

Beautiful Game



Kate Christie

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by

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To Alex, the first round draft pick for our home team

About The Author

Kate Christie was born and raised in Kalamazoo, Michigan. After studying history at Smith College, where she played the beautiful game Division III-style, she earned a Master's in Creative Writing from Western Washington University. Currently she lives near Seattle with her wife, their two loyal mutts, and the newest addition to the family—a beautiful, amazing, incredible baby girl, worthy of as many superlatives as her entirely unbiased mothers can conjure. *Beautiful Game* is Kate's third novel.

CHAPTER ONE

At first I didn't think I liked Jess, back when I still believed that surface appearances could be reliable measures of character. Even though the '90s were just beginning, I think I saw the world then through a sort of 1950s lens as one long series of uninspired binaries: good vs. evil, right vs. wrong, black vs. white. At nineteen, I hadn't experienced anything yet to make me question my version of reality. My family was healthy, my parents happily married, and I was in college in sunny Southern California playing my way into adulthood.

Probably I believed in hard-and-fast boundaries because, like Jess, I was a college athlete. Only instead of a tennis court like her, my playing field of choice was a regulation hundred and twenty yards long, sixty yards wide, anchored at either end by goal posts that measured eight feet by twelve: a soccer field. But

even soccer is subjective, as any fan will tell you. Referees oversee every match, and with human ego in the picture, you might as well kiss objectivity goodbye. As much as I genuinely love the game of soccer, it's still just that—a game. It took me most of my college career to realize that sport can sometimes distract you from what's real. Almost four years to notice the gray in the world all around me.

I miss that time, when soccer was all I could think about and I woke each day knowing exactly why I was where I was, happy to be doing what I was doing. Because once I noticed the gray lurking at the edges of the people and places and things I loved, the colors around me never seemed quite as vibrant again.

I met Jess in the spring of 1991, my sophomore year of college, on seemingly just another night at the San Diego University cafeteria. I never thought our food service was all that bad. I appreciated the luxury of institutional food, liked having my meal ready and waiting, guiltily enjoyed having other people clean up after me. Ever since I could remember, my older brother and I had been the reason our parents never owned a dishwasher. Most evenings when I was growing up in Oregon, my family sat down together around the oval oak dining table to a dinner of vegetables, bread and meat, amiably wrangling over Reagan's mismanagement of the federal government, the Republican-guided depletion of natural resources, the state of communism in the Soviet Union. Every once in a while my father, a high school special education teacher, would try to make something unusual for dinner, like fried bananas or sushi. Those nights typically ended with the four of us piling into the family station wagon and heading for Balboa's, our favorite Portland pizza joint.

At SDU, I was almost always late to dinner because of practice. In the fall I played intercollegiate soccer. Over the winter, I played intramural soccer. And in the spring, I worked out with the middle distance runners on the track team. The track coach had offered me a spot on the team, but I didn't want to be away at meets every weekend. Besides, I needed my Saturday

mornings clear for the occasional spring soccer scrimmage. My attendance wasn't optional—I was at SDU, a Division II state school with just over eight thousand students, on a partial soccer scholarship.

As usual, I was running late that Tuesday in March when I parked my mountain bike in the rack outside the student center and got in line behind Jess Maxwell, SDU's very own tennis phenom. Everyone on campus who followed sports knew Jess was currently ranked number two nationally in singles and had been voted NCAA Division II Rookie of the Year the previous spring, our freshman year.

As I stood in line, I tugged on the bill of my worn navy baseball cap and checked Jess out. Whenever I saw her around campus or made it to a tennis match, I always noticed her legs. Beautiful, long and lean, not as thick as you might expect for a tennis player, and evenly tanned, except for the sock line that sometimes peeked out from the top of her short socks. She always wore Nike tennis socks and Nike cross trainers. There was a rumor floating around campus that Nike had offered to sponsor her.

Jess must have felt my eyes on her legs, somehow, because I glanced up to find her looking over her shoulder at me. I lowered my hand from my cap. Busted. Our eyes caught, hers a lighter brown than I expected, almost copper-colored, and one of her eyebrows lifted as if to say, *What do you think?* I smiled at the quirky eyebrow. She smiled back, and we both looked at the food up ahead beyond the plastic guard.

For my part, I gazed upon the cooked broccoli trying to convince myself that yes, Jess Maxwell had indeed smiled at me. This was momentous mainly because Jess was known around campus for her chronic unfriendliness to anyone not on the tennis team.

“You play soccer, don't you?” she asked.

I looked up from my contemplation of the vegetable selection. “Oh, yeah,” I said. “You play tennis, right?”

She nodded. Her dark hair was pulled back in a ponytail that swung with the movement of her head. A few curls had come free and framed her oval face.

The line moved forward a couple of steps.

