

Nate
ROCKS
the
WORLD

Karen Pokras Toz

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First Edition

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*For John, Josh, Sarah, and Cole
Your support and inspiration made this book happen -
there is a little bit of each of you in Nate.*

Chapter 1



“The score is three to two in the bottom of the ninth with two outs. The Philadelphia Phillies have a man on first, but honestly folks, I think this game is over. The Phillies have just not been able to pull it together this World Series, and now with all of these injuries, who could the Phillies possibly put in to bat? It looks like this hometown team is running out of options. I hate to say this, but I think the dream of winning this year’s World Series is now over for this team. Wait a minute – is that Nate Rocks approaching the plate? He hasn’t been off the bench all season. Surely, the Phillies have someone more experienced they can use. Even Nate looks confused, as he steps up to the plate. I don’t know about this. Here comes the first pitch ... swing ... and a miss. Second pitch ... ooh, a 95 mph fastball ... and that’s strike two. The Philadelphia crowd of 45,000 is silent, as we wait for the third pitch ... the pitch that determines this year’s world champions. The pitcher looks around, winds up, and ... CRACK – that ball is OUT OF HERE! I don’t believe it, folks! Nate Rocks has hit a home run and the Philadelphia Phillies have won the World Series!!!”

The Phillies rush out of the dugout, running toward me, as I cross home plate. They pile on top of me. Thunderous cheers of enthusiastic fans echo through the stadium. I can barely breathe. I feel a hand reach out to me.

“You did it, Nate! You did it!” The Phillies’ first baseman yells. He pulls me to my feet.

Two other players help hoist me up over their shoulders. I wave to the crowd in victory. The players parade me around the bases and the crowd begins chanting:

“Nate!”

“Nate!”

“Nate!”

“Nathan! For the fourth time – dinner is ready!”

“Huh?” I ask.

Mom is standing in my bedroom doorway, hands on her hips, staring at me, as I sit on my floor among a sea of colored pencils.

“I said dinner is ready. And for goodness sake Nathan Michael Rockledge, clean up this mess!”

“Okay, Mom,” I say. Mom turns around and heads down the steps.

I look back at my drawing. “Not too shabby,” I note, staring at the cartoon. I pick up a pencil and finish drawing myself holding the World Series trophy. Okay, so maybe I made my red hair not quite so bright, took out the freckles and added a few muscles to my scrawny body, but I still think it looks like me. I gather all of my colored pencils and

scraps of paper off my carpet and throw them into my desk drawer.

“Nathan, Mom told me to tell you to stop picking your nose and get your butt down to dinner.”

I turn around see my older sister, Abby, standing in the hallway outside my bedroom. Abby is thirteen and is *always* complaining about something. Plus, she thinks she knows everything. Really, the only thing she knows is how to be annoying.

“Stop it, Abby, she didn’t say that!” I close up my sketchpad and follow her down the stairs.

“What were you drawing anyway?” she asks, as we head into the kitchen.

“None of your business.” I take my seat at the table, where Dad has already started eating.

“Some stupid comic probably,” Abby comments. She sits down across the table from me.

“All right, that’s enough,” Mom says. She puts a plate filled with spaghetti and meatballs in front of me. “Now eat your dinner, Nathan.”

“Yeah, eat your dinner,” Abby says. She swiftly kicks me from under the table.

I stick my tongue out at Abby and take a bite of my dinner. I wonder if meatballs are supposed to be crunchy. I take a big gulp of my milk to help wash down the crispy meat, as I prepare myself for a forkful of gummy pasta.

“How was school today, Nathan?” Dad asks cheerfully. One thing about my dad, he is always in a good mood. Sometimes I question if Abby was adopted – or maybe there was a mix-up at

the hospital or something.

“Okay, I guess.” I look back down to my plate.

To be honest, today wasn't one of my better days. Oh, it started out okay, I suppose, nothing spectacular. I woke up, threw on some random clothes, and went downstairs for breakfast. As usual, I met my best friend Tommy Jensen at the bus stop, just as it started to drizzle. My first thought, after being annoyed that we were standing out in the rain, was excitement over the fact that we would most likely have indoor recess. Believe me, I like recess just as much as the next kid does. I mean, who wouldn't love being thrown outside for forty minutes of pure torture? Ten minutes of Tommy trying to talk me into playing kickball with the rest of the fourth graders, one minute to realize I am the last kid picked to be on a team, followed by twenty-nine minutes of praying the ball doesn't come anywhere near me. When we have indoor recess, I don't have to worry about any of that. I can just sit at my desk for forty minutes and draw cartoons.

The rain had stopped by the time the bus reached school.

The good news was nobody wanted to play kickball during recess. The bad news was they chose football instead. Let's just say things did not go so well and leave it at that.

After recess, we went right to lunch, where I discovered that Mom had packed me the remainder of last night's dinner: Chicken Surprise. The

surprise, it seemed, was that the meal tasted even worse the next day than it did the night before. Mom refuses to allow me to buy hot lunch. She says why waste money when she is able to pack me perfectly good lunches? I can't wait until I am older like Abby. At least she gets to save up her babysitting money to buy her own lunches at school.

After lunch, Mrs. Dempsey announced that we would be starting a new science unit on energy and light. We would be working with partners. Each team would pick a project to work on, both in class and at home. Mrs. Dempsey usually lets us pick our own partners for science, but this time she stated she had assigned partners that we would be working with for the next two weeks. As soon as Mrs. Dempsey said the words, I closed my eyes and started silently concentrating as hard as I could:

“Please don't let it be Lisa Crane, please don't let it be Lisa Crane, please don't let it be ...”

