

Gutter Balls and Strikes

Jessica Hale exploded off the sofa, shouting, “That was pass interference, you moron.” For added measure, she walked to the TV and thumped the referee who missed the call. She turned around to catch her friend, Sydney Turner, rolling her eyes. “What? Anybody with eyes can tell that was interference.”

“Maybe if you moved your ass, I could see it in replay.”

“So now you don’t trust my vision?” Jess pushed her glasses up on her nose and returned to the sofa, easily dodging the popcorn thrown her way. “Pig.”

“Thank you.” Sydney bowed her head before turning her attention to the game. “You’re right, that was a mugging.”

“If you were actually paying attention to the game, you would have seen that the first time around. What’s that you keep looking at, anyway?”

“Nothing, really. A flyer.”

“A flyer?” Jess laughed. “She must have been hot.”

Sydney wiggled her eyebrows. “Smokin’. It’s for a charity bowling thing. You pledge to donate fifty cents for every point you make.”

“They wouldn’t make much off me. You know I can’t bowl worth a damn.”

“So, does that mean you want to go?”

Jess looked at her friend like she was crazy. “Hell, no. I don’t do sports where you have to put your feet into shoes millions of other people have worn.” She returned her attention to the game. As far as Jess was concerned, the discussion was over. “Will you look at that? I missed a touchdown fooling with you.” She jiggled the University of Oklahoma cheerleading doll she’d gotten ten years ago as a gag gift. In earlier years, she would pull the string in Little Miss Red’s back and make her talk to celebrate an OU touchdown. But too many drinking games had worn Red out, so Jess settled for making her do flips.

“I can’t believe you still have that doll,” Sydney said, reaching over to smooth down Red’s skirt. “Brings back a lot of memories.” She smiled at her best friend. In looks they were opposite.

Sydney with her blond hair-blue eyed all-American looks versus Jessica, with black hair-brown eyed Native-American looks. But in most everything else, they were kindred spirits.

Jess nodded. “Best secret Santa gift I ever received.” Sydney had given her the doll their junior year in college and Red still had her honored place on Jess’ bed, except for when, like today, OU football games were televised

“Are you feeling sentimental enough to go bowling with me?” Sydney nudged Jess with her bare foot. “I’ll owe you.”

“Give me that.” Jess snatched the flyer from Sydney’s fingers. Her eyes narrowed as she read the description. “All single *and* all lesbian...right. Too good to be true.” She threw the flyer at Sydney. “I know you don’t believe that crap, Syd. Sounds like a perfect example of bait and switch to me.”

“It’s not crap. And just for the record, there were three hot women handing out the flyers, not one.” She looked at Jess as if to say, top that.

“I bet you ten dollars most of the women who show up will be at least sixty and *not* single.”

“Done.” Sydney pulled her wallet from her pocket and slapped a ten dollar bill on the coffee table. “You *know* what this means, right?”

“That I’m going to pick up an easy ten bucks?”

“No. That you have to go with me for validation purposes.”

Jess groaned. “Why do I like you?”

“So, not only do I have to pay fifty cents a point, I also have to pay for each game, and to rent previously worn shoes?” Jess asked as they waited in the line to get into the bowling alley. She was already a little peeved because judging by the women in line, there were not going to be a bunch of sixty year olds in attendance. The jury was still out on the singlehood status. To her judicious eyes, there were a number of pairs whose body language suggested they were a couple. *Maybe I’m only in debt for five dollars.* Sydney punched her shoulder, bringing her out of her musings. “Hey, watch it,” Jess snarled playfully.

“Suck it up, Hale. You can afford to pay for the game and the shoes.”

“That’s beside the point. It’s the principle of the thing,” she said loftily, then had the grace to be ashamed when the cute woman in front of her turned and gave her a “speaking” look. “Of course you’re right, Syd. It is for a good cause. And I did bring an extra pair of socks.”

“Good thinking. I’m sure cooties can’t make it through two pairs of socks.”

“There’s no need for sarcasm, Turner.” Jess returned the earlier punch. “You wait. Ten years from now they’re going to come out with some finding about cancer and sharing bowling shoes.”

Sydney laughed along with several of the other women in line. “I’ll just stamp a big i on your forehead. I think it’s only fair the single women be warned.”

Jess ran her fingers through her short hair, inadvertently leaving behind two horns. “After I contribute to this worthy cause, I’m killing you,” she said for Sydney’s ears only. “You’re dead.” She jammed her hands into the pockets of her loose-fitting jeans and kicked a pebble half-way across the parking lot. Lucky for her, there was nothing in its path.

