

Missfits Fastpitch

By Jody Studdard

Chapter 1

I hate judges. They're always so old, and grumpy, and arrogant. They sit up there on their stand, in their fancy black robes, peering down at you through thick, dark-rimmed glasses. Judge Wilson is the worst. He's completely bald, with huge bags under his eyes, and he looks like he's a hundred years old, maybe more. And worst of all, he's always in a bad mood, at least when I'm in his courtroom.

But then again, I shouldn't be in his courtroom.

Especially since it's the third time in the past year.

But at least I'm not alone. Misery loves company, right? Three of my best friends (Madison Johnson, Kaya Suzuki, and Jennie Miller) are sitting next to me, facing the same fate as me. Once again, we're at Judge Wilson's mercy. This time, however, I don't think we're going to see much mercy.

Judge Wilson lowers the file he was reading, removes his glasses, and turns to our defense attorney, who sits directly to my right. "Counsel," he says. "Would you like to explain how these young ladies ended up in my courtroom again?"

He puts special emphasis on the word 'again.'

Our defense attorney, a man in his late twenties named James Kingsley, rises to his feet to respond to Judge Wilson's question.

"Your honor," he says. "This was all a misunderstanding. My clients —"

"A misunderstanding?" Judge Wilson interrupts. "Four young ladies, all fifteen, were at a party drinking alcohol. How is that a misunderstanding?"

"The police report isn't completely clear," James says. "Many portions are vague and confusing. There's no clear evidence my clients were consuming alcohol."

"It seems pretty clear to me," Judge Wilson says. "Regardless, it's irrelevant. At the last hearing, I ordered them to stay away from parties or any environment where alcohol is present. Like I do in all cases with underage alcohol consumption."

There is a long, awkward silence as both men wait for the other to say something. I fully expect James to come forward with something more in our defense, since he's a great attorney and he did a wonderful job at our past hearings. Both times, we got little more than a warning, a scowl, and a few hours of community service. But this time, I can tell he's struggling, and he really doesn't know what to say, which is unusual since he's usually so articulate.

Finally Judge Wilson breaks the silence.

"Here at the Justice Center," he says, "I see these cases every day. Minors in possession. It happens. It's not good, but it happens. But I find this case especially troubling, since I've now seen these particular ladies three times. Correct me if I'm wrong, counsel, but at the last hearing, and at the one before that, didn't you assure me this type of thing wasn't going to happen again?"

James clears his throat, then adjusts his tie. He's really sweating now. And for good reason. It's true. At the last hearing, he assured Judge Wilson we had cleaned up our act and he would never see us again.

"I did," he says.

“Then why are these young ladies back in my courtroom?” Judge Wilson asks.

“Girls will be girls,” James says. “But I assure you, your honor, I’ve discussed this problem with my clients, and they assure me this is the last time.”

Judge Wilson laughs. “I’ve heard that before,” he says. “Correct me if I’m wrong, counsel, but at the last hearing, I gave your clients a thirty day sentence, correct?”

“Correct,” James says.

“And I suspended all thirty of those days on numerous conditions, including no repeat offenses within six months. Correct?”

“Correct,” James says.

At this point, I don’t really know what the two men are talking about (James explained the term ‘suspended sentence’ to me once but I forget what it means), but I know it isn’t good. Especially since James’s face is getting red. He clearly knows where Judge Wilson is heading with this line of questioning and doesn’t like it.

“So,” Judge Wilson says, “why shouldn’t I give these ladies the full thirty day sentence, in the juvenile detention center, beginning immediately? Perhaps that would take care of the problem once and for all. Or at least for thirty days. In the detention center, the ladies won’t have any access to parties or alcohol.”

For a brief second, I think I’m going to pass out right there on the spot. Thirty days in the detention center (in case you don’t know, the detention center is our county’s version of a jail for teens)? What am I going to do in the detention center for thirty days? It’s a nightmare of epic proportions.

“The detention center may be exactly what these ladies need,” Judge Wilson says. “They’ll finally get some discipline and some appropriate supervision.”

He puts special emphasis on the word ‘appropriate.’

He shoots a nasty glance at our parents, most of which are sitting in the rows behind us. I turn slightly toward my dad, who is sitting in the front row to my right, and see he has an awkward, embarrassed, angry look on his face.

I don’t really want to spend thirty days in the detention center, but after seeing the expression on my dad’s face, it may not be such a bad idea after all. I may need the protection. If I’m allowed to go home after this hearing, I’ll likely face the death penalty. Or something worse, if there is anything worse than the death penalty.

“Thirty days is so harsh,” James says. “Perhaps your honor will consider a shorter sentence. A week would be plenty to teach the ladies a lesson.”

Judge Wilson scowls, but much to my surprise he actually considers James’s proposal. “Perhaps,” he says. “A week in the detention center, without their phones, should do it.”

At that, I can’t help myself. “What?” I ask. “We don’t get our phones when we’re in the detention center?”

Judge Wilson shakes his head.

I can’t believe what I just heard. An entire week without a cell phone? That’s worse than the death penalty. Now I might as well head home and face the wrath of my dad.

“That’s not fair,” I tell Judge Wilson. “That’s cruel and unusual.”

James immediately signals for me to be silent, and I wait anxiously, nervously, fully expecting Judge Wilson to give me a nasty reprimand, but he doesn’t.

