



Smokey O

Celia Cohen

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by

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About the Author

Celia Cohen is a newspaper writer. She lives in Delaware with Joyce, and their dog Zippy, whose name is entirely the author's fault.

*For Mary, Robbie, John, Joyce and especially my sister, who put on
their rally caps for me when I needed them most.*

CHAPTER ONE

“Yo, Smokey,” the Boston sportswriter called to me. “How do you feel?”

“Like a Christian who’s been traded to the lions,” I said.

The sportswriter laughed, flipping open her notebook to find a clean page. She had her story for the day, and she knew it.

“I’m going to miss you, Smokey,” she said. “You always give good quote.”

That’s me, all right. Smokey O’Neill, known to the space-conscious headline writers as Smokey O.

Until that morning, I was the first base player for the Boston Colonials of the Women’s Baseball League.

Then Coach Pettibone summoned me to her office and announced with vicious glee that she had traded me to the Delaware Blue Diamonds.

“I don’t mind telling you,” she said, shredding a cigarette and compulsively shaping the little brown pile of tobacco that lay on her otherwise empty desk, “that this is one of the happiest days of my life.”

I didn’t have far to go to join my new club. The Boston Colonials were in Newark, Delaware, to play the Blue Diamonds. All I had to do was walk down the corridors of Du Pont Stadium from the visitors’ clubhouse to the home team’s. That’s when I passed the Boston sportswriter.

Like a Christian who’s been traded to the lions. I wasn’t kidding.

The Boston Colonials and the Delaware Blue Diamonds were battling for first place in the Eastern Division of the W.B.L., the Women’s Baseball League. It was a rivalry that was getting as serious as the Yankees and the Dodgers.

For the first three years of the league, the Delaware Blue Diamonds had won the division and gone on to beat the winner of the Western Division for the W.B.L. Crown. Then, for the first time last year, the Blue Diamonds were dethroned in the East by the Boston Colonials, who proceeded to blow the championship series.

That was my first year of pro ball.

On the day I was traded, Boston was in first place and threatening to stomp the Blue Diamonds.

The two teams were playing a three-game series, and Boston had won the first game.

There had been a little animosity, though. You might say I was the cause of it.

The heart of the Delaware Blue Diamonds was Jill

MacDonnell, Mac for short, a lanky center fielder with dark hair and dark eyes and a stare that could melt ice cubes.

Mac was more than the heart of the Blue Diamonds. She was practically the heart of the entire Women's Baseball League.

Mac had been an American hero for a decade, ever since the Russians conned the Olympics committee into making women's baseball an event. American women were still playing softball then, not baseball, and it was tough to put a team together. Mac was the center fielder on her college softball team, playing in her senior year, and she volunteered.

The Olympics were held in Atlanta that year. The U.S. women, many of them veterans of sandlot games and Little League, had baseball in their blood, the way all Americans seem to, regardless of gender, race, creed or criminal record. From the time you're a tot, you seem to grow up knowing how to pound your glove and spit, and kids learn the mantra, "You can't get out on a foul," quicker than they learn, "Honor thy father and thy mother."

There was a lot of pressure on the American women's team, but they played as though they were born to win—and no one played better than Jill MacDonnell.

Mac played with an American haughtiness, making her someone to admire, if not to approach. When she wasn't hitting game-winning RBIs from the cleanup spot, she was whipping balls in from center field and cutting down runners on their way to a sure triple. She was fast and she was strong, and the U.S. team was riding on luck and laughter under her lead. They just slaughtered the other teams—until they came to the Russians.

The Russians played with all the grace of robots, but

they could play. It would have been funny, watching them imitate American idiosyncrasies like high-fives, except that they were grimly efficient. People had the willies at home, afraid that the Russians were going to beat us at the Great American Pastime.

I know. I was watching. I was twelve at the time.

Mom and apple pie were at stake when the U.S. took the field, our team in blue uniforms and theirs in red. The Russians hung in as fiercely as a Siberian winter. Our team threw good leather at them but weak bats, and going into the bottom of the ninth, the U.S. women trailed 3-0.

America hung its head. It covered its eyes. It went to the refrigerator for something to eat, anything to stave off the all-but-certain humiliation unfolding wherever there was a television set. A baseball game, to be ended with the playing of the Russian national anthem!

The first American batter walked, but the second one struck out. The third laid down a nifty little drag bunt that put runners on first and second. A double steal on the next pitch put them on second and third, but the batter popped out. Two down.

A cheap infield single loaded the bases, and then Mac MacDonnell sauntered to the plate as cool as a kid on the first day of summer. America held its breath and waited as she kicked at the dirt in the batter's box and scanned the pitcher with that dark laser stare.