“I like your shoes,” I said, offering a lame explanation of why I had been looking at her legs. I wondered if she would shoot it down. She had to know she had great legs.

But she said only, “Thanks.” Apparently she was willing to participate in the cover-up.

As we moved forward again, I tried to think of something else to say. The most obvious line, one I’d exchanged with literally hundreds of fellow students since coming to San Diego, was, *Where are you from?* But I’d seen her hometown, Bakersfield, listed in the tennis program. Central Valley had the reputation of being hot, dry, and ultra-conservative—not exactly the place for self-professed homos like me.

At her turn, Jess picked mashed potatoes, turkey, and a side salad. A glass of water. No dessert. We chose the exact same meal, except I opted for different salad dressing. Ahead of me, she handed her meal card to the cashier to run through the register. As she walked away, she smiled at me again over her shoulder. “See you around, Cam.”

Cam was short for Camille, a name only my professors ever used, and usually only once.

“See you,” I said, waving a little as I handed over my own meal card. Jess Maxwell knew my name? She had a nice smile, I decided. I was used to the frown of concentration I’d seen on her face whenever I watched her play tennis, the stony gaze she wore like a mask around campus.

Orange plastic tray in hand, I surveyed the cavernous seating area. A couple of guys I knew from the swim team were just finishing up their meals, so I slid into a chair next to them.

“Hello, boys.”

“Yo,” Jake Kim said. His black hair was just growing back. He’d shaved his entire body for nationals a couple of months before.

“Howdy, Cam,” Brad Peterson said. Slightly in love with Andre Agassi, Brad liked to think of himself as a rebel. He defied swimming convention by wearing his hair in a ponytail and had still managed to set a D. II record in the butterfly in this, his junior year. “Was that you we saw actually conversing with the tennis goddess?” he added.

“Can you believe it?” I drowned my salad in dressing. “She caught me checking out her legs and didn’t even freak.”

Jake winced at my liberal use of dressing. “You know you’re exceeding your daily fat intake with that stuff,” he couldn’t resist saying.

Brad and I rolled our eyes at each other. I dug into my mashed potatoes. “You forget, Jake, I’m a soccer player. The bigger I am the better.”

I had added ten pounds to my five-foot six-inch frame since coming to SDU, but it was all muscle. Or mostly muscle, anyway. The weight had helped. In the fall, I’d been named all-conference first team and all-region second team—not bad for a sophomore defender. My coach had told me if I kept up my level of play and avoided injury, I might even make All-American. The awards were political, I knew. Someone would have to owe my coach a favor for me to make All-American. Still, it would feel good. Hell, who was I kidding. It would feel amazing.

“We know, you’re a brute,” Jake said. “So what did Maxwell have to say?”

I shrugged and took a swallow of water. “Not much. Oh, she knew I played soccer.”

Brad leaned forward. “That’s a good sign. It means she’s noticed you.”

“There aren’t that many non-football playing athletes on campus. I bet she knows you both swim, too.”

“She’s never said anything to either of us,” Brad said.

“Yeah, well, she probably knows you guys are a couple of fairies.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Jake lisped exaggeratedly. “Just because a man is in touch with his feminine side doesn’t mean he’s a fag.”

Brad threw his crumpled napkin across the table at Jake. “Of course it does, sweetie.”

The conversation moved on. The campus Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual Alliance was hosting a dance Saturday night, and one of Jake’s friends was planning a pre-party in his graduate apartment if I and some of my buds cared to attend.

“Bring along that cute girl we saw you with at Zodiac last weekend,” Brad added.

Zodiac was a gay bar in the city that held eighteen-and-up nights once a week for the college crowd.

My smile turned sheepish. “I would, but she has to go up to L.A. this weekend. She kind of has to break up with her boyfriend.”

“Another straight girl?” Jake shook his head. “If you’re not careful, you’re going to have a posse of dissed boyfriends after you by the time we graduate.”

I was a little leery of that possibility myself. But I couldn’t help it that somehow I always ended up with women on the verge of coming out. I had going what my best friend from soccer, Holly Bishop, called the twelve-year-old boy look: short dark hair, delicate features, freckles, and small breasts that were just substantial enough to assure you I was in fact a nearly twenty-year-old woman. Straight women were always telling me how cute I was. I just smiled and went along with it. I was young, in college and playing the sport I loved. Even I knew enough to appreciate these years while they lasted.

A couple of days later, I was walking toward the gym for track practice when a red Cabriolet pulled up alongside me on College Lane. A dark-haired woman in sunglasses and a black sweatshirt leaned out the driver side window. Jess Maxwell.

“Want a ride?” she asked.

“Sure.” I walked around the car and hopped in, resting my bag on my lap. “Thanks.”

“No problem. You are going to the gym, aren’t you?” she added, smoothly shifting gears.

“I am.”

