give this game a ride

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/12614604.

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give this game a ride

by elegantstupidity

Summary

round two of prompt fills

table of contents in the first chapter
### Table of Contents

2. **but everyone notices**: I reeeeeeally need a “help I can’t zip up my dress/oh shit I’m zipping up her dress and I’m in love with her oh noooooo”

3. **a new hope**: Mike and Ginny have time off and decide to attend Comic Con. Lawson being a huge Star Wars nerd and perhaps Ginny dressing up as Princess Leia to surprise Mike.

4. **the fire went wild**: I’d love the same idea [from just like a ring of fire] from Mike's POV. Did he realize how his feelings were growing before ep 8 or did he just think he was attracted to her?

5. **no me vayas a dichabar**: something about them secretly dating and the team finding out, sequel to a tus zapatos

6. **gotta do what you've gotta do**: My favorite team (the Cubs) sometimes dress up for road trips (they did a 70s day, biker gang etc.) to improve morale. I vote the Padres adopt this trend and Al lets Ginny pick the theme!

7. **where the loyalty lies**: Mike getting tossed from a game

8. **the party will come**: sth where everyone is out in a club/bar/etc and mike sees ginny in a dress and just can't cope

9. **places that you could never reach**: Can you write something Mike meeting Ginny before he knew she is a ballplayer

10. **my worst enemy**: Neither of them can get the baby to sleep so they start enlisting team mates to come over and help

11. **good shape will do**: Mike teaches Ginny to play pool.

12. **if you got the timing**: Ginny’s first major league home run

13. **some kick-ass to it**: Mike’s first day as a WAG + how about a semantics issue w/ the twins telling someone that their aunt and uncle got married? Or Mike and Evelyn sibling cuteness?

14. **caught up in a dream**: ginny and mike go swimming in mike's pool together ;) + a follow up to "we'll conquer them all"

15. **i like danger, all right?**: Aunt Ginny is taking care of the boys while Blip/Evelyn take a weekend away to work things out and something goes wrong - so she calls Mike because she doesn't want to disrupt Blip/Evelyn's weekend

16. **playing through the pain**: Ginny takes Mike's gear off for him
but everyone notices

Chapter Summary

hermiginnyharvelle: I may or may not have been rewatching Deathly Hallows and now I reeeeeeally need a “help I can’t zip up my dress/oh shit I’m zipping up her dress and I’m in love with her oh noooooo”

Chapter Notes

chapter tags: future fic, ESPYs, Ginny & Evelyn, so much UST

chapter title: Cynthia Lewis quote, "Nobody notices it when your zipper is up, but everyone notices when it's down."

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Intellectually, Ginny understands why the ESPYs always come the Wednesday following the All-Star Game. It’s pure practicality. No one’s playing any games. Baseball’s in its midseason break. The NBA, NFL, and NHL are all in their off seasons. High school and college athletes are on summer vacation.

Everyone’s schedule is wide open; a true rarity in the world of sports.

The logic of it all is easy. She’d never argue otherwise.

That doesn’t mean she has to like it.

Because on this particular Wednesday following the All-Star Game, Ginny Baker is exhausted.

Right now, nothing sounds better than going home to her condo—sparsely furnished as it is, it has her own bed, which is really all she wants. Doing nothing but sleep and have food delivered to her for the next 48 hours sounds too good to be true.

Because, of course, it is.

It doesn’t matter how much Miami had taken it out of her.

True, there wasn’t much work for her to do during the All-Star Game itself—she’d considered herself lucky to stay on the mound for a whole inning—but the media circus leading up to it was a grind all its own. (How’s her arm doing? Is she feeling 100% again? What does she think of the trade rumors? How does she like the Padres’ shot at the postseason?) Between Work Out Day and the Home Run Derby and the interminable red carpet before the game even started, Ginny’d been interviewed and filmed and photographed until she was sure she was more soundbite than real person.

Suffice it to say: if she never sees another camera or microphone or tape recorder in her life, she’ll die a happy woman.
But try telling her agent that the media market is fully saturated when it comes to the Ginny Baker Brand™. Going to the ESPYs—even if she is nominated—and walking the red carpet—posing for the flock of vultures and their flashbulbs—isn’t going to change that. Anyway, surely there was such a thing as too much press coverage, right?

(When Ginny hopefully offered up this argument, Amelia stared at her for a full minute, like the suggestion was so utterly foreign she couldn’t begin to wrap her mind around it. It’d been enough to get Ginny to reluctantly backpedal and agree to go.)

Well, there’s no pulling out now. Not when she’s already all made up, hair done, requisite Instagram post already making the rounds on the internet. It hardly matters that she won’t win. There’s nothing Ginny can do to get out of this now.

Although, she thinks, considering the height of the heels she’s supposed to put on, maybe I can fake a rolled ankle…

Ginny sighs and sluggishly pulls her dress off its hanger even as she tells herself it’s better not to get any of the club’s trainers involved in a lie to the entire sports media industry. Her fingers skim over the dark fabric at the waist, and she regrets that something so undeniably pretty only fills her with annoyance. She can’t count the number of times just today she’s shaken her head at the body-hugging number, but Ginny’d bowed to Amelia and Evelyn’s superior fashion sense before. There’s no reason not to do it now.

At least Evelyn had made most of today pretty fun. Even if it wasn’t being back home in San Diego, pigging out on Postmates-delivered Korean barbecue in bed, Ginny had to admit her friend had a knack for making the most out of a less than ideal situation. They giggled and gossiped and goofed off, fitting in the necessary beauty routines in between pitchers of bloody marys and terrible pay-per-view movies. Almost before she even realized it was happening, Evelyn had transformed her into the Red Carpet Ready Ginny Baker™ it seemed like everyone wanted to see.

Now that Ginny was alone again, having sent Evelyn off towards her own room, tipsy and belting out “I Wanna Dance With Somebody,” it was a little harder for her to be caught up in the moment.

All Ginny had now was her exhaustion, general annoyance with the situation, and this ridiculous dress to put on.

It would be a shame to miss out if Blip and Mike end up taking home the award for Best Play, she tells herself, stepping into the mostly unzipped dress and tugging it up her body.

Idly, she wonders what they’ll think when they see her in this. Well. What one of them will think. It’s an intrusive thought, but similar enough to the kind Ginny’s gotten pretty used to dealing with over the past months. Her inconvenient attraction to Mike Lawson hasn’t gone anywhere. Not over the offseason, not during Spring Training, and certainly not over the front half of the regular season. Going to Miami with him, the only Padres reps for the All-Star Game, certainly hadn’t helped.

The fact that he hadn’t asked any questions, hardly even complained, when she—more than once, too—used him as a human shield with the roving pack of reporters didn’t make Ginny any more aware of what she feels. She’s been uncomfortably aware of that since before she got that text on her first date with Noah. His teasing grin, even as he kept shifting to provide her with better cover, however, was enough to make her seriously consider actually doing something about it, damn the consequences.

In return, that was more than enough to send Ginny into something of a tailspin. She’d done her best
to avoid him while she recalibrated, but it was an essentially impossible effort. She and Mike share pretty much everything, even when it’s not just them stuck in Miami together. Dugout, hotel, rides to the airport; avoidance wasn’t in the cards. Then, of course, their seats on the red eye into LA were right next to each other. Ginny hadn’t let herself fall asleep for fear she’d wake up propped against Mike’s shoulder just as she has on so many other flights. Hell, only a hallway separates their rooms here in LA.

And now, not even two days after that realization, she’s got to go walk the red carpet with him.

All right. Maybe her reluctance isn’t just media-induced.

Ginny holds the neckline in place and admires the effect in the full length mirror. It’s a little difficult since a certain amount of her brainpower is currently dedicated to thoughts of dark beards framing pink mouths. Still, she soldiers on. Amelia and Evelyn had definitely known what they were doing, picking out this dress, even if it’s a little racier than Ginny usually wears for public events. The lack of straps is worrying, but the sheer determination of the elastic in the fabric should be protection enough. Once it’s zipped and in place, she’s been assured, it won’t go anywhere.

It better not, at least. The last thing she needs is a very public wardrobe malfunction or someone to start the rumor that Ginny Baker doesn’t believe in bras. It’s not her fault the scant material at her chest won’t allow for one.

Reaching around for the zipper, Ginny resolves to go to the ESPYs and have—if not a good time—at least an okay one. If she can make it through the night without embarrassing herself, she’ll call it a success. Then, she can go back to San Diego and cry with relief when the only journalists she has to talk to are the familiar Padres beat reporters.

But first, she really needs to get dressed.

Which, she realizes with a frown as she tugs again at the zipper to no avail, might prove harder than she’d first assumed.

There aren’t any buttons or snaps or ties to hold the thing closed, after all. Just a long zipper from the hem all the way up the back of the dress. Ginny is fully capable of handling a zipper on her own.

Or she’d thought she was.

Struggling to crane around and catch sight of where she’d gone wrong, Ginny huffs in frustration. At least Amelia wasn’t wrong when she’d said the stupid thing wasn’t going anywhere. She can’t get the fabric to stop clinging long enough to shimmy it around to get a better view of the problem. Even if she does manage to get the zipper somewhere she can see it, there’s no reason to believe she could get the damn thing turned back the right way once she fixes it.

Why did she ever agreed to wear this dress?

Flopping in defeat onto her suite’s couch, Ginny picks up her phone.

*please come help me,* she types to Evelyn, willing to take a little teasing if it means arriving to the ESPYs fully clothed, *zipper stuck*

Since Evelyn had only departed the suite to, “Make sure my husband isn’t going to embarrass me,” Ginny’s sure she’ll be rescued in no time. It’s not as if Blip, who loves clothes and getting dressed up as much as his wife does, is at risk of embarrassing anyone.

Then again, Evelyn had been belting Whitney as she left, and while Ginny would never admit to
knowing this, she has it on good authority that Whitney is a foolproof way to get her friend feeling a
little frisky...

Shaking off any consideration of Blip and Ev’s sex life, Ginny tells herself that any minute, Evelyn
will be at the door. She’ll fix her dress and reassure her that everything is going to be be fine like the
perfect fairy godmother/best friend she is.

And she won’t be at all annoyed because Ginny definitely hadn’t interrupted her debauching her
husband.

When the knock comes, Ginny bounds up from her slump, softly sculpted curls bouncing against her
bare shoulders.

“Jesus, Ev. Why would you let Amelia pick this thing? How am I supposed to keep my tits in here?”
Ginny’s complaining before she even opens the door. When she does, though, she halts in her tracks,
blinking in disbelief and feeling like the floor cannot swallow her whole fast enough. “You’re not
Evelyn.”

“Oh, no,” Mike replies after a long moment in which his gaze rakes over her, more than a little
dazed. He shakes himself and continues, “But she did brief me. Some sort of fashion emergency?”

Belatedly, Ginny’s hands fly to her chest. Jesus. How close had she come to flashing whoever was
in the hall? Never mind that the hallway beyond her team captain is blissfully empty. It’s easier to
worry about that than the obvious.

“So she sent you?”

What was Evelyn thinking? Sending Mike over to Ginny to deal with a wardrobe malfunction? She
knows—

It dawns on Ginny. She knows.

He rolls his eyes, clearly taking her emphasis for disdain. If only it were that simple. “I’ve been told I
clean up pretty well.”

Mike certainly isn’t wrong. He fills out his light gray, summer-weight suit to perfection. The crisp
white shirt beneath his jacket stretches ever so slightly across his broad chest, a blue tie concealing
whether or not the buttons are under any strain.

A little—large—part of Ginny thrills at his appearance. It isn’t just that the gray of his suit picks up
on the lighter strands shot through his beard—is he going gray?—or that the subtle plaid of the fabric
is practically begging her fingers to trace over each and every line.

No, it has far more to do with the fact that they match. They go together, even. Sure, Ginny’s heels
—still sitting neglected in their box—are a much darker blue than either Mike’s tie or pocket square,
and his suit is closer to monochrome than the ombré effect on her dress, but who cares? They
complement each other. They match.

Or, they will once Ginny’s actually dressed.

“So,” he drawls, shifting a little awkwardly as the silence stretches out, “what’s the problem?”

Ginny would gesture if she weren’t worried removing her hands from the top of the dress would treat
Mike to an eyeful.
And if Mike ever does get an eyeful, it certainly won’t be because of a wardrobe malfunction, she thinks. Then, tacks on more honestly, Or when we have to make a public appearance within the hour.

Without betraying that bit of inner monologue, she keeps both arms clasped over her chest to hold the fabric in place, and steps aside to let him in. Better to discuss this out of the hallway, where anyone could overhear and leap to conclusions.

“The zipper’s just stuck,” she says, keeping her back to the wall as Mike comes inside and closes the door. Ginny is suddenly and entirely too aware of just how much of her bare back is exposed and how unprepared she is for Mike to see it. She’d managed to get the zipper up over the curve of her ass, but not much further. “No big deal. I can wait for Evelyn.”

“I’m pretty sure I can handle a zipper,” he replies, sounding far too amused for her comfort.

Ginny doesn’t chew on her lip as she thinks, but only because she doesn’t want to reapply her lipstick when she inevitably scrapes it all off. This is decidedly not how she’d pictured Mike first helping her with her clothes.

For one thing, she never imagined him helping her put them on.

Mike lifts a brow and all bets are off. She’s never been able to back down from a challenge. Even when she knows she should.

“Oh, okay,” she agrees, nodding decisively and taking a step toward him. She can’t quite keep the bait out of her tone. “If you say so.”

With that, Ginny closes the distance and turns her back on her captain. She doesn’t think she imagines his sharp inhale or the long pause before his fingers brush across the top of her shoulders, sweeping her hair out of the way. Ginny doesn’t complain even though there’s nothing for it to get in the way of.

If anything, she wants to beg for more.

So, of course, his hands disappear from her skin. The disappointment that crashes through her is nearly physical, but thankfully brief. Ginny has to brace herself when they reappear at the small of her back, where the two sides of the dress refuse to come together. It’s just a slight pressure, the faint suggestion of warmth through fabric, but it’s enough to tell her where all of Mike’s attention is currently focused.

Her eyes flutter closed at the slightly too sharp tug down that dislodges the zipper from where it’d gone astray. How far did he unzip? Can he see the top of her underwear? Ginny thinks the ragged exhale she hears is answer enough.

At least it’s nice underwear, she finds herself thinking, aiming for detached but veering dangerously close to giddy.

She breathes deep, more than a little disappointed, when Mike rights his course and slides the zip up its track. One knuckle drags featherlight along her spine before, the cloth closing together behind.

Finally, though it really can’t have taken that long, he reaches the end of the line, just below Ginny’s shoulder blades. His knuckles brush against her skin and over the fabric, making sure it lays flat.

His thumb sketches a gentle arc, just where her skin disappears beneath the dress. Ginny can’t help but shiver, toes curling against the soft carpeting.
Nonetheless, Mike doesn’t pull his hand away.

Nor does he when Ginny turns, stepping into his bulk rather than away as she should. His hand remains high on her back as she tips her face up to him, lips parted and eyes wide.

Suddenly, Ginny’s not too worried about reapplying her lipstick.

Mike looks back, a flush riding high on his cheekbones. His gaze roams hungrily over her face, the hand on her back encouraging her closer.

Ginny feels like she can’t breathe. But unlike her panic attacks, she leans into this dizzy uncertainty. She lays a hand on Mike’s arm, sliding up the smooth arm of his jacket and coming to a stop at his brawny shoulder.

Just as she’s resolved to rock in and snap the thin thread of her self-control, code and potential lipstick smudges be damned, three sharp raps sound at the door.

Mike and Ginny don’t move. Aside from the slight widening of their eyes, both remain stock still, breath mingling in the scant space still separating them. Even after another flurry of knocks, they stare at one another, far too aware of the line they’ve nearly crossed.

Still want to cross, in fact.

Just as Mike’s eyes dip back to Ginny’s mouth and he leans in, though, the knocking graduates to yelling through the locked door.

“G?” Blip calls, sounding only slightly harried. “Ev wants you to know the car’s downstairs, and if you’re not in the lobby in five minutes, she’s leaving without you.”

It’s enough to pop the bubble.

Ginny clears her throat, and locking eyes with Mike—her friend, her teammate, her something—she takes a step back.

They can’t be doing this. Not now.

Not for a long while, yet.

Disappointment flashes through his eyes, but he still nods and takes his own step back, too.

“Got it, Blip,” she calls back. “Meet you down there.”

He must agree because Mike and Ginny are left in her too quiet suite with nothing to distract them from what they’d nearly done.

Well, Ginny can’t have that. Not if she’s going to spend the evening being filmed and photographed in this man’s company, her every move picked apart and dissected by morning. It’s bad enough that she’s got her own intrusive thoughts, but to know that Mike’s got them, too, that there’s some serious overlap between his and hers, it’s too much.

So, Ginny does the only thing she can; she pretends nothing’s happened.

She whirls through the suite, collecting her clutch and phone and emergency snacks, checking over her appearance one last time as she fastens the buckles of her shoes, puts on the loaner jewelry Amelia’d scored, and generally pretends Mike isn’t even there. Which is difficult when he insists on staring after her in amused befuddlement. If Ginny spends any time appreciating the adorable little
frown furrowing his brow, Evelyn and Blip really will leave without them before she gets her mind back on track.

When she feels prepared to do more than steal glances at him in the mirror—as prepared as three minutes will buy her, at least—Ginny turns back to Mike and pastes a bright smile on her face.

“Ready to go?”

His eyes sweep over her form, but it isn’t the reckless perusal it’d been when she first opened the door. No, this is slightly more concerned, a cautious once over to make sure she really is all right, and not just faking it. It’s the same look he sometimes gives her on the field, when he thinks she’s lying about having more in the tank. Ginny allows her grin to turn a little more sheepish, uncertain. Mike softens.

“Yeah, Baker,” he replies. “Let’s get outta here.”

They manage to put up a fairly normal front for their fellow passengers, not that Blip and Evelyn make it hard. They squabble good-naturedly about who deserves to win which awards, seeming to draw both Ginny and Mike into the conversation effortlessly.

Maybe it even is effortless. Maybe it’s just unthinking and automatic, their desire to engage with their friends on their way to what should be an exciting night.

Ginny, however, has her doubts.

She knows Ev’s calculating face—has been treated to it more times than she can count over the years—and her expression the whole ride is awfully familiar. Evelyn definitely clocks Mike’s lingering frown, and the way she’s eyeing the careful space Ginny’s left on the bench between her captain’s thigh and hers isn’t comforting. If Blip notices anything, he’s got a better poker face than his wife.

When Ev ushers her husband out of the car first claiming she wants, “A few goddamn shots of just us before Lawson the camera hog makes an appearance,” and Blip doesn’t complain, though, Ginny knows Sherlock Sanders has struck again.

She tries to appreciate the sight of her friend cowing the photo pool into turning their attention away from Michael Phelps and onto some Blip Sanders, but it’s hard when she’s entirely too aware of the man sitting next to her. He’d slid an inch closer to her when the limo stopped, so now she’s viscerally aware—just like she’s aware of the exact feel of his jacket beneath her fingertips and the way his cologne still lingers in her nose—of his warmth radiating into her.

So why are her arms covered in goosebumps?

“Hey,” he murmurs, nudging her softly with his elbow. Ginny frowns, but doesn’t say anything. He nudges her again, and she shifts, cocking her head to show she’s listening, even if her eyes are still focused out the window. She doesn’t think she can look him in the face and not kiss him, now. Not with his warm arm pressed against her and his dark eyes looking at her with such genuine concern.

Damn it. Even the reflection is too much.

Mike sighs, not quite loud enough to cover the faint rasp of his hands smoothing over the legs of his pants. “Talk to me, Baker.”

If it’d come out any less pleading, Ginny wouldn’t turn around. She would keep her attention on the mayhem outside, and pretend she’s just trying to center herself before wading in. It isn’t even completely untrue.
As it is, she turns to face him and can’t help but remember that the angle had been a little different back at the hotel. They’d faced each other head on there, and her eye line had been a little lower, level with the ticking tendon in his neck rather than the hints of gray framing his mouth.

But this is still too similar.

“What’s there to say, Lawson?”

“Don’t play the avoidance game. Not now.”

“Avoidance game?” she hedges, fingers worrying the hem of her dress. For all its cling, it sure can ride up her thigh.

Mike just shakes his head. “I know when you’re avoiding me, even when you’re right here. You’ve been doing it since Miami.”

She doesn’t protest. “Yeah,” Ginny agrees. Would it really help to tell him that she’d thought about kissing him, or more, in Miami? Will that make it easier on either of them? It seems unlikely. Nonetheless, she can’t stuff the words back into her mouth once she says, “Maybe today wasn’t the first time I thought—”

His eyes go wide even as his lips part in a disbelieving, reckless grin. His hand lands on top of her own, almost on the bare skin of her thigh, but that’s nothing compared to the way Mike’s looking at her right now.

Ginny swallows and forces herself to go on, “I thought about it. This. Even when I know we can’t.”

His smile doesn’t dim, but that seems to knock the air out of his sails. For a moment, Mike just studies her. Ginny can’t help but stare back, cataloguing every arch and curve of this face she already knows like her own. His hazel eyes caress her face, more tender than any touch. Finally, satisfied with whatever he’s seen, he blows out a long, unsteady breath. Ginny can certainly sympathize.

His head tilts a little to the side and his eyes go soft as he asks, “We’re good?”

“We’re good,” she promises, gaze dropping to her lap. To his big, callused hand covering hers.

This thing with Mike is hard and sometimes it’s scary as hell, but Ginny never doubts that their friendship, their connection on the field, comes first. It’ll take more than a few charged moments to throw them off their game.

Then again...

When Ginny finally looks back up at him, it takes a moment for his concern to dissolve away, but Mike is nothing if not excellent at hiding his misgivings. Sure enough, he smirks, a mischievous sparkle lighting up his eyes. He gives her fingers one last squeeze before letting them go.

“Good,” he drawls, making Ginny roll her eyes. If anything, his smirk just grows, which does nothing to dissuade Ginny from the dismaying opinion that smug looks really good on him. “I know we’re not talking about, well, any of this, but I’ve got something for you to keep in mind.”

When he doesn’t elaborate, she arches a brow and demands, “And what’s that?”

He leans in and brushes a rasping kiss against Ginny’s cheek. She freezes, too aware that all she needs to do is turn her face a few inches and she could be kissing Mike Lawson. Stubbornly, she remains stock still.
Ginny can feel, more than hear, his responding chuckle. “Any time you need some help with your zipper?” he murmurs, right into her ear and making goosebumps erupt across her skin. “I’m your guy.”

With that, he opens the car door and climbs out onto the red carpet, leaving behind one stunned teammate.

Alone in the back of the car, Ginny can’t help dissolve into laughter, maybe a little hysterical. Could anyone blame her, though?

Once she manages to reel her mind in from the tangent Mike has inspired, she sucks in a deep breath. She doesn’t bother convincing her lips to drop their grin, though. Much as she loves to imply otherwise, Mike’s outrageous self-confidence is irresistible. It's one of the things she—

Well. If she can’t even kiss the man, yet, she probably shouldn’t be thinking that.

Anyway, if he thought he’d gotten the last word in, he has another thing coming.

Stepping out onto the red carpet, making sure to shake her hair and smile dazzlingly only once she’s positive she has Mike’s attention, Ginny is very sure of that.

Chapter End Notes

Looking for KB red carpet pictures for inspiration definitely isn't something I'd actually complain about, but it does make me a little annoyed no one's hired her recently, so there's no new fic fodder. Fingers crossed she gets to do press stuff for her movie soon!

Anyway, I still feel like this is a bit fiddly. It's entirely possible I come back to this in a couple months and tear it down and start from scratch. But what did you think? Too much introspection compared to dialogue? That's kinda where I'm at right now, but I'd love to hear your thoughts!
a new hope

Chapter Summary

anonymous: Mike and Ginny have time off and decide to attend Comic Con. Lawson being a huge Star Wars nerd and perhaps Ginny dressing up as Princess Leia to surprise Mike.

Chapter Notes

chapter tags: Comic Con, but probably not Comic Con as exists in the real world, because I've never been to Comic Con in the real world, Ginny's second season, Mike Lawson loves Star Wars

“You’re not gonna make me wear the bikini, are you?”

Mike adamantly did not choke on his tongue, but Jesus did he want to. Bad enough that they had to sit through this meeting at all, now Mike had to do it while pretending an image of Ginny in that iconic costume wasn’t occupying all his focus?

What the hell had he done to make the universe hate him so goddamn much?

“No, no. Nothing like that,” Oscar assured her without batting an eye. He leaned his elbows on his desk and stared down the three Padres seated across from him. Blip, Ginny, and Mike stared back, largely unimpressed.

Before their GM got a chance to press his case, though, Blip decided it was his turn to crack a joke.

“Well, I’m not wearing it,” he drawled, wicked grin lighting up his face.

Mike allowed himself to react to that, leaping on the chance to fight back the wild tangent—Ginny and gold and miles and miles of smooth skin—his imagination so eagerly provided. This was not the time for that, no matter what his mind (and something a bit further south than his brain) might tell him.

He snorted. Ginny did, too, though she tried to play it off as a cough.

Oscar finally grimaced, looking vaguely pained.

Well, if fucking with the front office was on the table, Mike could definitely get behind that. He shook his head (and with it the idea of Ginny in any kind of swimwear) before rubbing a contemplative hand against his chin and offering, “I’ll see about getting mine back from the dry cleaner.”

Ginny’s lips flickered in a quick smile, there and gone in a flash. Blip, though, didn’t bother reining in his amusement. He guffawed from her other side, reaching around the pitcher to offer Mike a fist
Oscar just heaved a sigh, entirely too put upon.

“Are you done?” Their GM looked nowhere close to entertained. Not that it bothered the three ballplayers.

Still, they all traded glances and, after a silent conference, nodded their agreement.

Rather than risk them changing their minds, Oscar plowed forward. “The Publicity Office hasn’t settled on the final details, but I can assure you there will be no swim suits involved. Can we count you three in?”

Mike shot a glance first to Blip. The center fielder shrugged. It was no skin off his back to dance to the front office’s tune this time, as long as he also got his pot shots in. They were in agreement there, so both men turned to focus on the woman sitting between them.

Ginny gnawed on her lip uncertainly as she weighed her options. No one, aside from maybe Amelia, would blame her for sitting this one out. But even Amelia could probably agree that having her client’s face plastered across every Padres ad spot, every bit of promotional material, since she’d been called up last season was exposure enough. Nonetheless, it only took a moment for Ginny’s eyes to slide to Blip and then Mike, checking to see they were all in agreement.

Mike did his best to show her, when she turned those luminous brown eyes on him, that he’d follow her call, no matter what. Thankfully, whatever she saw, it was enough to get Ginny to give him a shallow but decisive nod.

That settled, her thoughtful frown faded and was replaced by her deep dimples, flanking the grin spreading across her face. Mike only got a quick glimpse of it before she turned back to the desk and the anxious GM sitting behind it.

“I’m in,” she declared, to Oscar’s clear relief.

Mike personally thought that was a little premature given the mischievous spark kindling in Ginny’s eyes. Blip was clearly in agreement, settling back into his chair and folding his arms over his chest, delighted anticipation lighting up his face.

And Ginny Baker did her best not to disappoint.

Still grinning, and flanked by her two teammates, she laid her lone stipulation on a long-suffering Oscar:

“But only if I get to hold the lightsaber.”
Wikipedia page by now—it’d be one of the few true things on there.

Exhibit 2: He’d actually bought the theme song and set it as his ringtone. Back when people actually had ringtones, at least.

Exhibit 3: He’d named his dog _Jedi_ for god’s sake, and proceeded to talk about that poor, dumb dog a lot, oftentimes to reporters who were far more interested in his OPS and the tweaks he was making to his batting stance. It was a matter of public record.

Nonetheless, Mike also wouldn’t say it was something that a lot of people actively knew about him. And that suited him just fine. After all, he had a reputation in his clubhouse to preserve. He couldn’t very well maintain order and lay down the law if his entire team thought he was no better than the geeks so many of them had spent their high school careers pantsing and shoving in lockers.

But this might be the year when that hard-earned reputation as a hard ass went up in smoke.

Because this year, Mike Lawson was going to Comic Con.

Okay, he was going to stand _outside_ the San Diego Convention Center wearing a silly costume to film the ad spot for Petco Park’s annual Star Wars Night, but who cared?

He was going to fucking _Comic Con_.

He wasn’t sure who in the front office this bright idea belonged to, but he was seriously considering sending them a gift basket of some kind. At the very least, a thank you card.

In all the years Mike had played San Diego baseball, he’d never actually had a chance to attend. When he first started playing, it wasn’t nearly the three ring circus that it would one day become. Before his very eyes, he’d gotten to witness it evolve from a niche convention to the star-studded event of the summer.

Well. Sort of.

Mostly, he’d gotten to marvel over the proceedings and pandemonium from across the street for a few minutes each year before getting back to business.

What sacrifices he made to live the dream, right?

So now that Mike was finally getting a shot at coming within spitting distance of the convention hall, he wasn’t going to stop there. Despite having no passes to speak of, he was determined to get inside and see Hall H for himself. He did, after all, have a secret weapon on his side.

Well, she would be once he’d convinced her.

“C’mon, Baker,” he urged, leaning against her door and flashing what he hoped was a winning grin. He was going to charm her into this, damn it. Not wheedle and whine. Still, his next words weren’t quite the pinnacle of persuasive power he’d hoped for. “It’ll be fun.”

“I doubt that,” Ginny huffed, swiveling side to side in her rolling chair. She eyed him suspiciously. “This is the third time you’ve brought it up, though, so you really must think so.”

He shrugged, trying to play it off.

The funny little smile on her face told him he wasn’t particularly successful. Rather than tease him, she drew a knee up to her chest and began unlacing her cleat. “Okay, say I were to concede that it
could be fun,”—Mike perked up at this softening of her earlier blunt refusal, though of course that wasn’t the end of it—“I don’t see how I’m supposed to get us in. Don’t you need tickets or something?”

“Well, yeah, but you’re Ginny Baker.”

She started working on the other shoe, though how she managed when her eyes were rolling hard enough to fall out of her face was a mystery. She’d accused him last summer of doing it too much, but the way Mike saw it, Ginny was just the pot (Or was it the kettle? Something like that.) in this situation.

“Yeah, ‘cause there’s a lot of overlap between the geeks at Comic Con and the clinically Ginn-sane.”

“You’ve got crossover appeal,” he tried, though it sounded weak to his ears for all the truth of it. God, he was off his game. “And who says geeks can’t have layers?”

“You talkin’ from experience there, Lawson?”

If Ginny’d just been teasing him the way she’d done all season—like relentless humor would erase any number of charged moments they couldn’t seem to keep from stumbling into—Mike could’ve replied the way he had all season, with a gruff reminder of who was captain here. (Which, honestly, was far more effective in reminding Mike why those moments should be avoided like the plague. He was her captain for Chrissake. Of course there couldn’t be any more than fleeting, godawful tempting, moments between them. No matter how appealing she looked, grinning up at him after landing a solid dig, or how much he wanted to know how long it would take for him to kiss that grin away.)

He would’ve done just that, except his mental faculties were otherwise occupied.

Because Ginny had chosen that moment to stand up and start unbuttoning her jersey, casual as anything. Like it didn’t matter that he was standing right there as she shrugged it off and was left in just the clingy spandex of her undershirt.

It probably didn’t matter. Mike had seen her dressed exactly like this at least a hundred times before. He’d almost gotten used to the fact that he could usually make out the outline of her sports bra—and sometimes, when the A/C was cranked all the way up, even more than that.

Except, Mike had never been confronted with the direct prospect of Ginny Baker getting undressed before.

(Not even at that goddamn photo shoot last season when he’d caught sight of her in that robe, fiddling with the tie before she looked up and saw him.

And Mike’s had dreams about that day. Dreams where Ginny didn’t march over and twitch the curtains closed and where no one else was within even shouting distance of the studio. Which was a good thing because those dreams were not always quiet.)

Like she had no idea what was going through his mind—or, worse, did—Ginny’s hands fell to her belt buckle just as she looked up at him, an eyebrow arched in question.

Mike’s brain shorted out.

He muttered something, though God only knew what, and got the hell out of there.
It was the only option. After all, there was no way he could focus on getting Ginny on his side of this Comic Con thing if half his brain—and some certain other body parts, if he was being honest—was more concerned with getting her somewhere else entirely.

In the end, Mike never broached the subject with Ginny again. It was probably better for all involved if he didn’t try and nudge her into doing something she was skeptical about.

(Mike tried to tell himself he only meant Comic Con. He was at least partially successful.)

Instead, he tried to focus on the positives. He’d get to hang out near Comic Con for a few hours, and on Star Wars Day no less, which was better than he’d managed so far in his life. He’d get to see all the people in their costumes and chat with some fans and maybe even see about sweet talking his way inside for just a peek around.

It would be fun.

Thank God it actually was.

He, Blip, and Ginny had a blast filming their bits for the promo. Mike couldn’t remember laughing so hard or so helplessly in a long time. Ginny got to hold the only lightsaber, as promised, and was like a kid in a candy store with it. The shoot director had her swing it like a baseball bat while Blip and Mike pitched plushy little Stormtrooper heads at her. More of them ended up hitting her than not, but she didn’t seem to mind much. Blip and Ginny got into a wookiee roar-off, though neither of them, in Mike’s unwanted opinion, were all that good at it. No one had to wear the gold bikini, though plenty of con attendees had made their own. Mike gamely put on the Leia wig and frowned forbiddingly at the camera for a few moments even though he just knew it’d end up in the final cut.

It was worth it for the way Ginny’s cheeks pinked up as she howled with laughter, leaning heavily against Blip to keep her balance.

All told, the whole process only took a few hours, most of which were spent goofing off and looking like incredible dorks.

He’d certainly had worse days.

Still, Mike couldn’t help but look wistfully up at the massive edifice of the Convention Center when the ad director called a wrap. He shook it off quickly enough, shaking hands with the various crew and clapping Ginny and Blip on the back before heading towards the Park to pick up his car and go home.

Maybe yelling at Attack of the Clones would cheer him up.

“Lawson, where are you going?”

He turned around and came face to face with a puzzled Ginny Baker. Her brows were drawn together in confusion, a light sheen of sweat glistening there, dark curls blown wild by the sea breeze. She was still the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen. In a Padres blue shirt with the words “San Diego” stretched across her chest in the Star Wars font—a shirt which happened to
match his—and one of her endless pairs of leggings, Ginny didn’t look all that different from usual.

