



The Umpire Strikes Back

(Return to Starlight Bay #9)

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Category: Sport

Description: In the world of baseball, the only thing more explosive than a Riptide fastball is the rivalry between fiery umpire Kali “The Call” Carter and the irresistible pitcher Ripley Johnson, known as Riptide. When Kali’s sharp wit and unwavering dedication to her craft clash with Riptide’s laid-back charm and protective instincts as a single father, sparks fly—both on and off the field.

Kali dreams of opening a girls’ baseball camp, but first, she must prove that a woman can call the shots in a male-dominated sport. Riptide, while battling his own challenges of parenting and career, is convinced that Kali is the last person to mentor his daughter. As their banter escalates from playful jabs to heartfelt moments, they discover that beneath the rivalry lies a shared passion for the game—and maybe something even deeper.

In this pitch-perfect romcom, Kali and Riptide must navigate the muddy bases of love, family, and their own dreams. Will they find common ground before the final inning, or will their stubbornness keep them from hitting a home run together? Grab your mitt and join the fun in this delightful tale where love is the ultimate game-changer.

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Kali

I'm sweating buckets under this August sun, and it's not just because of the heat. The stadium lights haven't fully flickered on yet, but the early evening glow does nothing to ease the suffocating warmth. The faint smell of popcorn, hot dogs, and sunscreen filters in from the stands—standard minor league ambiance. Still, I wouldn't trade it for anything. I stand behind home plate, tugging my facemask down as the crowd roars and the scoreboard flickers: 3–2, home team trailing by one, top of the seventh inning. It's close, and everyone can feel it.

I glance at the runner leading off first base. He takes a cautious step, testing the pitcher's attention. The runner on third looks just as antsy, primed to sprint home at the smallest opportunity. My eyes shift to the pitcher on the mound—Ripley “Riptide” Johnson. He's tall, lean, and brimming with a cocky confidence that practically radiates off him. If half the stories about him are true, he's a natural talent on the verge of a big league call-up. But if the other half are true, his ego could fill this entire ballpark.

He sets his stance, glove tucked under his chin, staring down the batter. The batter, a lefty with an open stance, taps the plate twice. The crowd's hum dies down for a moment, like everyone's collectively holding their breath. My knees are slightly bent, and I reposition my feet to make sure I have the best angle possible. Umpiring at this level means I can't afford even the smallest hesitation.

Riptide inhales and begins his motion. I can see the runner on first tense his legs,

ready to break if he spots an opening. Riptide lifts his left foot, and I catch a flicker of movement in his shoulders. Something seems off—the angle of his pivot doesn't match the direction of his stride. At first, I assume he's going for a snap throw to first, but he hesitates mid-turn. His hips rotate back toward home plate, but he's no longer in a continuous pitching motion. It's jarring, like he's trying to do two separate moves at once.

I know the rulebook inside and out. A pitcher can't start a move to one base and then suddenly shift toward the plate without completing the initial motion. This is the definition of a balk. My right hand shoots up almost before I consciously decide it's time.

"Balk!" I call, my voice slicing through the tense silence.

The reaction is instantaneous. The crowd bursts into half cheers and half boos, the stadium's ambiance plunging into chaos. The runner on third dashes home, practically grinning from ear to ear. He stomps on the plate with a victorious flourish, and the scoreboard flashes a new tie: 3–3. The away team's dugout erupts in celebration—this run could shift the entire momentum of the game.

Riptide's glove smacks the dirt as he whips around to face me, fury etched across every line of his face. "Are you kidding me?" he practically roars. Sweat drips down his forehead, and I can see how tense his jaw is. "That wasn't a balk, and you know it!"

I suppress the flutter of nerves in my stomach. I've seen pitchers lose their cool before, but he radiates a particular intensity that's hard to ignore. "You broke your motion," I say, keeping my voice as steady as possible. "You can't start to throw to first and then change your mind to pitch home. Textbook balk."

His eyes flash like he wants to argue the fine print. "I didn't break anything! I was in

my set motion, and I stepped off the rubber legally.”

“Johnson,” the catcher interjects, stepping out of his crouch and placing a cautious hand on Riptide’s shoulder, “relax, man. We’re still in this game.”

Riptide shrugs him off, taking a few steps toward me. Now he’s dangerously close. “No, this is garbage. You just gave them a free run.”

I’ve learned over the years that you never back down as an umpire—never flinch or show a shred of uncertainty. The moment you do, the entire field smells blood. So I square my shoulders, meeting his glare head-on. “I didn’t give anyone anything,” I reply, my tone clipped. “You made the illegal move. We enforce the rules here.”

“You call that enforcing the rules? Looks more like a power trip to me,” he snarls, pointing a finger in my direction.

“Hey!” The home team’s manager, a burly man with a sunburnt neck, bursts out of the dugout. He charges toward us, presumably to hold Riptide back or maybe to direct his own brand of anger at me. The crowd noise intensifies, a rumble of discontent and curiosity. Everyone loves a good argument, apparently.

“Manager’s on the field,” I warn, flipping off my facemask as I turn. “Stay in your dugout,” I tell him, but he ignores me, stomping over with heavy footsteps.

The manager, Reyes, if I recall correctly, plants himself between me and his pitcher, though it’s unclear who he’s really trying to protect. “What’s the call here?” he demands, resting his hands on his hips. “We had a good game going, and now you’re throwing balk calls around like confetti.”

“Your pitcher made an illegal motion,” I explain, gesturing at the rubber. “He engaged for a throw to first, then attempted to revert to pitching home. That’s a balk.”

“You telling me that was a real balk?” Reyes’s voice rises with each word, and I can see the veins popping in his neck. “Or did you just see an opportunity to flex those stripes?”

Outrage flares in my chest, but I force it down. “I’m not here to ‘flex’ anything. Balk is a balk. The rule is clear. Check your replay if you don’t trust me.” I flick my gaze to the scoreboard, which shows the newly tied score. “One run came in because of a mistake. That’s the game. Let’s move on.”

Reyes splutters, but I think he realizes pushing the issue could get him tossed out. The crowd is chanting something now—hard to make out over the general din, but it sounds like a mix of “Ump, you suck!” and “Let him pitch!” Typical fan meltdown. Tuning them out, I gesture for the game to continue. Riptide’s still standing there, eyes locked on me, as though he’s daring me to do something else that’ll set him off.

The catcher tries once more to calm him down. “Come on, Ripley. Let’s just get back in the zone. We still have a couple innings left.”

Riptide finally picks up his glove from the dirt. He points at me again, but his voice is lower, more controlled, as he mutters, “This isn’t over. You owe me.”

I nearly roll my eyes. “I owe you nothing,” I say firmly. “Pitch the game or leave the field. That’s your choice.”

For a second, I think he’s about to launch another tirade, but then he bites down on his lip and storms back to the mound, firing a resentful look my way. Meanwhile, the manager lingers in front of me for a moment longer, his gaze boring into me as though he’s memorizing my face for future vendettas. Then he turns on his heel and stomps back to the dugout.

I replace my facemask, ignoring the sheen of sweat on my forehead. My pulse is

pounding, but outwardly I keep it together. I glance toward the stands, noticing a few fans leaning forward in their seats, cameras and phones raised to capture the drama. Great—this'll probably end up on social media, with endless debates about the call. But if it's the right call, it's the right call. That's why I'm here... to keep the game fair.

The next pitch from Riptide is a fastball, low and inside. "Strike!" I call, my voice echoing across the field. The batter barely flinches. There's a certain heat behind that throw, a barely contained rage that might cost Riptide if he can't control it.

He sets up for the second pitch, shoulders taut, tension visible in every muscle. The ball rockets toward home plate, this time going wide. "Ball!" I bark.

The catcher shakes his head slightly as he throws the ball back, probably telling Riptide to breathe, to steady his arm. But the pitcher's expression is stormy, and his gaze darts back to me more often than it does to the catcher's signals.

As the at-bat continues, I notice the runner on first creeping off the bag again. The tension is back. If Riptide tries another pick-off move, he'll have to be flawless. The crowd knows it too. Every time he lifts his foot, the entire stadium seems to hold its breath, waiting for a repeat of that balk call or some other meltdown.

He hurls another fastball. "Foul!" I announce as the batter clips it, sending it dribbling up the first-base line. The runner retreats, and the tension ratchets up another notch. We go through a few more pitches—two more balls, another foul, then finally a sharp grounder to short. The shortstop scoops it neatly and fires to second. They catch the runner in a force play, and the second baseman whips it to first, but the batter beats the throw by a step.

"That's two outs!" I yell. The scoreboard updates, showing the home team's fleeting chance to salvage the inning. Riptide stands on the mound, hands on his hips, glaring

at the dirt as if it's personally offended him.

Between batters, I step back to give the catcher some space. He glances up at me. "You all right, Kali?" he asks softly, sounding almost sympathetic.

"I'm fine," I reply, shifting my mask up to my forehead. "Just hot as hell out here." My throat is parched, and I'd love a big swig of water, but I can't leave my post now. The game is still on, the next batter stepping up to the plate. The scoreboard clock says we're two hours into the contest, and it feels like it's just heating up in more ways than one.

The next batter is a switch-hitter who opts for the left side. He digs in, adjusting his gloves, and peers at Riptide. I take a moment to look at the man on the mound. His posture is rigid, but there's no denying his skill. When he's not fuming at me, his form is something to admire—fluid, powerful, and precise. It's ironic how someone so talented can let pride sabotage his own performance. So good-looking too.

He delivers another blistering pitch—right down the middle. "Strike!" I call. The batter steps back, presumably to gather himself. The crowd, still a bit rowdy from the earlier drama, begins chanting for a hit.

A group of children leans against the chain-link fence near the dugout, craning their necks to see the action. They're the purest fans out here, just wanting a good game. They don't know or care about the drama swirling around Riptide and me. Their innocence is refreshing.

The next pitch is high and outside. "Ball!" I announce, and I notice Riptide flinch. He might be second-guessing every move now, afraid another balk call is coming. The scoreboard still shows a tie, which means this game is on a razor's edge. A single swing could change everything.

The at-bat stretches longer than usual—fouled-off pitches, more balls, a lot of head shakes from Riptide, and anxious stares from the batter. Finally, on a full count, Riptide unleashes a wicked curveball that breaks late and sends the batter flailing. “Strike three, batter’s out!” I yell, motioning the end of the inning.

That should be the last out for the top of the seventh. Relieved, I peel off my mask and walk toward the umpire’s station for a quick breather and to switch out a couple of scuffed balls. The home team jogs off the field, Riptide heading straight for the dugout without looking at me. I can practically feel the waves of anger emanating from him, but he keeps it tamped down.

As I reach for a fresh set of baseballs, the second base umpire, a veteran named Tully, ambles up behind me. “He giving you trouble?” Tully asks quietly, jerking his chin in Riptide’s direction.

“He’s not thrilled with my call,” I reply, shrugging. “But it was a balk. No question in my mind.”

Tully nods. “I saw it too. Had to happen at some point. Kid’s got good stuff, but that pick-off move’s always been on the edge of legality. Sooner or later, someone was gonna call him for it. Good on you for sticking to your guns.”

I give Tully a small, appreciative smile. “Thanks. I’m not here to make friends. I’m here to keep the game fair.” And that’s the truth I remind myself of every time I step on the field.

When we return to our positions, the scoreboard transitions to the bottom of the seventh. The stadium announcer’s voice booms over the speaker system, reminding fans of the post-game fireworks if the home team manages to pull off a victory. The crowd cheers, eager for any sign of a home-team comeback. I check my watch—time is marching on, but the tension remains thick as ever.

Riptide's team takes the field for defense. I notice he's still out there, stretching his shoulder and rolling his neck to shake off the previous inning. Despite the drama, he's staying in the game. I almost respect his determination... almost. But I remember the way he got in my face, accusing me of everything under the sun. That, I don't appreciate. There's a line between frustration and hostility, and he tiptoed right over it.

The bottom of the seventh begins with a base hit to left field, and the crowd roars its approval. The next batter bunts, advancing the runner. Then a ground ball to second results in an out, but it moves the runner to third. Just like that, there's a scoring threat. Riptide's team scrambles, trying to keep it together. A base hit here would mean the home team takes the lead.

The crowd rises to its feet for the two-out pitch. The batter connects with a solid crack, and the ball screams toward the right-center gap. The runner on third sprints home, crossing the plate before the outfield can scoop and relay. A fresh wave of cheers explodes, making the bleachers quake. The scoreboard updates: 4–3, home team in the lead.

My chest tightens with the excitement of the moment—I love a good nail-biter, even if I'm the neutral official. The intensity, the roar of the crowd, and the tension among the players is what keeps me coming back game after game.

I jog off the field, my throat yearning for water. I can see Riptide reemerging from the dugout, snapping at a teammate who probably offered some unwanted advice. He picks up a bat, likely taking some practice swings for his own turn in the lineup.

I can't help but shake my head. He's clearly still fuming, and I brace myself for another confrontation if he crosses my path. However, I remind myself that I've dealt with worse. Arrogant players come with the territory. Some nights they calm down; other nights they hold grudges. Either way, I have a job to do, and I intend to do it.

I slip into the small umpire area behind the backstop, grabbing a quick sip of water from a cooler we keep there. My shoulders ache from the constant crouching, my gear feels heavier than ever, and my face is flushed, but the thrill of being on the field overrides every complaint.

As I head back out, a few fans shout at me. “Hey, ump! Call it down the middle, will ya?” one hollers. Another, wearing the visiting team’s hat, yells, “Don’t bail them out again!” I ignore them both. The crowd will always be divided. One side thinks you’re great; the other side thinks you’re blind. That’s the nature of officiating.

When I take my position for the bottom of the seventh, I notice Riptide is next in the batting order. I wonder to myself why he’s even batting. It’s probably his God complex kicking in. Now I’ll get to see if his frustration carries over to the batter’s box. Part of me braces for more fireworks. Will he try to show me up? Maybe get ejected by yelling about something else?

“Why not use a designated hitter?” I mutter as he passes by.

He strides up to the plate, bat propped on his shoulder, eyes locked on me rather than the pitcher. “And let you miss the opportunity of watching me knock it out of the park?” The tension between us is almost tangible. But I focus on the new pitcher, who’s shaking off two signals from his catcher. Finally, the pitcher sets, winds up, and fires a high fastball. Riptide doesn’t even move. “Ball!” I call.

He taps the dirt with his bat. “Well, at least you can see that was high,” he mutters, voice dripping with sarcasm.

Why does he have to be so gorgeous?

I ignore his dig. The next pitch comes in low and away. “Ball two.” Riptide squares up, but he still sneaks a glance my way, as if challenging me to say something. The

crowd's volume seems to taper, everyone waiting to see if we'll have another altercation.

Pitch three is right down the heart of the plate. "Strike!" I announce clearly. Riptide scowls, but he doesn't argue. He steps out of the box, takes a practice swing, and steps back in. The next pitch is borderline, painting the black on the outside corner. It could go either way, but from my angle, it nicks the strike zone. "Strike two!"

He exhales, jaw clenched. I watch him tighten his grip, probably wishing he could do something to retaliate. Then the fifth pitch is a nasty slider in the dirt, and he holds off. "Ball three."

Now it's a full count. The stadium is electric again. The fans who love him cheer wildly; those who hate him boo just as loudly. My heartbeat thuds in my ears. The pitcher sets, eyes locked on the catcher's mitt, and unleashes a rocket of a fastball. Riptide swings, making contact with a deafening crack. The ball slices foul down the left field line, landing among a scramble of fans leaping for a souvenir.

We reset, still locked at three balls and two strikes. The tension is thick as smog. The next pitch is another fastball, but it sails high. "Ball four, batter takes first," I announce. I give him a little wink. "Maybe you'll hit it out of the park next time, Rip." I step aside as Riptide tosses his bat and jogs down the line.

As he passes me, he mutters under his breath, "Don't think this means we're cool," and continues on. I don't respond. Let him stew. I'm not here to make friends.

Eventually, the inning ends without him scoring. There's two innings left, and anything can happen in baseball. But for me, the real story of the night has already played out. I called a balk on the local golden boy, and now he's got a personal vendetta. Fine. I've dealt with bigger tempers and stronger personalities.

I take a breath, letting the humidity fill my lungs. The lights overhead are at full brightness now, illuminating every blade of grass and every speck of infield dirt. The scoreboard glows with the 4–3 tally, reminding me we’re not done. I brush dirt off my pants and settle my mask back on my face, preparing for the top of the eighth.

No matter what else happens tonight, I know I made the right call. Riptide can seethe all he wants; I’m not backing down. If he balks again, I’ll call it again. That’s how this game works.

And as I crouch behind the plate, scanning the field for the next pitch, I feel the usual rush of satisfaction. There’s nothing like being in the thick of a high-stakes game—rules, tempers, and all. This is baseball, and I’m here to make sure it’s played fair.

If that means facing off against Ripley “Riptide” Johnson, so be it. Because I might sweat in this summer heat, and I might get screamed at by managers and players alike, but there’s one thing I never do: I never compromise the integrity of the game. And if Riptide wants a fight, he’ll learn soon enough that I’m not the type to back down from a challenge.

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Ripley

I'm still riding the high of our win as I stride into the locker room, cleats clacking against the concrete. The place reeks of sweat and sports drinks, but for me, it smells like victory—despite the fact that the new umpire did everything in her power to sabotage me. Okay, maybe not everything, but she sure as hell handed the other team a free run with that balk call. If we'd lost, I might've lost my mind.

I drop onto the bench in front of my locker and start unlacing my cleats. Fenway's the first to wander over, a lazy grin on his face. "Hey, Riptide. Nice job out there, minus that hiccup."

"Hiccup?" I glare at him, but I can't help smirking. "That 'hiccup' almost blew the game for us."

"Dude, we won!" Fenway says, slapping my shoulder. "Way to bounce back."

Mike, toweling off his hair, jumps in. "And you can't blame the newbie ump for calling it like she saw it. Maybe you should have made your move less... questionable."

I huff. "Questionable? Come on, that was a clean pick-off attempt. She just—she didn't see it right, that's all."

Jace, never one to miss an opportunity, laughs. "Or maybe she saw it fine and you're

just salty.”

“Shut up, Jace,” I grumble, which only makes him laugh harder. I roll my eyes and change the subject. “By the way, did any of you notice who was under that umpire’s mask? I mean, she pulls it off, and—bam.”

Fenway wiggles his eyebrows. “So Riptide did notice. Thought you only had eyes for the strike zone.”

“She blindsided me,” I admit. “I wasn’t expecting someone who looked... well, like that. Didn’t mean I appreciated the call. But still.”

Mike whistles low, clearly amused. “I sense a little tension in the air.”

“Yeah, the tension of me wanting to never deal with her again,” I say quickly, trying to rein in my thoughts. She may be beautiful, but still. I shrug and push up from the bench. “Anyway, I’m out of here. I gotta pick Juniper up from my sister’s place.”

“Give the kid a high five from me,” Fenway calls.

“Sure thing,” I say. “If she’s still awake.”

* * *

I swing by Hattie’s place around nine. She lives in a cozy little house in a cul-de-sac with a big oak tree out front that Juniper loves to climb—at least, whenever Hattie lets her. The moment I knock, the door flies open, and Juniper barrels into me, nearly knocking me off my feet.

“Daddy!” she squeals, wrapping her arms around my waist. “I heard you won your game!”

“That’s right, Junebug,” I say, ruffling her curls. “We pulled it off. Barely.”

Hattie appears behind her, hands on her hips. “Barely, huh? I was watching the highlights online. Looked like you gave everyone a heart attack.”

I roll my eyes and lead them back into the living room. “The new umpire—Kali something—decided to call a balk on me. A balk !” I throw my hands up dramatically. “Totally unnecessary. She’s brand new, and she’s already going rogue.”

Hattie snorts and plops down on the couch. “So, is this ‘rogue’ umpire also the one you were staring at when she pulled off her mask?” she says, arching a thin brow in a way that suggests she’s heard rumors. “I think everyone noticed.”

I feel heat rush up my neck. “I—I wasn’t staring,” I protest, dropping my duffel bag near the coffee table. “I was surprised, is all. I thought she was just another guy behind the plate. Didn’t expect...” I realize Juniper’s eyes are on me, big and curious. “Never mind.”

Hattie laughs. “Oh, come on, lighten up. So you had a balk called on you. Did your buddy Fenway have anything to say about it?” Her eyes dart nervously around.

It’s no secret my sister’s had the hots for my best friend, Fenway. I’d just never allow it. I mean, it’s weird, right? I choose to ignore her lame attempt for more information about him, and simply answer her question.

“Fenway was telling me to calm down,” I grumble. “He’s a rookie, but he’s not wrong. Anyway, I kept it together—for the most part. Don’t want to make it easy for them to toss me out.”

Hattie raises her eyebrows. “You can’t afford to get ejected too often. That temper’s gonna catch up with you one of these days.”

“I know, I know,” I sigh.

Juniper climbs onto my lap, swinging her little legs back and forth. She’s only six, but she’s been around baseball her whole life. “Did you argue with the umpire, Daddy?” she asks, tilting her head.

“What if I did?” I reply, ruffling her hair again. “She made a bad call. I had to let her know.”

Juniper gives me a pointed look. “You probably deserved it,” she teases in that singsong voice. Hattie bursts out laughing, and I can’t help but join in.

“You little brat,” I tease right back, giving her a playful nudge. “You always side with the ump?”

“If you broke the rules, then yes,” Juniper declares, mimicking a serious expression. “No exceptions.”

Hattie claps her hands. “That’s my girl. Holding you accountable already.”

I shake my head, grinning at my daughter’s sass. “Okay, Miss Baseball Expert. How about you let me show you how it’s really done?”

“Actually, Dad, I wanted to talk to you about that!” Juniper says, eyes shining. “I want to learn to play! Aunt Hattie found a flyer for a coaching program at the rec center.”

My eyebrows shoot up. “Oh, yeah?” That place is about ten minutes from here, a nice little facility with beginner leagues and training camps. “You want to be a baseball player, huh?”

“Or softball. Or maybe an umpire! Or both!” Juniper bounces on my knee. “I want to learn how to pitch and catch and hit home runs. Aunt Hattie said you might teach me.”

I glance at Hattie, who gives me a warm smile. “I figured you’d want to hear it from her.”

I look back at Juniper and see the excitement brimming in her eyes. Suddenly, all the stress from the game, the balk call, and the new umpire’s glare fades into the background. “Sure, Junebug,” I say softly. “I’d love to teach you. Let’s sign you up.”

She squeals in delight, then throws her arms around my neck. “Thank you, thank you, thank you!”

Hattie stands, nodding at the clock on the wall. “We can register online tonight if you want. It’s a beginner’s program—Saturday mornings, I think.”

I grin. “Saturday mornings work for me. We’ll have to see about road games, but I’ll make it happen.”

Juniper wriggles off my lap and starts spinning in the middle of the living room like a tiny tornado of excitement. “I can’t wait!” she exclaims. “Can we get a pink glove? And maybe a sparkly bat?”

“Whoa, one step at a time, kiddo,” I say, laughing. “We’ll find you the right gear, I promise.”

Hattie pats my shoulder as I rise to my feet. “I love seeing you like this—a proud dad. You know, maybe you should thank that tough new umpire. She knocked you down a peg. Keeps you humble.”

I roll my eyes dramatically. “Let’s not go that far. I’m happy for Juniper, but that umpire, Kali... She’s on my list.”

Hattie snorts. “Your list of what? People who actually know the rules?”

“Ha-ha,” I deadpan, grabbing my duffel. “Keep it up, Sis. I’ll remember this.”