Sydney shrugged off the threat and wisely turned the conversation to the upcoming Oklahoma-Texas game.

Although Jess knew what her friend was up to, she bit anyway. Her adoptive parents had brought her up right, setting aside everything to watch OU games on TV. It had been a forgone conclusion that Jess was going to grow up and go to OU. “One day, we have to get back to Dallas for the game. See if it’s anything like the four years we attended.”

“We? So, I guess that means I’m still your friend?”

Jess smiled sweetly and looked her watch. “For about two more hours.”

“Ouch. I feel a long slow game coming up.” She sighed. “If you let me live, I can go to the game with you.”

“And buy me beer. Oh, look.” Jess motioned with her head to a table set up to the right of the front door. “Are they the ones who were handing out flyers?”

“Yeah,” Sydney said, checking to make sure no strands had escaped from her ponytail. “The one in the middle is named, Libby.”

“Nice.” Jess unobtrusively checked out the petite brunette, who looked like she might have been a cheerleader in another life. “You’ve still got good taste. I forgive you for dragging me here.”

“Sydney, you made it,” Libby said with a big smile. “Here’s a pledge form. I’ll catch up with you when we get everyone in, okay?”

“You bet. And I need another one for my friend, Jess.”

Libby ran around the table to give Sydney a hug. “That’s for bringing a friend.”

Jess was still grinning at Sydney’s red cheeks as they entered the bowling alley. She stopped a moment and let her eyes adjust to the darkness, which was periodically cut with flashes of light. At the shoe desk, Jess silently handed over one of her shoes to be held hostage until she returned the size-eight bowling shoes. She wondered darkly about the type of person who would even

think about stealing the butt-ugly shoes, then shuddered. Some things were just too gruesome to consider.

“See, that wasn’t that bad,” Sydney said once they were at their assigned lane. They were going to be sharing it with six other players. “Sign us in while I get the first round.”

“Now that’s an offer I won’t refuse.” Jess took a seat in front of the console, read the instructions, and entered first Sydney’s initials, then hers. By the time she was finished, four other players had wandered over, so she entered their initials as well.

When Sydney returned with two pitchers of beer and a stack of plastic cups, all of the players for their lane had shown up. After a round of introductions and the distribution of beer, they toasted each other and Sydney took her turn.

As Jess had forewarned, her bowling skills stunk. “Time for more beer,” she announced loud enough to be heard over the music blaring from the ceiling. She’d just rolled her fourth gutter ball and needed a break. “If my turn comes up before I get back, somebody please roll for me.”

“Get some nachos or something, I’m starting to get hungry,” Sydney said.

Jess nodded and made her way to the end of the line at the concession counter.

“Nice shirt.”

Jess turned to find herself looking at a face full of freckles and dancing green eyes. “Thanks. Worn by only the proud and the few,” she joked.

“You got that right,” the other woman said, tugging on her own crimson Oklahoma Sooners t-shirt. “And before you say it, I know it clashes with my hair.”

Jess feigned shock. “Bite your tongue. Our colors clash with nothing. I *read* that in the student handbook.”

The redhead covered her face and groaned. “Please tell me you just wear the shirt and aren’t actually an alumni.”

“I can’t in good conscience tell a lie, ma’am. But I can tell you I was punning before I went to OU if that makes you feel better. I’m Jess Hale, class of 2002.”

“I’m Margaret McCurdy, class of 2004. I go by Maggie.” She shook Jess’ hand. “Are you set for next Saturday? It’s the big one.”

“Maybe.” Jess sighed. “The coach doesn’t have a good record against Texas, and they barely won that game today. I feel a loss coming on.”

“Yee of little faith. They’re going to win, I feel it.” Maggie grinned and showed Jess a rabbit’s foot hanging from the leather string around her neck. “This is my lucky charm. When I take this to the games, we win.”

“You’re going to the game? Sweet.”

“My dad and my granddad are like huge OU football supporter. So my dad offered to pay my way. I’d be a fool to turn that down.”

Jess nodded. “And you’re obviously no fool.” She joined Maggie in laughter, liking the way her nose crinkled when she laughed. She took a quick look at Maggie’s ring finger and was relieved to find it unadorned. “Maybe you could tell me about the game when you get back. Over dinner or a drink?”

“What’s taking you so long?”

