

Love and Baseball

A Short Story with Nick and Alexa from *The Marriage Bargain*

by Jennifer Probst

Nick shook his head and stared at his wife. “Do you really think all this is necessary?”

Alexa shot him a glare from under her NY Mets baseball cap. Her inky curls spilled wildly around her cheeks and down her shoulders. Dressed in her old Piazza Mets jersey, she sat cross legged on the sofa clutching a tattered pennant from 1986 that screamed Let’s Go Mets! “Are you really asking me that question?” she shot back. “After all these years of losses, scrambles, and torture? This is our time, dammit, and I will not squander it by being sloppy. I need the juju.”

His lips twitched but he knew arguing was no use. When it came down to baseball, they walked a slippery slope. Even he had to admit, he was a bit pissy about the Yankees not making it. He wondered what would happen if the Mets actually got through the Playoffs and won the World Series this year. He may never hear the end of it. “Fine, but watch your cursing around the girls. And don’t blame me when you’re tired tomorrow at the bookstore. Last night, you stayed up past midnight.”

She stuck out her tongue.

The clatter of footsteps down the stairs hit his ears before the girlish shriek did. “Mommy, I’m ready! Did you get the popcorn?”

“Right here, sweets. Oh, you look wonderful! Aunt Maggie really spoiled you this time.”

Nick’s mouth fell open. Lily raced past him dressed in a pink Mets Jersey, stretch pants, and a pink ball cap. Her black hair was a messy cloud so like her mother’s, and her China blue eyes were wide with excitement. She gave a squeal and launched herself onto the sofa. Her pink sequined sneakers glittered. “Daniel Murphy has been amazing lately. And he’s so cute!”

“I know, right! But you know I’m still a Wright fan. He’s pure class.”

“And I love Jacob’s hair—it’s so chill! He’s my fave pitcher.”

Nick stalked in front of the television, ignoring their protests as he blocked the pre-game chatter. “I will not have my ten year old daughter talking about baseball players being cute,” he growled. “It cheapens the game.”

Lily giggled. “Don’t be jealous, Daddy. And I’m sorry about the Yankees this year. But it was bound to happen.”

Alexa grinned with pure mischief. “That’s right, babe. You know you’re number one in our books, right? Now, can you move a bit to the left?”

“Girls, they’re probably not going to win. You should prepare for that.”

And just like that, Nick knew he was in trouble.

Matching sets of blue eyes turned cold. Silence fell—the awkward, violent type silence that preceded a female temper tantrum. “Please remove your negative energy from the room,” his wife stated. Uh, oh. He hated when she got that eerie calm look on her face. It didn’t bode well for any of them.

His daughter shook her head. “Daddy, you can’t mess up the juju. Maybe you should go play with Maria.”

He began to respond when another set of footsteps trotted down the steps, but these belonged to canine, not human.

Oh, yeah. He was going to lose it.

Old Yeller, his beloved hound dog, slowly made his way into the living room with an old fashioned dignity he’d always exuded, every since they first got him ten years ago. Around his neck was the familiar Mets bandana, but Alexa had stepped up her game. In disbelief, he watched his dog sit beside her dressed in a royal blue jersey that screamed: New York Wants It More.

“You put clothes on him?” he asked in disbelief. “He probably hates it.”

Old Yeller shot him a look, yawned, and dropped his head on Alexa’s foot.

“Et tu, Brute?” he muttered.

Nick moved away from the television and let the females take over.

And take over they did. They screamed, threw popcorn at the billboard television screen, and danced like no one was watching. During the fifth inning, he took a stroll upstairs and ducked his head into Maria’s room. She was lying on her stomach, surrounded by Pokemon cards, her newest obsession, with a line of stuffed animals watching her play. Simba, the yellow lab, wagged her tail furiously when Nick sat on the edge of the bed. “Hey, pumpkin. What’cha doing?”

“Going through my Pokemon cards and deciding what to trade,” she said. She looked up and smiled. Nick’s heart always did a flip flop when his daughters’ gazed at him with that look of open love and adoration. It was better than any drug he’d never used. “Game still on?”

