

OUTSIDE *the* LINES

Book Three of the
Girls of Summer Series

by Kate Christie

Chapter One

“Hand me a baby wipe, will you?”

Jamie glanced around the living room, trying not to panic. A baby wipe? Where the hell was she supposed to find a baby wipe?

From her vantage point on the corner of the couch, Emma uttered a quiet laugh that cut off as Jamie’s gaze skittered back to her. “Maybe bring me the diaper bag?” Emma suggested, her tone suspiciously neutral.

Of course—the diaper bag and its seemingly endless contents. Why hadn’t Jamie thought of that? She reached for the battered black bag peeking out from under the coffee table, its sides decorated with fading Dr. Seuss characters. She took a calming breath. It wasn’t like Emma had asked her to change the baby. *Thank god.*

As Emma made short work of the newborn infant’s shockingly full diaper, Jamie couldn’t stop the disgusted sound that escaped the back of her throat. Seriously, how did someone that small produce that much excrement? Emma rolled her eyes at her response, and Jamie felt a flare of irritation. She had *told* Emma they were too new to do the baby thing. She didn’t have the foggiest idea what to do with an infant. But Emma had only smiled and said, “I do.”

And it was true, she did appear to know how to take care of a squirming, squalling newborn. In her eight years on the national team, Emma had obviously embraced her role as adopted auntie to the half dozen children whose player moms had lugged them to tournaments across the globe. Yet somehow this knowledge did little to assuage the panic that rose in Jamie’s chest every time she thought about holding the baby herself. It wasn’t her thing, a fact that Emma didn’t appear to find

relevant.

“Can you take her?” Emma asked, tucking the soiled diaper into what looked like a doggy waste bag. “I need to wash my hands.”

Jamie tried to school her features into less of a deer-in-the-headlights stare. “Um...”

“Come sit next to me.” Emma nodded to the couch cushion.

Warily, Jamie approached. At least the baby—no, she corrected herself, *Julia*—had ceased her pitiful mewling now that she was clean and dry.

“Here.” Emma held out the tiny infant. “Don’t worry, you’ll do great. I’ll help you. Okay?”

Reluctantly Jamie extended her arms, arranging them as Emma directed. And then Emma was smiling softly into her eyes and placing the baby in the cradle of her arms.

“See? You’re a natural. Just make sure you support her head. I’ll be right back.”

Alarmed, Jamie glanced up. But Emma was already retreating down the hallway leaving her alone with the—with Julia.

For a moment Jamie closed her eyes and inhaled another breath, trying to calm her racing pulse. It wasn’t like you could break a baby, right? Like, that wasn’t really a thing, was it? Unless you dropped it. Or inadvertently smothered it... Her eyes popped open and she stared down at the baby, relieved to see herself being watched by eyes that slid in and out of focus. The infant’s airway was perfectly clear, at least outwardly, and there was every reason to believe that was the case inwardly as well. Jamie forced her shoulders to relax. She could do this. After all, the baby couldn’t even move on her own yet. If Jamie could go one-on-one against Phoebe Banks, the best goalkeeper in the world, she could hold a baby without breaking it.

Huh. She hadn’t known a newborn would be this small. She stared into Julia’s flint grey eyes,

so unlike her mother's hazel ones, and let herself feel the heft of the tiny creature in her arms, warm and soft and incredibly light weight. Were newborn bones hollow, like a bird's skeleton? She would have to Google that.

Slowly, as the seconds passed and Baby Julia watched her with a permanently confused, wondering gaze, Jamie settled more deeply into the couch. This wasn't so bad. In fact, it was pretty cool to bear witness to the beginning of a life. Hard to imagine it now, but one day this baby would become a girl who would walk and then run and then, more than likely given her parentage, chase a soccer ball across the first of many fields. She smiled as she imagined watching the future girl line up in an American uniform; cheering her on as she tracked down an opposing player the way her mom had done for years; celebrating as she lifted a gold medal high in the air, her teammates whooping around her.

No pressure, though. Maybe the kid wouldn't even like sports. Some people didn't, a fact Jamie had long acknowledged to be true (her own sister and mother, for example) but had never quite been able to accept deep down in her heart.

Julia gurgled, almost like she was trying to assure her that she would—*dub*—like sports. Jamie murmured, "Of course you will, little one. Of course you will."

The baby's mouth formed a slight "O" at the sound of her voice, and her eyes focused again on Jamie, who felt the weight of her stare like a physical touch. This tiny creature was looking to her for protection and safety. Not like the baby had a choice, but still, she could have been screaming bloody murder. Instead she was snuggled into Jamie's arms like she belonged there. Like they both belonged in this moment, together. Jamie felt her own breath slowing, her heart rate evening out. She would protect Julia. She wouldn't let anything happen to her, not on her watch. And all at once she felt it, this new sensation that had been steadily creeping over her ever since she'd decided to

move home: She was ready for the next stage of her life, whatever it might bring.

Julia gurgled and squirmed, mouth twisting, so Jamie tried rocking her gently, watching her face to see if the movement helped. It seemed to, and she smiled, inordinately proud that she had managed to relieve the baby's discomfort. She had thought about babies in the abstract before. She'd known since college that she wanted to settle down one day and start a family of her own. But babies in theory were considerably less daunting than one in the actual flesh. Although now that she was holding this particular one against her chest, *daunting* seemed like the wrong word. Entrancing was perhaps better, or fascinating, or even, well, incredible. Because the miracle of life? Turned out it was aptly named.

She was so focused on the infant in her arms that she didn't notice Emma until she swooped in beside her and leaned close, chin resting on Jamie's shoulder.

"Hello again, Baby Julia," she cooed. "Are you my sweetest girl?"

"Hey, I thought that was my nickname!"

"No, you're my sweetest *woman*."

"Already giving away my nicknames—I see how it is."

"Guess you'll have to learn to share."

Jamie watched Emma stare down at the baby. "You're beautiful," she said, the words sending a slight thrill through her that intensified as Emma's gaze shifted to her.

"So are you." Dimple evident, Emma leaned in to kiss her.

But Jamie yelped and drew away. "Dude! Not in front of the baby!"

Eyebrows lifted, Emma huffed out a laugh. "Why not?"

“I don’t know. Just because!”

“You’re so weird,” Emma said, and pecked her lips before pulling back. “Do you want me to take her?”

Actually, she didn’t. “Um, no?”

Her response didn’t seem to bother Emma. “See. I knew you’d be a natural.”

She rested her arm against Jamie’s shoulders and they settled comfortably together, alternately chatting and fussing with the baby. Soon Julia’s eyes began to close, and Jamie felt her own eyelids grow heavy, almost as if the baby were hypnotizing her.

“It’s okay,” Emma murmured, slipping her other arm under Jamie’s to help support the baby. “You can go to sleep. I know you’re still jet-lagged.”