The hairs on the back of Jess’ neck stood on edge when another woman grabbed Maggie’s bicep and squeezed. Before she could react, Maggie yanked her arm from the other woman’s grip.

“Do you see the line, Val?” Maggie asked. “It’s not like I can just saunter to the front and place an order.” The sarcasm fairly dripped from her voice.

Val turned her gaze to Jess. “You seemed mighty friendly a minute ago. Is there something going on I should know about?” She drew herself up to her full height of five-eleven and glared down at Jess with her blue eyes blazing.

“We were just talking about football,” Jess said, ignoring the fact she had just asked Maggie out. “Look at our shirts.” She pointed to the white OU above her breast on her polo shirt. “We root for the same team.” Jess could tell Val wasn’t buying her explanation, and she didn’t relish the idea of getting into a pissing match with a woman who looked like she could take down a house. “You have nothing to worry from me.”

“Val, why do you have to ruin everything?” Maggie’s her face and neck almost matched the color of her hair. “We were just having a friendly conversation. You don’t own me. I’m allowed to talk to other people. I don’t why you can’t get that through your thick skull.” She pinched the bridge of her nose and exhaled. “It really pisses me off.”

I don’t think I’m supposed to be hearing this, Jess thought and turned so she was facing the front of the line and away from the discussion.

“You want to know what pisses me off?” Val asked. “That I can’t let you out of my sight for a minute. What have you got to say about that?”

“Just drop it and go back to our lane,” Maggie replied. “I don’t want to talk about it anymore.”

“You don’t want to talk about it? *You* brought it up.’ Val’s voice grew louder with each word. “And now *you* don’t want to talk about it. What, I’m not good enough to talk to now?”

“Shut up,” Maggie ground out. “Nobody wants to hear this argument. Least of all me.” She crossed her arms across her chest and stared fixedly at the back of Jess’ shirt.

“Don’t tell me to shut up.” Val grabbed for Maggie, missed and struck Jess in the back, sending her forward into the person in front of her.

“What the hell?” The person in front of Jess roiled around. “Are you drunk already?”

“Sorry,” Jess mumbled, rubbing her chin, which had made contact with a hard skull. She was lucky she hadn’t bitten her tongue. “Somebody pushed me into you.”

“Are both of you okay?” Maggie asked, brushing aside Jess’ hand to gently feel her chin.

“You’re probably going to have a bruise. I’m so sorry, Jess.”

Jess leaned in Maggie’s touch, soaking up the TLC. She got the feeling Maggie was apologizing for more than Val’s bad behavior. “Not your fault. It’s just one of those things.”

“Val, don’t you have something to say?” Maggie said harshly.

“Yeah. Take your hand off of her before I beat the shit out of her.”

“You do and I never want to see you again.”

By now everyone close by was tuned into the unfolding drama. Jess felt like she was on a trashy reality show and wished she were somewhere else. It didn’t matter where, as long as it was far away. She was never going to talk to another woman for the rest of her life.

“What’s going on here? Is there a problem, Mags?” Libby asked as she walked up and placed herself between Maggie and Val. Her demeanor was nothing like a light airy cheerleader, but like a woman who meant business. “Just say the word and I’ll have security come take care of this.”

Maggie shook her head. “We were just leaving.”

“Are you sure? *You* don’t have to leave.” Libby shot Val a pointed glare. “Come on, you’ve put a lot of work into this event. I know you’ve been looking forward to this for weeks.”

Maggie glanced at Val before saying, “Still, it’s best we go. I doubt I’ll be having much fun now anyway.” She turned to Jess, a look of regret on her face. “Again, I’m sorry. If you have any problems, Libby knows how to get in touch with us.”

Jess tried to smile, but the pain in her chin made it more like a grimace. "I'm fine. Have a good time next weekend." She watched Maggie walk away and sighed. When she thought about what might have been, the disappointment was almost overwhelming.

"I really am sorry, okay?"

The way Maggie looked at Val was similar to the way she looked at dog crap on the bottom of her shoe. "I don't want to hear it, *okay?*" She brushed past Val and entered the kitchen of the two-bedroom apartment they shared. Ignoring the presence behind her, she opened the refrigerator door and stared sightlessly at the packed shelves.

"We have to talk about this, honey. Please?"

Val's demeanor was almost meek, contrasting harshly with her earlier behavior. But then that's how it always was. Maggie closed her eyes against a surge of rage. She slammed the door shut and faced Val. "Talk? There is nothing left to talk about," she said, enunciating carefully.

