



GAME TIME

Book Two - Girls of Summer

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Book Two of the
Girls of Summer Series

by Kate Christie

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Dedication: To KAM. You & me, babe—co-captains on team M-VW for life.

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Chapter One

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Emma strolled the aisles of Fremont's natural foods co-op, basket slung over one arm, reusable bag and purse on the other. She was still getting over the cold she'd managed to pick up during a photo shoot in LA, and it had taken nearly all of her energy just to get ready to leave her condo. When the two teenage girls who had been trailing her since the ice cream section finally worked up the nerve to tap her shoulder, she was tempted to ignore them. But then she remembered how the last two American professional women's soccer leagues had folded due to lack of support, and she turned to face them, smile pinned to her face.

"You're Emma Blakeley, aren't you?" the bolder of the two asked, her cheeks turning pink as her friend elbowed her.

"Yes. And you are?"

At least they didn't say they were her biggest fans. They did, however, ask for photos. Emma acquiesced, grateful she had washed her face and redone her pony tail and mascara. No doubt the photos would be up on Twitter and Instagram before she finished shopping. She gave them her usual plug to support the Reign, the local professional team that had recently completed its inaugural season in the National Women's Soccer League (NWSL), and then the two girls skipped off. Sure enough, Emma's phone vibrated inside her purse with a series of notifications as she continued down the juice aisle.

Had she ever been that young? These days high school seemed impossibly distant. Even

though she was back in Seattle after nearly a decade on the East Coast, she had found that living in the city as an adult was significantly different from growing up in the suburbs. Her current life barely resembled her childhood, not least because her brother lived in DC and her mother had moved back to Minnesota. The only person tying her to the Pacific Northwest was Dani, her childhood best friend, who after ten years in Southern California had taken a job with a Seattle PR firm. They had seen each other often over the years, given US Soccer's proximity to Long Beach where Dani lived and worked after college. But now they saw each other almost daily again, and their friendship had resumed as if they'd never been apart.

Speak of the devil. Emma was about to check out when the text alert she'd picked for Dani—a whistle—sounded. She tapped the screen.

“Call me?” Dani had texted.

“At PCC. Call you in fifteen.”

“Better yet, meet at yours?”

“Perfect. See you soon.”

Emma wondered if her friend's desire to see her was truly urgent or if her text merely reflected her usual lack of patience with social niceties. With Dani, it was hard to tell.

No one else recognized her as she left PCC and walked to her car, a Subaru Legacy that had been all but given to her by a Bellevue dealership when she signed with the Reign. After anchoring the back line in the last World Cup and Olympics and earning all-league honors first in the Women's Professional Soccer (WPS) league and now in the NWSL, she was a recognizable figure in soccer-crazy Seattle.

Ten minutes later, Emma pulled into the parking garage beneath her building on West

Highland. Her general text alert sounded as she was unlocking the door to her unit, followed by three more chimes. A group chat usually meant either the national team or her club, and with Reign pre-season months away and NT training camp starting in a few weeks, it wasn't hard to figure out which. US Soccer was supposed to release the official camp roster that afternoon. Was that why everyone was feeling so chatty suddenly? For a moment she considered leaving her groceries on the counter and checking the federation's website, but she was pretty sure she already knew what it said. Besides, Dani would be here momentarily to discuss the implications.

Emma had just kicked off her Chucks when the buzzer sounded in Dani's signature rhythm. She buzzed her friend into the building and headed into the kitchen to put away the perishables. A minute later she heard Dani push through the unlocked front door, slamming it as she always did.

"So?" the other woman demanded, rounding the corner from the hall.

Head still in the refrigerator, Emma glanced over her shoulder. "So what?"

"You don't know, do you?"

"Apparently not." She kept her tone even despite the fact she could probably guess what had her oldest friend smiling so smugly.

"Here." Dani shoved her phone at Emma, who took it and leaned against the nearest counter.

As she'd expected, the browser was open to a US Soccer story about the upcoming national team training camp. She scrolled through the list of players invited to attend, pausing as she read the name: *Jamie Maxwell*. For the first time during Emma's tenure on the national team, she and Jamie would both be in LA for residency camp.

Toying with her pony tail, Emma shrugged and handed Dani her phone. "And?"

"You can't expect me to believe you have no reaction to the idea of spending two weeks with

her.”

“It’s been almost a decade. Besides, we’re both professionals. It’ll be fine.”

Dani’s eyes narrowed. “I didn’t ask if it would be fine. I asked how you felt about seeing her.”

“We’ve seen each other before, Dan. Don’t go stirring up drama where it doesn’t exist.”

“Another dodge.” As Emma stared at her, Dani held up her hands. “Fine, I’ll let it go for now—as long as you promise to feed me. As if Mondays don’t suck enough, I missed my afternoon coffee break.”

They settled on Thai and called in the order. Then, wine in hand, they retired to Emma’s living room where large picture windows and a private patio looked out over Kerry Park, the Space Needle, and the lights of downtown. In late November the sun set by four thirty each afternoon, so Emma was used to seeing the city all lit up. Her favorite time of year in her hometown was summer, when the sun didn’t set until after nine and the city skyline remained twilit even later. And yet, she always welcomed the return of rain in autumn. This was her first full year back in Seattle. She hadn’t realized how much she missed the Pacific Northwest until she’d moved back.

At first she’d rented an apartment not far from here, uncertain where soccer would take her in the future. But then Dani convinced her to check out this listing. One visit and Emma knew—this was it. The view from the living room alone had been worth the condo’s exorbitant price tag, an amount paid not by her national team salary—as if—but by her endorsements. As one of the higher paid pro women soccer players in the world, she didn’t have to worry about where her next paycheck would come from. Then again, with the trust fund her father had left, she likely wouldn’t ever have to worry about affording her more than comfortable lifestyle.

As usual, she and Dani talked about nothing and everything while they waited for their food

to be delivered, eventually transferring to the kitchen bar where they spread out the containers of sweet and sour chicken and spicy pad thai. Dani was dating a guy she'd met at a club on one of their nights out in the city, but it wasn't serious. Emma meanwhile had been single for almost a year and wasn't looking. With her schedule, having a relationship took way too much effort.

"You don't have to have an actual relationship to have sex, you know," Dani said.

"So you say."

"Are you sure you're not a lesbian? I've heard serial monogamy is big with the Sapphic ladies."

Emma sipped her wine, trying to decide if she should respond to her friend's jab or not.

"I know," Dani said. "It's the person you're attracted to, not the gender."

"At least you don't call us 'the gays' anymore."

"Not where you can hear me, anyway. Speaking of gay... When's the last time you saw Jamie? Last year at the Olympics?"

She should have known Dani wouldn't give up that easily. "No, I had dinner with her in LA and didn't tell you."

Her friend ignored her sarcasm. "Do you think this means she's back in the pool for good?"

"No idea. I'm not on the coaching staff, am I?"

"Ooh, a bit snippy, are we?"

Emma frowned. "Seriously, Dan, let it go."

"Fine," Dani relented. "But only because you're sick. I'm here if you decide you want to talk about it, okay?"

"You'll be the first to know."

After dinner, they poured more wine and caught up on *Grey's Anatomy* on DVR. Then Dani hugged her and headed out with promises to text as soon as she got home.

“You’re still coming to Thanksgiving, aren’t you?” Dani asked as she slipped into the hallway.

“Wouldn’t miss it,” she said, and waved.

Alone again, she refilled her wine glass and put her feet up on the coffee table, watching the lights of helicopters and commercial airliners crossing over the city while Pandora played Adele on Bluetooth speakers. So Jamie Maxwell was coming to December camp. It was hard to believe they would finally be in LA together after all these years. Jamie had worked out with the national team in London before the Olympics the previous summer, but she had only been around for a handful of practices and had gone home to her own flat each night. Residency camp was different. Camp meant two weeks sequestered together in the same hotel where Jamie had ended their friendship nine years earlier. Two weeks of double sessions, team meetings, group meals, bonding exercises, and general hanging out while US Soccer documented their every move. You know, to make things even more interesting.

The modern obsession with cameras wasn’t all bad. Emma would never admit as much to Dani, but she’d kept track of Jamie not only via the national team’s impressive grapevine but also on social media where she’d been following her for years. It wasn’t like she could be considered a genuine creeper, she assured herself whenever she pulled up Jamie’s Facebook page, Twitter feed, or Instagram profile. She only checked once in a while to see if their paths might cross. Because as professional American soccer players with a whole slew of friends in common, their paths were bound to cross.

The first time they saw each other again was the summer of 2010, six long years after their friendship blew up. By then Emma had been a pro for two years and a regular on the national team for three, while Jamie was in her first professional season with the WPS after a solid career at Stanford.

Emma was playing in Boston that year for the Breakers while Jamie had been drafted by the Bay Area side, FC Gold Pride, at the end of her senior year of college. She hadn't even graduated yet the first time their teams met.

Emma had always thought it fitting that the first time soccer brought them back together they were in California, the state where their friendship had begun and ended. Their reunion in a San Francisco bar after the match had gone better than Emma could have expected. A month later, their second meeting in Boston went just as well, and Emma had even introduced Jamie to Sam, her then-girlfriend, over dinner. With their teams scheduled to meet twice more and Jamie widely considered a shoo-in for the next World Cup, Emma had been sure their renewed friendship would continue to grow that summer. But in July, she heard the news: Jamie had torn her ACL only days before her first scheduled call-up to the senior national team.

Her ACL surgery and recovery took her out of contention for the 2011 World Cup squad. That team played so well—despite losing to Japan in the finals—that the coaching staff decided not to make any significant changes going into the 2012 Olympics. As a result, Jamie didn't make it back into the pool until late 2012. But Emma wasn't around for Jamie's first official call-up. Sidelined by a burst appendix midway through the gold medal victory tour, she'd had to watch from her mother's living room in Minneapolis while Jamie earned her first cap before a huge crowd in Portland during a friendly against Ireland. She'd played beautifully, assisting on not one but two goals in the twenty minutes she was on the field, and Emma couldn't help but be excited for her—and for the team, too. Jamie was still one of the most talented playmakers Emma had encountered, and she had long believed Jamie deserved a spot on the national team, if only she could stay healthy long enough to win it.

Emma had been watching with her mom again a few days later when Jamie started the second half, again against Ireland but in Arizona this time. Watching, too, when an Irish player slide-tackled

her at midfield. Jamie’s initial scream had echoed throughout the suddenly silent stadium, and as Fox ran the replay on a loop, the sickening snap of her ankle could be heard over the crowd’s collective gasp. Emma had held tightly to her mother’s hand as they watched the trainers load Jamie onto a stretcher, her lower leg immobilized. That was it for Jamie’s first call-up. By the time Emma rejoined the national team for January camp in LA, Jamie was already back in England with her club side trying to make it back from her second potential career-ending injury in two and a half years.