Jamie started to protest, but the couch was so comfortable and Emma was so warm, and Baby Julia was full-on dozing now. She gave up the fight and let her eyes fall shut, settling in more fully against Emma. “Maybe for a little while.”

She felt Emma’s lips press against her temple, breath fanning across her forehead. “Sleep well, my sweet girls.”

Maybe they *could* do the baby thing, after all.

“Damn, you two don’t waste time, do you?” an amused voice commented at much too high of a decibel for someone so freaking close.

Jamie blinked awake to find Ellie standing over them, her grin teasing, as Grant Baker lifted a bag of groceries onto the counter behind her. In the near distance, she heard footsteps galloping down the stairs to the lower level of the house. They were back.

“Again, Elle,” Emma said, yawning and stretching beside her, “we’ve known each other longer than you’ve known Jodie, so...”

“Yeah, yeah. How’s my goddaughter? I missed you, Julia,” she added, sitting down on Jamie’s other side and leaning down to inhale the baby’s downy hair. “God, I love how babies smell.”

Jamie frowned. “Everyone always says that, but she smells sort of sour to me.”

“Thanks a lot,” Tina Baker said, appearing on the stairs from the lower level, her two sons trailing in her wake. “That *is* my child you’re talking about.” She paused, lifting her hand to her chest dramatically. “Wait. *You’re* holding her, Max?”

“I am capable of holding a baby.” Although she wasn’t sure how much longer that would be true. Her arm was totally asleep.

“I don’t think it’s the capability she’s questioning,” Emma said, “as much as the willingness.”

Everyone paused as the boys accosted their mother for a snack, but Grant intervened. “I’ve got it,” he said, giving his wife a quick kiss.

“Thanks, love.” Tina sighed as she settled on the couch next to Emma, hefting her feet onto the coffee table.

Ellie leaned forward so she could see the exhausted mom. “Speaking of love... Aren’t these two almost disgustingly cute?” She waved at Emma and Jamie, her look affectionate.

“They are,” Tina agreed. “Awfully domestic, too. What do you gal pals call it, U-hauling?”

Emma rose. “And on that note... Jamie, do you want to get going now that Mama Bear is back? By which I mean you, of course, Ellie.”

The national team captain held out her arms eagerly. “Come to Mama Bear.”

Jamie almost didn't want to relinquish her charge, which she knew was silly. She would see the baby again in a matter of hours. Steeling herself, she smiled down at Julia sadly and handed her over.

"Sorry to crash your first official date," Tina offered. "Though honestly, I thought you were together at January camp."

"They claim they weren't," Ellie said without looking away from her goddaughter. "They were just being clueless, weren't they, widdle wun?"

Tina didn't seem remotely surprised by Ellie's descent into baby talk. Probably, Jamie thought, she had seen it all before.

"So where are you going?" Tina asked.

Jamie shrugged, slipping her phone and wallet into her jeans as she followed Emma toward the front door. "We haven't decided yet. By the way, did you get any sleep down there?"

"I did. It was lovely." Tina smiled. "Thanks for loaning me your room—and for babysitting."

"Anytime." Emma slipped her hand into Jamie's. "We'll see you guys later."

"Have fun," Tina said.

"Don't stay out too late," Ellie added, but her tone was distracted as she kept her gaze on the little girl dozing contentedly in her arms.

They grabbed their jackets from the front closet and then they were outside, following the paved path to the driveway where Jamie's hatchback was parked. Ellie's Explorer and the Bakers' minivan were in the other half of the driveway, shiny and new and big compared to her more modest set of wheels. Emma's car, meanwhile, was parked on the street. Jamie was kind of happy

that she drove something as low-key as a Subaru.

“Sorry about all of that,” she said, waving toward the house. “I didn’t realize Tina was coming up today.”

“Are you kidding? That was a perfect way to spend the afternoon. Well, almost perfect...”

As they neared the driveway, Jamie felt hands propel her forward into the side of her car, and then Emma was turning her and leaning in for a long kiss. Jamie’s body, already on notice at Emma’s proximity, immediately went on full alert, and it was all she could do not to groan into the kiss. It had been too long. She and Emma had made out plenty in California, among other things, but with the nature of her injury at January camp, she hadn’t been up for anything strenuous. Well, that wasn’t entirely true. She would have been only too happy to have her way with Emma, but Emma had insisted on waiting for their first time until they were both completely healthy.

If Jamie had known it would take *this* long to be in the same city, she would have pressed the issue. Somehow weeks had turned into almost two months apart as they kept missing each other. First there had been Emma’s three-week road trip with the national team, during which Jamie had remained in Berkeley and focused on physical therapy. By the time her groin muscle was rehabbed and her dad had helped her move up to Portland—within easy driving distance of Seattle—the national team was off again to Portugal for the Algarve Cup. They’d joked that their planes had probably passed somewhere over the Atlantic, but it was literally possible: The same day Emma returned from Europe, Jamie headed to London to prepare for Champions League. She’d only gotten back to the States a few days earlier and launched immediately into the remainder of NWSL pre-season. Today was Emma’s first day off from the Reign in a week, so here she was at last, and here they were kissing—at last.

When they finally broke apart, Emma smiled up at her. “I’ve been wanting to do that ever

since I got here.”

“Me too,” Jamie admitted, almost shyly. Which was ridiculous, because she and Emma had been official for a while now. But ridiculous or not, the time apart had led her to wonder how Emma would feel when they were finally in the same room again. From her kiss, it appeared she still felt the same. *When.*

“Are you hungry?” Emma asked, body still pressing into Jamie’s.

She swallowed, tempted to make a crass quip. They weren’t quite there yet, were they?

“And before you go all Angie Wang on me,” Emma added, leaning in to breathe hotly against her neck, “you should know that I plan on ravaging you later. But for now,” she paused to suck lightly on Jamie’s earlobe, “I need actual food.” She pulled back, dimple flashing mischievously.

Jamie closed her eyes and tilted her head back, shaking her head at the ash-colored sky. “I swear, Blake, you’re going to be the death of me.”

“Drama queen. Now come on. Where are you taking me?”

In anticipation of Emma’s visit, Jamie had mined Ellie and Jodie, her fiancée, for Portland restaurant recommendations. As they slid into the car she asked, “What kind of ambiance are you in the mood for? Like, candles and low light, or bright lights and diner food? Or something else?”

“Um...”

Jamie was backing down the driveway, so she didn’t see Emma’s expression, but she could hear the hesitation in her voice. “What?”

“No, I just—I’m not sure I’m in the mood for the whole restaurant date thing.”

They were out on the road now, a quiet street in Southwest Portland situated midway between Providence Park Stadium downtown and the Thorns practice facility in Beaverton. Jamie

braked, slowing their descent into the city, and glanced at Emma. “What are you in the mood for, then?”

“Honestly? I would love to get take-out and find a park or someplace else with a view. I just want to be with you.”