Which, Mike supposed, was exactly the point.

“Home, Baker,” he said, well used to repressing any and all thoughts about Ginny. They were all dangerous at this point. “To have a beer and take advantage of the off day.”

“Oh, I thought—” Her lips pursed uncertainly before she swung her backpack to one shoulder so she could rifle through it. After a moment, she drew out two lanyards, each hung with a plastic card sporting a familiar logo. Mike stared at them for a beat before refocusing on Ginny’s face. She grinned a little, but it was fading fast. “I thought you wanted to go—”

“I did. I do,” he corrected fast, almost tripping over the words. “Definitely. I just didn’t think—”

Ginny relaxed almost immediately, her forehead smoothing out. “Well, who am I to deny the Padres’ number one Star Wars fan?”

Mike couldn’t help but roll his eyes. “Where’d you hear that one?”

“Sonny,” she replied promptly, bright grin returning. “Then Butch, Blip, and Bessner. Tommy texted me about it. Even Al said he hoped you’d get a kick out of seeing all the Star Trek stuff.”

He ignored his skipper’s flub; Al refused to watch anything that wasn’t on A&E or the History Channel. Instead, Mike picked up one of the lanyards still dangling from Ginny’s fingers, examining the pass for a moment before letting it fall back to join the other.

Gruff, but just so he wouldn’t tip his hand, he said, “Just because our teammates have big mouths doesn’t mean you had to do this.”

She shrugged, clearly a little uncomfortable. Mike raised a brow and she busied herself with righting her backpack, ducking her head so she wouldn’t have to look at him. Jesus, did he want to reach out and tip her chin up, give him a better view of those wide, brown eyes. Thankfully, for everyone involved, he kept his hands to himself and just waited her out.

When she was done and it was clear Mike wasn’t going anywhere without an explanation, Ginny blew out a huff of slightly disgruntled air.

“I know I didn’t. Just—” Here she paused, tongue poking out from the corner of her mouth as she weighed her words. Not that it seemed to do her much good since she let them all out in a rush, “I felt bad for calling you a geek.”

Mike rocked back a little on his heels. Was that what she thought happened? Well, he should probably be grateful she hadn’t assumed he couldn’t keep his perving under control, but, Christ. How fragile did she think he was?

“Baker, you told me to get my fat ass back behind the plate just last week. Geek’s where you think you crossed the line?”

Ginny at least seemed to see ridiculousness of the situation, a grin curling over her full lips. She flapped her hand at him anyway, saying, “It’s different on the field. Plus, you stopped asking about it when you’d really seemed so excited. It wasn’t that hard to get these.” Her fingers waggled at him and the plastic passes clacked together lightly.

Yeah, sure. Mike knew for a fact that Comic Con Badges sold out in the blink of an eye.
Still, he couldn’t help but glance back to the Convention Center.

Sensing that she had him on the ropes, (And why was he resisting at all? A full day with Ginny, schooling her on all the wrong opinions she’d spouted during the commercial shoot, sounded like the fucking dream. Or one of them, anyway. Which, then again, was exactly why Mike should go straight home and forget all about this encounter.) Ginny pressed her case.

“C’mon, Mike,” she cajoled, waving the lanyard in his face. “It’ll be fun.”

Hearing his own words echoed back at him, Mike folded like a house of cards. In one swift move, he liberated a pass from Ginny’s grip and had it hanging from his neck. “All right,” he agreed. “But I’m not gonna play body guard for you when everyone on the floor realizes exactly who’s in their midst.”

She laughed, shaking her head, but Mike didn’t care that she didn’t agree with him. Ginny Baker was smiling at him, a fond spark brightening her already twinkling eyes. As far as he was concerned, Ginny could call him a moron and a geek and an old man and whatever else she wanted just as long as she kept smiling at him like that.

But then it was gone as she turned on her heel and marched off towards the entrance. “I really think you’re overestimating how popular I am,” she tossed over her shoulder with a little smirk, leaving Mike to catch up.

Well. What else was new?

In a way, they were both right.

Ginny certainly got recognized and was stopped every so often for a selfie or an autograph. To be fair, Mike was, too, but Ginny bore the brunt of the attention. Given the relaxed set of her shoulders and the genuine grins she gave everyone who approached, Mike could tell this was hardly the worst she’d ever dealt with.

Mostly, though, people’s eyes seemed to pass right over them.

Ginny insisted that meant she was right: there wasn’t a big enough overlap between sports fans and con dwellers. Mike figured it had more to do with what they were wearing. Well, what they weren’t wearing. After all, it was easy to overlook two more people in street clothes when there were so many amazing, and frankly baffling, costumes on display.

Even when one of those people was arguably the most famous woman in America. Certainly in San Diego every other weekend of the year.

Mike, personally, couldn’t figure it out. He couldn’t conceive of any situation in which Ginny Baker simply faded into the crowd. No matter what, no matter the size of the room or the number of people, she’d always be the first and best thing he noticed.

Apparently, though, Mike’s feelings were not universal (and what a lucky son of a bitch he was for that small mercy). So, it was easy enough for them to slip through the crowd, largely unnoticed, and straight to the Star Wars booth.
Booth was maybe—definitely—underselling what it really was. Even through the masses of people, it was impossible for Mike to miss, looming over the entire convention hall and making his poor, fanboy heart thunder in excitement. Once inside the huge pavilion, he couldn’t decide what needed to be inspected first. Well, he wasn’t about to waste time trying to figure it out, so he dove right in, only absently checking to make sure Ginny followed along. There was a model X-Wing taller than he was and just a little further on, that was a bank of costumes and props from the new movie. Dotted around the space was station upon station of merchandise, selling everything from replica lightsabers—far more realistic than the one Ginny’d swung around all afternoon—to licensed costumes to the tie in comic books and action figures. And plastered across every flat surface were giant Star Wars logos. Just in case anyone forgot exactly where they were.

In short, it was a Star Wars fan’s Holy Grail.

Mike could only marvel, and feel a little nostalgic, over what he’d been missing out on all these years. He would’ve killed to see something like this as a kid, though even if it’d been around, there was no way his mom could’ve taken him.

Still, he got to see it now, and it really was amazing. Almost overwhelming, to be honest. But still ridiculously cool to finally experience.

And it was all thanks to Ginny.

Now that the initial frenzy had faded enough that Mike could think clearly about something other than a galaxy far, far away, he sheepishly turned to make sure he hadn’t lost track of her.

Well, he definitely had, but at least she’d kept an eye on him, making sure to stay in his orbit as he geeked out. He had vague recollections of letting his excitement spill over and gushing to her over every little detail that caught his interest. She’d always responded, suppressed amusement coating her words, not that Mike was really in the right frame of mind to appreciate how much she was indulging him.

He was now.

He chanced an embarrassed look at her, but she was already looking back, a fond smile on her face.

“Sorry,” he muttered, feeling the tips of his ears begin to burn, only about ten minutes too late. Jesus, this was not how to convince women he was worth their time and attention. Not that he was doing that with Ginny, but—

“For what?” she laughed, though it hardly stung. For all she was definitely laughing at him, it was too warm and sweet for him to mind. “I didn’t know there was room for anything other than batting stats and heat maps in that head of yours. It’s nice to know you’ve got range.”

He rolled his eyes, but still said, “For geeking out on you, I know you’re not—”

“I don’t know why you think I’m not into geeks, Lawson,” she interrupted, with some kind of significance in her tone. “If you haven’t noticed, they’re kind of my thing.”

Thinking about it—which Mike really tried to avoid when it came to Ginny’s dating habits—he realized she wasn’t wrong.

After her thing with video game guy fizzled in the off season, Ginny’d been out on more than a few well-publicized dates. Often with Bay Area tech guys. Mike had just figured she was getting as far away from ballplayer jock-types as she could. But maybe if a ballplayer jock-type also happened to
“Your thing, huh?” was all he could bring himself to say.

Ginny rolled her eyes, and he couldn’t begin to figure out how she found it so annoying when he did it. On her, Mike couldn’t look away. “My type or whatever.”

“I see. So that means I should go give that guy your number?” He nodded to the beanpole of a kid who’d been staring not so subtly at Ginny’s ass for the last five minutes. If anyone fit the role of “geek,” it was that kid.

(If Mike were interested in being fair, he’d acknowledge that the kid also happened to have excellent taste. Ginny’s ass in this—and every—pair of leggings was practically a work of art.

Thank God Mike had no interest in being fair.)

Right on cue, she turned to look and the guy in question turned bright red and spun around to disappear into the crowd.

Good.

“If you think your creaky knees can catch up with him, be my guest.”

That startled a laugh out of Mike. At this point, he wasn’t sure how she kept managing to surprise him, but Ginny Baker was never one to rest on her laurels. So, Mike laughed long and loud in the middle of the San Diego Convention Center, ignoring the confused looks being sent his way as he delighted in the woman standing before him. All that mattered was that Ginny was lit up with a proud, smug smirk, reveling in her latest accomplishment. And while that look would’ve rubbed Mike the wrong way on any other face, on her it was just another facet he was grateful to uncover.

“God, I love you,” he sighed, his stomach aching from all the laughter.

It was only when Ginny went still, eyes wide and lips parted in shock that Mike went back and catalogued his words.

Shit. Oh, shit.

His mouth worked without anything to show for it. He tried to form the words to reassure her that it wasn’t what she thought, that he didn’t mean it, that she should forget it—

But he just couldn’t.

Not when saying so would be a filthy fucking lie.

Instead, Mike stared helplessly at Ginny, speechless for once in his life. His heart thuded against the his ribs, threatening to burst with each second of silence. It wasn’t helped by the sheer variety of emotions that flickered across Ginny’s face, surprise and worry and hope and far more, there and gone too quick for him to name.

Finally, though, after what felt like an eternity of silence, she took a tiny step towards him, her chest practically pressed against his. Her face tipped up towards his and her full lips stretched into a bright, blinding, brilliant grin.

They were surrounded by hundreds of thousands of people, but it didn’t even matter. Mike couldn’t look away from the one thing he’d walked in knowing like the back of his hand.

And why should he? He’d never seen someone so beautiful.
“I know,” Ginny said, simple and easy and just as devastating as it’d been the first time Mike heard Han Solo say it.

She didn’t pull it off with quite the same self-assurance as a young Harrison Ford, but what did Mike care about that? Ginny Baker, in any circumstance, was way better than Harrison Ford.

He couldn’t help but grin back, so close to ducking down to see how well their smiles lined up.

Like she could read his mind, Ginny tucked her chin down and Mike broke out of the daze exhilaration and her eyes had put him under. Immediately, he cleared his throat, trying to nudge his heart back into its rightful place in his chest. As he did, he was suddenly and unpleasantly all too aware of the swirl of people eddying around them. He glanced around, worried that they’d caught the attention of someone with a smart phone.

Only when he felt warm, dry fingers twine through his did Mike abandon his search and turn back to Ginny. Looking up shyly through her lashes, she offered, “We’ll pick this up later, okay?”

She squeezed his hand and a flood of relief rushed through him. It was the easiest thing in the world to reply, “Whenever you’re ready, Ginny.”

Her smile this time was less blinding, but just as precious. Mike reveled in the way her eyes roamed over his face. His thumb stroked over the delicate skin of her wrist and Ginny’s dimples deepened in reply.

Mike would’ve been more than happy to live in that moment for the foreseeable future.

Eventually, though, the bubble had to burst. They couldn’t just go on ignoring the thousands of people milling around them, after all.

So, Ginny gave him a decisive nod and something shifted in her body language. Her smile remained, but it wasn’t the private thing that’d been there a moment ago. It turned playful. Mischievous.

Mike knew that look too well to expect anything good from it.

“C’mon, Lawson. I see a guy in a Chewbacca costume and I wanna see if there’s more hair in it or your beard.”

“Ha fucking ha, Baker,” he groaned, even as he followed her willingly through the crowd.

Maybe, though, that was more to do with the fact that her hand remained firmly in his.

That, Mike thought even as he curled his fingers more securely around hers, was a pretty good consolation. He would take that.

Well.

He’d take it for now, at least.

Chapter End Notes

Only sort of sorry I didn't get Ginny into some kind of actual cosplay. I considered making them wander around the Convention Center in some kind of disguise, but then I
thought about that Chewbacca mask that makes the noise and suffice it to say, I got
distracted and ended up forgetting about it. Whoops.

Now I wanna know how many times Mike's gone as Han Solo for Halloween. Is he
weirdly proprietary about it? Like, has any other Padre tried to go as Han, too, and Mike
had to put the kibosh on it? Hmm. Thoughts? (On that or the fic, your choice!)
the fire went wild

Chapter Summary

dothing: I'd love the same idea [from just like a ring of fire] from Mike's POV. Did he realize how his feelings were growing before ep 8 or did he just think he was attracted to her?

Chapter Notes

chapter tags: companion piece to just like a ring of fire, 4+1 fic, missing scenes, Mike POV

chapter title: "Ring of Fire" by Johnny Cash

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

catching your lollipop fast ball

Another perfect screwball landed squarely in Mike’s mitt. He couldn’t help but be impressed, not that he really wanted to show it. Couldn't let the rookie get too full of herself, now could he? So, he snapped his gum a few times before popping the ball out of the webbing and snatching it right out of the air. He didn't even bauble the catch.

Baker wasn't the only one who could impress.

“Good,” he finally called, throwing it back to the artificial mound. “Now throw me the fastball I actually asked for.”

Her nose wrinkled, eyebrows furrowing. Without the brim of a baseball cap to cover it up, it was pretty obvious. A little amused, Mike had to wonder if that was how she always looked when she wanted to shake him off. The set of her mouth looked just right, lips pursed in annoyance. He’d gotten pretty familiar over the 17 entire times she waved his calls off her last start.

“That’s not what I’m working on,” she tried, worrying the ball behind her back. There was no doubt in Mike’s mind that her fingers had settled into a screwball grip yet again. Well, if she wanted to dick around, fine. At least the foam mats here in the pitching lanes were a little easier on his knees than the hard packed clay on the field. Mike could wait her out.

“It’s gonna be,” he tried anyway. If he didn't have to spend his entire evening in the bowels of Dodger Stadium, even if it was with someone as intriguing as Ginny Baker, why should he? “There’s nothing you or I can do to tweak that screwgie. Your fastball on the other hand…”

Baker’s pursed lips flattened out into a straight line, but she didn't give him an actual reply, instead
Looking down as she toed the rubber and settled into her windup.

It was a refreshing change not being told to fuck off. Most of the bullpen was too familiar with him for the full force of his captaincy to have much effect on them. Mike should really work with the rookies more often. They had such a pleasing way of deferring to his every call.

Well. Most of his calls.

Another screwball landed in his mitt.

He tilted his head at her in exasperation, rolling his eyes though he was sure she couldn’t see it in the dim light of Dodger Stadium’s pitching lanes or the shadows of his mask. She raised her eyebrows in challenge.

Flinging the ball back at her with more strength than the throw really required, he gave up on reining in his annoyance. Given the way the impact with her glove rang against the cold cinderblock, Mike had a feeling Baker knew it, too. Still, she didn’t wince or even shake out her hand, simply climbing back up the hill to set for another pitch.

“Fastball,” he commanded gruffly, giving her the hand sign for good measure.

To be honest, if she didn’t listen again, Mike wasn’t sure what he’d do, but it’d probably involve more than a little yelling on his part. He had a feeling, though, that Ginny Baker would give just as good as she got.

(He kind of wanted to find out.)

Baker huffed but shrugged. She settled into her stance and sent a perfectly serviceable, if unenthusiastic, fastball right down the middle of the plate. If every hitter worth their salt wouldn’t have been all over that pitch like white on rice, Mike wouldn’t have minded the lack of heat.

As it was...

“I hardly even needed a mitt to catch that, Baker,” he taunted, throwing the ball back. “Weren’t you just tellin’ me you top out at 87? That couldn’t’ve been more than 70.”

Even across 60 feet, 6 inches, it was hard to miss the stubborn set of Ginny Baker’s jaw. It was a new expression from her, but one that Mike had a feeling he’d be seeing much more of before the season was out. She gave a sharp shake of her head, reared back into her windup, and threw again.

Fastball, top inside corner. This time, there was even a slight sting in his palm.

Something like pride fluttered to life in Mike’s gut. And when Ginny grinned, teeth on full display, that flutter kicked into high gear.

Mike cleared his throat, flinging the ball back a little harder than necessary, though it had nothing to do with annoyance this time.

“Good. Again.”

They continued on in this pattern, Mike alternating between approval and goading to get his desired results and Ginny generally rising to meet and exceed his expectations, until Baker’d exhausted her 40-odd pitches. She didn’t protest when he stood and signaled the end of their session, but Mike could still tell that she was itching for more.
Good. It was nice to see that first game really had been a fluke. She really did want this.

Mike jerked his head to the door, but didn’t wait for her to catch up. She had the knees of a 23-year-old. He did not.

Sure enough, it only took a few seconds for her to fall into step beside him on the walk back to the visitor's clubhouse. She shook out her arms and stretched them over her head, bouncing on the balls of her feet even as they walked. Mike marveled at her energy. Hadn’t she done early work—and Jesus, it was work. Parts of Mike still ached from yesterday's tandem work out session—before Kimmel, too? Wasn’t she tired? He sure as hell was, and the game hadn't even started yet.

“Blip said if we win in LA, there’s a club y’all usually go to. You gonna come out, too?”

Mike always did. And usually he left the place with some very entertaining company. But something within him rebelled at the idea of sharing that bit of information. He shrugged it off and frowned, trying to project an air befitting his status as her captain.

“Let’s worry about actually winning first, okay, Baker?”

Her grin, dimples popping and eyes dancing, made him feel a lot of things, but most of them weren’t even remotely related to his status as her captain.

Automatically, he grinned back. Privately, though, Mike resolved to put as much effort as necessary into finding some company for tonight. A little no-strings fun, some relieved tension, and hopefully he’d wake up in the morning with his head on straight again.

Yeah. That was exactly what he needed.

"This is such bullshit,” Baker muttered mulishly. Mike could just see her now, crossing her arms over her chest and slumping in her seat.

Except, he couldn’t see her.

They were all the way across town from one another, Baker presumably in her suite at the Omni and Mike stretched out on one of the recliners scattered around his pool, trying to convince himself to go inside. If he went inside, though, started getting ready for bed, he’d have to end this phone call. Because while it wasn’t weird to talk to his rookie most nights—about anything from tomorrow’s start to the meager offerings of late night TV in hotel cable packages—it was definitely helped by the fact that Mike stayed out of his bedroom while doing it.

Specifically, he stayed out of bed.

It just— It was better if he did.

“Huh?” Mike was pretty sure he’d missed something. Hadn’t they just been talking about the surplus of fro yo shops in the Gaslamp Quarter and what’d happened to all the real ice cream shops, didn’t people know that the novelty of paying by the ounce was not offset by the objective inferiority of
frozen yogurt?

Which was definitely some kind of bullshit, but not the kind that would inspire this level of annoyance from Baker.

Well. Maybe it would. The girl did take her food very seriously.

She sighed down the line. “Sorry. Amelia sent me this interview request.”

When she didn’t elaborate further, Mike prodded, “Isn’t that her job?”

He didn’t love talking about Amelia with Baker. Just like he didn’t love talking about Baker with Amelia, but he could suck it up and play it cool for a while. It helped that he hadn’t actually seen Amelia today. Mike didn’t like to think about the fact that it was easier to talk to his rookie when he hadn’t recently hooked up with her agent, though. Too messy for his tastes. Then again, hooking up with his rookie’s agent was probably too messy for his tastes, too.

“Yeah,” she agreed, a little listlessly. “She usually does a better job of weeding out the obviously sexist ones. I think she’s been distracted lately.”

Oh, was this another one of her girl power trips? He could definitely deal with that. Ignoring the rest of her complaint and whatever role he might play in it, Mike tucked an arm behind his head and asked, “What’s wrong with the request?”

“What isn’t?” Baker muttered under her breath. Mike waited her out until she sighed and offered, “They led off with what they wanted the photo spread to look like.”

“I don’t see what’s so obviously sexist about that.”

“That’s because you’re a dude.”

“That’s probably true.”

It didn’t even get a laugh. She was too worked up for his dry delivery to even dent her indignation. To be fair, there was a lot in her life to be indignant about.

“Like—” Baker cut herself off with a humorless laugh, but not for long. “No one sends your agent the list of outfits they want you to wear for a photoshoot and completely forgets to add the interview questions, right? No one would dream of doing that to anyone else in MLB. Just me. It’s just me who has to navigate even the shortest interaction with a reporter like I’m guarding state secrets. All because I want people to focus on how I play the game.”

Mike didn’t tell her that he couldn’t really remember the last time an article about him had included an actual photoshoot. “You’re not wrong,” he said because A) that was what he was supposed to say in this situation, having learned his lesson from listening to Rachel’s complaints, and B) she wasn’t.

“And no one asks you about your skincare regimen during pre-game pressers. Or cares what you wear on road trips or what you eat on your cheat days or which of the hundreds of guys you’ve been in a four-foot radius of in the past 24 hours is secretly your boyfriend and which ones just want to sleep with you.”

“Well,” he drawled, “if I had a secret boyfriend, I’m pretty sure some people would be interested.”

That earned Mike his laugh. Not quite as bright as he’d wanted and almost in spite of herself, but he grinned at the still water of his pool anyway.
“You know what I mean.”

“I do.”

And he did. There was no denying that Ginny Baker, just by virtue of being the first, was going to be subjected to bullshit her teammates weren’t and never would be. While it wasn’t often that she actually complained about it, Mike couldn’t miss the way it dragged on her. The way her smile was always a shade too harsh in press conferences, her jokes rehearsed. He definitely couldn’t miss the way she always let out a huge sigh of relief the second she got out of the press room, shoulders slumping and exhaustion settling in.

“Yeah, I know.”

That certainty was nice to hear. That was why Mike felt warmth rush through him, flooding his face. It was so nice, in fact, he was still smiling when he finally hung up the call and climbed into bed.

He might’ve even been smiling as he fell asleep.

_________________________________________________________________________

the way you constantly interrupt me

Well, there was no beating around the bush. This speech blew.

It wasn’t often that Mike couldn’t talk his way out of a corner, but he had a sinking feeling, the longer he went on, this might be one of those times.

Something about the rhythm of it, maybe? It wasn’t up to Mike’s usual standards for all he was hitting all the usual beats and talking points. Then again, he’d gotten a little out of practice. Hadn’t had much occasion to give celebratory speeches these past few weeks.

But today, the Padres had clinched their first series sweep in what felt like forever. And clinched it with a shutout victory, at that. That was certainly cause for Mike to step up and address a few words to his team.

But it was time to start wrapping it up, now. Before they realized he was talking in circles.

He raised his beer one last time to the gaggle of Padres still jostling each other in the open space of the clubhouse.

“This was just the beginning. We keep playing like that, then you better believe the postseason’s got our name on it. Good job, guys—”

“And girl.”

Mike whirled and took in said girl’s defiantly raised chin. He hadn’t put his back to the hallway holding her changing room on purpose, except, yes. He had. Most of these mooks might not know a great orator from a stuttering wallflower, but he had zero interest in finding out if Ginny Baker fell in with the crowd on this front. He had a feeling she didn’t and wouldn’t have any problem with letting him know it.
Funny. It wasn’t often he hated being right.

Next to her, Blip’s arms crossed over his chest, but a grin was pulling at the corner of his mouth as his eyes darted between her and Mike.

For his part, now that he’d turned his attention back to her, Mike couldn’t imagine looking away.

Flush with victory, he couldn’t think of a time she’d looked better. Not even on the red carpet, wearing that ridiculous red dress that should’ve been illegal by any sane standards. Not that he really had a horse in this race, but Mike was pretty sure he preferred her as she was now, still wearing her uniform, a little disheveled from the game.

And what a game!

Tonight, for the first time since she went AWOL from her party, Ginny’d taken the mound and thrown a beautiful game. A work of art, really. Mike had seen a lot of twirlers in his time and if he’d had any doubts about Ginny Baker’s actual skills, this game would’ve taken them out back, shot ‘em, and buried ‘em six feet deep.

And that was just on the strength of five innings. Erring on the side of caution, Al took her out with the Padres up 4-0. It hadn’t seemed like she chafed at the tight leash, though, given the way she draped her arms loosely over the dugout fence to watch the rest of the game.

Then again, Mike could only go based on what he’d observed.

Ginny still wasn’t really talking to him.

Until now. Until this.

He didn’t even tell her off for interrupting him.

“And girl.” He tipped his bottle to her, nodding his head for good measure. A smile flickered across her lips for a second.

Unspeakable relief swept through Mike. It’d been so long since Ginny’d actually addressed him off the field (or the red carpet), he hadn’t quite realized that he’d been craving it, missing what’d come so easily not even two weeks ago.

Jesus, how long had it been since they last talked outside of a game situation? It couldn’t have just been two weeks. He wouldn’t feel so fucking grateful to hear her voice again, without the roar of a crowd underpinning it, if it had only been two weeks.

Since he couldn’t stare at his rookie pitcher in awe quite as long as he would’ve liked, Mike cleared his throat and shifted his attention back to the rest of his teammates. “All right, you mooks. Get your asses in the showers and go home. We’ve got another game to play tomorrow.”

There was roughly an equal amount of booing as cheering, which was about as good a reaction as Mike could ask for.

Because he wasn’t going to push his luck and ask for Ginny to actually smile at him, too.

If he watched out of the corner of his eye as she clapped Blip on the shoulder and retreated to her dressing room, that was his business. It was also his business if he took the first opportunity to follow her.
“Come in,” she called, hardly before he’d finished knocking.

Mike pushed the door open, but didn’t step into her space. It felt important that he didn’t. Not yet, at least.

“That was a good game.”

Ginny turned and blinked, like she was surprised it was him. Since there was none of the anger or confusion that’d colored their interactions the past weeks, Mike tried to take it in stride.

“Thanks,” she replied, looking wary, but not entirely closed off. “Wouldn’t have managed it without that homer in the seventh.”

Mike shrugged, though she wasn’t wrong. When she continued to stare at him probingly, he grinned, a touch too self-conscious to manage his trademark charm.

“You gonna go out with the guys?”

“I thought we were supposed to go home so we could come back refreshed for tomorrow.”

He rolled his eyes. “You think I really expect any of these dummies—”

“You calling me a dummy, Lawson?” she demanded, and that! That was a smile. A real smile from Ginny directed straight at Mike.

“If you go out to the karaoke bar the way Voorhies wants, then there’s no—”

She laughed. “You asshole.”

Since Ginny looked legitimately fond, Mike didn’t even protest. He laughed, too.

“Yeah,” he agreed, more than a little wondering. “That’s me.”

Mike was fucking exhausted.

And why shouldn’t he be? They’d played a doubleheader yesterday and suffered through a rain delay at Wrigley today. Yesterday. Whatever.

They were supposed to leave Chicago at 11:00. It was now 2:30 in the morning and they’d only just pulled away from the gate. Mike had been awake for nearly 20 hours now, and tomorrow—today, whatever—he’d have to get up and do most of it again.

It wasn’t the game that’d kill him, though. It was the fucking plane.

Mike couldn’t quite explain the hatred he felt for the endless array of charter planes the Padres commandeered in the course of a season. For a guy who didn’t even go to an airport until he was 18 and heading out for Idaho and his first stop on the way to the majors, air travel doesn’t hold much
romance for him. The seats were too close together and now that he’s gotten old, the dry air makes his throat itch and back tighten.

It beat day-long bus rides, though.

If he could help it, he never slept on the plane, hated waking up with a kink in his neck and stiff knees, but he’d make an exception today. He was just that tired.

What Mike really wanted was his bed. And preferably a warm body to share it with. It’d been a while since that happened, though, and he wasn’t holding his breath for tonight. So, he’d have to settle for reclining his seat as much as possible—fuck Margolis sitting behind him; he’d given up a triple and let three runners steal before getting yanked—and sleeping while he could. If he didn’t, there was a good chance his drive home would end poorly.

Nothing quite drove home how old he was getting quite like feasibly believing he might fall asleep behind the wheel.

Thank God most of the team was in agreement on that front. The cabin was dark, only the dim, blue glow of iPads and phones illuminating the space. It was quiet, too, just Al’s sonorous, familiar snoring disrupting the silence.

Until someone had to go and make Ginny Baker laugh.

In spite of how tired he was, the sound of her laugh—loud and more than a little obnoxious but entirely genuine—was enough to make Mike smile automatically in response. He kept his eyes shut, letting her guffaws fade away and send him to sleep.

It wasn’t so different from being on the phone with her late at night, game adrenaline slowly filtering out of his system and his eyes growing heavy. Okay, maybe he’d given up on staying out of bed for all of their conversations, but he was only human. Sometimes Baker talked a lot, and it always put her in a good mood when she could tease him the next day for falling asleep on the phone.

Except Ginny wasn’t on the phone with him. She wasn’t even laughing at him.

Which shouldn’t have been the problem and shouldn’t have fucking bothered him at all.

“Do that again!” she demanded, delight coating every word.

Salvamini’s laugh was more mellow, and if Mike weren’t sure the man was head over heels in love with his wife and family, he’d think he was flirting.

“You’re not gonna figure it out,” the first baseman replied, and there was the soft whirr of shuffling cards. There were a few quiet moments before it started all over again.

“How did you do that?” Ginny demanded, laughing bright and loud and not at all aware that it was nearly 3:00 AM and everyone around her wanted to be asleep.

Still, Mike couldn’t bring himself to yell at them to shut up. He did sit up and glare blearily their way, cutting Salvi off in the middle of saying, “A magician never reveals his secrets.”

Magician. Yeah fucking right. The only people who actually believed that were the guy’s kids. And none of them were over the age of six.

Salvi had the nerve to grin, making Ginny turn to look, too. “Looks like captain’s calling,” he teased, nodding to Mike three rows ahead.
Mike rolled his eyes and flopped back into his seat. He didn’t cross his arms over his chest, because then it would look like he was pouting.

Which he wasn’t.

He closed his eyes. If he tried really hard, he could probably fall asleep in the next thirty seconds. That seemed reasonable.

The soft pad of sneakers against the carpeting of the aisle wasn’t enough to make him open them, but the soft creak of leather and mechanical parts shifting right beside him was. He cracked one eye open and took in Ginny Baker curled up on the seat next to his.

She grinned when she saw she had his attention.

“Did I interrupt your beauty sleep, old man?”

“Don’t need it,” he rumbled, “when you look as good as I do.”

Her responding laugh, though it was absolutely familiar, was quiet this time, just for Mike’s ears.

“You keep telling yourself that,” she murmured, eyelashes kissing the tops of her dusky cheeks as she settled in for some sleep herself.

She was the last thing before Mike’s eyes shut and the first thing he saw when the plane touched down in San Diego, and that didn’t make him feel any kind of way.

Not at all.

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i’m gonna miss the hell out of you, baker

His phone should be in his pocket. Better yet, he should’ve left it at home when he decided what he needed to do with his last night in San Diego was go out and get sad drunk all by himself.

(Maybe all by himself. He still hadn’t decided. Which was, of course, the problem.)

It was, unfortunately, neither of those places.

No. It was sitting right on the slightly sticky bar top, mere inches from his third beer of the night.

This was a disaster waiting to happen.

When had drinking and cellphones ever been a good combination? Never, in Mike’s experience.

He couldn’t resist unlocking the screen every so often, though, staring at the text he’d drafted on his way here and still hadn’t sent.

Blip’s warning kept replaying in his head.

You could have just said bye to everyone.
Well. Mike didn’t give a shit about everyone. It stung that Blip was clearly so put out with him, but they’d get it together. Probably once Blip figured out that captaining that gaggle of overgrown kids was no walk in the park and maybe he needed or just wanted a little of Mike’s advice.

And yeah, if he were in the right frame of mind, he’d want the whole team to understand why he was going, but they’d get it after his press conference from Chicago tomorrow. They’d—probably, not all Padres were made equal, after all—figure out what went down.

And if they didn’t, what did Mike care? He wasn’t their captain anymore. He wasn’t anyone’s captain.

Still, there was one teammate he wanted to say goodbye to. One teammate he needed to know understood the whole messed up situation.

Not that Mike quite understood it all himself.

All he knew was that he’d been ready to fight tooth and nail to stay a Padre, but one look at Ginny Baker, going through her stretch and hum routine before taking the mound again made him realize he couldn’t. He couldn’t stay her teammate, stay in her life even, and not fuck it all up somewhere down the line. That was what he did best: fuck good things up. He refused to do it to her, though. No matter how fucking fond he felt every time she yelled at Stubbs for calling his ex a crazy bitch, or lit up the first time her fastball cracked 89, or laughed too long and too loud at terrible jokes, or cut him off to start a story of her own.

No matter how “fond” didn’t even come close to cutting it.

He’d leave his team, the closest thing he had to a family, before he put Ginny’s career in jeopardy.

Because he loved her, okay? He’d fucking fallen in love with his rookie, the first woman in MLB. He loved her and knew she meant more to the game than he ever would. There was no point in denying it now.

Mike laughed a little to himself. All the signs had been there. But it was the fucking humming that did him in. Fucking Katy Perry pushed him from willful ignorance straight over the edge into self-awareness.

Yeah, he’d miss this town and miss this team, but mostly what he’d miss would be her.

And, terrible as this idea was, he wanted her to know.

He drained the last of his beer and unlocked his phone again.

Before he could convince himself otherwise, Mike hit send.

Like magic, a blue bubble popped up on his side of the conversation, just two words, but two words that he thought might change everything. Or enough. God, he hoped it would be enough.

Boardner’s Bar.

Chapter End Notes
I'm back! I didn't really go anywhere, but I took a break from prompt posting to get through the holidays, but thankfully Yuletide (where I wrote *some stuff*, check it out if you haven't) recharged my writing batteries and I'm feeling pretty good.

Anyway, I am 100% honest in saying I will bring 4/5/6+1 fics back or so help me. And in conjunction with Mike's list of things he'll miss about Ginny, which I think are more sincere than he probably means them to be, I've found a personal happy place. Does it work for you, too? Let me know with a comment here or drop by my inbox on tumblr. Thanks in advance and hope everyone had a happy holiday season/New Year!
no me vayas a dichabar

Chapter Summary

Anonymous: something about them secretly dating and the team finding out

Chapter Notes

chapter tags: Livan POV, follow up to a tus zapatos, secret dating, my very bad Spanish
chapter title: (Questionably) Cuban slang for, "Don't tell anyone."