She didn't make America wait long. With a hitch of her slim shoulders, she took the first pitch downtown, for one of the greatest grand slams in American history. It was one of those immortal sports moments: Babe Ruth pointing to the stands, a weeping Michael Chang falling onto the soft red clay of the tennis court at the French Open, Mac

MacDonnell hitting an in-your-face home run against the Russians.

The game ended with the score at 4-3 in the worst Russian meltdown since Chernobyl.

There was no place for Mac to showcase the talent at home. She did a round of charity commercials for the Special Olympics, but she hated interviews and refused to do endorsements. She took her college diploma and got a job at a bank.

But America came calling four years later for the next Olympics. Mac, who had been playing some softball, said yes and carried the flag in the parade of Olympians.

Expectations were high, but Mac wasn't the same wonder that she had been in Atlanta. Her hitting was respectable but not outstanding, and every game seemed to produce a new American star.

But the script was the same. The game for the gold medal pitted the U.S. women against the Russians in a rematch.

Mac couldn't do anything right. She struck out twice with runners in scoring position, and the Americans went into the ninth inning nursing a 1-0 lead, with the Russians batting last.

There were two quick outs and then a double. And then the next Russian hit a grounder that just skidded past the second base player and into the outfield. It should have been a run-scoring single to tie the game, but somehow Mac had sensed it coming and skipped in from center field to back up the play.

She scooped up the ball and rifled it to the catcher, who was almost too astonished to glove it. In the bone-crunching collision at home plate, the Russian runner was

out, the Americans had another gold medal, and Mac was a hero again.

She went back to the bank, but not for long. This time some promoter realized that women's baseball was exciting. It could make money. Two years later, the Women's Baseball League—with twelve teams split evenly between the Eastern Division and the Western Division—was formed.

Delaware, being the first state, got the first pick in the draft. The Blue Diamonds would have been the laughingstock of the civilized world if they hadn't chosen Jill MacDonnell.

Mac carried that team in its early seasons the way she had carried the U.S. women in the first Olympic competition. In the opening year of the league, she won the triple crown for batting average, home runs and runs batted in.

But other players were coming along now; the Blue Diamonds had a third base player who was a home run terror and a second base player with soft hands in the field and a sweet swing at the plate. And Mac was in her thirties now.

Mac wasn't accustomed to attention being elsewhere. The haughtiness sharpened. It seemed to jab right into the gut of the Boston Colonials and especially into me.

Mac came up to bat with the first game of the series on the line.

The score was tied at 3-3, with one out in the eighth inning. The Blue Diamonds had runners at the corners, and both of them were looking cocky.

The stadium was boogeying, the fans as loud as groupies at a rock concert. Not to steal a line or anything, but they'd put up even money now with MacDonnell at the bat.

The pitcher threw a sinker. Mac tapped a roller toward

the shortstop. The runner on third broke for home.

The shortstop fielded cleanly and went for a double play to end the inning. The second base player took the toss and pirouetted to make the throw to me.

I was stretched-stretched-stretched as far as I could, barely balanced against the bag, when Mac's foot came hooking around mine and flipped me off-balance and I tumbled.

It was clearly deliberate. I rolled over and looked to the umpire for the interference call that would give us the third out and get us out of the inning with the score still tied. Instead, the umpire signaled Mac safe.

I came off the dirt in a fury.

"What do you mean, safe?" I shouted. "It was interference!"

"The runner is safe," the umpire snarled back.

Mac was standing on the bag, looking bored. The crowd was hollering things at me that I wouldn't have wanted my mother to hear, and my coach was sprinting from the dugout before I could do any more damage. But she wasn't quick enough.

"What the hell's the matter with you? This isn't the Olympics anymore!" I screamed.

Mac came alive and fired her MX-missile stare at me. The umpire shouted, "You're gone, pal!" and thumbed me out of the game.

I drop-kicked my glove toward the dugout. Some fan threw a handful of Good & Plenty candy at me, and the whole stadium resounded with the pound-pound-pound of feet stamping in time to a chant: "Ivory clean! Ivory clean!" It was the fans' endearing way of saying I was headed for the showers.

My teammates were as angry as I was. In the top of the ninth, they batted around, scoring four runs and winning the ballgame 7-4.

I did not go straight to the showers. I wish I had, because then I would not have been raging in the locker room when the sportswriters came in, trying to shade that greedy and eager look in their eyes as they circled like vultures and hoped I would give them the good quote they craved. I did.

“Mac MacDonnell is a freakin’ coward,” I told them. “She’ll knock an infielder down and then go stand all safe and pristine out in center field, where the only thing that can attack her is maybe a mosquito. On a warm night.”

The next morning, the headline in the hometown newspaper read, “Smokey O-pines: Mac’s Cowardly Attack!”

Then I got traded to the Delaware Blue Diamonds.

Like a Christian who’s been traded to the lions.

*We hope you enjoyed this
Bella Appetizer.*