“Sure you will.” Hattie smirks, guiding Juniper toward the hall to grab her overnight bag. “In all seriousness, I’m just glad you survived another game without getting ejected. And that you won.”

As Juniper races back, backpack swinging wildly, I swoop her into my arms. “All right, you ready to head home, slugger?”

“Ready!” she chirps.

I share a smile with Hattie, who waves us off. “See you soon, big shot. Don’t let the umps get under your skin.”

“I’ll do my best,” I say, making a face. And as I step out into the warm night air with Juniper in my arms, I realize that no matter how annoying that balk was—or how unexpectedly stunning that umpire turned out to be—there’s a whole lot more in my life that matters than just one bad call. Still, I can’t help thinking about Kali again. Maybe I should forget her. Then again, maybe that’s going to be harder than I thought.

Kali

I'm weaving through the narrow streets of downtown Starlight Bay, one hand on the wheel and the other propping my phone up so my sister, Bristol, can see my face. The Saturday morning sun is bright, shimmering off every window I pass, and the tourists are already out, strolling along the sidewalks with iced coffees and sunglasses. The air smells like fresh bagels and the ocean just two blocks away—a sweet reminder that no matter how small this town is, it has its own little charms.

“Come on, spill it,” Bristol insists, her eyes sparkling through the phone screen as we Facetime each other. “You can’t drop a bomb about calling a balk on Ripley ‘Riptide’ Johnson and not give me the juicy details.”

I snort, easing my ancient Honda into a parking spot near the rec center. “I told you what happened. He broke the rules, I called the balk. End of story.”

“Sure,” she drawls, flipping a strand of pink-streaked hair behind her ear, “because you absolutely did not notice how scorching hot he is, right? I mean, the man’s practically a walking highlight reel.”

My cheeks warm. “That’s not the point.” I grab my duffel bag from the passenger seat, juggling it along with my phone and keys. “I’m an umpire. My job is to stay impartial, not drool over some hotshot pitcher who thinks he’s untouchable.”

Bristol’s grin is practically feral. “You just admitted he’s a hotshot. That’s close

enough to admitting you think he's hot too."

"Will you let it go?" I sigh, slamming my car door with a hip. "I'm on my way into the rec center to coach some adorable munchkins, not to debate Riptide's... physical attributes."

"Speaking of adorable munchkins," Bristol says, "did you hear that Riptide?"

"Gotta go!" I say, cutting her off with a playful grin. "My class is about to start. Love you, bye!"

I hang up before she can press me further, tucking my phone into the back pocket of my athletic shorts. The old brick building of the Starlight Bay Rec Center looms before me, large glass doors reflecting my own image—ponytail, ball cap, and a look of determination I hope offsets my nerves. This is my first time coaching the Saturday morning kids' program, and I want to make a good impression.

Inside, the space smells faintly of rubber gym mats and that unique rec-center scent that reminds me of my childhood—a mix of sweat, lemon disinfectant, and excitement. Parents and kids mill around, some shyly checking in at the front desk, others already racing around with plastic whiffle bats.

I smile at a few parents and wave to the rec coordinator, Mr. Lewis, as I head toward the baseball section in the back gym. That's when I see him.

Of course, it's him. Leaning against the wall near a poster of "Rules of Baseball" is none other than Ripley "Riptide" Johnson himself. He's in casual clothes—athletic shorts and a form-fitting T-shirt that clings just enough to make me swallow hard. He looks every bit as good off the mound as he does on it, hair tousled like he just rolled out of bed looking perfect.

I can't ignore the way my pulse jumps. Damn it, Bristol. This is exactly what I didn't want—being reminded just how annoyingly attractive he is. But that's not even the most startling part. Standing beside him is a tiny blonde girl, clutching a pink water bottle and gazing around with wide, curious eyes.

No way. No way .

I try to sidestep them, maybe sneak around to the equipment room, but it's like Ripley has a built-in radar for me. His gaze snaps toward mine, and our eyes lock. My stomach flips. I attempt a neutral smile.

“Oh, fantastic ,” he says, voice dripping sarcasm. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“Believe me, the feeling’s mutual,” I mutter, tugging at the brim of my hat. “What are you doing here?”

He glances down at the little girl. “Juniper’s signed up for baseball camp. Thought this was going to be a great experience, but now...” He looks at me pointedly. “I’m reconsidering.”

Juniper, all of probably six years old, puts her hands on her hips and frowns at her dad. “Daddy, you promised I could learn how to play.”

He looks between her and me, clearly torn. “I did promise, Junebug. But I didn’t know she —” He jabs a thumb in my direction. “—would be the coach.”

I set down my duffel bag and squat to be on Juniper’s level, hoping to diffuse the tension. “Hi, I’m Kali. I’m helping run the kids’ baseball sessions today. It’s nice to meet you, Juniper.”

She smiles politely. “Hi! I’m six. I want to learn to pitch—and hit home runs. Daddy

says?—”

“She doesn’t need the details, Junebug,” Ripley cuts in, crossing his arms.

“I don’t see the problem,” I say sweetly, standing back up. My heart’s hammering in my chest, but I keep my tone light. “Everyone’s welcome here, even exasperating pitchers.”

He arches an eyebrow. “Oh, I’m the exasperating one? Last time I checked, you were the one handing out balk calls like party favors.”

I fold my arms. “Then don’t break the rules, big shot.”

He lets out a dry laugh. “You know, Juniper, maybe we can find a different session on a different day. One without this coach.”

Juniper’s eyes go wide. “But Daddy, I like this place! And she clearly knows the rules,” she adds, with a pointed look at her dad.

I bite back a grin. This kid’s got spunk. Ripley rakes his hand through his hair, clearly outnumbered and not loving it. “Fine,” he relents at last, sighing dramatically. “But don’t think I’m going anywhere. I’ll be right here, watching.”

“Perfect,” I say, trying to sound confident instead of shaky. Why does the idea of him watching me twist my stomach into knots? “You can observe all you want. Just don’t interrupt my class, or I might have to?—”

“Throw me out?” he suggests, smirking.

“Call security,” I correct. “Security is more fun than an ejection.”

He chuckles low, but there's heat in his eyes—a challenge I can't ignore. "I'll behave, Coach. I'm just here for my daughter."

"Great," I say, forcing a bright smile I'm not sure I feel. "Let's get started, then. Juniper, come with me. We'll get you a glove that fits and warm up."

Riptide nods tersely, stepping aside to let Juniper follow me. I can feel his gaze trailing me, and I swear my skin tingles under his scrutiny. Focus, Kali, I tell myself. You're here to teach kids baseball, not to get into a stare-down with the world's most arrogant—and unfortunately attractive—pitcher.

Still, as I lead Juniper toward the equipment rack, my mind buzzes with a thousand questions. What are the odds he'd bring his daughter to my session? And why does the sight of him—hair tousled, arms folded, T-shirt hugging every muscle—scramble my common sense? And more importantly, is he married? I'm half-tempted to pull out my phone and Google the man, but I need to remain professional.

I can Google him later. In the privacy of my own home. Maybe glance at a few pictures. Late at night. In my bed.

Under the covers.

My cheeks heat as I remember where I am.

I push the thoughts aside, forcing my attention on Juniper and the other kids gathering around. I'm a professional here, after all. Sure, Ripley's going to be watching my every move, but I can handle this. I called a balk on him before—I'm certainly not going to let him intimidate me now.

With a deep breath, I plaster on my best coaching smile. "Okay, kids! Let's have some fun today!" And maybe try not to get completely distracted by the tall,

smoldering pitcher lurking in the background, who I now hope isn't married.

Would it be weird to ask his daughter about her mother? It's not, right?

I huddle the kids together, finding gloves for each of them. When I hand Juniper hers, I smile. "Will your mother be joining us today too?" I am so ashamed of myself.

Juniper blinks. "My mother isn't around. I've only met her once. Maybe twice. Daddy says she's not a good person." Juniper shrugs as she puts the glove on.

I don't know if I should be happy or sad about this information. I glance over at Ripley, feeling bad he's had to step up for a mother who didn't. What must that have been like for him? For her?

My gut twists, but a slow smile spreads across my face when I realize... he's not married.

Score.

Ripley

I'm leaning against the chain-link fence that wraps around the rec center's makeshift diamond, watching Kali run through basic drills with a bunch of wide-eyed kids. Juniper stands out from the pack, her blonde curls bouncing every time she hops around to catch the ball. And she's absolutely beaming—like she's discovered the coolest place on earth.

I can't pretend I'm not impressed with how Kali handles all of them. She's calm, patient. She smiles a lot, and somehow her voice carries that perfect blend of kindness and authority. One moment she's adjusting a kid's batting stance, the next she's dodging a grounder and yelling encouragement to another. Watching her reminds me, uncomfortably, of how much Juniper's missing with no mother around. Does she need someone to guide her in a way that's... softer, more nurturing? I do my best, but it's not the same.

Stop it, I tell myself. Kali's just the umpire who nearly cost you the game. But I can't ignore how my pulse picks up when I glimpse that confident grin of hers, or the way her ponytail swishes against her shoulders. She's in athletic shorts and a tank top, and if I catch myself looking a little too long, well, that's my problem to deal with, right?

"Nice throw, Juniper!" Kali shouts, and my daughter's face lights up like the Fourth of July. A pang hits my chest. Juniper's always been a pretty happy kid—Hattie and I do everything we can to keep her that way. Still, seeing her soaking up praise from someone she admires stirs up all sorts of emotions. She hasn't had a consistent

maternal figure in her life. Sometimes I worry she's missing out.

I sigh, crossing my arms. We had a little disagreement this morning—Kali and I—about whether Juniper should even be in this class. I'm still not thrilled she's the coach, but Juniper's already attached to her, so what am I supposed to do? Pull her out because I have a grudge against the new ump? That wouldn't be fair to Juniper. And the kid's right. Kali clearly knows the rules. If I'm honest with myself, I know Juniper's in good hands. Doesn't mean I have to like it.

Finally, the session winds down. Kali gathers the kids in a circle, handing out high-fives and little pep talks. Juniper practically glows when it's her turn to receive a fist bump. I swallow the odd mixture of jealousy and pride that wells up in me. I hate that I'm jealous of Kali, but it's there—she's given Juniper something new, something she clearly loves.

I see Kali glance my way, and for a heartbeat, our eyes lock. There's a flicker in her expression—surprise, maybe, or acknowledgement. I tug my cap lower, determined not to give anything away. When the kids all scatter toward their parents, Juniper bounds over to me, face flushed and bright.

“That was amazing, Dad!” she chirps. “Coach Kali said I have a real good arm! Can we go buy a glove? I want a pink one with sparkles.”

I can't help smiling. “Sparkles, huh? We'll see. Come on, let's go. We gotta get to Hattie's for dinner.”

“You know what else?” Juniper's big eyes blink at me.

“What?”

“She loves Star Wars. She called me her little padawan.” Juniper beams with pride.

“She did?” A Star Wars fan, huh?

Juniper hops along next to me, but not before tossing a loud “Bye, Coach Kali!” over her shoulder. My eyes flick to Kali, who waves enthusiastically at Juniper. Then she crosses her arms and quirks an eyebrow at me, as if waiting for some kind of acknowledgment. I give her a small nod, which is about all I can muster without my chest doing that weird twisty thing again.

* * *

All the way home, Juniper cannot stop talking about Kali. Kali this... Kali that.

“And then she showed me how to line up my feet, and it made the ball go faster, and then she said ‘Great job, Juniper,’ and she gave me a high five, and?—”

I’m half-laughing, half-wincing at every mention of Kali’s name. “Okay, kiddo, I get it. She’s the best coach ever. Just don’t forget your dad’s a pretty decent ballplayer too.”

Juniper giggles. “I know, Daddy, but you’re always so serious when you play. Coach Kali makes it look fun.”

That stings a bit, but I force a chuckle. “I’m serious because it’s my job, you goof. You’ll see the difference when you start playing in games.”

We pull into the driveway of Hattie’s house. We live not far away in a nice little bungalow on the edge of town, overlooking the water. Hattie’s got the bigger kitchen, and she offered to host dinner tonight. So, of course I hopped on the plan. I’m still chewing on Juniper’s words when we step inside.

“Hey!” Hattie calls from the living room, flipping through a magazine. “How was

practice? Anyone break an arm yet?"

Juniper races over, bouncing on her toes. "No, but guess what, Aunt Hattie? My coach is the Kali! The one Daddy was talking about!" She giggles. "And she loves Star Wars too, just like Daddy."

Hattie's eyebrows shoot up. "The Kali? As in, the new umpire who gave your dad a hard time?" She glances at me with a wicked grin. "Must have been fun."

I drop my keys onto the counter, then loosen my shoulders. "Oh, it was a real blast," I say dryly. "Turns out she's pretty good with kids."

Juniper nods vigorously. "She's the best! She said my throw was awesome. And she showed me how to hold the bat just right. Look!" She mimics the stance, nearly knocking a lamp off the end table.

"Watch it!" I steady the lamp before it crashes. "We'll practice outside after dinner, all right?"

She beams at me. "Yes, please!"

Hattie stands up and motions me into the kitchen. "Come on, let's get started on dinner. Juniper, want to help me chop veggies?"

"Sure!" Juniper's already tugging a stool over to the counter.

I slip off my jacket and wash my hands at the sink, doing my best to ignore Hattie's smug look. She's up to something, I can tell. I toss her a suspicious glance. "Stop looking at me like that."

She grins, handing a plastic knife to Juniper for the veggies. "What do you mean? I'm

just curious about your day.”

“My day was fine,” I say, drying my hands. “We got through practice, Juniper had a blast, and that’s that.”

“Uh-huh.” Hattie stirs a pot of sauce on the stove. “You told me you ‘wanted nothing to do with Kali’ just yesterday. So how’d that go, Mr. I’m-So-Over-It?”

I clench my jaw, tossing a few pasta noodles into the pot. “I still want nothing to do with her. She’s my daughter’s coach, not my friend. End of story.”

Juniper giggles. “But Daddy, you were totally staring at her?—”

“Juniper!” I nearly drop the handful of noodles. “What are you talking about?”

She shrugs, giggling again. “I saw you, Daddy. You were watching her teach. And you had that look.”

“What look?” Hattie pounces, eyes sparkling.

I shoot Juniper a playful glare. “I didn’t have a ‘look.’ I was just making sure she was doing her job right. You’re my kid, I’m allowed to supervise.”

Hattie snorts. “Sounds awfully protective for a guy who wants ‘nothing to do with her.’”

“Can we drop it?” I mutter, feeling my cheeks heat. It’s infuriating how easily they gang up on me, but I can’t blame them for reading between the lines. The fact is, I am drawn to Kali in some bizarre way. I can’t stand her, yet I want to see her again. Makes no sense.

We chat about random stuff as we cook—Juniper’s new dance moves, Hattie’s latest painting project—until dinner is almost ready. While Juniper sets the table, Hattie sidles up next to me, lowering her voice.

“Look, I’m not trying to pry,” she says gently, “but you and Kali? There’s something there, isn’t there?”

I scoff, shaking my head. “There’s nothing. She’s stubborn, rule-obsessed, infuriating... She cost me a run with that balk call.”

Hattie gives me a knowing look. “And yet, somehow, you’re excited to see her at tomorrow’s game. Right?”

My stomach does a weird flip, and I hate how easily she can read me. “I just want to make sure she doesn’t pull another stunt like that.”

“Mm-hmm,” Hattie hums, patting my arm. “Sure, that’s the only reason. I know that face, Riptide. You’re intrigued. And maybe a little...?”

I sigh. There’s no point lying to my sister. “Fine, maybe a tiny bit. But I shouldn’t be. I mean, come on. We clash like crazy. And Juniper?—”

“What about Juniper?” Hattie prods.

“She’s getting attached,” I admit quietly. “I’m not sure how to handle it. I don’t want her to get let down.”

Hattie’s expression softens. She knows how protective I am of Juniper. “You’re a good dad, Rip. If Juniper enjoys Kali’s class, that’s a positive, no matter what you two have going on.”

“What we have going on is nothing,” I insist, even though a little voice in my head calls me a liar. “Now can we eat? I’m starving.”

Hattie shakes her head with a wry smile, and we gather at the table. Over bowls of pasta and sauce, we feast and talk about tomorrow’s game—my schedule, the team we’re up against. But in the back of my mind, I’m already imagining Kali, standing behind home plate in all her gear, unwavering in her calls. The idea of her eyes on me again makes my heart pound in a way I can’t quite name. Annoyance? Thrill? Both?

As we finish dinner and Juniper heads off to brush her teeth, I grab a dish towel and help Hattie clean up. She bumps her shoulder against mine. “You’d tell me if something changed, right?”

I shrug. “Sure. But nothing’s gonna change. This is just baseball. She’s the ump, I’m the pitcher, and that’s it.”

Hattie doesn’t push it further. Once the dishes are put away, we head home.

I tuck Juniper into bed, reading her a quick story about a puppy who finds its way home. She babbles for another minute about next week’s practice—Kali said something about practicing bunts and grounders. Then she dozes off with a smile on her face. As I watch her breathing softly, I can’t shake the image of Kali high-fiving my kid, telling her she has a good arm.

I head to my own bed, lying awake for a bit, replaying the day in my mind. I keep telling myself that I don’t want anything to do with Kali, that she’s infuriating. But there’s a part of me that’s itching to face her again.

Tomorrow, I think, closing my eyes. Tomorrow, I’ll show her that she can’t rattle me. But if I’m being honest with myself, I’m already rattled—and maybe a little more intrigued by the fiery umpire than I’d ever want to admit.

5

Kali

I'm perched on a rickety stool in the locker room's tiny umpire prep area, struggling to re-tie my ponytail for the third time. My hands are shaking, which I keep telling myself is purely from the leftover adrenaline of last night. My Google obsession. I now know everything there is to know about Ripley 'Riptide' Johnson.

I glance at my phone propped up against a bottle of sports drink. Bristol's face fills the screen, half of it obscured by a neon-pink scrunchie in her hair.

"I don't get it," she says, pushing the scrunchie aside so I can see her skeptical expression. "Why are you so nervous? You're an ump, you do this all the time. Just call the game and move on."

I blow out a breath, reaching for a fresh hair tie. "That's the problem. I usually do this all the time, no issue. But now... Ripley's going to be on that field. Last time we saw each other, we nearly came to blows."

Bristol snorts. "You mean he nearly came to blows, and you casually reminded him you have all the power with your rulebook."

I roll my eyes. "That's not helping."

"Look," she says more gently, "you just gotta do your job, same as always. Don't overthink it. So he's got pretty eyes and a killer smile—whatever."

I flinch. “Bristol!”

“Hey, you said it yourself, he’s easy on the eyes,” she teases, waggling her eyebrows. “Don’t shoot the messenger.”

“Ugh.” I rub my temples, feeling a headache threatening. “I gotta go. The game starts soon, and I still need to finish getting my gear together. Thanks for the pep talk... I think?”

She laughs. “Anytime, sis. Go knock ‘em dead.”

I hang up and stuff my phone into my bag. Within minutes, I’m suited up and heading out into the corridor. The din of the crowd grows louder with each step, that familiar mix of cheers, popcorn smells, and restless energy that I usually love. Except today, my stomach is doing an Olympic-level gymnastics routine.

Once I’m on the field, my mask in hand, I do my usual routine—check the baselines, nod to the other umps, confirm the lineup cards. But all I can think about is Ripley “Riptide” Johnson. He just looks so darn good strutting around the pitcher’s mound. When the game finally starts, I’m hyperaware of every move he makes.

During the top of the second, he’s on the pitcher’s mound. From behind the plate, I can see the set of his shoulders, the way his uniform fits just right, and... Kali, focus. I should be watching the batter, but I find my eyes drifting to his stance, his posture, the way his hair curls slightly at the nape of his neck. A crack of the bat jolts me back to reality, and I nearly flinch before I call “Foul!”

The rest of the game goes by in a blur of baseballs, dusty cleats, and shouted signals. Every time I make a call, I half-expect him to glare at me like he did the other day. But he keeps it civil, which somehow makes my nerves buzz even more. Is he ignoring me on purpose, or is he just being professional?

By the eighth inning, I'm fairly certain we're both on autopilot. The tension sizzles, though, like an invisible current between us. When the final out is called, the crowd roars their approval—another win for his team. I exhale a breath I didn't realize I'd been holding and prepare to hand off my umpire gear for cleaning.

But before I can slip away, I hear a small voice calling my name: "Kali! Coach Kali!"

I turn to see Juniper darting across the grass with a huge grin on her face, her blonde curls bouncing in the late afternoon sun. Ripley's a few steps behind her, trying to catch up, but it's clear Juniper is on a mission. My heart does a strange little twist at the sight of her beaming at me.

"You were so cool, Kali!" she exclaims, skidding to a stop in front of me. "I saw you calling strikes and outs and everything! Will you be here for every game?"

I glance up at Ripley, who stands there with his arms folded, a bemused look on his face. I force a light laugh. "Well, yes, I'm the umpire, so I'll be around."

"Good!" Juniper says eagerly. She casts a quick look up at her dad, then back at me. "Hey, want to come to our house for dinner? Daddy's making tacos or something. I told Daddy you love Star Wars too."

My jaw drops for a split second. I was not expecting that. "Oh, Juniper, that's really sweet, but?—"

Ripley straightens, clearing his throat. "Junebug, maybe Kali has other plans?—"

"But Dad," Juniper whines softly, "she's nice. And she's my coach. And I want her to see how I practice at home."

A wave of heat rushes into my face. I open my mouth to politely decline again, but

her eyes are so pleading, and there's a part of me—much bigger than I'd like to admit—that wants to say yes. Then Ripley surprises me by shrugging, a faint challenge in his eyes.

“Yeah, maybe she should come,” he says, his tone half-wary, half-inviting. “You know, if you're not busy.”

I sputter. “I—um—I don't want to impose.”

Juniper claps her hands. “Yay! She said yes!”

I blink. “Actually, I—” But by now, both Johnsons are looking at me with an odd combination of expectation and reluctance, and I find myself swallowing a thousand objections. “All right. Fine. But I need to run home first to change. And please, only if you're sure.”

“Sure,” Ripley says, a slight curve to his mouth that might be a grin. “We're pretty sure.”

Juniper bounces on her toes. “Dad will text you the address. See you soon, Kali!” She gives me a quick wave, and Ripley hands me a slip of paper with a scrawled phone number. I nod and mumble something about seeing them later, then practically flee the field, my heart pounding like I just sprinted around the bases.

* * *

Back at my tiny apartment, I dump my gear in a corner and hop straight into the shower. My nerves are a mess—why am I so worked up? It's just dinner with a pitcher who can't stand me and his adorable daughter. Not a big deal. Definitely not a date. Right?

I throw open my closet, combing through my casual clothes. I end up picking a light sundress, a soft pastel color that makes me feel summery and... feminine. Which is weird, because I'm usually in athletic wear or umpire gear. But something about going to Ripley's house has me wanting to look nice. As I smooth the dress over my hips, I catch sight of myself in the mirror. For a split second, I imagine this as a date—showing up on a Saturday evening, wearing something that highlights my curves, maybe even brushing on some lip gloss.

I shake the thought away. Not a date. Not a date. I remind myself sternly. Still, I slip into a pair of low wedges, because apparently, I want to torture myself further.

The GPS leads me through a quiet neighborhood with tree-lined streets and quaint bungalows. When I pull up to the address, my heart lifts in surprise. His house is a charming little bungalow with a wide wrap-around porch, hanging ferns swaying in the gentle breeze. The porch light casts a cozy glow, making it look like something out of a small-town postcard.