See the end of the chapter for more notes

To be absolutely clear, Livan hadn’t asked for any of this.

Clearly, he’d lost his mind when, in a fit of unconstrained idealism, he'd told his agent to take Arguella's offer in Amsterdam. If he hadn't, none of this would be happening. He'd be off in New York, rolling in his money from the international bonus pool and only thinking about Ginny Baker to wonder if her ass looked even better in person. It'd be so much easier.

Even if no judge would let him out of his contract just so he could go make millions with the Yankees, his reasons for defecting remained the same. Come to America, Play baseball. Make enough money to get his family out of Cuba.

That might take longer in San Diego, but in San Diego, Livan didn’t have Gary Sanchez or Aaron Judge to contend with. Here, just his second full season in the bigs, he was already the starting catcher and go-to clean up hitter; the definition of a big fish in a small pond.

Then again, he’d put up with Sanchez and Judge if it meant he wouldn’t be roped into doing shit like this.

This being the first—of what would evidently be several—fake date with Ginny Baker while her boyfriend (and the rest of their team) watched.

If it’d been a real date, maybe he’d take a more favorable stance on the matter—and even the audience. Given the way he’d walked in on her with her hand nearly down Lawson’s pants the other day, though, that option didn’t seem likely. And given the way Lawson's shoulders had steadily risen towards his ears over the course of the one—entirely tame—salsa he’d danced with Ginny, Livan had to guess his player liaison wouldn't look too kindly on any attempts to sway the odds in his favor.

Ay, Dios. Didn’t the idiot understand this was a long game? Livan still didn't quite know where Ginny wanted this whole plan to go, just that she wanted to teach their teammates a lesson for being such busybodies. He could stand behind that, and thought Lawson could, too, but really. Would a little subtlety kill him?
Not that the rest of their teammates were being all that subtle, either. The fact that they'd piled into the salsa club only ten minutes after he and Ginny showed up spoke to that. They were too eager to see if their plan was working to worry about giving it away. The way their attention volleyed back and forth, between Ginny and Livan on the dance floor and Lawson, who was in on this plan and had no business looking so disgruntled about it already, at the bar certainly didn’t help their ruse.

Still, it wasn’t like Livan was going to argue with showing Ginny a good time. No matter the circumstances. She might be tragically set on their grouch of an ex-captain, but Livan could at least make sure she didn’t go her entire life without knowing what a good date should look like.

The start of one, anyway. It wasn’t often Livan walked into a club with a woman on his arm, knowing he wouldn’t go home with her, too. He’d accept it this once. Ginny Baker wouldn’t be getting the full Livan Duarte experience tonight—or ever, if Lawson had any say.

Ah, well. Her loss.

What? It wasn’t like Lawson could be trusted when it came to romance. The man might be a legend—deservedly or not—with the ladies of this town, but it wasn’t like he’d gotten that reputation for wining and dining.

Maybe he’d learn a thing or two tonight, though. He certainly was watching closely enough.

That knowledge in the back of his mind, Livan didn’t bother to rein in his smirk as he laid his hands on Ginny’s hips. Time to move beyond the tame. Or at least look it. While his grip had the added benefit of making Lawson seethe at the bar, it was more to guide Ginny’s tragic sense of rhythm. She was gorgeous and threw just as beautifully, but not even Ginny Baker was perfect. Her lack of rhythm was just proof of that. She thought those awful line dances that’d been so popular in Peoria were hard. It wasn’t her fault, though. Baseball came first, last, always.

Tonight, though, Livan intended to change that. He’d show her some moves.

Or so he’d thought.

The third time she stepped on his toes because she was too busy craning around to catch a glimpse of her real boyfriend, Livan realized he’d need to actually do something to get her head in the game. Even though this was her game in the first place.

“You know, it’s not often that I get a woman in my arms, and she still has eyes for other men,” he murmured, executing a neat spin and putting a few more couples between them and Lawson, not that he expected it to do much good. Ginny seemed to have a sixth sense for the man. “If you’re not careful, you’ll make me jealous.”

“We both know you’re not the one who will be getting jealous,” she replied, taking a break from staring moonily after Lawson to look down at her feet, like she couldn’t trust them to make the right moves unless she was looking at them. Her nose wrinkled in concentration, and if Livan hadn’t known which way the wind was blowing on Lawson and Ginny the minute he'd joined the team, he’d be in more than a little in danger of falling hard.

As it was, he simply said, “No ‘will’ about it, mami.”

Which was absolutely true.

From the beginning, Lawson had not been as enthused with this plan as his girlfriend, had clearly only agreed to humor her. Ginny’d gotten so excited, lighting up at the prospect of pulling one over on her nosy teammates, he hadn’t been able to say no. But sitting at the bar, surrounded by his
former teammates, he looked even less thrilled than he’d been in his office.

Livan, personally, didn’t see the point of all this, either. There were too many moving parts for anyone to get the exact outcome they wanted, and Sanders was too clued in to both sides of the equation to be anything but a potential wrench in the works. Livan himself wasn’t even removed enough from either plot to come out unscathed if things went sideways. All in all, he should have just said no when he had the chance. Now that he was in, though, he would take the small wins he could. So, if Livan got to fuck with Lawson, even just a little, he was more than willing to roll with Ginny’s plan.

It’d just be nice if she were, too.

Her pretty mouth was pulled down in a frown, which didn’t say good things for her commitment to the cause. It was more than enough answer to his comment, though. Well, if Livan could see how jealous Lawson already was, his girlfriend probably should, too.

“Second thoughts?”

The pause between him asking and Ginny’s answer wasn’t comforting. “No,” she said, convincing Livan only that he needed to play poker with her more often. The girl probably couldn't bluff her way out of a paper bag.

“This was your idea,” he reminded her, deftly stepping out of the way of an errant Nike. Only Ginny Baker could get away with wearing sneakers—even if they weren’t the bulky ones she trained in—to a salsa club.

“I know,” Ginny replied, glum. Livan tried to remember if he’d ever danced with so reluctant a woman. It didn’t seem likely, and he hoped he never had to again. “But that was before I realized what it’d take.”

Presumably, she meant Lawson’s pouting. Or maybe having to keep her hands off him for a a few nights.

(If their poorly timed hookup in Lawson’s office was any indicator, that might be an actual challenge for them.)

Nonetheless, Livan sighed theatrically. “Ah, yes. Dancing with me is such a chore. Women always tell me so.”

“Must be why you take so many of them home,” she jabbed back, finally grinning.

Ah, there it was. Bright as the sun, Ginny's smile could cure all kind of evils.

Livan laughed and broke his frame, stepping closer to Ginny and putting both his hands on her hips so she could get a better sense of the dance’s timing. If it also made Lawson’s knuckles go white from all the way across the dance floor, all the better. To keep up the illusion for their over-invested teammates, even if Ginny was faltering, he leaned close and murmured, “They usually change their tune once we try a little horizontal dancing.”

“Oh my God!” she sputtered, leaning her forehead against his shoulder.

It was a miracle the glass in Lawson’s hand didn’t shatter. The peanut gallery had to be losing their minds by now, speculating wildly about when Lawson would cut in. If things went to plan, they’d be sorely disappointed. Good. They were no better than his abuela and her friends, gossiping about their neighbors and one another whenever one had their back turned.
“Tell me,” he said, right into her ear, taking advantage of her proximity and the chance now that he had it. He could admit to more than a little curiosity on the subject. “Lawson as good a lay as they say?”

“They?” she returned, looking up at him with a raised eyebrow. Still, a pretty flush stained her cheeks and chest, betraying her understanding. There was no way she meant to do it, but from a distance, this had to look pretty romantic.

Unwilling to give Lawson more reasons to have him murdered, Livan broke the moment. He shrugged and spun her out and back in. She landed with her back against his chest, skirt tangled between their legs, baring a whole lot of thigh.

Without looking, he knew Mike was staring them down, probably itching to intervene. But that wasn’t how this was going to work.

So much for not pissing off Lawson any more than necessary.

Well. *De perdidos, al río.*

Which was exactly why Livan leaned in again, his mouth right against the shell of Ginny’s ear. He could practically hear the excited clucking of the Padres, jostling one another and trying—subtly, like the ship on that hadn’t sailed the minute they all showed up to the club—to check Mike’s reaction. His expression didn’t change, but that wasn’t saying much. He’d looked that pissed all evening.

“Word gets around, *mami.* You telling me you never heard anything about his reputation?” She didn’t deny it, but the way her ear heated up against his mouth, probably flushing red, too, gave Livan a pretty good idea of the truth. He went in for the kill. “C’mon. How’s it line up with reality?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Ginny replied, turning back to face him and paying no mind to the beat of the music. Not that she’d given it much attention all night. Over her shoulder, it was hard to miss their teammates ogling, attention shifting between them on the dance floor and Lawson brooding at the bar, sucking down whiskey sours with an expression to match.

“There’s no way you haven’t heard the stories. Even I heard them, all the way in Cuba. Unless—” Livan smirked down at Ginny, thrilled that she seemed drawn in by his teasing. He gasped, and her eyes widened in question, wondering what realization he’d come to. Expression gone pitying, he clucked. “Ah, I see. He hasn’t given you anything to compare yet. Is that it, *mami*?” She opened her mouth to protest, which was more than enough answer for now. So, without giving her a chance to protest, he smirked, dark and inviting. “Well, you get sick of waiting around for him, you know where—”

“Baker.”

As one, Ginny and Livan turned to their player liaison.

“You cutting in, Lawson?” Livan challenged.

This was not part of the plan. He and Baker were supposed to go on at least two more fake dates before Lawson lost his cool and declared his undying love for Ginny—threatening Livan to some kind of fist fight while he was at it—preferably in front of the rest of the team. Or something. Livan had stopped paying attention during the planning phase when Ginny started drawing circles on Lawson’s chest and Lawson’s eyes darkened meaningfully. Since he doubted they were the type to welcome an audience, he’d beat a hasty retreat.

“You could say that,” Lawson drawled back, rolling his eyes. Then, softer and only for Ginny, “This
isn’t worth it, right? You can teach the guys a lesson some way that won’t end with me decking Duarte.”

Whoa. That better not have been part of the plan. He agreed to threats, not an actual black eye.

“Puto cabrón,” he muttered under his breath, prompting an elbow to the ribs from Ginny.

She wasn’t really paying attention to him, though.

No, every ounce of her not inconsiderable focus was centered right on Mike Lawson. Ginny smiled up at their ex-captain brighter than the grin she’d given Livan while they danced, but somehow all the more intimate. She stepped towards him, that one small movement doing more to ease the tension in Lawson's frame than any of the massages or realignments Livan had seen him go through. He smiled back at her, reaching out to finger the hem of her skirt as she closed the distance.

Which was Livan's cue to go and leave them to it. He didn’t need to play third wheel for them twice in one week.

God, he needed a drink. No, he deserved one.

Livan sidled up to Mike’s empty stool and caught the pretty bartender’s attention. Jesus, Lawson really was gone on Baker if the sight of a gorgeous woman flipping a bottle of $300 tequila through the air couldn’t cheer him up even a little. It certainly worked wonders for Livan.

Unfortunately, it wasn’t quite enough to ward off the annoyance that set in the second he was accosted by some less-than-innocent bystanders before he even got a chance to taste of her work.

“Dude, what happened?” demanded Voorhies, shaking Livan’s shoulder far too enthusiastically and spilling most of his drink in the process.

Scowling, he signaled for another. The bartender smirked, which didn’t soothe his ego any, but didn’t hurt much, either. It did incredible things to her mouth. To Voorhies, he said, “What’s it look like happened? Lawson made a move.”

“Uh, dude made a little more than a move,” Sonny replied.

“They were moving pretty fast,” snickered Salvamini, nudging poor Robles, who looked like someone’d stolen his candy.

What the hell did that mean? Had they ditched all that talk of caution and care and started making out in front of everyone? Oh, that Livan had to see. If Ginny wouldn't tell him about Lawson's talents, maybe he could observe from afar.

Except, when Livan turned back to the dance floor, expecting to see some serious over-the-clothes action between pitcher and (former) catcher, he was sorely disappointed. Not only did he not see Lawson playing grab-ass with his former rookie, he didn't even see any of Lawson. Or Ginny. They were nowhere to be seen. They’d disappeared. And left him to deal with the fallout.

Were they fucking kidding?

This was what Livan got for getting tangled up in the private lives of his teammates.

“The way he walked up to you guys, I thought he was gonna deck you!” crowed Butch, sounding far too excited by the prospect.
“It was discussed,” Livan drawled back dryly.

“What’d he say?”

“What’d she say?”

“I never thought it’d work this fast!”

“C’mon, you’ve gotta tell us!”

An expectant hush fell as Livan weighed his words.

“You want the truth?” he asked, cutting through the din. Immediately, silence fell, followed by a round of eager nodding. God, they were easy. “All right. The truth is, after Lawson said they’d figure out another way to teach you all a lesson, I have no idea what happened because I left. The probably decided to go home together.” Before any of them could start crowing in victory, Livan finished, “The way they have been for the past three months.”

Feeling as pleased with himself as the situation allowed—on the one hand, he’d been roped into this nonsense in the first place, but on the other, he’d gotten to mess with both Lawson and his meddling teammates a little—Livan turned back to the bar. He ignored the way their stunned silence turned into shocked squabbling in favor of finally taking a sip of that drink he’d earned.

What? If Baker and Lawson had wanted him to keep their business a secret, they shouldn’t have fucking left him to deal with these vultures alone.

Well. Su maletín ahora. Livan had an evening to salvage, and the bartender, who’d delivered his new drink with a wink and a generous view down her tank top, seemed like an excellent place to start.

Chapter End Notes

I love Livan. I need to write more of him. I also feel like I need to know more Spanish to do him justice. I can muddle my way through reading it, but that’s not an answer when it comes to accurately mimicking a native speaker, complete with idioms and slang. Ah, well. ¯\_(ツ)_/¯ Resolutions for the new year, right?

Anyway, I’d love to hear what you thought! Is Ginny actually a good dancer, but she was just a little distracted by a certain brooding former ballplayer? Let me know here in the comments or over on tumblr!
gotta do what you've gotta do

Chapter Summary

romanceisreal: My favorite team (the Cubs) sometimes dress up for road trips (they did a 70s day, biker gang etc.) to improve morale. I vote the Padres adopt this trend and Al lets Ginny pick the theme!

Chapter Notes

chapter tags: Ginny trolls everyone, team bonding, Mike POV, pre-relationship, Ginny's second season
chapter title: basically Rugrats, which I promise will make sense

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I feel like a kindergarten teacher,” Al grumbled, “assigning classroom chores.”

Any disgruntlement in the complaint was belied by the fact that the Skip’s hand was already swirling through the blizzard of paper in Sonny’s hat, which had been sacrificed to the cause because, as Dusty put it, “You’ve got a big ass head, dude.”

Nevertheless, even a big ass hat was put to the test by the magnitude of its current task, a few chits threatening to spill over its brim. Nearly every Padre had jumped—judging by the far more than 24 slips tumbling around Al’s hand, Mike suspected some had jumped more than once—at the chance to pick the first (of what he hoped to God would be the last) theme for costumed team road trips.

That’s right. Costumed. Team. Road trips.

The front office had decided that if it was good enough for the Nats and the Cubs, it was good enough for the Padres.

To be fair, the mere idea had already worked some wonders on team morale. Mike couldn’t remember the last time there were so many players left in the clubhouse so long after a game without the involvement of ski goggles, champagne, and bad behavior. But here they all were, eagerly waiting on their manager to pick one of their names out of a hat.

Maybe they really were all kindergartners, just aching to be made teacher’s pet.

Not that Al was doing anything to quell the hushed thrum of expectation coursing through the room. The opposite was true, actually. He was taking his own sweet time. All he needed was to pick a piece of paper and read the name on it, which did not require the whole production this little ceremony had turned into. It just went to show that for all his grumbling, there was no chance Al wasn’t enjoying the hell out of this.

Didn’t matter that he’d told Mike in private this whole ordeal was a disaster waiting to happen; he’d
still gone along with Oscar and would milk the opportunity for all it was worth.

Mike sighed and slumped further in his chair, just barely reining in the impulse to cross his arms over his chest and huff impatiently. He didn’t want to look petulant. (Didn’t want to hear he’d looked petulant from a certain pitcher, more like.) At the same time, though, if they didn’t get this show on the road, and soon, his knees would be the size of grapefruits in the morning.

“Nothing in kindergarten’s that random anymore,” Salvi pronounced sagely from his spot sprawled on one of the couches. He would know. The past four years, he’d had at least one kid in kindergarten. None of ’em had been held back, either. The Salvamini brood was just that plentiful.

Al rolled his eyes and finally plucked a slip from the hat. Of course that wasn’t the end of it, though. He unfolded the bit of paper, hummed seriously as he considered the name it revealed, and otherwise left his team nearly falling off the edges of their seats in suspense.

Well, most of them.

Personally, Mike had only put off his post-game ice bath so he’d have an idea of what—and whose sick sense of humor—he was about to be subjected to. As captain, it was probably better if he kept his name out of the running for this “honor.”

Probably.

Well, whatever. He was deeply unwilling to deal with the inevitable bitching and moaning that would erupt if he got picked, so his name stayed out of Sonny’s hat.

Looking around the room, Mike started to regret that decision, if only because he wanted at least a shot, however slim, at preserving his dignity. The only way that would happen, he just knew, was if it was his name plucked from that hat.

Because judging by the wicked gleam in his teammates’ eyes—Blip—they had nothing good planned.

And why would they? This newest PR stunt provided the perfect opportunity to enact some petty vengeance—which was probably not reflected of the front office’s analytics. But that was just their failure to take into account the one truth of all sports, amateur and professional alike: in any clubhouse, for any team, there was always a need for petty vengeance.

Mike knew it, though. And so, he resigned himself to his likely fate.

If it made the guys feel better to make him wear something ridiculous just to get on a plane, and it smoothed over some of his fuck ups from last season, Mike would play along. If not cheerfully, then at least without too much complaint.

If Skip would stop drawing out this whole ordeal, he would, at least.

Finally, Al cleared his throat and looked around the room, pinning each of his players with a hard stare and otherwise reveling in their eager anticipation. After a long pause that went beyond flirting with the dramatic and instead had it already smoking a post-coital cigarette—no one could say Al Luongo didn’t harbor an appreciation for the theatric—he announced, “Baker. First choice is yours, kid.”

As one, every set of eyes in the clubhouse swiveled to the team’s fifth starter where she stood leaning against the wall, arms crossed over her chest. To her credit, she remained cool under the scrutiny, merely tilting her head to the side before nodding once, decisive.
When do you want my pick?"

Al shrugged. Now that his moment was done, he was back to general disdain for the whole endeavor. “We leave for Colorado in a week. Give ‘em a day or two, but otherwise I don’t wanna hear about this again, understood?” That last was directed not just to Ginny, but the team as a whole.

There was a chorus of agreement and their manager hmpfed, shaking his head and retreating to his office.

As soon as he was gone, though, attention—still hushed and more than a little tense—swung right back to Ginny, who at least had the grace and presence of mind not to look too smug about whatever she had planned.

Because judging by the look in her eyes, Mike could tell that she had *something* planned.

“So,” drawled Butch, breaking into the uncharacteristic quiet, “what’s the damage here, Baker? How bad are you gonna embarrass us?”

Mike wasn’t smart enough to look away when her eyes swept over the room and seemed to linger a beat longer on him. Instead, he stared back, gaze locked with Ginny’s, almost daring her to bring it on.

Something bright and dangerous burned in her gaze, kicking into high gear when she realized she had his attention. (As if she ever didn’t.)

A smirk fought with her placid expression, but innocence won out. Ginny blinked and opened her big, brown eyes wide and guileless. No one was fooled. Especially not when she answered, “I haven’t decided yet. But I’m sure you’ll all look great.”

If Ginny’s intention in the next five days was to whip her teammates into a frenzied froth of worry about the potential damage to their—largely inflated, in Mike’s opinion—street cred, she did an admirable job of it. More than admirable. Masterful.

Not once did she give a teammate a straight answer on any of her plans. She didn’t even give a slanted answer. Or any answer at all, really. It wasn’t for lack of effort on the team’s part.

Mostly, she’d reply with an enigmatic, if pitying, smile. Sometimes, though, Ginny showed off her truly troubling command of psychological warfare. She had an unnatural knack for drawing out some of their worst fears—like the way she got Hanan to admit to his recurring nightmare where she had them all wearing hyper-realistic masks of one another and he couldn’t figure out who was who—and then responding with a considering hum, like she was tucking away the idea to mull over.

Since, on more than one occasion, she left cryptic lists with such worryingly disparate items as “rainbow body glitter” and “viking helmets” and “Care Bears???” around the clubhouse—probably for the express purpose of being found—Mike was inclined to think she was just fucking with them and taking a lot of pleasure in the resulting meltdowns.

(Inclined because she hadn’t given him a straight answer, either. And he’d asked so nicely too.)

When she consistently denied any knowledge of these lists, smile wavering between bemused and benign, to whichever teammate brought the latest to her attention, he became sure.

Ginny wasn’t stupid. Far from it, actually, which was more than he could say for some of his teammates. She’d pick—had probably already picked—something that was fun and, yeah, likely
embarrassing, but it wouldn’t be the catastrophe so many Padres feared. Ginny liked messing with them all, maybe a little too much even, but she wasn’t going to risk stirring up real shit so early in the season. She was still coming off her injury and it was clear the team trainers were prepared to pull her for the slightest whiff of a relapse. No way she’d put her spot in the rotation in jeopardy for a wholly separate issue.

Which wasn’t to say that Mike wasn’t a little worried about what was going to unfold—the field day the media’d have or how many pictures of him in something regrettable would circulate on Twitter by the end of the day, clogging his mentions—but none of it was because of Ginny.

Of all his teammates, Ginny was the least likely to pick something specifically to make him look bad.

Supplying booze and food every Thursday in Arizona had done a lot to rebuild the team’s goodwill, but Mike knew better than to think that last season’s near-trade fiasco was forgotten. He wouldn’t put it past one of them to take the opportunity to teach him yet another lesson about team loyalty.

What could he say? Petty vengeance.

But there was far more than a bungled trade attempt hanging between him and Ginny.

Not that they were talking about that. And not that not talking about it had gotten great results.

Don’t get him wrong: Ginny’d crushed it in Spring Training, but that was in spite of whatever the hell was bubbling up between them, not because of it. She was a gamer and Mike was willing to admit that he had nothing on her ability to focus on the game above and beyond anything else.

It didn’t matter how many dangerous looks and almost-moments had passed between them in Peoria. It didn’t matter that Mike still found himself staring at Ginny far longer than he should or itching to call her before he went to bed, let her voice lull him to sleep. It didn’t matter that every inning he played with her, every day that passed, he was more and more sure he didn’t want a life without Ginny Baker in it.

There were lines that he— she— they shouldn’t be crossing. Shouldn’t even consider crossing until he wasn’t her captain. No matter how much he, she, they—God, he hoped it wasn’t just him—might want to.

Which was why Mike was mostly going to stay out of this whole costumed road trip thing and just let it happen.

Unfortunately—or not if that meant he was the only one dealing with this quandary—no one else was taking his lead. Seven straight days Mike was forced to listen to his teammates try to alternately cajole and bully a real answer out of Baker. He couldn’t count the ways they’d tried to get her to spill, offering up food, faulty logic, even favors, paying far too much attention to the one woman in the world who didn’t need more of it.

Mike was at his wit’s end. And not just because Ginny suddenly had so much less time to tease him, specifically, when she was working on pulling one over on the entire team.

So it was no wonder that, on the day of her deadline, Mike’s teeth were already on edge even as he went through the motions of priming his body to play.

“Not even one hint?” Stubbs wheedled, aiming what he probably thought were puppy eyes at Ginny where she sprawled on one of the couches, trying to go over hitters for her next start.
“You’ll find out after the game,” she returned without even looking up. She didn’t even sound interested in playing with them all anymore, the tick in her jaw telegraphing her annoyance for anyone watching closely enough to see.

Which, apparently, was just Mike.

Salvi came and flopped down just next to her feet, squashing himself against the armrest. Rolling her eyes, she drew her legs back in, grudgingly ceding him the cushion. Just in time for him to ask, “You weren’t serious about that list, right? The one with the chaps and the sequined vests?”

“Uh, sure,” Ginny replied absently.

“Sure, you weren’t serious or sure, you were?”

“Yep.”

Salvi gave up, but someone else was willing to take on the fight.

“How about the Minions costumes? Those things’ve invaded my nightmares. My kids won’t stop watching those fucking movies.”

Rather than reassure Butch, though, Ginny remained silent. Apparently, only Mike could tell it was just because she was too caught up turning someone’s heat map over in her mind, trying to puzzle her way into an assured strikeout.

“Baker, you can’t do that to me. My girl’s never gonna let me live it down!”

“Yeah, you gotta give us a hint!”

“C’mon, Baker.”

“Ginny, please?”

That was more than enough of that. And not just because Robles was practically pouting, flashing hopeful looks her way.

“Jesus H. Christ, shut the hell up!” Mike exclaimed, exploding to his feet and throwing his water bottle into his locker. He didn’t wait for quiet to descend, just wheeled on the room and barreled on, shouting through the ache his jaw had earned grinding his teeth for the past week. “Would you listen to yourselves? All this fucking whining over a stupid costume!”

Shaking his head in disgust and electing to ignore the curious glint in a certain pitcher’s eye, Mike took a deep breath.

“You’re all acting like a bunch of goddamn babies,” he sneered, staring down a suddenly cowed group of grown ass ballplayers. Fucking good. They should be embarrassed. They were fucking embarrassing. “Quit riding Baker’s ass worrying about what she’s gonna make you wear and start worrying about the game we’re supposed to play today. Or did you all forget that’s why we’re here?”

There was a chorus of sheepish agreement, a few apologies tossed Ginny’s way, and ballplayers began dispersing to their lockers to finish getting ready or grab their gear and head for the field. For his part, Mike dropped back into his seat, moodily taping up his fingers and ignoring every Padre left in the clubhouse until he had a better handle on his irritation.
Even when one of them kicked his chair.

Ginny huffed, nudging Mike’s knee with hers when he didn’t react. Since it seemed unlikely that she’d go away until he at least acknowledged her presence, he lolled his head to the side, peering up at her.

“You doin’ okay there, cap?” she drawled, raising one sardonic eyebrow even as her lips curved in a faint frown. Clearly, she didn’t just mean his outburst; she actually looked worried about him.

“I’m fine,” he replied, gruff, though he did do his best to release some of the tension in his shoulders. Since her mouth straightened out at that, he figured he was at least halfway successful. “Be better when this is all behind us. You sure you’ve got something planned? Something good enough to make up for this circus?”

A wicked grin took root and blossomed on Ginny’s face, nearly knocking the breath straight from Mike’s wholly unprepared lungs. Backing away and still grinning, she assured, “Oh, I’ve got something planned, all right.”“There’s no way you already had this planned,” Mike groused as the woman responsible for his current predicament slid into her seat across the aisle from him. He looked forward to the day that she could just sit next to him the way they had almost all of last season. Though considering what she—and he, to be honest—was wearing, it was probably better to have a little distance.

Ginny grinned and Mike would’ve gotten lost in the brilliance of it if Salvi hadn’t sauntered by, pale, hairy legs interrupting his view. Jesus Christ, where were the man’s pants?

And why the hell had he wondered that more than once—and for more than one person—today?

Oh, right. Ginny’s chosen theme.

Why so many of them had gone so hard for Ginny’s choice, Mike would never understand. They’d been so concerned she would embarrass them and then they go and do it to themselves.

Well, it wasn’t as if a theme like “Pre-K Padres” didn’t give them plenty of opportunity to do so.

("Listen,” she’d said as she announced her pick after the game, “and I’m not gonna say this often, so get your phones out to record this for posterity,” she paused there, milking the moment as masterfully as she’d played every last Padre over the past week, “but Lawson was right.” That earned a round of chuckles and prompted an exaggerated eye roll from Mike. He meant it a little, but given the way Ginny was grinning, dimples tucked deep into her cheeks, it was hard to be truly annoyed.)

She laughed and Mike was glad to have another reason to turn his attention away from Salvi’s diaper-clad ass and the water fight Stubbs and Butch were conducting with their oversized baby bottles. “No, but it would’ve been amazing if I had.”

“Amazing might be pushing it,” he grumbled, shifting in his seat. Not from any discomfort, though. Mike wasn’t ashamed that this thing he was wearing was more comfortable than he’d expected, but he also wouldn’t be admitting it to anyone. If he didn’t immediately donate it to Goodwill when this day was over, that was his business and his alone.

So what if the last time he’d worn footie pajamas, he’d been five and just starting kindergarten? A man didn’t outgrow comfort.

Adding to his comfort level was the fact that Ginny’d fallen into his—and the saner members of the Padres organization—camp when deciding on her costume.
It was bad enough that his dream of never seeing a single one of his teammates in an adult-sized diaper—even if they were the costume ones from Party City or something—had gone up in flames today. If she’d done it, too, he’d have to murder something.

Because prolonged exposure to Ginny Baker’s bare legs would leave him in serious need of a defibrillator by the end of the day. Much better that she went the footie pajama route. Well, mostly better. At least this way, Mike didn’t have miles and miles of smooth, brown skin to be distracted by.

He’d stick to the normal levels of distraction Ginny Baker inspired off the field, thanks.

She did, after all, look downright adorable in her Padres-branded onesie. Dressed as she was, it was all too easy to imagine her curling up in bed, ready to fall asleep. From there, it was just a hop, skip, and a jump for Mike’s overeager imagination to picture himself tucked around her, either drifting off, too, or more intent on keeping them both awake a little longer—

And that was why the aisle currently separating them was a good, a necessary, thing.

Mike shook himself and refocused his mind on the more academic question of where the hell Ginny’d even found a Padres onesie, let alone one in her size. The only one he’d managed to track down that even came close to fitting was plain red, more like long underwear than anything a little kid might wear. But it wasn’t as if he was fooling anyone anyway, not with a full beard and 210-odd pounds of muscle. The onesie did fit a bit snug around his thighs and across his chest, but it got the job done well enough to avoid any heckling from his teammates.

At least his didn’t have an ass flap. Unlike Dusty’s.

The fact that Ginny’s attention didn’t waver for a second, even in the face of Dusty’s bare ass going by, her eyes firmly on Mike and the slightly strained buttons marching down his chest didn’t mean anything. It definitely didn’t make him puff up and put those buttons under just a little more strain.

No, of course not.

Her eyes flickered back up to his, pupils blown out and cheeks a shade pinker than normal. Mike tried to tell himself it was just the fleece of her costume making her warm. He was only mildly successful.

Still, she rallied admirably. “What did I say, Lawson? You were totally right,” Ginny teased, tongue poking out from the corner of her mouth and making him even more aware of how much he wanted to taste it than he usually was. And he was usually very aware of that fact. “They’re a bunch of babies. Might as well dress them like it.”

“Remind me never to get on your bad side,” he laughed, locking away that desire for another time.

“You really need the reminder?” She laughed, too, but her brows drew down just enough for Mike to glimpse the undercurrent of worry.

He couldn’t have that. Ginny wasn’t close enough for him to reach out for her hand or shoulder, or anywhere safe enough for him to touch, but he could put all his assurance, his confidence, in his ready reply.

“No.”

“Good.”
It wasn’t talking about it, literally not even in the realm of talking about it, but that was just fine in Mike’s book. Not that he didn’t want to talk about it. He definitely did, and sooner rather than later if he was being honest, just—

What he didn’t want was for that conversation to take place while he was wearing footie pajamas.

Ginny could keep hers, though.

“Yeah, Baker,” he said anyway. “It’s definitely good.”

Her responding smile, just a quick quirk of her lips really, told him everything he needed to know. She was on the same page. At this point, he couldn’t ask for much more.

Except then, without any prompting, Ginny squared her jaw, picked up her backpack, and slid across the aisle into the empty seat next to him. She didn't do anything so obvious as lean her head against his shoulder, but her knee did press against his and her fingers trailed across the back of his for a moment before elbowing him off the arm rest.

“Still good?”

Swallowing to keep the surging tide of emotion in check, he nodded and managed a hoarse, “Yeah,” in response.

It wasn’t winding himself around her in bed, even just to sleep, but Mike had a hard time imagining that anything could really top this. And all because of a stupid PR campaign.

Well, Mike was a big enough man to admit when he was wrong, if only to himself. Maybe, he considered as Ginny's shoulder pressed into his bicep and a stray curl brushed against his neck, just maybe, the front office isn’t full of number crunchers with terrible ideas. If the next one got him a payoff half as good as this—Mike couldn’t fathom how this, Ginny as close to tucked against his side as they could come with an armrest trapped between them, on a bus surrounded by their teammates too, could ever be equalled short of a new MLB mandate encouraging intra-team relationships—he might even consider going along with their next bright idea.

For now, though, he’d be keeping that thought, as well as most of the other ones currently occupying his imagination, to himself for later mulling. He had other things to occupy his attention at the moment.

Well one thing. One woman.

One woman who was currently grinning up at him, offering a truly awful opinion about Star Wars and just begging to be schooled.

If that was what she wanted, well, Mike was more than happy to give it to her.

Chapter End Notes

Listen. I wanted what I wanted. And what I wanted was Mike Lawson in a onesie/long johns and Padres conducting water gun fights with giant baby bottles. I will not explain myself, if only because I can not. I'm already shaming myself, don't worry. I am positive, though, that there is a better theme name that would have gotten this result, even if I still have no clue what it is.
where the loyalty lies

Chapter Summary

monkshoodr: Mike getting tossed from a game

Chapter Notes

**content warning:** mentions of injury and blood

chapter tags: Mike getting roughed up, that's it, that's the show

chapter title: Seann William Scott quote, "I don't know *where the loyalty lies* in baseball. You really don't have to protect each other much, unless there's like a bench-clearing brawl."

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Mike Lawson, unfortunately enough, was no stranger to taking hits. He’d been in the show since before MLB brass started worrying about concussions—though long after the players did—and had been knocked around often enough defending the plate. It wasn’t all just wild runners trying to take him down, either. He’d taken more than a few punches in his time too. And not all of them had come in on-field brawls.