He sighed. “Yeah.”

Maria sat up. Her brown hair was caught up in a messy ponytail. She wore faded jeans, a simple t-shirt, and was bare foot. The two girls were so different. Lily loved clothes, bling, ruthless organization, and obeying the rules. Maria adored clutter, athletics, and making mischief. His sister Maggie, bemoaned Maria’s lackluster response to fashion or girly stuff. Nick had his hopes on her making the Olympics one day since she was the fastest runner he’d ever watched hurtle around the track in record time.

“I’m sorry, Daddy. It’s going to be a long month if they keep winning. I knew once Jeter left we’d have a difficult year.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Wanna put on our Yankee gear and get them mad?”

Nick laughed at her pert little face filled with naughtiness. Thank God, he’d recruited Maria as a Yanks fan. Simba, too. They were split right down the middle. “Better not, pumpkin. They’re not fooling around with the juju down there.”

“K. Let me know if you need me.”

“Love, you.”

“Love you, too, Daddy.”

Nick closed the door, went back down the stairs, and watched the game from around the corner. DeGraw got the strike-out to retire the side, and Lily announced the need for a bathroom break and took off. His wife wiggled her hips in a comedy of hip-hop, her curls bouncing under her cap with excitement.

And just like that, Nick was dragged into the past.

He remembered their first meeting. Dressed in a slinky red dress, it seemed like yesterday they had struck a marriage of convenience based on no sex, no emotion, and no mess. Her ridiculous condition of him not wearing any Yankees gear around the house had struck him mute, but her stubbornness and zest for life in all forms finally got him right where it counted.

His heart.

She’d given him a life again. One filled with dogs and children and chaos on a daily basis. She allowed him to leave his past behind and be the man he’d always wanted to be. God, he loved her.

His throat closed up. Slowly, he walked into the living room and grabbed her around the waist. She turned in his arms, gaze narrowed in suspicion, red lips pursed to yell at him.

“What?”

He touched both of her cheeks and smiled. "I was just remembering us ten years ago. When we first met."

Laughter gleamed in her blue eyes. "You mean when you were a complete jerk to me?"

"Yeah, that."

"And the time you had to beg my forgiveness so you sent Old Yeller to my bookstore in the Mets bandanna and read your poem aloud?"

Ugh, he was still a bit embarrassed at that scene, and Michael never let him live it down. Still, it had gotten her back so it was worth the slight humiliation. "Yeah, that, too."

Her arms wrapped around his shoulders, and she settled against his body like his other half. "Yeah, I remember," she said softly. "How did ten years go by so fast?"

"Not sure. I may not be a Mets fan, but I still love you like that very first day." His thumb pressed over her mouth, and just like that, he was hard and ready to take her. "I still want you like that very first day."

Her breath rushed out. She tilted her head back, and he leaned in. "For real? Even though I'm ten pounds heavier, and beginning to get wrinkles, and want to get another rescue dog?"

Nick pressed against her so she felt his erection. "I want you all the time, baby. Don't you know that yet?"

"Prove it."

He groaned and took her mouth in a hard, hot kiss. Plunging his tongue between her lips, he kissed her like the first time, claiming the woman he loved and promising to bring her to excruciating pleasure night after night. Her body softened, surrendering, and her hard nipples pressed into his chest. Slowly, he broke the kiss, nipping at her lush lower lip, cradling her beloved face in his hands.

"Damn, that was hot," she said.

"You're hot. What do you think of calling your Mom to babysit tonight?"

Her smile was wicked and full of promise. "I think I'll call her now."

Lily came racing back into the room. "Did I miss anything?"

He stepped back and shared a look with his wife. "No, nothing. I'll leave you girls to your game. Oh, Alexa?"

"Yes?"

"We're not getting another dog."

“Tell me that later tonight.”

Her laughter followed him out the door. In that moment, Nick almost hoped the Mets would win to make her happy.

Almost.