

chapter *one*

Two away, ladies! Any bag! Any bag!”
I squat down behind the plate and set up Jodi on the inside. A cool breeze finds the damp spot between my shoulder blades and chills me. My knees and right shoulder are aching. I think I tweaked something when I tried to throw Kathy out at second. Sure as shooting, she slid right under the tag and came up grinning – cocky as ever. And thanks to a passed ball on her third strike, Miranda is standing safely on first.

Kim – my old buddy – is up to bat.

We scored three in the top of the seventh to put us ahead of JL’s Bike and Skate by two runs. In the bottom of the inning, I caught a pop-up, and Amber, our rover, threw out the runner at first. This is JL’s last bat, and if we hold them, we’ll have beaten them for the third time this season.

And that’s a good thing because losing to Kim would suck.

maureen ulrich

Since hockey season ended, Kim and I get along okay. She's nice enough to me in the hallway at school, but I would hardly describe us as friends.

I don't think that's ever going to happen.

We've already got two strikes on Kim, who K's as often as she hits. She's always swinging for the fence, so pitching to her is a crapshoot.

Throw it on her hands, Jodi. It's getting dark and our fielders can't see the ball.

Jodi's on the mound, foot on the rubber, softball resting on her hip, partially hidden by her glove. She's a beautiful pitcher – a perfect combination of technique and power. She rolls into her windup. All the momentum comes from her core as she brings her elbow towards her ear and whips her arm around, collapsing her hip and barely grazing it with the ball as she releases it.

At the wrong time.

The ball flies high and wild, smashing into the backstop behind me. I wrench off my mask and nearly trample the umpire. By the time I scoop the ball out of the red clay, Kathy has already rounded third, daring me to pick her off.

But I'm smarter than that.

Miranda, naturally, is standing safely on second and now first base is open, taking away our force.

Simply great.

face off

I toss the ball back to Jodi, who gives me a sheepish grin. I scoop up my mask and curse under my breath.

“Well, that makes the game more interesting,” says a voice behind me.

I ignore him.

Jodi’s dad, Kevin Palmer, is already headed to the mound. He’s wearing flip-flops and a pair of khaki shorts. Mr. Palmer’s tall and lean, and even though I’m not supposed to notice, he’s got a great set of legs. We’ve definitely got the hottest coach in the league.

“Kim’s one of their best hitters. We should walk her,” Mr. Palmer’s saying when I reach him and Jodi. “It’s the right thing to do.”

“But I’ve got two strikes on her already,” Jodi says. “I can K her, Dad.”

“You’re sure?” Mr. Palmer asks.

“Sure I’m sure.” Jodi gives her dad a wink.

Mr. Palmer turns his body to include me. “What do you think, Jessie?”

I look back at Kim, who is taking some lethal practice swings. Man, I’d love to throw her a chair. “We can get her to chase a bad pitch. Kim wants a home run so bad she can taste it.”

“Pitch around her,” Mr. Palmer says. “Don’t throw her any strikes. If we walk her, we get the force back. No harm

done.” He turns to me. “Don’t forget to ask Mark about umping tomorrow.”

“I won’t.” I tug my mask on as I return to home plate and squat behind it, holding up my right hand. “Two away, ladies! Go to one!”

Jodi grooves one low and inside, but Kim’s no sucker.

Ball two.

The next pitch is high and outside. Right where Kim likes them. But Kim just watches it go by.

Ball three.

Full count.

Jodi leaves her next pitch hanging over the plate and Kim connects, drilling the ball over the head of Kendra, our right fielder. When the ball touches the grass, it keeps right on sizzling for the fence.

There’s no possible way Kendra, who just started playing softball this year, is going to remember to hit the cut-off man. I calmly pick up Kim’s bat and toss it out of the way while my teammates scream for Kendra to throw the ball home.

Kathy jumps triumphantly on home plate, then turns to welcome Miranda, the tying run. Mr. Scott is the third base coach, and he’s waving his arms like a maniac and screaming for his precious daughter to go home. Just as I predicted, Kendra overthrows our first baseman, and as Kim crosses home plate, JL’s Bike and Skate explode off the bench in joy.

face off

It's like they won the World Series instead of the first game of our playoff tournament.

Jodi watches them for a while. "I guess clean living paid off for them." She walks over to Mark, who's shedding his chest protector and mask. "Next time, remember your girlfriend's team's supposed to win. That's why you're umping."

Mark smiles wryly. "And here I thought your perfect season was because of your great pitching. My mistake."

Jodi walks away, chuckling.

As I gather up my gear, Mark playfully tugs my ponytail. "Better luck next time."

"That'll be next season, obviously. We're in the B pool now." I stare at the JL team, spilling out of the dugout, hugging their parents and boyfriends. "Losing sucks."

"Yes, but it builds character."

