tires on pavement. A car was approaching, but we couldn’t see it through the thick trees and black fence.

But when it turned into the driveway, my

heart leapt into my throat. Blood rushed to my face. I felt hot.

The car was all black, and it prowled up the driveway like a panther. Kara and I stopped walking. Midnight stopped at my side and let out a low growl.

The car halted. Still, we couldn't see through the windows. The glass reflected the sky and the trees. It was like looking at mirrors.

The driver's side door opened.

A black shoe emerged and stepped onto the pavement. Then another.

Dr. Wentmeyer had come home.

4

Until now, I'd only seen Dr. Wentmeyer from a distance. He always wore black pants, a white shirt, black shoes, and glasses with black rims. His hair was gray and messy. He never smiled.

And he wasn't smiling now, either.

He stood, and he was much taller than I expected. Like usual, he was dressed in black pants and a white shirt. His gray hair tossed in the breeze.

"And just *what* are you doing here?" he snarled. "Can't you read the signs?"

Kara and I didn't say a word. Midnight, who is usually very friendly toward other people, continued to growl softly. I patted his head.

"What's the matter?" Dr. Wentmeyer sneered. "Cat got your tongues?"

I spoke. "We . . . we were . . . um, uh—"

"You were *trespassing*," Dr. Wentmeyer interrupted. "I think I'm going to call the police. I'll ask you again: what are you *doing* here?"

"We accidentally broke one of your windows with a softball," Kara blurted out.

"I did it," I said. "I was the one. I hit the ball."

Dr. Wentmeyer looked furious. "You broke a window?!?! *You broke a window?!?!*"

"It was an accident," I pleaded. "I didn't do it on purpose. I never thought I'd be able to hit the ball as far as I did."

"Show me the window you broke," Dr. Wentmeyer said. His voice trembled with anger, and I knew I was in a lot of trouble. More trouble than I'd even imagined.

I pointed. "It's over there, on the other side of the house."

“I didn’t say ‘point,’ boy. I said take me there.”

Things were not looking good. If Dr. Wentmeyer was angry now, he was going to go ape-crazy when he saw the broken glass all over the ground and inside his house.

Kara and I turned and led the doctor to the back of his house. Midnight had stopped growling, but the hair on his back stood up. He didn’t like the tall, strange man with the messy hair.

When we reached the window, I pointed to the glass on the ground. Then, I pointed to the window.

“It was an accident, honest,” I said. “I didn’t mean to break it.”

“That’s why we came to your house,” Kara explained. “We wanted to tell you we were the ones who broke your window.”

Dr. Wentmeyer peered through the window. “There doesn’t seem to be anything broken inside,” he said. Then, he turned and looked at us. He didn’t seem quite as angry as he had been. “Well, I don’t think I’ll have to call the police, since you were only doing the right thing. But you’ll have to

pay for the window.”

Gulp.

“How . . . how much will it cost?” I asked.

“Fifty dollars,” Dr. Wentmeyer replied.

“*Fifty dollars!?!?*” I said. “Holy crow! I don’t have that much money!”

Kara shook her head. “Neither do I,” she said.

“That’s not my problem,” Dr. Wentmeyer said. “You broke my window. You’ll have to find a way to pay for it. Unless”

He stopped speaking and looked at the fragments of glass in the grass. “Unless you would like to work it off. Yes, yes . . . now *there’s* an idea.”

He turned and looked at us. Again, I was shocked at how tall he was. “How are you at mowing lawns and picking up brush? Can you wash windows?”

I looked at Kara, and she looked at me. Then, I looked at Dr. Wentmeyer.

“I mow our lawn at home with Dad’s push mower,” I said. “And I can pick up sticks and things.”

“Me, too,” Kara said, bobbing her head.

“Well, then,” the doctor continued, “perhaps we can make a deal. The grounds around my private laboratory are in need of attention. If you will mow the lawn, pick up sticks and branches, and wash the windows on the outside, I would say that would be worth the price of the window you broke. Could you do that?”

Again, I looked at Kara, and she looked at me. We really didn’t have any choice, since neither of us had any money.

“Yes,” we both said at the same time.

For the first time, Dr. Wentmeyer smiled. “Good,” he said. “My laboratory is only a mile away. I’ll give you directions, and you can get to work in the morning. Fair enough?”

We nodded.

“Good,” the doctor said with a sly smile. “I’ll see you in the morning, then.”

Cool, I thought with a huge sense of relief. I only have a few dollars in my bank at home. It would take me ten years to pay Dr. Wentmeyer for the broken window.

I didn’t know what to expect when we got

to his laboratory, but I'll say this much: when Kara and I arrived the next morning, we could only stare . . . and wonder what we'd gotten ourselves into.

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