As the months passed, Emma hadn’t been surprised to learn that not only did Jamie recover, she went on to post the best stats of her professional career. Jamie had proven before that she was a survivor. Once again her perseverance had earned her a shot at the national team pool, and this time there would be no avoiding being in the same place at the same time.

Assuming they both stayed healthy. It was the off-season in England and even Champions League was on a break, so unless Jamie injured herself skateboarding—she’d posted more than one Instagram video of herself cruising on a long board down a London street—they would soon be together for thirteen intense, fun-filled days and nights at the main US Soccer training center in sunny Southern California.

Please don’t let us be roommates, Emma thought, sipping her wine as a helicopter flew past the Space Needle, the whirl of its rotor blades a blur against the night sky.

#

When the familiar Los Angeles exchange flashed on her phone a few days before Thanksgiving, Jamie ducked into the kitchen, took a few calming breaths, and managed to say in a voice that didn’t tremble at all, “Hello?”

“Jamie Maxwell?”

“This is.” She gripped the counter with her free hand, trying to control her heart rate through sheer force of will.

“Carrie Fitzsimmons here, manager for the US Women’s National Team. Is this a good time?”

“Yes, ma’am.” *Ma’am?* Really?

“Good. First of all, congratulations on another fantastic year at Arsenal. A lot of people on both sides of the pond were impressed with the season you put together, especially after what happened against Ireland last fall.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

Out of habit, she painted a circle on the floor with her right toe, relieved as always when the ankle joint operated flawlessly. After that Irish hooligan had destroyed her latest national team dream, she had almost given up. But here she was a year later, stronger and faster than ever and fielding a call from the federation.

“How’s that ankle treating you these days, anyway?”

“Fine. No problems.”

“And are you match fit?”

“I am. We were up in Scotland a couple of weeks ago for Champions League.”

“All right, then. I won’t draw out the suspense. You may have heard we’re putting together a training camp in LA next month. We’d like you to attend—if you’re available.”

Jamie made herself pause a beat before replying, “I’d love to attend. Thank you for the opportunity.”

“It’s nothing you haven’t earned. Is your email address still the same?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll send you the details, then. We need to move quickly to get your travel arrangements made, so don’t be a stranger.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

As soon as they hung up, Jamie sent a group text to her dad, sister, and best friend: “Guess who’s going to national team training camp in LA next month?!”

Britt’s reply arrived first: “Way to go, stud!”

Meg chimed in ten seconds later even though it was only eight in the morning in Utah: “My awesome baby sister! Woo hoo!!!”

And their dad, probably on the way to work with their mom, wrote, “That’s our girl! We love you and can’t wait to hear more!”

“So? Did they invite you back?”

Jamie glanced up to see her girlfriend watching her from the kitchen doorway. “Yeah, they did.”

Clare closed her eyes briefly and nodded. Then she moved forward and pulled Jamie into a hug, fitting her head under Jamie’s chin as she always did. “Well done, love. I’m happy for you.”

Was she, though? Jamie wouldn’t blame Clare for being uneasy. Her first call-up had come almost exactly a year earlier. Her injury had brought them closer in the end, but for a while Jamie had struggled. Last January in particular had been a dark time, the darkest she could remember since the aftermath of her trip to France ten years earlier. Clare had stayed at her side as she worked to lift herself back into the light, but it had been difficult for them both. And now here she was ready to risk her health and their joint happiness for another shot at the dream that still eluded her.

“It’ll be okay,” she said, rubbing a gentle circle against her girlfriend’s back. “I promise.”

As Clare leaned back and gave her a look that said she shouldn’t make promises she might not be able to keep, Jamie’s phone buzzed again.

“Don’t be too long,” Clare said, pulling away. “Your tea is getting cold.”

“I’ll be right there.” Jamie smiled reassuringly before glancing back at her phone.

Britt had texted, “The pub. Nine tonight. Be there.”

“I’m in!” she replied, and then silenced her phone as she went to finish her afternoon tea.

The Twelve Pins on Seven Sisters Road was only a short bus ride from their flat in Holloway. By the time she got there that night, nearly all the members of the Arsenal Ladies FC squad currently in London were gathered around a table in the Function Room, hastily set aside for their impromptu celebration.

“Well done, Max! Where’s the little woman?” Jeanie, their tall, butch center forward, smiled as she clapped Jamie on the shoulder.

“She decided to stay home.”

“Smart woman,” Britt said, sliding a lager shanty light on beer and heavy on lemonade her way. “Everyone listen up! To Jamie Maxwell, future World Cup champion and Olympic gold medalist, for getting called back up to the show. May you dazzle the powers that be—and for fuck’s sake, stay out of the hospital this time!”

A chorus of cheers sounded around the table as Jamie held up her glass, grinning at her friends. “Thanks, guys,” she said, trying to memorize the feeling of happiness unfurling inside. If there was one thing sport had taught her, it was to enjoy the good times while they lasted.

This party, unfortunately, couldn’t last long. It was a weeknight, and almost everyone on the

team had second jobs that allowed them to moonlight as low-paid professional women footballers. Jamie covered her own expenses by running social media accounts for several players on the Arsenal men's side. The work came with a ton of perks: awesome seats not far from the home bench, and since her job required her to track down game day photos and post-match quotes, access to the locker room. It was a sweet gig as part-time jobs went. Unsurprisingly, most of her teammates weren't as lucky.

By eleven, Britt and Jamie were the only two left. They moved into the main room of the pub as Judy, the owner's daughter, came in to tidy up.

"Good luck in Los Angeles," Judy said, pausing to give Jamie a hug.

"Thanks, Jude."

"You will come back to us, won't you?"

"Don't worry, I still have another year left on my contract."

As they slid into an empty booth, Britt held up her phone. "Speaking of LA, they released the camp roster."

Jamie gripped her glass tighter, knowing what was coming. "So?"

"So no emergency surgery to save you this time."

"Dude, it's not a big deal. You saw us last year. She was perfectly friendly and so was I."

In addition to being her current club teammate and longtime best friend, Britt was also the only person in her life other than her sister—and Clare—who knew of her history with Emma Blakeley.

"A few practices is nothing like residency camp," Britt pointed out.

“Maybe not, but I do have a girlfriend, in case you hadn’t noticed.”

“This is Blake we’re talking about. If you’re trying to say you don’t find her attractive, I call bullshit.”

Jamie wasn’t trying to say that at all. In the decade since they’d met at Surf Cup in San Diego, she had watched from afar as Emma evolved from adorable teenager to lovely woman. At twenty, Emma had been the youngest player on the roster at the 2007 World Cup, and since then her international football star had ascended steadily. Her face popped up regularly in fitness magazines, Nike ad campaigns, and articles and social media posts about the national team. As a central defender she wasn’t as well known to the mainstream public as the team’s leading scorers and legendary goalkeeper. But her girl next door looks and mediagenic personality ensured that she was only a little off-center in nearly every US Soccer marketing campaign. The lead positions were occupied by Jenny Latham, straight, pretty, and a dynamic scorer; Maddie Novak, beautiful and fiery and the team’s midfield playmaker; and Rachel Ellison, the current captain and leading scorer—and the only short-haired, out lesbian player the UWSNT had ever known.

“I didn’t say she’s not attractive, Britt. But we were kids. Or I was, anyway. I’m not sure she ever was.” She pictured Emma on stage at her father’s funeral reading a eulogy she’d written herself, seemingly collected before the crowd of hundreds only a week after her dad died. At the time Jamie was sure she had never seen anyone or anything more impressive.

Britt touched her hand. “Be careful, okay? You can’t afford any distractions, not if you want to make it this time.”

“I know. Thanks, B. How are you holding up, anyway?”

“Me?” The goalkeeper shrugged and gave her a lopsided smile. “Okay. I haven’t given up *all* hope yet.”

Britt often said she'd been born at the wrong point in soccer history. Phoebe Banks, the current American keeper, had held the starting job for nearly a decade and didn't show any signs of slowing down. Her back-ups were almost as good as she was, and despite a few injuries always seemed to make it back in time for the big cycle years.

"Good," Jamie said, "because I'm still rooting for you."

"Fat lot of good that does me."

"I can't help you picked the one position on the field that almost never gets subbed."

Britt rolled her eyes. "Spare me the lecture on field player versatility, will you?"

Jamie reached across the table and tried to flick her arm, but the goalkeeper was too quick.

"You need to work on your hand-eye coordination, son," she said, smirking.

"Is that a challenge?"

"You know it."

"Bring it, then."

"Oh, it has already been broughten."

They played pool and threw darts for another hour, and Britt won almost every contest because Jamie's hand-eye coordination didn't get nearly the amount of work her foot-eye coordination did. After chatting with the pub staff a little while longer, Britt walked her to the bus stop around the corner. As soon as they stopped, Jamie was unsurprised to find herself being lifted off the ground and twirled through the air.

"Seriously, James, I am so freaking stoked for you!" Britt said.

"Thanks, buddy." Jamie pulled away and patted her shoulder. "You guys still bringing the

cranberries and pumpkin pie?”

“You got it. Allie can’t wait to experience her first American Thanksgiving.”

“My family still doesn’t believe I can cook, so we have to document the crap out of this.”

“You’d think they’d realize by now that we have to find something to do other than binge on Netflix.”

During the season, the team practiced at seven thirty each evening, which left plenty of daytime hours to fill. In the last three years, Jamie had taken advanced graphic design courses, studied German and Spanish, and volunteered at a variety of local organizations, including a nearby community kitchen where her fellow volunteers had taught her the art of “cooking,” as the Brits insisted on calling it.

“Anyway, I better get home,” Britt added. “Hi to your lady.”

“Ditto. Later.”

Britt waved and spun on her heel, heading for the nearby Tube station. Jamie took out her phone and scrolled through the photos they’d snapped in the Function Room. She found one of her and Britt, arms around each other’s shoulders with a couple of teammates smiling in the background, and posted it on Instagram with a caption that read, “I love @BrittCrawdad12 more than she knows—or probably wants to know. Thanks for the awesome night out with fabulous friends. #Shesakeeper #ArsenalLadiesFC”

When the red double decker pulled up only a little late, Jamie slid into the first empty seat she found. As the bus meandered south toward Camden, she scrolled through her feed. A few minutes in and her post had already garnered a couple of hundred likes, mostly from Arsenal fans and her faithful contingent of American followers, who, judging from their comments on her photos—“I can’t” and “ILYSM!!!!” and “I’m dead”—were predominantly fifteen-year old Tumblr girls who wanted to either

be her or be with her. She'd been out since she was fourteen, and despite the pressure on female professional athletes to refrain from using the "I" word, had never tried to hide who she was. Europeans didn't seem to care as much about the queer thing, and since she wasn't that well-known outside her sport, she hadn't attracted many bible-bangers or other haters.

All that could change, she knew, if she became a regular on the national team. She would take it, though. She would willingly withstand almost anything to represent her country at the highest level of her sport. Even share a hotel room with Emma Blakeley, if it came to that.

