

Chapter One

“What do you think?” Jamie asked, tapping her phone case nervously with her thumb as Ellie gazed around the one-bedroom apartment.

It wasn't quite the exposed brick walls and high ceilings Jamie had hoped for, but after a solid week of apartment hunting, her list of desired qualities had shifted. Noise, car pollution, people smoking outside and the scent of cigarettes and other smoking products rising into the windows was not a good combination, she'd discovered while looking in the hipster neighborhood she'd thought she wanted to live in. Burnside, the neighborhood where she'd stumbled across this apartment, was quieter and more residential, and offered easy access to Washington Park and its wooded trails, decorative gardens, and resident zoo. Living here, she would be sleeping only a couple of miles from lions and elephants and bears, oh my.

The building itself was historic, nearly a century old but carefully maintained and recently updated, according to the property manager. The wood floors were in good shape, the kitchen counters and appliances had been recently replaced, and the windows looked clean and functional. Windows which, incidentally, looked out over Providence Park only a block and a half away and downtown Portland beyond. The building's location in the Goose Hollow district was within walking distance of Thorns (and Timbers) home games, only two and a half miles from Ellie's house and an easy twenty minute drive to the team's training facilities in Beaverton. Not only was West Burnside's popular shopping district a few short blocks away, but—and this had made the decision for her, really—there was a Fred Meyer *and* a Chipotle across the street from the stadium. Jamie could walk to most of the necessities in life, an advantage that trumped wall surfaces and ceiling heights any day.

“I like it,” Ellie announced, gazing around at the gleaming wood floors and the three wide windows in the living room.

“It isn’t too white?” Jamie asked. The walls and most of the wood trim had recently been painted a nearly blinding white.

“Well, this is Portland we’re talking about,” Ellie said.

“Ha ha. I meant the walls.”

“Kidding. I think the white makes it feel really bright and clean.”

That had been Jamie’s impression, too.

“Burnside isn’t cheap, though,” Ellie added, lapsing into what Jamie thought of as mom mode. “Is the rent doable?”

She shrugged. “It wouldn’t have been before. But now... Besides, I could cover the lease with my savings if I had to.”

She was hoping—planning—that she wouldn’t have to do that, of course. She had yet to receive her first paycheck from US Soccer, and the Nike deal wouldn’t offer a payout for a little while yet, but she’d been earning more than league minimum while living rent-free at Ellie’s, not to mention her Champion’s League bonus payout for making it to the semis. Even without additional compensation, she could afford the deposit and a few months of rent without taking too much of a hit.

“All right, then,” Ellie said, grinning at her from across the empty apartment. “I think you should go for it.”

“Good,” Jamie said, her return smile a bit crooked. “Because I signed the lease an hour ago.”

“Are you kidding? It’s yours?”

“At least for the next year,” Jamie confirmed.

During the open house that morning, there had been multiple applications submitted on the apartment. Fortunately, the property manager was some form of queer, Jamie was pretty sure, as well as a self-avowed fan of the Thorns and Timbers. The place was Jamie's if she wanted it, the manager had told her when she dropped off a completed application, giving her a smile that let Jamie know she was getting the preferential queer treatment that every once in a while made life as a non-binary lesbian easier to deal with rather than more difficult. Or maybe the manager just liked the idea of having a soccer player in the building. Either way, Jamie had taken the apartment on the spot, only a little nervous as she signed the lease and handed over the deposit and first month's rent. Signing the checks had made it real in a way that even filling out the lease couldn't touch.

Now she took a deep breath as she gazed around her first solo apartment. She was definitely going to need to find some furniture. But that was what Craigslist was for, wasn't it?

"Dude! Congratulations!" Ellie said, her arms opening wide as she approached Jamie.

"Thanks." Jamie steeled herself for one of her soon-to-be former roommate's signature bear hugs.

"Have you told Emma yet?" Ellie asked as she released her a moment later.

"Of course. I had her on FaceTime during the open house."

"Nice. So when do you move in?"