I take a shaky breath before climbing out of the car, reminding myself I'm here for dinner with Juniper. That's all. Focus on the kid. My sandals click against the porch steps, and I pause at the front door, listening to muffled voices and laughter inside. There's a flutter in my chest, something that feels almost like hope. I can't tell if it's excitement or nerves, but it's definitely there.

I knock lightly, and for a moment, my heart hammers in time with the echoing rap of my knuckles. Then the door swings open, revealing Ripley. He's in a casual T-shirt and jeans, looking way too good for someone who's supposed to be my nemesis. His gaze sweeps over me, lingering on the sundress, and something flickers across his expression—surprise, maybe? Approval?

“Hey,” he says, his voice unexpectedly soft.

“Hey,” I manage, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear. “I... uh... nice place.”

He smiles, stepping aside. “Thanks. Come on in. Juniper’s been talking about you nonstop since we left the stadium.”

I step into the foyer, trying not to notice how close we are, or how his cologne mingles with the scent of something delicious cooking in the kitchen. I feel like an intruder in this cozy space, yet also strangely welcome. Maybe it’s the warmth of the lamplight or the sight of Juniper darting around the corner to greet me.

“Coach Kali!” she squeals, throwing her arms around my waist. “You’re here! Dad’s making tacos, and Aunt Hattie made guacamole. She’s the best at guacamole!”

I laugh, gently patting her shoulder. “Wow, that sounds amazing.”

Ripley clears his throat, shutting the door behind me. “We’ll see if you still think so after tasting my cooking. Come on, I’ll show you to the kitchen.”

And just like that, I’m following him through a hallway lined with family photos—Juniper as a baby, a younger Ripley in an old baseball uniform, a woman who looks like she might be his sister. Something about these glimpses into his life makes my chest ache, reminding me that beneath the surly pitcher is a whole person I barely know.

No. I remind myself, this is definitely not a date. But as I step into the warm, bustling kitchen, the smell of spices filling the air, I can’t help the tiny spark of excitement flickering in my chest—mixed with a healthy dose of nerves. Because if it’s not a date, why does it feel like one?

Ripley

I still can't believe that Kali—my new umpire nemesis-turned-reluctant dinner guest—is standing in my kitchen, chatting away with my sister like they've been best friends for ages. Part of me wants to pinch myself just to make sure I'm not hallucinating. A week ago, I wouldn't have imagined sharing a meal with Kali if the world depended on it. Now, here she is, wearing a sundress that does an unfair number on my concentration.

I catch myself staring a little too long at the soft pastel fabric skimming her curves, and I swallow hard, turning my attention back to the food. The plan was simple: whip up an easy taco dinner, show off a bit of culinary skill so Kali won't think I'm totally useless off the field, and maybe keep the evening short and sweet for Juniper's sake. But from the moment Kali walked through my front door, I've had trouble remembering how to properly stir ground beef in a skillet.

I shift my grip on the spatula, trying not to let my eyes wander over to where Kali and Hattie are whispering conspiratorially near the cutting board. My sister, as usual, has her long brown hair pulled back in a loose bun, an easy grin on her face as she lays out tortillas and carefully chops tomatoes. Kali stands beside her, handing over knives and bowls whenever asked, fitting seamlessly into a kitchen she's never been in before. It's such a domestic scene that I have to do a double take—since when do I let near-strangers come waltzing into my life and share my dinner table?

“Rip, you're burning the meat,” Hattie calls out, not even bothering to hide her

amusement.

I jerk back to the pan, noticing the edges of the beef are browning a bit too quickly. “I’ve got it under control,” I say, though my heart’s thumping hard enough that I’m not sure who I’m trying to convince.

“Uh-huh,” Hattie says in a sing-song voice, flipping a stray piece of onion off the cutting board and into the trash. She sets her knife down and glances at Kali with a conspiratorial smile. “You know, Kali, if you keep him talking long enough, he’ll ruin dinner. It’s the one surefire way to tease him.”

I clear my throat. “I’m standing right here, you know.”

Kali laughs, and the sound ripples through the kitchen in a way that has my pulse doing a weird flutter. “Don’t blame me,” she says. “It’s not my fault you can’t multitask.”

“Didn’t seem to have trouble multitasking on the mound yesterday,” Hattie points out, “but apparently cooking is his Achilles’ heel.” She wipes her hands on a dish towel and waves me away from the stove. “You know what? Why don’t you go hang out with Juniper? I can finish browning the meat, and Kali can help with the veggies.”

I stiffen. “But I’m the one who started cooking.”

“Exactly,” Kali deadpans, “which is why the stove’s about to catch fire.”

My mouth drops open. “It is not!”

“All right, Gordon Ramsay, move it along,” Hattie orders, stepping between me and the skillet. She plucks the spatula from my hand as if I’m a child about to break

something expensive.

Kali hides a grin behind her hand. Her eyes slide to mine, and for a second, I see something like humor mixed with genuine warmth. I'm not sure what to do with that look, so I huff in mock indignation. "Fine. You two have fun. I'll leave you to your veggie-chopping extravaganza."

I pivot toward the living room, where Juniper's peeking around the corner. She's dressed in a bright teal T-shirt and denim shorts, hugging her new pink baseball glove to her chest. I guess she's been itching to show it off since we got it this afternoon.

"Dad," she pipes up, voice excited, "can we go outside and practice throwing? Kali showed me some new tricks, and I want to see if I can do them."

I rake a hand through my hair, glancing over my shoulder at the kitchen. My sister waves me off without looking up, and Kali gives a small nod of approval, so I shrug. "Sure, Junebug. Let's do it."

She tugs on my arm, practically bouncing in place. "Awesome!"

I lead her through the sliding glass door into our small but comfortable backyard. There's a modest patch of grass, a towering oak tree on the left side, and a well-worn patch of dirt we jokingly call "home plate" whenever we play. Juniper hands me one of her older gloves to use, and I jog a few steps away to put a little distance between us.

"How about we just toss it lightly at first?" I suggest, slipping on the glove. "Get you warmed up."

She nods, determined eyes fixed on me. "Okay."

I lob the ball underhand, letting her catch it easily. She grins, adjusting her stance to the position Kali must have shown her—elbow up, knees slightly bent. She tosses it back to me, surprisingly straight for a six-year-old. I catch it and nod approvingly.

“Nice form.”

She beams, wiggling with excitement. “Kali said I should keep my wrist straight and follow through.”

I toss it again, smiling a little at how quickly she’s picking up these pointers. “She’s right. That’s good advice.”

We do this for a few more minutes, me increasing the speed gradually while Juniper focuses on staying in position. A gentle breeze rustles the leaves of the oak, and I can faintly hear Hattie and Kali laughing in the kitchen. I try not to picture Kali’s sundress swaying around her legs or how her smile lights up her entire face.

“Dad?” Juniper asks, mid-throw.

“Yeah?”

She catches the ball, hugging it to her glove. “Do you think Kali is, like... a pretty princess tonight? Like Princess Leia? And you can be Han Solo.”

I nearly choke on nothing. “I... what?”

Juniper’s face is earnest. “She’s wearing a dress, and it looks like a princess dress to me. But, like, not super fancy. Just... pretty. Do you think so?”

Heat rushes to my cheeks. I’m not sure how to navigate this conversation. “Uh... well,” I say, rubbing my hand along the back of my neck. “She looks nice, sure. I

guess you could say... yeah, she looks like a pretty princess.”

Juniper’s grin expands, and she throws the ball back to me. “I knew it! I can’t wait to tell her you said that.”

My heart skips a beat. “You’re not going to tell her that. Right? Because I didn’t exactly— I mean, I don’t want you?—”

“I can tell her, can’t I?” Juniper interrupts, her eyes wide and guileless. “Why wouldn’t she want to know she looks pretty? You always say compliments are nice.”

I swallow, at a complete loss. “Let’s just... let’s keep it between us, okay, kiddo?”

She smirks, and I realize my daughter’s a little more devious than I give her credit for sometimes. “We’ll see,” she says mischievously.

I groan inwardly but decide I can’t exactly force a vow of secrecy. “Fine, just... don’t embarrass me in front of her, okay?”

“I won’t embarrass you,” Juniper says, but her tone is entirely too innocent.

We throw the ball a few more times until we hear Hattie shout from the back door, “Dinner’s ready! Tacos are on the table if you want them hot!”

“Let’s go,” I tell Juniper, ruffling her hair. My stomach rumbles in anticipation. The smell of spices and sizzling meat has been drifting through the yard, reminding me I haven’t eaten much all day.

Juniper darts inside ahead of me, practically skipping. By the time I step into the kitchen, she’s already in full chatter mode—something about how well she threw the ball and how excited she is to show Kali next time they practice. I slip off my glove

and set it on the counter, then turn just in time to see Juniper lean across the kitchen island, her voice loud enough to echo.

“Kali!” she announces with breathless enthusiasm, “Daddy says you look like a pretty princess in your dress! But he doesn’t want to be embarrassed.”

Time slows to a crawl, and I swear my face catches on fire. All the chatter in the kitchen abruptly dies, and Hattie’s eyes flick to me with pure glee. Kali’s cheeks flush pink, and she sets the plate of tortillas down. For a moment, the only sound in the room is the gentle hum of the fridge.

“I—uh—” I stammer, my hands hovering uselessly by my sides. I risk a glance at Kali, whose eyes have gone wide. There’s a flicker of something—surprise, maybe pleasure?—before she quickly schools her expression.

“Wow,” she says, her voice light but tinged with humor. “That’s... very sweet, Juniper.”

Hattie chokes out a laugh. “Oh, it sure is sweet.”

I glare at her, wishing I could sink into the floor. “I told Juniper—well, she asked me—” My words come out in a jumbled mess, and I can’t remember the last time I felt so flustered. Normally, I’m the cool-headed one under pressure. But apparently, a six-year-old and a stunning woman in a sundress are enough to shatter that image.

“Relax,” Kali murmurs, picking up a bowl of guacamole and moving closer to me. “No harm done, right?”

The mild scent of her perfume drifts my way, mixing with the aroma of tortillas and taco seasoning. I suddenly realize how close she’s standing, and it sends a jolt of awareness through me. “Right,” I say hoarsely. “No harm.”

“Let’s just say I appreciate the compliment.” She gives me a small, almost playful smile, then turns back to Juniper. “You guys ready to eat?”

“Starving!” Juniper shouts, springing into a chair.

Hattie sets bowls of salsa and cheese on the table, still grinning like she’s witnessing a prizefighter get KO’d. I rub the back of my neck, trying to regain some composure. The four of us gather around the table, and for a moment, I can’t help but think: this feels strangely... nice. Domestic. Comfortable. If you’d told me a week ago that I’d be having dinner with the very umpire who made my blood boil, I’d have laughed in your face. Yet here we are, passing plates of tortillas and toppings around like old friends.

I keep one eye on Kali throughout the meal, watching how easily she banters with Hattie and giggles with Juniper. It’s baffling—how can she fit in so effortlessly when I’ve known her for barely a handful of days? But every time she catches me looking, I feel that flutter again, and I glance away, hoping nobody notices. If Juniper’s earlier statement is anything to go by, my daughter’s paying attention to every move I make.

We dig into tacos, discussing trivial things like the next rec center practice or random local gossip. Each bite of food somehow tastes better than usual, and I can’t decide if it’s Hattie’s cooking or just the strange, warm atmosphere. At some point, I realize I’m smiling—like a genuine, easy grin that’s been missing from my life for a while.

By the time we set our plates aside, the sun’s sinking low outside the kitchen window, casting a golden hue through the curtains. Kali leans back in her chair, looking content. Juniper’s already asking for dessert, rattling off possibilities like ice cream or brownies, her excitement never once dimming.

As for me, I’m thinking about how completely unexpected this night has been. And how I’m not entirely sure I want it to end. Despite the embarrassment, despite our

rocky start, there's something about Kali that makes me feel... alive. Maybe it's her quick wit, or the way she brings out my daughter's best qualities, or that sundress that has my heart beating triple-time. Whatever it is, I'm not about to admit it openly yet.

Instead, I clear my throat and lean forward, fiddling with a stray napkin. "So... who's up for dessert?" I say, feigning casualness. "We've got, uh, ice cream. Or I could run out and get something else, if you want."

Hattie sends me a knowing smile, while Kali raises her eyebrows in surprise. "Ice cream sounds great," she says. "But only if it's not too much trouble."

"No trouble at all," I reply, trying to keep the slight wobble out of my voice. Because the more I think about it, the more I realize I'm in trouble—deep trouble. Especially if Juniper keeps sharing my so-called compliments with Kali at full volume. But at least for tonight, I'm oddly okay with it.

Kali

I'm not entirely sure how I ended up here, swaying gently on a back porch swing with Ripley "Riptide" Johnson at my side, the warm glow of a setting sun painting the sky in hues of bright pink and orange. One minute, we were joking around in the kitchen about his cooking skills (or lack thereof), and the next, Hattie was hugging Juniper goodbye and gathering her things. She offered me a quick smile and told me to "have fun," leaving me feeling both amused and oddly apprehensive.

So now it's just me, Ripley, and Juniper. Juniper's hopping around the backyard, practicing her batting stance with an imaginary bat. The only noises are the quiet squeak of the swing's chains, the distant hum of neighbors, and Juniper's excited chatter whenever she imagines hitting a grand slam. It's peaceful in a way I haven't experienced in a long time.

I can't help but let my gaze flick over to Ripley. He's leaning back, one arm stretched out along the top of the swing's frame, the other resting on his thigh. He's ditched his baseball cap, leaving his hair slightly messy, and in the soft twilight, I notice a few faint lines around his eyes—signs of someone who's spent a lot of time squinting at a sunlit field. It's a nice look on him, I have to admit.

"Beautiful night," I say softly, feeling the need to break the silence.

He nods, eyes on Juniper as she pretends to round imaginary bases. "Yeah. Hard to beat a Starlight Bay sunset."

I shift slightly on the swing, the old wood creaking beneath me. “So... thanks again for having me over. I wasn’t expecting such a warm welcome.”

He tilts his head. “I wasn’t expecting to invite you, to be honest.” There’s a hint of a smile ghosting across his lips. “But Juniper can be persuasive.”

“I’ve noticed.” We share a quiet laugh that feels surprisingly companionable. For a second, the memory of me calling a balk on him flashes through my mind, and I think how crazy it is that we’re sitting here, almost like friends.

As if reading my thoughts, Ripley clears his throat. “So... about that game. The one where you called the balk.”

I glance down at my lap, picking at a loose thread on my sundress. “Right. Listen, I... well, I feel like I owe you an apology. I mean, I know you said it was the right call, but I also know how badly you wanted that out?—”

He waves me off. “Nah, don’t sweat it. It was the right call. I was mad at first, yeah, but I’d have called it too if I were you.” His tone is casual, but there’s a sincerity that warms my chest. “Besides, it led to all this, didn’t it?” He gestures around at the porch, Juniper’s giggles punctuating the air.

I smile, a little shy despite myself. “Yeah, I guess it did. Though I never thought officiating a minor league game could land me a dinner invitation.”

He chuckles, shifting his weight so that he drifts a bit closer to me. “Life’s weird like that.”

We fall into a comfortable silence. I rest my hands on my knees and tilt my head back to watch the sky. The last edge of the sun dips below the horizon, leaving ribbons of pink and gold streaked across the clouds. A soft breeze drifts by, bringing with it the

faint scent of the ocean. Moments like this are what I've always loved most about moving to a town like Starlight Bay.

Ripley must sense my thoughts because he asks, "So why'd you move here, anyway? You said you were new in town?"

I nod. "Yeah. I came from a bigger city, but it was too... everything. Too crowded, too loud, too competitive. Don't get me wrong, I loved it there at times, but I needed a break. Plus, I've always wanted to umpire somewhere a bit more laid-back, where I could still hone my skills but not get lost in the chaos. So when the chance opened up at Starlight Bay, I took it."

"And how's it working out so far?" he asks quietly.

I smile ruefully. "Well, I'm currently known as the 'new girl who called a balk on the Riptide Johnson,' so there's that." When he laughs, I feel a tiny buzz of pride that I've made him laugh. "But honestly, it's been good. I like it here. The beach, the slower pace, the sense of community. It's a nice change."

He nods, looking thoughtful. "I get that. I've been bouncing around the minors for years, so I'm used to traveling, but this place always felt more like home to me than anywhere else. Juniper loves it here, too. My sister, Hattie, moved here first, and when Juniper came along... it just felt right to stick around."

Something tugs at my heart as I watch him talk about his daughter. There's warmth in his voice, pride in every syllable. It reminds me of how I always wanted a close-knit family of my own, though it hasn't happened yet. "She's lucky to have you," I say softly. "You're a great dad, Ripley."

He ducks his head, looking a little embarrassed. "Thanks," he mumbles. "I'm just doing my best. It's a team effort. Hattie's a big help. But I worry sometimes... about

what Juniper might be missing, you know?” His voice catches for a second, like he’s not sure how much to say.

I touch his arm lightly, the swing swaying with the motion. “From what I’ve seen, she’s a happy, confident kid. She adores you.” A small, soft laugh escapes me. “And she’s so proud of you. She couldn’t stop talking about your pitching skills during practice.”

Ripley’s lips quirk into a half-smile. “I guess that’s good to hear. She’s got a whole life ahead of her, so I just... yeah. I want her to have good influences.”

I’m about to say something more when Juniper bounds up the porch steps. Her cheeks are rosy from running around, and she clutches a whiffle ball in her hands. “Dad, Kali, come see me hit!” she exclaims, pointing excitedly to the makeshift home plate out in the yard.

Ripley chuckles. “We’ll be right there, Junebug.”

“Okay!” She zooms off again, leaving us in silence for another moment.

I sigh, realizing the time. The sun has fully set now, and the sky is dipping into twilight blues. “I should probably get going soon,” I say reluctantly. “It’s getting late.”

Ripley nods, though there’s a flicker of disappointment in his eyes—or maybe I’m imagining it. “Yeah, you probably should. Don’t want you getting stuck in the dark.”

We stand up from the swing, and I smooth down my sundress, trying not to feel too self-conscious about the lingering closeness between us. We head down into the yard to watch Juniper take a few more enthusiastic swings at the whiffle ball, cheering when she finally makes contact and sends it sailing a few yards. Her giddy smile

makes the whole day worth it.

Eventually, I gather my things, and Juniper pouts. “Do you really have to go now, Coach Kali? Can’t you stay for a little while longer?”

My heart twists. “I wish I could, but I have to get home. How about we pick up where we left off next practice?”

She makes a show of sighing dramatically, but her eyes are dancing. “Fine. But you better come back soon.”

Ripley walks me to the front door, the porch light illuminating us in a gentle glow. Neither of us says much at first, just exchanging small smiles. Finally, I break the silence. “Thanks for tonight,” I say. “For dinner, and... well, for not kicking me out when I showed up.”

“When you showed up,” he whispers, his eyes drop to check out my sundress. He chuckles. “I didn’t mind it one bit, actually.”

A swirl of warmth blooms in my chest at his words, but I force myself to keep it together. “Well then, maybe I’ll come back,” I say, flashing him a quick grin before stepping onto the porch.

“Looking forward to it,” he replies, leaning against the doorframe with that slow, crooked smile that I’m starting to find dangerously appealing.

I head off, heart thumping, and can’t resist one last wave at Juniper, who’s standing in the doorway looking half sleepy, half thrilled. The evening air is cooler now, brushing against my skin as I walk toward my car parked along the street. The lamp posts cast long shadows on the sidewalk, and the ocean breeze carries a soft hush.

I start the engine with a quick twist of the key, and give one last wave as I drive off.

Once I'm a few blocks away, I dig my phone out of my purse. Bristol picks up on the second ring, sounding out of breath. "Hey, you," she says. "How'd it go?"

I can't help but laugh, the events of the night swirling in my head. "Well, let's just say I ended up on his back porch swing, talking about life while his daughter practiced batting in the backyard."

"Whoa," Bristol exclaims, and I can practically hear her grin through the phone. "You serious?"

"Dead serious," I confirm, slowing the car as I pass a row of little bungalows similar to Ripley's. "He's... different than I expected. And Juniper is adorable. It was nice... comfortable, even."

"So did you two talk talk, or was it awkward?"

I consider for a moment. "We actually talked. Like, about why I moved here, how he got into ball, Star Wars, stuff like that. And you know, about the balk call. He said it was the right call."

Bristol's teasing voice goes up an octave. "Oh, so now you're all buddy-buddy?"

"Hardly," I snort, though a flutter of something hopeful ignites in my chest. "We just... made peace, I guess. He's not so bad, Bri. Juniper's smitten with the idea of me coaching her. And... well, I might not hate the idea of seeing him more."

She squeals so loudly I have to pull the phone away. "Calm down," I say, laughing. "It's not like that. We're just?—"

“Just what?” Bristol challenges, ever the instigator.

I park in front of my apartment building, staring at the glow of the porch light as I exit my car. “I don’t really know yet,” I admit softly. “But tonight was... good. That’s all I can say.”

And as I end the call, unlocking my front door and stepping inside, I realize that might be enough for now. Good. It’s been a while since I’ve felt this kind of gentle excitement about where things could go—friendship, something more, I’m not even sure yet. But I do know that for the first time in a long while, I feel like I’ve found something worth exploring here in Starlight Bay.

Kali

It's been four days since dinner at Ripley Johnson's house, and yet every time I close my eyes, I see flashes of that night—the creak of the wooden porch swing, the buttery glow of the sunset, the soft sound of Juniper's giggles in the background. It's embarrassing how many times I've replayed the memory. Even more embarrassing is how often my mind veers into daydream territory: images of him leaning in, fingertips at my jaw, brushing my hair aside before pressing his lips to mine. That last one is on constant rotation no matter how hard I try to squash it.

The thing is, I barely know the guy, but something about him keeps tugging at me, like a current under my skin. I used to think I had a pretty good handle on my emotions. I moved to Starlight Bay precisely because I was craving calmness, routine... stability. Instead, I meet a hotshot pitcher with an adorable daughter, and suddenly I'm entertaining fantasies of pancake breakfasts in matching pajamas. It's completely ridiculous.

But I can't help it. There's just something about the way Ripley looks at Juniper—like she's his whole world—that absolutely melts me. And the way he stood in his kitchen the other night, half-flustered when I teased him about burning the taco meat... or how his gaze flicked to me every so often, with this quiet intensity that made my pulse flutter.

I'm distracted again today, and it's Saturday, which means it's time for my weekly kids' baseball coaching session at the rec center. Normally, I love this gig. I get to

hang out with these bright-eyed little kids who are so eager to learn and have fun, and for an hour or two, I get to forget every worry in my life. But as I'm setting down foam bases and hauling out the plastic cones, my brain won't shut up about Ripley.

Get it together, Kali. I mentally scold myself, adjusting a bright orange cone into position on the gym floor. The group of kiddos huddles nearby, hugging their shiny new gloves or fiddling with water bottles. I run a quick head count—eight kids, all accounted for. Well, minus one. I give them a cheerful “Good morning, everyone!” and start explaining the day's drills. We're doing a simple fielding exercise, focusing on teaching them how to properly catch grounders and toss underhand to a partner.

That's when the door squeaks open, and I hear a familiar voice calling, “Hey, kiddo, watch your step,” followed by an excited squeal.

Him. My stomach does that annoying little flip, and I glance up to see Ripley guiding Juniper inside. She scampers over to join the other kids, waving enthusiastically at me. Rip stands by the entrance for a moment, scanning the room. When his gaze lands on me, he smiles. It's not a wide grin—just a small, soft upturn of his lips—but it's enough to send a rush of warmth through my veins.

