

THE ROAD TO CANADA

Book Four of the
Girls of Summer Series

by Kate Christie

Chapter One

Jamie tried to blink away the sweat dripping into her eyes. She would have wiped it away with her hands, but they were currently occupied.

“That’s it,” Emma said, her voice urgent. “Don’t stop, Jamie!”

Breathing hard, Jamie closed her eyes and narrowed her focus. She wasn’t about to stop now, not with Emma urging her on. Besides, the burn in her muscles was only lactic acid.

Above her, Emma’s voice rose in pitch. “Come on, Jamie. That’s it. Yes!”

Jamie strained, concentrating her energy on one task. She could do this. Just a little more...

Another voice broke in. “Gross, you guys. Keep your sex talk to yourselves!”

Jamie’s eyes flew open, and she glared at Angie as fiercely as she could muster while lying on her back. “Dude. Fuck off.”

“That’s what she said,” Angie said, smirking.

A white towel snapped and caught Angie in the ass, and Jamie grimaced in a grin of sorts as her friend squealed in pain.

“I can’t believe you did that,” Angie said, scowling over her shoulder.

“You know you love it,” Maddie replied.

“Ew,” Emma said, shaking her head. “And *I* did not need to hear *that*.”

“Serves you right, jackass,” Jamie grunted at Angie. She glanced up at Emma. “How many is that?”

“Nine,” Emma told her, hands extended, ready to catch the bar if Jamie needed assistance.

“Three more,” Jamie said, gritting her teeth as she started to lift the bar again.

“You can do it,” Emma coached. “You got it.”

Around them, their teammates worked individually and in pairs, moving through the machines and weight-lifting stations as prescribed by the national team’s fitness staff. Lacey Rodriguez and her assailan—*assistants* were pacing the weight room too, their sharp eyes missing nothing. Except, Jamie hoped, Angie’s wildly inappropriate comments. At least her camp roommate had waited until no one else but their girlfriends were around to crack one of her many tasteless jokes.

Two weeks into the 21-day residency camp, Jamie felt like she’d spent more time on the track and in the gym than on the soccer field. She now understood why the veterans on the team referred to January camp as “Death Camp.” During the opening meeting the first night, Lacey had joked that they were all going to hate her when they saw what she had in store for them, but the players wouldn’t be here if they didn’t enjoy at some level pushing their bodies to the point of almost breaking. Besides, it was your own fault if you came into camp unfit. Lacey sent out regular training updates throughout the year with sample training plans and information on the program’s semi-annual fitness testing. Jamie had been around the youth and senior national teams long enough to know that you would be sent packing if you allowed your sprint times or endurance to drop off during time away from the team.

Actually, maybe that was why Jo had taken the team to Brazil in December: so that no one would be tempted to take an extended break from their fitness routine. Like any of them would. It was a World Cup year, for eff’s sake, and they had something to prove. The international rankings had come out in December after they lost to Brazil, and for the first time since 2007, the US had

dropped to second place in the world behind Germany. That meant they would almost certainly have to do better than Germany in Canada to regain the top slot.

At that same first meeting, a serious Jo Nichols had stood at the front of the conference room, flanked by her unsmiling assistants as she gazed around the room, briefly making eye contact with each player. “There are twenty-nine of you,” she had said, grabbing the elephant in the room and holding it up for all to see, “but only twenty-three can make the World Cup roster. That means we need to see the absolute best you can give us, athletes. That means each of you needs to elevate your game. That means you need to come to every single training session prepared to give your best. You control your own destiny. We can give you the tools to succeed, but ultimately you’re the one who decides what you do with those tools.”

Now, as Jamie struggled to lift the bar, weighted down with more than she was accustomed to lifting, she could feel the seductive lure of negativity. Six people would be cut between now and the spring when the official roster was announced, and the only roster she’d made in the past year was for Brazil. She’d made the cut then, but they’d taken twenty-four players to South America. Twenty-four—one more than the World Cup roster allowed. What if she was the last player cut before Canada? How would she ever face her friends and family—and *Emma*—again?

“You can do it,” Emma said, smiling down at her. “One more, Jamie. You got it.”

Jamie took a deep breath and closed her eyes again, focusing her energy on her hands, arms, and shoulders. Teeth clenched, she pushed up, her muscles burning, arms trembling.

“You got it,” Angie added, followed by Maddie’s encouraging, “Get it, Max!”

