

## How a Cannonball Cracked Open the Truth

It was a blistering summer afternoon. The sun hung high in the sky; its rays were so intense they seemed to set the air on fire. 15-year-old Alex and his friends gathered in his backyard to swim. His above-ground pool was filled with cool water that offered a refreshing escape from the relentless heat, enveloping their bodies in a soothing embrace. The boys frolicked, and water droplets burst into diamonds, flashing in the sunlight with every splash. The sound of their joyous shouts and playful banter filled the air, blending with the rhythmic hum of cicadas and the distant chirping of birds.

The pool was more than just a place to cool off—it was a stage for the boys' adventures and a canvas for their imaginations. Today, the pool was also the gateway to an epic lesson Alex would never forget.

Alex was a typical teenager with a wild spark in his eyes, always ready for the next adventure. His tousled, sun-bleached hair, evidence of countless hours spent outdoors, framed a face perpetually lit with excitement. His friends often joked that he had a magnetic personality, drawing everyone into his orbit with his infectious enthusiasm and boundless energy.

Alex was in his element, turning the pool into a stage for his wild antics. He repeatedly launched himself into the water with fearless cannonballs and gravity-defying flips, each splash sending waves of laughter echoing through the yard. Despite its modest size, the pool transformed into the boys' personal paradise, a magical escape where the scorching heat melted away, leaving only the pure joy of summer adventures.

As Alex climbed the ladder, his hand brushed the faded yellow sticker on the side— “No Diving.” He didn’t even glance at it. The thrill was louder than caution.

Alex’s mom watched from the kitchen window with a familiar cocktail of emotions— amusement, pride, and that ever-present thread of worry. She saw Alex, always the daredevil, launch himself into the pool with another cannonball, water erupting over the edge like a geyser. Her fingers tightened around the dish towel in her hands. She admired his fearless spirit, but the pool wasn’t deep enough for such stunts. She knew how quickly joy could turn into tragedy. She’d seen it before, Alex with a broken wrist from climbing the garage roof, a sprained ankle from doing kickflips with his skateboard off the porch and down the driveway. Each time, she’d patched him up, kissed his forehead, and whispered, “You’re my brave boy.” But bravery had its limits.

She spoke aloud, though no one was there to hear. “He thinks I’m just trying to ruin his fun,” she murmured, her voice barely above a whisper. “But I’ve seen what happens when fun goes too far.” Her gaze lingered on the backyard, memories surfacing uninvited— an ambulance’s flashing lights, the sterile chill of a hospital waiting room, and the sound of a doctor’s voice saying, “He was lucky.” She shook her head, as if to clear the images away. She lingered at the window, debating. Should she let him learn on his own? Was this the moment to trust him or to protect him? Her heart tugged in both directions. The worry gnawed at her until she couldn’t stay silent any longer.

With a sigh, she stepped outside. “Alex!” she called out, her voice carrying a note of urgency. He turned to look at her, mid-laugh, water dripping from his hair. “You need to stop with the cannonballs,” she warned, her tone firm but loving. “The pool isn’t deep enough. You could get seriously hurt.”

Alex rolled his eyes, the motion exaggerated and theatrical. “You always say that,” he snapped, his voice laced with the kind of irritation that had been simmering for years. It was her greatest hit—nagging about danger like it was her personal anthem. He could still hear her voice echoing through the neighbourhood, shrill and relentless, warning him about skateboarding out front like he was some fragile porcelain doll. She never saw the thrill, only the risk.

Sure, he’d sprained his ankle once—only because she’d startled him mid-trick with her screeching—and then came the lecture, a full-blown TED Talk on safety that he’d mentally muted after the first sentence. Back then, her concern felt like a leash. Now, it felt like a muzzle.

His mother’s nickname resurfaced, sharp and satisfying: *Killjoy*. She’d earned it—especially after the dirt bike debacle. Alex and his friends had been seconds away from launching into the ride of the summer, helmets purposely “forgotten,” adrenaline buzzing. Then she’d appeared, like a horror movie villain. No warning, no mercy. She marched straight into the middle of the group, grabbed his handlebars, and barked his name like he was a toddler about to wander into traffic.