My mom waves to me from the stands behind the backstop. "Do you need a ride home?" she shouts.

I point at Mark, and the smile on Mom's face vanishes. She doesn't argue the point though.

Kathy Parker struts over. "Sucks to lose on an inside-the-park home run, doesn't it?" she crows.

"Yep." I'm trying really hard not to let my gritted teeth show.

"Coming over to Shauna's later?" Kathy pulls off her ball cap and threads her fingers through her sweat-soaked blond

hair. “I hope you can forget we’re in the A pool and you’re in the B. We could have a group hug and make friendship bracelets and sing *Kumbaya* around the campfire.”

I can’t help laughing.

When we’re ready to leave, Mark gives Jodi and me a ride back to my place.

Jodi flops down in the back seat of Mark’s half-ton and pitches her ball glove on the floor. “Nothing worked tonight. I couldn’t hit the plate if my life depended on it.”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself.” I turn around and smile at her. “Our bats were cursed.”

Jodi moans and tilts her head way back, staring at the roof of the truck. “Don’t remind me. I’m friggin’ zero for five today. I need a drink.”

Mark looks at her in the rear-view mirror. “Are you girls going to Shauna’s?”

“Yep.” Jodi digs in her ball bag and pulls out her water bottle. She’s been carrying it with her everywhere lately. She takes a swig and hands it over the console to me.

“No thanks.” I avoid making eye contact with Mark. I know all too well what he thinks about Jodi’s bottle – which is laced with vodka.

“Is Jordan coming?” I ask Jodi.

“Probably not. He and Greg won’t get back from Weyburn until later,” Jodi adds, taking another swig. “Where

face off

was your dad tonight?”

“Courtney had a make-up game, and he had to ump.”

“Too bad,” Jodi says. “He’s got an ass that just doesn’t quit. I love watching him get your equipment out of the car.”

“Your dad’s ass is ten times nicer,” I reply without even thinking. This whole “hot dad” thing is second nature to us. I look over at Mark to see how he’s taking it, but he’s laughing and shaking his head. I know it’s the same way on his hockey team, only with the moms of course. “Which reminds me, Mark, can you ump our first game tomorrow? Jodi’s dad asked me to ask you.”

He raises a blond eyebrow. “Couldn’t I just give him one of my kidneys?”

“Mark!” I smack him in the arm. “You already told me you aren’t doing anything tomorrow.”

“If the weather’s nice, I’m going golfing.”

I know he’s just yanking my chain. Mark never goes golfing when I play softball. He’s only missed one game this season.

In spite of what he says, he’s really good about umping behind the plate or between first and second base. I’m the only girl on the team whose boyfriend umps. Most of the guys – like Jodi’s boyfriend, Jordan Decker – would rather golf or go boating at Boundary Dam.

But not Mark.

We've only been dating for four months, and I feel like it's just too perfect. Mark's too perfect.

"I missed too many of your hockey games last winter," he always says. "Maybe if I'd been at more of them, it wouldn't have taken so long to get together."

"Are you golfing in the men's tournament next weekend?" Jodi asks, pulling me out of my thoughts.

Mark adjusts the rear-view mirror. "I haven't decided yet."

"You should," Jodi says. "What're you shooting anyway?"

"Doesn't matter."

Mark golfs on his high school team, the ECS Elecs, and he's having a great season. He could probably get himself a hockey *or* golf scholarship at the end of Grade Twelve if he keeps it up.

Mark's second year of Midget AA hockey was a big disappointment for him. Mark says some of the guys "lacked focus," which is a nice way of saying they would rather party than play hockey. Last February, things came to a head when Mark's coach sent everybody home from a tournament after some of the guys broke curfew and got drunk.

Half the parents hit the roof, the coach quit, and two dads stepped in for the rest of the season, but they were way over their heads. The AA Bruins, favoured to win a provincial title, lost out in the first round of playoffs.

face off

Mark could have been playing AAA all along, but he wants to stay in Estevan so he can go to school at ECS and keep an eye on his mom. His mom and dad split up a few years ago, and his dad lives in Calgary. Mark's more interested in becoming an engineer than playing elite hockey.

With any luck, he'll sign with the Bruins, our SJHL team, and stay here in Estevan for his Grade Twelve year.

Mark drops Jodi and me off at my place. The garage door is wide open, and my dad's Prius is nowhere in sight. Dad must have taken Courtney for ice cream after her game. Mom's beaten us home. She's hunkered over one of the flowerbeds, pulling weeds. She's still wearing her work clothes.

"I have to fill with gas and run over to Canadian Tire," Mark says. "I'll come back in an hour to pick you and Jodi up. Make sure you're ready." He tries to look stern, but he doesn't do a very good job.

I plant a quick kiss on his cheek and start to climb out of the truck, but he grabs my hand and pulls me back. At first I think he's going to kiss me, but he says, "We need to talk later."