And—*there!* She’d done it.

Emma reached out and helped her guide the bar back onto its stand. “I knew you could.”

“That makes one of us,” Jamie joked, sitting up on the bench and wiping the sweat from her face at last.

She sat for a moment, catching her breath and reminding herself to take the journey one step at a time, one day at a time. Less than a year ago she had been cut from the program, and now here she was with a credible shot at making the World Cup roster. THE WORLD CUP ROSTER. If that didn’t show what was possible, she wasn’t sure what did. Anyway, at the end of the day, soccer was only a game.

Right. As if.

“My turn,” Emma said, stretching her arms over her head. Her shirt rose with the movement, revealing a tanned swath of muscled midsection.

“Totally,” Jamie said, biting her lip as she rose from the bench. Team time. Professionalism. *Totally.*

The afternoon session was outdoors and featured a focus on set pieces, Jamie’s favorite. Plus she would take the national training center practice fields, with their perfectly even grass surfaces and the warm sunshine of Southern California over the smelly, cramped interior of the weight room any day.

Practice was almost over when Jo called her over to discuss her ball placement on free kicks in front of the goal.

“When we’re within our offensive third, I’d like you to look for Ellie,” Jo said, turning Jamie with a hand on her shoulder and gesturing toward the goal where Phoebe and Avery were taking shots. Trish and Britt, the third and fourth string keepers respectively, were at the other end of the field working with the keeper coaches.

Or, at least, they had been.

“Just Ellie?” Jamie asked, frowning a little. “Because I thought you said—” She stopped as Britt popped out in front of her and, before Jamie could react, pushed a whipped cream pie into her face.

“Happy birthday, James!” Britt crowed, laughing.

What the fuck? Jamie shoved blindly at her friend with one hand while wiping away—was that Cool Whip?—whipped cream with the other. “Jackass,” she choked out, but she was laughing, too, because honestly, the ambush could have been so much worse. Although, now that she thought about it, was Cool Whip on the approved team diet?

“And with that,” Jo said, her tone amused, “I think practice is over. Happy birthday, Maxwell.”

“Thanks, Coach,” Jamie said, still wiping whipped cream from her cheeks and eyebrows.

“Hey,” Angie said, slinging an arm around her waist, “are you ready for some dancing? Because I think Ellie said something about mandatory team bonding tonight...”

She had, indeed. When the coaches had mentioned at lunch that the team would have the following day off, Jamie and Emma had exchanged a hopeful look. Maybe they would be able to go out on their own to celebrate her birthday. But then Phoebe and Ellie had squashed that plan with their whole team bonding shtick, so now Jamie would be out with Emma and the entire team, celebrating en masse. Which wasn't a bad thing, really. She vividly remembered her last January camp, right before Craig cut her from the program. Going out with the team hadn't stopped her and Emma from holding hands under the table at the club Ellie and Phoebe had chosen for their team outing. She doubted it would stop them from making ou—ahem, from *hanging* out tonight, either.

But first, she needed a shower to wash off the cream pie.

And yeah, that wasn't a line she had ever expected to say.

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Jamie glanced toward the dance floor, wondering if she should cut in between Emma and Jenny, who were laughing it up after a round of shots. Nah. She was just being selfish. Emma and Jenny were clearly having fun, and it wasn't like Jamie and Emma hadn't spent time together that night. Just like on previous occasions, the team had eaten dinner at a large eatery with a back room that could accommodate thirty people. This time, though, Jamie had sat at the same table as Emma and Ellie. No more Ellie making creepy spying gestures between Jamie and Maddie, no more guzzling wine with newbies. She was now routinely hanging out with veteran stars even though she had fewer than a handful of caps to her own name and, as Jo had pointed out, was squarely on the bubble for the World Cup.

After dinner, they'd driven the team vans to the same dance club they always patronized where confirmed party girl Jenny Latham had insisted on a round of birthday shots. Jamie had declined, but Emma hadn't. Afterward, those who wanted to dance had gone straight to the dance floor while those who didn't—Ellie, Gabe, and Jamie, to name a few—ordered nachos, fries, and other food that was most definitely not on the approved team diet list. One night wouldn't hurt, would it?