Jamie pondered the request. The spring day had been fairly warm, and it hadn’t rained recently. She kept a blanket and a couple of camp chairs in the back of her car they could use if it got chilly, and anyway, she had never been a huge fan of supposedly romantic restaurant dates. They seemed forced somehow, like the participants were playing a part in a show that was more for other people. Besides, Emma being Emma meant that there was always the risk she would be recognized, especially in soccer-crazy Portland. Better not to have their limited time together interrupted by star-struck soccer fans.

“Let’s do it,” she said, smiling over at Emma. She was *here*, her brain marveled. In Jamie’s car! Preparing to take a meal with her! And, you know, do other stuff later. Holy *crap*. *Holy crap, crap, CRAP*. But Jamie swallowed down her mixed nerves and anticipation over the end of the date and focused on the more immediate question: “What kind of take-out?”

A little while later they were camped out on a hillside lawn in a park not far from Ellie’s house, the city spread out below, legs tucked under a shared fleece blanket as they washed down copious amounts of Whole Foods sushi with water and miniature bottles of wine. Supposedly this was the highest point in Portland. The sun was still a ways from setting, but low clouds blocked the view of area peaks. From her daily runs around the neighborhood Jamie knew that on a clear day both Mt. Hood and Mt. St. Helens—as well as a few other Cascade volcanoes—were visible.

Sushi was the perfect finger food, Jamie decided, although Emma wielded chopsticks like a pro as she asked, “So tell me more about London. Did you have fun with Britt?”

“Totally. If you don’t count the whole losing thing.”

Arsenal’s 2013-14 Champions League campaign had ended in the quarterfinals. This was good news for her NWSL commitments because if Arsenal had won this round, they would have played two more matches in April and, potentially, the finals in May. Still, Jamie couldn’t pretend she wasn’t disappointed by the result. Arsenal had been her home for the last three years, and the final loss at home to Birmingham City had meant her time in London was over, at least for now. She’d actually teared up when it came time to board the plane for the US. Knowing she would see Emma soon, though, had comforted her as she’d traversed the Atlantic for the fifth time in as many months.

“Tell me about it. I hate losing.” Emma expelled a frustrated breath that Jamie easily interpreted. The US team, currently ranked number one in the world, had failed to win a single group stage match at the Algarve Cup on their way to finishing the tournament in a beyond embarrassing seventh place.

“Right? It’s literally the worst,” Jamie dead-panned. She had heard Emma rant about their generation’s willful misuse of the word “literally” on more than one occasion, but it was still amusing to watch her eyes narrow and her head list to one side as she tried not to twitch in exasperation.

“Well, maybe not—” Emma seemed to realize that she was teasing a second too late and stuck her tongue out. “Jerk.”

“Nerd. What’s the deal with the team, anyway? Ellie hasn’t said much.”

Since returning from London, Jamie had overheard muttered comments about line-ups, coaching decisions, and heads that would likely never find their way out of asses, but she hadn’t wanted to pry. Getting cut from the program was a bit too fresh in her mind.

“I think people have calmed down by now,” Emma said, “mostly because we were all sucked into club pre-season as soon as we got back. But morale isn’t good. We lost to *Denmark*, for Christ’s sake, and the World Cup is less than a year and a half away. You know?”

“Yeah,” Jamie said, and reached for another piece of salmon nigiri. “I know.”

The silence that settled between them felt awkward, and Jamie wished her last comment had sounded less sulky teenager and more supportive friend. Or date. Girlfriend? Whatever. It wasn’t Emma’s fault that she was on the national team and Jamie wasn’t. It wasn’t anyone’s fault, really—except maybe Craig Anderson’s and his coaching staff. *Bastards*.

“Is it bad I don’t feel completely awful about how you guys did at the Algarve?” she asked, hazarding a glance at Emma.

“Oh my god.” She paused, chopsticks in mid-air. “I can’t even believe you, Maxwell!”

“Sorry?” Jamie skewed her face into a cross between guilt and amusement.

Emma shook her head and laughed. “No, you’re not.”

“You’re right. I’m totally not.”

“If it makes you feel any better, I *may* have heard more a few people say that leaving you off the roster was a bad call. One in a long list, admittedly, but still.”

“Really?” Jamie wanted to ask who had had her back in Portugal, but she restrained herself. It was nice to hear, but ultimately it didn’t matter what the players thought. The only opinions that counted were those of the coaches. And the federation, to a degree that wasn’t entirely clear.

“Yep.” Emma plucked a dragon roll off the plastic tray in her lap. “You have quite the loyal following, turns out.”

“Including you?”

“Naturally. President of your fan club right here.”

“Ditto,” Jamie said, and reached for her miniature bottle of wine. Emma’s words washed over her, warm and real, reminding her once again that this was really happening. *They* were really happening. Living and working in different cities might leave more gaps than not, at least during the pro season, but that was okay. Their feelings for each other had survived a decade-long separation; in comparison, a few weeks or even months seemed like nothing.

Well, not *nothing*. Honestly, it sucked. But they would figure it out. Not like there was a whole lot of choice in the matter.

Beside her, Emma popped another sushi roll in her mouth and chewed. “Anyway, how was it seeing your ex? You never did say.”

“It was—civilized,” Jamie said, remembering the cool smile and brief hug Clare had bestowed upon her the day they met for coffee. “She’s dating someone, I’m dating someone...”

Emma looked at her askance. “You are? Who?”

“Shut it, dork.”

“You’ll have to make me.” She glanced around, and then, apparently satisfied they were alone enough, leaned in to kiss her.

Jamie stuck her tongue out, intending to be silly, but almost immediately she realized that french kissing Emma was not silly in the least. No, it was hot and sexy and soon she was scooting closer—

Emma pulled back, looking around the park again. “Sorry. It’s just—we’re in public.”

“No, I know. Don’t worry about it.” Jamie squashed a sigh and reached for her wine again. Emma was leery of PDA, and it wasn’t like she was a huge fan of public make-out sessions herself.

But with their current logistics, she had a feeling they were going to have to seize the moment whenever—and wherever—they could. Speaking of which... “We should probably talk about sleeping arrangements. I told Tina she and Grant and the baby could have my room tonight.”

Emma blinked at her. “Oh.”

“Given the boys are sleeping on the pull-out in the family room, that leaves the upstairs couch for us.” As Emma continued to stare at her, Jamie ducked her head. “I know, I’m sorry. Ellie swears she told me about Tina’s visit right after I got back from London, but that day is pretty much a blur, so...”

“You know what? This is fine,” Emma announced, smiling as Jamie’s eyebrows rose. “Just one more reason we shouldn’t stay at Ellie’s house tonight.”

“It’s a little late to call up Bruges.”

Jordan Van Brueggen, a relative newcomer on the national team, was the other allocated player at Portland. She had grown up in Colorado, played college ball in Arizona, and was one of a handful of social and political conservatives in the pool.