He looks so serious my heart kicks into high gear and my insides start churning. He never volunteers much information about himself. He always says he'd rather talk about me. "What about?" I ask.

“I’ll tell you later, when Jodi’s not around.” He stares at Jodi, who’s talking to my mom.

“See you later.” I slide off the seat and get my ball bag out of the truck box before Mark takes off.

“So you girls are going over to Shauna’s later?” Mom asks when I get there.

“Is that okay with you?” I reply.

Mom smiles tightly. “Don’t stay out too late. Nine a.m. comes early.” She looks at Jodi for a second, then says, “Jodi, why don’t you go shower? I want to talk to Jessie for a minute. You know where the clean towels are.”

“Sure do, Mrs. Mac.” Jodi picks up her backpack and pulls the strap over her shoulder. She uses the garage entrance to go into the house.

Mom and I are left alone.

“I smelled booze on her breath,” Mom says. “Have you been drinking too?”

“No, Mom.”

“Do I need to smell your breath?”

“No, you don’t.”

“Because if I have to do that to know when you’re telling the truth, and I find out you’re lying –”

“Mom, I have *not* been drinking.”

Mom stares at me for a moment before continuing. “That girl is headed for trouble, and she’s not even at the Comp yet.

Her parents are too permissive.”

She’s not telling me anything I don’t already know. Jodi’s got three older brothers, and I think the Palmers got tired of enforcing any rules by the time Jodi came along.

Jodi and I have been hanging out all ball season. Jodi sleeps over at my place nearly every weekend. I stayed at her place a few times, but Mom and Dad quit trusting her after I brought her home drunk from a party at Jordan’s and she threw up all over my bed. I don’t drink when I’m with Jodi. One of us needs to stay in control because Jodi makes *really* bad decisions when she’s tanked.

“We think you should spend more time with Shauna and Tara. Like you used to,” Mom’s saying.

“I *do* spend time with Shauna and Tara! I’m going to Shauna’s tonight, remember?”

“And your father and I think you should spend less time with Mark. You two are getting too serious.”

“How can we get serious?” I say angrily. “I’m only allowed to stay out after midnight once a week, and even then I have to be home by one thirty or Dad’ll come looking for me.” I don’t add that he usually has bed-head and a pair of old sweats on, so I’m always home on time.

“You’re still in Grade Nine, and Mark’s going to graduate next year.”

“Mom, he’s only two years older than me!”

“We think things are moving too fast.”

Too fast? I’d like to throw a few details in her face, but I don’t. It’s none of her business. If she only knew how considerate Mark is of me, how careful he is not to push me into anything.

“So does this mean I can’t go to Shauna’s?”

Mom puts her hand on my forearm and squeezes. “You’re a smart girl, Jessie. You had a tough start here last September, but you’ve really turned things around. We trust your ability to make good decisions.”

My defensiveness drains away. “Thanks, Mom.”

She wipes her eye with the back of her hand and reacts instantly. “I think I just got dirt in my eye.”

“Here, let me have a look.”

It’s too dark to see anything in her eye, so we head inside.

She’s right about turning things around. My life is now the total opposite of what it was last September, when we moved here from Saskatoon. Sure, the first two weeks were okay until I stuck my big foot in my mouth and said something stupid about Kim Scott to her best friend, Natalie Wilgenbush. I didn’t really even know much about Kim before that.

But I soon found out.

Within a few days, she’d rallied every girl in our class against me. They started wrecking my stuff and sending me

face off

nasty messages on MSN and gossiping about me. And Kim even told Marsha, one of the tough girls at ECS, that I called her a “fat pig,” so Marsha would beat me up.

But when I started playing girls’ hockey with the Xtreme, everything changed. I got to be friends with Shauna and Tara and Kathy and the rest of the girls. And our coach, Steve Brewer, who’s Tara’s dad, helped me to learn to love hockey even more than I love ringette, which is saying a lot because I love ringette.

The rest of the winter wasn’t so bad at all – if you don’t count being scared to death of Marsha and her pals for three months.

Or Kim joining the Xtreme halfway through the season and ragging on me all the time on the ice.

Luckily, Kim and I finally called a truce during provincials in Rosetown. And on the bus ride home I sat with Mark and caught up on a winter’s worth of misunderstandings.

It was the best six hours of my life.

When we got back to Estevan, he pulled me behind the bus and kissed me for the first time.

Now that was definitely something worth waiting for.

As I walk into our kitchen, I glance at the calendar on the wall. Last February I circled June 21st with a red marker.

Yesterday was June 21st.

The longest day of the year.

maureen ulrich

The day I've been waiting for.

Because on June 22nd the nights start to get longer and the countdown begins – the countdown to hockey season and my first year playing Midget girls in a brand new league.

And in Jodi's words, it's gonna be friggin' awesome.