To be honest, Jamie kind of missed the previous year's birthday celebration. She and Emma had sat pressed up against each other in one of the semi-circle booths, holding hands and flashing secret smiles at each other while a very pregnant Tina Baker had chatted with Ellie, Steph, and Phoebe. They hadn't even been together, and yet Emma couldn't seem to stay away from her. She'd admitted later that she had almost kissed Jamie right there in the crowded bar with the team—not to

mention a load of strangers—around them. Tonight, though, Emma was having no problem keeping her distance. She'd sat across from Jamie at dinner, and now she was out on the dance floor, sandwiched between Jenny and Maddie, apparently content to share an occasional look while maintaining the separation US Soccer demanded.

“Yo, Max,” Gabe said, flicking her in the bicep.

Ouch. What the hell?

“Why don't you just go dance?” Gabe said, rolling her eyes at Ellie as if to say, *Can you believe this kid?*

“Fine,” Jamie said, and grabbed the last of the nachos from the platter. “I will.”

She almost slipped up behind her girlfriend. She did. But then Britt and Angie waved her over, and Lisa and Rebecca were there too, and anyway, Jamie and Emma weren't exactly an old married couple. They could dance with other people, couldn't they?

Only, *damn it*, she thought a few minutes later as she moved to the beat and tried to avoid Britt's elbows, this was her birthday. She had hoped she and Emma might find some time to themselves tonight. After all, it was their first time spending either person's birthday in the same city since they'd started dating. They'd been on different continents in October for Emma's big day—a freezing, closet-encumbered occasion Jamie preferred not to dwell on—and though they'd talked to each other on their birthdays back in high school, they had never been in each other's physical presence. Until now.

She caught Emma's eye once again, and once again her girlfriend smiled at her before turning her attention back to Jenny. As Jamie watched Jenny take Emma's hands and spin her around laughingly, she tried to push down a wave of envy. Stupid US Soccer and their stupid

professionalism clauses. Besides, maybe Emma had a surprise in mind for her later. Not that they hadn't celebrated first thing that morning. Emma had taken Jamie to coffee and given her a card and a gift certificate for tickets to *Pitch Perfect 2*, which was due to open in May. They'd spent most of the day together, and yet thanks to team rules, Emma seemed more like just another friend than her long-term girlfriend. And yes, Jamie knew she was behaving a bit like an entitled douche, but she had been trained since early childhood to think of this day as the one 24-hour period each year when she got to embrace her own inner selfishness.

The team stayed out until close to curfew, and Emma remained tantalizingly out of reach. She didn't even sit next to Jamie in the van on the way back to the hotel. Jamie spent the ride squished between Angie and Britt, lamenting the fact that she was sober, more exhausted than she'd been in what felt like years, and the arms around her shoulders belonged to her best friends instead of her girlfriend. And yet, she reminded herself, she was at training camp with the national team and so was Emma. Wasn't that enough of a birthday present?

Gabe, Emma's camp roommate, flashed them a knowing smile when the group reached Jamie and Angie's room first. Angie and Maddie slapped hands—they were planning to go out for breakfast the following morning just the two of them, Jamie knew—and then Angie tugged Emma toward the room with a breezy, "Come on, Blake. I've got that medicated rub you wanted."

Jamie saw Ellie roll her eyes, and yes, the phrase did sound indecent, but it wasn't like teammates didn't routinely share their pain-relief secrets, she thought as she followed Angie and Emma into the room, closing the door securely behind them.

"Tick, tock, mothafuckas," Angie said as she slipped into the bathroom, her phone in hand. "Don't say I didn't give you a present this year, Jamieson." The door shut and the bathroom fan went on, and seriously? Was Angie scrolling through Instagram or was she actually...?

Never mind. Jamie didn't want to know.

Emma grabbed her hand and tugged her to the bed by the window. "Was this your idea?" she asked as she pulled Jamie down onto the rumpled comforter cover.

"No," she admitted. "I thought it might be yours." She held herself still as Emma leaned in to kiss her neck, blinking up at the ceiling.

After a moment, Emma paused and levered herself up on her elbow. "Are you too tired for this?"

"Probably." But it wasn't that. She could tell Emma the truth, couldn't she? "It's just, you seemed really distant tonight. Like, all night."

"Oh." Emma pulled back even more. "Well, we sort of have to be, don't we?"

Jamie gazed up at her. "We could have at least danced near each other. I mean, Jenny was legitimately dry-humping you for half the night, Emma."

Her girlfriend's head tilted. "Are you jealous of Jenny?"

"No," Jamie said, and then let out a frustrated breath. "The word is *envious*. She got to touch you and I didn't."