Emma scoffed. “No way are we calling VB.”

“Then where are we staying?”

“You’ll see.”

“Emma...” They’d had this argument before in January when Emma suggested she spring for a few nights at a fancy hotel in downtown San Francisco, or even for an average room near Berkeley’s campus.

“No, Jamie. I’m not about to sleep on a couch with you tonight. For one thing, my back can’t take it, and for another, I don’t want to have to worry about Tina’s boys walking in and asking

why Auntie Emma is hugging ‘that girl.’ Naked.”

“That totally wouldn’t happen,” Jamie declared.

“How do you know?”

“For one, Ian is convinced I’m a dude. I heard him arguing with his dad: ‘No, that’s a boy! He even has a boy’s name!’”

Emma bit her lip, clearly trying not to laugh. “Small fry aren’t so good with the gender cues.”

“You think?” Jamie snorted, and the conversation got stuck momentarily on little kids and their obsession with fitting everyone and everything into neat categories. Emma did most of the talking on this subject while Jamie sat back, sipping her wine and nodding at appropriate moments. God, Emma was beautiful. And intelligent. And legitimately loaded. What was she doing with someone who couldn’t even afford an apartment of her own?

Whereas Jamie had allowed her pride to prevail in January, now she was tempted to rein it in. More than tempted—this was their one night together for the foreseeable future. Emma was flying to Denver tomorrow for the first of two national team friendlies that would keep her traveling for the next week. After that they would both be in-season through the end of August. Given that Portland’s first three league games were on the road and Seattle’s second three lay far from the Pacific Northwest, they might not be able to see each other again until their teams met the second week of May. And even that first match was scheduled for Portland, where Jamie would likely still be sharing a roof with Ellie...

“Okay,” she said a little while later after they’d finished the sushi and most of the wine, “you win. Let’s stay someplace else tonight.”

“Babe,” Emma said, her tone a cross between kind and condescending, “that was decided a

while ago. Seriously, you need to learn to keep up, beanpole.”

“Whatever. You know you want all of this.” Jamie waved at her body, currently hidden by a bulky sweatshirt/fleece combo.

“You’re right.” Emma moved closer to murmur in her ear, “I do want all of you.”

Jamie felt a shiver work its way along the sensitive skin of her neck and down her back. A hotel would be fine. Definitely.

She sprang up, faking a yawn. “Sheesh, will you look at the time?”

Emma smiled up at her. “Pretty late, isn’t it?”

“Totally.” She held out a hand. “Ready?”

Emma took her fingers and pulled herself up. “The question is, are you?”

That really was the question, wasn’t it?

* * *

Emma sat in the front seat of Jamie’s hatchback, thumbing through hotel options on her phone while Jamie packed the car. That one looked promising. She clicked through and skimmed the amenities—suite available overlooking the Willamette River, king bed, and in-room Jacuzzi. *Perfect*. She booked the room, completing the process just as Jamie slid into the driver’s seat.

“All set.” Emma slipped her wallet back into her handbag. “Do you know how to get to the South Waterfront?”

“Yeah, no. I’ve been in Portland for a total of ten days.”

“GPS it is. Wait. Are you okay to drive?” she added, frowning a little.

“I’m fine.”

“I can drive if you want.” Not only did Emma weigh more than Jamie, she was pretty sure she partook of alcohol a tad more often. Possibly more than a tad.

Hand on the ignition, Jamie hesitated. Then she undid her seat belt. “I’m a better navigator than you, anyway.”

Emma pretended to elbow her as they crossed in front of the car. “Nice.”

Jamie caught her arm and tugged her off-balance, holding her close long enough to connect their lips. The kiss was brief, almost glancing, but Emma felt it deep inside. God, she had it bad. She pushed Jamie away, ignoring the smug look in her eyes.

“You’re lucky I—” she started, and then stopped as Jamie’s look shifted, “—like you.” She continued around to the driver’s door, face-palming inwardly. That was not how she wanted to tell her. Anyway, did confessing one’s undying love really qualify as first date material?

Probably as much as getting naked in a hot tub did. And yet, that was where they found themselves an hour later: facing each other from either end of a steaming tub on the top floor of a South Portland hotel, the sky outside the indigo that always reminded Emma of watching the sunset from her parents’ living room in Seattle.

They had managed to get in and out of Ellie’s house fairly quickly. With children present, the adults hadn’t been able to tease them too much about their sudden recollection of an unspecified prior engagement in the city, one that would keep them out so late that they might as well stay downtown so as not to wake everyone else up. They were doing the house’s current inhabitants a favor, really.

While Tina snorted, Ellie exchanged a knowing glance with Jodie, her fiancée, who had come home from work while Jamie and Emma were out. But they didn’t say anything as Jamie

jogged downstairs to pack a bag for the night.

Ellie waited until she was out of earshot to elbow Emma. “Don’t mess this up, Blake.”

“I have had s-e-x before, you know,” Emma snarked back.

And then her smirk faded as Jack, Tina’s oldest at six and a half, piped up: “What’s sex?”

The room was silent for a moment, and then all the adults busted out laughing. Jack’s chest puffed up in pride and he began to dance around the room repeating, “Sex-sex-sex-sex,” while Emma—subtly, she hoped—flipped off her amused friends.

The drive into the city had been oddly tense, and Emma had searched for conversational topics, discarding one after another. Soccer, the most obvious, was tricky because their pro teams were rivals and the national team was in disarray. She hadn’t let on to Jamie how bad it was, but after bombing out of the Algarve, most of the older players were furious with Craig over formation choices and starting line-ups. The grumbling of recent months had grown into a veritable cacophony over many of his decisions, including cutting Jamie and starting inexperienced newbies over older, more seasoned players. With discord running rampant, Craig was losing control, possibly justifiably so.

For once Emma would rather be with her club than the national team. At least the Reign organization was stable, even if the same couldn’t necessarily be said for the league. But with financial backing from the federation—something the two previous American women’s pro leagues had lacked—the NWSL had a better chance at sticking around for the long term. The Thorns franchise was stable, too, in addition to being the closest team to Seattle. They were lucky Jamie had landed in Portland with Ellie, even if 175 miles sometimes felt like it might as well be a thousand.

Tonight, though, they would be in the same city. Tonight they would sleep in the same

room. And right now, they were naked in the same tub.

“Hi,” Emma said, sliding one hand slowly up Jamie’s taut, firm calf.

“Hi,” Jamie echoed, watching her with glowing eyes and pink cheeks.

Emma gave her leg a tug, careful to be gentle. “You’re too far away.”

“I am?”

“You are.” She watched as Jamie’s lovely body with her lovely muscles and her lovely tattoos drifted closer, closer, until all she could see was the blue of her eyes.

Jamie stopped. “I love you, you know,” she said, her voice soft and a little bit hoarse.