Back in the sixth grade, he broke his nose. Had his nose broken for him, more accurately. Some little asshole decided Mike’s ratty clothes and spacey mom made him an excellent target for schoolyard taunts. Mike decided that turning the other cheek was for pansies. He taught that shithead a lesson but not before earning himself a trip to the school nurse, where his nose was reset without any trace of sympathy, and then the principal’s office, where he was given his first suspension.

On the bright side, even after he was allowed back at school, he had the black eyes to prove no one got away with messing with Mike Lawson.

In all honesty though, one broken nose in his life was more than enough. Mike would take his licks when it came down to it, but he had no wish to repeat the experience and risk ruining his moneymaker.

(No matter what his agent told him, Mike remained convinced that his face was responsible for at least 5% of his salary. Maybe 10% now that his knees were both starting to go. After all, there was a reason it was his mug on all the Padres’ marketing material.

Well, it did before Baker showed up, at least.)

There were lots of things Mike would miss about the game when he eventually retired. Brawls and the danger to his future gigs as a celebrity spokesman/possible trophy husband were not among them. If he finished out his days in MLB without seeing another fight on the field, he’d count himself lucky.
Before today, he’d had high hopes for just that. One last season; it wasn’t such an unreasonable expectation to make through a season without a real brawl.

After today... Well.

Today, he had a San Diego Padres towel clutched against his face to stanch the flow of blood from his nose. Mike held back a snorting laugh. Not just because he’d taken the first (and second) hit to his face in God knew how long—seriously, the first lesson any catcher worth his salt learned was how to duck. Mostly, he didn’t want to invite any more pain than was already on his plate. Deserving as it might be, a snort would only make things worse.

This was what his life—seventeen years in the majors not to mention all the bullshit that came before that—came down to. Feeling wrung out and beaten to a pulp from just one well-timed punch.

Not all the time, of course. On the good days, taking a hit made him feel like a warrior. Athletes were the closest thing the world had to gladiators now. At least, that was what Mike told himself. It wasn’t so off base. He put his body on the line for entertainment value, and every game was like a battle, one to protect something precious: his team and his home—in more than the metaphorical sense.

On the bad days, though, Mike felt barely half a step up from a crash test dummy, except he chose to put himself through this. The poor dummies weren’t afforded the same consideration.

He wasn’t sure which was better.

What Mike was sure of, however, was that this—sitting by himself in the trainer’s room even as the game continued just a hallway and a few doors away—had all the makings for one of the bad days.

He didn’t even bother to turn on the TV, too tied up in feeling sorry for himself to monitor how the rest of the game he’d been tossed from played out. In silence, so unusual for the ordinarily raucous clubhouse, Mike slumped moodily on one of the tables, back to the door and shoulders hunched around his ears.

It was bad enough that he’d been left to mop up his own blood all on his own—everyone but the trainer, who’d gone looking for more ice, was still out on the field, y’know, actually playing the game.

What really added insult to the injury, was that it all happened in the stupidest possible way.

_Fucking Theo Falcone_, Mike thought savagely, shifting the towel to see if he was still leaking blood. He was. _Of course it all started with him._

He’d been traded from the Cardinals in the offseason, but hadn’t managed to leave his bad attitude in St. Louis like he should’ve. No, he showed up for the Braves’ three game series at Petco with a chip on his shoulder—then again, he showed up pretty much everywhere with a chip on his shoulder—and looking for trouble.

Even if the guy’s teammates hadn’t ratted him out to Mike—at every possible chance they got, too—it was easy enough to see in his eyes. He was pissed about having to play Ginny again.

Which, stupidly enough, wasn’t so unusual. While most of the Padres had gotten over playing with The Girl™, the rest of MLB wasn’t on quite the same page. Sure, there were plenty of players who respected her stuff, on and off the field, but just as many were skeptical or patronizing or plain ignorant at best. Mostly, that all faded away once they had a chance to actually play against her, step into the box and see one of her screwgies blow straight by, but every bushel had at least a few rotten apples. Some of ‘em, it didn’t matter what they saw with their own goddamn eyes. They’d go to their
grave insisting Ginny Baker was a stain on the sanctity of the national pastime.

And Theo Falcone was the most vocal of them.

Mike knew it. Ginny knew it. The team and coaching staff and front office knew it. Probably everyone who’d listened to even five minutes of sports talk radio in the past week knew it, too.

Ginny, at the very least, seemed to take it in stride, prepping for her start as if it were any other game. Mike couldn’t say he or the rest of the Padres even approached her level of zen. The dugout was abuzz, not with the electric anticipation of another game, but something tenser, more dangerous. He took the field already on edge, ready for whatever bullshit Falcone had up his sleeve.

Maybe if he’d followed her lead, he would still be out on that field, guiding her to a win rather than sitting here, feeling sorry for himself as more blood leaked onto a towel that, statistically speaking, at least one Padre had definitely used to dry off their ass.

Well. Ifs and buts, right?

Anyway, Falcone’s first at bat went well enough. He didn’t come up until the top of the third, Ginny having put away the rest of the Braves in short order, and he quickly followed their example. The fucker’d never been all that good connecting bat to ball, but he also wasn’t patient enough to work out a walk. Not that Ginny walked many guys, even on her bad days. Either way, Falcone went down swinging after three pitches, only just managing to knick the ball on his last pass. It wasn’t enough to keep him alive, though, the baseball settling snugly in Mike’s mitt without even changing course.

Petulantly, muttering too low for the umpire or Mike to hear, he stomped back to the visitor’s dugout. Mike was more than happy to see the back of him.

Tension seemed to leak out of the Padres with Falcone back in the dugout, though the man certainly did his best to ratchet it back up every time he took the mound.

It was another three innings before Falcone stepped back into the batter’s box. He was wired, too, clearly pissed by the fact that he’d given up a homer to Blip and allowed Robles to steal home on a wild pitch. He hadn’t beaned anyone—Ginny—yet, but there had been more than a few close calls. Too many to chalk up purely to poor control.

Mike couldn’t fathom why the Cards’ manager hadn’t gone to the bullpen yet, but he also wasn’t going to argue with the results. The Padres were up, 3-1.

Falcone stepped into the box and sprayed dirt and clay all over Mike as he dug in.

All the way out on the mound, Ginny’s eyes tracked the movement, her jaw setting into a harsh line as he dusted himself, thankfully just his chest protector, off. He’d managed to turn his head just in time to avoid a wave of clay in his face. Still, Mike could practically hear the grinding of her teeth from all the way behind the dish. He ignored it, kept his face impassive behind his mask, and put down the sign.

He should’ve known something was up when she didn’t shake him off.

How could he anticipate what would unfold, though?

Ginny threw inside because of course she did. Not close enough to actually hit him, but more than enough to brush Falcone back.
“Watch it, girlfriend,” he snarled. She just rolled her eyes and leaned in for Mike’s next sign.

“You fucking watch it,” Mike spat. “Stop crowding the plate.”

“Settle down,” warned the ump.

Suffice it to say, neither of them did.

“Huh.” Falcone smirked, like he’d just discovered something wildly amusing. He darted a quick glance down to where Mike crouched behind him. He’d never been a fan of the other pitcher, especially not the last season or so, but that sly, insinuating look pushed Mike right over the edge into unadulterated hatred. “I see how it is.”

Mike, idiot that he was, didn’t ignore him and let Falcone talk himself into distraction. He let himself get a little distracted, too. “How what is?” he growled, flashing a series of signals to Ginny without thinking too much about them. This time, she shook him off, but it was Falcone’s snide laugh that got under his skin.

“You’re gettin’ a piece of that, too,” he said, like it was completely obvious. A done deal. But Falcone couldn’t let it lie there. He had to keep needling. “Aren’t you, Lawson? Cleaning up after Davis’ sloppy seconds?”

Mike didn’t dignify this with a response. No matter how much he wanted to.

It was no longer a secret that Trevor and his stupid fucking cloud account had been the source of Ginny’s selfie leak last season. Mike wouldn’t say that he’d handled the news when it broke three days before spring training particularly gracefully. At the very least, he managed to keep the roiling pit of anger, confusion, and, yeah, more than a little jealousy it inspired out of Ginny’s face. Mostly he did, anyway.

But seriously. She dated—broke her goddamn code for—that fucker?

Well, the middle of a game wasn’t the time to delve into that knot of unpleasantness again. At least Trevor’d been traded into the AL during the offseason and Mike didn’t have to see him for another year probably.

He put down the sign for a change up, but before Ginny could accept or blow off the call, Francone had to go and open his fucking mouth again.

“Tell me,” he drawled nastily, licking his lips, “she taste as sweet as she looks? Maybe I’ll give her a whirl before I leave town. She looks like she’d be—”

A roaring, pulsing rage washed over Mike with every word that spewed out of the pitcher’s mouth. The clamor of the crowd faded away. All he could hear was the echoing drum of his pulse in his ears. He felt hot. Too hot for the breezy June day. Fire flooded from his gut to his throat and finally settled somewhere in his fists.

Before he was fully aware of what he was doing, before he could give the umpire a chance to intervene, Mike had exploded from his crouch, thrown down his mitt and mask, and hit Falcone.

Really, truly decked him. And, God help him, it felt good.

The satisfying sting in his knuckles was nothing, though, compared to the unadulterated satisfaction at seeing that asshole hit the ground. Hard.
Unfortunately, the insulating bubble of Mike’s anger popped before the dust even settled. Literally

While the crowd—and even the home plate umpire, judging by the lack of response from behind Mike—was stunned by this violent turn of events, none of the players let their shock get the better of them. Almost immediately—but only almost because an apparently unprovoked attack wasn’t quite enough to dredge up much sympathy for Falcone—the Braves’ bench was clear, a stampede of players converging on home. The Padres were a little more thinly spread, but they still made good time in wading into the fray.

Pretty soon, even though most of them had to be wondering what the hell had gone down, Petco Park had its first bench-clearing brawl of the season on its hands. Before the umpires and security staff could wade in, Mike had taken his own knocks, even spitting a little blood after someone’s right hook glanced off his mouth.

None of which was the stupid part.

Mike would do all of it again in a heartbeat, and possibly would before the curtain had fallen on his career. No one fucking talked about Ginny like that, especially not on her home turf.

The stupid part—loath as he was to admit it, even to himself—was this:

It wasn’t even Falcone who was responsible for potentially the second broken nose of his life.

No, the Braves were smart enough to drag their punk of a starter off the field and out of the way of any more damage Mike could do to him.

Which, okay. Maybe Mike should’ve taken that as a win and shouldn’t’ve tried to follow the fucker just to make sure the lesson really stuck.

Then again, the rookie from the Braves probably shouldn’t’ve tried to clock him from behind.

It would’ve been fine, honestly, if Mike hadn’t turned at the sound of Ginny’s indignant, and far too close—she had to be in the middle of all this nonsense for him to hear her that clearly—“Lawson, what the fuck?” If he’d kept going, the punch would’ve glanced off his ear, maybe made him stumble in his single-minded pursuit of Falcone.

As it was, Mike heard Ginny’s voice and turned. Right into the flying fist.

At least the kid looked suitably horrified at the spray of blood he produced.

With its two instigators down for the count, the fight quickly lost its steam. Mike didn’t even bother sticking around long enough to formally get tossed. He simply followed the slightly blurry navy shirt of a trainer back into the clubhouse and tried not to drip too much blood onto his jersey as he went.

He was only semi-successful.

At least he had the towel to keep damages to a minimum, now. Blood was a fucking nightmare to get out, even from fabric that’d been Scotchgarded to hell and back like these uniforms were.

Mike pushed aside thoughts of laundry in favor of wondering where the hell the trainer, and his promised ice, had gone. Just as he considered going to look for some himself—the ache in his face hadn’t settled yet into the dull throb he just knew was coming, but he wanted to stay on top of the pain—when the door to the training room creaked open.

“Jesus, Kiki. Where’d ya go for that ice pack? All the way to Mexico?” he grumbled, ignoring the
pull on his split lip and reshifting the towel to make sure his complaint wasn’t muffled. It had the added bonus of keeping him from breathing in the iron tang of his blood, a cleaner patch of terry cloth now pressed to his nose. Thankfully, the flow had finally slowed to a lazy trickle. It was bad enough that he could feel it drying stiffly against his skin and beard, it would be a real bitch of a day if he was in danger of bleeding out, too.

It wasn’t Kiki who responded, though.

“Not quite,” came Ginny’s terse voice, enough of a shock that Mike spun to face her. He was sure he must paint quite the picture, blood stained towel held to his face by a hand with rapidly swelling knuckles. He had the presence of mind to be glad one of the clubbies had already taken his jersey to get to the bloodstains before they dried. Although maybe Ginny’d look more sympathetic if she could see them. Sympathy seemed to be the last thing on her mind, even if she did have a dripping bag of ice in her grip. “Just had to make sure there was enough for your giant head.”

Brushing off her sour look, he demanded, “What’re you doing in here?”

She ignored him and held out the bag. Mike took it with his free hand but didn’t shift the towel away. He wasn’t sure he wanted to subject Ginny to the massacre his face currently felt like.

“I’m done for the day. Al wasn’t gonna send me out for the sixth anyway, but definitely not after Falcone took the mound again.”

That got him. He threw his hands in the air and growled, “They didn’t toss that fucker, too?”

Mike was so incensed that he missed Ginny’s quick blink as she took in his battered face: split lip, scuff along the arch of his cheek bone, steadily darkening ring around his right eye. He missed the way her tongue darted out to wet her lips almost unconsciously, something that was definitely not horror overcoming her annoyance. She caught herself, though, because a second later, when she took back the bag of ice before he flung it across the room or hurt himself more, her expression was back to muted irritation.

He did hear her sharp intake of breath, though. Mike did his best not to wince. If only because it would really fucking hurt.

He must look worse than he’d thought.

Well, that knowledge didn’t do much to cool his ire, even if he hurriedly covered his face with the towel again.

“No, they didn’t. When you get sucker punched out of nowhere, people tend to side with you,” Ginny replied crisply.

He would glare, but it hurt too much to furrow his eyebrows over his nose. “Wasn’t outta nowhere,” he protested mulishly, though he kind of hoped that got lost in mass of ice—which, even through thick terry cloth, began to soothe his aches right away—Ginny settled over the lower half of his face.

Of course, it wasn’t.

“Sure seemed like it from where I was standing.”

He busied himself maneuvering the ice into a better position, reaching up to hold the bag on his own so Ginny could take her hand away. She didn’t, though, her pinky cold and clammy against Mike’s. Over the top of the bag, Ginny’s eyes searched his.
Mike looked away first.

She sighed and her hand disappeared. It shouldn’t have felt like more of a punch to the gut than anything he’d ever taken on the field, but there’d been a lot of shouldn’ts today; what was one more?

“Let’s take a look at the damage, then.”

He knew better than to think that she’d accept a refusal. So, wincing—and, yep, that definitely stung—Mike set aside both ice and towel. Between the condensation and the scant stretches of clean fabric, hopefully most of the blood had washed away. He’d always give her what she asked for, but he didn’t want to horrify her or send her running, after all.

Ginny gave no indication of her thoughts as she studied him, more intently than her first glimpse allowed. Her full lips pressed into a flatter line than usual, but she didn’t say anything as her gaze raked over the scrapes and bruising. A few flakes of dried blood clung to his beard, but blood had never really bothered her; especially not when she had such immediate evidence that he was warm and breathing and less than a foot away.

She did lift one finger to trace the slight swelling along his nose. He hissed, but didn’t rear away. Ginny touching him like this, skin to skin and in the clubhouse and with no one else around, happened too rarely for Mike to stop it prematurely. Even if it hurt.

She hummed, though she began to prod more gently. “Doesn’t feel like it’s broken,” she pronounced, her fingers trailing to the tender skin under his right eye, “but you’re definitely gonna have a shiner. Not to mention this beauty.” Ginny’s touch skidded down the slope of his cheek and landed right against the split in his bottom lip.

He grinned and didn’t stop in spite the way it pulled at the scab that was already forming. How could he do anything else when Ginny was touching his mouth like this, feather-light and curious? That grin only grew when her gaze darted to the injury and stuck there, none of her game time focus anywhere to be found. If anything, she looked downright hazy, almost hypnotized.

She only blinked when he chuckled, a frown pulling at her perfect mouth even as her cheeks pinked up.

“Like what you’re seeing?” he teased.

The frown deepened into a scowl, but she didn’t deny it. Not that she could with any credibility while that bright flush rode high on her cheeks and her attention kept straying back to his mouth. Still, she didn’t cave and confirm it, either. “Not loving the reason I’m seeing it.”

“Gin—”

“I don’t even want to know what he said, Mike, but you can’t go around starting shit with everyone who bad-mouths me.”

“Yeah, it’d take way too long,” he muttered.

“Thanks,” she drawled, dry as tinder. “Always nice to remember how many people hate me.” His beard got a sharp tug in retaliation.

That was fair. Even if it made the scrape on his cheek burn.

He tipped his head to the side, trying to catch her eye. “But not the people who matter.”
“Debatable,” she sneered, almost sounding like she meant it.

Mike hooked a finger into Ginny’s belt loop before she could step away, put some distance between them, the way he was sure she wanted to. He tugged her close, for once throwing caution to the wind. They weren’t supposed to do this in the clubhouse—had specifically agreed that they wouldn’t do a lot of things in the clubhouse, least of all this—but he’d just gotten in a fight, very nearly permanently disfigured himself, because some dick couldn’t keep his opinions about Ginny to himself. He was pretty sure he deserved some comfort, and not just snark, from his girlfriend.

The only bright side of this all was the fact that there was no way Falcone knew just how close to the truth his nastiness hit.

Mike was getting a piece of that—had been since the end of Spring Training—though he’d never put it so crudely.

For one, Ginny would dump him without thinking twice, and Mike’d been making some plans that hinged on her doing the exact opposite of that.

For another, he wasn’t enough of an asshole to talk like that. He was an asshole, yeah, but nowhere close to Theo Falcone’s level.

“Oh’re you saying doesn’t matter, Gin? Me?” he murmured, looking up at her through his eyelashes. She liked it when he did that, though usually when he got a chance, he was doing it from a much, much lower angle.

Her mouth twisted, torn between the truth and proving her point. She couldn’t lie and tell him, yeah, in fact; he didn’t matter, and have him actually believe it. He knew all her tells, just like she knew his.

“Jealousy’s not a good look on you, Mike,” Ginny warned instead, even as she swayed into him. One hand landed on his shoulder, skating up the silky fabric of his undershirt to curl around his neck.

Jesus, her eyes were dark. Almost no sign of the whiskey and coke of her irises, just velvety black pupil reflecting back Mike’s battered face. Coupled with Ginny’s pinking cheeks and shallow breath, it made Mike wonder. He’d been teasing before, when he asked if she liked seeing him all banged up, and figured her response to him was just the novelty of touching him at all, let alone his face and lips, in the clubhouse, which they’d agreed was off-limits. Even if it presented so many tempting possibilities. That would’ve more than explained it.

Except—

He knew that look. Had become intimately familiar with it in the past few months, though he’d never seen it quite this unguarded in the clubhouse. Mostly, it was a look that’d been confined to his house—Mike would say his bed, except he and Ginny had been pretty busy (to say nothing of creative) since coming back to San Diego—but that didn’t mean he didn’t know exactly what it signified.

Ginny was turned on.

Really fucking turned on.

Not by his jealousy because she was right about that; it wasn’t a good look. And she was too much of a professional to let a little skin contact burrow under her expertly crafted barriers between the team and their team—the one that was just Mike and Ginny. Not without extenuating circumstances at least. Extenuating circumstances that could look an awful lot like a black eye and split lip. Maybe seeing him a little roughed up hit some buttons for her.
Buttons that, if any of this was even remotely true, Mike fully intended to exploit.

He leaned in towards her, parting his knees to make room for Ginny’s hips. In spite of her annoyance, she shuffled closer automatically, until the edge of the table pressed into the tops of her thighs. Her eyes hadn’t stopped roving over his injuries for a moment, and now that he was closer, he could hear the tiny hitch of her breath when licked his lips and winced as his tongue brushed over the split.

While she did look concerned, Mike was far more interested in the look of desire hovering beneath the surface.

“No, it’s not,” he agreed, close enough to Ginny that his lips brushed against hers with every word, “but you really like the split lip, don’t you?”

She cut off any more of his teasing, sealing her mouth against his. Mike was more than happy to shut up if this was what he got out of it, but he couldn’t help but laugh a little when her own tongue darted out and traced over the cut, like she couldn’t quite help herself.

He knew it! Oh, he was totally gonna make the most of this once they made it back to his place.

Mike, unlike some people, though, was smart enough to keep his thoughts to himself. He knew how not to ruin a good thing, and if he got his way, this good thing of his would only get better and better.

Maybe it was a little ridiculous that he ever thought that this would be one of the bad days. Sure, he might have the beginnings of a black eye. He very possibly had fanned the flames of Falcone’s grudge into an inferno. He’d definitely have to pay out a hefty fine to MLB for instigating an onfield brawl—

But.

He also had woken up with his face buried in Ginny’s hair, her fingers tangled in his. He currently had her lithe form draped against him, her tongue soothing the sting of his split lip. Once he got her home, he had some pretty concrete plans to show her exactly how much he wanted her to keep him around.

If that wasn’t a good fucking day, Mike didn’t want to know what was.

Chapter End Notes

What I wouldn’t give to see Mike actually get into it on the field. My kingdom for Mike throwing an actual punch, etc. etc. I’m sure it’s my cavewoman brain or whatever, but the heart wants what it wants, y’know?

Anyway, I’d love to hear what you think! Can you sympathize with Ginny's reaction or does this deserve a little kink-shaming? I don't mind either way. I know who I am.
the party will come

Chapter Summary

anonymous: sth where everyone is out in a club/bar/etc and mike sees ginny in a dress and just can't cope

Chapter Notes

chapter tags: future fic, Mike's a wreck, Ginny enjoys it

chapter title: Dorothy Parker quote, "If you wear a short enough skirt, the party will come to you."

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The problem, Mike considers as he downs yet another bourbon and tries to keep his eyeballs inside his head and his ass in his seat, is Ginny’s probably not doing this on purpose.

Why would she, after all? What possible reason could Ginny have to fuck with him like this? She was the one to decide on the No-Talking-While-Teammates Rule for God’s sake. Even if she has a good reason to torment him, which he’ll admit is not outside the realm of possibility, that would mean that she knows it’s fucking with him. And that would be absolutely unacceptable.

Because if Ginny knows, then Blip knows. And if Blip knows, there’s not a chance in hell that Evelyn doesn’t know.

And if Evelyn knows that Mike can’t handle the sight of Ginny’s bare legs extending beneath the hem of these light summer dresses, there’s no chance Ginny ever shows up in public in anything other than short, fluttery sundresses, damn the consequences.

… Which would certainly explain Ginny’s new wardrobe this season.

Oh, God damn it. She knows.

There’s a part of him that’s beyond flattered that Evelyn thinks he and Ginny as more than teammates and friends might be a good idea. Good enough to try and taunt him into crossing that line to find out, at any rate.

Most of him, though, the parts that damn Evelyn for her masterful exploitation of his weaknesses, just wants her out of his goddamn business. And head. Definitely out of his head.

(It does, of course, raise the question of why Ginny would go along with it, but that’s really better a topic left unexamined. For Mike’s sanity if nothing else. If he lets himself, he could obsess for days on end over the slightest of Ginny’s actions. And this one is anything but slight. This one could consume the rest of his life—not to mention brain power—if he never gets around to doing something about it.
Which he can’t until he’s done with the Padres for good.

Mike taps the bar and another lowball glass appears. He just manages not to knock this one back as quick as the last, but it’s a close call. He sips at it instead and tells himself he’ll leave as soon as the liquor’s gone.

Seventeen years in the majors and Mike’s still unwilling to leave a $20 glass of booze undrunk.

Anyway, he’s put in his appearance. No one can rag on him when he’s not even the first to head out, that honor having fallen to Blip and his almost nauseating need to be near Evelyn now that they’ve patched up whatever it was that happened last season. It’s safe to go now.

Much safer than staying, at least.

Which is not something that Mike feels particularly proud to admit. He’s the captain of this team; that doesn’t stop the moment the game ends. It’s important that he build relationships with his teammates on and off the field, in and out of the clubhouse. He takes that very seriously.

Except, when they’re in the clubhouse, Ginny’s not parading around in a wardrobe exclusively made up of things designed to make Mike’s—and probably most straight men’s—brain short circuit.

Then again, there isn’t a lot about Ginny, or her wardrobe, that doesn’t make Mike’s brain short circuit. She can be out on the mound, throwing smoke, and some part of Mike’s attention will unfailingly be dedicated to imagining what it’d be like to lay her down on the grass and make her fall apart with his hands, his mouth, his dick.

He gets it. He’s a perv.

He also can’t help it.

 Asking him to ignore how fucking beautiful Ginny Baker is on the field is about as far as Mike is willing to go to play pretend. Ignoring it when she’s out in the real world, smiling and so unbelievably gorgeous—and, yes, wearing a never-ending supply of pretty, knee-baring, clavicle-showcasing dresses that make it impossible to forget just how much of a woman she is—that’s something Mike refuses to do.

Not just because he’s not sure he can.

So, ever since she started ditching her leggings and lycra zip ups sometime during Spring Training—as if he doesn’t remember the first day she showed up in the clubhouse wearing a light sundress and looking exactly how he’d always imagined her on their first date—Mike’s been making himself as scarce as possible at post-game outings. Much better to have the guys rag on him for being an ancient spoilsport than risk embarrassing himself because Ginny’s wearing exactly what she feels like.

(Or, more accurately, risk decking someone for… appreciating Ginny wearing exactly what she feels like.)

The problem with this avoidance tactic is that Mike hasn’t built up a tolerance for her new style. He’s used to her workout gear. Even if all that lycra hugs each and every one of her curves to perfection, at least it also pings some kind of reminder that she wears it because she’s, first and foremost, an athlete and his teammate. Anything else falls at a distant second.

These goddamn dresses do no such thing. Each time he sees Ginny in one of them, it feels like the first. Each time, Mike nearly swallows his tongue.
God, but she looks good.

Tonight is no different. Which is why Mike’s kept himself carefully separate from the team, sucking down bourbons from his spot at the bar and counting the minutes before he can leave without anyone kicking up a fuss. Mike may have given into peer pressure, but he’s not about to let himself do something truly stupid like let his defenses down. He’d borne too much whining—and endured too many confused, injured looks from certain parties—in the past weeks to open himself up to a whole new round of it starting again tomorrow because he hasn’t stayed out long enough.

Now, though, he’s confident he can slip out without inspiring any protest from anyone.

Perhaps he thought too soon.

“You gonna take a break from holding up the bar here, Lawson?”

Mike has either done too good a job of keeping his eyes off Ginny and her dangerous clothing choices, or she’s gotten sneakier this season. She does have three stolen bases to her name already. And every single time she’s managed it, she’s shot a smile just like the one currently spread across her face into the dugout. Straight at him.

Usually, it makes him want to shake some sense into her. Funnily enough, that’s not the impulse he’s entertaining now. Maybe it has something to do with the fact that from less than a foot away, her grin could probably disarm bombs, to say nothing of her captain’s prickliness.

“And do what?” he grumbles, though not quite as forbiddingly as he’d like if Ginny’s reaction is any indicator. If he conveniently leaves out his plans to head out, it has nothing to do with the fact that his pitcher is close enough for her skirt to brush up against his leg. Even though the thick denim of his jeans, he can easily imagine way the soft fabric would feel against his skin.

Rather than retreat, she leans in closer, slotting herself into the space between his stool and the one next to his. There’s not a lot of room, but enough that she doesn’t precisely need to crowd against him the way she is. Not, of course, that Mike’s complaining or neglecting to store the heat of her and the smell of her shampoo in his memory banks. He doesn’t swallow as he redirects his attention upward, well away from the expanse of smooth skin of her chest and shoulders.

Her head tilts to the side, but cute as it is, it does nothing to distract Mike from the way her tongue pokes out from the corner of her mouth in her amusement. “Come talk with your teammates maybe? Y’know, the whole reason you came out to begin with.”

“I talk to those mooks every damn day.” When it looks like Ginny wants to protest, he continues, “And would you look at that, I’m talkin’ to one of ‘em right now.”

She laughs—which has always done inadvisable things to Mike’s insides, but now has him about ready to combust—and climbs onto the stool next to his. It makes her skirt ride up her legs, exposing even more of her lean, brown thighs. And there’d already been a generous dose of her skin on display. Mike averts his eyes as quickly as he can. Which doesn’t feel very quick considering the way his gaze has to drag over so much skin, wanting to linger almost as much as he wants to let his hands—and, dear God, his mouth—follow after. His resolve is tested when she crosses one lean leg over the other and toes at his shin, tapping him until he sighs and turns to face her.

Arching an eyebrow, he drawls, “Can I help you?”

Ginny leans an elbow on the bar and sets her chin in her palm. It doesn’t do amazing things to the line of her neck or the slope of her breasts disappearing into the scooping neckline of her dress.
This one has tiny white flowers dotted across dark blue fabric. It’s thin enough that Mike can still see the golden glow of Ginny’s skin through the weave. That and the lace edge of her bra. Jesus, between that and the blink-and-you’ll-miss-it glimpse he caught when she twirled out on the dance floor earlier and her skirt spun up, he knows way too much about Ginny’s underwear for his sanity.

It doesn’t make him want to get his hands on her and feel that warmth for himself. Not any more than he already did, at least.

Ginny arches an eyebrow back. Well, she tries. Both of them climb up her forehead, but she squints out of one eye at him, like that’ll make up the difference. It’s what tells Mike she’s trying. And that she’s had more to drink than usual, her typically superfine control slipping just a bit. It takes a lot of effort not to laugh—fondly! God, is he fond—in her face, but Mike manages it. He looks down at the bar to do it, but his self-control is worth the price of not looking her full in the face. He tells himself it is, anyway.

“You can help me,” Ginny says, grave and apparently unaware of the herculean struggle playing out in Mike’s head. “You can stop being such a grump.”

“A grump, huh?” In spite of himself, he can’t keep the amusement out of his voice.

She nods. “Mike the Grouch.”

He really does laugh at that. “You come up with that on your own?”

“Salvi,” Ginny admits, not even a little sheepish. “His middle kid’s on a Sesame Street kick.”

“Figures.”

“It’s not like he’s wrong,” she points out. The way Ginny cranes around, like she’s trying to look him in the eye, makes Mike all the less willing to meet her gaze. He’s got a feeling that the second he does, he’s gonna spill his guts. “It was like pulling teeth to get you out here tonight. Has been all season.”

Even though he knows he shouldn’t, the vulnerability in Ginny’s voice makes Mike raises his eyes from the bar top to her face. Her full lips are parted, lush and pink and beyond tempting. His gaze darts away and lands on the solid six inches of her thigh peeking out from beneath her skirt.

Jesus, this is really his rock and hard place, isn’t it?

“I’m gettin’ old, Baker,” he tries.

Her mouth twists up, and he knows she’s not taking it. “You’ve always been old, Lawson.”

An incredulous scoff puffs out of his mouth. “Nice,” he sneers. “And you wonder why I don’t wanna come out with you.”

“So it is me?”

“What? No!”

Like hell he isn’t gonna lie about that. If he tells the truth, it isn’t such a far leap to telling Ginny exactly what about her that’s keeping him away. Only because he wants to get in so very, very close.

Unfortunately, Ginny doesn’t seem to believe him any more than he does.

“Mike,” she murmurs, vulnerability leaking out of her every pore. “Just tell me the truth.”
“Fuck,” he groans, and a hand comes up to scrub at his face. Why hadn’t he left when he had the chance?

“If you don’t want to,” Ginny says, suddenly stiff and so close to walking away.

“There is nothing I’d rather do less,” he tells her, which doesn’t seem to dispose her in his favor any. So, he continues, barreling on without knowing where this is going and probably more than a little helped along by the bourbon in his bloodstream. Which is probably a good thing because if he knew he’d ask, “D’you have any idea how fucking hot you are?” there’s no way he’d actually say it.

“Um,” Ginny hedges, looking down and playing at modesty.

He snorts. “Ah, shit, don’t pretend. You know exactly how good you look.”

She lifts her head and rolls her eyes in response. “I’ve been told one or two times, yeah.” Ginny doesn’t sound remotely close to flattered.

Which is just one of the things he fucking loves about her.

“Well, this is me telling you,” Mike says, not bothering to keep the rough edge off his words. Now he’s the one making sure to look Ginny in the eyes. She stares back, apparently waiting on bated breath. “It’s not like I haven’t noticed. It’s impossible not to fucking notice. Especially now.”

Her head tilts to the side again. “Especially now?”

Mike’s eyes slide shut. “Christ, Baker. Don’t make me say it.”

“No, I think you’re really gonna need to say it.”

“It’s like you’re a real girl now.”

“Always’ve been a real girl, thanks,” she drawls, unimpressed.

“Yeah, well, now I can’t fucking ignore it.”

“Were my tits that hard to miss before?”

“Jesus! That’s not what I’m saying.” It's true; Mike makes it a point to never overlook Ginny’s breasts, even when that makes things hard for him. Literally and figuratively. “I just got used to you in a certain way, and now you’re sometimes not that way—”

“Not what way? You’re confusing the hell out of me, Mike.”

“The dresses, okay?” he blurs, bourbon and desperation overpowering common sense. “It’s the goddamn dresses. I’m trying my hardest to keep it together, keep myself in check, but it’s hard when every time I turn around, I see you and you’re not in uniform or your workout gear and it’s so easy to fool myself into thinking—”

“Thinking what?” she prompts when it’s clear Mike cut himself off for a reason.

Well. She asked, didn’t she?

“Thinking that it wouldn’t be such a bad idea if you were more than my teammate.”

Ginny processes this for a moment, sitting quietly at his side. Her knee jogs up and down, making her skirt flutter with each movement. Finally, she licks her lips, smooths her hands over her skirt, and
checks, “And this is all because of the dresses?”

“Well,” he starts, but how can he tell her that although the dresses have made it harder to ignore, this all started with her in a too-big Padres windbreaker and her palm connecting squarely with his ass? “Yeah.”

“Well, Christ, Lawson,” she says, somewhere between disbelief and indulgence. She hops off her stool, a hand planted on his shoulder to keep her balance. Except once Ginny’s steady on her feet, she doesn’t pull it away. Instead, her fingers trail, lingering and lighting him up from the inside out, down and over his chest. It takes all his self-control not to grab hold of her wrist and keep her from going anywhere. “Who d’you think I’m wearing them for?”