"She's not touching me now," Emma pointed out. Her hand slid across Jamie's collared shirt and rested on her belt as she leaned in and whispered, "Besides, I would much rather you touch me, Jamie. You know that."

Jamie's breath hitched at the light pressure on her belt buckle. Why was she pouting when she wouldn't have Emma in her bed much longer? That was the challenge of team time—to make the most of the brief periods they had alone. Besides, it wasn't like it was Emma's fault that they couldn't show any PDA around the team, not even on her birthday.

She turned her head so that their lips brushed lightly. “I would much rather that, too.”

“Good,” Emma whispered against her mouth. Then she maneuvered on top of Jamie and slipped one leg between hers. “Guess we better make this fast, hmm?”

An in-person quickie was so much better than skexing from a thin-walled closet in a dank North London basement apartment, Jamie thought a short time later when Emma flopped down next to her again, breathing hard. So. Much. Better.

“Happy birthday,” Emma whispered, kissing the corner of her mouth.

“Happy—I mean, thanks,” Jamie whispered back, smiling besottedly.

Angie, of course, had to ruin the moment by opening the door a crack and saying, “Are you finished? ’Cause it sounds like you’re finished.”

“Fuck off, Angie!” Jamie whisper-shouted.

“That’s what she said,” Angie replied for the second time that day. “Seriously, though, it’s curfew, birthday girl. You have one minute to cover up your birthday suit. Hah.”

The door shut again, and Jamie sighed. “Sorry about that.”

“It’s okay. Without Angie, I wouldn’t have gotten to do this.” She leaned in to kiss Jamie one last time before slipping from the bed.

Jamie followed, and they smiled sheepishly at each other as they pulled on their hastily shed clothing. Emma was patting down her hair as she headed to the door, Jamie on her heels, when she glanced back and said, “Gabe is meeting her family for breakfast tomorrow morning. What do you think about having coffee in my room?”

Tomorrow was their rest day, which meant they could spend it any way they wanted. Jamie paused, her hand on the doorknob as she pictured coffee and tea and the Premier League Match of

the Day in Emma's room. *Naked*. Yep, this birthday thing was definitely looking up.

"I think that sounds perfect," she said, smiling.

"Good. I'll text you tomorrow when it's all clear." Emma pecked her on the cheek. "Happy birthday. I'm glad we got to spend it together."

"Me, too," Jamie said. And then she opened the door a crack and watched as Emma disappeared into the hallway.

If they were lucky, she thought as she closed the door again, Jessica North wouldn't happen to be walking by and observe Emma's flushed cheeks and obvious sex head. The coaches, either, for that matter.

The bathroom door opened. "You're welcome," Angie said, grinning. "Now take a shower, will you?"

"Whatever," she said, and brushed past her friend, ignoring her laughter. She wasn't really mad at Angie, though. After all, the other woman had made sure she didn't end her birthday orgasm-free.

Ten minutes later, she slipped between her sheets, freshly showered, and reached for her Kindle. In the opposite bed, Angie was sitting up against her own pillows, iPad in hand.

"What are you watching?" Jamie asked.

"*Chicago Fire*," Angie said, and pulled off her headphones. "Maddie loves it, so I thought I would give it a try. What about you? Fanfiction or Netflix bingeing?"

"I haven't decided yet."

"You okay? You seemed a little quiet at the bar."

“No, I’m fine. It’s just, team time sucks, doesn’t it?”

“I don’t know,” Angie said, shrugging. “I thought it did, but now I sort of think it’s more of a protection than persecution. I mean, as long as we abide by the policy, no one can come after us for being involved with a teammate. At least, no one connected to the federation, anyway.”

Her wording seemed significant, but Jamie wasn’t entirely sure why. “What do you mean, no one connected to the federation?”

“Oh.” Angie’s eyes flickered, and she fumbled with her headphones. “Nothing, really. It doesn’t mean anything. I have to finish this episode, okay? Happy birthday, Max.”

“Thanks,” she said automatically, and turned back to her own tablet as Angie refocused on her iPad.

Her finger hovered over the Netflix icon, but then she moved it away. She didn’t feel like starting anything new. It usually took her longer than an actual episode to decide what to watch, and it was getting late. Twitter would be a double-edged sword—birthday messages from fans and less pleasant tweets from trolls. There had been a lot of those lately, some of them downright disturbing, but it wasn’t like she was the only female athlete receiving them. Mostly she tried to follow Britt and Angie’s example and compartmentalize the online stuff. Fanfiction and its perfect, homophobia-free alternate worlds it was.