As if of their own accord, her fingers brought up Emma's feed. She had posted a photo a few days before of herself with fellow national team members Maddie Novak and Jenny Latham, all made up and decked out in Nike gear, supposedly working out somewhere warm and sunny. The caption, "#Nike #NikeStrong #USWNT," reinforced Jamie's suspicion that the photo was part of a shoot, because who looked that good while working out? Which wasn't to say that Emma and the other two women didn't look good doing most things. But pro athletes tended to exercise hard enough to sweat in buckets, and the image on Emma's feed revealed only the lightest of sheens.

The bus hit a pothole and Jamie juggled her phone briefly. Regaining control, she checked Emma's photo quickly, relieved that her bumbling hadn't resulted in her accidentally "liking" the picture. She didn't need Emma to know that she was creeping her feed on the way home from the pub. At least they weren't strangers on social media. They'd started following each other on Instagram during the Olympics last year and had been Facebook friends even longer, ever since the first time their WPS teams played each other. Their teams had gone out together in the Mission after the game, and she could still remember the way they had watched each other across the bar until finally Jenny Latham, Jamie's teammate at FC Gold Pride, had waved Emma over.

"Emma, this is Jamie Maxwell from the U-23s. Max, say hello to Blake."

To her surprise, Emma had actually held out her hand, eyes uncertain as if she thought Jamie might freeze her out. Jamie had only hesitated a second before reaching out and tugging her former friend into a quick hug.

“It’s great to see you,” she’d said, smiling as she pulled away.

Emma had smiled back, brow slightly furrowed. “Really?”

“Of course. I can’t believe it took this long.”

“Honestly, I can’t either.”

“You two know each other?” Jenny had asked, watching their reunion curiously.

Emma’s eyes were still on Jamie’s. “You could say that.”

They’d found a quiet corner and caught each other up on the past six years, and as the evening wore on, Jamie had felt the tension easing from her shoulders. She couldn’t remember why she’d been so nervous about seeing Emma. True, things had ended beyond badly when they were teenagers. But Emma still seemed like the same smart, kind person she’d been in high school, and the connection between them, though frayed, was still there. By the end of the night, Emma was scrolling through her iPhone showing her photos of the woman she’d been dating for a few months. She’d seemed happy, and enough time had passed that Jamie could be happy for her, too.

The next time they’d seen each other in Boston, Emma had brought her girlfriend to the post-match dinner. The group was smaller this time, and Jamie had enjoyed her conversation with Sam, a sports photographer, about LGBT representation in professional athletics. She could see why Emma liked her. Sam was intelligent and attentive. They looked good together, too, a fact that wasn’t lost on Emma’s many social media followers. She may not be officially out, but she had posted a few photos of her and Sam all dressed up and out on the town. You’d have to be an idiot not to figure it out.

All of that was before the 2011 World Cup made Emma and her fellow national team members household names. Jamie had heard through the soccer grapevine that Emma and Sam broke up not long after the US lost to Japan in the finals. A little while later the WPS folded and Emma moved back to Seattle where she'd been photographed out and about with a bearded, tattooed hipster. Apparently she still favored fluidity when it came to her sexuality—not that her sexuality was any of Jamie's business.

At her stop, she stepped off the bus and walked the short distance to her building with her raincoat hood up and her snapback pulled low, a bottle of mace at ready inside her jacket pocket. Even after three years, London still occasionally spooked her. She didn't think she was meant for gritty urban life. But she made it home without incident and let herself into their flat on the second floor of a terraced house. Inside she dropped her keys on the table near the door, kicked off her boots, and headed into the kitchen.

Clare had left the light on over the sink, and as she drank a glass of water, Jamie surveyed the smallest room of their flat. The refrigerator was one of those tiny English types that looked like a holdout from 1950 but had in fact been manufactured sometime this century. The stovetop was burners only while the oven was mounted at face level above a row of drawers. Jamie wasn't sure how this setup saved space, but it would simplify cooking their Thanksgiving turkey. She hoped.

This apartment had been home for almost a year now, longer than anyplace else she'd lived since college, and Clare's presence was a big part of the sense of well-being she always felt here. While they had spent time apart—Jamie usually went home to California for a couple of weeks in the off-season—the upcoming trip felt different. Residency camp with its constant training sessions, group meetings, and team meals meant being out of touch in a way they hadn't previously experienced.

On the side of the refrigerator was their calendar, and Jamie drifted closer. "Thanksgiving!"

was scrawled over Thursday's square in her handwriting, with Clare's characteristic smiley face below. A primary school teacher, she was big on smiley faces. Jamie had always found this endearing, seeing as Clare's smile was the first thing she'd noticed when Britt's girlfriend Allie introduced them at a dinner party eighteen months earlier. Allie and Clare had gone to university together, and Jamie had been fully aware that Britt and Allie were setting them up. But once she met Clare, she forgot to be irritated by their mutual friends' machinations.

Her phone buzzed again, and she turned it off and plugged it into the charger on the counter. Clare had to be up early for school, but she might have waited up. She usually didn't like to go to sleep without saying goodnight.

Jamie headed down the hallway, hopeful when she noticed the light coming from their bedroom. There she discovered Clare propped up against her pillows—fast asleep, book open on her lap, reading glasses perched low on her nose. Carefully Jamie slipped the glasses off and moved the book to the bedside table.

“Goodnight,” she murmured, kissing her girlfriend's forehead before turning out the light. “Love you.”

Clare sighed and slid lower under the covers. But she didn't say anything as Jamie moved quietly about the darkened room getting ready for bed.

Chapter Two

Emma had always loved returning to training camp after a break. No matter what had happened in the last friendly match, tournament, or cycle, camp always felt like a fresh start. Part of the shine was the younger faces the coaching staff liked to bring in for the longer residencies. Not only did the new kids change team chemistry, but they also kept the returning players hungry. Nothing like riding the bench for a match or two to remind you that your position was only as stable as your fitness, work ethic, and quality of play deserved.

This time, though, as her airplane taxied toward the arrival gate at LAX, there was a different quality to her sense of anticipation. She was looking forward to seeing her friends on the team, but despite her assurances to Dani to the contrary, she was anxious too. For once her pre-camp jitters had nothing to do with what was about to happen on the pitch.

As the plane slowed to a stop, Emma turned her phone on and texted her mom to let her know she'd arrived safely. Out of habit, she checked her Instagram feed. Her teammates had been arriving throughout the day, and there were the obligatory group shots. A certain Arsenal player had yet to arrive by the looks of it... Crap, there went her brain again. Why was it stuck on someone she'd only seen a few times in the past decade? She didn't like worrying about something she couldn't control. And yet there the worry was, stubbornly persisting.

Everyone else in business class leapt out of their seats the second the plane stopped, but Emma remained where she was, playing on her phone. While US Soccer paid for coach, her frequent flyer miles basically meant free upgrades for life. Like father, like daughter—though hopefully not when it came to heart disease. According to the tests the federation required, she was as healthy as,

well, a professional soccer player. Good thing, too—residency camp almost always started out with extensive fitness testing. The beep test with heart rate monitors, forty and one hundred meter sprints with GPS trackers, power analysis of vertical jumps, agility testing, body fat measurement, average VO2 max, and all the other tortures Lacey Rodriguez, the longtime fitness coach for the women's side, could dream up.

As she waited, Emma cracked a new bottle of water and finished her half-eaten energy bar. They would hit the field tonight after dinner “to get the blood flowing,” as Lacey liked to say. It was a tradition to put in a light workout on travel days. Helped everyone recover and eased the newbies in right away, before their nerves could get the best of them. Emma wondered if Jamie would arrive before the night session. Players who came from overseas usually needed that first workout the most.

The cockpit door finally opened, and as Emma swung into the aisle, her gaze fell on a figure in coach reaching into the overhead compartment. Emma paused, her eyes on the stranger's narrow hips and lean upper body, clad all in black. There was something familiar about... Oh. *Oh*. As the athletic woman turned toward the front of the plane, Emma looked away quickly, hoping she hadn't been caught. No wonder Jamie Maxwell had been on her mind. For the past two hours she'd apparently been sitting a dozen or so rows back as they sped along at 500 miles per hour six miles above the earth.

A man cleared his throat impatiently—Emma was blocking the aisle. Forcing herself not to look in Jamie's direction again, she grabbed her carry-on and filed off the plane. Inside the terminal she hesitated, debating whether or not to wait. Would she for a different teammate? Obviously. Besides, they would no doubt end up sharing a shuttle to the hotel in Carson, so any avoidance would be short-lived. With a sigh that felt more dramatic than it needed to be, she stepped out of the way of the passengers disembarking behind her, trying not to chew her lip as she watched the crowd for a

glimpse of black.

It was no mystery how Emma had failed to register Jamie's presence on the plane. Her flight routine involved boarding at first call, slipping her headphones into place, and leaning against the window, eyes averted to discourage (1) anyone from recognizing her, and (2) those who did recognize her from trying to engage. The "fuck off" vibe she emitted when she wanted to was difficult to miss, or so she'd been told. Had Jamie even known she was on the plane? And if she had, why didn't she say hello?

As she waited, Emma's mind suddenly cast her back to the first meeting between their WPS teams in California three years earlier. She had noticed Jamie during warm-ups, of course. Half expecting her teenaged friend—friendly and a bit coltish—she had instead been faced with grown-up Jamie, whose high cheekbones and tattooed biceps were surprisingly intimidating. When their eyes met across the field, Emma had looked away and then instantly regretted doing so. They were adults, mostly, and professionals. Besides, she'd always hoped they would meet again.

For whatever reason—rookie status, stacked team—Jamie sat the bench that game, so they didn't come face to face until afterward when their teams shook hands. Emma had smiled hesitantly when she reached Jamie, relieved when her former friend smiled back. If she hadn't, Emma might not have gone out to the bar later for the usual post-match socializing. But she had gone, unsure what to expect of their first significant encounter since the week of her father's funeral.

Now as Jamie exited the gangplank and glanced around, Emma watched her carefully. She looked good. Tired and a bit disheveled but strong and healthy, as if she had never been carted off a field and into a waiting ambulance while an entire stadium—and all those watching at home—tried to process the magnitude of her injury.

Jamie's gaze stopped when it landed on her. She halted a few feet away, her eyes questioning.

“Hey.”

“Hey yourself.” Emma forced a smile and bridged the distance, offering the other woman what might have been the shortest hug in the history of hugging. “It’s good to see you. Congrats on making residency camp.”

Jamie smiled back, but it seemed almost as tentative as Emma felt. “Thanks. It’s good to see you too.”

“Baggage claim?” she practically chirped, cringing inwardly at her own cloying cheerfulness.

Jamie nodded and they fell into step together.

“So. Same flight, huh?” Emma commented.