With a wink and a dangerous grin, Ginny spins away and melts into the crowd.

It takes a long moment for Mike to pick his jaw up off the floor, not least because he’s got another flash of the bottom curve of Ginny’s ass to commit to memory. Once he does, though, he can’t shake the stray thought that just won’t leave his brain.

Maybe he’s getting a little ahead of himself, but if Ginny’s wearing these dresses for him, then maybe, just maybe, she’d be willing to take one off for him, too.

Immediately, Mike downs the rest of his drink and pushes to his feet. He steps away from the bar, but rather than head for the door as he’d intended, well, up until right now, actually, he heads straight into the crowd.

Hot on a certain pitcher’s heels.

Chapter End Notes

As I edited this one, I realized I did a snippet that’s kind of like this one, but not. And it did not ping anything in my memory as I wrote that, which is how I know this has been sitting in my drafts too long. Also, I really need to do a not-Mike POV and soon. I love him, but I'm gonna struggle to get into anyone else's head space if I don't switch it up.

Anyway, I'd love to hear your thoughts!
places that you could never reach

Chapter Summary

anonymous: Can you write something Mike meeting Ginny before he knew she is a ballplayer

Chapter Notes

chapter tags: Mike & Blip, I'd like to have seen more of that heather zip up Mike wears in the bar, lust at first sight, canon divergent from "Pilot"

chapter title: Peter Lerangis quote, "Fantasies hurt. They hurt hard and deep. They lifted you up to places that you could never reach, then they let you down with a crash."

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Big day tomorrow,” Blip observed, trying not to fidget too much with the bottle in front of him. He never quite knew what would scare the man sitting next to him off, and if there was a time he needed Mike Lawson present and focused, now was it. Not as his friend, but as his captain.

For his part, Mike took a long pull off his own beer, arm slung over the back of the empty barstool beside his, before replying. “Is it? Just another game against the Dodgers.”

“Lawson.”

Mike rolled his eyes. “Yeah, yeah. Your little friend got called up.”

“If you mean Ginny—“

“Who the hell else would I mean?” he grumbled, killing his drink and signaling to the bartender for another.

No one in San Diego, and very possibly the world, had meant anyone else all fucking week. Ever since Tommy officially went on the DL and the front office started dicking around with who to call up from El Paso for his start, the first name off of anyone’s lips had been: Ginny Baker.

Since then, it’d been the only name off anyone’s lips.

Not that Mike could really fault them. Sure, Walker’d actually done a stint in the bigs—for all of two starts—but he’d also had a shaky season so far down in AAA. Baker, on the other hand, was working an ERA that even Mike was a little impressed by. Didn’t matter that the batters in the PCL had seen her screwie for the better part of two seasons. None of ‘em could seem to get a handle on it.

If it weren’t for the fucking media circus that descended on San Diego and Mike’s entire goddamn life, he’d be a little excited about getting to see it for himself. He’d heard all about it—mostly from the man sitting beside him—but seeing, as they said, was believing.
As it was, he was trying to resign himself to the dog and pony show that tomorrow would inevitably be. He was no stranger to press, enjoyed his time in the media spotlight, but tomorrow would be a whole new ballgame. Almost literally. Mike already felt tired just thinking about it. Blip, seated next to him, was doing his best to get him in a more charitable frame of mind.

Which mostly involved paying for Mike’s drinks at his favorite bar in town—effective—and talking his ear off—less so.

“Would it kill you to take this seriously?” he demanded.

“Yes,” Mike said, immediate. At Blip’s heavy sigh, his shoulders absolutely didn’t climb towards his ears, a defensive justification on his tongue. He bit that down and continued, grudging, “She’s just another rookie making her first start.”

“Don’t do that, man. Don’t pretend she’s not coming into something way beyond you or me—hell, anyone—has done.”

“Christ, Blip, I’m not.”

“Sure,” he replied, doubtful.

Mike heaved a put upon sigh. It didn’t do his authority as captain any good if his team, even one of them, doubted his judgment. Even if that one might have something of a point.

“I’m not downplaying what she’s gonna have to do,” he started, measuring out his words, testing the truthfulness of them. Eh, he’d done worse. “But don’t you think she might need someone to act like it’s any other day?”

“Act, sure. But have you even gone over her scouting reports yet? Have you put the time in?”

“You remember the minors,” he returned, frowning. “Not like there’s a lot of scouting available. I watched what I could watch.” And what he could watch—that actually involved baseball rather than her slightly stilted interviews with local press—was pretty fucking scant.

Blip seemed entirely unconvinced, which from anyone else would’ve annoyed the ever-loving shit out of Mike. With Blip, he was willing to take it. If only because the guy really was just worried about his friend.

“You ever actually caught a screwball in a game? A good one? Back in San Antonio, our catcher thought he was too good to study up on her game and ended up lookin’ a fool when he couldn’t come up with a single pitch she threw.”

“Who was that?” Mike asked, only vaguely interested, his eyes scanning the press of bodies filling the bar. It wasn’t as if there’d been a lot of good catchers coming out the Padres system in recent years. Not that there should’ve been, considering who was at the helm up at the top.

Blip’s face screwed up in disgust. “O’Malley,” he spat. “Asshole burned out a few years ago and I’ve never been so happy to hear someone’s leaving the game.”

“I think I’ve got a leg or two up on Derek O’Malley,” Mike drawled back, annoyed at being classed with a 30th round draft pick who’d never made it out of AA. What was it they called him, again? DJ? DB? Something like that.

What an asshole.
Blip snorted, but he smiled a little, too. “Yeah, Lawson. You, with your seven All-Star appearances are a better catcher than DC O’Malley.”

“As long as we’re clear.”

Of course, that wasn’t enough for the center fielder. “She’s gonna need your help.”

The stroke to his ego was more effective than he wanted to admit.

Still, Mike rolled his eyes even as his attention remained on the crowd.

Well, to one member of the crowd.

He was more than willing to listen as Blip pushed Baker’s case, but only because they were at a bar that had never failed to provide a little—or more than a little if that was what he was after—company for when he decided to pack it in. Mike could clean up here. Tonight was no different.

Because tonight, he’d already found the perfect candidate for that company. Had, in fact, spotted her while Blip rattled on about subpar catchers that Mike could out-play in his sleep.

Sure, he had yet to see her face, but Mike had a good feeling about her anyway. Standing as she was with her back to him didn’t do anything to dissuade him from that feeling. It only fueled it.

Mike’s head tilted to the side as he studied the generous curve from thigh to hip. (Which wasn’t even mentioning the swell of her perfect, pear-shaped ass. It was enough to make his mouth practically water. Even through the dense crowd, Mike had no problem seeing that her body was a fucking work of art.) God, he’d love to map that line with his hands. Or mouth. Preferably both, but whichever she preferred to start.

Hey, he was nothing if not dedicated to making sure his partners left his bed very, very satisfied. Part of the Mike Lawson experience and all.

His gaze trailed up to the dip of her waist. He had a strange sense that his arm would feel right tucked there, like the gap between her elbow and ribs had been made just for him. It wasn’t a consideration he usually had when scouting potential bedmates, but Mike pushed past it without giving it too much thought. It’d been a while since he’d had anything like a steady partner; he was probably just getting a little sappy and needed to work it out. Vigorously and often. Hopefully, starting tonight.

His attention continued up to the riot of curls brushing over her shoulders, mostly contained to a ponytail. He wasn’t even a little ashamed to admit he was already imagining what her hair would look like splayed out across his sheets later tonight. Or maybe wound through his fingers as he pulled, exposing the long line of her neck to his greedy mouth.

By the end of the night, if he had his way, it wouldn’t be just her neck he got a taste—or far more than a taste—of.

If there was something familiar about the way she held herself—and not at all in the way that so many of these pretty, young things seemed familiar to the point of interchangeability lately—he ignored it.

What Mike didn’t ignore: the churning swell of attraction settling low in his gut or just what he planned to do with it.

What could he say? He had a feeling she’d look right at home in his bed.
“Oh, I’m gonna be helpin’ the hell out of her in about an hour.”

Normally, that would get an eye roll or a snort of disgust from his center fielder.

Tonight, though, Mike earned a more violent reaction. Blip, knowing too well that he’d lost Mike’s full attention some time ago, followed his gaze and immediately choked on his beer.

“The hell, man?” he sputtered angrily. “No, you won’t!”

An indignant “Huh?” was all Mike had time to get out before the world seemed to slow to an endless molasses drip, a single moment stretching into forever.

The woman he’d just set his sights on, with her springy curls and spandex clothing—all athletic gear, interestingly enough; it was a nice break from the body-hugging dresses he’d grown accustomed to peeling off his dates—which somehow didn’t look entirely out of place even in a swanky bar like this, began to turn around. Anticipation unspooled in his chest.

Mike was only gonna get one first look at her, and he intended to make it last. So, his eyes dragged up her long, undeniably toned, legs. Over the close fit of her warm up jacket, right up the sloping line of her throat. It almost didn’t matter what her face looked like at this point. Her body was a god damn masterpiece; all that lycra was unforgiving, and he wanted to experience it for himself, even if she had a snaggletooth and a hairy mole.

Anyway, that was basically what reverse cowgirl had been made for.

Except, as it turned out, it really did matter what her face looked like.

Maybe if she’d been a butterface, Mike would’ve been less disappointed.

(Which, he knew, was counterintuitive. How could a face like hers, delicate but warm, with deep dimples flanking full lips, be a disappointment?)

She wasn’t, though. She was fucking stunning.

Maybe if Mike hadn’t seen that face on every TV screen, news site, and magazine cover every day of the past week, it’d be different, too.

To make matters even clearer—just in case Mike really needed the point driven home—standing right next to her, an arm now looped familiarly around her waist, was his teammate’s wife.

The same wife who was supposed to be entertaining a certain call-up tonight.

Blip shot him a quick, dirty look—like he had to make sure Mike would behave himself—before turning back to the women.

“Girl,” he called across the bar, “get your big ol’ bubble butt over here and give me a hug!”

It took a moment, but finally, she caught sight of them. Her eyes lit up—which did very fucking little to temper Mike’s disappointment, even if that delight wasn’t for him, exactly—and a smile stretched across her face. Half jogging, she wove through the crowd, making a beeline straight for them as Evelyn followed behind.

“Blip!” she cried, throwing her arms around his neck and laughing a little.

In his enthusiasm, Blip lifted her off her feet, practically swinging her around.
Mike gave Ev an absentminded kiss on the cheek and tried to calm his racing thoughts.

Jesus Christ, what had he done? Well, intended to do, but it wasn’t like he could take back some of those—pretty fucking filthy—thoughts. They were already out there in the universe. Just waiting to come back and haunt him because karma had a sick sense of humor.

He couldn’t have fucking known that they were about the one woman in the world who was unquestionably, completely and utterly, off limits.

Her heels dropped back to the floor as Blip released her, and Mike continued to berate himself for being so fucking stupid.

Still, he couldn’t quite miss the way she pushed her nonexistent flyaways behind her ears, almost shy, as she turned towards him. Even in the low, red light of the bar, there were stars in her eyes, an eager, reverent smile on her lips.

And wasn’t that just a sock in the gut? A necessary one, for damn sure, but it still didn’t feel good.

Especially not compared to what Mike had already imagined seeing in her eyes, before he even knew what they looked like. Now that had felt goddamn fantastic. At least, he imagined it would before his fantasy of some no-strings fun had been so rudely cut off at the ankles.

Still, he could be the bigger man here. It was what captains did.

“Well, look what we got here,” Mike said, desperately pushing down the looming wall of interest that had already sprung into being. Stubbornly, irrevocably, it remained put, but he was gonna pretend like hell that it didn’t. He could do that. He had to do that for his sanity’s sake if he wasn’t good enough to do it for her. “Ginny Baker in the flesh.”

Chapter End Notes

So, as it turns out, I’ve got a lot of thoughts about the way Mike says, "I'm gonna be helping the hell out of her in about an hour." And, yeah, I'm really into soft puppy Mike and the way he so gently talks around his feelings for Ginny to keep the ball in her court, I'm also really into man about town Mike Lawson, flirt and charmer extraordinaire. Like, really into it. The fact that I never got to see him turn that charm on Ginny is a god damn travesty. A travesty!

This kinda feels like it's not the end. But I really wanted to end on that line and keep it in Mike's POV, so I don't even know where it'd go... Hmm. What are your thoughts on the situation? Leave 'em here or in my ask box and potentially there's a follow up in the future.
my worst enemy

Chapter Summary

romanceisreal: Neither of them can get the baby to sleep so they start enlisting team mates to come over and help

Chapter Notes

chapter tags: babyfic, Mike being a drama queen, arguably in the same timeline as allow me the influence and maybe, hopefully, against all odds, or I don't like coming up with new baby names, it's up to you

chapter title: quote from The Office, "... but you married my worst enemy."

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It was entirely possible that at the grand old age of 41, before he’d even managed to make it onto the ballot for the Baseball Hall of Fame or master the art of the one-handed diaper change, Mike Lawson had finally lost his mind.

Sleep-deprivation-induced insanity was a thing, right? They—and he didn’t know who exactly, but he was willing to bet someone out there believed this—said that too many nights without hitting a REM cycle could do that. Mike had to have left that particular benchmark in the dust at least a week ago.

He’d either lost his mind or he’d actually crashed the car on his way home from the grocery store and this was some hallucination courtesy of a concussion and an infusion of the good shit at the hospital. Because he definitely hadn’t stumbled his way through laying up his haul, probably stowing boxes of spaghetti in the freezer and the Eggos in the pantry, in his fatigue and eagerness to get upstairs for Ruby’s bedtime only to be confronted by... this.

Because this could not be real. Not unless some very serious brain damage was at play.

It was the only way to explain what Mike was witnessing in the nursery. It had to be his eyes playing tricks on him. His exhausted brain had finally given up the charade and melted into a puddle of goo that’d come dribbling out his ears any minute.

That, after all, was just as plausible as the scene he’d just walked out on: Ruby Baker-Lawson for once sound asleep at her designated bedtime.

Of course, that wasn’t what made him turn on his heel and go in search of her mother. That, if anything, was a dream come true. Had he mentioned how goddamn long it had been since he’d had a good night’s sleep?

(If he were less tired, he’d remember that he’d started keeping track on the calendar on his phone. As it was, Mike was just relatively sure it’d been too fucking long.)
The problem was who, exactly, had finally, miraculously, gotten her down for the count.

It wasn’t Ruby’s mother or father; their kid had proven over and over again that she had little respect for his or Ginny’s authority.

(Or their begging and pleading, for that matter.)

It wasn’t Al, who’d been more than happy to adopt yet another grandchild, in spite of the fact he already had a horde of his own.

It wasn’t even Blip or Evelyn, which would’ve probably stung a little. In the interest of reintroducing his daughter to something even approaching a regular sleep schedule, though, he’d learn to get over it.

He was less sure he’d get over this.

Mike wasn’t sure how to even begin wrapping his brain around the sight of *Livan fucking Duarte* in the nursery—settled as comfortably into the rocking chair as if he’d been the one to spend hours cursing over the incomprehensible instructions just to construct the damn thing—a sleeping Ruby nestled into the crook of his arm.

Was it too late to ask for that total mental breakdown?

“Ginny!” Mike hissed, probably too loud considering his daughter was soundly asleep for the first time in what felt like weeks just a room away. He wanted answers. Right fucking now.

Which, okay. If it was possible that Mike had actually lost his mind, it was more than possible that he was overreacting.

He knew this. Somewhere in the last reasonable part of his mind—the part that wasn’t operating solely on day-old coffee, adrenaline, and three hours of dozing, one ear always cocked for fussing from his baby girl—was fully aware that this was not the hill he wanted to die on.

(If he had to pick, he’d definitely go with something more important. Like the superiority of *Empire Strikes Back* over *Return of the Jedi*. Or implementing Pants-less Thursdays in the Baker-Lawson household like he’d tried before Ginny got pregnant.

At least as long as Ruby was too little to notice. How else was she going to get a younger sibling? Well, given his track record, in a multitude of ways, but this would definitely up the odds, right?)

Problem was: that part, that utterly reasonable part of him that he wanted so desperately to listen to? It was weak. Defenseless. Beaten down by weeks of failure to get his daughter to do one of the four things all babies were constitutionally designed to excel at: sleep.

So much so that every other part of him—the ones that had turned a little ruthless in the face of too little rest and too much stress—had no problem squashing it like a bug.

Poor thing. It never even stood a chance.

His wife, as relentlessly productive as usual, though she had to be operating in the same thick fog of fatigue as him, stuck her head out of the laundry room but stepped into the hall when she caught sight of his thunderous expression. She padded along the plush runner, wafting the soothing scent of dryer sheets and warm linen as she approached.
Mike didn’t let himself be lulled out of his anger in spite of the way she smelled exactly the way he’d always imagined home would and looked even better. (It was always something of a marvel that Ginny’d actually agreed to hitch her wagon to his, not least because she still managed to look like a goddamn supermodel with bags under her eyes and dried spit up on her shirt.) He steeled himself, didn’t let the indignation sputter and die, instead stoking it to a crackling roar.

How could she have called him? Of all the people who would’ve dropped what they were doing to help them out—and Mike could even admit that they probably needed it—it had to be Livan?

“Seriously?” he demanded, unwilling or unable to translate his—God, there was no word for it but—betrayal into more something more eloquent.

He didn’t really need to, though. They knew each other too well—which was almost always a good thing, even if something ugly was stirring in the pit of Mike’s stomach now—for there to be any question of what he meant.

Her jaw squared, shoulders drawing back as she braced for his response to her answer. “He’s babysitting. So we can get some sleep.”

Mike snorted, even if the thought of actually getting to sleep with Ginny in the same bed at the same time nearly made him tear up in desperation. It’d been too fucking long since he’d had that and goddamn it, he missed it.

Livan Duarte, hotheaded hotshot still tearing up the NL West and coaxing Ginny through her starts, had lowered himself to babysit? And Mike was supposed to just go to sleep with him in his house? Jesus, what had the world come to?

Theoretically, it wasn’t such a bad idea. It was pretty brilliant, actually. Mike would just chalk it up to sleep deprivation that he hadn’t come up with it himself.

It was the reality of it all that bothered him. Livan had already taken one job from Mike. He couldn’t have this one too.

If Mike were just a little less exhausted, he was pretty sure he could put up a better fight. Then again, if Mike, or Ginny for that matter, were a little less exhausted, there’d be nothing to fight over.

He’d been tired before, but this was something else. Worse than any burnout from a playoff push, worse than back to back doubleheaders in the depths of July, worse than his bouts of insomnia during his separation from Rachel. Worse because there was no end in sight; he and Ginny were responsible for this mess—under ordinary circumstances Mike would never refer to his six-month-old daughter as a “mess” unless she’d managed to blow out yet another diaper, but he figured it might be allowed in this particular instance. Ruby was theirs to raise and love unconditionally and, yeah, at the moment, grit their teeth and deal with until she eventually grew up and moved out.

Which, to be clear, Mike still wanted to come only after she’d graduated or maybe turned at least 35. Still, it was a little hard to remember that sometimes.

Because for what seemed like the past eternity—but could only have been a month tops or they’d already be dead instead of just dead on their feet—little Ruby Baker-Lawson had been running her parents ragged. His own progeny.

spawn seemed more accurate lately.

God knew Mike loved Ruby more than life itself—remember: no moving out until after she had her own 401K and maybe not even then—but would it really kill her to cut them a break? To go the fuck
to sleep and stay asleep for more than an hour or three at a time?

Given Ruby’s continued refusal to do so—even in the face of her parents’ increasingly desperate tactics: swaddling, long car rides, the rock n’ play she was rapidly outgrowing, sprawling her bare-skinned and squirming against Mike’s chest to be lulled by his breathing, endless circuits of the house as Ginny bounced and rocked her into drowsiness—Mike suspected that it just might.

As soon as they thought they had her down, settled into her crib, white noise machine whirring, and began to sneak out of the room, the baby would begin to wail, upset at finding herself left alone.

On darker days, Mike found himself wondering from which parent she’d inherited her clear terror of abandonment.

It wasn’t that Mike would rather endure his daughter’s sobs, his heart broke every time her little lip so much as wobbled, but did it really have to be—

“Him?” he hissed, not bothering to keep his voice down. So what if Ruby had been quiet the whole time he’d been home and this woke her up again? Apparently, they’d hired a goddamn Cuban manny without Mike even realizing. God, how long had he been at the grocery store? “Ginny, Jesus! You called him? To our house? Where we live?”

“Neither of us are gonna be living here much longer if we can’t get Ruby to sleep through the night! We’re gonna lose our minds, Lawson,” she hissed right back, albeit at a far more reasonable volume. Any louder, though, and Mike was sure she might’ve just given in and yelled. Clearly, neither of them were at their best tonight.

Well, at least he wasn’t the only one entertaining that possibility. Maybe going crazy wouldn’t be so bad if Ginny was in it with him. It sent a funny wave of warmth rushing through him; he really did love this woman. Wouldn’t trade her or her ability to understand him for anything, not even a solid eight hours.

“Besides,” Ginny continued, apparently oblivious to the rush of affection she’d just inspired in her husband, or she wouldn’t ask, “who else should I have called?”

“Anyone!” Mike was aware there was a distinct whine to his voice, but he didn’t really care.

Out of all the people she could have asked to come lend a hand, (Blip and Ev, Salvi, Al and, weirdly because he had no kids of his own, Omar all had pretty good track records with Ruby, even if only for short periods. They were better than what Ginny and Mike were currently managing. Some other time, when Mike’s brain wasn’t shrouded in a haze of sleep deprivation, he would feel worse about the fact that his baby only went to sleep for men who weren’t him,) she had to pick the smirking asshole who’d taken his job.

After he retired on his own terms, of course, but it still fucking rankled.

She rolled her eyes. “You never complain when Omar babysits.”

Which was—

Well, absolutely true. But for good reasons!

For one, Omar had never set himself up as the Baby Whisperer, easily getting Ruby to cooperate and fall asleep where neither of her parents could. Omar definitely hadn’t looked up at Mike’s entrance into the nursery, baby cradled peacefully in his arms, smirked, and said, “Heard you needed my help, old man.”
Because for two, Mike actually scared Omar.

That’d never been true of Livan.

Of course, now Livan had even less reason to be afraid. He had an ace in the hole.

The kid loved him. She loved lots of things—strained carrots and her stuffed turtle, Ginny’s dimples and his beard—but there was no doubt in anyone’s mind that she loved Livan Duarte.

It was a bit of a sore point.

Even before this latest bout of sleeplessness, Ruby always lit up whenever the Cuban catcher happened to walk by when Mike took her to Petco to visit Ginny. Livan, in turn, was slightly less obnoxious while interacting with Ruby; he grinned rather than smirked and it didn’t matter if he spoke to her in crooning Spanish because it wasn’t like she really understood him anyway.

If it were anyone else, Mike would’ve been happy to admit Ruby babbling in excitement as she was danced around the Padres’ clubhouse was pretty fucking cute.

Except it was Livan and, seriously, fuck that guy.

Still, Mike didn’t really have much interest in delving into his lingering resentment and jealousy of the guy who’d taken his job.

So, he replied, “Because Omar’s not gonna teach our kid Spanish pickup lines before she can even walk.”

Ginny laughed, a short, almost hysterical sound that immediately had Mike catching hold of her hands to draw her in close. She took the invitation gratefully, but didn’t collapse against him the way he really wanted. She held herself up, looking him straight in the eye as she asked, “What did you want me to do? Neither of us have slept for more than an hour at a time all week.”

“She’s just reverse cycling,” he tried, feeble and well aware of it.

Sensing the flicker in his resolve, Ginny shifted her grip and twined their fingers together. The cool, platinum band of her wedding ring against his skin flicked a switch somewhere deep in his gut. Immediately, his hammering heart rate dropped, the flood of anger and desperation leaking away. She looked up at him, big, brown eyes weighted down by heavy shadows. Mike doubted his were much better.

“I’m this close to losing it, Lawson,” she said, honesty and a little shame coating her words. Automatically, he squeezed her hand, bringing a flicker of a smile to her face. Still, Ginny shook her head. “Livan’s the only one to reliably get her to stay down for more than an hour or two at a time, and she’s so little. She needs to sleep. If that means he has more opportunity to push your buttons, I’m willing to put up with it.”

“How it’s not your buttons he’s pushing,” he muttered.

“Mike,” she pleaded, pressing her forehead into his shoulder and otherwise sagging against him. His arm wrapped around her waist, support and comfort all at once. He marveled, not for the first time, that in six months she’d already worked off all the baby weight. He didn’t necessarily miss the extra softness, though it’d been nice while it was there. Honestly, he loved Ginny any way he could have her. Besides. Her rack? Still phenomenal. A fact he could appreciate all the better with her pressed to him. He did manage to drag his thoughts out of the gutter to listen to the rest of her request. “I need to sleep. We need to sleep.”
She sounded so exhausted, so close to throwing in the towel in a way he wasn’t used to, not from Ginny fucking Baker, that he immediately caved.

“I know,” he murmured, rubbing soothing circles up and down her back. Ginny sighed, and Mike was sure that if he kept it up, they’d fall asleep standing right there in the hall, mere steps from their bedroom. When her arms came up to wrap around his waist, and she snuggled in, warm and close and perfect, he thought he might not even mind.

Except, that was the moment Livan chose to emerge from the nursery, cradling their sleeping baby—the love of Mike’s life right alongside her mother—and smirking that insufferable smirk of his. He raised a brow at the position he found them in, but otherwise managed to keep his thoughts to himself.

“Mami,” he murmured, low and concerned enough that Mike felt a stab of affection rush through him; anyone who cared about Ginny that much couldn’t be all terrible, “I thought I was here to babysit. Let you and the old man get some sleep. What are you still doing up?”

Ginny pulled away and any charitable thoughts Mike might have harbored went up like so much smoke.

“We’re going, we’re going,” she replied, tugging on Mike’s hand, to lead him to their room. He followed along, only a little grudging.

“You sure it had to be him?” he muttered, low enough to seem like he didn’t mean for Livan to hear it while still making absolutely sure he did.

Ginny just squeezed his hand. Livan, though, hadn’t quite learned when to keep his trap shut.

“Don’t be mad, Lawson,” he said, that god damn smirk somehow audible. “Your girl’s just got good taste.”

Whether he meant Ruby or her mother was up for debate. Neither option left Mike feeling warm or fuzzy, though.

He glared but still allowed Ginny to pull him away, into their dark bedroom. Which was made only darker when she shut the door, cutting off the hall light and any more snark from their babysitter.

Smart move.

In the dark with just his wife to worry about—for all his faults, Livan could handle a sleeping baby on his own—the world seemed to slow down. Mike wasn’t quite so aware of the way his pulse rushed in his ears, became more attuned to Ginny’s quiet breaths filling the space, the warmth of her hand still clasped in his.

At the foot of the bed, she turned back to him. Her hands skated up his arms, over his shoulders, fingers finally lacing behind his neck to hold him just where she wanted.

Mike waited.

Not for long.

In the weak light filtering in through the windows, she leaned up to press a less than chaste kiss against his mouth. It didn’t take much convincing for MIke to sink into it, even with a cocky Cuban somewhere outside their door.
It didn’t matter that he couldn’t quite remember the last time he’d done more than swig mouthwash; Ginny’s tongue was curled around his, sweet as the first time he’d ever kissed her. For the first time in weeks, Mike was at his leisure to reciprocate, working a hand into his wife’s—God, he was never gonna get tired of that; Ginny Baker was his goddamn wife—hair and drawing her in close. She came eagerly, leaning against him the way she had in the hall, though there was nothing weary about her now. She licked eagerly into him, rising on her tiptoes to get her own taste.

For once, nothing interrupted the moment.

For once, Mike got to languidly undress Ginny, fingertips skimming over miles of smooth, brown skin, and enjoy her hands against his arms and chest and thighs as she did the same for him.

And, yeah, once they made it into bed, they were too fucking tired to do much more than curl together and lazily kiss until their eyes and lips grew too heavy to do anything other than give in to the heady call of sleep. But Mike wasn’t going to complain.

Sure, it was Livan playing babysitter to his daughter, but there were worse things in the world. Especially since it meant Mike was going to wake up after a full night’s sleep with Ginny Baker in his arms. Maybe, come morning, they’d even be able to finish what they started. A little morning sex would more than cancel out putting up with a smirking Cuban in his house.

Plus, once he was properly rested, Mike could start coming up with some appropriate payback. Livan could joke about Ginny’s, or Ruby’s as yet unproven, taste in men all he wanted. Just like Mike could bribe his former teammates to replace all of Livan’s expensive hair products with glitter-infused knockoffs.

He chuckled in spite of himself.

From her place draped over his chest, Ginny let out a sleepy sigh, nuzzling her cheek over his heart as she settled more firmly against him. Mike didn’t bother reining in his beaming smile as he dropped one last kiss on her forehead and closed his eyes, arms tightening around the love of his life.

Didn’t matter how satisfying it would eventually be; payback could wait. He had something much better to focus on now.

Chapter End Notes

I'm reasonably sure that every time I've written Ginny being pregnant/having a baby it's been in the same timeline. Not positive, but I'm gonna say it's true anyway. Because I really don't want to come up with another name for a baby.

Anyway, I have no baby of my own, but I would let Livan come rock me to sleep if you know what I mean. (PS there should be an eyebrow wiggle emoji.) Thinking that telling you all that is a good idea is how I know it's time for me to go to bed. So, let me know what you thought and I'll get back to you... at some point.
good shape will do

Chapter Summary

mazza: Mike teaches Ginny to play pool.

Chapter Notes

chapter tags: Spring Training '17, future fic, Mike feeling old, Ginny feeling mischievous

chapter title: Apparently, pool has sayings and proverbs? Here's one of them: "Don't try to get perfect shape when good shape will do."

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was something of an exaggeration to say there was nothing to do in Peoria. It was a big suburb of a major city, not Bumfuck, Middle-of-Nowhere, after all.

It might’ve been an exaggeration, but that didn’t negate the fact that the six weeks of every year that Mike was stuck in Arizona, it always felt true.

Sure, there were restaurants that weren’t McDonald’s or Taco Bell, not to mention movie theaters and malls and more besides. Mike would know. He’d learned each and every one like the back of his hand a decade ago. And, yeah, Peoria even boasted a few clubs—on top of the scores of bars (because what else was there to do in suburban Phoenix?)—of its own, but their appeal waned with every passing year. Mike kept getting older, but it seemed like the clientele never did.

And wasn’t that just a bitch.

Maybe, he considered as he took another sip from his beer and tried not to look bored out of his mind, he’d been doing this too long. He’d been haunting the same bars and hot spots in this town since he was 20, invited to his first training camp for his first taste of the bigs and getting his fill—of the parties and the admiration and, God, the girls—in case it was also his last.

Obviously, it hadn’t been. He’d gotten much more than a taste. More than his fair share, he was sure some might say.

After 17 years in the bigs, Mike could maybe, possibly, see where they were coming from. Most days after a game behind the dish, his knees felt more like loose gravel than functioning joints. Spending nine innings over at first was less of a battle, but it wasn’t what he loved. Sure, it was still baseball, still kept him on the diamond and with his team, but the first baseman didn’t run the show like the catcher did.

And Mike really liked running the show.

He couldn’t quite manage it in his personal life—back in December, Rachel’d taken a promotion that
would move her to New York without pausing to ask what he thought; it was probably better if he
didn’t get into where Mike stood with the other women (well, woman, if he was being honest) in his
life—so he’d have to settle for it professionally.

Thank God he could. He’d put in the effort over the offseason to win back the team, and it’d paid
off.

Mostly. He still had to put up with more ribbing, often far less friendly than it used to be, than he was
used to, but Mike had at least shored up his standing with his teammates enough that they listened to
his input on what to do in the yard.

And, more immediately, where to spend their off nights.

Which was why the San Diego Padres had ended up in the seediest pool hall Peoria had to offer on
this particular Wednesday evening.

Hey, it was hard to be bored when the possibility of a bar brawl increased exponentially with every
round of shots Hinkley and Melky knocked back. The Padres hadn’t gotten into a dust up off the
field in a long time. Maybe it would be enough to knock Mike out of this mood.

Probably he shouldn’t be pulling for one or more of his teammates to get their faces beaten in, but,
well... Mike couldn’t take yet another night in yet another townie hangout he’d been frequenting the
last seventeen years of his life.

So, the pool hall it was.

Was there a pool table in Mike’s Arizona house? Definitely; he loved playing pool, liked the
meditative aspect of it. Did that mean he wanted a horde of ballplayers descending on that house just
so he could teach them the fun of the game?

Hell fucking no.

A few of them, sure, but Mike wasn’t about to re-alienate the ones he didn’t want around just for the
sake of not having to leave his house. Mike didn’t want to spend more time with most of them than
was absolutely necessary.

Most of them.

The woman currently leaning on her pool cue, casting a skeptical eye over her table, however, was
not most of them.

Ginny Baker was, and always would be, in a class all of her own.

Tonight, wearing a pair of beat-up jeans—they’d probably come off the rack with all those holes, but
the way the denim hugged every last inch of her leg had to be the work of a very dedicated tailor;
one Mike would probably be better off never meeting—with a loose blouse that showed off her
shoulders and delicate collarbone and the shadows pooling there in the low lighting, that was more
than clear.

Unfortunately, Mike wasn’t the only one who noticed.

It was impossible to miss the way too many pairs of eyes trailed her trim figure as she circled the
table, looking for a shot, lithe fingers trailing up and down her cue. His did, too, but he knew how to
fucking keep it subtle. Especially when it came to Ginny Baker.
Playing down the way his attention always gravitated straight to Ginny Baker, no matter the crowd or situation or distance between them, had become something of a specialty of his.

And even if her ass did present an incredibly tempting prospect as she bent over to inspect an angle, the way she jabbed her cue forward, skidding the tip across the green felt and making the cue ball bounce twice before it knocked weakly into the 10-ball, was enough to drive all thoughts of her perfect backside straight out of Mike’s mind.

Well, almost.

“Someone needs to work on Baker’s technique.”

Mike was so focused on the game across the room that he missed Blip’s disbelieving snort. “Is that what you’re calling it these days?” the center fielder asked, something knowing and more than a little belligerent in his tone.

His captain ignored it.