She was still searching through tags on Archive of Our Own when her phone buzzed. She picked it up from the bedside table, squinting as she saw Emma’s name. “Happy birthday again, Jamie,” she had texted, followed by a link to a website Jamie didn’t know. Studio Byzantine? What even was that? But it was from Emma, so it probably wasn’t virus-laden or anything... She clicked the link and ended up on a website for a tattoo parlor in Seattle.

Wait, what?

Her phone buzzed again with an incoming Skype call from Emma.

“Dude,” Jamie answered, laughing as she tucked her ear buds into place, “what did you just send me?”

“I’m sorry—I was going to wait until tomorrow but I couldn’t!” Emma said, smiling. She was dressed in her sleep shirt, and with her hair down and face scrubbed free of make-up, she barely looked twenty. “You said you wanted a tattoo of that tree on your calf, so I thought maybe I could give it to you.”

“You’re such a dork. A dork who gives awesome presents,” Jamie amended as Emma huffed at her from five rooms away.

“I considered surprising you when we got home, but this is the first time we’ve ever been together on your actual birthday, and I wanted it to be special. Well, as special as it could be at Death Camp.”

“It was,” Jamie said, her voice softening. “It really was. I’m glad I got to spend it with you, Emma.”

“Me, too, Jamie,” Emma said, smiling at her through the airwaves.

And yes, it was a little bit ridiculous that they had to spend the night apart. After all, they were consenting adults in a mature, adult relationship. But this was the life they had both chosen. And honestly, Jamie wouldn’t trade it for anything. Emma, she was pretty sure, wouldn’t either.

“Thank you,” Jamie said. “I love it, and I love you.”

“I love you too,” Emma said. Then she flashed a jaunty wink. “Thanks for earlier.”

“Um, pretty sure I’m the one who owes you the thanks.”

“You can finish what you started in the morning,” she promised.

Nice. As much as Jamie had enjoyed her seven minutes of pillow queendom earlier, more time and privacy in the morning was a much better option to look forward to. “Can’t wait.”

“Same,” Emma said. “Love you, birthday girl. Especially in your birthday suit.”

“Ditto. Now, get some sleep, huh? I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Yes, you will.” Emma blew her a kiss that Jamie pretended to catch and tuck under her pillow, and then they were hanging up, still laughing at each other’s cheesiness even as the screen winked out.

Jamie turned off her phone and the lamp over her bed, snuggling down into her bed with the tablet beside her. But she didn’t turn it on. Instead she closed her eyes and pictured the tree design she’d finally perfected, the one she wanted to add to her body to remind her to stay grounded in this, the year that had the potential to be the second hardest of her life. That, or the best ever. Either way, it wouldn’t be easy. As she’d told Emma’s family over the holidays, one way or the other she would be at the World Cup. Could she really cheer Emma and the others on if she didn’t make the cut? She wasn’t sure. She hoped she wouldn’t have to find out.

“You calling it a night?” Angie asked.

Jamie opened one eye and squinted at her friend. “Yep.”

“Kay. Goodnight, Jamie.”

“Goodnight, Angie.”

Down the hall, she pictured Emma arranging the covers on her bed in the room she shared with Gabe, pictured her setting her ear plugs in place and reaching for her eyeshade. Soon enough, morning would come and they would be alone together for a blessed few hours. And that, really,

was the best birthday present Jamie could ever ask for.

Chapter Two

Emma touched the ball once and sent it straight up the field to Jamie before moving into a supporting position and calling for the return pass. Jamie dropped it back on an angle for her to run onto. Emma picked her head up before the pass arrived—Ellie was calling for the ball but she had a defender on her back. Instead, Emma one-touched the ball outside to Angie, who sprinted to the end line before rocketing a cross back into the center. Ellie skied above her defender and buried the ball in the net.

“Nice!” she called as she turned away from the goal, giving Emma a thumbs-up. “But let’s try it again, and this time pass to my feet when I ask for the ball, okay?”

Emma nodded and jogged back into place. She had considered passing to Ellie in traffic, but her mind almost always chose the safe route, the sure pass. As a defender, she was more concerned with maintaining possession than attacking in the mid third. Frankly, she’d rather hit the open player on the outside than risk missing the dangerous player inside the box.