"This weekend." As Ellie gave her a surprised look, she shrugged. "I know, I'll barely be here for the next couple of months, but I wanted to have a place to come home to after Canada. You know?"

Ellie nodded and threw her arm around Jamie's shoulders. "I know exactly. Now show me the rest of it. This place is definitely bigger than my basement."

“You mean your daylight basement, right?” Jamie said as she led her toward the kitchen/dining room.

“Sure, buddy. Whatever you say.”

The tour didn’t take long, because while the apartment was decently sized for a unit of its kind (Jamie felt like an expert on Portland residential properties after the past week), it was still only three large rooms—plus a walk-in closet.

“Holy shit,” Ellie said, turning a circle inside the closet. “This is huge.”

“I know,” Jamie said, grinning as she surveyed the space. She could practically fit her car in here, which wasn’t saying much given it was one of the smaller automobiles on the road.

“Well done,” Ellie said, holding up her hand.

Jamie slapped it hard, laughing at Ellie’s wince as the sound echoed through the empty apartment. This was her new place. Her place. *Hers*.

A few hours later, though, as she lay in the guest bedroom in Ellie’s basement going through her nightly meditation routine, she found herself distracted. Upstairs she could hear the occasional rumble of a voice, punctuated by the creak of a floorboard and the whoosh of water surging through pipes. Usually, these sounds were so much white noise, but tonight they engendered an almost panicked nostalgia. In a matter of days, she would be sleeping alone in her new building several miles away, surrounded by strangers in separate, locked apartments. But maybe she didn’t actually have to move just yet. Ellie wouldn’t mind if she figured things out after the season ended, would she? The property manager might let her rescind her application. It wasn’t like they wouldn’t be able to fill the space.

As anxiety swirled through her, Jamie closed her eyes. *Thinking*, she told herself, trying to pick up the threads of her lost mantra. She refocused and made it through the exercise twice more before

the wave of nausea subsided, leaving her tired and slightly empty. She went through her mantra a few more times, continuing until, finally, she could feel the peace of meditation in every part of her body and mind. *May all beings everywhere be happy and free. Including me.*

But she wasn't free, and it was possible she never would be.

In the middle of the night, she awoke from a dream so real that it took a full thirty seconds for her to realize that it was only a nightmare. Even after her eyes grew accustomed to the dark and she understood that she was in a house in Portland and not in the back room of a bar in Lyon, the dream that was in fact a memory lingered, its inky fingers probing her brain against her will. She huddled under her comforter, sweat making the short hair at the back of her neck itch. She was too hot, but she couldn't stand the thought of baring her skin to the cool air of Ellie's basement. So she lay where she was, shaken and shaking, and tried to trick her mind into thinking different thoughts.

At first she thought of Emma lying beside her the last time she'd visited Portland, but that wasn't quite right. She tried another memory, one from their recent trip to Lyon—but no, that was wrong, too. The idea was to escape the nightmare, not revisit it. Finally, she remembered their last camp in Carson. On movie night, Emma had sat beside Jamie on the bed, their hands clasped loosely on top of the covers, friends and teammates all around them. Jamie had felt completely at ease even though she was still technically on the bubble. It had helped that Jessica North had been cut before New Zealand.

At the thought of Jessica North, a tiny spark of outrage flared in her brain. Quickly Jamie seized on it, fanning it carefully until it became an actual ember that burned away the inky tendrils still trying to occupy her mind. Jessica North didn't deserve to represent the stars and stripes. Ultimately, it didn't matter if you were the best skilled player on the soccer field; you had to be a good teammate, too. Jamie had seen it on the men's side again and again in London: a team made up of superstars who couldn't seem to find a way to work together on the pitch. That was why

seemingly inferior teams were often more successful—because their players struggled less with subjugating their egos to the team.