“If she tears a hole in the felt,” he reasoned, less interested in convincing his teammate than working out the rationale for himself, “I’m not gonna pay for it. Are you? It only makes sense to make sure she doesn’t cause too much damage.”

“I wouldn’t worry about it, man,” Blip started, but Mike was already walking away, heading straight toward the small knot of Padres across the bar.

He hadn’t picked a pool hall just so he could show Ginny the ropes—to say nothing about a little quality time that had so far been in short supply this spring training with her while he was at it—but now that he had the chance, Mike certainly wasn’t going to complain about it.

“C’mon, Baker,” he said, catching her awry elbow in one hand before she could jerk it forward and send the cue ball popping into the air yet again. “Someone needs to show you a thing or two.”

He didn’t give Salvi or Butch a chance to protest, knew Omar wouldn’t once he’d been sufficiently glared at, and pulled her over to an empty table tucked into the far corner. She only dragged her feet a little.

“I don’t need—”

“How’s your elbow feeling?” he interrupted. Mike didn’t really want to hear that Ginny didn’t need, or maybe want, anything from him.

“More than up to the oh-so strenuous task of shooting pool,” she sniped.

Mike rolled his eyes. “Just making sure.”

“You and everyone else in a 15-mile radius,” Ginny muttered grumpily, like she hadn’t thrown four shutout innings of baseball today.

To be fair to everyone else, she’d just thrown her, much anticipated, first start of spring training. Al’d kept her in the bullpen until now. She’d made a few strong showings in relief, but Ginny would be the first to say coming in to throw out one or two batters wasn’t the same as going the distance from the first pitch. Still, they’d been strong enough that she’d more than earned her start today.

Mike couldn’t help but worry.
Rather than tell her that, though, he shrugged. “We’re in the middle of the desert. What else is there for people to care about?”

He didn’t give Ginny a chance to snark back, just ushered her onto a stool and launched into a soliloquy on the mechanics and motion of the perfect stroke and trying to make her laugh.

Mike wasn’t proud about commandeering what should have been her victory lap, but he hadn’t suggested this outing so they could all get kicked out when Ginny inevitably ruined all the playing surfaces. Or so Omar could stutter and blush every time Ginny leaned over to take a shot, his eyes right where Mike’s wanted to be. And what Mike really wasn’t going to do was give some other mook the opportunity to crowd up behind her and give her a hands-on lesson—as he was sure more than one person had considered.

Not that Mike planned on doing it, either—not if he wanted to maintain his grip on sanity—but he definitely didn’t want anyone else thinking they could even try it.

As he went over the basic rules and racked the balls, he couldn’t help but notice Baker’s restlessness.

The whole—though it really was short for him—spiel about stripes and solids and racks and breaks, Ginny’s leg bounced up and down, impatient and unwilling to pretend otherwise. Apparently, Ginny Baker was too good for the rules. Mike wanted to laugh. That was just typical, wasn’t it? She wanted to run before she even had the lay of the land.

“Got somewhere to be, Baker?”

“Just wondering how long this is gonna take,” she drawled, hopping off her stool to stare up at him in exasperation. “I already know how to play pool.”

Mike snorted.

“I do!” she defended, laughing at his skepticism. “How else would I know I can win the game on the first shot if I sink the 8-ball?”

“Yeah, I don’t think that’s something you’re gonna have to worry about.”

“Asshole.”

Mike shrugged in agreement, but grinned down at her.

Hanging off her cue, she tilted her head to the side, soft, pink lips following in an uneven grin. Just the one dimple pressed into her cheek. Her curls cascaded messily over her shoulder and bounced away when she waved off any more explanation, uncovering more of her smooth, unblemished skin. Not that Mike was capable of much more when she looked like that.

Like she was his dream come fucking true.

Then again, she always looked like that.

“You gonna show me how it’s done or not, Lawson?” she challenged, teeth sinking into the lush curve of her lower lip for a bare second.

“If you insist,” Mike replied, shaking off the slight daze that Ginny so effortlessly inspired in him. It was easier now that he was methodically filling the rack, keeping his eyes down. “You want the break?”
She shrugged, fingering a spare cube of chalk and inspecting the sheen of blue dust it left behind before brushing it off on her pants. Disinterestedly, she replied, “If you don’t want to, sure.”

“All right,” he said, determined to get her interested in this game if it killed him. Maybe, once they got back to San Diego, Mike could get her to come over and play a few games. With Blip, of course. If he wanted. It wasn’t that he just liked the idea of Ginny in his house. Okay. It wasn’t only that. “Go ahead and put the cue ball in the kitchen, then.”

One of Ginny’s eyebrows climbed her forehead, and she leveled him with an unimpressed stare. “You better not follow that up with a joke about a sandwich, old man.”

“A little faith, rookie,” he threw back, clutching at his heart in mock offense. She pursed her lips, but didn’t protest the nickname. Ginny Baker might not technically be a rookie, but she was always going to be Mike’s rookie. One of his last, maybe. Tapping the diamond a quarter of the way down the table, he said, “Just put it down anywhere behind this line.”

Ginny shrugged and carelessly let the ball roll out of her fingers. It came to a stop just a few inches away from the edge of a rail.

“You sure that’s where you want to put it?” he checked, eyeing the ball in question. It was far from an impossible shot, but it didn’t give her a great angle for a clean break.

“It doesn’t really matter, does it?” Ginny shrugged as her attention wandered around the bar, clearly more interested in their teammates’ bullshit than the truly excellent advice Mike was trying to give her.

He rolled his eyes but did his best not to frown. “If you don’t get a legal break, it matters.”

“And you think I can’t.”

It was hard to tell in the dim light, but Mike would have sworn Ginny’s eyes were twinkling in spite of the accusation in her tone. She blinked slowly at him, one corner of her lips tugging to the side. He shook himself and went to recheck the rack. They hadn’t moved, but it gave him something better to do with his time than gaze adoringly at Ginny Baker. He’d already hit his quota for the day.

“It happens sometimes. You have to get at least one ball in a pocket or four to the sides.”

Of course, she caught on quick. “If I don’t, then you get a shot at it?”

“That’s the idea.”

She eyed the ball once more before nodding. “It’s fine there.”

“If you say so.”

The doubt in his voice didn’t seem to get to her as Ginny leaned over and lined up her shot. Before she could take it, though, she lifted her eyes to Mike, all the way at the foot of the table. With a grin that did dangerous things to his insides, she asked, “What do you say we make this interesting?”

Mike raised a brow of his own. “What’d you have in mind?”

Her lips quirked to the side in thought. If she had a free hand, he was sure she’d tap her chin to really sell the bit. After just a moment, she lit up, and if Mike had thought her grin was dangerous before, the curve of her lips now was downright deadly. A throb of interest pinged low in his gut. Lower, if he was being honest.
Jesus Christ. This was not the time.

“If you lose, you have to pay for my dinners for the rest of spring training.”

Mike could imagine worse fates than treating Ginny to a few dinners here in Arizona, even with her bottomless pit of a stomach.

“Fine,” he agreed. Though not so quick as to seem desperate for some of her time. “What about if I win?”

“Up to you.”

Oh, now that was a dangerous prospect. There were so many things Mike ached to say: If I win, you sit next to me on every plane ride this season instead of walking by like you have so far; you come over and watch Star Wars without complaining about the hokey special effects; you tell me the name of your perfume so I can soak my sheets in it; you agree to talk about this thing between us; you let me take you home and show you a much better use for a pool table. The possibilities were limitless.

But, Mike wasn’t going to push it. They were only just getting back into the swing of things, slowly easing into a collegial relationship that was indisputably aware of the current of desire underpinning it. He didn’t want to mess with their fragile status quo.

So, he said, “If I win, you can only shake me off twice a game until we leave Arizona.”

“Four times.”

“Three.”

“Deal.”

She reached out, across the table so Mike had to lean in too, and they shook on it. Ginny’s warm, callused palm against his felt beyond right, but now wasn’t the time for Mike to get all mushy about holding her hand. So, after maybe a second longer than necessary, he released her and nodded to the table.

Ginny studied him for another long beat before bending back down to line up her shot.

Unlike the few strokes he’d seen her take in that game he’d pulled her from, this one was smooth and measured, brisk. The cue ball shot forward and knocked into the rack, scattering the formation easily.

Definitely a legal break. She hadn’t pocketed anything, but there were certainly more than four balls on the rail. A couple were still lazily spinning toward them, too.

One happened to be the 8-ball.

Transfixed, Mike watched as the black ball, freed from its spot in the middle of the pyramid, spun its way towards a center pocket. Just when he thought it would stop, only a smidge shy of the hole, another ball ricocheted into it, neatly pocketing it and winning Ginny the game.

One stroke and she’d beat him.

Smoothly, Ginny straightened, a triumphant smile making her glow.

God damn it, that was hot as hell.

From a table away, having clearly drifted closer when Mike wasn’t paying attention, Blip burst into
howls of laughter. Ginny grinned over at him, lifting her chin in acknowledgment before leveling her victorious grin on Mike again. It probably shouldn’t have made his heart swoop in his chest, but there were a lot of things about Ginny that shouldn’t make Mike feel the way he did. The center fielder wiped a few tears away from the corner of his eyes, his shoulders still shaking.

“Man, I wanted to tell you,” he crowed when he caught sight of Mike’s shocked face, “but you didn’t even give me a chance. Ginny used to hustle all the locals back in San Antonio.”

When Mike turned his disbelieving stare on her, she hitched a shoulder modestly.

“Minor league pay only takes you so far.”

That was certainly true, but it didn’t make pool sharks out of all its players.

“How the hell did you learn how to do that?” Mike demanded, feeling more than a little guilty for underestimating Ginny. Someday, he’d learn to stop doing that.

“I lived in Texas for three years, Mike,” she said, like that explained everything. Then again, it wasn’t like he’d spent a lot of time there in the minors, so maybe it did. “And I aced Geometry.” Ginny shrugged, like that was a reasonable segue. Mike just stared at her, still more than a little gobsmacked. The right side of her mouth quirked up, dimple sinking into her cheek. “That’s all this is. Planes and angles. Like pitching.”

“Like pitching?” Mike sputtered, staring in bewildered amazement at this woman.

“Yeah,” she said, finally turning that steady gaze of hers on him. An eyebrow arched. “Haven’t you heard that before?”

There was a fog or something clouding Mike’s brain. That had to be why his voice sounded so distant when he said no.

That fog only thickened when delight spread across Ginny’s face, lighting up her dimpled smile. Grinning like a maniac—the prettiest god damn maniac Mike had ever seen—Ginny hung off her pool cue and teased, “Are you telling me there’s baseball wisdom Mike Lawson’s never heard before?”

He rolled his eyes and did his best to cut through the haze hampering his critical thinking skills. That and the knots his tongue had been tied into.

“You make me sound like a walking encyclopedia,” he eventually managed.

“Aren’t you? When it comes to baseball, at least? Coulda sworn I saw your name in Ken Burns’ credits.”

“I am wise beyond belief, yes,” he replied, puffing out his chest and ignoring Ginny’s incredulous snort, “but even I don’t know everything. I’d be too amazing if I did.”

“You’d be too something, that’s for sure.”

“Respect your captain, rookie!”

She bit her lip and looked down, long lashes casting a heavy arc of shadow on her bronze cheek. When she glanced up at him, her eyes were sparkling, delight dancing deep in the whiskey brown depths. God, if this was how he felt from just a smile, fuck him if she ever decided to— Well, fuck him. “Only if you keep me well fed, captain.”
“Now that, I can do. I make a mean chicken parm.”

What? He said he’d pay for her dinners, and he would. Just, she never specified who was going to make them.

Both of Ginny’s eyebrows jumped in surprise. “You don’t have to do that,” she tried, a flush rising up her chest. It was unusual to see, and not just because Mike usually didn’t have such an unencumbered view of her chest.

“I’ll pay for your dinners, Baker, but don’t think I’m paying for you to eat a cheeseburger and a strawberry malt every day. Oscar and Al’d kill me if I let you clog your arteries at the ripe old age of 24.”

“My dietician says it’s malts every other day,” she corrected, another grin tugging at the corner of her mouth.

“Well, that makes all the difference, doesn’t it?” Ginny laughed and Mike didn’t keep himself from joining in. When the brash, braying sound—which sounded more and more like music every time he heard it—faded away, Mike tipped his head to the side, regarding her. Something that felt an awful lot like yearning burned a hole in his chest. “C’mon, Baker. I promise not to poison you.”

For a long moment, she studied him. Mike had no idea what she wanted to find, but she must’ve because Ginny nodded and asked, “Your place or mine?”

“Do you even have cooking utensils in your kitchen?”

“My dishes are all microwave safe. What more do I need?”

He rolled his eyes. “That’s a no, then. All right, tomorrow after the game, you’re coming over and I’m feeding you food that didn’t come in a microwaveable box. How’s that sound?”

He’d be lying if he didn’t want the next words out of her mouth to be: “It’s a date.” And while Mike Lawson could lie with the best of them, he had no interest in stretching the truth on this front.

He also knew that now, as was so often the case lately, just wasn’t the time.

But maybe now was the time for laying a foundation. For when the time eventually came.

Ginny nodded. “Works for me.”

“Good.” Mike tried not to heave a sigh of relief and pushed all the plans he was already busy making to the back of his mind. “Now, show me that trick shot of yours.”

“It’s not a trick!” she protested, laughing but still circling the table to start reracking the balls. “It’s geometry. And physics.”

Mike rolled his eyes but listened attentively as she leaped into her explanation. No, he had no idea how torque or angles or the Newtonian laws of physics could be applied to a pool table, but Ginny did, and he would be more than happy to listen to her talk about duller things for much longer.

Okay. So maybe Peoria still didn’t have much to offer in the way of entertainment, especially not when Mike had learned the town inside and out over the past 17 years. It was as familiar as the back of his hand.

However, for the next month, Peoria had Ginny Baker. And, as Mike was learning, with Ginny
around, the familiar things had this funny habit of feeling brand new.

Chapter End Notes

When provided the opportunity to let Ginny troll someone and/or subvert expectations, of course I take it. Which does not mean I didn't think long and hard (hah) about the prospect of Mike giving a hands on lesson on the finer points of billiards. Who knows, maybe it's Ginny giving that lesson a little down the line. It is her move, after all.

As always, I'd love to hear what you thought!
“So, Mike...”

Startled, Ginny looked up at one of the many 60-inch screens mounted around the room but didn’t let her pedaling slow—she needed to hit five miles before game time—at the sound of her former captain’s name. She’d known his press conference was today, that he’d officially be in Petco for the first time since his retirement at the end of last season, but she hadn’t expected Fox Sports San Diego to carry it live.

Seated all alone at the long table in the Padres’ press room, Mike Lawson looked relaxed, a familiar, cocky grin on his face and one arm slung over the back of the chair next to him.

If Ginny only noticed this for the way it stretched the logo of his brand new Padres staff polo across his chest, she figured she was probably in pretty good company. Lots of other people would be enjoying that view, too.

Ginny just managed to yank herself out of that rabbit hole to catch the last of the question.

“... your number one goal for hitters this season?”

“I’ve got lots of goals for this team,” Mike replied readily, like he’d rehearsed it. Maybe he had. Once, Ginny might have known for sure, but it’d been a while since she was in Mike’s loop. Probably right around the time he started talking with Oscar about taking this job, actually. “There’s a lot of talent, a lot of drive, especially with a team as young as this one—”

“Yeah, what’d the average age on the team go down to once you retired? Fourteen, fifteen?” cracked one of the beat reporters from the Union Times.

Mike rolled his eyes, but still seemed to be in pretty good humor as he answered, “I think now that Blip hit the big 3-3, it’s actually 16.” That earned an appreciative chuckle from the gaggle. He raised an eyebrow at them, a silent, Can I continue now? and leaned forward, forearms braced on the table. Ginny didn’t look away from the screen in spite of the way the cords in his arms were leading her mind well away from the game. “Yeah, the team’s young, but that just means they’re not set in their
bad habits. By the end of the season, I bet we’ll have a club of sluggers. The whole bench’ll be hitting homers.”

Ginny almost did stop pedaling at that. Hell, she almost fell off the entire bike, she was so surprised.

She, apparently, wasn’t the only one.

Utter quiet met Mike’s words in the press room, a truly rare occurrence. Until one brave soul ventured, “The whole bench?”

After three years in the spotlight of the majors, Ginny’d mostly gotten used to the idea of suddenly being on any number of people’s minds all at once. It came with the territory.

What she’d never experienced, though, was watching it play out in real time. Usually, Ginny was actually involved in whatever incident turned the collective consciousness to her; she didn’t get to watch it happen on local TV. To be picked up nationally by God knew how many stations, too.

That was exactly what she witnessed then, though. As one, Ginny Baker and her career .107 batting average popped into each and every reporter’s, and everyone watching too, mind. It couldn’t have been more obvious if they were all in a comic book, one common thought bubble floating above their heads.

It was no different for Mike, though he clearly didn’t find the prospect of Ginny Baker hitting an honest to God home run as amusing or baffling as everyone else. He frowned at the gathered press, looming over the table like it was all that was keeping them safe from his ire.

Pretty effectively, it cut off the few burbles of laughter that had sprung up in the room.

Blown up in glorious HD, head about as big as his ego made it seem, Mike Lawson’s unimpressed look did something similar—she definitely didn’t want to laugh at that serious, intent face—but very, very different to Ginny.

*Really make sure to disinfect this bike seat,* she thought through a haze, shifting her weight as Mike-on-the-screen—and Mike-in-real-life, just a few floors away—licked his lips and leaned down to the microphone before him.

“Oh, yeah,” he affirmed, low and rumbling and probably not intentionally directed right towards every fantasy Ginny’s ever had. “Homers from the entire team before the end of the season.” Then, before anyone could prompt an incentive, Mike, by luck or design, stared right into the FSSD camera, and by extension, Ginny’s eyes in the cardio suite and proved he really had lost his mind.

“Oh, you’ll shave the beard.”

The thing was, there was no way Mike was serious. Even if he weren’t preternaturally attached to that shrub growing from his face, there was no way he really thought he could get the entire bench and bullpen to hit a homer.

In less than a season.

Sure, he’d had some time with most of the team as a “Special Instructor” out in Peoria, mostly
hanging around the batting cages—which, as a side note, meant Ginny saw him only rarely during Spring Training; and that hadn’t stung at all—but he was coming into his new job almost six weeks into the regular season.

As far as Ginny knew, no team had ever had every member of their 25-man roster record a home run. Even if she weren’t the obvious weak link at the plate, there was no way the entire bullpen—seriously, all those relievers—could even get on base, let alone hit an actual homer.

Mike had to be joking.

Except.

He really wasn’t acting like it was a joke.

Within a week, he’d called the entire pitching staff into the cages to go over the basics. Mechanics and timing and patience. Things Ginny hadn’t heard from a coach since she was in high school, honestly. Not just because it had been that long since anyone really bothered to get her to do more than slap bunt or try for a walk. Which, of course, wasn’t to say Ginny didn’t spend her fair share of time in the cages. There was nothing quite so satisfying as the crack of ash against leather and watching the ball sail away.

Except striking someone out looking, of course.

(And other things that Ginny did not miss as she continued to ride out her current dry spell.)

Anyway, she and the other pitchers humored their new coach. It wasn’t so unusual; new guy comes on staff and has to prove that he was worth the signing bonus by shaking up the clubhouse a little. Or trying to, anyway. Mike’d drop the homer thing once he settled into his new role on the team and realized it was a better use of his time and energy to focus on the position players.

Then, Sonny had to go and hit one.

It took everyone by surprise. (Sonny included. He’d stared in disbelief as his hit sailed over the wall before realizing he actually had to round the bases.) The sportscasters in the replays that looped ad nauseam in the clubhouse after the game were no exception.

“They’d been in the middle of reading the legal disclaimers when they noticed what was actually happening on the field.

“... may not be redistributed or broadcast without—”

“Would you look at that! Evers has taken an outside breaking ball and driven it up the right field line! That ball’s got some loft, it could carry! And it’s gone! Have a night, Sonny Evers!”

In the recording, the roar of the crowd nearly drowned out the commentators. In real life, it had been even louder. The home crowd screamed out their approval for the first home run hit by a pitcher all season.

Even the crowd’s clamor, though, was put to shame by the sheer riot in the Padres’ dugout.

Ginny wasn’t ashamed to admit that she’d nearly vaulted over the dugout fence in her excitement. She wasn’t the only one, either. At her side, Blip rattled the chain link while others rushed up, eager to watch Sonny trot around the bases. Once he reached home, he accepted a hearty smack on the ass from Omar and strolled back to the dugout, wide—and still entirely stunned—smile on his face.
The first to greet him was Mike, who couldn’t’ve looked prouder, grin splitting his bearded face as he greeted the pitcher back into the dugout.

(Which, Ginny was perfectly ready to admit, shouldn’t have made her feel jealous. The hug Sonny got, strong enough to lift him off his feet regardless of the strain on Mike’s back, on the other hand...

Okay, definitely not the time for that.)

The party didn’t stop until well after the game was over, a blow out in the Padres’ favor. Everyone’s bats really woke up after Sonny’s solo drive. And once they’d sent the Dodgers home in disgrace, no one wanted to go to bed. So they didn’t.

Why should they? It was a good day for the Padres. An even better one for the team’s new batting coach.

Which was probably why he wasn’t grumbling about staying out so late with his former teammates, leaning into the “old man” digs the way he had to get out of similar nights out in Arizona. Apparently, maintaining his elevated status over the team didn’t hold a candle to reveling in his success.

It was well past 1 AM when Ginny sidled up to Mike at the bar, enough alcohol in her bloodstream to make her think it was a good idea. It wasn’t like it was a bad idea, to be fair. Just wasn’t a good one, either.

Nonetheless, she climbed onto the empty stool next to his and ordered another round.

Before she could congratulate him, Mike turned to her, frowning.

“You’ve gotta work on getting your hands around faster.”

Ginny rocked back, brow furrowing. That was certainly not how she expected their first one-on-one interaction in months to start. “When I’m batting?” she checked, wondering if she’d somehow crossed from pleasantly tipsy to nearly plastered and was now losing the thread of her conversations.

He rolled his eyes. “When else? If you don’t get your hands around, there’s no way you’ll have time to follow through with your hips and generate enough power to get a ball over the fence.”

Mike looked so serious, so utterly sure of his advice, maybe she should have taken him seriously. She did not. Ginny tipped her head back and laughed, long and loud and, going by his expression when she finally managed to rein in her amusement and straighten up, more than a little obnoxious.

It’d been a long time since Ginny’d seen Mike look so affronted, and the expression pulled a last few giggles right out of her, by her laughing right in his face. Then again, this was the first time she’d done it since he officially became her coach.

(Which. That was a whole other discussion. That they also weren’t having.)

Apparently, as her coach, he wasn’t going to stop pulling her leg the way he had as her teammate. So, Ginny didn’t feel all that bad about laughing right in his face the way she had when he was hers.

Except. Maybe he wasn’t pulling her leg.

He frowned at her, his brow furrowing. “What’s so funny, Baker?”

“You really think you’re gonna get me to hit a homer?” she demanded.
“You better. I staked my professional reputation on it.”

It was Ginny’s turn to roll her eyes. “You staked your beard on it.”

“Same difference.” To him, it probably was. His beard had become such a symbol of his career, it wouldn’t feel right to see him on the field without it. Like he might not fit there anymore.

Then again, Ginny was more than happy to see how he fit other places without the beard. Or with it. She’d freely admit to not being particularly picky when it came to Mike.

Ginny shrugged, like that didn’t mean anything to her. “Well, you’ve heard my opinion on the beard. If you really wanted me to turn into a slugger, you’d offer to let me the one to shave it.”

“Baker, you and I know how you really feel about the beard.”

If they did both know, it hadn’t come from any kind of conversation.

(Even before he’d retired, he’d been good about leaving whatever wasn’t team-related between them unspoken. Even if Ginny thought that might change—had looked forward to that changing—once he did, she could honestly say she was glad it hadn’t. Not if he was going to retire as her captain only to come back as her coach just a few months later. Ginny didn’t mess around with teammates; that was doubly true for coaches.)

She squinted at him, unsure if he was really trying to start one, or he was just trying to sway her to his side. Well, if it was the second, he was wasting his breath. She was always on his side. If the first, this seemed like the worst time possible.

“Yeah,” she drawled, cutting off any opportunity to turn this into something it shouldn’t be. “I really feel like it’s got to go.”

“Tell him, G.”

It took all of Ginny’s not insignificant willpower not to jump at Blip’s voice at her shoulder. Neither she—nor Mike going by the wide-eyed surprise on his face—had noticed his approach or presence. They’d gotten too wrapped up in one another to notice anything or anyone else.

Somehow, she managed to grin at her friend, and her voice was steady as she replied, “Oh, I intend to.”

“Good. ‘Cause there’s no way he’ll find the next Mrs. Lawson with the mountain man look.”

A hysterical burble of laughter exploded out of Ginny’s chest without her permission. It was better, at least, than the thought that threatened to follow it: Maybe he already has.

Mike’s mouth flattened, his head shaking as Blip and Ginny laughed, Blip more sincere in his amusement. Even after the center fielder excused himself, drink in hand, Mike didn’t crack.

She nudged him with her elbow, which needed a little more attention two years down the line, but was holding up beautifully under the strain of full major league seasons.

“C’mon,” Ginny coaxed, finally back on familiar footing—if there was one thing she knew, it was how to cajole Mike Lawson out of his grouching—“you know it’s a little funny.”

“Yeah,” he agreed, sounding almost affable, “watching you sell yourself short’s hilarious.”

“Lawson,” she sighed, any impulse to giggle drying up as he frowned down at his drink, “I don’t
think I’ve ever hit a home run in my life—not in Little League or Legion or high school; definitely not in the minors—and I probably never will. But what does it matter? I still got called up. I’m still a starting pitcher for a Major League Baseball team. Seriously, who cares?”

“I do.” Mike shook his head, unappeased. “You might be satisfied with that, but I’m not. I’m your hitting coach and if I say you’re gonna hit a Homer, the only thing you need to ask is ‘How far?’ Got it?”

If Ginny’s salute was a shade south of respectful, she didn’t think anyone would blame her.

(She certainly didn’t. She was already planning to blame it on the beer.)

Judging by the reluctant quirk to Mike’s mouth, she didn’t think he did, either.

If Ginny had thought that her conversation with Mike would have broken the seal on their working relationship, she was both right and wrong.

True, Mike didn’t seem to avoid her and situations that left them alone as studiously as he had when he first started, but it wasn’t as if he was seeking her out now, either.

Which was just fine by Ginny, okay?

At the very least, it was probably safer.

And anyway, she hadn’t been kidding when she told Mike there was no way she was going to hit a Homer. Not even at Wrigley on a really windy day. Mike would just have to come to grips with losing the beard when the season was over.

It wouldn’t even be Ginny’s fault. Even if she didn’t add a dinger to her stats, there was no way Mike could get all 25-plus Padres on the home run train.

Except...

After Sonny’s shocker of a bomb, it didn’t seem like everyone else was so skeptical. In fact, it seemed to open the floodgates. Suddenly, Ginny’s quiet evenings in the cages or the lanes weren’t nearly so meditative; everyone wanted to get their cuts in, hungry for a Homer of their own. And some of them even got one. Javanes and one of the new infielders joined Sonny in the Homer club in short order, and soon everyone with an empty HR column for the year was clamoring for Mike’s help.

Which he was all too happy to give and Ginny was all too happy to ignore.

And that was easier said than done, but she was nothing if not resourceful. Mike was a creature of habit, and Ginny knew all of them. She knew he preferred morning to evening workouts and liked smaller audiences when he was tweaking his technique. He was easy enough to avoid.

He seemed to realize it, too. The first time Mike showed up with one of the rookies while Ginny was in the cages, he’d offered her a victorious nod, like he’d beaten her at something, which she guessed he had. Since he kept his focus firmly in his own cage, Ginny was willing to let him have it. So, she turned her attention to the machine and the heft of the bat in her hands.
She worked into a good groove, nailing a few line drives into the corners of the net. A fine sheen of sweat had collected on her brow and in the small of her back, but Ginny was feeling good, like maybe this was the year she cleared the infield. A home run was still absurd, but a double wasn’t. She’d be happy with a double.

Of course, not everyone would be.

“Stop dropping your elbow, rookie!”

“Huh?”

“Not you,” Mike snapped at the poor kid, making Ginny look back over her shoulder. Indeed, he wasn’t talking to him, instead staring down Ginny with a considering frown. When he realized he had her attention, he squinted and smirked—which really shouldn’t have set her cheeks on fire. But there she was, blushing in the middle of the batting cages like she was back in high school and the captain of the varsity team had just winked at her from across the field.

“Got something to say, Lawson?” she demanded, smacking the button to turn off her machine.

“Yeah,” he said, which was quite the change. He hadn’t had much to say to her since last season. “You aren’t gonna be hitting any bombs if you keep dropping your elbow.”

“I’m not gonna be hitting bombs, regardless,” Ginny threw back, ducking out from under the netting. She’d meant to hit for another fifteen minutes, but her mind wasn’t in it anymore. “Don’t work the rookie too hard, okay?”

Before anyone could get in the last word, Ginny was out the door and headed safely home.

Which didn’t, as she found out later that evening, mean that the matter was closed.

“You also need to start working on your launch angle.”

Ginny blinked and, because she was the only person around to see, actually pulled the phone she’d unthinkingly answered away from her ear to check that it really was “Mike” displayed on the screen; she didn’t think she’d hallucinate his voice, but it didn’t hurt to check. Then, her gaze flicked to the clock on her bedside table. 11:47 glowed back at her.

It’d been a long time since Ginny’d had the chance to fall asleep with his voice as the last thing she heard. She wouldn’t say it’d affected her much, but sometimes it was awfully hard to fall asleep. And sometimes, she eagerly snapped up her phone when it buzzed only to discover it was just another notification from Facebook. It’d happened often enough that she stopped jumping to check every time her phone went off and stopped expecting Mike to be on the other end every time it was a call.

Which was probably why she was so slow on the uptake the one time it was.

“Uh, what?” she said, bringing her phone back to her ear. Then, once his demand registered, “Couldn’t this wait for the morning?”

“Nope.”

“No?” Ginny repeated, feeling more dazed by the minute. “What if I’d been asleep?”

“You’re never asleep before midnight,” he replied, utterly confident. Which only got Ginny more turned around. Once, she would have shown the same confidence about any one of Mike’s quirks, but she’d been rethinking that since he took a job with the Padres without any warning. Clearly, she
didn’t know him as well as she’d thought.

Chafing at that knowledge, Ginny dug in her heels. “Well, what if I was busy?”

“Are you?” he challenged.

Looking around her half-furnished apartment, Ginny wished that she was. She wished that she had anything other than SportsCenter highlights and her empty bed to look forward to. She definitely wished she had someone to join her in bed.

(Whether that was because she wanted to prove Mike wrong or just wanted him was something of a toss up.)

Setting her jaw, she had to admit, “No.”

Mike huffed, and there was another sound undercutting his irritation. The rustling of paper, maybe? Had he not left the park yet? Or was he at home, sprawled on that big ass sectional in his living room, still working?

It wasn’t hard to imagine; he’d always preferred hard copies of heat maps when he could get them. The problem with letting even that bit of imagination loose, though, was that it wasn’t inclined to let itself be reined back in. So, now, Ginny was faced with the mental image of Mike Lawson frowning down the phone at her, covered in stacks of scouting reports and not much else.

God, this dry spell was going to kill her.

Flapping a hand in front of her suddenly warm face, Ginny listened as Mike repeated himself. “Good. Then let’s get back to your launch angle, Baker. I’ve been going over your tape, and you really need to work on your launch angle.”

She scoffed. “You never worried about that shit.”

“Yeah, cause I’ve got about a hundred pounds of muscle and fifteen years of experience on you.”

Funny enough, a hundred pounds of muscle and fifteen years of experience on her sounded pretty great. All up on her.

She bit her lip and suppressed a groan. Their phone calls didn’t used to be like this. Sure, she’d harbored plenty of un-professional thoughts about Mike then, but they’d never threatened to overwhelm her like this. She’d let her defenses lapse in the time since Mike was her teammate and this was routine.

“You know you’ve opened yourself up to about a million old man jokes, right?”

Mike didn’t bother to suppress his groan. Ginny knew it was a sound of exasperation rather than—Well. But that didn’t stop it from punching right into her gut and pooling warmly between her thighs.


“Can you restrain yourself?” he asked, almost like he knew exactly what thoughts were racing through her mind.

Ginny remained silent. It seemed safer.

Mike chuckled, and Ginny’s eyes squeezed shut. “I’m taking that as a, ‘Yes, Mike. Now, tell me all
your baseball wisdom.”

She couldn’t help the laugh that burst out of her mouth. It was too loud probably, too fucking delighted by the prospect of Mike joking with her again, but Ginny didn’t care.

Just like she didn’t care when Mike’s low laugh echoed across the line, too. Sure, it sounded nice melding with hers and brought vividly to mind how many countless hours they’d done just this—shot the shit and laughed and talked about anything and everything—before Mike had to go and retire and then come back as her god damn coach, but she didn’t care about it.

After swallowing down the lump in her throat, Ginny said, “You sure you can remember any of it? I hear the mind’s the first thing to go.”

His eye roll was practically audible, but he was still laughing. “Thought you were gonna show some restraint.”

“I was,” she agreed, though she’d made no such assurances. “But when you leave me that kind of set up...”

Mike barked out another laugh, this one jolting right into the middle of Ginny’s chest where it lodged between her lungs and refused to move. That had to be why she felt so simultaneously warm and aching; he’d stabbed her in the gut. And then, he twisted the knife when his voice, dripping honey and affection rang into her ear again: “God, why do I even put up with you?”

“Because it’s your job.”

A long silence followed Ginny’s jab. Maybe because there was a little more venom in it than she would have intended if she’d even intended to say it in the first place. Maybe because he hadn’t heard. Maybe because he had and was pretending that he hadn’t.

Maybe Ginny imagined the sigh that preceded his words, too.

“It is my job,” Mike said, as inscrutable as she’d ever heard him.

“Which you had to take because, what? The car dealerships weren’t enough to keep you occupied?”

“There’re only so many ad spots a guy can film,” he joked. Which didn’t do nearly as much to soften Ginny as his next defense. “Plus, I didn’t have you to boss around at the dealerships.”