The words weren’t really a surprise; at some level, Emma *had* known. But the warmth that seeped into her bloodstream, heating every inch of her and making her throat tighten, that was a surprise. She slipped her arms around Jamie’s neck, fingertips delicately rubbing the hair at her nape. “I love you, too.”

She tilted her head back slightly. “Even if I play for the Thorns?”

“Even so.” Emma smiled up at her. Despite the teasing words, she was deeply, ecstatically happy. Nothing else mattered except the two of them alone in this room—at least for a little while. “Kiss me?”

“So bossy, Blake,” she said, her eyes on Emma’s lips.

“You love it.”

Jamie didn’t answer, only leaned in a bit more, strong arms bracing her as the tub jets whorled and whooshed, and then their lips connected, softly at first and then harder as Emma tugged again. Jamie’s body fell into hers, and she gave a surprised gasp that Emma immediately

longed to hear again. Quickly the gasp turned to something else as their skin slipped and slid together under the roiling surface of the water, legs entangling, chests pressing, thighs rubbing. The heat inside Emma raced and then settled, pooling low in her abdomen as light shifted against her closed eyelids and she felt Jamie everywhere all at once.

It had been so long that it only took a few minutes of rocking together, mouths and bodies moving feverishly, before Emma felt herself tipping and falling, her limbs tensing in the final moment before the orgasm washed over her, forcing a muted cry from her lips. She kept her eyes closed through the delicious waves, only opening them after Jamie pulled away slightly.

“Wait, did you..?”

Emma bit her lip. “Yes?”

“Wow.” She ducked her head and kissed her again, lips moving more slowly now. “That’s amazing.”

“I think that’s supposed to be my line.”

Jamie paused again, eyes narrowing as she pressed her hips into Emma. “Not yet it isn’t. I’m not done with you.”

Emma closed her eyes as the heat flared back up. Another surprise—Jamie taking control. She wouldn’t have predicted it, but she definitely liked it. Hell, she more than liked it. “You’re not?”

“Not even close. We have the rest of the night, don’t we?”

“We do,” Emma agreed, and pulled her back down.

“Did you set the alarm?” Jamie asked, slipping back into bed and immediately snuggling into her side.

“Mm-hmm,” Emma murmured, turning her head to lazily kiss Jamie’s still-damp forehead. She smelled like toothpaste and lavender bath salts and sweat and sex, and it was almost enough to make Emma want to have her way with her, *again*. But it was after midnight and the alarm was set, and despite what they might want they each had busy days ahead—national team training camp in Denver for her, Thorns practice and a pre-season scrimmage for Jamie. They were professional athletes, and as much as they might want to stay up all night, their consciences wouldn’t let them.

Still, they had utilized the past few hours to the best of their (considerable, Emma thought) abilities, exploring each other and learning what the other liked first in the tub and then in the king-sized bed. Eventually they’d donned robes and fed each other pita chips and hummus from the “care package” Ellie had pressed into Jamie’s hands as they left the house. They’d laughed and kissed as they filled their glycogen windows and Emma had been amazed at how easy everything felt, how normal. Being with Jamie was just what she had expected in some ways and yet, at the same time, nothing like she could have predicted. Jamie was tender and sweet in bed, but she was also teasing and demanding, driving Emma to the brink multiple times before backing away and building her back up again. Little remained of the girl who had never been kissed, and Emma wasn’t sure if she was insanely jealous of or incredibly grateful to the women who had taught Jamie how to be so comfortable with her own body—not to mention, with Emma’s. She had felt Jamie’s eyes on her as her fingers curled and twisted inside her, drawing gasps and sounds she was pretty sure she’d never before emitted. No first time had ever been quite as meaningful, but then again, she’d never been in love with a partner before sleeping with them. This thing between them was already more serious than most of her past relationships combined.

How serious had become clear during dinner at the park near Ellie’s house when the conversation had shifted to Baby Julia. With the sky overhead slowly darkening into a soft purplish gray, Emma had explained about oxytocin, the “love hormone” triggered by physical and emotional

connection with others. Newborn babies, she'd told Jamie, tend to bring it out in anyone and everyone.

"That is one awesome evolutionary development," Jamie had commented, "given that babies are so completely incapable of self-care."

"Toddlers, too," Emma had pointed out. "It takes years before a kid can dress herself or wipe her own ass."

"Nice," Jamie had said, wrinkling her nose.

And then, for whatever reason, Emma had found herself blurting, "You've said you want to have kids, but are you sure?" As Jamie looked at her quickly, she'd added, "I know, this isn't normal first date fodder. But the kid thing is kind of a deal breaker for me."

Jamie had nodded, gaze unwavering. "I'm sure. I'm also fairly certain the idea terrifies me. But so did trying out for the national team, and I wouldn't change that for anything. I mean, I'd change the *outcome*, of course, if I could."

"You never know. The door might seem closed now, but stranger things have happened."

Jamie had hesitated. "You don't always have to try to fix everything, you know."

"Oh. Yeah, I know." And she did. But knowing she didn't have to and preventing herself from trying were two very different things.

They'd eaten in silence for a little while after that, and Emma had been relieved by Jamie's answer regarding future offspring even as she'd wondered if some overly defensive part of her brain was trying to put the kibosh on their relationship. She hadn't really needed to ask that question, had she? If she'd had any doubts, Jamie's sentiment toward kids had been on display since Emma had arrived at Ellie's earlier to discover Tina, Grant, and their three children already in residence. While

Jamie had been wary of the newborn baby, she had rough-housed and rumbled happily with Jack and Ian, the two older boys.

Emma hadn't been the only one to notice Jamie's way with the brothers, either. Shortly before Grant and Ellie took the boys to the store, Tina had commented, "They've only met her twice and they already love her."

"They really do," Emma had agreed.

She wasn't surprised by Jamie's capacities when it came to engaging children. After all, she'd seen her work magic on Steph's young son at residency camp, too. It was more that Jamie didn't seem like the maternal type. But was that completely true? Even as a teenager, Jamie had been amazing with Emma's little brother the week after their father died, hanging out with him and generally helping distract him from his grief.

Anyway, being kind to children wasn't only within the scope of "maternal" types. She chided herself on her own bias. For women like Jamie who fell towards the middle of the gender spectrum, closer to androgyny than femininity, it was a disservice to assume they wouldn't like kids just as it was a disservice to assume that men wouldn't, either. Look at Ellie, who couldn't wait to have babies. Look at Grant, and Steph's husband Geoff, too. They were both involved, dedicated dads. Her own father may not have spent much time with children outside of the surgical suite, but that didn't mean other men were the same.

Now Jamie burrowed closer, her face on Emma's shoulder. "I love you, Emma," she said, her voice drowsy and sweet.

"I love you, too," Emma whispered back, kissing Jamie's forehead again.