“Yeah. Kind of crazy.” Jamie was quiet as they neared the end of the terminal. Then she said almost apologetically, “I would have said hi but you seemed like you didn’t want to be bothered.”

“No, I get it.” She glanced sideways. “I actually didn’t see you until the very end.”

Jamie met her gaze and then looked away quickly, face unreadable. “Right.”

Did she not believe her? But that would mean she thought Emma had been avoiding her. Fantastic. This entire encounter was following the worst case scenario script in her head. She didn’t get it—there was no reason they should be this awkward. They’d had drinks and even dinner together in the not-so-distant past. On both occasions, though, they had been part of a group, which meant this was the first time they had been alone together since high school.

The last time they’d been in an airport, Emma remembered, she’d flung herself at Jamie and cried all over her jacket. A week later she’d flung herself at Jamie again, this time at a train station, and unwittingly signed the death knell for their friendship. No wonder Jamie hadn’t said anything during the flight. Talk about awkward.

And yet, it was too early—and she was far too stubborn—to concede defeat. “How was your flight from London?” she asked, still channeling the same rapidly cheery version of herself.

Jamie shrugged. “Not too bad. We went over Greenland, which was pretty cool. I kept looking for polar bears but no luck.”

Emma glanced at her, nearly tripping over her carry-on. Then she noticed Jamie’s eyes crinkling at the corners. Apparently she wasn’t ready to give up, either.

This time Emma’s smile was more genuine. “Very funny.”

“As in hardy-har-har?”

“As in looking,” she replied, the banter returning easily as if it hadn’t been a decade since they’d exchanged those well-worn lines.

In her peripheral vision she saw Jamie smile too, and the sight made her relax slightly. Maybe they could do this after all. And if not, she had kept her distance from other players before. When you routinely threw two dozen or more insanely competitive women from a variety of backgrounds and regions together, there was bound to be conflict.

They were almost to baggage claim when a dark-haired blur crashed into Jamie.

“Oof,” Jamie grunted, barely managing to catch the smaller woman. “Easy! I kinda need my sternum.”

Angie Wang pulled away, snickering. “Wuss. That’s what ice baths are for. I can’t believe you’re finally here, though. Took you freaking long enough!”

Jamie’s head tilted. “Do you mean literally here as in LA or figuratively here as in residency camp?”

Angie whacked her on the shoulder. “Both. Oh, hey, Blake,” she added, turning her smile on

Emma.

“Oh, hey, Wang,” Emma mocked, grinning back.

They hugged, and then Angie reached for Jamie’s carry-on and started towing it toward baggage claim. “I volunteered to drive the shuttle when I heard it was you.”

“So you can reach the brake pedal, then?” Emma put in.

“Dude, already with the short jokes?” Angie shook her head and glanced back at Jamie, her face brightening again. “By the way, congrats on a killer WSL season. I only wish Britt could be here too.”

“Right? Then it’d be like a genuine reunion tour.”

Emma followed them, eavesdropping as they chattered on about the third member of their self-proclaimed “bro band,” Brittany Crawford, the starting keeper at Arsenal. Britt, who had played at Stanford with Jamie and lured her to England after the Bay Area club folded, was a frequent guest on Jamie’s social media feeds, along with her cute Scottish girlfriend, Allie.

Wait. Was it strange that Emma knew the name of Jamie’s best friend’s girlfriend? But it wasn’t like she and Britt were strangers. The lanky keeper had been in and out of the national pool since their youth days and had practiced with the senior side more than a few times. She might not be one of the top five keepers in the country, but she wasn’t that far down the list. With three of the top five over the age of thirty, it wasn’t impossible to think she might get a shot at a roster spot someday. After all, look at Jamie.

She watched Jamie laugh at something Angie had said and throw her arm around the smaller player’s shoulders. The girl she had known all those years ago had been considerably less comfortable with casual physical contact than the woman before her seemed to be—for reasons Emma

remembered only too well. As they reached a conveyor belt that had yet to begin moving, she wondered in what other ways Jamie might have changed.

The next two weeks were bound to be interesting, that much was certain.

#

As Angie gave her the lowdown on the schedule for the rest of the day, Jamie stole glances at Emma, who stood nearby, her gaze fixed on the unmoving baggage carousel. When she'd boarded the plane in Seattle after clearing customs and jogging what felt like a mile through Sea-Tac, the last thing Jamie had expected was to see Emma already settled in business class, noise-reducing headphones clamped over her ears, face turned to the window. The federation often placed players together, and with her flight connecting through Seattle, Jamie had been aware they could end up on the same plane. But the team manager hadn't mentioned it, and in the rush to make her connection, the possibility had slipped her mind. Unprepared, she'd paused in the aisle to see if Emma would look her way. When she didn't, Jamie had moved on, not sure if she was more relieved or disappointed. She knew from Emma's Instagram and Twitter feeds that she had been approached by fans in airports and on flights more than a few times since the last World Cup and Olympics. Probably she wanted to be left in peace.

During the flight, Jamie had accommodated that wish, but it hadn't kept her from staring at the back of Emma's head. Even in jeans, a sweatshirt, and ponytail Emma looked photo shoot-worthy. Why wasn't everyone else on board staring at her, too? But the rest of the passengers didn't seem to realize who she was, and Jamie had to remind herself for the zillionth time that women's sports stars usually flew under the radar.

"Are you listening to me?" Angie asked, elbowing her.

Jamie felt Emma's gaze swing back to her. "Light training, dinner, and a meeting. I have a

copy of the schedule in my email, you know.”

“Ooh, look who’s being all high and mighty,” the Jersey girl said, holding up her hands. “My bad. Only trying to help. Whatever.”

“I can’t believe you still talk like a twelve-year-old boy,” Jamie commented.

“The ladies love it. Right, Blake?”

“Freaking irresistible,” Emma dead-panned.

Jamie cracked up. “Nice shade, Blake.”

Angie glanced between them. “That’s right, you guys know each other. How did you meet again?”

Emma looked at Jamie, eyebrows slightly raised as if to say, *This one’s all yours.*

“We played against each other in high school,” Jamie said, hoping Angie had a sub-par memory.

No such luck. “That’s right. You guys were tight back in the day, weren’t you?”

Jamie shrugged, playing it casual. “For a little while. Then this one went off to the East Coast and never looked back.”

Emma frowned, and Jamie held her gaze. Technically *she’d* been the one to call off their friendship. But unless they wanted the entire team to know what had gone down between them, they would be better off sticking with the most reasonable explanation of why their friendship had ended: distance and time.

Apparently Emma recognized this fact because after a moment she nodded. “We got back in touch after college, but this is the first time we’ve been called up at the same time.”

“Why—oh, yeah.” Angie slapped her forehead. “I almost forgot about your little emergency last year. You thought you were the drama queen with the ambulance in the stadium, Max? Well, this one here freaked everyone out at open training in Connecticut. No one was even near her when she turned completely white and like, collapsed.”

This wasn’t news to Jamie. A fan had caught the whole thing on video and put it up on YouTube. Apparently Emma’s appendix had burst the day before, but she’d ignored the pain, thinking it was only extreme cramps. People routinely died from untreated appendicitis. In fact, the older brother of a girl Jamie had played club with in California had died at soccer camp when the staff misdiagnosed him. What had likely saved Emma, Jamie had read later in *USA Today*, was her incredible fitness level. She’d been hospitalized in serious condition for a few days after surgery but had recovered more quickly than anyone had expected.

“What are we, ninety?” Emma asked, tugging on the end of her pony tail.

The gesture was so familiar that Jamie stared at her, story momentarily forgotten. The last time she’d seen Emma do that had been at the train station in downtown Seattle. Emma had tugged on her hair, and then she’d leaned in and kissed her. After nearly a decade, Jamie still hadn’t forgotten what it had felt like to be kissed by Emma Blakeley. How could she? Emma had been the first girl she’d ever kissed.

Angie scoffed. “What do you mean, are we ninety?”

“This is what my great aunts in Minnesota always do,” Emma explained, one corner of her mouth turning up. “They sit around comparing major illnesses and surgeries, competing over who has it worse. ‘Oh, geez, Helen, my pancreatitis is worse than your infected boil, I guaran-damn-tee it.’” She glanced at Jamie to share the joke, her gray-green eyes warm.

Clare, Jamie thought. She should text Clare to let her know she’d arrived. It was past midnight

in London, but her girlfriend had said she would leave her phone on.

“Excuse me,” she said, and stepped away, already scrolling through her contacts.

The carousel began to turn as she finished the text, and soon they were headed out to short-term parking. Emma climbed into the back seat of the van, leaving the front for Jamie. They hadn’t made more than brief eye contact again, instead allowing Angie to carry the conversation. Why were things so weird between them? In London last year at the Olympics they’d been friendly, and not once had Jamie recalled their first kiss. *Only* kiss, she reminded herself, half-listening to Angie chatter on about the Southern California traffic and weather as they left LAX. Emma had kissed her once and then gone off to U-19 World Cup qualifiers in Canada where she’d slept with Tori Parker, resident whore of the American youth national pool.

Hmm. Jamie gazed out the passenger window. Perhaps she still had some unresolved anger about the past, after all.

Angie was saying something about roommate assignments when Jamie tuned back in. “Wait, who am I rooming with?”

“Ellie.” Angie gave her a significant look.

Holy crap. She was going to room with the national team’s co-captain and leading scorer? Britt was going to be so jealous when she found out. Rachel Ellison was a legend. Even people who didn’t follow soccer knew her name. She’d arrived on the team a dozen years earlier and had led by example ever since. Most people thought she would pass Mia Hamm’s scoring record before she was done, which in and of itself was fairly impressive. She was also the first openly gay player in US Soccer history, male or female. Jamie had met her a couple of times now, including the previous year when she’d been called up. In Phoenix, Ellie hadn’t left her side once while they waited for the ambulance. She’d also been the first player to show up at the hospital the next day after Jamie was cleared for

visitors. But while the veteran player's support in Phoenix had been incredible, Jamie was happy to be seeing her again under less dire circumstances.

Soon Angie was pulling into the familiar hotel driveway to unload. Jamie took a deep breath before stepping out of the van. She hadn't been here in forever, not since her last under-23 training camp in college. While she'd spent the past few years trying to work her way back from one injury after another, Angie and a handful of their other U-23 teammates had been training with the senior side. At least she would know people—other than Emma—at camp.

Angie waited until she and Emma had retrieved their bags. Then she waved out the window and called, “Later, dudes!” before heading off to park.

“Nervous?” Emma asked as Jamie stood on the circular drive, staring at the hotel entrance.

“A little bit.” No use lying; Emma would probably see through it anyway.

“Might as well get it over with.” Emma squeezed her shoulder gently and propelled her forward.