Ginny’s eyes slid shut as she absolutely didn’t revel in the first half of that sentence. She was still indisputably annoyed that he’d done this; he’d shoved whatever was brewing between them to the back burner yet again. But, God, if she didn’t melt at the mere suggestion that he’d missed her.

“Hate to break it to you,” she said, her eyes still shut but her voice steady, “but you still don’t have me to boss around, Lawson.”

“Oh,” Mike chuckled, doing terrible, terrible things to Ginny’s insides, “we’ll see about that.”

It did get easier.

Not the whole “hot for coach” thing—which remained an absolute minefield, even if Ginny got a
little better at avoiding the traps—but everything else.

(Which, she realized, wasn’t actually saying all that much.)

Once Ginny got used to having Mike around again, it was easier.

It wasn’t that they’d avoided one another once he started his new job, but they definitely had. If the past three years had been spent drifting slowly together, learning each other, smoothing out one another’s rough edges with easy camaraderie and the promise of something more, this season was like they’d been tossed ashore, exposing an entirely new set of rough edges. Ginny wasn’t sure how they fit together anymore.

She was pretty sure Mike didn’t, either; he was just better at faking his way through it.

Where she would have been tentative, he now charged forward, scheduling one-on-one sessions in the batting cages and refusing to act like maybe time spent alone—when it was so much harder to deny that there was... something pulling them together—wasn’t the best idea.

It wasn’t even a good idea, but Ginny wasn’t going to be the one to point that out.

Because like it or not, Mike Lawson was a man on a mission; he wouldn’t listen even if she did say something.

Suddenly, as if he hadn’t spent months avoiding her, what felt like all of her spare time was spent being dragged down to the batting cages for another session with the Padres’ batting coach. Between working on her swing, her timing, and getting more than a little sick of the sound of a baseball thudding against the backstop as her bat swung through empty air, all under Mike’s watchful eye and with his constant chirping in her ear, it was pretty much sink or swim.

And Ginny had no intention of letting this drown her.

It would help if Mike reserved his coaching for their appointments in the cage, of course, but that was always going to be a long shot. He thought too highly of himself—and even when she was thoroughly sick of him, Ginny had to admit that ego wasn’t wholly unwarranted—to limit his wisdom-sharing to a few days a week. He’d pop up where she least expected him, in the video room or cardio suite as she prepped a start, dropping into the open seat next to her on the plane the way he did when they were just teammates. And when he sensed that she’d start swinging for him instead of the fences, he’d make himself scarce. Though he made sure his presence was still felt; Ginny would find post-its in her changing room reminding her to hold her bat steady or video of her swing airdropped onto her tablet or diagrams of strength building exercises tucked into her backpack.

If she ever caught him at it, she’d definitely read him the riot act, but Mike was apparently craftier than that. As it was, Ginny had a steadily growing collection of notes covered in Mike’s scrawl tucked away in a spare set of cleats in her locker where no one would ever find them.

Because no matter how Ginny felt about him, Mike was still her coach. A fact that was distressingly easy to forget sometimes.

After all, he still had LAWSON and 36 emblazoned on his back, still sat next to her on the bench, still tried to tell her what to throw when she took the mound again, still sent her onto the field with a smack to her ass or a tug to her ponytail.

He was still her friend.

But now, he happened to be her coach, too.
Which was why Ginny shouldn’t feel about ready to combust when Mike stepped up behind her in the batting cage, nudging her hips into the position he wanted and circling an arm around her middle to keep her from shifting her weight back and forth as she anticipated the pitch.

He just wanted her to be a better player. It wasn’t an excuse to get close, put his hands on her.

(No matter how much she might want it to be.)

“You’ve got too much going on, Baker,” he said, standing steady and resolute behind her. There wasn’t much contact between them, just his his hand cupping her back elbow to hold it still and his elbow brushing against her waist. That didn’t stop Ginny from burning up, no doubt helped along by all the body heat he was putting off. “I know that brain of yours’s going a mile a minute, but there’s no reason every pitcher in the league needs to know it, too.”

“I don’t want to get locked up,” she protested once she’d worked some moisture into her dry mouth.

“You won’t. Just keep your knees loose. Springy.”

“Cause you know all about springy knees.”

“Shut up,” he jabbed, emphasizing the admonishment with a squeeze to her ribs, right where he knew she was ticklish.

On cue, Ginny yelped, jerking back into his chest and immediately wanting to stay there for about forever. He laughed, but only long enough for her to collect herself and step viciously on his foot.

Not viciously enough, though. “You don’t weigh enough for that to actually hurt,” Mike teased, before getting back to business. “Now focus.”

He stepped away and turned the pitching machine back on. Ginny did her best to keep her weight loaded on her back foot and her bat still over her shoulder as she waited for the ball to come.

Mike seemed satisfied with this progress, letting her get a few cuts in, a few hits sailing to the back of the nets with enough heat to probably earn her a double. A triple if she really legged it. No homers, but Ginny still thought Mike was overestimating his abilities as a miracle worker on that front.

He, though, clearly didn’t. After the third hard liner, he cut off the machine again, sending the dark cavern of the batting cages into quiet.

Ginny didn’t even have time to turn on him to demand what was wrong now before he stepped back into her bubble, his warmth leeching into her back and bare arms. His hands landed on her waist, drawing her up a little taller, her shoulders rolling back to brush against his chest.

“Closer. We work a little on your launch angle, and I think we’ve got something.”

“Maybe if I put on about forty pounds of muscle, too,” she snorted, doing an admirable job at pretending all of this was totally normal.

“You think I don’t know exactly how much you can bench? You’ve got more than enough muscle to knock one out of the park.”

“Then explain why I’ve never hit one before.”
“It’s all about the timing,” he murmured, right in her ear, hands sliding down to find a home on her hips.

If they were anywhere else, if they were anyone else, it would’ve been a clear signal. But when had things ever been clear between Ginny Baker and Mike Lawson?

Ginny needed a little clarity in her life.

“Are you putting the moves on me?” she demanded, half laughing, half holding her breath and hoping it was true.

“What moves?” he scoffed, not even bothering to step away or take his hands off her. If anything, his grip only tightened and the fire in her belly only burned brighter.

“Don’t play dumb.” Ginny almost added, “It’s not cute,” but she had yet to find a look on Mike that wasn’t cute.

“Not playing. And believe me, Baker,” Mike murmured, right in her ear and not doing anything to convince her, “when I put the moves on you, you won’t need to ask. You’ll know.”

Ginny froze at that, bat still hovering over her back shoulder. Almost breathless, she murmured, “Yeah?”

The silence before Mike’s returned, “Yeah,” was heavy.

She couldn’t do this with him at her back anymore. Lowering her bat, Ginny turned, still in the circle of Mike’s arms. He didn’t relinquish his grip on her, making the hem of her shirt ride up and letting his fingertips settle onto her bare skin. She pushed down the shiver that wanted to crawl up her spine and instead made herself look straight into his eyes and ask, “And when can I expect to know?”

Mike regarded her for a long moment, desire and greed and something that looked dangerously close to fuck it all flashing through his eyes. Ginny couldn’t look away, even if she’d wanted to. A few things started to come tentatively into focus: why Mike had avoided her for so long and why he was now working so hard with her to accomplish the impossible. Ginny knew all about denial and the many forms it could take.

She kept staring, even as the moment passed and he loosed a slow, controlled breath as he shook his head.

“I’m your coach, now. We shouldn’t—”

“Yeah,” Ginny agreed, her gaze dropping to his lips and thoroughly undermining the sentiment.

A wry smile unfurled across that mouth, making her feel somehow warmer than she already was. “How’s this?” Mike offered, his familiar voice an entirely unfamiliar caress. “I’ll give you a taste of my moves, but only after you hit your first homer.”

Ginny couldn’t help but laugh, even around the hitch in her breath. She leaned her forehead against his shoulder, her own shaking helplessly in her amusement. Of course, she still took the opportunity to breathe in his familiar scent, sweat and apples and leather, while she was there; she was hysterical, not stupid. “You’re awful,” she complained, even as her nose rubbed against his collarbone and his grip on her tightened.

“You like me anyway.”
“Yeah,” she agreed. It wasn’t even a fraction of the truth, but was still enough to make Mike’s heart pound. She could feel it beating away against her forehead. “But who’s always telling me I’ve got terrible taste?”

“You do,” he grumbled, fingers spreading across the back of her hips, just above the swell of her ass. It took probably too much effort for Ginny not to shift, raise herself just enough so those hands she’d spent so much time considering and watching and learning could actually hold her the way she wanted. The way she thought he wanted, too. “What else would explain all the grape soda?”

Ginny lifted her head from the crook of Mike’s neck to look him straight in the eye. “Lay off the grape soda, old man.”

“Old man who’s gonna school you on how to hit for power,” he teased, finally releasing her and going back to the control panel for the machine. “Now, let’s get back to it.”

She took a deep breath, keeping her feet planted in the batter’s box. No matter how much Ginny wanted to follow him, she couldn’t. Not yet.

So, she turned back to the plate, heaved her bat over her shoulder, and dug in. Saving the beard hadn’t been that enticing of an incentive, but getting a sample of Mike Lawson’s legendary moves? Ginny would do much worse than swing big for a chance at that.

And, one day, more.

“All right, Lawson. Let’s do this.”

Ginny was riding high. Her heart was still pounding, hours after all the action had gone down. It was a miracle she’d managed to cool it on the mound, centering herself to throw a solid game.

Then again, she probably could have given up ten runs and the world would’ve forgiven her.

Because today, Ginny Baker, first woman in MLB, trailblazer and icon and role model to millions, had just passed yet another milestone.

She’d hit the first home run of her career.

Yeah. She still couldn’t quite believe it.

And, okay. It didn’t leave the park. It came pretty close, knocking hard into the wall out in left field, just inches away from the tip of the Rockies’ outfielder’s glove. He went down, a little stunned by his rare miss, and the center fielder had to scramble to get into the corner and pick up the ball.

He got there just as Ginny caught sight of Rogers at third giving her the sign to hold up. She was close enough that there was no need to get down in the dirt; she could come in standing up.

She definitely did.

She also definitely blew through the stop sign.

Ginny was nothing if not a pragmatist; even as she ran, she knew she was unlikely to hit something so close to home run this season, let alone the rest of her career.
There was also the fact that she was getting really sick of ignoring the fact that she wanted to put her hands all over Mike Lawson. And experience his on her without any talk about using her hips to generate power.

Okay, there could be some talk about that. Just as long as it didn’t happen in the batting cages.

Well, actually, the cages had grown on her in a weird way. Something about the quiet and the dark and the rhythm of the pitching machines. And, to be totally honest, the way Mike kept finding reasons to get her down there alone and kept finding ways to flirt with that line they weren’t crossing. It probably wasn’t good to develop some kind of Pavlovian response to somewhere she worked, but damn if Ginny didn’t feel her heart speed up and her thighs clench at the sight of all those nets.

All of which swirled through her mind as Ginny rounded third and barreled towards home.

Somehow, her vision expanded, both zeroed in on the catcher setting himself up to tag her out once he got the ball and widened to the entire stadium: the screams from the stands, her team hanging over the dugout fence as they watched, and, of course, Mike hovering at the top of the steps, arms straining as he clutched the railing to keep himself from storming the field.

His mouth was moving, too.

“Ginny, down! Get down!”

That, even more than the defending catcher’s eyes turning away to track the throw coming in, cut through the haze, pulling Ginny fully into the present.

Without thinking too hard about it, she pitched herself forward, arms outstretched as she skidded over the dirt and clay.

Since just a few seconds later, the umpire called, “Safe!” she must have dodged the tag and gotten her hand down on the plate, but she couldn’t say for sure how it had happened. Ginny lay stunned in the dirt for just a second before bounding up, grin bright and triumphant. Somewhere between second and third, she’d lost her helmet, and she did not look forward to scrubbing the grit out of her hair, but that was a worry for later.

At the moment, she had a team celebration and a beaming batting coach to join.

Even now, hours after the game, it was still a worry for later.

Ginny had yet to take a shower. She’d managed to scrub her face clean before getting sucked into the gaggle of reporters after the game. An ESPN crew had shown up to cover post-game press on top of the usual local broadcasters, so she’d had plenty to juggle.

Honestly, though, as cheerful a face as she presented to the press, Ginny was only interested in talking to one person.

One person who’d made himself pretty scarce, it seemed. Luckily, Ginny knew just where to find him.

Not that he made it all that hard.

“So,” Ginny drawled, leaning up against the doorway to Mike’s office. They didn’t spend much time in there, for good reason. Why linger on the fact that he was her actual coach and more off-limits than he’d ever been as her captain any more than they had to? But lingering on the threshold as she
was, she had a chance to take it in. All the Padres gear on the shelves, the parade of Mike Lawson bobbleheads on his desk. He’d hung the picture from their Wild Card win last season behind his chair, the one where he’d crushed her to his side, face so close to her that it looked like he’d kissed her hair. It’d felt like it, too. “Dunno if you saw, but I hit a homer.”

Mike looked up from the stack of reports that he probably was only pretending to read. Leaning back in his chair, looking completely at ease—and how was that fair when Ginny was so keyed up she could barely stay in her skin? He smiled, a little sardonic but a lot devastating. “That was a triple and an error.”

“The official scorer would disagree with you there.”

“Did Billy give it to you?” he asked, like he didn’t know full well what had gone down in the official scorebook.

Ginny Baker’s first home run.

She nodded anyway, unable to keep a grin from spreading across her face. She’d been smiling since she crossed home plate, hard enough to make her cheeks ache.

This one, though, didn’t hurt at all; it was just for him.

He had the good sense to look more than a little awed. Still, Mike eventually managed to blink, clear his throat, and say, “Well, he’s always had a soft spot for you.”

“I don’t care about his soft spot.”

“Good to know. It’ll break his heart, but,” his lips quirked, cheeks rounding even as his eyes roved hungrily over her form, “good to know.”

Taking that as her cue, Ginny stepped into the office, shut the door behind her, and began to advance. Mike didn’t protest.

Good.

In the hours since nearly knocking one out of the park, Ginny’d come to a few realizations.

1) There was no point in pretending she didn’t want Mike Lawson. She did. She wanted him more than she’d wanted almost anything else in her life.

2) She was sick of waiting to have him. To hell with timing. Ginny’d already done the impossible, again and again. What was adding a dash of the inadvisable on top of it?

3) So, she wouldn’t.

Mike swiveled in his chair to follow her path as she rounded his desk, his eyes locked on her every move. Ginny stopped with only a bare few inches separating her knees from his.

“So?”

“Huh?” He blinked, shaking off whatever had turned his eyes dark and hungry.

Ginny’s grin took on a wicked edge, dangerous enough to make Mike’s Adam’s apple bob.

“I seem to remember being promised something once I hit my first home run,” she said, her knee jogging forward to rest against his. As one, their eyes turned down to that one point of contact before
olting back up to tangle together. Drawn as she was into Mike’s gaze, Ginny still had the presence of mind to finish, “But I think I’d like a different reward.”

Mike frowned, faint. “You would?”

“Yeah. I want more than a taste. I want you.”

Dumbstruck wasn’t quite enough to describe the expression that took over Mike’s face at that confession. But Ginny only got a glimpse of it before he was surging out of his seat and scooping her into his arms. So much more than their knees were touching now. He deposited her on his desk, easily muscling into the space between her spread legs as his hands roamed desperately over her body. Ginny settled for tucking her feet around the backs of his thighs, her fingers curling into his sweatshirt. To keep him close.

“You’ve got me,” he breathed, bristly cheek brushing against hers. Too bad he might still have to shave it. Ah, well. It’d grow back. “You’ve always had me, Gin.”

She turned her face to his, seeking out his lips. “Then show me.”

He huffed a laugh, too sexy for words. “So impatient,” he chided, trailing a kiss across her high cheekbone. Okay, maybe she really, definitely wanted the beard to stay put. Well, if anyone could whip this team into shape, it was Mike.

Not that Ginny was going to tell him that.

“Are these your moves?” she teased, arching into him to enjoy the solidity of Mike’s chest against hers. “I thought you said I’d know—”

He cut her off, and yes. He was absolutely right. Ginny definitely did not need to ask if this was Mike Lawson putting the moves on her.

She just knew.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry Rachel for sitting on this for approximately forever!! I wanted to do the idea justice. I'm, uh, not sure that I did, but I had fun anyway.

What do you think: does Mike win the bet, or does the beard have to go? As always, I'd love to hear what you thought!
some kick-ass to it

Chapter Summary

anonymous: how about a semantics issue w/ the twins telling someone that their aunt and uncle got married? Or Mike and Evelyn sibling cuteness?

and

monkshoodr: Mike’s first day as a WAG

Chapter Notes

chapter tags: Evelyn POV, established relationship, secret relationship, formerly known as WHAGs Club, follow up to the moral comments of the neighbors

chapter title: John Mulaney quote, "‘My wife’ just has some kick-ass to it, you know?"

See the end of the chapter for more notes

In theory, children, no matter how well behaved, were not allowed in the Padres Suite. The Padres Suite and its perfect view of the field was the realm of bigwigs and owners and the WAGs who didn’t have offspring to supervise. The ones who did could “enjoy” the family room down off the clubhouse.

In practice, Evelyn Sanders did not care.

She was no fool. She knew that leaving her two thirteen-year-olds—God, she was the mother of teenagers; how messed up was that?—unattended in a Major League stadium, even in the shelter of the Padres family room with its dedicated attendants/babysitters, was a recipe for disaster. Her boys might not be typical troublemakers, they made sure not to ever get caught at the least, but Evelyn wasn’t about to give them more leeway than they deserved.

They could work and scheme for their chances at mischief the way Evelyn had. It would build character or something.

Anyway, it was Opening Day. Marcus and Gabe deserved to see their dad take the field from the best seats in the house. Plus, it wasn’t every day that they got to skip school and watch their honorary aunt pitch in her first home opener.

If they got into trouble up here, at least she’d know what it was right away.

That was her intention, anyway.

Of course, Evelyn’s vision of trouble was pretty tame. She knew her boys; maybe they’d spill something on the new carpeting or demolish the appetizer spread in an effort to fill the yawning abysses of their stomachs. At worst, their newly gangly limbs would send them crashing into something and there’d be a spot of property damage. She could handle that. Evelyn herself had done
much worse, not that she’d ever let them know that.

What she hadn’t imagined, though, was that the twins would entangle the General Manager of the San Diego Padres in their nonsense.

She really shouldn’t have underestimated them.

She also probably shouldn’t have taken her eyes off of them, not even for a second. However, she’d been a little distracted by Mike Lawson swaggering out onto the field to make his first ceremonial pitch as a retired man. Evelyn had promised Ginny she’d have a full report on his performance after the game, and she intended to keep her word.

Watching from the outdoor deck, Ev had an excellent view of Mike’s delivery to Blip—a little high, but nothing to be embarrassed over... if he weren’t an ex-professional athlete; as it was, Evelyn planned to roast him mercilessly for failing to execute an easy fastball in the zone at the first possible opportunity—and the manful hug they shared out on the mound before posing for pictures. Evelyn didn’t bother trying to get a picture of her own; it definitely paid to be friendly with the team photographer.

She turned to head back inside only to run straight into Oscar Arguella, Gabe and Marcus trailing—guiltily if she wasn’t entirely off base, and Evelyn Sanders never was—along behind him. Casting a cursory, critical eye over the Padres General Manager for any sign of foul play, she offered him a semi-apologetic smile.

“I hope these two aren’t getting underfoot.”

Her teenagers rolled their eyes, but Oscar just laughed, flashing a pearly white smile. If he didn’t hold the entirety of her husband’s future and career in his strong, manicured hands, Evelyn would probably like him more. She’d always had a weakness for a pretty face, and his face was one of the prettiest. Also, she’d seen pictures of Arguella back in his playing days; he’d been a fan of a snug fit to say the least.

“No, no,” he assured, tucking his phone into his breast pocket. His hands seemed strangely empty without it. “We were just talking about the wedding. I didn’t realize Blip had a sister.”

“He doesn’t,” she replied. Then, as the rest of his words sank in, Evelyn froze. “Wedding?”

Oscar didn’t bat one long, naturally curled eyelash. “Your boys said their aunt got married over the offseason? It must have been your sister. Congratulations.”

“Thank you,” she murmured, eagerly smoothing over the fact that her own sister had been married for three years already. The only offseason wedding any of the Sanderses cared about, they hadn’t even been invited to. Not that Ev harbored any lingering bitterness over that. Both of her sons sheepishly avoided her suspicious glance. Evelyn smiled, resisting the urge to drag her boys away by the ears. “That’s so nice of you to say.”

Oscar smiled, polite as ever, but he was already reaching for his phone again. He glanced at the screen and excused himself, leaving Evelyn and her progeny alone.

Without her even having to say anything, they both started babbling out excuses and accusations.

“It wasn’t my fault! Marcus—”

“Gabe was totally the one who—”
“—said he was sick of looking at wedding pictures! I didn’t do anything!”

“—told him it was our aunt, like that made it any better! And you did, too, you liar!”

“Enough.” Evelyn didn’t even need to raise her voice for her teenagers to fall silent, and not just because they knew to listen to their mother. On the one hand, it was a little comforting to know her boys couldn’t keep a secret if their lives depended on it. On the other, who had even raised them? “I told you very specifically not to tell anyone about that wedding. And what did you two nearly do?”

“Tell someone about the wedding,” they mumbled in that funny twin-sync they still sometimes channeled.

“Exactly. Now if you can’t follow directions, then—”

They were saved from the rest of her threat by the entrance of Mike Lawson into the suite. Marcus and Gabe took their chance and made a quick escape. Their mother didn’t stop them; she had other fish to fry.

Even at a solidly over-the-hill age—Ginny’d cackled a few years ago when she’d ordered his birthday cake with Over the Hill You Go piped across it in cheery blue; since Evelyn had wheedled a firsthand account of the ways in which Ginny had eventually made up for that dig, she didn’t feel all that bad for thinking it now—and with his career firmly behind him, Mike Lawson knew how to command a room.

In all his years as a Padre, he couldn’t have had much occasion to come up to the suites, let alone watch a game from one, but that didn’t stop him from looking utterly at home as he greeted his former teammates’ wives and girlfriends and parents. He cheerfully chatted, looking more at ease in retirement than anyone who knew him would have expected.

Of course, no one who knew him knew the source of that ease quite as well as Evelyn Sanders. Leisurely, like he hadn’t spotted Evelyn when he first walked in, Mike made his way through the room, drifting closer and closer to the balcony where she waited impatiently.

“Ev,” he greeted, jovial enough in spite of the wicked glint in his eye. He was up to something, and Evelyn was pretty sure she didn’t like it.

“Mike,” she said anyway, bussing an air kiss to his cheek. “The boys almost spilled the beans.”

His smile didn’t drop, but he did dart a quick glance around the room. Oscar hovered several feet away, but only offered a distracted smile and nod. Since his attention was all on his phone call and he hadn’t gone apoplectic with surprise, it was a safe bet that Mike and Ginny’s news was still safely contained. “They did, huh? I thought you told them it was a secret.”

“Of course I did,” she returned, waspish. Like she would be so careless.

“Then you must be slipping, Ev,” Mike teased, his shoulders dropping an inch as he forced himself to relax. His grin was lopsided and, yes, Evelyn could admit, at least a little charming. She didn’t get the appeal for herself, but if it worked for Ginny... “Didn’t quite put the fear of God in them this time around.”

“It’s not my fault they need the fear of God in the first place. I mean, who had to go and get hitched without telling anyone?” Evelyn muttered out of the side of her mouth. She didn’t huff and cross her arms over her chest, but that was only because she didn’t want to crease this blouse; the silk was delicate and it was such a pain to iron.
Mike had no such reservations. His arms crossed and he frowned around the suite, dropping the prodigal son act. Still, there was no mistaking the twinkle in his eye when he muttered back, “C’mon, Ev. It’s not the ‘anyone’ that annoys you. It’s the ‘you.’”

“You’re damn right, Lawson,” she bit out. “I should’ve been at my best friend’s wedding.”

“I’m flattered.”

His shit-eating grin faltered when her elbow dug into his ribs, hard. “Don’t be. If Ginny weren’t so happy with her small, island wedding and the husband she got out of it, I’d have no problem teaching you some manners.”

“I think I’m past saving there.”

“Tell me about it,” she muttered, earning an eye roll from Mike. If he wasn’t careful, his face was gonna stick that way. It’d be so much easier to convince Ginny to leave him. Just so Evelyn could plan the wedding that her best friend deserved, of course. Because not even an unfortunate facial tic was going to be enough to permanently keep Ginny Baker and Mike Lawson apart.

Mike nudged her, far softer than she’d done to him. Lowering his voice as a few more Padres family members circulated out to the deck as the count to the first pitch wound down, he said, “You know we would’ve had you there if we could’ve. It wasn’t like we planned it this way.”

Evelyn would have to beg to differ.

She had seen the proposal pictures. (Every last one of them, which was the only way she’d allowed herself to even begin to be mollified when they broke the news.)

The pretty landscapes of pristine sand and sparkling water in Mike’s camera roll quickly gave way to his favorite subject: Ginny. Ginny laughing as she splashed through the waves. Ginny clutching her sunhat as an errant breeze threatened to toss it down the beach. Ginny shocked as Mike’s hand entered the frame, holding an unmistakable light blue box. Ginny turned away from the camera as she fought off tears, her hands pressed to her lips, incidentally showing off a gorgeous oval-cut diamond.

Then, of course, there was the slew of selfies where she pressed kiss after kiss to Mike’s dazed, elated, bearded face.

Ginny’d taken the phone back before Evelyn could get to anything really good.

(“You asked for the proposal, Ev,” Ginny had laughed, using her long arms to beat her friend at keep-away, “not what came after!”)

“I don’t care about you and Mike getting frisky,” she’d replied, mostly truthfully. “Now, show me the goddamn wedding pictures, Ginny.”)

Based on the time stamps, there were less than three hours between the proposal and Mike and Ginny walking out of some tiny Hawaiian chapel as husband and wife.

They looked good. Better than good. Happier than Evelyn had ever seen either of them, and she’d watched them win a World Series.

Still, she wasn’t going to budge on the real sticking point.

“You should’ve told me what you were going to do the minute you knew.”
“You were still pretending not to know Ginny and I were even dating,” he pointed out, so mildly it made her blood boil.

Evelyn ignored him. “You knew that you were going to pop the question. Just like you knew there was no chance you were coming home without walking down the aisle first.”

He sighed but didn’t deny it. Rubbing a big hand through his beard, which he had yet to get rid of in spite of all of Evelyn’s dropped hints, Mike asked, “Blip told you what I said to him when he found out about me and Ginny and he accused me of trying to use her to relive my glory days, didn’t he?”

“No,” she said, stubborn. Evelyn absolutely did know, but she wanted to hear Mike say it.

“I told him I wasn’t just sleeping with her.” Mike’s gaze had gone a bit hazy, a half smile playing over his mouth. “Just a minute with her was better than the best game I ever played, every homer I ever hit. And the minute she agreed, I was gonna marry her.”

Evelyn kept frowning.

Mike huffed, clearly expecting her to soften. Nice try, buddy, but Evelyn wasn’t the softie that her husband was. “It didn’t quite happen the minute she said yes—filling out a marriage license takes longer than you’d think—but I wasn’t gonna put it off if I didn’t have to. Besides, it wasn’t like Ginny was all that eager to wait, either.”

It was the way he thumbed at the discreet gold band on his left-hand ring finger, grinning sweetly behind that mountain man beard the whole time, that finally got Evelyn to melt. Just a little.

She was still annoyed, but she got it. She did. After all, she and Blip hadn’t exactly waited around to plan out a big, elaborate ceremony and reception. They couldn’t exactly afford it on a minor league salary and with two buns in the oven, but they didn’t really want to, either. They’d just wanted to be married, to start a life together.

“Fine,” she said, grudging even now. It wouldn’t do to have Mike thinking he could win her over this easily all the time. “I forgive you. But you’re still letting me plan the reception for whenever you two decide to come clean and you need to earn everyone else’s forgiveness.”

Mike chuckled. “Fair enough. Actually, I think that’ll be sooner than—”

The sudden uptick in noise all around the stadium should have been sign enough that something big was happening. Instead, Evelyn and Mike took a much quieter, if closer, cue.

“Oh, my word,” breathed Dusty’s mother, one hand flying up to her mouth.

Both Ev and Mike followed her gaze straight out to left field. More specifically, the Jumbotron towering above the second deck. There, blown up for all of Petco Park to see, was Ginny Baker taking the mound for the Padres home opener.

Only, she wasn’t just Ginny Baker anymore.

Crowded across her back, almost too many letters to fit, was her new name.

BAKER-LAWSON

As one, nearly every eye in the suite turned to the grantor of that second name on Ginny Baker’s jersey.
Mike Lawson just stood there, looking smug as hell. He didn’t quite tip his cap to the camera blowing his face up on the Jumbotron, but it was a near thing.

A polite smattering of applause broke through the Padres suite, punctuated by a few calls of “Congratulations!”

Oscar, on the other hand, looked anything but congratulatory. He abruptly ended his call, staring blankly out at the screen. His handsome features were arranged in something approaching a smile, though the fact that his face was also rapidly turning purple didn’t do much to project an aura of calm confidence. Clearly, he was struggling not to blow a gasket. Evelyn could almost sympathize. He pivoted to face Mike, the movement as slow and controlled as his smile was strained.

“Care to explain?” he asked, probably cursing the missed opportunities for PR more than anything else.

“Not much to explain. That’s my wife,” was Mike’s only response. He shrugged and looked away, but the proud, elated grin on his face made it pretty hard to pull off nonchalance.

Oscar closed his eyes, no doubt running through some kind of calming technique that only almost worked. At the very least, when he opened his eyes again, his color had become far less concerning. Probably because he accepted defeat. He shook his head as he turned from Mike, writing him off as a lost cause.

Naturally, his gaze fell right on Evelyn.

“Your sister’s wedding?” he sighed, sounding far too put-upon for a man who still looked the way he did.

Evelyn smiled, not even halfway apologetic this time, and shrugged. Oscar just shook his head again and went back inside, no doubt to start up the spin machine of the team’s PR office.

At her side, Mike snorted. “Does that make me your brother-in-law now?”

Her nose wrinkled as she thought the proposition over. Mike was too cool a customer to fidget as he waited, but Evelyn knew how to push his buttons as well as any sister could.

She hummed thoughtfully. “I guess there are worse things you could be.”

“Like what?” He grinned, and it really wasn’t such a wonder that Ginny was absolutely gone for him. Mike could be downright charming when he wanted.

“Competition,” Ev replied bluntly. “Don’t think that just because you were a Padre yourself that you have a leg up on me in elections for President of the WAGs’ charitable organization.”

“That doesn’t sound very inclusive,” he mused, smirk tucked into the corner of his mouth. Scratch everything Evelyn had thought about Mike’s charm. “Shouldn’t it be W-silent-H-AGs now?”

“Like you’d settle for anything silent,” she jabbed.

Mike barked out a laugh. “Fair point. What if we just agreed to be co-presidents? We could run this town, Ev.”

“It’s cute,” she said, patronizing and loving the sour twist it gave his face, “that you think I don’t already, Lawson.”
Still, she’d think about it. There were probably worse people to have as her right hand than Mike Lawson.

And after all, they were pretty much family.

Chapter End Notes

Leaving aside the fact that Evelyn would be livid to find out that she’d missed the wedding of the century, I do love that she’s loyal enough to continue to keep that secret. Though she’d also definitely make sure Mike knew how displeased she was to be excluded because she knows what she deserves. (And that’s being matron of honor at her best friend’s wedding.)

Let me know what you thought! (I swear I’m going to reply to comments soon. I appreciate each and every one of them!)
caught up in a dream

Chapter Summary

anonymous: ginny and mikes pool together ;)

Susan Rundell: a follow up to "we'll conquer them all"

Chapter Notes

chapter tags: new relationship; future fic; softcore smut/foreplay; follow up to "years have gone so fast," we'll conquer them all."

chapter title: "Wake Me Up" by Aloe Blacc

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

She wasn’t sure how, exactly, a day spent playing exactly zero baseball could be more tiring than the entire month of playoffs leading up to it, but there it was. Ginny was exhausted.

Her teammates probably were, too. They, at least, had the excuse of having been out all night celebrating the San Deigo Padres’ first World Series win, partying with the entire city.

Ginny’d been celebrating, too, of course; she’d just been more selective about who celebrated with her.

And her party hadn’t required staying up all night.

In all likelihood, she and Mike were the only Padres who’d gotten a good night’s sleep—or any sleep at all—before the first round of their victory press junket, but that wasn’t enough to keep her from yawning the whole way back from Petco. She was so tired, Mike didn’t even bother to tell her to unfurl her legs and get her shoes off the custom leather upholstery.

At least it was a shorter ride to Mike’s place than to hers. She didn’t have the time to fall asleep.

Not that she didn’t give it a good shot. Mike’s car smelled like him—leather and mint and home. Less so than the sheets she’d woken up in this morning, but enough to remind her of how good she’d felt wrapped inside them. It was hard not to let it lull her into unconsciousness. The gentle thrum of the engine and Mike’s fingers twined comfortably into hers didn’t help. He hummed tunelessly as he drove, his thumb sweeping over the back of Ginny’s hand.

Her eyes must have drifted shut at some point, the sun hanging low in the sky washing them with golden warmth, because the next thing she knew, the slight roughness of Mike’s beard on her face was drawing her back to awareness as his lips pressed against her cheek.

She turned into him without thinking, rising onto her knees to lean over the center console and draw him into their first kiss in hours.
That’d been the worst part of today. Ginny didn’t love doing press, but if answering the same questions and having flashbulbs go off in her face for six consecutive hours was the price for winning the biggest game in baseball, she’d gladly pay it. What really cost her was keeping her hands off Mike’s delicious backside—seriously, those jeans worked magic on his already tempting ass—and her dirty suggestions out of his ear. She was utterly aware that in spite of the fact that she’d woken up in his bed this morning, there was a lot she still had to learn about Mike Lawson.

Ginny was also utterly aware that if she opened that door, any sense of professionalism would go out the window. Their secret would be out before it had even begun. Mike had promised to be all hers once they’d navigated the media circus; she could wait that long.

Now, she was done with waiting.

Mike’s laugh, even though it was definitely at and not with her, lit her up. It was low and warm and she wanted to hear it every day for the rest of her life.

“C’mon, Gin,” he urged, lips brushing softly enough against hers to draw out goosebumps. “We can’t stay in the car.”