“Nathan,” Mrs. Dempsey said, “you and Lisa will be working together.”

I could hear Tommy snickering under his breath. I looked over at him and shook my head. I turned back around to see Lisa standing right over my desk.

“Hi Nathan,” she said in her over-bubbly voice.

“Oh, hi.”

Lisa Crane and I have been in the same class since kindergarten. There is nothing wrong with Lisa, exactly – well except for the fact that she reports every second of every day back to her mother. Lisa's mother, Marge, and my mother have been

best friends for the last five years. Ever since Lisa reported to her mother that I got in trouble at school last year for falling asleep during math, I have spent a good portion of my life trying to stay away from Lisa Crane.

“So Nathan, I hear you and Lisa are science partners now,” Mom says. She sits down at the table.

“Uh, yeah.” Why am I not surprised that Mom already knows?

“Well, Marge says Lisa is really excited. She hasn’t stopped talking about it since she got home from school today.”

“I’ll bet,” I mumble under my breath.

“Science, huh?” Dad begins, “I loved science as a kid. Hey Nathan, did I ever tell you the story of the volcano your uncle Robert made for the school science fair?”

“Yeah, Dad, he put in two cups of baking soda instead of two tablespoons.”

“Uncle Robert poured in the vinegar and before we knew it, the judges were all covered in lava.” Dad bursts into laughter, as if this were the first time he was telling this story about his older brother, instead of the twentieth.

“Anyway, Lisa wants to get started on your project right away, so I invited her and Marge over on Saturday,” Mom informs me.

“But Mom, you know Tommy and I have plans to go see the new Captain Asteroid movie on Saturday!”

“So, see it on Sunday instead. Besides, you know

schoolwork comes first. I think it will be fun to work with Lisa!”

“Yeah, Nathan,” Abby pipes in smirking, “think of how much fun you’ll have on your *play date*.”

I glare at Abby and continue to twirl my pasta on my fork, thinking of something I can say to convince Mom to cancel. I suppose she wouldn’t believe I have a rare and highly contagious disease that can only be cured by going to the movies on Saturday.

“Bill, how did your meeting go today?” Mom asks Dad, letting me know the conversation about my Saturday plans is now over.

“Pretty good actually. Sales are up. I should be seeing a nice commission. Maybe even enough to take that vacation we were talking about,” Dad says, winking at Mom.

“What vacation?” Abby asks.

“Well ... nothing is planned yet, but Mom and I were thinking it might be fun to go to Florida over your winter vacation. You know, get away from this cold weather and possibly go to Disney World or something. We thought maybe you could each bring a friend.”

“Disney?” Abby shrieks. “Dad, I’m thirteen, not six. You guys can go have fun with Mickey and Donald; I’d rather sit on the beach with Emma.”

Emma is Abby’s best friend, which makes sense, since she is just as annoying as Abby.

“Yeah, and scare all the seagulls away,” I say. “Hey Dad, can we go to the space museum there? I heard you can actually walk through the space shuttle.”

“Great idea, Nathan,” Dad agrees, “but let’s not get ahead of ourselves. It’s only October. Besides, the sales numbers for last quarter aren’t final yet.”

Everyday, Dad talks about the sales numbers. To be honest, I’m not even sure what exactly it is that Dad does, although I think it has something to do with some fancy computer program. He works downtown for Mercury Research Group. I know he has a small office with a view of the parking garage, I know he has an assistant named Doris, who always messes up his schedule, and I know that according to Dad, the sales numbers are even more important than whether the Phillies make it into the World Series. But other than that, I really don’t have a clue what Dad does for eight hours every day.

Last year, Dad came to my school on career day. He talked about this computer software that was supposed to help organize information. He talked a lot about sectors and data, and by the end of his fifteen-minute presentation, the entire class had glazed looks over their eyes – even Lisa Crane.

“I gotta go call Emma and tell her we might be going to Florida,” Abby says, jumping up from the table. She puts her plate into the sink and gets the cordless phone off the kitchen counter, before running up the stairs.

Abby is always on the phone with Emma. Everyday after school, the first thing Abby does, is grab the phone and take it into her room. I can usually hear her cackling all the way from the family room, which is down the stairs and three rooms

over. It makes no sense to me. She sees Emma all day at school, and they even ride the same bus home. Tommy and I are friends and all, but I don't need to talk to him every second of the day!

Abby keeps complaining to Mom and Dad how she is the only person in the entire eighth grade, who does not have a cell phone. I hate to admit it, but she may be right on that one. I have even seen some of the fourth graders with their own phones, not that I want one. Talking on the phone seems like a big waste of time to me. I would rather be sketching or hanging out with my friends in person.

“Nathan, aren't you hungry? You've barely touched your dinner,” Mom asks, clearing away the rest of Abby's place.

“I'm okay. That lunch you packed really filled me up today,” I say, patting my belly and thinking about the bag of pretzels I have stashed under my bed. It's no wonder I am so skinny.

“Well, I'll just wrap up the rest of your dinner, and you can bring it for lunch tomorrow.” Mom smiles at me, completely unaware of how awful her cooking truly is.

Great – cold crunchy meat and chewy sticky pasta in red watery sauce – yum. I make a mental note to sneak into the kitchen tomorrow morning before Mom gets up, to throw some extra snacks in my book bag.

“Okay. I have to go finish my homework.” I bring my dishes over to the sink.

Mom and Dad are already deep in conversation

about the upcoming school fundraiser. Mom is on the organization committee, and apparently there is not one other parent in the entire school who works as hard as she does.

I head back upstairs toward my bedroom.