"Sweet dreams."

“Sweet dreams to you, too.”

Jamie sighed, the sound happier and more relaxed than Emma had ever heard from her. *She* was responsible for that, and no one else. The corresponding rush of emotion that surged through her body was made up of equal parts love, oxytocin, and terror. Because if she loved Jamie this much now, what would being with her for months or even years be like?

The thought would have been more frightening, probably, if she hadn't felt so entirely peaceful in the dimly lit hotel room, Jamie's warm body flush with hers under the soft cotton sheets, the sounds of the city of Portland washing up against the building's exterior as they fell asleep together, legs and arms entwined.

Chapter Two

Jamie stood under the hot spray, practically moaning as the warm water slowly eased the chill from her extremities. It was her own fault she'd gotten this cold. Playing soccer in rainy, fifty-degree weather wasn't the problem. Driving home in wet clothes without showering first at the Thorns practice facility, on the other hand, hadn't been her best decision ever. But she'd wanted to get home ASAP. Emma and Ellie and the rest of the national team were playing China in Colorado, and she didn't want to miss a single second.

Unfortunately—or perhaps fortunately?—Jodie had texted to say that her work function was going longer than anticipated. Which, hello, it was Sunday. But Jamie wasn't one to talk, given that she'd technically had to work that afternoon as well. At least she would get time off tomorrow after today's pre-season scrimmage; Jodie was not as fortunate. In any case, the delay had made this shower possible and might even give her time to watch the pregame without her housemate. After all, she had to make sure the DVR was working properly, didn't she?

Right. She could practically hear Angie's voice echoing over the sound of the water: *So whipped, boi!* And, yeah. Valid.

Did she even want to tune into the pre-game, though? Watching the national team these days was equal parts pleasure and torture. The good part was watching Emma and Ellie and the rest of the team kick ass on the field. The bad part was watching Emma and Ellie and the rest of the team kick ass on television rather than from the sidelines. Or, alternately, from the field herself.

Sometimes she thought it might have been better never to have been part of the national team player pool. This morning, for example, she'd awakened early and lay in the dark imagining Emma and their mutual friends waking up in their hotel near Denver. She could picture every step

of their Game Day routine, from Ellie's habitual raw egg smoothie and Phoebe's post-breakfast hot tub soak to Gabe's mid-day meditation circle and Angie and Lisa's pre-game dance party. Could picture, too, her Arsenal teammates on the other side of the Atlantic, lacing up their boots to take the pitch for practice under the lights.

If the national team had never called, if she hadn't been invited to December or January Camp, she'd wondered, would she have been out on that London pitch? Probably. She certainly wouldn't have been lying alone on the futon in Ellie and Jodie's guest room waiting for a morning text from Emma. She wouldn't have been trying to psych herself up for a scrimmage with another new team, steeling herself to interact with teammates already bonded from the month of pre-season she had missed during Champions League.

Closing her eyes, she lifted her face to the shower spray, trying to drum out the doubt rising inside her anew. Had she made the right call? Had leaving her safe, comfortable footballer's life in London been worth it? She and Emma were finally together, but they'd barely seen each other since January and the next few months didn't look to be much better. Would their relationship last the NWSL season? And if it did, could it survive what might be years of Emma playing on the national team without her? There was her growing friendship with Ellie to appreciate, but even now Jamie sometimes struggled with the sense that she'd let down the national team captain—her *idol*, for fuck's sake—at the end of January Camp.

She tried to imagine herself attending friendlies as a fan, tried to picture herself at the World Cup next summer in a Blakeley jersey, cheering Emma and Ellie and their other friends on from the sidelines. She would do it, of course she would. But she couldn't pretend doing so wouldn't kill her inside a little bit more each match. She'd come *so freaking close* to making the national team, and maybe that really was worse than never having had a real shot at all.

Sighing, she reached for the coconut body wash and began the lengthy process of scouring the Oregon mud from her skin and under her fingernails. No going back now, she reminded herself. No Mulligans in real life, as one of her college coaches had liked to say. No choice but to kick off the covers each morning and get on with it. She would give the Thorns her everything, leave it all on the field as she had always tried to do. After all, she was a professional, and expending effort was a huge part of the vocation that, despite the ups and downs, she loved more than almost anything else. Her pro soccer career, she'd always known, was temporary. Some day she would look back on these days as some of the best of her life.

Maybe. Probably. Depending on how this and future seasons turned out. Right now her team's future—and that of the NWSL itself—was still a blank chalkboard. Or, more accurately, a blank dry eraser board.

She stayed under the spray longer than was probably polite, given her goal of not running up Ellie and Jodie's water bill while living in their basement. It was hard to pull herself away, though, even on days when she wasn't chilled to the bone. One of the things she loved about being back in the US was the water pressure. In London, the ancient pipes had been infamously treacherous, and coin-operated hot water heaters could be inconvenient, to say the least. More than once she'd run out of hot water and had to scramble about the bedroom, dripping soap everywhere (much to Clare's displeasure) while looking for a spare 50p coin. Not so here. Like Jamie's parents, Ellie and Jodie kept their water heater turned up high, which meant there was almost always hot water to spare.

Finally, with visions of Emma slide-tackling Chinese strikers dancing in her head, she shut off the water. As she was toweling off, she heard floorboards creak overhead. Jodie was back, which meant they could watch the game. *Yes!* She raced through her post-shower routine and tugged on

the first dry clothes she saw, practically sprinting upstairs until she remembered how slippery the wood floors were, especially when all you had on your feet was a pair of fluffy fleece socks. She'd rather not imagine the humiliation of having to admit she'd injured herself while sprinting to watch Emma play on TV. Slowing, she checked to make sure the person currently moving about the home's main level was Jodie before picking up her pace again and sliding sideways into the kitchen.

"Oh my god!" Jodie shrieked, hand on her chest. "Jamie! Don't do that!"

"Sorry," she said, trying to bite back a smile and failing spectacularly.

"I can tell." She turned away and then spun back. "Wait. The game's taping, right?"

"Duh. I texted you like half an hour ago." She bounced on the balls of her feet a couple of times. "Want to watch?"

"Obviously. But let me change and get some food first?"

"I guess..." She sighed dramatically.

Jodie only smiled. Probably she knew the feeling.

While Jodie changed, Jamie set about warming up leftover Thai food for them both. In a surprisingly short time the other woman was back, hair released from its tight bun, contacts replaced by glasses, blazer and trousers she'd worn earlier swapped for USWNT sweats. What hadn't changed was the T-shirt she'd paired with the blazer, a black crewneck that proclaimed, "Wild Feminist."

"I need to get me one of those," Jamie said, pointing at the tee.

"I think I could probably get my hands on one—if you agree to post photo receipts on Instagram, that is."