Ginny made a skeptical sound. She was pretty sure they could stay in the car at least as long as it took her to refamiliarize herself with the taste of Mike’s gum and the rub of his beard.

“C’mon,” he repeated with another chuckle. “I bet you’re starved by now.”

This gave her pause. Mike certainly wasn’t wrong—being on camera all day didn’t leave much time for grabbing a snack—which was the only reason Ginny followed his lead and got out of the car with minimal fussing. The fact that his arm looped easily around her shoulders as soon as she’d pressed herself into his side, the way she’d wanted to all day, certainly helped. Tangled together, they made their way into the house.

Unfortunately, they didn’t stay tangled together for long.

Once they hit the kitchen, he nudged her towards the stairs leading up to the pool deck.

“Trying to get rid of me already?”

It was a joke and it wasn’t. Ginny wasn’t sure the day would ever come that she was completely secure in the knowledge that Mike Lawson wanted her, no matter how true it was. How true she knew it was.

Doubt was a hell of a drug.

The reassurance otherwise, in the form of an eager, deep, wet kiss that threatened to steal her breath, was, at the very least, a nice side effect.

“Just,” Mike murmured, once he was absolutely sure she’d gotten the picture, “trying to get you out of my kitchen.”

If Ginny weren’t so dazed, she’d protest. Start one grease fire two years ago, and now she’d never be allowed to cook again. Or even hang around long enough to admire Mike’s easy familiarity with his kitchen, the way he sometimes whistled as he scrambled eggs or chopped garlic. One day, he’d let her stick around and help.

As it was, she simply laid another kiss against his mouth, giving his bottom lip a warning nip for good measure. Before he could get a good grip on her, give her a warning of her own, Ginny sidled
away. At least she got to admire the hazy look in his eye before she went.

“Anything I can do?” she asked, one foot on the stairs.

“Check and make sure there’s beer in the mini fridge?” he replied, already turning towards the pantry. “And don’t fall asleep on me. I’ve got plans for you, Baker.”

Ginny shivered at the heady promise in his voice and the intent look in his eye but began to climb before she could stick around and distract him from their dinner.

What? She was hungry.

And since her first task was completed easily—it’d been a while since Lawson invited the team over for beer and barbecue—Ginny had a lot of time to spend with her second if she didn’t want to go back down to the kitchen and cajole Mike into abandoning their dinner. Which she definitely would do if she let herself back inside.

Hungry or not, Mike was far more appetizing than whatever food he was whipping up.

But if she wanted to make it through whatever he had planned for her—another shiver raced down her spine at the memory of Mike’s rumbling voice—she had a feeling she’d need the energy.

So, Ginny did her best to stay awake.

It was a funny thing. On the one hand, she was exhausted. Between dealing with journalists and league officials, measuring every word that came out of her mouth to make sure it wouldn’t blow back on her or her team later, wouldn’t overshadow this monumental thing they’d done, she was ready to collapse. On the other, it felt as though energy and anticipation were dripping out of her pores, ready to send her bouncing out of her skin. It was no wonder. She hadn’t done much more than sit or stand around all day, smiling for cameras and nosy reporters. Sure, it was work. Just not the kind she was used to.

For a while, she paced, but that just made her want to pace right on down to the kitchen and sidetrack Mike thoroughly enough that by the end of the night, she wouldn’t be the only one capable of starting grease fires. So, Ginny lay down on one of the loungers.

Basking in the final rays of the setting sun, it was all too easy to let her eyelids droop, and from there, it would be even easier to fall asleep. Once she was asleep, Ginny was pretty sure she’d be down for the count. It’d be such a shame to put off Mike’s plans for another night. She forced her eyes open and searched for something to keep her conscious.

The pool glittered enticingly.

Before she’d quite thought it all the way through—she had no swimsuit, to say the least—Ginny was peeling off her press-friendly blouse and jeans, kicking out of her sneakers, twisting her carefully styled hair into a sloppy knot, and diving into the water.

A heated pool wasn’t quite the jolt to her system that Ginny was looking for, but it would do.

She glided along the tiled bottom for several long strokes, enjoying the way sunlight slanted through the ripples and the rest of the world fell away. Only when her lungs felt ready to burst did she pull hard for the surface and air. Once she’d gulped down her heaving breaths, Ginny settled into an easy rhythm; the pool was too short to swim real laps, but it was certainly long enough to keep her blood pumping and her body awake. It also let her bleed off some of the coiling energy that had built up over the day.
If Ginny also figured that a little exercise would be a good warm-up for whatever Mike had in store for her, that was between her and the water.

She lost track of the laps she’d swum and the turns she’d made, which was just fine. Almost every thought had drifted from her head, leaving only clarity to rival the water Ginny glided through.

Until a hand wrapped around her ankle.

In the middle of the ocean, or anywhere that wasn’t the clean saline of Mike’s pool, Ginny would have panicked. As it was, she simply turned over onto her back and pulled her knee up to her chest, towning her captor close.

Buoyed by the water, Mike wasn’t nearly the burden he would be on land. (There was also something to be said for the picture he painted, stripped down to his underwear like Ginny, the water doing nothing to hide the breadth of his chest or thick muscles in his thighs.) He floated toward her easily, letting his grip skate up her legs until his palms found the round, mostly bare, curve of her ass. Which, coincidentally left him close enough for Ginny to cross her ankles at the small of his back. She settled an arm around his bare shoulders for good measure, fingers combing into his wet hair.

“Hadn’t done enough work yet today?”

“You told me not to fall asleep. I always follow my captain’s orders.”

He snorted, but the jerk of his hips and the growing bulge in his boxers told Ginny he didn’t just find her teasing funny. Testing her theory, she rocked down, straight into a bulge that Ginny desperately wanted to become more familiar with. That earned her a low groan and a squeeze to her ass.

“Then here’s another one,” Mike said, wading over to the side of the pool and crowding her up against the wall. Ginny tried not to melt completely as his hips slotted perfectly against hers. Before she could take advantage of her new leverage, though, Mike’s grip was tightening on her waist and he was heaving her out of the water to deposit her on the deck. He followed just a second later, his chest and biceps rippling and glistening in the sun as he pushed himself up and onto dry land. “Come eat your dinner.”

Ginny had every intention of complying, but first...

Winding her legs around him again, she lay back and brought down Mike with her. It didn’t matter that they were lying on concrete and the November air was beginning to chill. Ginny was sun-drunk and affectionate with it. She wasn’t going to wait another second to get her hands and mouth on Mike Lawson.

Her hands only got a few seconds to explore the broad, wet expanse of his back, the muscles bunching under his skin, before he was heaving himself upright.

Ginny squinted up at him, feeling the beginning of a pout on her lips. Even though he looked good, wearing only his boxers and pool water, haloed all around by golden light, she would appreciate it much more if he were where she could do more than look.

“Dinner’s gonna get cold,” he said almost placidly, holding out a hand.

It was as if he didn’t even notice that she was lying there in her underwear—the pretty, lacy ones she hadn’t deliberately worn because she was sure she’d have a chance to show them off—practically begging him to do more than help her to her feet.

Except. Steady as Mike’s hand was, he couldn’t stop the roving of his eyes, the way they dragged up
the long line of her legs and tracked the curve of her waist, the rise and fall of her breasts. He certainly couldn’t hide the unmistakable bulge tenting the front of his boxers.

So, Ginny let him haul her upright, maybe stumbling a little on the landing to give herself a reason to drape herself over his chest. Mike made a low noise of pleasure, but he still drew her over to the couch where he’d already set up their dinner—frozen pizza and a couple of beers—and lit a few citronella candles. Once they were seated at each end of the couch, their legs extended into the middle, he picked up his phone and tapped a few times until low, soothing music started spilling out of the patio’s hidden speakers.

Ginny grinned at him. Mike avoided her gaze, biting into a piece of pizza more gruffly than was strictly necessary. From her corner of the couch, she toed at his thigh until he looked at her. The tips of his ears and tops of his cheeks had turned pink, like he was embarrassed to have been caught out. Like he didn’t think Ginny had realized he was a closet romantic years and years ago.

“Pulling out all the stops, huh, old man?” she asked, grabbing her own slice. He was right; she was hungry. Hungry enough that it was a miracle her stomach hadn’t rumbled and given him reason to laugh while she was trying to tease.

He rolled his eyes. “Yeah, ‘cause I know you’ve got such high standards.”

It wasn’t quite bitterness in the set of his mouth, but it was awfully close. Too close for Ginny’s comfort. So, she took her plate and set it on the ground next to her beer. Tucking her legs beneath her, she rose onto her knees and stared Mike down until he looked her in the eyes.

“I’ve got high standards where it counts,” she murmured, laying her hand on his ankle. It wasn’t enough contact, not when they’d opened the floodgates and Ginny knew the exact give and warmth of his skin against hers, but it would have to do. Her thumb brushed over the bony knob mostly because she couldn’t help herself.

His answering grin was neither bitter nor the cocky thing Ginny had learned by heart across sixty feet, six inches of baseball diamond. It was better. Mike pulled his foot in, bringing her hand with it.

“Oh, she could definitely do that.

Leaning forward, she planted her hands on either side of his hips and looked up at him through her eyelashes. He looked back, steady and patient and perfect. When she couldn’t stand waiting another moment, Ginny tipped her head back and laid a kiss on him. He cupped her face, only letting go once his tongue had swept into her mouth and he’d thoroughly explored every last inch of it.

It took a long moment for Ginny to open her eyes. When she did, she got a good view of Mike practically ogling her mostly unclothed body. He had a pretty spectacular view.

Something dark and hot ignited in her belly as his eyes slid up from her thighs, over her stomach and the pebbled peaks of her breasts, poking through the flimsy fabric of her bra. He didn’t stop there, though, continuing along her throat and plump, flushed lips. Mike blew out a wondering breath.

“God, you look good like this.”

“If you wanted me on my knees, all you had to do was ask,” she laughed, prowling up towards him. Dripping pool water as she came, Ginny was sure she painted a tempting fucking picture.

“Let’s get you flat on your back first.”
He didn’t, though. Just filled his hands with her jaw and ass as he pulled her in close and kissed her again. Apparently, Ginny wasn’t the only one jonesing for more skin-on-skin action. Like this, each dressed only in their damp underwear, it wasn’t hard to get.

She pressed her palms to his chest. Mike was obscenely warm. Even as the evening breeze chilled his wet skin, he radiated heat straight into her.

It threatened to burn her up, and Ginny didn’t mind one bit. Especially not as his hand dipped into the waistband of her underwear and seared his fingerprints into her backside. She rolled her hips, sending his fingers even further south, to the aching wetness—not just from their quick swim—between her thighs. The approving sound Mike made as they slipped between her folds rattled around her brain right alongside the electric pleasure that he was dragging out of her.

She groaned, her thighs going tight as a high wire.

“Fuck,” they breathed in tandem, though for very different reasons.

Ginny rocked back against Mike’s fingertips even as he withdrew them, leaving her even wetter than they’d found her.

“Mike,” she whined, grinding down against the only relief left to her: the stiff, hot bulge in his boxers.

He sputtered, but just for a second. “Let’s go in—”

Ginny shook her head. He’d started this out here, he could finish it, too.

She ducked down and licked a hot, desperate stripe up his chest, just catching the edge of his nipple. He cursed, white-knuckling her hips in an effort to get himself under control. Ginny just hissed, her mouth trailing up over his collarbone to the tendon in his shoulder. Mike’s bid for control went up in smoke.

In a flash, Ginny found herself flat on her back, just as he’d promised. Mike’s hips fit perfectly between her splayed thighs, the slight chill of their wet underwear no match for the fire burning between them.

“I’m not fucking you in my backyard,” he growled, though the shallow thrusts of his hips made her think it wouldn’t be so hard to convince him otherwise.

Which was exactly why Ginny batted her eyelashes and pouted, asking, “Not ever?”

Mike, rightfully, was quick to backtrack. “Not right now. Not for this.”

There was no question in her mind what Mike meant: their first time. Her romantic mess of a man wanted their first time to be special. He’d probably plotted out every move, every word, every breath that would eventually lead Ginny Baker into his bed. The thought sent a bright thrill running through her veins.

So, Ginny let her pout melt into an easy grin and ran her fingertips across his bearded jaw. “I don’t need a candlelit dinner, Lawson,” she assured him. “Don’t need the serenade.”

He flushed, eyes darting to the candles on the table. “Then what do you need?”

“Easy,” Ginny said, brushing a thumb over his lower lip. “Just you.”
His eyes went starry and dazed even as the brightest, truest smile she’d ever seen spread across his face. “You keep sweet talking me like that,” he murmured between messy pecks along her neck and cheeks, “maybe I will fuck you out here.”

She laughed but rolled out from under him and to her feet. Mike shifted to blink up at her, disheveled and debauched and looking hotter than she’d ever seen him. Much as she wanted to get right back on that couch with him, Ginny instead held out her hand to him.

“Can’t have you abandoning all those plans for me now, right?”

One wiggle of her fingers was all it took for Mike to slide his palm against hers and stand up. That was all it took for him to lead her into his house and into his bedroom and all the way to his bed. All it took for him to free her of her damp underwear as she did the same for him.

And, of course, all it took for him to lay her down on his bed and show her just how thoroughly he’d planned this.

Later—much later, it had to be said because Mike Lawson’s skills did not extend just to baseball and planning his future—Ginny found that she couldn’t bring herself to sleep. It wasn’t that she wasn’t tired, didn’t feel the delicious pull of sore muscles or the haze of post-orgasmic bliss.

For once, the insomnia wasn’t about worry or panic or overthinking. For once, she was so absurdly content, Ginny didn’t want to miss a second of it.

As if he could feel her gaze on him, Mike shifted on the mattress, drawing her close to his intoxicating heat.

“Go to sleep, Gin,” he grumbled, burrowing his face into her neck. His hands swept soothingly over her sides and stomach, lulling her into relaxation.

“Thought I had to stay awake for those plans of yours,” she murmured even as her eyelids fluttered closed and her arm tightened across his chest.

Mike hummed his agreement. “Tonight’s plans. You’ve gotta sleep to hear the rest.”

“The rest, huh?”

“In the morning,” he said, though it was distant, like he wasn’t wrapped tight around her. “I’ll tell you all about them in the morning.”

Ginny didn’t reply. She’d already fallen asleep.

Chapter End Notes

The final installment in this series is finally here! I hadn't really intended to write it, but the pool in Mike's weird house (or Mike's weird house in general) is basically my catnip, so here it is. I'd love to hear what you think, and thanks in advance for reading!
Mike couldn’t help the helpless, no doubt downright goofy smile that unfurled across his face when Ginny Baker lit up the screen of his phone. It didn’t matter that it was barely eight in the morning, he was in the middle of making breakfast, and just a second ago, he’d been annoyed to hear the damn thing even ring.

There wasn’t a time of day he didn’t want to hear from Ginny, and it didn’t happen so often that he was going to waste this chance.

Not, of course, that he was about to let her know that.

“Whaddya want, Baker?” he asked, phone balanced between his cheek and shoulder. He flipped his pancake with a practiced flick of his wrist. It was the offseason, okay? A man couldn’t live on scrambled egg whites and whole grain toast his whole life.

Still, those pancakes could wait for his favorite rookie.

The second he heard the panicked edge in Ginny’s voice, he knew that they definitely would.

“Lawson?”

He moved the pan off the burner. Automatically, a hand came up to hold his phone, like it would give him better control of the situation.

“Ginny?” he asked, heart already beginning to pound. And for good reason. She never sounded this shaky, this scared. Not even when she’d been in the hospital, her career hanging from the strength of her overworked tendons. Only something monumental could have her so unsteady. “What happened? What do you need?”

“I lost one of them,” she practically hissed, teetering right on the edge of panic. Mike was right there with her.
“One of what?” he demanded, already abandoning the kitchen and his breakfast in search of his keys. The more information he had before he left, the better he’d be prepared when he got to her.

“One of the twins.”

Mike’s frantic preparations ground to a halt even as his thoughts continued to race, trying to make sense of what she’d just said.

Twins. The Twins didn’t play in San Diego until June, and he was pretty sure they were out East this weekend. How could Ginny have lost one of them? Which didn’t even address what business she could possibly have that would put her in a position to lose one of them in the first place.

Unless...

He blinked once, then twice, then a bunch of times in a row, like each flash of darkness could reset his dawning comprehension. There was no way—Ginny couldn’t possibly mean she’d—

“You lost an entire kid?”

“Better than half of one!” she snapped, shrill and clearly terrified.

Taking a deep breath, Mike listened until Ginny instinctively mimicked him. “Good,” he murmured, making his voice go low and soothing. She made a sound of impatience on the other end of the line, as if she knew exactly what he was trying to do, but Mike didn’t let that sway him. “Now, tell me what happened.”

With a bit more composure, Ginny told him, “Blip and Ev went out of town and asked if I could take the kids.”

“Why would Blip and Ev trust you with their kids?” As soon as it was out of his mouth, Mike knew it probably wasn’t the best thing to say. After all, right about now, down one Sanders boy, Ginny was probably wondering the same thing.

Nonetheless, her reply was instantaneous. And indignant.

“Because I am great with them! We watch TV, play video games, eat junk food, and run around the yard until their sugar high crashes. It’s foolproof.”

“What part of foolproof involves losing an entire 8-year-old?”

Ginny didn’t laugh, though he didn’t really expect her to. She just barrelled on with the story. “They wanted to play hide and seek. I didn’t even think about saying no, but Blip and Ev’s new house is A) huge and B) unfamiliar.”

He winced. “You never had a chance, Baker.”

“Are you gonna laugh at me or help?”

He sighed down the line, but since Ginny could probably already hear the clinking of his keys when he replied, “I’ll be there in fifteen,” he didn’t feel that bad about it.

“Make it ten,” she replied just before the line went dead and Mike could answer that he was already planning on it.

A bare eleven minutes later, Mike was standing on the front step of the new Sanders house. He tried
to push aside the knowledge that he hadn’t been invited to the housewarming party, and how weird it
felt to visit for the first time without the owner’s permission. Then again, it wasn’t like Blip was
going to find out about this.

He raised his hand to knock once more just as the door swung open. His knuckles rapped smartly
against Ginny’s forehead.

She huffed and glared at him but didn’t bother to give him any grief. Instead, Ginny just turned on
her heel and marched back into the house, her head swiveling as if she might catch out a hiding 8-
year-old if she was just vigilant enough. The set of her shoulders, even with one arm still confined to
a sling, told Mike everything he needed to about how worked up she was. The sooner they found
Ginny’s lost charge, the sooner the tension would leave her, and the sooner his need to touch her,
soothe her, would go with it.

“How long has it been since you saw—”

“Gabe. It’s Gabe. And it’s been—” she said, leading Mike into an immaculate kitchen. Blip and Ev’s
last kitchen had been nice, but this place was another thing entirely. Just the place for a woman who
was toying with opening a restaurant of her own, or so Mike had heard through the scant gossip that
had filtered his way this offseason. Ginny pressed her palm to the marble counter, frowning down at
her right as if she was surprised the sling got in her way. She sighed, and Mike forced his feet to
remain rooted to the floor rather than cross the distance and pull her into his arms. “It’s been less than
an hour. Maybe 45 minutes?”

“And you don’t think he left the house?”

Ginny snorted. “Ev put the fear of God in them before she and Blip left. She said if they went
anywhere without me, she’d know and they wouldn’t see a video game for months.”

“Sounds like Ev,” he said, grinning. Ginny smiled weakly back, and his heart thumped hard against
his chest. “Where’s Marcus?”

“Watching some stupid cartoon in his room. He helped me look for a while, but he got bored. Said
Gabe had done this before and would come out when he was ready.”

“But you don’t think that’s true.”

The one shoulder shrug Ginny gave him was half helpless, half lost. “What if he got stuck?” she
asked, eyes bright and wild with worry. “What if he can’t call for help? Or he’s not even here? What
if—”

“Hey,” Mike said, stepping close for the first time. He put his hand out, just to cup Ginny’s elbow,
offer a little comfort, but he got so much more. Ginny collapsed into him. Her good arm wrapped
around his waist, her right cradled between them. Breath shuddering through them both, she pressed
her forehead against his chest. Automatically, he put his hand on her back and rubbed big, sweeping
circles, anything to keep it from settling in one place and holding on for dear life. She was so warm,
felt so perfect, it was hard to keep his mind on track. “It’s all right. We’re gonna find him.”

“I know.” Her voice was muffled by his shirt, and Mike couldn’t tell for sure, but he could have
sworn she sniffled, too. Either way, when Ginny pulled herself away, her eyes were dry. She nodded
once, decisive. “We’ll find him.”

He nodded back. “Then let’s get started.”
“Thanks for coming to the rescue,” she murmured much later, when the twins were both sound asleep, and Mike and Ginny were pretty close to it, slumped comfortably together on the living room couch.

It had taken them far longer to find Gabe than Mike would care to admit. (It was an hour and 37 minutes, Ginny getting more and more frantic with each passing moment and every closet they cleared as Mike tried to keep his cool.) Of course, when they finally tracked him down in the basement, curled in the cabinet that housed the laundry chute, he didn’t even bother to look up from the game he was playing on his Gameboy when he observed, “Took you long enough.” Then, he’d scrambled out of the cupboard and bounded off to search for his brother. No doubt to cook up even more mayhem.

Mike and Ginny had turned to stare at each other in speechless shock. Well, Ginny was shocked. Mike was, too, but he’d been busier trying to count the exact number of colors swirling through Ginny’s gorgeous eyes; it wasn’t all that often recently that he got the opportunity to see them up close. He was cut off when she’d let out a bright, relieved peal of laughter and collapsed against him in boneless relief. Her warm, pliant curves pushed against him was more than his brain could take.

“Oh, thank God,” she’d gasped, her breath warm against his neck, and that— That was definitely more than his brain could or should take.

“Told you we’d find him,” he somehow managed, in what he hoped was a level tone. Considering the way his hands had found their way to her waist—low enough to nearly be her hips, far enough back to nearly be the perfect ass he’d stopped slapping when he realized he liked the way it always made her jolt a little too much—it was a miracle he could speak at all.

“You did,” Ginny agreed as she pulled away. She’d looked up at him then, wondering and radiant. Mike could do nothing more than look right back, sure that his every thought, every feeling was right there for her to see.

They’d stared at one another for another long beat, but there was no shock in this moment. They’d known about this since last August.

Ginny looked away first. She’d blinked, her lashes falling to her cheeks, and while Mike didn’t break his gaze, when Ginny looked up again, her eyes had fixed on a point over his shoulder. Still, she’d smiled.

“I could use a drink. You?”

He’d cleared his throat. “Sure. But only if you know where Blip’s put his good bourbon.”

Of course, she did. So, he’d stayed. And then, well, Mike had just gone on staying. He’d made dinner for them all when the boys revealed half of their frozen pizza had been burned at lunch—even made sure there were vegetables on their plates. He’d watched Ginny cream Gabe and Marcus at Mario Kart one-handed, and even schooled them all for a round. (Okay, he’d gotten his ass kicked six ways to Sunday, but the way Ginny cackled victoriously was more than worth the blow to his ego.) He’d made it all the way through the kids’ bedtime. If he wasn’t careful, he’d make it to his before ever leaving.

It didn’t seem like such a bad idea. Dangerous, but not bad.

Mike shrugged, jostling Ginny’s head where it rested on his shoulder, but not enough to make her move it. Which was just fine by him. “You know me. Say the word, and I’m on my way.”
She hummed, soft and sleepy. Her cheek pressed harder against his shoulder, and he took her weight gladly. Out of the end of her sling, her fingers curled into his shirt. “I know.”

The breath that rushed out of Mike’s lips was more ragged than it should have been. He closed his eyes, and for an instant—just a moment—he let himself imagine. Imagine that he hadn’t spent the day just playing house with Ginny. Imagine that this was real. This was his couch and his person and his life.

The arm he’d draped over the back of the couch dropped down to curl tentatively around Ginny’s shoulders. He felt like a fourteen-year-old on his first movie date, too nervous to put his arm around the girl beside him, worrying she’d shrug him off or spill their popcorn in his lap.

But Ginny didn’t protest. If anything, she settled even closer.

Mike opened his eyes.

“I should go.” The suggestion was too loud for the quiet room, but it had to be said. If Mike let himself stay another minute, he was sunk. He was never going to get out of this house without being consumed—forever probably—with wondering what it would be like to make Ginny fall in love with him.

Which would only make him wonder how to do it.

And if he figured that out, Mike just knew he wouldn’t be able to keep himself from following through.

Ginny didn’t reply, so he said it again. “I should go.” This time, he coupled the words with movement. He shifted, pulling his arm away. Before he could get too far, though, her grip on him tightened. She didn’t take any of her weight back, either. Mike finally chanced a look down into her face.

Her eyes were shut, eyelashes a dark smudge against her cheek, her lips were parted, soft breaths puffing out in quiet snores.

She’d fallen asleep.

If Mike let himself think about it, he’d talk himself into extracting himself from Ginny’s warm, exquisite weight and either arranging her snugly on the couch or picking her up and getting her into a bed. His knees might not like the strain, but they could handle her. He could handle her. He’d talk himself into putting her to bed, checking on the twins one last time, locking up the house, and driving home alone.

Mike didn’t let himself think about it.

He twisted a little so he could lie back, bringing Ginny with him, tucked perfectly between his side and the back of the couch. It put him right on the edge of the cushions, perilously close to falling, but it wasn’t as if he wasn’t familiar with that sensation. Their legs stretched out, knees knocking together.

This was the dangerous choice. The good one, but the one that would have some part of the back of Mike’s brain working overtime from here to eternity figuring out what he could do to recapture this feeling, make sure he never went another second without it.

Mike didn’t let himself think about that either. He closed his eyes and let Ginny’s steady breaths lull him to sleep.
Ah, well. He’d deal with it in the morning.

Chapter End Notes

It's been so long, but the (hopeful? longshot? I don't even care, I'll cling to anything?) rumors about enticing Dan Fogelman into contracts with the promise of renewing Pitch have made me giddy enough to get over some writer's block. I'd love to know what you think about this, but I'd love it even more if you tweeted something with #RevivePitch to show how excited you'd be if this show came back! Thanks friends and fingers crossed I'll be back sooner than I was this time around :)
It was probably a problem that the ringing in his ears buzzed over the distant cheers of the crowd. It was probably a problem that he could still feel the world spinning around him, even with his eyes closed and head leaning against the cool concrete wall just beyond the dugout doors. It was probably a problem that if it weren’t for that wall, he was pretty sure he’d topple right off the trainer’s table to the unforgiving floor.

It was definitely a problem he couldn’t remember much of his concussion protocol test, not that Mike had a chance to tell anyone.

Mike remembered the impact, his teeth rattling as his head bounced off the hard-packed clay around home. Remembered the rest of him hitting the ground just as hard and Robertson’s concerned, “Shit, man! Are you okay?”—which, what’d he think after he’d just slide tackled Mike on the way home—when he didn’t get up. He remembered the distant applause as he got off the field on his own two feet, passing an unusually grim Livan on his way down the dugout steps. Definitely remembered Ginny’s wide brown eyes as she played with the corner of her lips, her usually glowing complexion nearly ashen.

He thought he’d managed to wink at her, or nod, maybe. Something to show he was fine even as he could’ve sworn there were cartoon stars spinning around his head.

Judging by the concern still splashed all across her face, he might be misremembering that.

Still, he didn’t bother to fight off the wave of pure relief that swept through him when he’d opened his eyes to find her standing on the threshold to the dugout, worried wrinkle between her eyebrows and all.

“You here to have your way with me?” he mumbled, the words feeling loose and indistinct in his mouth.

Ginny didn’t respond, just let the door to the field swing shut behind her, cutting off the noise of the game, and clattered down the stairs. She stalked closer, that wrinkle deepening with every step. Maybe she hadn’t heard him.

He opened his mouth to say it again because that seemed like a good idea. It also seemed like a good idea to sit up straight, rather than slump against the concrete wall, cool and soothing as it felt on his
back. Thankfully, the second cut off the first; Mike was too distracted by the crackling ache everywhere, flaring most insistently at the shoulder and knee that hit the ground first, to manage any words. For a moment, everything was a haze of pain, far worse than the regular stiffness he dealt with, and he struggled to even breathe.

But then everything came to sharp, sweet clarity the second Ginny put her hands on him.

“Mike!” Her voice was a low throb, but it was her cool hands, one cupping his neck and the other steadying his waist as he struggled upright, that got him to push through the pain.

“Hey, Baker,” he said, his own voice harsher than he’d like to admit. He peered up at her and grinned, trying to ease that worry. “You come here often?”

She didn’t even bother to roll her eyes or point out that they’d done a post-game interview with one of the local radio stations from this very spot just yesterday.

Ah, there was another thing he remembered, and a good thing, too. Ginny’s shoulder casually leaning against his as her feet swung and she talked pitch sequencing was something he wanted to hold on to.

Ginny let out a long breath and dropped her hands to her sides. He didn’t protest, but it was a close call. The furrow between her brows didn’t disappear, but one dimple made an appearance. If Mike weren’t a big pile of aches and bruises, he’d reach out and trace a line straight from it to her full mouth.

Her full mouth that was now moving. Mike gathered himself and focused on her words and not the way her eyes were roving over him.

“—that they didn’t even get you out of your gear.”

Oh, huh. That was true.

Looking down at himself, which didn’t make his head spin any worse at least, Mike took stock of his chest protector and leg guards, all of it caked with dirt and clay. He wasn’t sure where his helmet had gone after he flipped it off to receive the throw from left, but someone must’ve pulled it off the field as he hobbled down here.

“Right,” he said and then made no move to shuck any of his gear. Mike wasn’t sure if he even could get it off. What was usually the work of a couple seconds was going to take some careful maneuvering if he couldn’t even sit up without discomfort.

Rather than leave him to the indignity of struggling to do something he’d done a million and a half times before, Ginny just sighed and stepped in.

Surely, she lifted his arm and went straight to the buckle at his ribs holding the chest protector closed. Then, she went to his other side to help gently guide his arm through the hole. When he winced in spite of his best efforts, her hands froze, eyes darting up to his face.

He quirked his mouth in something that was probably more grimace than grin, and Ginny hummed sympathetically. “Sorry,” she murmured, lifting the padding over his head and making sure to miss the growing lump at the back of it.

“S’okay,” he breathed, staring hungrily at her. Whether it was because of her delicate touches and clear worry or the fact that his defenses had been knocked loose, he couldn’t fight down how much he wanted Ginny. In this moment and every other of his life, he wanted her.
That desire spiked into hot, overwhelming awareness as Ginny set his chest protector to the side and lowered herself to start working on his leg guards.

Ginny knelt, fingers working the catches, and Mike could only stare, dumbfounded, down at her.

He wouldn’t lie, though even in his potentially concussed state he knew it would be better to keep this to himself, but this wasn’t exactly the way he’d imagined first seeing Ginny kneel for him. Still, he wasn’t sure if he should praise or curse the hard barrier of his cup in his shorts; it wasn’t exactly comfortable at the moment, but it was certainly keeping him from embarrassing himself any further.

Still, Mike was intensely aware of how quiet it had suddenly gotten in the hallway. Even the ringing in his ears had faded, so there were only the faint, metallic clinks of the latches coming undone. Soon, one leg was free, and Ginny shifted to start on the other.

“Man, if I knew all I had to do was get clocked for you to start tearing my clothes off—”

Ginny gave his unprotected calf a thump with the side of her fist. “Don’t even,” she bit out, quickly working her way up his leg.

“Hey,” he said, bracing himself against a wave of dizziness, fingers curling over the edge of the table, “it’s not my fault you just started undressing me.”

She eyed his white knuckles and picked up her pace. Quickly enough, both guards lay on the floor, but Ginny’s hand still lingered on his knee, even as she climbed to her feet.

It was easier to breathe when she was once again at eye-level.

Though, now he had to confront the naked fear in her eyes.

“Because you couldn’t do it yourself, Lawson,” Ginny said, with none of the teasing that he’d come to expect from her. Hell, she didn’t even call him “old man.”

“Just a little banged up,” he assured her.

She seemed doubtful, so to prove that he was just fine—or would be in a couple days, Mike reached out and snagged her elbow. He pulled her in close until his knees bracketed Ginny’s hips where they were pressed to the edge of the table, and her hand slid up from his knee to the top of his thigh.

“C’mon, Baker,” he cajoled. “I’ve been in worse shape.”

Ginny just shook her head, but she didn’t put any distance between them the way she had every other time they’d gotten this close off the field. If anything, she leaned in, drawing on their closeness as much as he did. “Not since I’ve known you. It took you so long to stand up, Mike.”

“But I did.”

She sniffed, and that was when Ginny gave in and wrapped her arms around Mike’s neck. He grunted at the sudden weight of her draped over him, but he wouldn’t give it up for anything.

“You can’t do that to me again,” she said right into his neck, like she couldn’t admit to it if she were looking at him.

“No promises,” he replied, as gently as possible. Anything else, he’d give her without thought and without even knowing what their future would be. But until his baseball days were behind him, he couldn’t promise he wouldn’t get hurt. “And I mean, if you’re gonna insist on getting me out of my
gear yourself when I do, then—“

Ginny reared back and nearly shoved him. She stopped with her hand just inches from his shoulder, her lips pursing.

“Watch it,” she warned, undermined by the tender way she pressed her hand to the left side of his chest. It lingered for a moment, like she had to verify that it really was his heart beating beneath her palm. “Or this is all the action that gear’s ever getting.”

“It’s not the gear I’m worried about, Ginny.”

Shivers raced through her, making the hair on her arm stand at attention. Mike was more than pleased with himself, even when Ginny gave him a disapproving look to cover her reaction.

She backed away, as reluctant to go as Mike was to let her, but there were footsteps echoing down the hallway, and it was probably better not to get caught like this.

“Worry about yourself, old man,” she confirmed, eyes darting to the side to gauge how much more privacy they’d have. “Because when action is on the table, you’re really gonna want to be at peak performance.”

Her smirk and the heat in her eyes perfectly conveyed exactly what she meant, and the haze of Mike’s pain retreated in favor of the dreamy, steamy daze of his imagination. And he’d always had quite the imagination.

He growled as she sauntered away, conveniently leaving Mike to explain to Kiki and his assistant exactly why he was looking so flushed.

This wasn’t exactly a problem. After all, he’d pay Ginny back in the end.

(Once he was back in prime physical condition, of course.)

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