He's wearing jeans that fit him a bit too well and a casual T-shirt that highlights the muscles in his arms. Great. As if my focus wasn't already shaky enough, now I have to deal with this. I gulp, quickly turning back to the kids so I don't look like I'm blatantly ogling him.

“All right, everyone!” I say, clapping my hands together, trying to sound upbeat and professional. “Let's line up at the first cone, and we'll do a quick demonstration on how to scoop up a grounder. Remember, stay low, glove on the ground?—”

I falter momentarily as I glimpse Ripley moving to the sidelines, arms folded, watching me. My heart stutters. Why am I acting like a middle-schooler trying to

impress her crush? I'm a grown adult, for crying out loud. Clearing my throat, I refocus on the kids and run through the demonstration. Juniper, for her part, is all smiles, eyes bright with excitement as she copies my motions, elbow in, knees bent.

Throughout the lesson, I do my best to stay calm and keep everything running smoothly. But I'm hyperaware of Ripley's presence. Every time I look up, he's there, leaning against the wall with casual confidence, giving Juniper a thumb-up when she does something right, or nodding approvingly when I praise one of the other kids. My chest tightens in a weird combination of nerves and delight. I can't decide if I want him to keep watching me or if I want him to look away so I can breathe.

The session goes by in a flash—probably because my brain is so overloaded with Ripley, Ripley, Ripley that I barely register time passing. By the end, the kids are grinning and sweaty, and they gather around me for the usual round of high-fives.

“You all did awesome today!” I say, beaming as I slap their little hands. “Same time next week, okay?”

They scatter, parents stepping up to collect them, but Juniper lingers behind, fiddling with the Velcro on her glove. She shoots a quick glance at her dad, then looks up at me with hopeful eyes. “Coach Kali,” she says, tugging on my shirt, “Daddy and me are gonna get pizza at Starlight Pi's. We always do that after baseball. You should come!”

My heart flutters. Before I can form a coherent response, Ripley approaches, his expression a mixture of amusement and something else—something maybe a bit shy. “Only if you want to,” he adds quickly. “Juniper's big on post-practice carbs.”

I laugh, warmth blooming in my chest. “Carbs are a vital part of any athlete's diet.” My voice trembles just a hair. “I'd love to join you. Starlight Pi's is the place on Maple, right?”

Juniper squeals, dancing in place. “Yes! The one with the fun math riddles and the best crust! I get cheese with pepperoni and pineapple, but Dad hates pineapple. We argue about it every time.”

“I do not hate pineapple,” Ripley objects, rolling his eyes. “I just prefer my fruit off my pizza.”

I grin at their banter, feeling a sudden swell of affection for them both. This could be a terrible idea, I know. I’m walking a thin line between professional interest and something that feels dangerously close to romance. But I can’t resist the chance to spend more time with them, especially Juniper, who’s grown on me so quickly.

So I grab my bag, lock up the equipment room, and follow them out of the rec center. The whole drive to Starlight Pi’s, my fingers are drumming nervously on the steering wheel. Calm down, Kali, I tell myself. It’s just pizza.

* * *

We arrive at Starlight Pi around noon, and even from the parking lot, I can catch the mouthwatering aroma of marinara sauce and melted mozzarella. The interior is classic small-town pizzeria—red-checkered tablecloths, neon signs advertising root beer floats, a jukebox in the corner. There’s also this whole math theme going on. It’s kitschy and fun. My stomach rumbles.

We’ve barely crossed the threshold when a group of three women at a nearby table perks up. One of them gasps, eyes widening like she’s just seen a celebrity. “Oh my God, it’s Riptide Johnson!” she exclaims. Instantly, they’re on their feet, phones in hand, heading our way like a small swarm of giggling fans.

Juniper moves closer to Ripley, half-hiding behind him. I step aside, not quite sure where to position myself as the women surround him, squealing about how much

they love watching him pitch. “Can we get a selfie?” one pleads, holding her phone at arm’s length. “Please, please, please! ”

“Sure,” Ripley says, smiling politely. He bends down a bit for the photo, one hand resting lightly on Juniper’s shoulder as if to reassure her it’s all okay. The phone clicks multiple times, capturing angles from every direction.

One of the women then brazenly tries to slip a piece of paper into Ripley’s hand. Another is tapping away on her phone, presumably trying to add him to her contacts, and she reaches out like she wants him to take her number. Their glances at me are anything but friendly—more like Who’s she? with an undercurrent of annoyance. I try not to let it get under my skin, but it’s hard when they’re all but dismissing Juniper and me from the conversation.

Ripley’s kindness doesn’t waver, though. He continues being polite, not rude, but not exactly encouraging them, either. He steps back a little, tucking his hands into his pockets. “Thanks for the support, guys,” he says, nodding at their phones. “I appreciate it. But, uh, I’m here with my daughter, and we’re just trying to grab some lunch. I’m not looking for anything special right now.” He emphasizes that part softly when one boldly asks for a date. “I’ve already got my hands full—Juniper here takes up all my attention.”

The women deflate like a bunch of punctured balloons, exchanging disappointed glances. One of them forces a tight smile, whispering a thin “Oh, sure, we get it. Enjoy your meal,” before they retreat to their table, none too quietly. I stand there, chest oddly tight.

He’s not looking for anything special...

That phrase rings in my mind, and something in me crumples a bit. Logically, I know he’s just trying to be respectful—he’s blowing off those groupies, not me. But my

brain twists it around, whispering that he's not interested in any kind of relationship right now, especially not with a newbie umpire who's barely settled in town. My cheeks warm. Of course he's not, I tell myself. He's busy being a dad, busy with his baseball career, busy being a minor league star. Why would he have time or space in his life for me?

Juniper tugs on my hand, snapping me out of my spiral. "Come on, Kali," she says, pointing to an empty booth near the window. "That's our favorite spot!"

I manage a smile. "All right, lead the way."

The three of us slip into the booth, with Juniper and Ripley on one side, me on the other. The moment I slide across the vinyl seat, I feel the tension in my shoulders. My excitement for this meal cools a little, replaced by a nagging sense of... deflation? It's not that I'm expecting a proposal or anything insane. But hearing him say, "I'm not looking for anything special," stings more than I care to admit. Especially since I've been daydreaming about the man for days.

We grab our menus, and Juniper starts gushing about the different toppings. Ripley teases her about pineapple again, and she does an exaggerated pout. It's cute enough that I can't help smiling despite the ache in my chest.

I refocus on the menu, scanning the options: The Pythagorean Pi, Prime Pepperoni Pi, and a Cosine Calzone. My appetite dulls a bit, but I force myself to pick something anyway—The Quadratic Quattro Cheese. I try to hide my swirling emotions, but I feel a little off-balance now, uncertain about how to handle this new wave of disappointment.

Ripley glances at me with concern. "You okay?" he asks quietly, brow furrowed.

I force a nod. "Yeah, I'm good. Just, uh, hungry," I lie, shrugging a shoulder. "Let's

order before we starve.”

He seems to accept it, and we turn to the waitress who arrives with a pitcher of water. Juniper chatters excitedly about the rec center session—how much fun she had, how she can’t wait to show her Aunt Hattie her new throwing form—and I murmur words of encouragement. Still, the echo of “not looking for anything special” drums in the back of my mind.

I hate feeling this vulnerable. I’ve only known the man a short while, but everything about him—his devotion to his daughter, his easy humor, his gorgeous, lopsided grin—has me completely disarmed. Now, I’m stuck facing the possibility that I might be alone in feeling something beyond a casual friendship. Maybe he just wants me to coach Juniper. Maybe he’s just being nice because his kid likes me. And maybe that’s all there is to it.

In the midst of my internal battle, Ripley cracks a joke about how pineapples belong in fruit salads, not on pizza, and Juniper squeals in mock outrage. I can’t help but laugh. That’s the thing about being around them—it’s comforting, even when I’m anxious. I realize with a twinge of guilt that maybe I’m reading too much into one little comment, letting my own insecurities run wild.

“All right, you pineapple weirdos,” I say, trying to adopt a teasing tone. “I’ll stick to the cheese pizza. You two can sort out your fruit fiasco on your own.”

Juniper giggles, hooking her arm through Ripley’s. “Dad, you have to try it once, please? I bet you’ll like it!”

He frowns in exaggerated horror. “I’d rather walk across hot coals, Junebug. But hey, maybe Coach Kali wants to try it.”

Our eyes meet, and for a split second, I see a softness there that makes me wonder if

I'm overreacting. There's warmth behind his gaze, a kindness that's more than mere politeness. But then I remember the crowd of women fawning over him, and the casual way he said he doesn't want anything more. I swallow hard, turning my attention back to Juniper, forcing another smile.

And so the afternoon goes—filled with sauce and cheese, pepperoni debates, and pineapple-lovers vs. pineapple-haters. On the outside, I join in the laughter, but inside, a small part of me pulls back. Because I'm realizing just how deep my feelings might be going for this man, and I'm not entirely sure I'll have the courage to handle it if he truly only wants to keep things... uncomplicated.

Still, sitting here with them feels strangely right, like I've stumbled into a little family scene I never knew I wanted. And that, more than anything, scares me to death. Because I'm not sure if I have the strength to watch that door close—especially after I've already peeked inside and caught a glimpse of what life could be.

Ripley

I can't shake the feeling that something's off with Kali. I noticed it the moment we walked into Starlight Pi's—she's all smiles one minute, then her face sort of falls as soon as those women approached me. Part of me wonders if she's just annoyed by the fan-girl circus, or if it's something more. Whatever it is, she tries her best to hide it under polite chatter and forced laughter, but I've spent enough time around her these past few days to tell when she's putting on an act.

Even Juniper notices. Halfway through our meal, my daughter tugs at my sleeve and whispers, "Is Coach Kali feeling okay?" I just give her a small shrug and tell her to keep being her usual, sunny self. But inside, I'm tense—like I'm bracing for something I don't fully understand.

After we finish off the last of the pizza—pepperoni and pineapple for Juniper, cheese for Kali, and plain old pepperoni for me—Kali insists on paying her share. I wave her off, sliding my card onto the edge of the table before the server picks it up. She presses her lips together but doesn't argue. I wonder if she's upset about that, too, or if it's just another layer to this tension.

It's getting dark when we leave, the neon "Starlight Pi's" sign buzzing quietly in the window behind us. Juniper is yawning, so I scoop her up in my arms. Kali walks a few steps behind as we head out to the parking lot, her arms folded around her middle like she's trying to hold herself together. The night air is thick with the promise of summer—humid, but with a slight breeze that rattles the chain-link fence around the

dumpster area.

I stop by Kali's car, a small sedan that's a bit worn around the edges. She fishes her keys out of her bag, glancing at me with a faint smile. I know it's not her real smile—too tight, too hesitant.

“Thanks for coming out with us,” I say, shifting Juniper's weight on my hip. “She always loves hanging with you.”

Kali's gaze flicks to Juniper, who's half-asleep against my shoulder. “I had a good time,” she replies, her tone soft but distant. Then she adds in a quieter voice, “Thanks for inviting me.”

I wait for her to say something else—maybe bring up whatever's bugging her—but she doesn't. So I gently clear my throat. “Are you sure everything's okay? You seem a little... I don't know. Different.”

She nods too quickly. “I'm fine. Really. Just tired.” Her eyes dart away, and I can tell she's not telling me the whole story. But I can't exactly corner her in the parking lot to demand an explanation, not with my daughter half dozing in my arms.

“All right,” I say finally. “Guess I'll see you soon, then. At practice or something.”

“Yeah,” she murmurs, “definitely.”

She unlocks her car door, and I stand there feeling like there's a ton of unspoken words clogging the air between us. But with Juniper squirming, I don't push it. I step back, and Kali slides into the driver's seat, offering me one last forced smile before she closes the door. I watch her headlights cut across the lot as she pulls away, the brake lights disappearing around the corner.

I sigh, tightening my hold on Juniper. Something's not right, and I'm determined to find out what.

* * *

By the time we get home, Juniper is fully conked out, barely stirring as I tuck her into bed. My mind keeps wandering back to the look on Kali's face at the restaurant—the way her eyes dimmed when those fans tried to slip me their numbers. I wonder if she was put off by that. Usually, I handle the random fan stuff without a second thought, especially at the minor league level. It's more flattering than it is intrusive. But for some reason, seeing Kali's reaction to it has me all knotted up inside.

The next day is an easy Sunday. There's no early games or mandatory practices. I figure I'll get some errands done, maybe toss the ball around with Juniper in the afternoon. But after breakfast, Juniper plants herself on the couch, remote in hand, flicking through channels before she looks over at me with hopeful eyes.

“Daddy, can we invite Coach Kali over today?” she asks, legs swinging off the edge of the cushions. “Maybe we can do practice in the backyard again.”

I hesitate, rubbing a hand over my chin. The truth is, I want to see Kali too—partly because I enjoy her company, but mostly because I can't shake the memory of her disappointed expression at Starlight Pi's. But something about inviting her over again, after last night's weird vibe, feels risky. I'm not sure if she needs space or an open discussion.

Still, I can't help but recall that flush of warmth in my chest every time she's been around, how Juniper lights up whenever Kali steps into the room. Maybe this is exactly what we need—some time to talk and figure out what's going on. Or maybe it'll blow up in my face. Hard to say.

“We’ll see,” I tell Juniper, earning a dramatic groan from my daughter. I pull out my phone and stare at Kali’s contact info for a solid minute before I type out a short text: Hey, everything okay? You seemed a little off last night. I read it back twice, then send it before I can overthink it.

While I’m waiting for a response, Juniper chatters about the cartoon on TV. My phone buzzes after a minute or two, and I glance down.

Kali: I’m fine, really. Sorry if I seemed off. Just tired. Thanks for checking in.

I frown. That’s the second time she’s told me she’s fine. In my experience, when somebody insists they’re “fine” a few times in a row, they’re usually the opposite. Might as well cut to the chase. So I send back:

Ripley: I’d like to see you again. Maybe dinner tonight? Maybe around 6 if you’re free.

There’s a longer pause this time. My heart thuds in my chest like I’m awaiting the final out of a tight game. Then my phone buzzes again.

Kali: Okay. I’d like that. I’ll come by.

Relief washes through me, followed by a swirl of apprehension. Good, we can talk. I glance at Juniper, who’s half paying attention to the cartoon, half eyeing me suspiciously. I open my mouth to tell her Kali’s coming over, but my phone buzzes again—this time it’s Hattie calling.

“Hey, sis,” I answer, stepping into the hallway for a moment of privacy.

“Morning, Rip,” Hattie greets. “Just calling to remind you that Juniper’s staying with me tonight, remember? We’ve got that early trip out of town tomorrow and I wanted

to leave before traffic gets nuts.”

I smack my forehead lightly. “Right, the mini vacation. She’s been talking about that all week, how could I forget?” I throw a glance at Juniper over in the living room. She’s got both arms in the air now, pretending to be a soaring airplane. Sometimes I swear my kid never runs out of energy. “So you want me to drop her off this afternoon?”

“That’d be perfect,” Hattie says. “I’ll have her back tomorrow evening. I’ll bring her to the field for your game. Tell her we’ll be stopping for ice cream on the way—she’ll be thrilled.”

I chuckle. “You spoil her rotten.”

“Of course,” Hattie snorts. “Anyway, see you later.”

We hang up, and I pocket my phone with a sigh. So dinner tonight is just going to be me and Kali. That’s... definitely not how I pictured it when I asked her. But the idea sends a strange jolt of excitement and nerves through my gut. This might actually be better. A chance to figure out what’s going on, uninterrupted by six-year-old commentary.

* * *

The day slips by in a blur. I help Juniper pack a small bag while she chatters about Aunt Hattie’s plan to visit some kind of roadside attraction. Then we pile into the car, and I drive her to Hattie’s place. My sister greets us with a teasing grin, asking if I’ve got a “hot date” while Juniper’s away. I dodge the question as best I can, muttering something about just hanging out at home.

Once Juniper’s taken care of, I head back to my place, the house eerily quiet without

her. I toss a look around the living room, noticing stray socks and Juniper's crayons scattered on the coffee table. I tidy up a bit, my nerves hitting me full force now that I'm alone. Why am I so wound up?

I decide to keep dinner simple. I'll grill some chicken, maybe throw together a salad. Nothing fancy. But halfway through seasoning the chicken, I realize I'm basically pacing the kitchen. Am I expecting this to turn into a date? I'm not sure. All I know is that I want to see Kali, talk to her, maybe figure out how she feels. Because I'm starting to realize how I feel—it's more than casual. It's... something bigger, something that doesn't settle quietly in my chest.

Finally, around 6:10, there's a soft knock at the door. I wipe my hands on a dish towel and take a calming breath before answering.

Kali stands on the porch, wearing a light sweater over a casual sundress, her hair pulled back in a loose ponytail. She looks more relaxed than last night, but there's still a flicker of uncertainty in her eyes. The sun's dipping low, casting a warm glow across her face. For a moment, we just stare at each other, neither of us quite sure what to say.

"Hey," I manage, stepping back. "Come in."

She enters, glancing around as if checking to see if Juniper's lurking behind the couch. "Quiet," she remarks, a tentative smile appearing. "Where's your little shadow?"

I scratch the back of my neck. "She's with my sister tonight. They have an early trip in the morning." I shrug, trying for nonchalance. "So it's just us."

Her eyes flick up to mine, and I can see the questions swirling there. It's almost palpable, this tension like something unspoken and electric in the air. I take a breath,

remind myself to keep it cool.

“Hope you’re okay with chicken and salad,” I say, nodding toward the kitchen. “I was going for easy.”

“Sounds great,” she says softly. “Better than me microwaving leftovers in my apartment.”

I manage a chuckle, gesturing for her to follow me. “Well, let’s get to it, then.”

And as she steps past me into the living room, I can’t help the swirl of thoughts in my head. She’s here, we’re alone, and I have no idea what’s about to happen. But I do know one thing: I want to find out what’s got her so spooked, and maybe, if I’m lucky, give her a reason not to be.

10

Kali

I follow Ripley into the kitchen, and I'm immediately struck by how impossibly good he looks tonight. The casual T-shirt he's wearing clings to his chest and shoulders in a way that shows off his lean, athletic build, and the low kitchen light casts subtle shadows along his arms, highlighting the faint lines of muscle. He moves with an easy confidence, every step measured and sure, like a man who's spent his life training his body to react on a dime. The natural grace pulls me in, makes my heart flutter in a way I can't quite dismiss.

Even the way he turns to glance back at me—dark hair slightly tousled, a small smile tugging at the corner of his mouth—sends a spark through my chest. I wish I could play it cool, but the heat crawling up my neck won't let me. Maybe he notices, maybe not. My attention breaks when the scent of grilled chicken drifts by, reminding me where I am.

Then I see the table near the window, set with two plates and a little jar of wildflowers in the center. My breath catches. It's understated and sweet, but beneath that simplicity, there's something undeniably romantic about it. A warmth stirs in my stomach. Am I ready for this? I'm still not sure. But looking at Ripley—tall, confident, and so damned attractive—I feel a flutter of hope that makes me want to find out.

"How's the chicken look?" Ripley asks, fiddling with the knobs on the stove. "I tried not to burn it this time." His gaze flicks to mine, and there's a playful spark in his

eyes.

I give a shaky laugh. “It smells better than the tacos, so you’re already winning.”

He flashes a grin that makes my stomach flip. “That’s a low bar,” he says, gesturing for me to sit. I oblige, smoothing my palms against the fabric of my sundress as I settle into the chair. My nerves feel raw and every sense is heightened, from the clink of silverware to the gentle hum of the fridge.

We start eating, and the chicken is actually delicious. It’s tender, with a hint of lemon and herbs. I’m impressed, but also too distracted by how close his leg is to mine under the table to fully appreciate the taste. The conversation flows, though. We discuss everything from weird baseball superstitions to which Marvel hero is the best. Every exchange is peppered with laughter and sidelong glances that set my blood pumping.

Eventually, we talk about deeper stuff like childhood memories, old regrets, and the wild paths that led us both to Starlight Bay. I confide that I grew up in a crowded city, always searching for a place that felt more like home. He tells me he grew up in a dusty farm town, dreaming of that big-league call-up. The more he talks, the more I sense the old fire he still carries, even if he doesn’t outright admit it.

“So,” I say quietly, finishing off a roasted carrot, “you never gave up that dream? The majors?”

He exhales a soft laugh. “Gave it up a dozen times in my head, but never in my heart. Honestly, though, I’m pushing thirty now. Scouts want hotshot twenty-year-olds with bullet arms. I’ve got responsibilities—a daughter, a life here. I can’t chase the dream full-throttle anymore.”

A pang hits my chest at the weariness in his voice. “Juniper’s mother,” I begin

tentatively, “she’s not in the picture?”

His jaw tightens. “No. She left when Juniper was still tiny. Didn’t want the ‘burden,’ I guess.” There’s a flash of anger, then sadness, in his expression. “Truth is, after the shock wore off, I realized we’d be better off. Juniper doesn’t even remember her.”

I reach across the table, resting my hand on his. My heart thuds harder when he turns his palm over and links our fingers. The warmth of his skin is dizzying. “I’m sorry,” I whisper, hoping he hears the sincerity in my voice. “That must’ve been a lot to handle.”

He clears his throat, giving my hand a small squeeze. “It was. But I had Hattie and a few friends who helped. And Juniper... she’s everything. Couldn’t imagine life without her.”

The tenderness in his voice makes my chest ache with something I can’t name—admiration, empathy, maybe longing. I slip my hand free eventually, scared of how my pulse ratchets up with every lingering touch. Yet I miss the contact the moment it’s gone.

We finish dinner, both of us a little quieter, caught up in the feelings swirling between us. When he offers me a glass of wine, I know it’s a bad idea, but I’m already breathless around him without any extra help from alcohol. Yet I agree, because the thought of losing even a minute of this strange, intense closeness feels impossible.

Soon, we’re out on his back porch, a single bulb casting warm light on the small swing. A breeze carries the faint smell of ocean salt, and the sky is colored in shades of deep blue and indigo. We sink onto the swing, the wooden boards creaking as we sway. Our knees brush, a fleeting contact that sends sparks through my body.

He hands me my wine, and we clink glasses lightly. I sip, grateful for something to do with my hands. The silence that settles over us is thick with tension, and neither of us is willing to break it just yet. Finally, Ripley exhales, setting his glass down on the little side table.

“Kali,” he says, turning toward me. His voice is husky, laced with concern. “Look, about last night at Starlight Pi’s... I could tell something was up.”

My heart clenches. Am I really going to tell him? My pride wants me to shrug it off, but I know this moment is too real to hide. “I overheard what you said to those women,” I admit quietly. “When you told them you weren’t looking for anything special and that Juniper takes all your attention. I guess I thought...” My throat tightens, and I have to force the words out. “I thought maybe I was just making a fool of myself, imagining there was something... more ... between us.”

His brows furrow. The porch swing creaks as he scoots closer, the heat of his body radiating against my side. “You’re not a fool,” he says firmly. “And I’m sorry I made you feel that way. I was just trying to get them off my back without being a jerk. After everything with Juniper’s mom, the last thing I want is meaningless flirtation. But that doesn’t mean...” He trails off, searching my face. “That doesn’t mean I’m not open to a real connection.”

The knot in my chest loosens, relief mingling with a heady rush of desire. His gaze drops to my lips, and I swallow hard, a wave of heat coursing through me. “So... I overreacted?”