Jodie was a PR rep for a homegrown Portland clothing label and often brought home goodies both from the office and from "fashion networking events." Jamie understood this phrase

to signify nights when Jodie met up with her friends from different design houses for drinks and the pleasure of trading swag. Who knew Portland had such a hopping fashion community?

“Done,” Jamie said, slurping up a pad thai noodle that had wriggled free from its container.

“Sweet!” Jodie looked way too excited for the topic of conversation as far as Jamie was concerned.

Wait. Had she just agreed to become a—what did Ellie and Angie call it? Oh, yeah—“brand ambassador” to Jodie’s company? If so, she couldn’t have picked a better clothing company to align herself with. One of the founders of the label was a genderqueer lesbian, which explained why the clothes tended toward the gender-neutral end of the spectrum. Maybe someday if she ever made more than minimum wage, she would spend some money at the flagship store downtown. In the meantime, freebies in exchange for “photo receipts” worked.

Plates piled high with noodles and fried rice, the two women settled on the couch in the living room, glasses of wine within reach on the coffee table. Then Jamie hit play and they were off. Jodie liked to listen to the commentary, too, but they still managed to chat about their days as the pre-game unfolded with an analysis of the disastrous showing in the Algarve Cup a month earlier and what it might mean for World Cup qualifying in October.

At one point, the commentator paused before saying, “Actually, we were a little concerned earlier on before the match. There was, uh—”

Out of the corner of her eye, Jamie noticed Jodie sit upright, her eyes wide. Then as the British commentator continued on about the threatening wind and rain that had since subsided, Jodie relaxed again, a not-so-subtle sigh audible over the crowd noise blaring from the surround sound speakers.

“What was that?” Jamie asked, eyes no longer fixed on the screen.

“What?” Jodie kept her own gaze resolutely elsewhere.

“That,” Jamie said, waving her fork at her housemate. “You looked crazy nervous for a second there.”

“No I didn’t. You’re imagining things, Rook.”

Jamie wanted to tell her that only soccer players could call her that, but she was presently sitting on Jodie and Ellie’s couch eating off of their plates, drinking their wine, and watching their television. Probably Jodie could call her whatever she wanted.

This was the first time Jamie had watched a national team match with Ellie’s future wife, so she wasn’t sure what to expect. It soon became clear that even though she worked in fashion, Jodie loved soccer. She was nearly as rowdy as Ellie got during Premier League matches, bellowing at the refs and jumping up, hands on her head, whenever the US missed a close one. *Nearly* as rowdy because no one’s vitriol for poor refereeing decisions could rival Ellie’s. There were plenty of opportunities for hands on the head. Throughout the first half, the US missed chance after chance, even shooting wide of an empty net. Twice. Finally, five minutes before half-time, Maddie buried a shot from the top of the eighteen. But instead of jumping around in celebration, Jamie and Jodie simply high-fived and shook their heads.

Finally.

As Jamie fast-forwarded through half-time, Jodie leaned back and made a disgusted sound. “No wonder they bombed out of the Algarve. That was the most uninspired half I’ve seen them play in a while.”

“What I don’t get is this line-up. O’Brien starting over Lisa, and Gabe and Jenny

mysteriously absent? Speaking of, are you *sure* Ellie's not hurt?"

When the line-up had posted before kick-off with only one of the team captains starting, Jodie had seemed as surprised as Jamie. Ellie hadn't said anything about being hurt, nor had she texted Jodie about not starting.

"Maybe Craig wants to go in a different direction," Jodie said now, shrugging.

Jamie winced. It was too soon for her to hear the phrase Craig had used when he cut her from the program. Possibly it would always be too soon.

They agreed to skip halftime coverage since it was bound to be more of the British guy and his broadcast partner, a former national team player, talking about the plethora of missed scoring opportunities and the team's current downward spiral. Nobody needed to hear yet again how long it had been since The Greatest Generation (as Steph Miller sarcastically referred to them) had won a World Cup for the US. Even Jamie was sick of hearing about the '99 World Cup, and she wasn't even on the national team.

Which, yeah, still sucked.

They had just started the second half when Jodie's cell phone rang. She glanced at it and then waved at Jamie.

"Pause, will you? It's her."

For a brief moment Jamie couldn't work out why Emma had called Jodie, and then her brain caught up. Her as in *Ellie*.

"Don't tell me the score," Jodie opened with, smiling into the phone. "We're still watching. But how are you? You started the second half!"

She paused, smile falling, eyes going wide, and Jamie tried to zero in on the conversation.

“Craig,” she clearly heard Ellie say over the tinny speakers. Also “the federation” and “meeting” more than once.

“Right now? Are you serious?” Jodie asked, face still registering shock.

Jamie leaned closer surreptitiously, but Jodie must have twigged what she was up to because she stood up and headed for the kitchen.

Jamie stared unseeingly at the TV screen, frozen on a close-up of Gabe preparing to take a throw-in. What the hell was going on? Whatever they were talking about, it had to be major. Jodie, in a departure from the composed, unshakable front she usually projected, was clearly rattled.

“I won’t,” she said after a second, her back to Jamie. “Okay. I love you, Rachel. Everything will work out... Me too. Call me later.”

She hung up and stood motionless in the kitchen for several long seconds, one hand on her hip.

“Is everything okay?” Jamie asked, breaking the tense silence. She sat up straighter as a thought occurred to her. “Is it Emma? She didn’t get hurt, did she?”

“No.” Jodie was frowning as she turned to face her. “At least, not as far as I know. There’s team drama going on, that’s all. Let’s watch the second half, okay?”

Jamie stared at her, chewing her lip. Of course there was occasional drama on the national team. They were athletes living in the public eye, after all. But this sounded like unusual levels of turmoil. Did it have anything to do with the fight over turf fields at the World Cup? Or had someone said something to the media they shouldn’t have? Or—and here her heart fell—had a member of the team or staff been arrested? The women’s team had always been significantly less prone to scandal than the men’s, but that didn’t mean everyone in the organization was squeaky

clean.

Briefly she thought about checking social media for any mention of a scandal, but then she realized she would see the score. Besides, in the months since #Blakewell had exploded, she'd been slowly weaning herself off Twitter and Instagram. Her mentions had taken a turn for the ugly, as she'd known they might if she attracted a wider following, leading her to turn off direct messages and mute her notifications. Tumblr was the only place online she felt safe anymore, mostly because there was nothing in her ultra-generic profile that could be tied to her. To avoid the homophobic, transphobic, and misogynistic creeps trolling the Internet in droves, she'd followed Ellie's advice and created private Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter accounts under user names that only her family and friends knew. The less time she spent online, she'd found, the happier she was.

Funny how that worked.

Jodie settled down beside her, actively avoiding her gaze. Clearly she wasn't about to break Ellie's confidence. God-damned federation contracts and their fine print.

Jamie hit play, only half paying attention as she typed a quick text to Emma. "Still watching the game. Not the best team performance I've ever seen, but you're amazing as ever."