“Alex. Home. Now.”

The silence that followed was brutal. Then came the laughter—snorts, jeers, one of his friends even mimicked her voice. He’d wanted to sink into the ground. She didn’t just ruin the moment; she detonated it. His reputation, his independence, his cool factor—all obliterated in front of everyone. She didn’t just kill the joy, she buried it!

However, not this time. This time, he was ready. His comeback was hard-won, and his mother wasn't going to crash the party and slap a warning label on his life. Not again!

Ignoring her warning, Alex climbed the ladder once more, his heart pounding defiantly. He sprang upward, curling into a tight ball with his knees hugged to his chest and chin tucked in, determined to unleash his most massive splash yet. Time fractured as he soared above the water. The sun glared in his eyes, and the world hushed for a heartbeat. Then— BAANG! A jolt of pain shot through his jaw as he slammed into the bottom of the pool like a ton of bricks. Alex felt a sickening jolt of fear.

Emerging from the water, Alex instantly felt a warm trickle down his chest. He peered down to see bright red blood flowing from his chin over his chest like someone had opened the floodgates to the Hoover Dam. His friends, usually quick to tease, didn't utter a sound, their faces pale with shock. Their silence was deafening! The boys quickly exited the pool, hovering near the edge of the yard, unsure whether to help or flee. Alex's mom rushed to his side, her eyes wide with panic. She didn't say "I told you so." She didn't need to. Her silence was louder than any lecture. Alex felt the weight of her worry settle over him like the towel she pressed to his chin. The towel she used was an old one with faded cartoon sharks— his favourite since he was seven. Somehow, that made it worse. Or maybe better. He wasn't sure.

As his friends decided to leave, one of them called out softly, "Text us, okay?" But Alex didn't answer. He just nodded, clutching the towel tighter.

"Alex, are you okay?" his mom finally questioned, her voice trembling. Alex nodded weakly, the pain and fear making it hard to speak. He realized, too late, the

profound impact of his actions. Without another word, his mom guided him inside to get dressed.

As the pair headed to the hospital, the silence between them was louder than any siren. Alex would need seven stitches to secure his skin, but the wound beneath, the one between them, felt harder to mend.

The Emergency Department buzzed with fluorescent light and distant voices, but inside their small corner of it, time seemed to slow. Alex sat perched on the cold metal bed, the scent of antiseptic sharp in his nose, waiting for the numbing injection to dull the pain. His mom sat beside him, her hand resting lightly on his—not gripping, not trembling, just there. Steady. Present. Alex studied her. Her fingers were blotched with faded dish soap stains, her nails uneven. She hadn't even changed out of the shirt she'd been wearing when she'd burst out to the poolside—still damp, still streaked with flour from the pie she'd been baking. A smear of cherry filling clung to her sleeve like a forgotten detail. Her shoulders slumped, her jaw tight. Her eyes, locked on the doctor's hands, looked like they hadn't blinked in hours.

She looked... spent.

Not just tired. Worn. Like someone who'd been holding up the sky for years and was finally letting it press down.

She hadn't said a word since they'd arrived. No scolding. No sighing. Just silence, though it wasn't empty. It was full of everything she couldn't say without her voice cracking.

Alex continued to watch her, and for the first time, he saw it, not just the worry, but the wear. The quiet exhaustion of someone who'd spent years trying to protect a boy who kept running toward danger with open arms. She wasn't just listening to the doctor. She was replaying every scraped knee, every late-night ER visit, every time she'd held her breath and prayed that he'd be okay.

He remembered how she used to hold his hand during thunderstorms, whispering stories about brave explorers and magical forests to drown out the thunder. Back then, her voice had been his shield. Now, her silence was.

Her hand on his felt like home—not the place, but the feeling. The safety. The love that didn't need words. For the first time in a long while, he didn't pull away.