He lifts a hand, brushing his fingers lightly against my jaw. My entire body tingles at the touch. “Not overreacted. You just didn’t know. Maybe I should’ve found a better way to say it.”

I part my lips to respond, but no words come. My heart is hammering too loudly in

my ears. The space between us feels charged, like if we so much as lean in, we'll ignite. Before I can second-guess myself, I tilt my chin up, letting the quiet longing in my eyes speak for me.

Ripley moves first, bridging the last bit of distance with agonizing slowness. His lips press against mine, a gentle, tentative kiss that has me inhaling sharply. My hand trembles, but I lift it to his chest, feeling the steady thump of his heartbeat. The warm, solid feel of him against my palm sends my thoughts into a hazy spin.

He deepens the kiss, sliding his free hand along my waist, pulling me closer. The swing rocks with our movement, and I can't help a soft gasp. God, he tastes like wine and something purely him—something I want more of. Heat pools low in my belly, and I angle my body toward him, our legs tangling in the small space of the swing.

A low groan rumbles in his throat as he grips my hip, fingertips pressing into the thin fabric of my dress. My skin burns with every point of contact. We break apart only to catch our breath, foreheads touching. The night air feels electric, thick with the promise of something neither of us can deny any longer.

"Kali," he breathes, his gaze searching mine with a kind of reverent awe. "I don't... I don't want to push you. But I can't pretend I don't feel this." He lightly trails his thumb over my lower lip, and my heart just about stops.

"I feel it too," I whisper, wrapping my arms around his shoulders, letting my fingers toy with the hair at his nape. A wave of heady warmth rushes through me at the realization that this is really happening—no more dancing around it.

We kiss again, slower this time but just as intense, exploring each other with more confidence. Each brush of his lips sends a cascade of tingles down my spine, and I cling to him, drowning in the headiness of it all. My pulse thunders, my thoughts scattered. All I know is I want more—more closeness, more honesty, more him.

Eventually, we break apart, breathing hard, and he presses his forehead to mine. “Damn,” he mutters, eyes shining. “You have no idea how long I’ve?—”

“Me too,” I admit, a soft laugh escaping. My cheeks feel like they’re on fire.

He chuckles, the tension in his posture melting into something easier. “Stay for a while?” he murmurs, voice rough, fingertips tracing circles on my waist through my dress. “We can just talk. Or not talk. Whatever you want.”

I swallow, catching my breath. Every fiber of me screams yes. But a flicker of apprehension still lingers—fear of jumping in too fast, of complicating my carefully constructed life. But I want him. The realization is a hot, insistent pulse, harder to ignore than any rational worry.

I manage a small nod. “Yeah,” I whisper, letting my hand slide over his shoulder to rest on his chest again. “I’d like that.”

Relief sweeps across his face, and he kisses me once more, a sweet, lingering sweep of lips that reassures me. Then he tugs me closer, tucking me against his side on the old porch swing, both of us exhaling as we settle. It’s such a simple moment—a quiet summer night, the creak of wood, and two people finding their way to each other.

Ripley

The moment we step back inside the house, the air between us crackles. I can't stop looking at her, caught between awe and desire. Her eyes gleam in the soft light as I close the door behind us, and the hush of the empty house makes every breath feel louder, every heartbeat more insistent. I've been wanting this—wanting her—for longer than I'd care to admit, and the thought that we're finally on the same page sends a rush of heat flooding through me.

I lead her down the short hallway, away from the kitchen. The living room is dark save for a small lamp in the corner, and my pulse kicks up another notch when I catch her gaze flick toward the bedroom door. She doesn't look away, and that's all the invitation I need.

"Kali," I murmur, reaching out to brush my knuckles lightly along her cheek. The simplest touch from me, and she exhales a shaky breath. I can feel the tension coiling between us, and it's driving me fucking crazy in the best possible way. "If at any point this is too fast?—"

She cuts me off by tangling her fingers in my shirt and pulling me closer. The brush of her lips on mine is a jolt of electricity, and I groan softly, letting myself sink into it. We fit together in a way that feels both maddening and natural, my hands sliding up to cup her face as hers wrap around my waist.

I'm not sure how we end up stumbling into my bedroom, but soon the door clicks

shut behind us, and the dim glow of the lamp light spills across the bed. My breath hitches as Kali presses herself against me, her warmth radiating through the thin fabric of my shirt. I tug it over my head, tossing it aside without much grace, too focused on the sensation of her hands roaming over my skin.

“God, I’ve wanted this,” I rasp, my lips finding hers again in a frantic kiss that steals the air from my lungs. She moans into my mouth, and every nerve in my body ignites. Between heated kisses, I manage a half-coherent confession: “I’ve... I’ve been thinking about you like this since we first met. Couldn’t get you out of my head.”

Her eyes flutter open, and she searches my face with a softness that nearly undoes me. “You... you have no idea how much I’ve thought about you too,” she whispers, voice trembling with want.

That admission unleashes something inside me. I capture her mouth again, this time slower, more deliberate, savoring each second of contact. My hands slide along her waist, over the curves of her hips. She arches into me with a small gasp, fueling the fire already raging in my veins.

“Ripley,” she breathes, my name a plea on her lips. I ease us both toward the bed, my heart hammering so loud I’m sure she can feel it. She’s all soft heat beneath my hands, and when she leans back on the mattress, a wave of longing nearly overwhelms me. I slip onto the bed with her, the sheets rustling as we shift, finding each other in the darkness.

I keep my touch gentle at first, letting her know this isn’t just about the sparks—though those are definitely there—but about something deeper that’s been building for what feels like ages. She meets my gaze, her chest rising and falling in an unsteady rhythm. There’s so much I want to say—that she’s special, that she’s changed everything for me—but words fail when her mouth brushes my jaw in a

slow, intentional caress.

I let out a trembling breath, my hands framing her face so I can hold her still for another kiss. “I don’t think... I’ve ever wanted anything this badly,” I admit in a rush, heart thudding. “You... you have no idea.”

Her fingers slide into my hair, and she kisses me again, a tender promise hidden in the urgency of it all. “I think I do,” she whispers against my lips, sounding just as breathless, just as overwhelmed.

And so we lose ourselves in each other, our heartbeats pounding in sync with touches that make the rest of the world melt away. Every kiss, every whispered word, feels like a confession we’ve been holding back for too long. It’s new and it’s terrifying and it’s right all at once, and I can’t get enough of her.

In between kisses, I manage to breathe out a promise: “I’m not going anywhere,” I murmur, my forehead resting against hers. “I want this. You. ”

She nods, heat swimming in her eyes. “I want you too.”

I move myself between her legs, gazing into her eyes. “Let me show you how badly I want you.” My palms spread her thighs, and I smile. My heart hammers madly around my ribcage. Fuck, I want her so badly.

I drag her pink panties down her long, tanned legs, my breath catching as I do.

“Oh god,” she calls out, her head falling to the pillow.

“Take this dress off,” I tell her, grabbing at the hem, ready to rip the damn thing to shreds if I have to.

She giggles softly, the sound filling the emptiness of my bedroom. “Hold on,” she whispers as she removes the dress.

“You’re fucking stunning.” My breathing’s hard, labored, as I stare at her body beneath me. “So fucking pretty.”

Her cheeks blossom with a rosy flush, and I feel a surge of anticipation as I settle back between her thighs. The warmth of her skin and the slight tremor in her breath make my pulse pound with need. It’s been far too long since I’ve known the taste and touch of a woman, and every cell in my body is alive with the promise of what’s about to happen. My gaze drifts over her, taking in every curve, every subtle shift of her hips as she offers herself to me. I lean closer, inhaling the delicate scent of her skin, letting the desire build until it becomes almost unbearable. Tonight, I plan on showing Kali pleasure in every possible way.

I swipe my tongue over her heated skin, nibbling at the inside of her thigh. My hands spread her more, and her wetness coats a path just for me. I swipe my tongue over her pussy, letting her taste flood my mouth. “You’re so fucking hot,” I tell her on a groan, my cock hardening in the process.

I work her clit between my teeth. Gently. Softly. Like it’s the most precious thing on the fucking face of the Earth. Because to me, it is. I swirl my tongue around it, applying the right amount of pressure. I move in closer, rocking my face into her. Her fingers fly into my hair, her legs tightening around my head.

Fuck yes. This is what dreams are made of. I once thought my biggest fantasy was getting called up to play in the majors, but I now know it’s right here. Fucking heaven on earth. My face buried between Kali Carter’s thighs. Only one problem. Her last name isn’t fucking Johnson.

At the thought of marriage, it does something deep inside my chest. It urges me on,

egging me to go faster. I work a circuit, starting with her clit. I push a thick finger deep inside her, hooking it perfectly to hear her cry my name.

“That’s it. Sing for me, good girl.” I work another finger deep inside her as I continue to work on her clit.

Her moans grow louder, and it makes me proud that I’m the one doing this to her. That I’m causing her pleasure. “Oh, Rip,” she screams, her fingers fisting tightly in my hair.

“Come for me, Kali. Come on, show me what a good girl you are for me.”

Her legs tighten, her back arching off the bed. “I’m right there.”

I flick her clit between my teeth and her moans nearly deafen me. She’s a screamer for sure. I smile as her orgasm overtakes her, causing her whole body to shudder against me. I watch her, like a fucking stalker as her body falls apart.

She’s beautiful.

My cock’s raring to go. It’s painful, and I move up her body as she catches her breath. “That was the greatest thing I’ve ever seen,” I tell her.

She blushes again, a delicate flush that creeps across her cheeks, and something inside my chest tightens. It’s a painful tug that I can’t quite explain. There’s a magnetic pull about her that’s both gentle and fierce, as though she’s silently tearing down every wall I’ve built around myself. My heart pounds so hard it feels like it might break free from my ribs at any moment. All it takes is one glance from those captivating green eyes of hers, and I’m powerless.

12

Kali

Oh, wow. My heart's about to leap straight out of my chest. This is really happening, and I'm here for every breathless second of it. Ripley's positioned over me, gorgeous and broad-shouldered, his hair a dark mess that falls across his forehead in a way that makes me want to keep running my fingers through it. His eyes, intense and focused, flick over me with a hunger that ignites every nerve in my body. There's something about the way his jaw sets—a mix of determination and barely tamed desire—that sends my pulse racing. I've never seen anyone like him before, all lean muscle and quiet confidence, like he's ready to protect me from the world but also pull me closer into his own. In this moment, as he looks at me with that devastatingly beautiful gaze, I realize I don't want to be anywhere else.

"I've got a condom somewhere," he whispers, looking around his room. He lifts off me, and I miss the warmth of his body immediately.

"I'm on the pill," I rush out. "I'm clean, and haven't had sex in ages." God, I can't even remember the last time I had sex.

Ripley's lip curls into a soft smile, his eyes filled with a heat so intense I'm afraid it'll catch the world on fire. "Are you sure?"

I reach out to him, wanting the feel of his body against mine once more. "Yeah," I whisper.

He moves quickly, like lightning, covering my body with his. "I'm clean. We get checked a lot on the team. Promise." His words fly out of his mouth quickly, like he's trying to persuade me.

"I trust you," I tell him. And I really do. It's crazy how much I trust this man. It's only been a little bit of time, but I trust this man completely.

He smooths a hand over my hair. "I'd never hurt you, Kali."

I suck in a deep breath. "I know."

His eyes lock with mine as he roams that same hand down my body, cupping my ass to bring my leg over his hip. He lines his hard dick up with my entrance, and pushes in. Ah, god. He's so big. Ginormous if I'm being honest. "You handle me so well, baby," he whispers, squeezing my ass with his palm.

I'm so wet for him. I don't think I've ever been this wet before in my life. With his other hand he wraps it around my breast, bringing his mouth down around my nipple. He sucks it between his teeth, teasing it gently. He keeps pushing into me, his dick opening me up.

I cling onto him like my life depends on it. I don't want to let go. Like ever. He's not even all the way inside me yet, and I'm already all up in the feels.

Could I love this man? No, it's too soon.

I won't be one of those women who falls for a man the first time they have sex. Nope. This is just sex.

"Your pussy grips me just right. Like it was made for my thick cock," he whispers close to my ear, and it turns me on.

I've never had a man talk to me this way, and yet, I want more of it. So much more of it. "I love your dick," I tell him, obviously not well versed in the art of dirty talk.

His eyes meet mine as he squeezes my ass harder. "Yeah? You like the way this cock fucks your sweet pussy?"

"Yes, oh god, yes."

He tsks me. "Not god, sweetheart. This is all me pounding your tight little pussy." He slams into me. "You like that, huh?"

"Oh fuck," I shout out. "Yes, more."

He slams into me again, a little harder this time. He moves his hand off my ass, bringing his finger to my lips. "Suck me, baby." He pushes his finger deep down my throat. Tears spill at the edges of my eyes. I suck him best I can, and his eyes light up like the Fourth of July. "Can't wait until you've got my fat cock stuffed in this pretty mouth." He pulls his forefinger out, and moves it down.

Oh my Ripley. What is he doing?

He pushes the wet finger against my ass. Oh. "And I seriously can't wait until I can fuck you here." He slides his finger deeper, and my eyes widen.

"I've never done that, or this."

His smile brightens his face as he pushes his dick deeper inside me. "I want to fill you completely up, Kali. I want you to remember me everywhere."

I don't think I'll ever be able to forget this man. Ever.

He continues pushing his finger into my back entrance as he pounds into me with his dick. He moves up to where he's on his knees, moving a pillow under the small of my back. His eyes gaze down on me. "You're so fucking hot." He's got one hand working my ass, as the other hand moves down my body, pressing against my clit.

He's gorgeous, and right now, he's all mine. I reach out toward him, wanting to touch him. He leans closer, his hand working my clit forgotten as he braces his hand beside my head.

"Your body's so responsive to me, Kali. It's like it was seriously made for me. How did I get so fucking lucky?"

I want to fight with him, tell him I'm the lucky one, but I can't form the words. I can't do anything but focus on the subtle climb of my body. The orgasm looming close by.

I've never had an orgasm twice in one night. This is insanity. What is this man doing to me?

However, the sensations coursing through my body are unstoppable. "I'm so close," I shout out, my nails raking down his broad chest. My breath hitches as he pounds harder.

"Come on my cock. I want you to mark me, Kali. Make me yours."

My chest tightens as my orgasm is so freaking close. Fuck, I can nearly feel that overwhelming feeling again. "I want you to be mine," I admit, hoping that I'm not laying my feelings all on the line for him to crush them. Yet, I trust him, right?

His eyes lock with mine, softening just a tad. "I am yours, Kali."

My entire body seizes the moment those words leave his lips, the heat inside me building like a pressure cooker that finally explodes. A shuddering gasp rips from my throat, and I scream his name—“Oh, Rip!”—as the orgasm tears through me in unstoppable waves. Each pulse sends electric sparks racing along every nerve, making my muscles quiver and my mind flood with a sensation so intense it borders on surreal. My toes curl, my back arches, and for one endless second, I’m lost—no conscious thought remains, only the raw, dizzying bliss of pleasure that slams into me over and over until I’m left breathless, trembling, and utterly consumed.

“Fuck,” Rip says on a groan, his body holding onto me tightly. He removes his finger from my ass as his dick pulses inside me. “Kali, fuck, baby. You have no idea what you’re doing to me.” His own orgasm rips right through him as he thrusts into me a few more times.

After the last tremors of ecstasy fade, I’m left with a lingering warmth coursing through my limbs. He rises first, disappearing into the en suite bathroom with a lazy, satisfied smile. A low hum of pleasure still thrums in my veins as I slip off the bed and follow. Inside, the soft glow of the vanity lights casts shadows across the tiled walls, and I catch a glimpse of my reflection in the mirror—flushed cheeks, tousled hair, a happy curve to my lips. I rinse off, letting the water soothe my still-sensitive skin, then dab my face gently with a towel. My heart hasn’t quite returned to its normal rhythm yet. Stepping back into the bedroom, I scan the space for my sundress, finding it draped haphazardly over the arm of a nearby chair where I flung it in the heat of the moment.

“I, uh... I should go.” My voice wavers as I tug my dress over my head, the fabric sliding against my still-warm skin. I glance around the floor, searching for my panties in the jumble of discarded clothes. My eyes skim the bedside table, the plush rug, then the chair in the corner—nothing. Probably lost in the shuffle of heated moments.

“You have a game tomorrow, and I’ve got...” The rest of my sentence falters, my

mind scrambling for some plausible excuse to leave. Truth is, I can't think of a single reason except the creeping worry that if I don't take control and slip away now, he might be the one to usher me out.

Memories of the things he whispered while we were tangled in each other still pulse through my thoughts. But I'm no fool. I'm not expecting some grand invitation to stay—even though a part of me clings desperately to that hope. The reality is, people say things in the heat of the moment. I try to tamp down the flutter in my chest that demands otherwise.

He quirks an eyebrow, his gaze pinning me in place. "Where are you going?" There's a note of challenge in his voice. He shakes his head, dark hair ruffling over his forehead. "No way am I letting you leave, Kali. Not after that. Not after what we just did." He points to the rumpled sheets, eyes flashing with a familiar hunger. "Get in. Now."

A wave of relief and excitement washes over me, and I can't help the small, hopeful smile that tugs at my lips. Carefully, I shimmy out of my sundress again, the cool air brushing my skin before I slip under the covers. My heart thrums a wild beat, and as I settle against the warmth of the bed, I realize I'm exactly where I want to be.

Ripley

I wake up feeling more rested than I have in a long time, my body draped around Kali's like we've been sleeping together for years instead of just one night. It's one of those perfect moments. Her head's pillowed on my chest, one arm slung across my stomach, her breathing soft and steady. For a second, I can't quite believe she's really here, that last night actually happened. My heart thuds, a pleasant warmth coursing through me.

I resist the urge to pull her closer, afraid of waking her. She looks so peaceful, dark lashes resting on her cheeks, lips parted in a faint smile. Carefully, I ease out from under her arm. The mattress shifts, but she doesn't stir, just burrows into the pillow like she's determined to cling to the last remnants of sleep.

I slip on a pair of sweats and pad quietly into the kitchen. The sun streams through the windows, illuminating the space in a soft, golden haze. My mind flickers to Juniper, who's still off with Hattie until this evening. Part of me wishes I could see my daughter's reaction to Kali here, though I know we're not quite there yet. Even so, the thought of them all together in this house makes my chest flutter with something alarmingly close to hope.

Focus, Ripley. First things first: breakfast. I scavenge the fridge, grabbing eggs, cheese, and a few veggies to whip up an omelet. My cooking skills may be questionable at times, but I'm determined to do better than scorched taco meat. The coffee pot gurgles as it brews, filling the kitchen with that comforting, rich aroma.

While the eggs sizzle in the pan, I sense movement behind me. A drowsy-eyed Kali appears in one of my T-shirts, hair mussed from sleep, and my heart nearly stops. She gives me this sleepy, lopsided grin that might just be my new favorite sight in the world.

“Morning,” she murmurs, voice husky from sleep.

I grin back. “Hey there, Sleeping Beauty. Hope you don’t mind, but I’m making you breakfast.”

Her face lights up as she pads closer. “Mind? Not at all. Smells amazing... and coffee.” She nudges her chin at the steaming pot. “Heaven.”

I hand her a mug, trying not to stare too obviously at how good she looks wearing my T-shirt, how it just barely skims her thighs. She leans against the counter, taking her first sip with a soft moan. I have to clear my throat to keep my mind from wandering back to last night.

“I was going to bring this to you in bed,” I say, flipping the omelet. “But you beat me to it.”

Kali laughs quietly, running a hand through her tousled hair. “And miss the sight of you in the kitchen? No thanks.”

A ripple of satisfaction moves through me. I finish plating up two omelets, adding a side of toast, then set them on the small table in the corner. She slides into a chair, and we eat in a comfortable silence for a few minutes.

Eventually, Kali glances around. “So, when does Juniper get back?” She looks up at me, eyes bright, genuinely curious. “I mean, I wouldn’t want her to walk in on, uh... unexpected company.”

I fight a smile. “She’ll be home this evening. Hattie’s bringing her to my game. Hattie took her out for some sort of kid-friendly adventure.” I think of how Juniper practically bounces off the walls whenever Hattie takes her on these mini-excursions. “I’m sure she’ll have a thousand stories to tell by bedtime.”

Kali’s lips curve into a softer smile. “I was thinking... I’m not umping your game today, so maybe I could come watch you play?”

My heart does a weird lurch. “You want to come to my game?”

“Yeah, of course,” she says, ducking her head a little like she’s worried about coming on too strong. “If that’s cool with you?”

I reach across the table to squeeze her hand. “I’d love to see you in the stands. I’m sure Juniper would be thrilled too. She loves showing off when we have someone special there to cheer us on.”

Kali’s cheeks flush at the word special, but she doesn’t shy away. Instead, she lifts her coffee mug in a small toast. “Then I’ll be there.”

We finish our breakfast, sharing a few smiles and lingering touches that set my nerves humming all over again. Afterward, she insists on helping me clear the dishes, washing while I dry, our arms occasionally brushing in a way that sends shivers down my spine. It’s so domestic it almost feels surreal—but I can’t deny how right it all seems.

Finally, Kali says she needs to head home and get ready for the day. We linger by the door, arms wrapped around each other, the spicy-sweet scent of her shampoo messing with my head. I can’t resist one last kiss—slow, lazy, with just enough promise to make me wish she could stay.

“I’ll see you at the game,” she whispers, stepping back and smoothing her hands down her dress.

“Count on it,” I say, my eyes still fixed on her.

She’s halfway out the door when I tug her back by the wrist, stealing another quick kiss that leaves her laughing. Then she’s gone, and I’m left standing in the open doorway, feeling like a teenager with a lovestruck grin plastered on my face.

* * *

A couple of hours later, I’m in the locker room at the stadium, pulling on my uniform pants and running through mental drills. The guys around me chat about everything from last night’s bar scene to the next big away game, but my mind keeps drifting to Kali—the way she fit against me, how her smile looked when she saw me cooking for her in the kitchen, the fact that she’s showing up to watch me play today without a whistle or chest protector.

I’m distracted enough that Fenway nudges me in the ribs. “Hey, Rip, you in there?” he teases, pulling on his socks. “Earth to Johnson.”

Mike leans over from the next bench, a grin stretching across his face. “He’s got that look. That ‘I just spent a killer night with somebody special’ look.”

Jace smirks, crossing his arms. “So, rumors are you’ve been hanging around a certain ump lately...”

I roll my eyes, though I can’t hide the flicker of a smile. “Yeah maybe I have.”

“Try to focus on the game today, okay?” Fenway laughs.

“Look, she’s not umping today, okay? She’s... coming to watch.”

“Oho, so it is serious!” Fenway prods, eyes dancing with mischief. “Come on, spill. We need details. Are we losing you to the dark side of officiating?”

“You’re not losing me anywhere,” I laugh, shoving my shoes into the bottom of the locker. “And I’m not about to give you some romantic play-by-play. Let’s just say... I like her.” A lot, I add silently, even if I can’t quite bring myself to admit it out loud in a room full of rowdy teammates.

A chorus of amused hoots and whistles goes up, making my cheeks burn. Mike claps me on the shoulder. “Good for you, man. Just don’t let her call balk on you off the field.”

“Ha, ha, hilarious,” I mutter, but my grin doesn’t fade.

We wrap up our pre-game routines, talk strategy, double-check our gear. My mind is half on baseball, half on the image of Kali in the stands, hopefully wearing that same soft look in her eyes she had this morning. And for the first time in what feels like ages, I step onto the field thinking less about pitching a perfect game and more about the woman who might just make all the chaos worth it.