Unlike the cars of most college kids I knew, you could see the floor in Jess’s. It even appeared to have been vacuumed recently. Only the back was slightly cluttered, plastic containers of tennis balls sharing the seat with a sports duffel, two jacketed tennis racquets and a backpack.

“Where’s the bike I always see you on?” she asked.

“One of my suitemates snagged it this morning. I’m Cam, by the way.”

She smiled a little, eyes hidden behind her sunglasses. “I know. I’m Jess.”

“I know,” I echoed.

We drove across campus, past brick buildings and under palm trees, the sun warm on our shoulders and bare arms. Back at home in Oregon it was probably rainy and fifty degrees. Once again I thanked my lucky stars I’d landed at SDU.

On the floor at my feet was a textbook, *Art: Context and Criticism*.

“Are you an art major?” I asked, surprised for some reason by the idea.

“Art History. What about you?”

“Education.”

My father was a teacher, as had been his mother before him and her mother before her. My older brother, an extreme sports junkie, couldn’t stand to be indoors for any significant length of time, so it looked like I would be the one to take up the family educator mantle. In my intended future career as a high school history teacher, I was hoping to land a position at a school that needed a girls’ soccer coach. But that future seemed a long way off yet.

Jess downshifted to turn into the athletic building parking lot. The gym was only three years old, an impressive modern structure with a glass-walled atrium that spanned three floors.

“You have practice?” I asked unnecessarily as Jess parked the car. Of course she had practice. Tennis was a two-season sport, but spring was the “real” season—the most competitive tournaments took place during the last two months of the school year.

“Yep. You work out with the track team, don’t you?”

“Just to keep in shape for soccer.”

Only five months now until preseason, that twelve days of hellish double sessions that strained every leg muscle until it hurt even to sit on the toilet. I couldn’t wait.

She reached into the backseat to grab her bag and a racket,

her arm brushing mine. This close, I could smell her shampoo, a delicate floral scent that somehow didn't seem to match the image she projected.

"Can you lock?" she asked as we both slid out.

"Sure." I did, slamming the door a little harder than I meant to, and thought I saw her wince behind her shades. We stood facing each other for a moment on opposite sides of the car. "Thanks for the ride."

"No problem."

Still we lingered near her car. The sun was out, hardly unusual for Southern California, and a slight breeze rustled the trees at the edge of the lot.

"How's tennis going?" I asked. I knew the team was doing well, mostly thanks to Jess. Everyone was saying she would get All-American this year for sure.

"Not bad. We've got Big Eights up in San Francisco this weekend. Shouldn't be too tough." She paused. "I heard you guys did pretty well this season."

"We made it to quarterfinals at nationals. And we hosted Big Eights earlier in the fall and ended up beating Southern State in the finals."

"I know. I was at that game."

"You were?"

I bit my lip, remembering how I'd nearly gotten red-carded in the finals. A tall forward I was marking had actually punched me when the referee wasn't looking five minutes in, and the rest of the game had been a thinly veiled battle between us. Her, to mentally knock me off my game and score. Me, to stop her from scoring and take her down legally without getting called. I succeeded, mostly. She never did score. But I got a yellow card midway through the second half for slide-tackling her from behind at the half line. I could tell the ref thought about red. A yellow card is a warning, while a red card gets you ejected and makes your team play down a man for the rest of the game. I'd gotten lucky that day.

Jess tilted her head slightly. "You kept picking on some girl on the other team. I thought she was going to have to be carried off on a stretcher."

“She hit me first!” All at once, it seemed inordinately important that Jess Maxwell not think I’d instigated the fight. My rule in soccer was simple: Never start anything, but finish everything. “Seriously. She kidney-punched me when the ref’s back was turned. I almost had to be carried off on a stretcher.”

“Uh-huh.” She raised her eyebrows again, and I realized she was just teasing me, pushing my buttons to get me riled up. If it had been someone other than Jess Maxwell, I would have sworn she was flirting.

“At least I never busted a racquet on the court after double faulting a game away,” I said slyly.

At one of the matches I’d attended the previous year, Jess had done just that despite the fact she was leading 6-2, 4-1.

She appeared to color slightly. “You saw that?”

“Your McEnroe impression? Uh-huh.”

“Guess we’re even, then.”

She took off her sunglasses and slipped them into her bag. Then she smiled, and I noticed the coppery glint of her eyes again.

I checked my watch. “I should probably head up. Thanks again for the ride.”

“De nada. See you around, Cam.”

She turned away, and I did too a moment later, heading in the opposite direction. As I walked toward the track, I pondered the fact that her “de nada” had a Spanish lilt to it, which might have to do with her slightly darker coloring. Maybe she wasn’t as WASPy as the majority of the tennis players I had met in Southern California.

Curiouser and curiouser. Not only did Jess Maxwell know who I was, she seemed to want to get to know me better. I could dig it, I thought, only just stopping myself from skipping all the way to the stadium.