"We've said it all before. A thousand times before!" When Val reached out to her she stepped away and suddenly felt deflated. The anger was gone, replaced by disheartenment. "No, Val, not this time. You went too far and I don't think there's any way to go back."

Val's eyes widened. "Don't say that. Please, don't say that, Maggie. You know I love you."

"It's not enough anymore." Maggie took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Why had she taken so long to get to this point? "I'm tired of not being able to go anywhere because I don't know how you'll act. I'm tired of putting up with your constant accusations. And I hate to say it, Val, but I'm tired of what being with you does to *me*," she said, pointing to her chest. "I...I can't do this relationship anymore."

"No. No," Val said, tears streaming down her face. "I promise I'll get better. Give me another chance, please? I'll do anything. I promise."

"No you won't." Maggie blinked rapidly against the burn of tears. "You've already broken one promise tonight. I can't trust you, and I can't be with someone I can't trust."

"You can't tell me you're going to walk away from three years. I'll give you some space to think it over. Like last time. Oh God, but this time I really mean it. I really will change."

As she watched the tears stream down Val's face, Maggie hardened her resolve. She'd already wasted too many second chances, believing Val was going to change and that things would be different. Angrily wiping at her own tears, she said, "We're over." Then, feeling as if she'd made the best, and at the same time, the worst decision of her life, Maggie slowly made her way to the second bedroom.

After locking the door, she sank down on the futon and cried. She cried because no matter how hard she'd tried she could never be what Val wanted her to be. She cried because Val couldn't be what she needed and she cried because she'd wasted too much time on something she'd known deep in her heart would never work.

Her cell phone rang as the tears slowed down. She checked the caller ID and knew she had to answer. "Hey, I knew you'd call to check on me." Maggie could hear the noise from the bowling alley in the background, and for a second she wanted to be back in line talking to Jess. She hadn't felt that carefree in a long time. Too long a time. "I'm okay."

"You don't sound it. Have you been crying? What did she do now?"

"Not her, me. I finally took your advice and ended it." Maggie exhaled the tears threatened to return. "For good this time though. I can't keep doing this to myself."

"Oh...Mags. I'm coming over. You shouldn't be alone."

"No! I'm okay. Really." She used the bottom of her shirt to wipe her face. "Besides, isn't there some hottie you're supposed to be chasing?"

"You know you're more important than that, Mags."

"I do, Libs, so trust me when I say I'm fine. I know I did the right thing, I just need a little time to adjust to the idea." *To get over the disappointment.*

There was a pause before Libby finally said, "Okay, if that's what you want. And it goes without saying that you have a place to stay if you need it. For as long as you need it."

Maggie groaned. "Shit, I hadn't thought that far ahead. Breaking up sucks."

"Not when you have me as your best friend," Libby said briskly. "I'm coming to pick you up for brunch tomorrow. We'll get everything sorted then."

She managed a weak smile. "Yes, whirlwind. I'll see you tomorrow, and promise to have some fun for me."

"Not a problem as long as you promise you'll call if you need me."

"Promise." Maggie let the phone drop onto the futon beside her and massaged her temples. She had a lot of hard work in front of her. But with Libby on her side, she could get through anything.

The light filtering in through the blinds awakened Jess the next morning. She yawned, then gently stretched and checked the bedside clock to discover she'd slept half the morning away.

Feeling better than she had a right to considering the amount of beer she'd consumed the night before, she threw back the covers and swung her legs over the edge of the bed. She probably had Sydney to thank for her clear head. It was physically impossible to be hung over after spending half the night listening to her friend drone on about Libby and her Super Woman powers.

Jess grinned as she made her way to the bathroom. Yeah, Sydney was seriously gone on one hot, yet nice, brunette. *And it couldn't happen to a better person.* Her friend was due a break in the romance department. *I wish it had been me.*

She glanced at the mirror above the sink and sighed. The bruise on her chin was dark enough to stand out against her light brown skin. *Maggie.* She didn't have to think hard to see the image of a freckled face, red hair, mischievous green eyes and a killer smile. And even though they hadn't had a chance to talk for more than five minutes, Jess had felt the call of something. *Too bad it had to be a wrong number.*

After giving herself a stern talk about coveting thy neighbor's wife, she got dressed, filled her water bottle, grabbed a couple of energy bars and schlept her bike down three flights of stairs. It was the perfect day to chase the blues away with a long bike ride.