At her touch, Jamie felt a nearly forgotten sensation spreading through her limbs. Even after all these years, Emma could still somehow make her feel calm, like herself only better. Then, as they entered the hotel, Jamie's gaze fell on the corner of the lobby where she'd sat that awful night nine years earlier, breaking curfew so that Emma could try to explain why she'd lied about hooking up with Tori Parker. The memory no longer hurt the way it once had, but it did make her step out of Emma's reach.

Thankfully, Tori had fallen out of the pool in the intervening years. Probably she'd slept with one too many fellow players. Teams were only as good as their chemistry, and whor—*people* like Tori usually weren't good for team cohesion.

“Blake!”

Jamie tried not to stare as an attractive blonde swept across the lobby toward them. Maddie Novak had been a couple of years ahead of Emma at UNC and was now considered the best offensive midfielder in the country, possibly the world. Naturally, Jamie had been star-struck around her in London, Portland, and Phoenix the previous year. It didn’t help her tongue-tiedness one bit that Maddie apparently derived pleasure from flirting with anyone remotely masculine. Compared to other queer women, Jamie was a soft butch, but Maddie didn’t seem to differentiate.

Speaking of butches—Rachel Ellison was in the lobby too, and as Maddie and Emma embraced, chattering on as if they hadn’t seen each other in years, the co-captain came over and gave Jamie a one-armed bro hug, thumping her shoulder enthusiastically.

“Good to see you again, Max. I hear you tore it up in the WSL this season. Nicely done.”

“Oh. Yeah. Thanks, man.” She tried—and likely failed—to keep the awe out of her voice. Ellie was an American legend, one who would be sleeping in the bed next to hers for *two whole weeks*. Britt was seriously going to blow a gasket. Then again, Jamie might too. One of her assists against Ireland had been a cross to Ellie’s head, and she had watched the highlight clip on YouTube a few thousand times to motivate herself during recovery.

At her first national team practice in Portland the previous fall, Angie had told her that newbies on the team always knew they had arrived when Rachel Ellison took an interest in them. Maybe Ellie was only being nice because they were roommates, but Jamie hoped this camp might finally signal the next stage of her national team career.

When Ellie went to hug Emma, Maddie turned her megawatt smile on Jamie. She tried to smile back but was pretty sure her expression more closely approximated a grimace. As Emma shot her an amused look, brow quirking quizzically, Jamie turned away, hoping to at least partially hide the

mortified blush she could feel coming on. Freaking Scotch-Irish heritage.

“Here’s your room key,” Ellie said as if nothing had happened, passing her a key card. “Let’s get you settled before dinner, huh?”

“Okay.” Jamie watched as Ellie reached down and grabbed her duffle. “That has wheels.”

“I’m good,” the striker said, throwing the strap over one broad shoulder. “You ready?”

Jamie nodded, relieved—until she realized that Emma and Maddie were trailing them to the elevator. Unbelievable. She was about to ride in an elevator with Emma, Rachel Ellison, and Maddie Novak. For a moment she wondered if she could somehow get a photo or video of the moment to preserve for time eternal, but she caught herself in time and left her phone in her pocket. She was so intent on not making an ass out of herself as the elevator crept upward that she didn’t realize Ellie had asked her something until all eyes zeroed in on her. Automatically she looked at Emma. *Help.*

“She grew up in Berkeley but played at Stanford,” Emma supplied. “Which I can’t imagine your parents took very well,” she added, eyes on Jamie. “They both went to Cal, didn’t they?”

Jamie nodded and managed to find her voice. “They were all, ‘But honey, Cal has a great athletic program. Are you sure you don’t want to go to Cal?’”

“Don’t let Dierdorf hear you talking smack about Cal,” Maddie said as the foursome unloaded on the second floor and headed down the hallway together.

“I would never talk smack about Cal,” Jamie said mock innocently, thrilled when the three veterans laughed.

A year ago she’d barely been able to speak around Maddie or Ellie. Now, with Emma walking beside her along the hotel corridor, everything seemed easier. Before her father died, Emma had been an unwavering fount of support during a year when Jamie wasn’t sure she’d ever be happy again. Her

anchor, even, as confirmed by the bracelet Emma had given her for her sixteenth birthday. In an impulsive act she had long regretted, she'd thrown the bracelet away the morning after she found out Emma had slept with Tori. A decade had passed, and yet she could still remember how the cool metal had felt against her wrist, tiny engraved letters pressed against her pulse: *I'll be your anchor if you'll be mine.*

She watched Emma now as they came to a stop before doors on opposite sides of the hall. Did Emma want them to be friends again? Was that even a real possibility? She was laughing at something Maddie had said, but her gaze swung back to Jamie as it had always done. Jamie thought she read a similar question in her eyes, and all at once it was too much. This was her chance to finally make the national team. She needed to focus on doing all the little things right—paying attention to coaches and trainers, interacting positively with teammates, making sure she got enough rest, water, and the right kinds of food—not trying to figure out where she and Emma stood, if they stood anywhere at all.

She looked away and followed Ellie into their room. Time to get her head in the game.

Chapter Three

“Grab some water and we’ll put what we’ve been working on into a full-field scrimmage,” Melanie Beckett, the defensive coach, said, waving them toward the sideline.

Emma jogged over to the bench and grabbed her water bottle, grateful for the break. Despite her “insane level of fitness,” as her brother commented every time he saw her, she was dragging slightly. After two straight days of fitness testing hell, they had at last started to play actual soccer. *Finally*, they had all exclaimed that morning, jubilant—until the coaches started running them into the practice field ground, too.

Out of the corner of her eye, she spotted Jamie a little ways down the sideline wiping sweat from the back of her neck. Jamie caught her gaze, and after a second they exchanged a small smile. Emma looked away first, digging through her bag to find one of her many tubes of sunscreen. It was a lovely, summery, winter’s afternoon in LA, and sunscreen was definitely in order, especially for a Seattleite of Scandinavian descent.

Once fitness testing had begun, Emma had been relieved to find that her pre-camp jitters were easily forgotten in the usual blur of raucous laughter and flint-eyed competition. The launch of the new pro league had kept everyone so crazy busy that she hadn’t seen her teammates much in recent months. In between measurements and tests, they joked around even more than they normally did, stealing water bottles and occasional items of clothing, choreographing silly dance steps to pop tunes, and teasing each other about everything from musical ability and fashion sense—some of the younger players *still* insisted on rolling their shorts—to nocturnal habits and cooking prowess. Emma had known many of these women since she was sixteen, and while she admittedly loved some more than

others, most felt like family. Whenever they came back together, it was almost like they hadn't ever been apart.

As in any family, though, there was usually tension simmering beneath the surface. You only had to know where to look.

When Steph Miller, starting defensive midfielder for the last two World Cups, approached Jamie on the sideline, Emma drifted closer. Before the water break Melanie had been testing the starting defense with different midfield line-ups in a small-sided game, the point of which was to focus on working the ball out of their defensive end. With Steph in the line-up, the starters had struggled to move the ball efficiently through the midfield. But then Melanie had subbed Jamie in for Steph, and the starting unit went on to score three times in a row.

"Nice work out there," she heard Steph tell Jamie. "But maybe take it down a notch, huh? You're making me look bad."

Despite the semi-teasing note in Steph's voice, it was all Emma could do not to snort. Could she be any more obvious in her clumsy attempts at manipulation?

Oh, wait. Apparently she could.

"Are you kidding?" Jamie asked. "No one could make *you* look bad."

A hint of guilt played across Steph's face. "Well, thanks. You're pretty great yourself. It's really good to have you back with us."

Jamie flushed at the praise while Emma resisted the urge to shake her. This wasn't the first time she had out-performed the veteran midfielder. During the beep test Monday morning, Jamie had come in second overall, handily beating out a bevy of starters who clapped her on the back encouragingly as she tried to catch her breath after the sprint competition. Of the returning players,

only Steph had failed to congratulate her. While Jamie hadn't appeared to notice the slight, Emma had. She'd almost been expecting it. During the victory tour the previous fall, Jamie had subbed in for Steph in both Portland and Phoenix. Initially Emma had thought she was wasted at defensive mid. Surely Jamie's creativity marked her as an attacking midfielder, either on the outside or through the center. But to Emma's surprise—and in her entirely unbiased view—Jamie had performed equally as well as the national team mainstay, if not better.

She was guessing that fact hadn't been lost on Steph, either.

Should she intervene? Emma frowned, tossing the tube of sunscreen back in her bag. Would she do so for any other new player, or was the temptation to swoop in and play knight in shining armor specific to Jamie? But that was silly. As an older player and possible future captain, it was her *responsibility* to look out for the younger players. All of them. Doing her part to keep team dynamics positive was nearly as important as coming to camp fit and ready to play.

Emma slipped her water bottle back into her bag and turned in time to see Angie launch herself onto Jamie's back, whooping.

Jamie caught the smaller woman's weight and spun around, brow furrowed. "Does anyone else hear that? A fly buzzing, or like, maybe a mosquito?"

As everyone in the vicinity cracked up, Angie huffed and slid off Jamie's back. "Funny, I didn't hear you laughing the other day when I kicked your ass in the hundred meter."

"No one ever said your tiny body wasn't built for speed."

As Angie lifted her water bottle and squeezed, Jamie ducked out of the way. The stream of water sailed well wide of its target and struck Maddie squarely between the shoulder blades. Emma snickered under her breath as the statuesque blonde slowly turned and fixed her glare on Angie.

“Sorry?” the younger woman offered, hunching her shoulders in a half-shrug.

“Apology not accepted,” Maddie all but growled, advancing on her with a distinctly predatory gleam in her eyes.

Emma stared at her residency camp roommate. Maddie wasn’t flirting with *Angie Wang*, was she?

“Holy shit,” Angie breathed, seemingly frozen in place.

And then Melanie blew her whistle. Break time was over.

“This isn’t finished, Wang,” Maddie declared, eyes still narrowed menacingly. “Not by a long shot.”

Angie skittered away, grinning impishly over her shoulder. “You’ll have to catch me first.”

“Oh, don’t worry. I will,” Maddie promised, following her out onto the field.

Well, *that* was weird. Not to mention diverting—she’d completely forgotten about Steph and her little mind games. Fortunately, with ten days left in camp, there would be plenty of opportunity to warn Jamie which veterans to watch out for. And to warn the other newbies, too. Obviously.

Emma followed Jamie and Lisa Wall, the other starting center back, out onto the field. Jamie’s years of youth national pool experience had allowed her to fit into residency camp more easily than the average new recruit. Her group of longtime friends—Angie, Lisa, and a couple of others—had played together for the under-20 and -23 squads. When she wasn’t with her “bro bandmates,” as they referred to themselves, she was often squirreled away in a corner with Ellie, appearing to listen intently as the older player spoke, hands gesticulating passionately. Were they talking soccer? The pros and cons of long-term relationships? Favorite reality television shows? Emma had no idea. And, obviously, it was none of her business. She and Jamie might be making an effort to be friendly, but they weren’t

really friends. Not anymore. Yet? *Whatever.*

Back on the field, the low hum of conversation faded as the coaching staff divided them into starters and non-starters for the first eleven v. eleven scrimmage of residency camp. The focus, Melanie reiterated as they spread out, would be on transitioning through the midfield. Neither team was allowed to shoot until they had connected a minimum of five short passes, and at least one member of each unit—defense, midfield, offense—had to touch the ball before a goal would count.