14

Kali

I'm half-jogging up the concrete steps of the stadium when my nerves kick into overdrive. Calm down, Kali, I scold myself, pressing a hand to my stomach. My pulse is already fluttering like I'm on my way to a final exam. But this isn't a test. It's a minor league baseball game. And the only difference is that for the first time, I'm not on the field in an umpire's uniform, barking out calls. I'm in the stands, about to watch Ripley pitch... as his maybe something more .

I spot Hattie and Juniper almost immediately, waving from a mid-level section of seats. Hattie's wearing a ball cap, and Juniper's bouncing excitedly on her tiptoes, blonde curls bouncing with every hop. I hurry over, trying not to grin too widely, but I'm pretty sure I'm failing.

"Kali!" Juniper squeals the second I'm within earshot. She practically tackles me around the waist. "You're here! Dad said you might come."

I steady myself so I don't topple over. "Yeah, I wouldn't miss it," I say, ruffling her hair. "How was your big adventure with Aunt Hattie?"

Juniper's eyes go wide with excitement. "We went to this cool science museum, and I touched a starfish in a tide pool—well, a pretend tide pool, but it was still real water. And then we ate the best cotton candy ever! "

"Sounds like you had a blast," I reply, letting her tug me into a seat between them.

Hattie grins at me, lifting the brim of her cap in greeting. “You made it just in time. They’re about to do the national anthem.”

I nod, noticing the field below is already bustling with the pre-game routine. My eyes instantly zero in on Ripley near the dugout, stretching his arms behind him. He looks so good in that uniform—broad shoulders, trim waist, every motion precise and confident. My stomach does a little flip, and I have to remind myself not to stare like a love-struck teenager.

Juniper bounces in her seat. “Dad’s starting pitcher today, right? I heard Coach say he’s in top form.”

“He sure is,” Hattie agrees, snickering when she catches me still looking at Ripley. “Let’s hope it goes well. We need that win.”

“Yeah,” I murmur, forcing myself to tear my gaze away. “I’ll be cheering extra loud.”

Juniper beams. “Me too!”

We settle for the anthem, standing with hats off, and then the crowd breaks into cheers as the players take the field. I can’t help the rush of pride (or something deeper) when I see Ripley jog out to the mound, all business now. My heart constricts in a way I’m not prepared for. Wow, I think, I’m in way too deep. But a part of me doesn’t care in the slightest.

As the game kicks off, Hattie leans over, voice low but playful. “So, how was dinner last night? Did my brother keep his promise not to burn anything?”

I bite my lip, feeling a betraying flush creep up my cheeks. “He did okay,” I say lightly, trying not to give too much away. “Better than tacos.”

“Mhm.” Hattie’s gaze sharpens, and she smirks. “I notice you have that whole ‘post-sleepover glow’ going on.”

I nearly choke on my own breath. “Wh—” I stammer, eyes darting to Juniper to make sure she’s not listening. She’s busy watching the batter warm up, thankfully. “We, um... I ended up staying late, yes, but?—”

Hattie laughs, patting my arm. “Relax, I’m not gonna rat you out to Juniper. She doesn’t need every detail. I’m just... happy for him. And for you.” She softens, her gaze flicking to the field. “Ripley can be a handful. He needs someone who’s not afraid to keep him on his toes. Someone who won’t just let him slip into that broody mode he gets sometimes.”

I nod, relieved she’s not grilling me. “I know he can be stubborn,” I admit, remembering the spat we had over the balk call. “But he’s... I don’t know. He’s a good man, Hattie. And Juniper—she’s like a ray of sunshine wherever she goes.”

“They both are,” Hattie agrees, eyes shining. “You might be exactly what they need.”

A fuzzy warmth settles in my chest at her words, but I also feel the weight of it. Is that what we’re doing? Filling holes in each other’s lives? Because if so, I’m definitely okay with it. If it means more nights like last night, more sleepy mornings and stolen kisses, I’m all in.

The crack of the bat jerks my attention back to the field. The first batter just fouled one off, and Ripley’s resetting for the next pitch. I watch him square his shoulders, eyes locked on the catcher’s signals, that jaw set in fierce concentration. He winds up, and the pitch zips in, a perfect strike. The crowd cheers, and Juniper squeals with delight.

“Oh my gosh!” Juniper hops up and down. “Dad’s on fire!”

I grin, hooking an arm around her shoulders to keep her from tumbling forward. “He looks strong,” I say, my heart swelling.

Hattie nudges me. “Could be that extra motivation, huh?”

I chuckle, rolling my eyes. “He’s always determined. That’s how he got his nickname, right? Riptide?”

“Yeah,” Hattie replies, shrugging. “But I think a certain umpire might have something to do with that laser-like focus.” She winks, and I can’t help but laugh.

As the game unfolds, I find myself torn between watching the action on the field and sneaking glances at Ripley whenever I can. The way he throws, each pitch a controlled explosion, leaves me breathless. He’s in command tonight—striking batters out, fielding grounders with ease. Between innings, he sneaks a glance my way, and our eyes meet for one charged moment. I swear my cheeks heat up all over again.

“Wow, that was a look,” Hattie murmurs beside me, clearly noticing. “You two are too cute.”

I can’t hide the smile tugging at my lips. “Stahhhp,” I joke, elbowing her lightly.

She laughs, tossing popcorn into her mouth. “What? I’m just saying. My brother’s been different these past few days. Happier, more... alive. Keep doing whatever it is you’re doing, okay?”

A flutter of pure joy washes through me. “I’ll do my best,” I promise, letting my gaze drift back to him on the mound. Watching him in his element like this, so confident and powerful, does dangerous things to my heart.

By the time the inning ends, Juniper is practically climbing over the seats in excitement. She cheers louder than anyone else in our section. I can't help but join her, clapping and calling out Ripley's name, feeling a rush of pride that I never expected to feel for someone else's performance.

Hattie leans in close, voice warm. "You know, he's not always easy to love, but that's why he needs someone who won't be scared off when he's stressed. I can tell you're strong enough for that."

I exhale, emotions tightening in my throat. "I hope so," I say softly, glancing at Juniper's shining face. Because I think I'm already half in love with him. The realization sends a wave of both excitement and terror through me. But as I look back at Ripley—who's catching my eye again from the dugout, a slow grin tugging at his mouth—I know it's the kind of terror I'm willing to embrace.

"Go, Dad!" Juniper hollers again, and Hattie and I trade amused looks. I give the little girl a high-five, my heart full to bursting.

I'm definitely in deep, I think, and I wouldn't have it any other way.

15

Ripley

I'm so full of adrenaline, I feel like I could run laps around the stadium. We won, and it was a solid victory. My pitches felt strong all night, the team was on fire, and I'm still buzzing from the roaring cheers of the crowd. As I head off the field, wiping sweat from my forehead with the back of my glove, my first thought isn't about stats or my pitching form—it's about finding Kali. And, of course, Juniper. Because tonight, she was in the stands too, cheering me on with her little lungs working overtime.

I jog through the dugout, weaving through a few fans who've stuck around, offering high-fives and fist bumps. The guys pat me on the shoulder, congratulating me on a good game, but I'm more interested in scanning the seats beyond. Soon enough, I spot Hattie's ball cap bobbing near the exit. Juniper's by her side, bouncing on her toes, and Kali stands next to them, smiling so brightly it outshines the stadium lights. My heart does a weird little flip. She's still wearing one of my team's caps—she must've bought it at the merch stand. The thought that she's representing me sends a surge of pride through my veins.

I break away from my teammates and head straight for them. Juniper is the first to bound over, throwing her arms around my waist. "Dad! You were so awesome! That last strike you whooshed it right past the batter!"

"Yeah?" I can't help grinning, ruffling her curls. "Pretty good, right?"

“Pretty great ,” Kali chimes in, and her voice makes my stomach flutter. She steps closer, eyes gleaming. “I’d say that was a near-flawless performance, Riptide .”

I arch an eyebrow, playing it off. “Near flawless? So where’d I mess up?”

She laughs, nudging me with her elbow. “I mean, you didn’t do a cartwheel across home plate after the final out, so I guess you missed a showboating opportunity.”

Hattie chuckles, adjusting her hat. “I’m taking off, guys. I’ve gotta get home and work on that project for Monday.” She pats me on the shoulder. “Congrats, big brother.”

“Thanks,” I say, giving her a quick side hug. “Need me to walk you to your car?”

“I’m good,” she says, waving me off. “I parked close. You three have fun.”

We exchange goodbyes, and then it’s just Juniper, Kali, and me standing under the glow of the stadium floodlights. The air is still crackling with post-game energy, but all I can think about is how nice it is to have these two waiting for me. My daughter, and the woman who’s becoming... more.

Juniper tugs on my sleeve, eyes dancing. “Dad, can Kali come over? We could have dinner or something.”

I glance at Kali, trying to gauge her reaction. She looks back at me with a hint of a shy smile, and that’s all the confirmation I need. “Yeah,” I say, nodding. “I was about to invite her anyway.” I turn to Kali. “If you’re free? We can just hang out, get some food.”

Kali’s grin widens. “Sure, I’d love that. I’ll follow you guys in my car?”

“Sounds good,” I say, trying not to sound too eager, but let’s be honest, I’m psyched.

Juniper squeals and does a little twirl, which makes both Kali and me laugh. We walk out of the stadium together, the crowd thinning as fans disperse. In the parking lot, I give Kali a quick wave before Juniper and I climb into my truck. The drive home is filled with my daughter’s nonstop chatter about the game—every strike, every run, every cool moment. I respond with half-focused nods, my mind drifting to thoughts of Kali pulling up behind me in her own car, the memory of her smile and the way she looked at me from the stands.

* * *

When we get home, the porch light’s on, and I spot Kali’s headlights coming around the corner. Juniper sprints to unlock the front door, and I stroll back to Kali’s car, opening the driver’s door for her. She steps out, a bit of the leftover summer breeze ruffling her hair.

“Hey,” she says softly, and there’s a moment where we just look at each other—this charged gaze that reminds me of last night. We share a grin, and then Juniper hollers from the front porch, “Come on, I’m hungry!”

Laughing, I usher Kali inside. The three of us kick off our shoes, and I drop my gear bag by the couch. “So,” I say, turning to them, “any preferences for dinner? We could rummage through the fridge—though I’m not sure what we’ve got—or maybe order pizza?”

Juniper bounces on the balls of her feet. “Pizza!” she exclaims, like it’s the greatest invention known to man. “Please?”

I glance at Kali, who shrugs with a little smile. “Hey, I’m not saying no to pizza,” she teases. “Especially after that game. I need some carbs.”

“All right, pizza it is.” I quickly dial up Starlight Pi, and place an order for a large half-pepperoni and pineapple, just in case Juniper wants her favorite combo. Kali keeps me company in the kitchen, leaning against the counter, arms folded, while Juniper runs to her room to change into PJs.

“How’re you feeling after that game?” she asks me, reaching out to poke my bicep. “Any soreness?”

I shake my head. “Nah, I’m good. I’m used to it.” I soften my voice. “Thanks for coming tonight, by the way. It meant a lot, seeing you up there with Hattie and Junebug.”

Her expression warms. “I wouldn’t have missed it.” She dips her gaze, a slight blush coloring her cheeks. “You looked... incredible out there.”

A surge of pride and something else—longing, maybe—flares in my chest. She likes me. She’s really here. The doorbell rings before I can say anything witty, though, and I hurry off to pay the delivery guy.

Soon, the three of us are sprawled in the living room with the pizza box open, sodas and water bottles scattered on the coffee table. We joke about the game, laugh at Juniper’s dramatic reenactment of my final strike, and pick out a family-friendly movie to watch. It’s some animated flick about talking animals, but Juniper is enthralled, and Kali and I exchange amused smiles whenever the plot gets too cheesy.

Halfway through the movie, Juniper’s blinking rapidly, trying to stay awake. Eventually, she loses the battle and dozes off against my shoulder. I gently lift her, careful not to wake her, and carry her to her bedroom. She murmurs something about starfish and batting averages—an odd combination that makes me grin. I tuck her in, smoothing the blanket around her, then close the door quietly behind me.

When I return to the living room, Kali's curled up on the couch, hugging a throw pillow to her chest. Her eyes flick to me, and the way she looks at me—like she's been waiting—is a direct hit to my gut. We're alone now, the movie paused, the house silent except for the faint buzz of the fridge.

"Hey," she says softly, setting the pillow aside.

"Hey," I echo, feeling that spark igniting again. I cross the room in a few steps and sink onto the couch next to her, close enough that our thighs brush. "Sorry, that took a minute. She had a lot of stories to share while half-asleep."

Kali laughs, a sound that makes my skin tingle. "She's the cutest. I love how excited she gets about everything."

"Yeah," I say, voice dropping a bit. "She's definitely my pride and joy."

Kali leans in, her hand sliding over mine. "She's lucky to have you." Her words hang there, soft and genuine, stirring something deep in my chest.

For a moment, we just look at each other. The tension from last night is back, but this time it's sweeter, more familiar. It's like we've stepped past some barrier, and now we're both standing in uncharted territory. I lift a hand to her cheek, brushing my thumb lightly across her skin. She leans into it, eyes fluttering closed.

Then I'm tilting my head, capturing her lips in a slow, deliberate kiss that sends a jolt of warmth down my spine. Kali makes a soft sound, pressing closer, and I slide my free hand around her waist, pulling her against me on the couch. The world shrinks to just us, the taste of pizza and the lingering smell of her shampoo swirling in my senses.

When we finally come up for air, her cheeks are flushed, and my heart is hammering

against my ribs. I can't resist dipping my head to her neck, planting a trail of slow, heated kisses. She arches into me, fingers clutching my shoulders, and a low groan escapes me. The couch feels too small for the surge of want coursing through my body.

"Ripley," she murmurs, breath uneven, "we should... we need to be careful. Juniper?—"

"I know," I rasp, kissing the spot right below her ear. "Believe me, I know." I pull back slightly, looking into her eyes. "I want you to stay tonight. Hell, I want you all the time. But... I don't want her waking up and getting confused. We haven't figured all this out yet."

Her gaze flickers with understanding, though I can see the same longing mirrored in her expression. "I get it," she whispers, hands still fisted in my shirt. "We need to figure out how to do this, the three of us. Especially for Juniper."

I nod, heart twisting. "I just... I don't want you to think I'm pushing you away, or that I regret anything. Because I don't." My voice almost shakes with the intensity of how much I want her to understand. "Last night was... everything."

Her eyes soften. She reaches up to cup my face, running a thumb over my jaw. "I don't regret it either. Not one bit." She kisses me softly, then laughs, almost self-consciously. "It's probably good that you're the cautious one here, because if it were up to me, I might just stay every night."

A rush of heat flares through me at the thought, but also a sense of relief that we're on the same page. I slide my fingers into her hair, pulling her in for another deep, lingering kiss. She melts into me, and for a few blissful moments, the rest of the world fades away. The only sounds are our ragged breaths and the faint ticking of the clock in the hall.

I ease her back against the arm of the couch, letting my hand roam over the curve of her waist, up her ribs—just shy of any territory that might lead to us losing all sense of control. Even so, the contact is electric, our mouths colliding in a desperate need to be closer. Kali slips a hand under my shirt, splaying her palm against my lower back, and my body lights up like a fuse.

Time stretches; I lose track of how long we kiss, how many times we pause to catch our breath before diving back in. Each time we break apart, we laugh softly, the sound tinged with hunger and a trace of disbelief that we're here, like this, in each other's arms. Eventually, sense kicks in—Juniper's asleep in the next room, and I know how light a sleeper she can be.

With reluctance, I rest my forehead against Kali's, trying to steady my breathing. "We should... we should head to my room," I murmur.

She exhales a shaky laugh. "Yeah... probably a good idea." She slides her hand out from under my shirt, smoothing the fabric back down. "I don't want to traumatize your kid."

I manage a wry grin, even as my pulse continues to hammer. "Definitely not. I need you, Kali."

Kali's lips twist in a small, sultry smile. "Yeah?"

I scoop her into my arms, carrying her with purpose down the long hallway toward my bedroom. I place her on the bed, and lock the door. Kali's eyes light up with heat as soon as I pull my shirt off. "You're such a filthy girl, aren't you?" I ask her as she licks her lips.

"Incredibly filthy." She takes it upon herself to remove her own shirt, flinging it across the room. She twists her hands behind her back, unclasping her bra in one

quick flick and she has that thing off just as quickly. She flings it at me, and I snatch it out of the air.

My body's turned on, my cock straining against the zipper of my jeans. "So filthy. You know what happens to filthy girls?" I ask her, keeping my voice low.

She shakes her head slowly, a small smile playing at her lips. "What?"

"They get tied up. They get punished."

Her eyes widen, and I love the way she's looking at me right now. Like she's not sure if she can trust me or not. But I want her trust.

Desperately.

"You trust me, right?" I ask her, unzipping my jeans. My cock's so fucking hard I can barely stand it.

She nods once, her eyes never leaving mine. "I...uh, yes. I do."

"You sound a little unsure."

She twirls a strand of hair around her finger as her other hand traces over her left tit. Fuck, she's priceless. "I trust you, Ripley."

My smile spreads slowly across my face. "Good." I step closer. "Take everything off," I tell her. I want her bare for me. I watch with eager eyes as she does what I ask.

I pocket her panties in my jeans, wanting to keep these for my own souvenir. I step out of my socks and jeans. I remove my boxers last, letting my cock jut forward. I stroke it with one hand, my eyes zeroed in on Kali's hot body.

“What are you going to do to me?” she asks me as I climb onto the bed, her bra still dangling from my fingers.

“On your knees,” I demand. “Hands behind your back.”

She’s such a good girl, instantly responding to my every command, her obedience sending a rush of heat straight to my core. There’s something about the way she looks at me—like she’s craving every bit of control I’m willing to give—that makes my pulse pound in my ears. The soft hitch of her breath, the slight tremble in her hands, all confirm what I already suspect: she was made just for me.

I work the bra around her wrists, binding them behind her back. I make sure it’s tight enough to where she can’t break free, but not too tight to cause her pain. I press my hand around the binding. “This okay?”

She glances over her shoulder at me. “Yeah,” she breathes out, breathlessly.

“Good, ‘cause I’m about to fucking own this perfect body, Kali.”

Her breath catches as her eyes blaze with heat. “Do it,” she demands.

I pull out some lube I picked up on the way to the ballfield today, and set it on my night stand. I resume my position behind Kali, and place two pillows under her stomach. I lean her over them, smacking her ass a bit as I keep one hand on the binding of her wrists.

There’s something about having this sense of control over her. Not because I’m some control freak, or anything like that. No, it’s more that I’ve got her trust. That I’m showing her how she can trust me. Like we’re here together, building something real. Something tangible. My cock’s raring to go, and I rub it over the soft folds of her pussy. She’s so wet for me, and I slide my cock deep inside her, loving the way her

tight walls clamp down around my dick.

“Pure heaven,” I utter out, my cock filling her up completely. With how wet she is, I probably won’t even need the lube, but I know I want to make sure she’s comfortable. Again, it’s the building of trust.

I keep fucking her, letting my cock enjoy her sweet pussy. I lean closer to her ear. “I need to fuck your ass, Kali. Are you ready for that?”

She glances at me, her eyes searching mine. “Yes, I’m ready.”

“Good girl.” I pull out of her, and grab the lube. I put enough around her back hole, and grip my cock with one hand. “Breathe, okay. I’m going to go so fucking slow, but not sure how long I’ll be able to continue at that pace.”

I push the tip of my cock into her, keeping one hand on the binding of her wrists. I nearly black out as I continue pushing deeper into her.

“You okay, baby?” I stall.

She nods against the mattress. “Yes, keep going.”

I push a little further in, letting my other hand press against her clit. “Fuck, Kali. I know your pussy’s getting jealous. Don’t worry. I’m going to fuck you with my thick fingers.”

“Yes, please. It’s so empty.”

I smile, pushing my cock further into her ass as I push my middle finger deep into her tight pussy. “I want you completely filled up,” I tell her, dropping her wrists so I can work her clit with one hand. “I want you at my mercy, Kali. I want you begging me

to come.” I start moving everything in unison, pushing another finger deeper inside her pussy.

I lean my head back, my eyes squeezing shut as I get lost in the sensations. I’m fucking her ass with my cock, and finger-fucking her pussy while my other hand plays with her clit. She’s thrusting her hips against the pillows, her clit slamming into the heel of my palm.

“That’s it, Kali. Fuck me, baby.” If I could bury my face between her legs right now, I would. I keep slamming into her, gently at first but now I’ve worked up to a solid pace.

“Oh god, Ripley,” she whisper-yells. “I need my hands.”

I laugh lightly. “Not a chance. I’m nowhere near done with you yet.”

“Oh please, fuck, Ripley.” Her voice grows louder, and I remove my hand from her clit so I can cover her mouth.

“Quiet, Kali. Shhh,” I lift her slightly so I can whisper into her ear. “You need to stay quiet, baby.”

“My hands,” she pleads through my palm across her mouth.

I let go of her mouth, quickly untying her wrists.

She places both hands against the mattress, bracing herself. “Don’t stop,” she whispers. “Please, Ripley.”

I resume playing with her clit. Her orgasm is close. I can tell, and I stop thrumming her clit. “Are you begging for me to make you come yet?”

Her eyes meet mine from over her shoulder. “Why’d you stop? I’m almost there.”

“Breathe,” I tell her. “This is edging.”

“What?”

“I’m not letting you come until you’re literally begging me for it, baby.”

Her eyes challenge mine. “Is that a fact?”

I give her a lopsided smirk. “Yep.”

She moves a hand between her thighs, making contact with her clit, nearly out of breath. “I can do it myself.”

I quickly grab her wrists. “Do I need to tie you up again?”

“Please let me come, Rip.”

I kiss her, moving my cock once again. I continue fucking her ass as my fingers fuck her sweet cunt. “Is this what you want?”

Her eyes nearly roll back into her head. “Yes, oh yes.”

“Get your fingers off that clit, baby. No cheating now. I want to be the one to make you come.” I push a finger against her clit with my other hand. “You like it when I touch you like this? When I own every inch of you?”

“Yes, Rip, yes.”

“Shh, remember you have to stay quiet.”

She drags her bottom lip between her teeth. “Then, don’t stop.”

“Are you negotiating with me?” I ask her, my cock so close to coming.

“Maybe,” she says with a wink that has my heart beating double time in my chest. “Don’t stop, Ripley. Please, I need to come. If you want me to beg, I will.” And then she starts to beg, asking me to never stop fucking her. To always make her come. How badly she wants to ride her orgasm out all over my fingers. How she’ll lick them clean when she’s done.

“You’re so fucking perfect,” I tell her, knowing I’m never letting this woman go. Never.

She comes in a glorious wave of moans and her whole body vibrates as she tightens around me.

“Fuck, baby. Your mine, Kali. I own you so fucking good. Fuck,” I grunt out as my orgasm crashes through me. I can’t stop coming as my breathing picks up. I’m nearly out of breath, my heart thumping wildly inside my chest. “Baby, I fucking...” I almost told her I love her. Hell, fuck... I think I do.

16

Kali

I'm driving home in the hush of late evening, the cool air rolling through my open window and tangling in my hair. My cheeks feel warm from both the wind and the lingering adrenaline that's rushing through my body. I can't shake the grin tugging at my lips, no matter how many times I tell myself to calm down. The truth is, I'm floating on a cloud of happiness, and I don't want to come down. I keep replaying the night in my head: the gentle warmth in Ripley's eyes when he kissed me goodbye at the door, the soft hush of his house as Juniper slept, and the warmth of his arms around me. If it weren't for his concern about Juniper waking up confused, I'd still be there.