“Perhaps,” he says. “And it’s definitely not my preferred way of handling cases like these. You four probably think I’m this old, terrible, grumpy judge, but I assure you, Miss Parker, I

take no pleasure in sending young ladies to the detention center. But I can't let this problem continue. So I need a solution. What's it going to be?"

For the next couple of minutes, you can hear a pin drop in the courtroom. The only sound is Judge Wilson's law clerk, who is organizing files to one side. I try my hardest to think of something, but nothing comes to mind. I turn to James, knowing he's by far the smartest one of all of us, and I pray he can think of something. But much to my dismay, he sits there, completely speechless.

"There must be something the four of you can do," Judge Wilson says, "to keep yourselves out of trouble. Don't you have any hobbies?"

We look at each other, but no one says anything. At one point, Madison opens her mouth, and I think she's about to say something, but then she has second thoughts and decides to remain silent. Kaya and Jennie just sit there, clearly too afraid to say anything.

Hobbies? To be honest, the closest thing I have to a hobby is collecting friends on Facebook. For awhile, when I was young, I collected dolls, but that came to an end years ago.

"What about sports?" Judge Wilson asks. "A lot of kids these days stay out of trouble by playing sports. Do you four play any sports?"

Once again, there is silence. None of us play any sports.

Somehow, I muster the courage to speak. "We used to play softball," I say. "Back in Little League. But that was years ago."

"I love softball," Judge Wilson says. "My granddaughter plays for a select team called the Washington Wildcats. Have you heard of it?"

Unfortunately, we haven't, so after exchanging several quick glances, we all shake our heads.

"Regardless," Judge Wilson says. "You may be on to something, Miss Parker. I tend to think most youth these days get in trouble because they're bored and have nothing better to do. So they turn to shoplifting, and drinking, and sometimes drugs. I tend to think these things wouldn't happen nearly as often if kids had a way to occupy their time and stay busy. So maybe that's what we should do with the four of you. Instead of sending you to the detention center, maybe I should find a way to keep you busy, so busy you don't have time to get in trouble. And softball is great for that. Especially select softball, like my granddaughter plays. With all of the practices, and the tournaments, and the workout sessions, you'll be busy most of the week. The more I think about it, the more I like it. So that's what I'm going to do. You ladies are going to form a softball team, a select team, and practice at least three times a week, with at least two tournaments a month. And we'll schedule a review hearing in six weeks so I can see how you're doing."

"Sir," James says. "I don't know much about softball, especially select softball, but I imagine forming a team must have some expense involved, tournament fees and equipment and insurance, among other things. None of the ladies have much money."

Judge Wilson rubs his chin. "I'll authorize the use of some funds from the court's registry," he says. "Not a lot, but enough to cover the basics."

"That's most generous," James says, "but the ladies will also need a coach, and possibly a manager of some sort, to keep things in line. I'm not convinced four teenage girls can run a team by themselves."

"I agree," Judge Wilson says. "That's where you come in, Mr. Kingsley. You're going to be their coach."

James's eyes get big. He clearly cannot believe what he just heard. "Sir," he says. "With all due respect, I don't know anything about softball."

Judge Wilson smiles. "I remember," he says, "you used to be quite an athlete back in the day, counsel. Didn't you play on a local team that won state?"

"That was years ago," James says. "Before I went to college, and to law school. I haven't touched a baseball in years."

"You'll shake the rust off," Judge Wilson says.

"Your honor," James says. "Baseball and softball are related, but completely different sports. I don't know anything about softball."

Judge Wilson shrugs. "That's not a problem," he says. "What do you do when you get a legal case you know little about?"

"Like all attorneys," James says, "I do some research."

"Exactly," Judge Wilson says. "So do a little research. Teach yourself how to coach softball, and help me keep these ladies out of trouble."

James hesitates for a long second, weighing his options carefully, before speaking again. "With all due respect," he says. "I have no desire to coach a softball team."

"Then I'll order you to do it," Judge Wilson says.

James's eyes get large. "Sir," he says. "I seriously doubt the court has the authority to make an order of that nature."

Judge Wilson glares at him. "Like always," he says. "You can appeal my decision, counsel. But you're going to be in front of me next week, handling another case, and the week after that, and the week after that, handling others. Do you want to be on my bad side?"

I raise an eyebrow. To be honest, I've never seen James speechless before. But right now, he is. He's actually beyond speechless. He's completely dumbfounded. His face is red and his eyes have glossed over.

"So it's settled," Judge Wilson says. "My sentence is as follows: you ladies will form a softball team, you will have three practices a week, and at least two tournaments a month. We'll schedule a review hearing in six weeks, to see how things are progressing and make adjustments as necessary. From there we will decide what we are going to do next. In the meantime, you four will stay out of trouble and have no contact with alcohol whatsoever. Understood?"

We all look at each other, but none of us are too excited about it. A softball team? None of us have played softball since Little League, and never at the select level. I used to be a pretty good pitcher, and I had a nice fastball, but I'm not certain I remember how to throw one now.

"I'm not too excited about it," I say.

"Me, neither," Madison says.

Judge Wilson grows stern. "You have two options," he says. "Softball, as I've proposed, or thirty days in the detention center. With no phones. It's your choice. What's it going to be?"

Our answer is swift and unanimous.

"Softball," we say.