Emma, for one, was psyched they were working on transitions. Since Craig Anderson, their New Zealand-born head coach, had taken over and experimented with the line-up—as was a new coach's right and even, most would argue, duty—the team had struggled when it came to working the ball out of their own defensive end. It wasn't that their defense wasn't solid. Emma and Lisa had shared the center ever since the last of the '99ers had retired, and their outside backs were quick and dynamic and could be slotted into almost any position on the field. The same could be said for their formidable cadre of strikers. But with the midfield and front line shifting continually and with so few international matches recently, the team had struggled to develop the chemistry they'd enjoyed under their previous coach.

Once the players were in their designated positions, Melanie joined the other coaches on the sideline and blew her whistle again. The game was on.

Scrimmages between starters and non-starters were always intense, given what was at stake. Knowing this, Emma kept an eye on Jamie. Not in a different way from how she looked after the rest of the team, just, you know, because they were playing in the same general vicinity. The coaches had started Jamie at offensive mid on the opposing team, which meant she and Steph battled for possession directly in front of Emma for the first few minutes. They were surprisingly well-matched—surprising mostly because in the previous exercise Jamie had clearly dominated the older player in

both speed and technical ability. At one point, Emma saw Jamie slow incrementally rather than go all in for a fifty-fifty ball. Evidently Steph's attempts to psyche her out had succeeded.

Oh, hell, no, Emma thought, slotting the ball Steph had tapped to her cleanly up the center to Maddie. This would not do at all. Jamie should be stepping up her play to compete for a permanent spot on the squad rather than laying off a player she admired. The same thing happened fairly routinely in residency camp, but respect in the form of hesitation wasn't a highly valued—or rewarded—trait at this level. Steph had come into camp less fit than usual, complaining to anyone who would listen that her son had started kindergarten and the whole family had been throughout the fall. But even if Steph had come in fully fit, Jamie should be playing her ass off. The national team wasn't a true meritocracy—did such a thing even exist?—but it was close, and this was Jamie's chance to prove her worth.

For a moment Emma paused, questioning her own level of emotional investment. It wasn't because it was Jamie, right? After all, who wouldn't cheer for someone who had worked hard to overcome years of bad luck and succeed at the highest level? Jamie had come into camp as the classic underdog, and despite Emma's previous arguments to the contrary, most people loved rooting for the underdog.

When Craig paused the scrimmage to talk to the opposing team's back line, Emma walked over and tugged on the back of Jamie's pinny. "Hey," she said, keeping her voice low.

Jamie glanced over her shoulder. "Hey what?"

"Stop laying off Steph."

At that Jamie turned to face her. "Who says I'm laying off?"

"I do."

“And how would you know?”

“Because I know you.” As Jamie stared at her, Emma tried to reel the words back in. “I mean, I don’t know you *now*, but I used to know you, and I don’t think you’ve changed that much. Or at least—”

Jamie set a hand on Emma’s shoulder. “No, you’re right. It’s just, she told me I was making her look bad.”

“Don’t let her get in your head. All you can do is play your best. Anything less is a disservice—to yourself and to this team,” Emma said, repeating the same advice one of the ’99ers had offered her at her first residency camp.

“Okay. I will. Thanks.”

Emma nodded, aware of Jamie’s hand still on her shoulder, her touch surprisingly gentle. And warm. She’d forgotten how much heat Jamie gave off. She was like a furnace, which was partly what Emma had found so comforting about sleeping beside her the week of her father’s funeral. Before Jamie arrived, she’d felt chilled all the time. But with her there, she hadn’t felt cold at all. Not until she stepped onto the stage and looked out at the hundreds of mourners who were staring at her, waiting for her to deliver the perfect eulogy for the seemingly perfect man who, in reality, was anything but.

Jamie’s eyes changed, and she stepped back, her hand falling away as Craig blew his whistle to restart play. Out of the blue the ball came at them, lifted over the top by a newbie defender on Jamie’s team.

“Away!” Phoebe Banks, literally the best goalkeeper in the world, screamed.

Automatically Emma pushed off Jamie to leap into the air and head the ball to Ryan Dierdorf, the starting left back. Freaking newbies. What the hell had happened to midfield transition?

“Nice elbow,” Jamie said, rubbing her shoulder.

“Get out of the kitchen if you can’t stand the heat.”

Jamie rolled her eyes as she jogged away, but Emma could see she was smiling.

After that Jamie kicked it back up a notch, and soon the coaches were swapping the lines around. This time Jamie was on Emma’s team. The ball started at Phoebe’s feet, and within a couple of minutes their side scored on a beautiful through ball that Jamie sent into the eighteen for Jenny to blast past one of the back-up keepers. Jenny hugged Jamie as they jogged back to the center circle, but Emma contented herself with a smile and a high-five.

The less hugging probably the better. At least for the foreseeable future.

#

Like the other days before it, Saturday in Carson was warm and sunny. At four thirty in the afternoon, Jamie sat in the grass at the center of one of the training fields mostly listening to the coaching staff highlight lessons learned in their scrimmage against the under-17 boys’ national team, also in residence that week. It was a little embarrassing to be matched up against boys who didn’t yet need to shave, but any older and the women’s side would be physically outmatched. The reality—that male players would always be bigger, faster, stronger—sucked, but she had long since accepted it. She didn’t think it was indulging in biologic predeterminism to admit that even the best female soccer players in the country couldn’t get around biology.

And they were the best—not only in the country but in the world, of that Jamie had no doubt. During warm-up and cool-down and in between most drills, the women around her liked to joke around. But once the whistle blew and play began, they morphed into athletic machines with laser focus and unsmiling precision. Jamie could appreciate that. It was how she had always tried to

approach the game too. Sometimes she thought that when the time came and she was too old to play at the highest level, she would have to quit cold turkey because there was no way she could see herself playing soccer in a rec league. Coach her kid's team, yes, but play in a beer league? Not likely.

Since her last go-around, she'd nearly forgotten the sheer intensity of national team practices. Despite her pro experience, the speed of play at residency camp was significantly faster than what she was used to. The need to up her own game had come crashing back during the first full-field scrimmage when Emma had all but told her to get her head out of her ass.

That night back in their room, Ellie had echoed Emma's sentiments, though a tad more judiciously. "You can't afford to worry about anyone else," she had said as they lay in the dark chatting before sleep. "You take care of you, and the rest will fall into place."

The captain's words had reminded Jamie of one of Ellie's early interviews, and it was all she could do to keep from quoting Ellie back to herself. Somehow, though, she'd managed to lie quietly in their shared hotel room and refrain from squeeing at the realization that the person whose breathing she could hear evening out in the bed beside hers was her younger self's biggest idol. She couldn't sleep herself. The old interview that she'd memorized as a teenager kept running through her mind: "A coach once told me that there are only three things you can control: your attitude, your work ethic, and your level of effort. Everything else is outside of your control—coaching decisions, field conditions, weather, teammates, and, of course, referees."

This field-level philosophy dovetailed nicely with Jamie's own sports/life mantra: "Control the things you can and let go of the things you can't." That was what she'd tried to do so far in LA: focus on her own attitude, work ethic, and effort, and let go of the things she couldn't control—Steph Miller's apparent resentment, for one; the look in Emma's eyes when Jamie touched her shoulder, for another. In spite of the occasional hitch, the first five days of residency camp had slipped past in a

blur of hard work, afternoon naps, and meals with women she was getting to know some for the first time and others all over again.

She had spent the most time with three of her former youth pool teammates: Angie, a fellow midfielder; Lisa, a defender (because what else would she be with a last name like Wall?); and Rebecca Perry, surprisingly tolerable for a striker. They sat together every morning at team breakfast, cheered each other on in fitness training, and generally had one another's backs. Between practices they napped together in someone's room, and on evenings the team didn't have anything planned, they went out to dinner and watched Netflix until curfew. It was so much like their early days in the national pool that sometimes Jamie felt as though in addition to traveling halfway around the world, she had also managed to journey back in time.

Despite the slightly surreal quality of being back in LA and her near-constant state of exhaustion, she was feeling good about her performance. At the start, she'd had no idea if she possessed even a slight chance at making the team. Now, almost a week in, she was starting to regain some of the blind self-faith that elite athletes usually carry in droves. The last few years hadn't been easy, it was true, and she'd lost some of her previously unshakable confidence. But one good thing about surviving trauma was that it could provide the survivor with perspective. Even if she didn't make the World Cup squad, she still had her health, her family, and a professional soccer career. Besides, she'd already earned a couple of caps with the national team, which was more than 99.99 percent of the soccer players in the world could say.

Beside her, Ellie and her fellow co-captain Phoebe Banks were murmuring quietly as they stretched, slotting their sentences into the gaps in Craig's end-of-first-week speech. On her other side, Angie and Lisa were engaged in a battle to see who could flick the other hardest without gaining the attention of the coaching staff. Jamie was almost certain Melanie, the eagle-eyed defensive coach, had

already twigged their game, but Mel didn't say anything as she and Bill, the offensive coach, stood slightly behind Craig, arms folded across their chests. Mel was Jamie's favorite, and not only because she was family. Unlike certain other members of the coaching staff, Mel didn't yell or rant at them. She was calm and thoughtful and had a decent sense of humor. And she seemed to like Jamie, which was always an attractive quality in another person—particularly in one with the power to make or break your biggest life goals.

“So unless you lot have any objections,” Craig finally wrapped up, “the rest of the coaches and I think you've earned your day off tomorrow. And that day off begins—” he lifted his arm, pretending to squint at his watch—“right now.”

The players immediately erupted in cheers, and if Craig had planned to say anything else, it was lost in the cacophony of thirty women discussing plans for their first day off in almost a week.

“Up for some surfing action tomorrow?” Angie asked, leaning in.

“Hell yes.” Jamie pulled her sweaty shin guards out of her socks. “It's been way too long.”

Lisa, a native Southern Californian (an identity Jamie generously overlooked), chimed in along with Rebecca, and the plan was set. The water would be cold at this time of year, but that's what wet suits were for. Jamie couldn't wait. Even when it wasn't the best day for waves, she loved being out on the ocean with the sea and sky all around, far from shore without a phone or any other mode of communication. Untouchable.

Before they could leave the field, Ellie and her co-captain called everyone in for an announcement.

“I know some of you want to spend time with friends and family,” Ellie said, “but those plans will have to wait until tomorrow. Tonight is mandatory team bonding.”