But I understand. This is all new—for me, for him, and especially for a six-year-old who doesn't need any extra emotional upheavals right now. That's why I'm making the responsible choice to head home, alone, and leave him to wake up to his daughter in a stable, routine environment. Yet as I drive, my heart flutters with the realization that I'm not just crazy about Ripley; I'm head over heels for Juniper, too. She's so full of life, curiosity, and a sweetness that melts my heart every time she flashes that big grin.

By the time I pull into my apartment complex, it's nearing midnight. I trudge up the stairs, fumble with my keys, and let myself in. My place is dark, only a faint streetlamp glow seeping through the curtains. It feels strangely lonely tonight—like I've left something vital behind. I flick on a lamp, set my purse down on the sofa, and catch a glimpse of my reflection in the mirror. My hair's a little wild from the drive,

my cheeks still pink. I look different, somehow. More alive.

I shower quickly, warm water cascading over my shoulders, and I let out a long, contented sigh. Thoughts of Ripley's smile and Juniper's giggles swirl around in my mind as I get ready for bed. The second my head hits the pillow, I realize there's no way I'll be able to sleep right away. My heart's racing with the knowledge that I'm in love. It's terrifying and exhilarating, all at once.

* * *

The next morning, sunlight filters through my blinds, and I wake with a flutter of excitement in my stomach. For once, I don't mind the early hour—my brain's already brimming with thoughts of a certain pitcher and his adorable daughter. I grab my phone off the nightstand and scroll through my notifications, half-hoping I'll see a text from Ripley. There's nothing yet, so I grin at my own impatience and decide to call my sister instead.

Bristol answers on the third ring, sounding a little sleepy. "Kali? Everything okay?"

A laugh bubbles out of me. "More than okay," I say, rolling onto my back. "Bristol, you're not going to believe this, but I'm pretty sure I'm in love. Like, crazy, head-over-heels, can't-stop-smiling type of love." I smile so hard. "Best part... he loves Star Wars just as much as I do."

Her voice perks up instantly. "Oh my god, really? Ripley?"

I grin. "Yes, him and his daughter, Juniper. I'm completely smitten. Like I want to paint a big heart on my bedroom wall kind of smitten."

Bristol squeals so loudly I have to pull the phone away from my ear. "Finally! I've been waiting for you to find someone you click with! And you're telling me you love

his daughter too?”

I sigh happily, sitting up in bed. “Yeah, she’s amazing. She’s so full of life, and she’s sweet, and... I can’t even explain it. I look at her and think, ‘I’d do anything to protect that smile.’ It’s crazy how fast it happened.”

“Girl, I’m so excited for you,” Bristol says, her tone brimming with genuine joy. “I want all the details, but if you’re truly in love, you’ll figure it out. Just keep me posted, okay?”

I promise I will, and we chat for a few more minutes about random sisterly stuff—like how Mom’s been asking when I’m coming to visit—before we hang up. I place the phone down on my nightstand, heart lighter than it’s been in ages.

That evening, I find myself back at Ripley’s place. He opens the door before I can knock, like he’s been watching from the window, and my stomach flips at the sight of him in a comfy T-shirt and jeans. He greets me with a soft “Hey,” pulling me into a warm hug. My entire body relaxes against his, and I breathe in that comforting mix of laundry detergent and faint cologne.

Inside, Juniper’s in the living room, standing on the couch cushions to see over the back of it. When she spots me, she hops down and rushes over. “Kali!” she cries, practically bouncing. “Dad said we’re making spaghetti tonight, and I get to help stir the sauce!”

I kneel to meet her enthusiasm, ruffling her curls. “That sounds awesome. I’ll help with the garlic bread if you want.”

Her eyes sparkle. “Yes, please!”

Ripley clears his throat behind me, amusement in his voice. “All right, you two. Let’s

get to it.”

We head into the kitchen, where I notice the table has already been set with mismatched plates and a little vase of flowers—clearly Juniper’s doing, since they’re half-wilted daisies from the yard. It’s adorable, and an odd warmth blooms in my chest at how domestic it all feels.

While Ripley browns ground beef for the sauce, Juniper and I huddle over the loaf of French bread, slicing it carefully and brushing on butter mixed with garlic and herbs. She chatters nonstop about her day. Like how she built a tower of blocks that almost reached her shoulders, how she practiced her throwing form in the backyard with Dad, how she can’t wait to show me her new dance moves. Her excitement is infectious, and I find myself laughing more tonight than I have in a long time.

When the spaghetti’s done, we gather around the table, bowls steaming. Ripley insists I take the seat next to Juniper, and throughout dinner, she keeps elbowing me or tugging on my sleeve to share little stories. Ripley just watches with a soft smile, occasionally jumping in with a teasing remark.

After dinner, we decide to watch *Star Wars: Return of the Jedi*. We cuddle up on the couch, Juniper sandwiched between us, devouring a bowl of popcorn and giggling at every silly joke onscreen. Ripley’s arm drapes across the back of the couch behind me, and I lean in just enough to feel the warmth of his shoulder. Every now and then, he glances my way with a look that sends shivers down my spine.

Before long, Juniper’s yawning. She tries to fight it, insisting she’s not tired, but her drooping eyelids say otherwise. Ripley exchanges a knowing look with me, and I volunteer to help her get ready for bed. We head down the small hallway to her bedroom, a cozy space filled with bright artwork and stuffed animals.

She changes into pajamas—blue ones with little stars on them—while I wait, then she

plops down at the edge of her bed, patting a spot next to her. “Will you brush my hair? Can you do it like Princess Leia?” she asks, holding out a sparkly pink hairbrush.

My heart squeezes. “Of course,” I say softly, taking the brush and sitting behind her. I run it gently through her curls, careful not to tug, and she hums contentedly, leaning back against me with that trust only a child can give so freely.

“Kali?” she says, her voice small and sleepy.

“Yeah, sweetie?”

She hesitates, fiddling with a loose thread on her pajama pants. “I wish... I wish I had a mother like you.”

Her words knock the breath out of me. Tears prick at the corners of my eyes, and I have to swallow hard before answering. “Juniper, you have an amazing dad who loves you so much,” I manage, my voice thick with emotion. “And... I’m here for you too, whenever you need me. Always.”

She turns to face me, looking so earnest. “You promise?”

I set the brush aside and pull her into a hug, heart aching and full all at once. “I promise,” I whisper, pressing a gentle kiss to her forehead.

Within minutes, she’s tucked under her blanket, drifting off with her stuffed unicorn clutched to her chest. I stand there for a moment, overwhelmed by the wave of love I feel for this little girl and her father. I’m definitely in deeper than I ever expected. And yet, the idea of stepping away now is unthinkable.

I flick off the light and slip into the hallway, a soft hum of voices from the living

room guiding me back to Ripley. He's waiting on the couch, gaze lifting as I approach. There's a tenderness in his eyes that tells me he overheard at least part of that conversation. My chest tightens. I want this , I realize. I want this family. And as I move to join him, curling into the circle of his arm, I know I've never felt more sure of anything in my entire life.

Ripley

I hover by Juniper's bedroom door for a moment, heart pounding, breath caught in my throat. I heard her little voice through the crack—the words I wish I had a mother like you —and for an instant, it felt like the floor vanished beneath me. Slowly, I back away, give them a moment, and let Kali handle it. But my chest tightens with an overwhelming mixture of longing and hope.

Because I want that too. I want her . Not just for myself, but for Juniper. And it hits me like a fastball straight to the heart: I love Kali.

I'm still trying to process that when Kali slips out of Juniper's room. She moves softly, like she's afraid of making noise, but there's a tension in her shoulders that tells me how much that little conversation affected her. She meets my gaze across the living room, something raw and tender shining in her eyes. Slowly, she crosses to the couch and sinks down beside me, not quite meeting my gaze yet. I can see the swirl of emotion in her expression, mirroring what's coursing through me.

My throat feels tight. Say something, Ripley. But instead of words, I slide an arm around her waist and tug her closer. She leans in willingly, resting a hand on my chest. The warmth of her palm sends a pleasant shiver down my spine. For a moment, neither of us speaks, just breathes in the hush of the room, the only light coming from a small lamp in the corner.

"She's okay," Kali says quietly, fiddling with the neckline of my T-shirt. Her voice

trembles, and I can tell she's still emotional.

"I know." I smooth a hand over her hair, the soft strands slipping through my fingers. "And she's right about you. You're... incredible with her."

She lifts her gaze then, those deep eyes full of something that makes my heart feel too big for my chest. "I just... I don't want to overstep. But I care about her so much. And you." Her voice catches. "I want this—both of you—in my life."

My chest constricts at how badly I want that too. Carefully, I slide my hand down to her chin, tilt her face up. There's a question in her eyes, and I answer it by leaning in, pressing my lips to hers. The kiss is gentle at first, a slow brush of mouths, but it's enough to send a surge of heat coursing through me. She tastes faintly of the wine we had with dinner and something else, something purely Kali that I've come to crave.

When our mouths part, I keep my forehead against hers. "I'm not sure how to do this," I admit, voice gruff. "I mean, I want you. And I know Juniper does too, in her own way. But... is it too fast? Are we rushing?"

She exhales a shaky laugh, brushing her fingers along my jaw. "It might be fast," she says softly, "but it also feels... right. Like we've been headed here from the moment we met."

I close my eyes, relief and desire tangling up in my chest. "I'm so glad you feel that way," I whisper, then I pull back just enough to look at her. "Because I want this, Kali. I want to figure it out—me, you, and Juniper, together. I want you in my life. Every day."

Her eyes glisten, and she leans in to kiss me again, deeper this time. My hand slips to her waist, sliding beneath the hem of her shirt to rest on the warm skin at her lower back. She makes a soft sound, one that sends a flare of electricity racing through my

veins. God, she feels so good in my arms. Like she's meant to be there.

I tug her closer, and she shifts so that she's practically in my lap now, one knee pressing into the cushions beside me. The couch creaks with the movement, but neither of us cares. She runs her hands over my shoulders, up the back of my neck, tangling her fingers in my hair. A low groan rumbles in my chest, and I deepen the kiss, our breaths mingling in the warm air.

"Kali," I murmur between kisses, "I swear, I've never felt like this about anyone before."

Her response is to kiss me harder, and I slide my hands up her sides, my thumbs grazing the edge of her bra. She gasps softly, arching against me, and my heart just about explodes at the realization that she trusts me, wants me.

We break apart for air, both of us breathing heavily, eyes locked. Her cheeks are flushed, and her pupils are blown wide with desire. I press my forehead to hers, trying to gather my scattered thoughts.

"Ripley," she manages, voice trembling, "I... I want this. I want to be with you."

"Yeah?" A grin breaks across my face, relief and excitement surging. "You sure?"

She snorts a tiny laugh. "I've never been more sure. I mean... I was afraid it was all in my head, that you'd see me as just a fling, or worry I couldn't handle Juniper?"

"Hey, no." I cup her face, forcing her to look at me. "I've been worried you'd run the second you realized how complicated my life can be. You've got your own career, your own dreams."

She shakes her head adamantly. "Complicated's okay if it's real." Then she swallows,

eyes suddenly shining with tears. “And this is definitely real.”

I draw her in for another kiss, tasting the salt of a single tear that escapes down her cheek. It’s not sadness, though, I can feel the joy behind it, the release of tension we’ve both been fighting. My arms tighten around her, like I can’t hold her close enough.

We make out like that for what feels like hours, hands roaming but still mindful of the fact that Juniper is asleep down the hall. The intensity flares, and each kiss grows more heated, more desperate. She rocks against me, and I feel her heartbeat thudding in sync with mine. Every brush of her lips sends a delicious ache through my body, and I’m half tempted to carry her to my bedroom right now.

As if reading my mind, Kali slides off my lap just enough to catch her breath, cheeks still flushed. “We should... probably talk about how this is going to work,” she says, voice husky. “Like, with Juniper, and boundaries, and... everything.”

I nod, still trying to steady my pulse. “Yeah. We’ll figure it out. Together.” I wrap an arm around her shoulders, pulling her against my side. She rests her head on my chest, her fingers idly tracing circles on my forearm. It’s so domestic, so sweet, that a part of me aches with gratitude. I never thought I’d have this—a real chance at love, with someone who gets me and isn’t scared off by my life.

After a few beats of comfortable silence, she lifts her head. “So... we’re doing this, right? Exclusively?”

Relief sweeps through me. “Absolutely,” I say, pressing a kiss to her temple. “No question.”

Her smile lights up the room, and she snuggles closer. “Good. Because I’ve already broken the news to Bristol that I’m completely gone for you and Juniper.”

I laugh, exhilarated at the thought that she's telling people about us. My heart feels almost too big for my chest. "Guess I'll have to let Hattie know we're official. She's gonna tease the hell out of me, but hey, she's on board."

Kali tilts her chin up to kiss me again, and this time it's gentler. I cradle her face, matching her unhurried pace, savoring the warmth of her lips and the taste of her. When we part, we rest in the quiet, bodies tangled in the space of my living room couch, hearts finally on the same page.

"I'm yours," I murmur, brushing a stray hair from her cheek. "And Juniper... well, she adores you. I think we're stuck with you now."

She giggles, eyes shining. "Good. I was hoping to be stuck."

With that I pull her in for another lingering kiss, and then we head off down to my bedroom.

18

Kali

I'm perched on a low bench near first base, watching the kids scatter across the makeshift diamond as they scramble to their positions. It's Saturday morning, and the weather in Starlight Bay is perfect for baseball—crisp, sunny, with just a slight breeze to keep the heat at bay. Normally, this is my favorite part of the week: coaching these enthusiastic little players, sharing tips I've picked up over the years. But today, my heart isn't fully in it.

It's not because I'm unhappy—far from it. In fact, things with Ripley have been amazing these past few weeks. We finally told Juniper we're officially together, and the way her eyes lit up was pure magic. She raced around the living room whooping, "We're a real family!" and jumped into my arms, nearly toppling me over. Every time I think about it, warmth floods my chest.

But right now, I'm distracted because Ripley has a day game, and I couldn't be there. And Juniper's with me instead of cheering on her dad. Once I wrap up here, we plan to drive over to the ballpark to catch the tail end of his game. Ripley was bummed, but we both figured Juniper would have fun helping me with the other kids.

I glance over to where she's standing with a small cluster of players, explaining the importance of bending their knees when fielding. She's wearing her purple T-shirt and cap, her cheeks flushed from the excitement of being "Coach Juniper" for the day. My heart squeezes at the sight. She's so proud to be helping, so thrilled to have a special role.

“All right, kids!” I call, standing up from the bench. “Let’s reset for one more drill before we wrap. Remember to keep your eyes on the ball and?—”

“Kali!” Juniper’s panicked shout stops me cold. My gaze snaps to her just in time to see a little Caleb swinging a foam bat—except it’s not a foam bat. He somehow grabbed a heavier practice bat we keep in the back. The kid is mid-swing when Juniper steps forward to demonstrate the stance.

Everything happens in a blink. The bat drops, and Juniper trips over it. She tries to catch her fall, but she yelps as her arm hits the ground. The world slows, and my stomach twists with dread.

“Oh god. Juniper!” I sprint over, my heart hammering so loud it drowns out the startled gasps of the other kids. Juniper is curled on her side, tears streaming down her cheeks, her face contorted in pain.

I drop to my knees beside her, careful not to jostle her arm. “Sweetie, it’s okay,” I murmur, pushing hair away from her flushed forehead. She’s whimpering, clutching her arm protectively.

“Kali,” she sobs. “It hurts. It really hurts.”

My chest constricts so tightly I can barely breathe. The other kids and a few parents hover anxiously, unsure what to do. Instinct kicks in—I need to get her to the hospital. If Ripley were here, he’d scoop her up in a heartbeat, but he’s on the mound somewhere, totally unreachable.

“It’s okay, Junebug,” I manage, my voice trembling. “We’re gonna get you checked out. I promise.”

With the help of one of the parents, we gently get Juniper to her feet. She’s guarding

her arm, and my panic spikes. I suspect it's broken, or at least badly sprained. I instruct the parents to wrap up the session, stammering out apologies, then guide Juniper to my car as quickly as possible. She cries softly the whole ride, her face pale, eyes wide with shock. I'm practically vibrating with fear and guilt, white-knuckling the steering wheel.

At the emergency room, the receptionist takes one look at Juniper's swollen arm and ushers us into the pediatric ward. Nurses hustle around us, asking me questions I'm barely able to process. I hold Juniper's hand, trying to keep it steady while an X-ray technician explains that they need images to confirm the fracture.

Once they whisk her away for the X-ray, I fish out my phone. My heart sinks—it's useless to try calling Ripley mid-game. He's probably in the bullpen or on the mound, his phone stashed in a locker. Hattie, I think, pulling up her contact info with shaky fingers.

She picks up on the second ring. "Kali? Everything okay?"

I swallow hard, tears burning in my eyes. "No. It's Juniper. She's hurt. It's her arm. It's probably broken. We're at the ER. I can't reach Ripley—he's in the game and?—"

"I'm on my way," Hattie says without hesitation, her voice steady. "Stay with Juniper. I'll be there soon."

The call ends, and I slump into a plastic chair in the waiting area. My gaze darts around: bright white walls, the faint smell of antiseptic, a child crying softly in a room nearby. Anxiety creeps up my spine. I can't believe this happened on my watch. She was my responsibility, and I let her get hurt. The guilt piles on until it's suffocating.

A nurse finally leads me to the exam room where Juniper is sitting on the bed, her arm in a temporary brace. She's still teary, but she brightens a bit when she sees me. "Kali," she says, voice trembling, "I'm really scared."

I choke on a sob, rushing to her side. "I'm so sorry, sweet girl," I whisper, stroking her hair. "I should've been paying closer attention. This is my fault."

She tries to respond, but the door opens and Hattie steps in, breathless. Relief clashes with another wave of guilt in my chest. Hattie crosses to Juniper, eyes wide with worry. "Hey, Junebug. You okay?" Her voice is gentle, soothing, as she examines the brace.

I can barely stand there. My heart's pounding, and the guilt is like a weight on my shoulders. I step back, letting Hattie take the lead. Something in me snaps—I can't handle the sight of Juniper's tear-streaked face, can't shake the thought that I failed.

Hattie glances at me, concern filling her gaze. "Kali, it's okay. Accidents happen."

I swallow a lump the size of a baseball. "I... I should've prevented it. I was supposed to keep her safe. How can I be anything like a stepmom if I—" My voice cracks, and I can't finish.

"Stop," Hattie murmurs, stepping toward me. "You didn't do this. It's an accident. Juniper doesn't blame you."

But I blame myself. My throat tightens, and I can't bear the thought of standing there, feeling so helpless, worthless. I back up, practically stumbling for the door. "I'm sorry," I choke out, tears spilling onto my cheeks. "I just... um, I can't be here right now."

"Kali, wait!" Hattie calls after me, voice tinged with sympathy.

I rush into the hallway, ignoring the stares of nurses and visitors. My mind races. I love her, and I love Ripley, but look at what I've done. I fumble through the exit, tears blurring my vision. The sharp smell of disinfectant follows me out into the parking lot. My lungs constrict as I slide into my car and slam the door, my hands trembling on the steering wheel.

How can I face Ripley after this? I can't protect his daughter. I'm supposed to be stepping into some kind of motherly role, yet I let this happen. With a strangled sob, I turn the key in the ignition and speed away from the hospital, tears streaming down my face. Every mile to my apartment feels like failure amplified.

By the time I reach my building, my chest is heaving with suppressed sobs. I dash inside and collapse onto the couch, burying my face in my hands. Hot tears soak my palms, and I can't stop the wave of self-loathing that floods me. I'm a horrible person. I don't deserve this family, or the love they've given me.

I curl into myself, trembling from head to toe. The image of Juniper's tearful face loops in my mind, and I break into another choked sob. There's no escaping the guilt. I can only hope that somehow, Ripley and Juniper might forgive me for being so careless. Because right now, I'm not sure I can forgive myself.

Ripley

I'm coasting on the high of our victory, sweat still clinging to my forehead as I jog off the field. My heart's thumping, but it's not from the pitching, it's from the anticipation of seeing Kali and Juniper in the stands. I half expect Juniper to come barreling down the steps, squealing about how cool that last inning was. But when I glance up at the bleachers, there's no sign of her or Kali.

Frowning, I wave off a few teammates who want to celebrate. A prickle of unease slides through my chest. It's not like Kali to just vanish, especially when she and Juniper planned to catch the game's final innings. They would've been cheering. Something must've come up...

Pulling out my phone, I skim through notifications, feeling a rock settle in my gut when I see several missed calls from Hattie. There's also a text, short and ominous:

Hattie: Emergency. Juniper's at the hospital. Call me ASAP.

My stomach drops like a stone. I don't even bother grabbing the rest of my gear. Within seconds, I'm sprinting through the corridors, phone to my ear, but Hattie's not picking up. God, what happened? My mind reels with worst-case scenarios. I can't even form a coherent plan; I just know I have to get to the ER.

I blow through the hospital's automatic doors a half-hour later, breathing so hard it feels like I've run a marathon. My uniform is still damp from the game, and I'm sure

I look half-crazed. The receptionist barely finishes a polite greeting before I blurt, “My daughter. Juniper Johnson. She... she’s here.”

It takes a moment for her to scan the system, then she points me down a hallway. I don’t wait for more directions I just hurry in the direction of her finger, adrenaline screaming through my veins.

Hattie’s standing by a vending machine near the waiting area. Relief washes over her face when she sees me. “Ripley, finally,” she breathes, and I note the tension in her posture, the dark smudges under her eyes. “I tried calling?—”

“What happened?” My voice comes out strangled as I fight a surge of panic. “Where’s Juniper? Is she—?” my words fall away.

“She’s okay,” Hattie says quickly, grabbing my arm. “She sprained her arm. She’s gonna be fine. They put a Velcro brace on her arm, and said she’ll need to keep it immobilized for a few weeks, but it shouldn’t cause permanent issues.”

The wave of relief hits me so hard my knees almost buckle. I have to brace a hand on the wall for support. “Oh, thank God.” She’s okay. My mind is still racing, but I can breathe now. “How did it happen?”

Hattie’s eyes flash with concern. “There was a coaching session, and apparently one of the kids accidentally hit her with a bat. Kali was running the clinic. She brought Juniper here immediately.”

“Kali...” My voice cracks. “Where is she?”

Hattie exhales, glancing toward the doors leading to the pediatric ward. “She left.”

I stare at her, uncomprehending. “What do you mean, she left?”

“She was overwhelmed,” Hattie says quietly, guilt shadowing her features. “She felt responsible, like she wasn’t fit to watch over Juniper. She blamed herself, even though it was just an accident. She was really upset, Rip.”

My stomach clenches at the thought of Kali beating herself up, probably terrified that she failed. Damn it. I rake a hand through my hair. “I need to talk to her. She must be—” I fumble for my phone, swiping at the screen. No missed calls from Kali. Why didn’t she call me? “Where’s Juniper right now?”

“She’s inside, waiting to be discharged,” Hattie explains. “Come on.”

When I step into the exam room, Juniper’s sitting on the edge of a hospital bed with a small brace protecting her arm. Her eyes light up the second she sees me, and I rush over to scoop her into a gentle hug.

“Dad,” she whispers, tears welling in her big eyes. “I’m sorry.”

My heart twists. “Hey, kiddo, you’ve got nothing to be sorry about.” I carefully brush back her curls, mindful of her injured arm. “How’s it feel?”