The tiny flame of righteous indignation did its job, and soon the sweat was cooling on her skin and she was burrowing deeper into her comforter for warmth rather than safety. The basement really was fairly cold, even now that spring had sprung in Portland. In a matter of days, she would be sleeping far above the earth on the third floor of—but she cut the thought off and pictured instead Emma in her condo at the top of Seattle’s iconic Queen Anne hill. Buyer’s remorse once again threatened to hijack her brain, but she pushed it down steadily. She needed to think of good things, like the smell of fresh mown grass, the morning dew sparkling on a soccer field, the softness of her cleats after she rubbed shoe polish into the leather. The quiet of an empty field as she warmed up by herself, getting ready for practice.

These memories were easy enough to draw on. Soccer had been the one almost daily constant in her life since she was a kid. Even if she wasn’t in season, she was always training for the next pre-season, the next opening match, the next championship run. When her soccer career was over, how would she mark the passage of time? Maybe she would coach, maybe not. Either way, there would be kids to teach the ways of the beautiful game. She and Emma were both clear on that, assuming their relationship lasted. Which meant kiddie practices and Saturday mornings at the local soccer complex, wherever that might be. Would their daughters (sons?) someday play at Emma’s high school, following in Michelle Akers’s and one of their mom’s footsteps?

No pressure, future kiddoes. No pressure at all.

The thought made her smile, and the gesture pushed out any remaining ink spots assailing her brain. She breathed deeply and concentrated on the words that always calmed her, and soon, before she even knew it was happening, she drifted into sleep where she remained until the world beyond her daylight basement was suffused once again with light.

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Her nightmare the following night was more of a morning-mare. She awoke at five AM sweating and gasping, certain once again that the dream was real. But it wasn't, of course. She was in Ellie's basement, not her new apartment, and—THANK GOD—there wasn't actually a faceless man standing beside her bed, silent and ominous.

Jamie held her chest where she could feel her heart pounding. Blood rushed in her ears, muffling the silence of her bedroom and making her feel oddly disconnected from reality. What had she been thinking? She clearly wasn't ready to sleep by herself in her new apartment. She'd romanticized the idea of living alone without taking into account what it would really feel like. She hadn't slept in a room by herself since her athlete's single at Stanford, and honestly, it was hard to feel isolated when your room was one of several hundred.

The sky was already growing light outside, and the dream had her too keyed up to get back to sleep. What she really wanted was a long, hot shower, but the noise would wake Ellie and Jodie. Instead, she slipped out of bed, pulled on warm socks and sweats, and went through the exercises and stretches she always did before starting a tai chi session. With her crazy travel schedule, it had been difficult the past few months to keep up her routine. Why was it that even when you knew something was good for you, you couldn't always make yourself do it? But she knew why she'd struggled lately to maintain her mental health. The lack of a consistent routine over the past few months meant she was lucky to brush her teeth regularly, let alone meditate or practice tai chi.

She began her tai chi moves, recalling an article Lacey, the national team's fitness coach and chief of torture, had shared a couple of months earlier. The trick to making a habit stick, the author had written, was to start small; schedule the new practice after an existing step in your daily routine, like brushing your teeth; and associate the action with a pleasurable reward. A square or two of dark

chocolate wouldn't be a violation of the team diet, Lacey had stressed unsubtly, especially as studies showed that dark chocolate was good for the human brain.

Maybe Jamie should pick some up. According to Ellie, Trader Joe's chocolate selection was the best, and Portland had at least three TJs in the city limits, one of which was only a few blocks from her new apartment. It might help her work her mental health regimen back into her daily routine. The incident with Jenny's stalker and the trip to Lyon were evidently hitting her belatedly, judging from her dreams.

Freaking PTSD. Every time she thought she'd gotten past Lyon, it came back to bite her in the ass. Or, to be more precise, in the brain. During her recent trip to France, Jamie had been surprised how little angst she'd felt strolling the narrow avenues of the city where she'd been assaulted. She would have thought she'd be looking for the guy everywhere, and she did occasionally think of him and what had happened. But even if she had crossed paths with him, she doubted either of them would have been the wiser. A decade was a legitimately long time, and she was such a different person now. Being in Lyon didn't have the power to hurt her like she'd thought it would. Maybe that was because Emma had been there too, smiling at Jamie with her heart in her eyes in the ruins above the city.