A faint smattering of groans was silenced by a single look from Phoebe Banks, who stood at Ellie's elbow with her hands on her hips. Angie had nicknamed Banks "The Enforcer" and claimed to find her weirdly hot. Banks was straight—or at least she was engaged to a male college soccer coach—but Jamie had always gotten a queer vibe off of her. Then again, most female keepers she knew came off as slightly butch, so probably it was an occupational hazard.

"Don't worry," Ellie added. "It's the kind of bonding that involves dinner and movies. We'll meet in the lobby in an hour, so don't be late."

The mood in the van was cheerful, despite the response to Ellie's pronouncement. It had been a difficult week and most players were ready to chill. For the last five days they'd traveled almost exclusively from the hotel to the training center and back again. A few people had hit the beach one afternoon, but most took advantage of their few hours of free time between sessions to sleep or, in the case of the college-aged players who had been called into camp, to do homework. Jamie remembered her youth camp experiences, cramming in math tests and lab reports wherever she could and dreaming about a life that was entirely devoid of homework. She now had that life, and it was at least as awesome as she had imagined.

An hour later, she was showered and ready to go out with the team. Ellie was ready, too, but she was out on the balcony Skyping with her fiancée. Jamie, meanwhile, had stretched out on her bed with her laptop and started an email to Clare. It was the middle of the night in the UK, so she couldn't call. She wasn't entirely sure Clare would answer even if she was awake. They had only spoken once since Jamie left London, and she was starting to think that Clare was avoiding her.

"Hola, bitches," Angie said, barging uninvited into the room. They had left the metal door latch wedged into the gap, which in camp parlance meant no one was naked and visitors were welcome. "Where's Ellie?"

Jamie nodded at the balcony where the striker was visible through the sliding door. “Chatting with Jodie.”

“Aww, they’re so cute. That’s relationship goals, for real.”

“I thought you didn’t believe in monogamy anymore?”

“It’s fine for other people.”

Angie paused in front of the dresser, checking herself out in the mirror. Her black hair flowed loose around her shoulders, partially hidden by a gray fedora. A red skinny tie complimented her black button down and dark gray skinny jeans. Low black boots, dark red lipstick, eyeliner, and a light coat of mascara finished off the look.

Jamie loved Angie, but the whole *playuh* thing she had developed since being dumped by her college girlfriend the previous winter was tiresome. So what if they had girls sending them messages daily wanting to hook up? Half the people Jamie knew outside of soccer had dating apps on their phones and could meet random hook-ups anytime they wanted, too. She had honestly never understood the appeal of sleeping around.

Angie launched herself onto the bed and peered over her shoulder. “Whatcha doin’?”

Jamie minimized her email quickly—but not quickly enough.

“Are you writing to Clare?”

She nodded, bracing herself for Angie’s reaction. Instead of teasing her about being whipped, though, Angie only sighed and rested her head on Jamie’s shoulder. “That’s sweet. You guys are sweet.”

“Hold on.” Jamie lifted her hand to Angie’s forehead. “Are you feeling okay?”

“Shut up,” Angie grumbled. “Now come on, get dressed. It’s almost time to go.”

“I am dressed.”

Angie sat up straighter and glared at her. “James Maxwell, you are *not* wearing a hoodie out tonight.”

“Why not? It’s not like I’m looking to hook up.”

“You have a lot to learn about being on this team. It’s not about hooking up, it’s about keeping up.”

“I actually agree with her, Max,” Ellie said, reentering the room. She was dressed in dark blue skinny jeans, a gray button down, and a black bow tie, her short hair slicked back. She even had some make-up on.

“But I like this sweatshirt.”

The other two ignored her as they ransacked her side of the closet, hauling out black skinny jeans, her favorite red and gray flannel, and her black high tops. Once she was dressed, they dragged her into the bathroom and set to work on her hair and face, brushing aside her protests that she didn’t “do” make-up.

When they were done, she stared at her reflection. It didn’t even look like her. The deep red lipstick matched her shirt while the mascara emphasized her long lashes, and the concealer they’d brushed on was so light she could barely tell it was there. The extra pomade they had rubbed into her hair made it look shiny but not crusty, and added body while keeping the longer strands out of her eyes.

“Damn, James,” Angie said, holding her hand up to Ellie. “You look so good I’d almost do you.”

“Totally,” Ellie agreed, slapping her palm.

In the mirror, Jamie shot them the bird.

By the time they reached the lobby, most of the other players were already waiting. Jamie glanced around until she found Emma standing between Maddie Novak and Jenny Latham. She looked beautiful in blue jeans, a loose gray sweater that fell to mid-thigh, and ankle boots, her long hair falling about her shoulders in a cascade of shiny curls. Her eyes caught Jamie's, and all at once Jamie had the strangest feeling, almost like she was about to lose her balance.

Ellie's elbow connected with Jamie's ribs, and she sucked in a breath. "The hell, Ellie?"

"Watch yourself," the older woman said, her voice low. "There are people and cameras everywhere, and you drooling over Maddie is not something you want to have end up online."

"No, I wasn't—it wasn't..." Jamie trailed off. What did it matter if Ellie had picked the wrong teammate? Either way, she was totally off-base. Well, not totally. Emma was attractive. Anyone with eyes could see that. But Jamie didn't have *those* feelings for her, not anymore.

Ellie slung an arm across Jamie's shoulders. "Residency camp is like being at a women's college. Jodie went to Smith in Massachusetts, and she said some of the dorms there were lesbian sexcapades twenty-four seven."

Angie leaned in. "Where are these lesbian sexcapades of which you speak?"

"Other than in your pants?" Jamie quipped, and slapped the hand Ellie offered.

At the restaurant, a warehouse-sized Americana place where the staff had set aside half the dining room for their party, Ellie pointed at her own eyes and then at Jamie, with a subtle nod toward Maddie. Jamie resolved to sit as far from the team captain as possible. This meant she ended up at a table with some of the new recruits, residency camp rookies who, unlike her, had arrived not knowing many of the rostered players. These girls seemed to group her in with the veterans, and she tried not

to let that go to her head as she sipped red wine and asked them about themselves. Making everyone else talk was pretty much her go-to move in any potentially awkward social situation.

At one point, Emma and Maddie visited their table on the way back from the restroom.

“Hey, Jamie,” Emma said, smiling.

“Hey.” Jamie smiled back, hoping her expression was suitably casual. From across the room she could feel the press of Ellie’s gaze.

“You all doing okay over here?” Maddie asked.

While the other women at the table rushed to assure the veterans they were doing splendidly, Jamie sipped more wine, Ellie’s words echoing in her head. The idea of her drooling over Maddie was kind of funny. The blonde may have left her tongue-tied on more than one occasion, but it wasn’t like Jamie was attracted to her.

As if to mock her, an image of Maddie from the previous year’s *ESPN Magazine* Body Issue floated into her mind. Naked. What the hell? Freaking Ellie and her obsession with lesbian sexcapades.

The fly-by didn’t last long. As soon as the two starters were out of earshot, one of the newbies declared, “They are so nice! I thought maybe the publicity photos were air-brushed or whatnot, but now I don’t think they are.”

“They’re totally prettier in person,” another player agreed. “Did I tell you guys Emma stayed after practice yesterday to help me with my one v. one defending? I thought for sure camp would be cutthroat, but the older players seem really supportive so far.”

Jamie wanted to say that it was the coaches you had to look out for and not the other players, but she kept the thought to herself. Steph Miller had proven her wrong with her mind games earlier in the week, and anyway, Jamie was competing with these women for a spot on the team. While she

wanted to believe she was basically a good person, she knew the fact that she was older and had already crashed and burned on two previous tries meant that she would have to work that much harder to stand out. There was another residency camp in mid-January and a three-match road trip two weeks later to open the team's 2014 schedule, followed by the annual Algarve Cup in Portugal in early March. At this point, her main goal was to be invited to the January camp so that she would have a shot at making the roster for the February matches. Then if she did well in the friendlies, she might make the Algarve Cup roster, something she'd always dreamed of.

Choosing not to share insight born of experience with her rivals didn't necessarily make her evil. It made her smart, didn't it? Right. She reached for her wine again.

By the end of dinner, she was feeling tipsier than she had intended. Combining utter physical exhaustion with social awkwardness *and* a general inability to hold her liquor had probably not been the wisest of choices. Wait, did wine count as liquor, or was the term reserved solely for hard alcohol? In addition to being a lightweight, she knew practically nothing about booze. She had her reasons for avoiding alcohol, but hanging out with other athletes meant fielding more than the occasional run-in with beer pressure. In high school she'd managed to stay mostly sober most of the time, barring the incident that had started her down the straight edge path. But in college she'd found it significantly harder to avoid drunkenness, especially as a varsity soccer player at an NCAA Division I university. Still, she didn't like to lose control. Tipsy was usually as far as she went.

Even after using the restroom, where she peed for what felt like a full two minutes, possibly longer, her tongue still felt heavy and her head was fuzzy in a mostly pleasant way. When she collided with Angie on the semi-lit sidewalk outside the restaurant, she threw her arms around the smaller woman's shoulders and tugged her closer.

"Hey there, little buddy," she nearly crooned. She loved Angie so much. She had missed Angie,

like, totally.

Angie grinned up at her. “Aw, drunk Max is in the house! My favorite!”

“I’m not *drunk*. I’m just so happy to be here with you guys, you know? I just *love* you guys.”

“We love you too, Max. Group hug!”

Angie slipped her arm around Jamie’s waist while Lisa and Rebecca crowded in, laughing and mussing Jamie’s hair while she stood in the middle, smiling so widely her face hurt. Over Lisa’s shoulder she caught Emma staring at her from a few feet away, a smile teasing her lips even as her eyebrows arched heavenward. Wait, was “heavenward” even a word? Jamie smiled back at Emma. She was just so genuinely happy. She hoped Emma was, too. Everyone should be, especially people who were as pretty as Emma was.

When Ellie pulled one of the team vans around, Jamie and her friends hustled aboard, smushing into the front row behind the driver’s seat. The other three made sure she had the center seat so that she could see out the front window.

“We don’t want you getting car sick on us, Max,” Angie said, her arm loose around Jamie’s shoulders.

“Like in Mexico,” Rebecca added.

“Oh my god, that was so gross.” Lisa made a face. “You totally puked in your shopping bag.”

“I took the clothes out first,” Jamie protested. “Anyway, like you remember—you were passed out in the back row.”

“To be fair, no one except Britt even knew what happened until we got back to the hotel,” Rebecca said, flipping her long, blonde hair from one shoulder to the other.

Why were all strikers blonde? Jamie frowned a little in concentration. Or was it that all *blondes*

were *strikers*? Whoah. That was too much for her brain to parse. If only Britt were here right now. Even at her drunkest, the keeper maintained a calm exterior and clear mind that allowed her to answer life's great questions. Missing her friend, Jamie closed her eyes and then opened them quickly, focusing on the road ahead as Ellie guided the van onto the freeway.

