



OUT AT HOME

By Glenn Ickler

Chapter 1

Rhubarb on Sunday

The Tigers lithe young pitcher uncoiled and fired a fastball across the outside corner of the plate, just above the knees of the Rainbows batter, who watched the white blur streak past without moving. Satisfied that she had thrown strike three, ending the game and giving her team the tournament championship, the pitcher flung her arms skyward. She had taken two steps toward the Tigers dugout before it registered that the umpire had called the pitch ball three.

Kristin Jeffrey halted her triumphant march from the rubber to the bench and pivoted to face the umpire. Her stance and stare registered astonishment and disbelief. This brought Umpire Jimmy Joe Clark bouncing out from behind the catcher. Whipping off his mask as he strode toward the startled pitcher, Clark yelled, "Don't you try to show me up, young lady."

"I'm not," said Kristin, backing away from the fast-approaching umpire, who outweighed her by a hundred pounds. "I didn't."

"One more word and you're out of the game," said Clark.

Kristin Jeffrey's coach popped out of the third base dugout. Rolling toward the umpire at a fast trot, with her waist-length red ponytail streaming through the opening in her purple softball cap, Heather Layne yelled, "Leave my pitcher alone. That was a rotten call and you know it." Coach Heather's right hand was aiming an accusing index finger at the red-faced umpire while her left hand was waving Kristin back toward the safety of the pitching rubber.

"Maybe you'd like to leave the park, too," said Clark.

"Oh, stop showing off, Jimmy Joe," said the lanky coach, who was now virtually eyeball to eyeball with the six-foot man in blue. Only the umpire's reflexive withdrawal kept their noses from bumping. "You don't need to scream at a 15-year-old kid just because she knows you blew a call."

"You should teach that 15-year-old kid some respect for umpires. That little smart aleck's been looking at me cross-eyed all day~every time I called a ball a ball."

"That's a lie and you know it. Lay off my pitcher and call the game right." Coach Heather spun on her right heel and strode back to the dugout.

“Did you hear that blind bastard?” asked the man sitting at my right in the bleachers behind third base. “He called my daughter a cross-eyed smart aleck. I’m going to go down there andΣ”

“Cool it, Al,” I said, grabbing his left arm.

“Yes, cool it,” said Alan Jeffrey’s wife, Carol, grabbing the other arm. “You’ll just embarrass Kristin.”

Back on the pitching rubber, Kristin was trying to compose herself for the next pitch, with the count three balls and two strikes, and a runner who represented the tying run on third base. Jimmy Joe Clark had pulled on his mask and was peering over catcher Kari Sundholm’s shoulder. Kari signaled for a fastball, and Kristin took a long stride toward the plate and let it fly.

As the ball left Kristin’s hand, she sensed disaster. The spinning ball was going to hit the ground where it would short-hop Kari and bounce away. Kristin yelled and dashed toward the plate, and the runner at third came charging down the baseline. Kari partially blocked the ball with her shin guard, but it rolled away to her right. Kari dove after the ball, grabbed it and, lying on her side, flipped a perfect throw to Kristin, who slapped the tag on the sliding Rainbows runner a split second before the girl’s foot hit home plate.

Kristin looked up at Umpire Jimmy Joe Clark in triumph, and was stunned to see him signaling “safe.”

“No way!” Kristin yelled. “She’s out!”

“She’s safe, and you’re out!” said Clark. “You’re out of the game.” He raised his right arm and swung it down in a swift, emphatic arc to signal Kristin’s ejection.

By the time Clark brought his hand back up, a screaming Heather Layne was in his face. The close-quarter shouting match ended quickly, with the Tigers coach also being tossed out of the game, but Heather’s tirade continued as she retreated to join Kristin. Because there was no locker room, the rules of the tournament required ejected players and coaches to leave the ballpark. As Kristin, who was in tears, and her coach went out the gate, Al and Carol Jeffrey left their seats and followed, intending to comfort their daughter. I stayed in the stands with Kristin’s 13-year-old brother, Kevin, to watch what happened next.

As cliché-loving sports announcers say too frequently, it wasn’t a pretty sight. The Tigers assistant coach brought in a new pitcher, who warmed up quickly without ever zeroing in on the strike zone. She walked two batters to load the bases, and sailed her first pitch to the next batter over Kari Sundholm,s head to bring in the second run for the Rainbows, giving them a 2-1 lead. Another walk forced in the run that made it 3-1 before the flustered teenager got her fastball under control and ended the top of the final inning with a strikeout.

The Tigers, with their heads hanging in disappointment and dismay, went down in order in their last turn at bat, and the Rainbows reigned as tournament champions.

The banished Tigers' coach and pitcher were allowed to return to the field for the post-game trophy ceremony. They were accompanied as far as the backstop by Al and Carol. Al had cooled down enough to resume doing what he always did: take pictures. (Al is a photographer for the St. Paul Daily Dispatch, the newspaper where I work as a reporter, and he never goes anywhere without a camera.) He photographed the presentation of the runner-up trophy and medals to the Tigers players and took some random shots of the disappointed players being consoled by their parents.

Amid the mob of parents, players and coaches milling about on their way to the exit, Al encountered Jimmy Joe Clark, who was pushing his way through the crowd on his way to the gate.

"That was the rottenest damn piece of umping I've ever seen," Al said, stepping in front of the departing umpire.

"Get out of my face," said Clark.

"I'd like to smash your face," said Al. "Better yet, I'd like to ram a bat up your fat butt! You're one ump that deserves to be killed."

The parents of several other Tigers players within earshot turned toward Al and raised their fists in agreement.

"Out of the way, asshole!" said Clark. He swerved around Al, pushed Kari Sundholm's mother aside with his facemask, and hurried away.

"You're the asshole," yelled Alan Jeffrey.

Kristin Jeffrey buried her face in her mother's right shoulder.

I wanted to hide my face in the other one.