The attending doctor, with a piercing gaze that seemed to see right through Alex, leaned in closer. "How on Earth did you manage to get yourself into this mess?" he inquired, his tone entwined with wonder and disbelief.

Alex explained his attempt to break the world record for the most powerful cannonball in an above-ground pool. The doctor chuckled, shaking his head. "Well, you certainly made a splash," he said. Then, his expression turned serious. "Didn't anyone warn you that those types of pools are way too shallow for diving? I once had a patient during my residency who, just like you, thought she could perfect her diving skills off the ladder of an above-ground pool. She ended up severing her spinal cord. It was a nightmare—one moment of thrill turned into a lifetime of regret." Alex hadn't stopped to think about the danger his activities posed while playing in the water. He remembered seeing the bright yellow warnings printed on the side of the pool cautioning against

diving, but he had brushed them off, thinking they were meant for little kids who didn't know how to swim, not strong swimmers like him.

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Alex's mom watched the needle pierce Alex's skin, each stitch tugging at something deeper. Her mind drifted, not to the pool, but to the garage roof. He'd been eight. He thought he could fly. She'd found him standing on the edge, arms spread wide, grinning like gravity was optional.

She hadn't yelled. Not then. She'd climbed up, sat beside him, and told him about the time she'd tried to jump off the porch with an umbrella. She told him how she'd landed in the rose bushes and cried for an hour. He'd laughed. She'd laughed too. But her heart had pounded so hard she thought it might crack her ribs.

That fear never left. It just changed shape.

Now, watching him wince as the doctor worked, she felt it again— sharp and familiar. The ache of loving someone who didn't see the cliff until they were already falling.

She hadn't said a word since they arrived. Not because she didn't have words, but because none of them could hold what she felt. She stayed. Her hand on his. Her presence was the only thing she could offer that didn't come with warnings or rules.

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As Alex continued to sit in the Emergency Department, the gravity of his actions continued to sink in. The doctor's stern words echoed relentlessly in his mind, each

syllable a hammer striking his conscience. Alex stared at the ceiling, the nickname echoing in his mind—*Killjoy*. But now, it felt hollow. Wrong. He replayed the moments with his mom, the times he thought she was out to embarrass him in front of his friends, to ruin his fun. But now, in the harsh light of reality, he saw the truth—his mom was never trying to humiliate him, she was trying to protect him, to shield him from the very pain he was now enduring. She always had been.

The realization hit him like a tidal wave, leaving him breathless and filled with regret. Alex saw his mom in a new light. Her worried face was now a symbol of love and care rather than restriction. The memory of every dismissed warning hit him like a blow, guilt tightening its grip. This was the moment Alex finally understood that parents aren't out to sabotage their kids' social lives; they just want to keep them safe. He turned to his mom, her eyes brimming with relief and love. With a trembling hand, he reached out and softly clasped hers, feeling the warmth and comfort he had taken for granted. "Mom, I'm so sorry," he choked out, his voice thick with emotion. "I get it now. You were just trying to protect me."

His mom's eyes sparkled with tears, a smile breaking through her worry. "I'm just glad you're okay, Alex," she whispered, her voice wrapping around him like warmth on a cold day. She could see the change in him and knew that he had learned a lesson.

After the doctor finished putting Alex back together, Alex and his mom stepped out of the hospital. The cool evening air filled him with a sense of clarity. Alex glanced at his mom; her face was etched with both relief and exhaustion. He felt a surge of newfound respect for her. It was humbling to admit, but he realized now that moms really do know best. From that day forward, he vowed to listen more attentively, to heed

her warnings, understanding that every word came from a place of deep, unwavering love. He didn't know if he'd ever stop chasing thrills, but now, he'd carry her voice with him—not as a *Killjoy*, but as a compass. A reminder that love sometimes wears the voice of worry. As they walked to their car, Alex clutched the shark towel, now speckled with dried blood. It wasn't just a towel anymore—it was a reminder. Of her love. Of his lesson.