She waited ten minutes, but when no response was forthcoming, she tried again. "You okay? Let me know when you get a chance."

Her phone dinged. "Tm mtng rn. Call u ltr!"

The plot thickened. Emma almost never used text shorthand. *Aargh*.... Once again, not being on the national team totally blew.

When her phone rang a few minutes later, Jamie jogged downstairs before answering.

"Do you want me to pause it?" Jodie called after her.

“No!” she hollered back. She was pretty sure Emma was about to tell her something significantly more interesting than the outcome of the match. “Hey,” she added into the phone, dropping onto the futon in the guest room. “What’s up?”

“A lot,” Emma said, her voice hushed. “I can’t talk long. It’s totally insane here. Barry and Rob just fired Craig. He isn’t even going to fly to San Diego with us for Thursday’s match.”

And that... was not at all what Jamie had been expecting. It did, however, explain what Rob Muñoz and Barry Winchester, the president and general secretary of US Soccer, were doing in Colorado. They had showed up at the beginning of training camp, bringing with them what Ellie and Emma had both deemed a “weird vibe.”

“Did you hear me?” Emma asked, her voice rising slightly.

“I heard you.” Jamie rose from the bed and crossed to the daylight basement window where she placed her free hand on the glass, letting the coolness penetrate her palm. “How’s the team? How are you?”

“I think we’re all in shock. A rep told us on the bus after the game that Rob and Barry wanted to meet with us, but most of us assumed it had something to do with the World Cup. Even Ellie and Phoebe didn’t know, although they did say the federation had checked in with them after the Algarve.”

As Ellie’s housemate, Jamie could imagine how that meeting had gone. “Did they offer a reason?”

“Rob says it’s an issue of culture. Apparently the federation has decided his coaching style isn’t a ‘good fit’ for the team. You should have seen Craig, Jamie. He came in afterward, and he was nothing but classy. I can’t believe he’s out. I mean, we’ve gone eighteen and two under him. Two

losses, that's it, and they fired him!"

Jamie wanted to feel bad for Craig, she really did. In theory she probably even succeeded. But in reality, she stared at her faint reflection in the window and gave a small fist pump with her free hand. Craig Anderson, the man who had convinced her to give up her European football career and then promptly squashed her national team dreams, was out. The coach who hadn't believed in her enough had been cut himself, which meant she might have a shot at making a future roster. As much as she wanted to feel compassion for him, she couldn't ignore what his sudden firing meant to her own future prospects.

She couldn't tell Emma that, though, so she schooled her tone and said softly, "I'm sorry, Em." Because as much as she was secretly thrilled by the shocking news, she also knew what it must be doing to the team right about now.

Emma sighed, and voices sounded in the background, clearly coming closer. "I have to go. I'll call you later, okay? Oh, and check your email. I swear it wasn't planned."

Before Jamie could ask what she meant, the line went dead. She lowered her phone and stared out the window, focusing on the yellow-orange lights of the city in the distance. No wonder Ellie had called Jodie freaking out. The World Cup was only a little over a year away. To fire a national team coach at this point in the cycle was almost unheard of. In fact, as far as she knew, it *was* unheard of.

The floorboards creaked overhead again and she heard Jodie call, "There's a goal! Do you want to see the replay?"

"Yes!" she hollered back. With a final glance at her shell-shocked reflection, she headed upstairs.

They didn't talk about it. Not yet anyway. Jodie kept watching the game as if nothing had happened while Jamie divided her attention between the television and her laptop. Sure enough, there was an email from Emma from earlier in addition to notes from Angie and Ellie, all with identical subject lines: "The Theory of Marginal Gains." Each message contained a PDF attachment that Emma's note explained was a handout from that morning's mental training session. Jamie started to angle her laptop screen away from Jodie and then stopped. Sharing training materials with an existing member of the player pool was allowed, she was fairly certain. Sharing details of a coach's firing before anyone outside of the federation knew, on the other hand—not so much.

The handout, titled "Sir David Brailsford and the Theory of Marginal Gains," wasn't long. Jamie skimmed it and then went back to read it through again more slowly, glancing up whenever Jodie's shouts grew excessively excited. The gist of the piece was that in 2010, cycling coach David Brailsford had been given the GM position at newly formed Team Sky and tasked with a goal no British rider had achieved previously: to win a Tour de France title. As Jamie well remembered—her English girlfriend's family had fully copped to being "a bit nutty" about cycling—Brailsford had accomplished this goal in 2012 when Team Sky's leader Bradley Wiggins became the first British cyclist to win the Tour. Wiggo's teammate, Chris Froome, came in second that summer and then, in a turn of events that had sent Clare's family "over the moon," had won the Tour himself the following year. Not only that, but with Brailsford at the helm, the British cycling team had cleaned up at the 2012 Summer Olympics.

According to the article, Brailsford's formula for success hinged on what he called "the aggregation of marginal gains." Basically, he believed that if Team Sky could improve certain areas of performance by just one percent each, those gains would eventually add up. He started with predictable targets: fitness, diet, and bike and rider aerodynamics. But then—and this was what set him apart from other team managers—he applied his philosophy of improvement to other,

seemingly unrelated areas. Like finding the most comfortable pillows to bring on the road, or discovering the best way to avoid infections and illness while on tour. His team, clearly, had flourished under this approach.

Jamie leaned away from the computer screen, considering the implications. Sleep comfort and immune system health were crucial to any professional athlete's career, so it made sense that Brailsford had focused his attention on those areas. What else might he have selected for his program? And, more to the point, was it possible that an aggregation of custom-tailored marginal gains might help *her* stay healthy and earn another shot at the pool? Her national team buddies obviously thought so, given that three of them had sent her the handout.

She was about to close the laptop, but then almost of her own volition, her fingers typed in "Twitter.com." Biting her lip, she searched on the USWNT hashtag and then skimmed the results, narrowing in on the headline from ESPN: "Craig Anderson fired from US women's national soccer team; Jo Nichols to serve as interim coach."

Jo Nichols. Jo Nichols, who had first selected her to the U-16 national team a decade earlier. Jo Nichols, who had made her a starter on the U-23 squad five years later.

Interim, Jamie reminded herself, trying to tamp down the sudden surge of excitement that practically buoyed her off the couch. Jo was only the temporary coach while the federation looked for someone to replace Craig. Still, an interim coach who had always believed in her was better than one who hadn't. As she scrolled through Twitter, restless energy flowed throughout her body, making her legs jump and her teeth all but chatter. The gloom and angst she'd started the day with was long gone now, replaced by—she shook her head at her stupid, naïve self—hope.

God damn it.

Jamie closed her laptop. *Control what you can*, she reminded herself as she refocused on the

television screen in time to see Emma pick the pocket of a Chinese striker and send the ball up the field to Maddie. *Let the rest go.*

Easier said, of course, than done.