At the second leg of Champions League semis, Emma had cheered Arsenal on as they fought valiantly against Lyon. She didn't even hide somewhere in the stands in a baseball cap and sunglasses, but rather insisted on sitting directly behind the visitor's bench at the Parc OL stadium, her recognizable blonde ponytail defiantly uncovered. When Jamie had asked worriedly if she was sure she wanted to be so public, Emma had touched her shoulder and said, voice calm and confident, "I'm sure."

And then she had taken off her sweatshirt and turned away, and Jamie had realized she was wearing an Arsenal jersey. Jamie's Arsenal jersey, to be exact. For a United fan, this was nearly akin

to proposing marriage. Britt must have had similar thoughts because she'd slapped Jamie in the arm during warm-ups and waved toward the seats where Emma was posing for a fan photo with her back to the camera, smiling over her shoulder with "Maxwell" and Jamie's number clearly visible.

"Do you think she'll take your name when you get married?" Britt had asked. "Or wait, I know—you could both change your names to Blakewell!"

"Shut it," Jamie had said, but she couldn't help smiling. Emma was definitely working hard to make up the whole lying thing to her. To be honest, it was working.

Now as she moved slowly and steadily through the familiar exercises, she smiled again despite the fact they'd gone on to lose 2-1 in heartbreaking fashion after actually going up a goal only five minutes in. Even though they hadn't expected to win against Lyon in France, the loss had still stung as much as any loss in Champions League could. For Jamie, the sting had been somewhat ameliorated by Emma's presence. Flying home first-class with her had been an okay consolation prize, she had to admit.

First class travel, an apartment of her own that was half the size of her parents' house, and enough money in the bank to pay off her car, if she wanted. Or even to buy a different car. If the Nike contract turned out to be as lucrative as Amanda, her new agent at Sparks Sport Management, had suggested it might—especially if they won this summer—then maybe Jamie would trade her tiny Kia in for a car more befitting a world champion. Like a Beamer or maybe a Mercedes... She stopped herself. No need to get all status-conscious. She lived in the Pacific Northwest, so a Subaru would be the best bet. Then she and Emma would have matching cars.

And yeah, no. That would be a little too saccharine even for her taste.

She used to fantasize about what she would do with money. She'd lived month to month for so long, never certain where her income would come from. Her first professional job with FC Gold

Pride in the WPS had come to a sudden, disastrous end, leaving her with the sense that no job in women's sports was ever guaranteed. Even now she knew plenty of NWSL players who lived with host families. If Ellie hadn't offered up her basement, Jamie might well have pursued a host situation herself. But with a US Soccer contract and a growing list of sponsorship opportunities, everything had changed—except who she was. All she really needed was a place to sleep, a gym membership, cooking supplies, and comfortable furniture. Well, and maybe some updated electronics. Her laptop was ancient, and she'd never actually bought a television. She was so used to making do with hand-me-downs, she didn't really feel like she needed much more to be happy. As long as her car could get her to Seattle and back, she was good.

She breathed in through her nose and out through her mouth as she moved through the familiar patterns, allowing the breath to expand her abdomen before tightening her muscles again on release. Energy buzzed in her fingertips each time she extended her hands away from her chest. That was how she knew she was doing the movements correctly. As relaxation flowed through her, she wondered if she even needed to trick her brain with chocolate to make tai chi part of her daily routine.

But then again, why would she pass up the opportunity to eat sweets that had been pre-approved by Lacey Rodriguez? Looked like a visit to Trader Joe's really should be in her near future. Ellie would be happy to come along, and maybe she would even let Jamie treat her to a stack of chocolate bars. After all, it was the least Jamie could do for her generous host.

Almost as if Jamie had conjured them, steps sounded overhead. Probably Jodie getting ready for a pre-work run. As Jamie headed for the shower, she reflected that she owed her soon-to-be former roommates much more than a stack of chocolate bars. Whether or not they would ever let her repay their kindness, however, remained to be seen.