“It hurts a little,” she confesses, sniffing. “But the nurse said I’ll be okay.”

I press my lips to her forehead. “You will be. I promise.”

Hattie speaks to the nurse, sorting out paperwork, while I sit on the bed with Juniper. She leans against my side, exhausted, and my heart hurts at the memory of me not being there when she got hurt. But Kali was. She rushed Juniper to the hospital, did everything right, except she fled when the guilt overwhelmed her.

Once the discharge process is done, we head out. I buckle Juniper into the booster seat, Hattie giving her a quick kiss before telling me she’ll come by later to check on

her. “Any word from Kali?” she asks me as I climb behind the wheel.

I shake my head, flipping my phone screen toward her—still no new messages. “I’ll keep trying.”

She nods. “Don’t let her beat herself up too much, Ripley. It’s not her fault.”

My throat tightens. “I know. But I’m worried she won’t listen to reason right now.”

On the drive home, I stop by a small shop and buy Juniper the biggest ice cream cone I can manage without risking a meltdown in the car. She perks up a bit, chatting about the different flavors, and my heart squeezes again at her bravery. She’s already talking about “when I can throw a ball again” and “Kali must feel so bad.” Which she does, I’m sure. And that kills me. She’s part of our family, I think. Doesn’t she understand we’re allowed to have accidents?

At home, I settle Juniper on the couch with extra pillows for her arm, letting her pick a movie. I keep checking my phone, mind racing with worry. I leave Kali another voicemail, voice taut with anxiety, “Please call me back. I just want to make sure you’re okay.”

But nothing. Hours pass, evening slips in, and I manage to coax Juniper into bed with minimal fuss—she’s still sore, but at least the pain meds are helping. She’s more upset that Kali’s nowhere in sight. “Is she mad at me?” she mumbles, half-asleep.

“No, baby,” I say, stroking her hair. “Never. She loves you so much.” God, please let her come back.

When I finally collapse onto the living room couch, phone in hand, it’s nearing midnight. I’ve tried texting Kali a dozen times, each one going unanswered. My mind keeps looping worst-case scenarios: is she crying alone in her apartment? Blaming

herself for a freak accident? Does she think we're angry with her?

My phone buzzes, startling me from my brooding. I snatch it up so fast my heart skips a beat. Kali's name. Relief surges, but it's short-lived when I see the text:

Kali: I'm so sorry. I can't do this, Ripley. Please tell Juniper I love her, but... I'm sorry.

The blood drains from my face, and my chest constricts like a vise. She can't do this? My thumb hovers over the keyboard, mind scrambling for words that could convince her otherwise. But for the first time in a long time, I'm speechless.

I try calling immediately, but it rings, then goes to voicemail. "Kali," I plead into the silent receiver, my voice trembling. "Don't—don't do this. Please talk to me."

But the line clicks dead. I lower the phone, gut twisting in fear and anger and heartbreak all at once. How did we get here so fast? Just this morning, we were this close-knit little trio. Now she's slipping through my fingers, and I don't know how to stop it.

I stare down the empty hallway, tears burning at the corners of my eyes. I've never felt so helpless. Kali, please. I can't lose her, not now. Not like this.

20

Kali

My hands won't stop shaking as I pull into the parking lot of the Starlight Bay ball field. It's early—too early, probably—but I can't sit in my apartment another minute. I spent half the night staring at my phone, trying to think of something to say to Ripley, and the other half sobbing into my pillow, consumed by guilt. At some point in the early hours, I messaged Hattie to check on Juniper. She responded with a short She's fine; she misses you , which only made my chest tighten more.

It's almost surreal, heading to the field to umpire a game after what happened yesterday. My mind replays the moment that bat cracked against Juniper's arm, over and over. A sprain, thank God, but the memory still feels like a punch to the gut. If I had been more vigilant... if I'd had my eye on that kid...

I force myself to park in my usual spot, inhaling sharply when I see the stadium already blazing against the morning sky. There's another game today, back-to-back games are rare, but they do happen. In the back of my head, I know Ripley's set to play today—he told me last week. Or had he? My memory blurs; everything's been a haze since that awful text I sent him: I'm so sorry and I can't do this. The words practically choke me now.

You have to keep it together, Kali. I slam the car door and take a few steadying breaths. I haven't seen Ripley since I left his house the other night, and I'm not sure if I have the strength to face him. But I have a job to do—one that demands composure and authority. I tug my hat lower, as if that'll somehow shield me from the world, and

head toward the entrance.

To my surprise, there's already a crowd forming, even though the game doesn't start for a good hour. The buzz of conversation hangs in the air. I nod politely to a few players warming up on the field, but my gaze darts around, searching for that familiar silhouette. My heart is pounding so hard it makes my ears ring. I'm terrified of what I'll see. Maybe I'll see Ripley's anger, or worse, his disappointment.

But then I see him, standing near home plate. My breath catches in my throat. He's dressed in his team's warm-up gear, glove resting against his hip. Tall, broad-shouldered, that lock of hair flopping onto his forehead. He's scanning the stands like he's looking for someone... like he's looking for me. Even from this distance, I can sense the intensity in his posture.

Before I can decide whether to run or walk over, I spot something else—something that sends a jolt through my system: Juniper. She's standing beside Ripley, her arm in a little sling, smiling up at him. What is she doing here on the field? My stomach clenches. A wave of guilt rushes through me, threatening to knock me sideways, but I grit my teeth and move forward.

A few fans in the bleachers start pointing, and I realize all eyes are shifting toward me. My nerves skyrocket. I'm just the umpire—why would they be...? And then I hear a crackling static, like someone turning on a microphone.

“Testing—uh—testing,” Ripley's voice echoes through the speakers. My head snaps up. He's holding a mic, tapping it nervously, glancing back at Juniper like he needs her strength. My heart leaps into my throat.

“Kali,” he says, voice booming over the field. There's a hush in the stands, curious murmurs drifting around. “Kali, I know you're here. I saw your car.” He takes a breath, and I can see how tense his shoulders are. “I, uh, I'm not real great with words

sometimes, especially not public speeches, but I need you to hear this.”

My entire body is trembling. I take a step forward, half-wanting to sink into the dugout, half-yearning to run straight into his arms.

Ripley continues, eyes scanning the field until they land on me. He lifts a hand, beckoning me closer. “Kali Carter,” he says, and my name ricochets through the speaker system. “Yesterday was... rough. You and Juniper had an accident— an accident , Kali. It wasn’t your fault.” His voice is raw, but there’s a fire in it. “Sometimes things happen that we can’t predict, and I’m so damn sorry I wasn’t there to stop it or to be with you when it happened.”

I can’t move. My eyes brim with tears I’ve been trying to hold in for hours. He glances down at Juniper, who nods encouragingly, her little sling resting against her pink T-shirt. Then Ripley looks back at me.

“I love you,” he says firmly. “I love you more than I ever thought possible. You make me feel alive and hopeful in a way I haven’t since... well, since before Juniper was born, honestly. And Juniper—” he gestures to his daughter— “she loves you too. I know she does. She’s been talking about you nonstop, worried sick that you might never come back.”

My breath catches. Tears spill silently down my cheeks as people in the stands start whispering, some of them snapping pictures or videos. It’s like a scene out of a movie. A grand gesture, I think, half in awe, half terrified.

“He’s right,” Juniper pipes up, surprising me. Her voice is sweet but resolute, echoing faintly over the speakers. “Kali, I love you. And I’m okay. Please don’t be sad anymore.”

A strangled sob escapes me, and I stumble toward them, oblivious to the onlookers.

My vision blurs, but I manage to step onto the field. Ripley's face is twisted with worry, fear, and hope all at once.

"Kali," he calls again, his voice wavering. "You're not a bad person. You didn't fail. You didn't let anyone down." He swallows, lifting the mic one last time. "We need you. I need you. Juniper needs you. We just... we want our family back."

And that does it. Something inside me snaps, the last thread of my self-doubt unraveling. I hurry across the distance, tears streaming, not caring that a hundred people might be watching. The moment I'm close enough, he drops the mic and wraps me in his arms. I cling to him, sobbing into his shoulder, feeling his warmth envelop me.

"I'm so sorry," I manage between ragged breaths. "I was scared, I felt so guilty?—"

"It's okay," he whispers, kissing my temple. "It's okay, Kali. Accidents happen. I love you. I want you to stay."

Juniper tugs at my sleeve, and I step back enough to see her big eyes shining with tears of her own. My heart splinters and reforms all at once. I carefully kneel, and cup her cheek. "I love you, Junebug," I say, my voice thick. "I'm so sorry I left. I was afraid I couldn't be what you needed. But I want to be. More than anything."

She hugs me tight, her little sling brushing my shoulder, and I wince internally at the reminder of her injury. But she just snuffles, smiling. "Will you come home now? Please?"

I nod, tears still slipping down my cheeks. "Yes, baby. Of course."

A cheer rises from the stands then, startling me. I'd almost forgotten we had an audience. Apparently, we do. Ripley glances around, sheepish, then helps me back to

my feet. He wraps an arm around Juniper and an arm around me, pulling us both in. The crowd continues to clap and whistle, though some are wiping away tears themselves. I can't help but laugh through my own tears, burying my face against his chest.

"You didn't have to do all this," I murmur, voice muffled. "But... thank you."

He presses a kiss to my hair. "You're worth every bit of it," he says, voice low and certain. "Now, are we good? Because I'm thinking we should probably get you out of umpire mode for a while."

A shaky laugh escapes me. "I still have a game to call," I say, though it's a halfhearted protest. My heart is too full, my mind too buoyed by the realization that we're okay.

"Maybe they'll find someone else for today," Ripley suggests, smirking. "I think you've got more important business to handle." He looks down at Juniper, who's beaming up at us.

"You have to pitch," I say with a laugh. My eyes dance between them, feeling the last vestiges of guilt fade away under their unwavering love. I grab Ripley's hand, intertwining my fingers with his. Yeah, we'll figure out the details later. Right now, I just want to soak in the moment: the three of us together on the field, a roaring crowd behind us, and the sure knowledge that I don't have to walk away. I can stay, be part of this family. For real, for good.

"I love you," I whisper to both of them, my voice trembling with happiness. Ripley and Juniper echo the words back, and the noise of the stadium swells in celebration. Suddenly, everything feels right, as if all the chaos and heartbreak led us exactly where we're meant to be.

And that's enough for me. It's everything I've ever wanted and more.

RIPLEY

Saturday sunlight pours through the kitchen windows, turning Kali's hair almost copper as she flits between the stove and the island, packing sandwiches into a cooler. Juniper sits on a stool in her brand-new rec-league uniform. A navy shirt, bright-white pants, ponytail poking through the back of her cap as she swings her legs while she wolfs down a bowl of cereal. Every few seconds she checks that her glove is still in her lap, like it might run away if she takes her eyes off it.

"Deep breaths, kiddo," I tease, ruffling the bill of her cap. "First games are supposed to be fun, not nerve-wracking."

"I'm not nervous," she insists, except her voice squeaks and her spoon rattles against the bowl. "Okay... maybe a tiny bit. But Coach Kali says nerves mean you care."

Across the counter Kali lifts an eyebrow and flashes us both a grin. "And caring means you'll try your best," she reminds Juniper. Then she glances at me, eyes soft. Even after three months of sharing a roof, that look still knocks the air out of my lungs.

The move-in process was chaotic—boxes everywhere, my pitching schedule, her umpiring assignments—but somehow it felt easy, too. Every time I found one of her hair ties on the bathroom sink or heard her laughing with Juniper down the hall, the house clicked a little more into place. Home isn't just walls; it's the people inside them, and I've never felt that more than I do now.

"Car's loaded," I announce, grabbing the cooler. "Bats, balls, water bottles. Check."

Overly enthusiastic family. Double check.”

Juniper hops off the stool and does a quick spin, showing off the number 7 on her back. “Let’s go before the whole team gets there! I want to warm up my ‘heater.’” She practiced that pitch in the driveway yesterday which was thirty-five miles per hour of pure determination.

* * *

The local ball field is buzzing when we arrive. Parents unfold camp chairs, little brothers chase each other beyond the backstop, and somebody’s selling coffee from a folding table. Hattie is already waiting near the dugout, camera in hand. She greets Juniper with a gentle hug, then turns her smile on us.

“This is it, superstar,” she tells Juniper. “Give ’em the old Johnson fireball.”

Juniper giggles, proud and a little shy, then scampers off to join her teammates. Kali pulls on her coach’s cap—same navy as the kids’ jerseys—and jogs to the chalked line to start warm-ups, calling instructions in that clear, confident voice I fell for. The kids cluster around her like planets around a sun.

I drop into a chair beside Hattie. The late-summer breeze ruffles the grass, carrying the sharp scent of chalk and freshly cut outfield. I watch Juniper mirror Kali’s pitching motion—shoulder high, glove tucked—and something warm unfurls in my chest.

“Never thought I’d see the day you’d let someone else teach her the finer points of pitching,” Hattie murmurs.

“Hey, Kali’s mechanics are solid,” I say, though my grin probably gives me away. Truth is, seeing those two together—one teaching, the other soaking it up—makes my

heart feel too big for my ribs. This is exactly what I pictured the night I first told Kali we needed her.

The game starts, and Juniper trots to the circle for the top of the first inning. She peers in for Kali's sign... yes, my kid already wants signals... then whips her arm forward. The ball arcs, a little high but right over the plate. Strike one. The bleachers erupt, and Juniper's grin could light the scoreboard by itself.

Between innings I wander to the fence. Kali meets me there, adjusting her lineup card. Sweat beads at her temples, and she looks happier than I've ever seen her.

"She's crushing it," I say.

"You mean we're crushing it," she corrects, tapping my chest with her pen. "This is teamwork, Johnson."

I hook my fingers through the chain link, draw her close enough that the brim of her cap bumps mine. "I love our team." The crowd noise fades; there's only her smile and the faint scent of sunscreen and lemonade.

"Love you too," she whispers, cheeks dimpling.

A polite throat-clearing behind us makes us break apart. Hattie's snapping candid, naturally. Kali laughs, calls her players back onto the field, and jogs away, ponytail swinging.

I lean on the fence, watching my daughter throw another strike and my fiancée—yeah, I'm planning to make that official before long—clap and shout encouragement. The sky is a flawless blue, the bleachers hum with cheers, and for the first time in years there's no itch to be anywhere but where I am.

This is happiness. Sun-drenched, grass-stained, perfectly ordinary, and absolutely everything I ever wanted.

* * *

Thank you for reading Kali and Ripley's love story.

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 6:44 am

Hartford

“Wait, did you say BDSM?” My eyes widen as I process my boss’s unexpected assignment detail. “As in...bondage? Forgive me if I’m misunderstanding and there is another meaning for BDSM, like Bread?—”

Mr. Charleston’s hearty laughter cuts me off and ripples through his office before he confirms he indeed meant bondage.

“Don’t look so shocked, Hartford. Takes every type to make the world interesting. I want you to uncover all the mysteries,” he says, resting his forearms on his mahogany desk.

I jot in my notebook, uncover all the things and wow as I nod, attempting to grasp the gravity of this peculiar assignment. In the year I’ve worked at Cobblestone Chronicles , my lifestyle pieces have focused on ordinary topics. Local festivals, music, or family-focused activities.

Five minutes ago, when I entered Mr. Charleston’s office, I expected accolades for my piece on 10 Ways to Make The Internet Safer for Your Kids . Little did I know, he would ask me to forget all those safety tips and delve into the dark corners of the internet for an exposé on BDSM.

“Right. All the things. Such as...” I let my words linger in the air, the atmosphere thick with curiosity.

“As I see it,” Mr. Charleston says, “women who read Cobblestone Chronicles want

adventure in their life. They want excitement. They want to explore their sexuality. We need to give that to them.”

I swallow past the boulder lodged in my throat and jot down the word adventure , followed by sex in my notebook.

“BDSM is no longer confined to dark clubs or basements.” He leans back in his leather chair. “This is a new era, and today’s movies and books have normalized it from being a dirty secret to something any mom can do in her house. Can they though? You’ll give them that experience and let them decide.”

I nod in agreement, my pen capturing his words in my notes:

Watch dirty movies.

Buy erotic books.

Moms can tie themselves up at home.

WTF?

I glance up from my notebook and meet his gaze. “Right, yes. Okay, I’ll research BDSM and get that to you.”

“That’s the thing,” he says. “I don’t want an ordinary internet search. I want bigger—better. I want you to use those phenomenal journalistic skills I know you have and give me an article that our readers won’t expect. Something that will catch their attention. Something that will put us on the map, grow our readership. If you don’t feel comfortable, I can find someone else.”

Seconds tick by as I consider whether to pass on this assignment. I should bow out gracefully, but my ambition to leave a mark with my writing and reach a global

audience is difficult to ignore. “I can do this.”

Mr. Charleston’s grin emerges beneath his shaggy, overgrown mustache. “Good. My plan is to add a new feature called Ridge Reflections to our online platform. People gossip in this town, so I realize you may want to keep this private. I have no problem with you using a pen name.”

“Okay, I’ll think about whether I want to use one.”

“When this idea came to me, I did a little research myself and they have local meetups for BDSM. They’re called munches. You should be able to get great interviews.”

I can’t stop nodding at this point as I make more notes:

Don’t have a heart attack.

Munch while interviewing people in bondage gear.

“Have the final proof in my inbox in three weeks,” he declares, wrapping up our unusual conversation with a deadline hanging in the air.

As I stand, I push my glasses further up my nose with a shaky finger. “Thank you for the opportunity,” I tell him before I leave his office in a panicked daze.

I know nothing about BDSM. Never been inclined to change that fact. The last time I had sex was a year ago.

After my breakup with Grant, the desire to jump back into the dating scene didn’t excite me. Sex has never been a monumental aspect of my life. My girlfriends insist I haven’t found the right man to sweep me off my feet, but I wonder if I’m just not that into it.

Can someone simply not find pleasure in sex? Is that a valid thing? Because, truth be told, it hasn't been a priority for me. Now, as I embark on this unexpected journey into the world of BDSM, I can't help but question my stance on the matter. Maybe this exploration will lead me to unravel more than just the intricacies of a provocative lifestyle.

It's quitting time, so I push away lingering concerns about the assignment and head to my cubicle to gather my things.

"Are you rushing home to chill with Paxton?" Delia asks as I hustle past her desk. "Let me guess. Pad Thai for dinner?"

I stop outside her cubicle. "Yeah, it's his favorite." Paxton travels a lot for his job, so he likes to have one day a week where he gets to unwind and relax over his favorite meal. And I'm happy to oblige him. This has been our quirky tradition for over ten years, dating back to his fifteenth birthday, where he ate about half his weight in Pad Thai.

She shakes her head, a cascade of silken strands tumbling around her shoulders like liquid gold, and a soft smile graces her lips, illuminating her face with a radiant warmth. Her brown eyes shine with mischief. "When are you two gonna finally get off your asses and date already?"

I shoot her a quizzical expression, my eyebrows quirking up in amusement. "It's not like that. We're best friends."

People might think I'm strange for having a male best friend, but who cares? It works for us. Paxton is that rare soul on this planet who truly understands me. Our friendship defies stereotypes, built on a connection that's deeper than societal expectations. He's my confidant, my partner in crime, and the one person who sees me for who I am. And in a world full of labels and judgments, having a friend like Paxton is a refreshing reminder that genuine connections know no boundaries.

“I heard Mr. Charleston gave you the BDSM assignment.”

My shoulders slump at the mention of my assignment. “Yeah.”

“You should ask Paxton to help you.”

I scrunch my face up in exaggerated distaste. “Heck no.”

“Think about it,” she calls after me as I head out.

I won’t think about it because Paxton and I don’t have that type of relationship. We never have. Our friendship began in kindergarten when the teacher told me to take a seat next to him. He sealed our bestie status when he gave me a red crayon, saying he didn’t like the color but thought I might because it would look pretty with my auburn hair.

I can’t lie and say Delia’s suggestion about Paxton doesn’t ramble through my head on the drive home. If anyone would look phenomenal administering pain, it would be him. I’ve watched him grow from a skinny boy to a muscular man, and I’m not made of stone. I’ve had my moments of wanting to trip and fall into his lips. But we’re friends. And always will be.

Usually, when I pull up to my cottage-style house, I instantly relax because it exudes quaint and cozy. It has character in its weathered white walls. I adore the bright blue shutters and pink flowers under the windows. I especially love the rocking chair on the front porch. Today, all I can think is this does not look like the house of someone about to embark on a BDSM mission.

I rent it from my aunt, who has retired to Florida, so we’ll blame her for the storybook-cottage vibe.

I head inside my place, drop my purse and keys on the kitchen counter, and order our

food. I can't wait until Paxton gets here and we can stuff our faces with beer and Pad Thai.

His family owns the local brewery, Atta Boy, and he gets me free beer all the time. Sometimes free food too.

Score, right?

With hurried hands I fluff the yellow pillows on the plush light-blue sofa, the soft fabric yielding to my touch. The couch is worn with years of snuggling up with a good book, or watching movies with Paxton. There's a vintage record player on a shelf in the corner, playing soft music giving off relaxing vibes, which I love to do after work. I arrange a few knick-knacks along the shelf, smiling at the photo of Paxton and me taken down by the shore the day of our high school graduation. We were so full of happiness that day, knowing we had our whole lives ahead of us.

The doorbell rings, and I don't need to peep through the peephole because I know who's on the other side.

"Hey," I say as I open the door.

Paxton steps inside with a backpack slung over one of his broad shoulders. "Hey, you. How was work?"

As usual, it takes me a moment to acclimate to Paxton's presence. He's got luscious dark hair and these dazzling green eyes that change their shade, depending on his mood. Like mood eyes. So sexy. He's tall and ripped. Not overly muscled, just the right amount. His lean body is the kind you want to explore with your fingertips, all the nooks and crannies. Not that I would ever do that, mind you.

My eyes follow his every movement as he sets down his backpack, ready to fill him in on my unusual day. "Well, my boss wants me to write an exposé on BDSM."

Paxton's green eyes zip to mine. "What?"

He follows me to the kitchen.

"Yeah, he wants me to learn, and I quote, all the things ," I say, using my fingers as air quotes.

"What?" he says, his eyes glued to mine.

"Yes, he thinks I need to go to a local meet up and learn all about BDSM."

"What?"

"Please stop saying what," I tell him, glancing at his backpack. "What's this?"

His eyes are wide, possibly still processing what I was telling him about BDSM. "Okay, we're going to have to circle back to the BDSM thing, but I brought you beer samples."

"Oh, gimme." I hold out my grabby hands.

He chuckles as he unzips the backpack and hands me an IPA. "You know why we're best friends?"

"Lack of options?"

"No," he drawls. "It's because you're the only girl who likes beer."

"That's not true. Tons of women drink beer. Your brewery has an entire line of beer dedicated to women with pink bottles."

"Okay, you're the only girl I know personally who likes beer."

I laugh. “That’s not true either. You’re forgetting about Anya.”

“She doesn’t count.”

“She so counts.”

“Little sisters don’t count,” he hops up on the kitchen counter, effortlessly making himself at home. With a nonchalant air, he cracks open his beer can, taking a casual swig as if the counter were his personal throne. “Besides, I don’t want to be best friends with my little sister.”

I open my can, initiating a toast by tapping the aluminum against his. “Fair enough. So, about my article. I honestly don’t even know where to start. He wants an article that is really in depth. Googling some key phrases won’t be enough. ”

He twists his beer can in his hands and then shocks me by saying, “I can help you with it.”

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