Jess fastened her helmet, mentally mapped out her ride and began her tour of the west side of town. The clouds, paying peek-a-boo with the sun, moderated the usually warm mid-October temperature. As her legs moved with rhythmic precision, Jess's thoughts once again turned to Maggie, and from there to Maggie's possessive girl friend. How a nice person like Maggie got stuck with a dud was a mystery.

Barely paying the passing scenery any attention, Jess weaved fanciful tales of rescuing a damsel in distress. In one scenario, she swooped in on a fire-breathing dragon and snatched Maggie from Val's cruel arms. They left a flightless Val cursing up a storm and, as in all her other tales, they lived happily ever after.

I really need a life, she thought with a rueful smile. *Knowing my luck, Val would down the dragon and beat the hell out of me.* Jess could see herself lying prone on the ground, watching helplessly as Val escaped with the prize, looking ever much the tragic figure. She laughed herself silly and suddenly the day felt brighter. Checking for traffic, she turned around and pedaled for home.

Jess was about a mile away from her home when she spotted a black puppy ambling in the middle of the street. Cars were honking, drivers were shouting, but the puppy didn't seem to care. Jess quickly pulled over, propped her bike on a parked car, gave a quick thanks for the years she'd run track and joined the melee. Shutting her mind to everything but the rescue effort, she managed to grab the pup from imminent danger with only a slight bump from an impatient driver.

“You need to have your dog on a leash,” the driver snarled as he opened the car door. “People like you don’t need to have pets.”

“It’s not her dog, dude,” a teenager on a skate board said. “She just saved you from being a puppy killer. Like, show some respect.”

“Jess, are you okay?”

The familiar voice brought Jess out of a daze. She blinked, suddenly very conscious of the cacophony of honking horns and strident voices, and the fact that she was in the middle of the street, clutching a now trembling puppy.

“Jess, are you hurt?” Concern etched Libby’s features as she placed a hand on Jess’ arm.

“Huh?” For a moment, Jess was sure her mind had conjured up Libby. She even wondered if the puppy was a metaphor for a dragon. “Libby, what are you doing here?”

“Making sure you’re okay.” Libby gave her a gentle smile. “Are you aware you’re holding up traffic?”

“Technically it’s the puppy’s fault.”

“That may be true, but can I suggest we move to the sidewalk?”

“You can suggest anything you want,” Jess replied, taking in amazing green eyes with golden flecks. Her memory hadn’t done them justice. She suddenly felt a little shaky and wasn’t sure if it was Libby’s gaze, or if the adrenaline that had helped her earlier was wearing off. “I think I might need to sit down for a minute.”

Under the watchful eyes of several onlookers, Libby assisted Jess and the puppy to one of the numerous bus stop benches dotting Mulligan Lane. “Can I get you some hot tea?”

Jess shook her head. “I feel better all ready.” She gave a weak smile as the puppy washed her chin with a long tongue. “My foolish act of heroism caught up with me.”

“Not foolish, courageous,” Libby insisted firmly. “And it looks like I’m not the only one who thinks so.”

“I’m not so sure about that.” Jess turned away from the warm admiration in Libby’s eyes and reminded herself of Libby’s giant, possessive girlfriend. No need for her little day dream to come true.

“What are you going to do now?”

“You mean I can’t just sit here and bask in the pleasure of your company?”

“Can’t say I’m not flattered. The puppy might object though.” Libby scratched the pup behind one ear. “You know, he doesn’t look scrawny enough to be a stray. Maybe we should canvas the neighborhood and see if we can find the owner.”

“I’m game, but don’t you have...other commitments?” She couldn’t bring herself to say Val’s name.

“My part of brunch,” Maggie replied cryptically. Seeing the puzzled look on Jess’ face she explained, “Libby won’t be very happy if I stick her with my part of the bill. We were finishing brunch when I saw you dash into traffic. It wasn’t until I came outside that I noticed the puppy.”

Jess knew she shouldn’t feel relieved Val wasn’t around. But she did. “If you’re sure you don’t have any other commitments...” *Like the kind that get mad.*

“Not any more.”

“I... I hope that’s okay.” Jess didn’t know what else to say. She wasn’t really sorry. Val was obviously not the right person for Maggie.

“You know, it really is,” Maggie said as if she’d just figured it out. “So how ‘bout I go pay my share and we go people hunting?”

Jess couldn’t stop the smile that took over her face. “I can’t think of anything I’d rather do.” As she watched Maggie walk away, she admitted to herself a new appreciation for bowling. How could she not when she’d somehow wrestled a strike out of throwing a bunch of gutter balls?