They were back at the hotel in a matter of minutes. But instead of retiring to her room alone to potentially drunk—ahem, *tipsy* dial her girlfriend, Jamie found the entire team piling into their room, where Ellie and Phoebe had arranged for a DVD player to be brought up. Right—movie night was happening in their room. In fact, Ellie had asked to commandeer the sleeve of DVD favorites she liked to travel with. Crap. She had totally forgotten.

Good thing she didn't drink that much normally. Her memory was questionable enough as it was. Too many headers, possibly? Or was it a trauma response? One of the things she admired about her girlfriend was that she had a mind like a steel trap. Not that her girlfriend was talking to her right now.

While Ellie and Phoebe wrestled with the DVD hook-ups, Jamie ducked into the hall and scrolled through her phone, trying to remember what time it was in London. Was the UK eight hours ahead or behind? It wasn't like Clare was going to answer either way. She had sent a grand total of three texts in the last week, all in response to messages Jamie had sent. Jamie rubbed her eyes and hit dial, wandering down the corridor as she waited for Clare's line to ring. But the call went straight to voicemail, so Jamie hung up and headed back to the room. She missed Clare. Why was Clare avoiding her?

Except she kind of thought she knew the reason.

In the open doorway she surveyed the overcrowded room, stopping when her eyes fell on the figure leaning against her headboard, iPhone in hand. Emma glanced up and their gazes met, and

Jamie stood there looking at the girl—no, the *woman*—who had once been her best friend. Then they had become something indefinable but definitely more, and then they'd stopped speaking altogether until the damn soccer gods had decided to bring them back together. Clare knew all of this in theory, but she didn't know details. The only person Jamie wasn't related to who knew everything was Britt, and that was only because Britt had held her hand through the longest week of her life after she broke up with Emma in this very hotel—or whatever you called it when you told your best friend slash sort of almost girlfriend you never wanted to see her again.

“Max, where's *Pitch Perfect*?” Ellie asked, breaking in on her spiraling thoughts.

Jamie tore her gaze away from Emma. “What?”

“Your movie case.” Ellie spoke slowly, enunciating as if she were talking to someone slightly hard of hearing. “Where. Is. It.”

Jamie frowned and glanced around, trying not to notice that Maddie, also seated at the head of Jamie's bed, was whispering in Emma's ear. She didn't know, right? Emma hadn't told her about what had happened between them? More importantly, Emma hadn't told her about France, had she? The old panic started to rise in her chest, mixing somehow with the tide of tipsiness, and Jamie stared at Ellie blankly. She could feel her face flushing, could feel the way her mouth opened and closed like a fish that been ripped from the water. Some dispassionate part of her mind noted the symptoms of extreme anxiety coolly, as if they were happening to someone else. But they weren't happening to someone else. They were happening to her in the presence of the entire national team player pool.

Fuck.

It was Ellie's turn to frown, and she was clearly about to say something when Jamie felt a hand on her arm. She started to jerk away, but then she looked into familiar gray-green eyes and paused as a wave of something that was the opposite of anxiety washed over her.

“Can I borrow you for a second?” Emma asked, tugging her toward the door.

Jamie let herself be pulled, barely managing to ground out to Ellie, “Backpack. Closet.”

Emma led her across the hall and into her room where she closed the door and leaned against it. Jamie stopped a few paces in, willing away the tiny pinpoints of light bursting at the edges of her vision as she tried to force air into her starved lungs.

“Can I...?” she choked out, gesturing toward the bathroom.

“Of course. I’ll be right here.”

She pushed into the mirrored room and shut the door. Then she turned the cold water on and leaned over the sink, splashing her face and trying not to notice the scent of cucumber shampoo hanging in the air. Except cucumber was a soothing scent, one that could be found in assorted aromatherapy products. Jamie had often wondered if it had a doubly calming effect on her—she associated it not only with essential oils but also with Emma, the girl who had helped her through the hardest year of her life.

As the water cooled her body, she meditated, focusing on her breathing and on the image of each word of the meditation falling slowly through the blackness of her mind into an imaginary well. A few minutes of deliberate practice and her heart rate and breathing slowed. *When*. The old method of calming her mind still worked. She hadn’t had to test it in a while.

After another minute or two, she turned off the water and dried her hands on a white hotel towel. Then she looked at herself in the mirror, noting her red-rimmed eyes and the flush in her cheeks. This right here? *This* was why she didn’t like to drink.

With a last scrub of the towel over her now make-up free face, she opened the door and stepped out to meet Emma’s concerned gaze.

“Are you okay?”

“I think so.” She hesitated. “How did you know?”

“Your face got red and you looked like you couldn’t breathe.” As Jamie winced, she added, “But don’t worry. I don’t think anyone else noticed.”

“That’s good, I guess.” Jamie rubbed the hair at the back of her neck. “Thanks, Emma. I mean it. That could have been... Anyway, thank you.”

“You don’t have to thank me, Jamie.”

Emma was looking at her in a way that made her heart rate increase again, and all at once she realized that they were alone together in a room whose furniture consisted mostly of beds. No wonder she could feel the panic trying to reassert itself.

“We should probably get back,” she said, gesturing to the hallway.

“Are you sure you want to?” Emma toyed with the tip of the ponytail she had trapped her hair in at some point during dinner. “We could go for a walk, maybe get some air?”

“Ellie would be pissed if we skipped out on mandatory team bonding,” Jamie heard herself say. Which was true and yet so not the point.

“Oh, yeah. Right. Back it is, then.” Emma opened the door and held it, waiting for Jamie to pass.

Her foot had already crossed the threshold when she paused. “Hang on. Can I ask you something?” She stood half-in and half-out of the room, fidgeting a little as she made herself meet Emma’s eyes.

“Sure. Do you want to...?” She waved behind her.

“No, that’s okay,” Jamie said quickly. “I was only wondering, does Maddie know about, well...”

“High school?”

She nodded, even though that wasn’t exactly what she’d meant.

“She knows about you in theory, but she doesn’t know it was *you*.”

Maddie didn’t know *what* was her? But what Emma may have told her friends about their past relationship wasn’t really any of her business, and it wasn’t what Jamie was after, anyway. “What about France? Does she know anything about that?”

Emma shook her head. “No. No way, Jamie. The only person I ever talked to about France was my mom. Well, and Sam, my girlfriend in Boston. But I never used your name. She didn’t have any idea it was you.”

Relief poured into Jamie’s chest, and suddenly she could breathe more easily. “Okay. Thanks. That’s good to know.”

A tiny crease appeared above the bridge of Emma’s nose. “Is that what you were worried about? Is that what caused—”

“My first panic attack in three years?” Jamie nodded again. “I think so.”

Except that wasn’t entirely true. She was pretty sure the anxiety had arisen from a confluence of events—letdown from the end of the first week of residency camp; dread over Clare going underground the second she left London; and, if she was being honest, worry over trying to negotiate a renewed acquaintance with the girl-turned-woman standing before her. But she couldn’t tell Emma all of that because they were potential teammates and possible future friends, which meant their relationship existed in the past and, if she was lucky enough to land a spot on the national team,

somewhere in the indeterminate future.

“Well, don’t worry,” Emma said, still holding the door open with one hand and reaching out to press Jamie’s forearm with the other. “Your secret’s safe with me.”

She believed her. Why wouldn’t she? Emma had always been so—what was the word Jamie had first coined to describe her? *Conscientious*. Until she wasn’t, but even then there had been extenuating circumstances that involved Jamie behaving like a clueless wonder and Tori Parker behaving like the badass girl-whisperer even Jamie could admit she had been.

“Thanks,” she said, and smiled a little. “Again.”

“Like, completely de nada, dude.”

Jamie rolled her eyes and turned away. “You sound a little too much like Angie, *dude*.”

“OMG, that was, like, totes the point.”

“Now you sound like Chloe. Are you a *Pitch Perfect* fan?” Jamie asked as they crossed the deserted hallway.

“Are you kidding?” Emma sounded almost offended. “Who isn’t?”

The opening scene of the musical comedy was already underway when they returned. Maddie had saved Emma’s spot on the bed, but Jamie wasn’t so lucky. As she went to find a space on the floor near the balcony, she noticed Ellie give her a questioning look from where she had squeezed onto her own bed with five of the older players draped over and under each other. Jamie gave her a brief thumbs-up, which seemed to satisfy her temporary roommate.

Yeah, this team wasn’t gay or anything, she thought as she intercepted the nervous glances her newbie dinner mates were sending Rebecca and Gabe Prescott, an older midfielder, currently cuddling against Ellie’s headboard. Were they harmlessly flirting or were they an actual thing? Wasn’t Rebecca

straight? She would have to ask Angie for an update later.

Her gaze found its way back to Emma, tucked into Maddie's side on the other bed, Jamie's pillows wedged behind them. Her pillows were going to smell like Emma tonight. Britt's words, the ones she'd carried around like a mantra since arriving in LA, came back to her again: *You can't afford any distractions if you want to make it this time.* At that moment, Emma glanced up and caught her looking. Almost hesitantly she smiled and lifted her eyebrows. *You okay?*

Jamie nodded slightly. *I'm good.* Then she looked back at the screen, letting the opening chords of "The Sign" by Ace of Base wash over her. She hated this song but she loved this movie. 2015 was going to be epic. Not only would the US women be trying for their first World Cup gold medal since 1999 but—wait for it—*Pitch Perfect 2*, the sequel, was coming out in the spring. If she didn't make the World Cup team *and* the Bechloe 'ship actually became canon in *PP2*? It would be debatable which event she would feel like celebrating more.

Ellie waited until after the team had filed back to their own rooms and they were lying in bed, lights out, to ask, "What happened with you earlier? If I you don't mind me asking."

"No, it's okay." She hesitated. Would Ellie get her kicked off the team if she thought she was a head case? "I had a minor panic attack. It's the first one I've had in years, though."

"Ah." There was no judgment in Ellie's voice, only understanding. "Is that why you don't usually drink?"

"How do you know I don't usually drink?"

"It's my job, Max. Besides, your reputation as a lightweight precedes you."

"Oh. Well, yeah. It is one of the reasons."

"And Blake? Where does she come in?"

Where *did* Emma come in? Good question, but one Jamie was far too sleepy and comfy to want to ponder for long. “We were really close friends when we were younger, and I think maybe we could be again one day.”

Ellie didn’t respond, but Jamie could tell by her breathing that she was still awake. Awake and chewing on something, based on the sound of her covers rustling restlessly.

Ooh, alliteration. Her favorite. Noise when she was trying to sleep, though? Not so much, not even when the noise in question was made by a certified soccer legend.

“Stop it,” she finally muttered into the quiet room.

“Stop what?”

“Thinking so loudly.”

The team captain huffed out a soft breath of laughter. “Go to sleep, Jamie.”

After a while she did, because Ellie was the boss and not even coaches or referees messed with her. Usually.

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