Jo claimed that players with a more defensive outlook suffered from a fear of failure. Playing it safe, she liked to say, stifled creativity. Of course, she was a former striker herself, so she would say that, wouldn’t she? As an offensive-minded player, Jo valued that same trait in the athletes she coached. She wanted every player on the field to have an attacking mentality, to get forward and take risks. That was the mentality she had tasked Emma with developing. And while Emma may not agree with Jo’s mindset, she wanted to play. That was why she’d asked the best offensive players she knew for help.

Throughout the final week of camp, Ellie, Jamie, Maddie, Angie, and Jenny had stayed after training with her to run extra passing patterns, to work on movement off the ball, and to practice

variety in the attacking third: one player checking, one penetrating, and one shifting back on the weak side to provide balance in the back field. They had practiced getting to the end line and slotting a variety of services into the box from there: near post on the ground, far post in the air, top of the box both on the ground and in the air, and Jamie's favorite, a drive into the eighteen followed by a "cheeky" chip to the far post. Even though she normally didn't think much about attacking, Emma challenged herself during these drills, looking for Ellie's head when she was the crosser and focusing on placing the ball in the net with whatever part of her body was handiest when she was the receiver.

The most important building block of offensive play, Jo had said more than once, was technical skill—precision in passing, dribbling, and shooting combined with overall confidence on the ball. For defenders moving forward into the attack, that translated into serving good passes and always remaining calm on the ball, no matter where you might find yourself on the field.

"If you don't believe you can do something," Jo could be heard calling out across the Carson practice fields at least once a day, "then you won't be able to do it."

That was probably how the US Soccer marketing folks had come up with the motto for the 2014 World Cup: "*I believe that we will win.*" A Naval Academy student may have made the chant popular at sporting events in the late '90s, but Emma suspected that Jo's repeated use of the motivating cheer had influenced US Soccer's adoption of the phrase as an official rallying call for both the men's and women's teams.

Now as Emma dribbled back into place, she took a deep breath. She could do this. She totally could. With a nod to her friends, she started forward again. This time she touched the ball outside to Maddie and then checked back for it. Maddie returned the ball and Emma dribbled forward again. No more than three touches—that was the rule for today's drill. Touch, touch, and

then she passed it to Jamie, who was checking back to her. They repeated the earlier pattern—Emma to Jamie, Jamie back to Emma on an angled run toward the box—only this time, as Ellie checked toward her, Emma was ready. She touched it to Ellie and watched as Ellie faked one way and used her defender’s momentum to roll off and around her at the 12. Then she rocketed the ball into the net, which snapped resoundingly with the force of her shot.

“There,” Ellie called, grinning at her. “See? You gave me a perfectly weighted pass right where I needed it to juke my defender.”

“Yeah,” Emma said, tilting her head, “but isn’t it a stretch to call J-La a defender?”

Jenny placed her hands on her hips in mock outrage. “Excuse you, but I have improved literally a hundred percent in my defensive takeaways since joining this team!”

“So what, you’re up to two per game now?” Emma asked, biting her lip as Jenny pretended to vibrate in anger. “Just kidding. Seriously, thanks, you guys, but I think we should call it a night. Don’t want to miss dinner.”

Everyone agreed whole-heartedly, and they set about collecting the extra balls and storing them back in the equipment area. Then they headed out to the parking lot where Ellie had left “her” van that afternoon. Lunchtime seemed so far away. Emma wanted only to eat two helpings of whatever meal the nutritionist had concocted, take a hot shower, and watch crappy television with Jamie until curfew. With only a few days of camp left to go, she was deeply, truly tired. She was looking forward to the week off between camp and the upcoming trip to Europe where they would play France and England, the number three and number six teams in the world, respectively. If all went well, she and Jamie would both go. Fingers crossed.

She was still toweling her hair dry an hour later when a soft knock sounded at the door. “Come in,” she called.

Jamie poked her head around the edge of the door. “Are you decent?”

“Unfortunately.” Gabe was gone for now but there was no telling when she would return, which meant they would have to be on their best behavior. Or at least good behavior, anyway. It wasn’t like either of them were rooming with Jessica North, but Emma didn’t want to make Gabe uncomfortable. She didn’t like the idea of asking their teammates to cover for them. Jamie’s birthday had been one thing—one very enjoyable thing, really—but regular residency camp life? Not so much.

“Bummer,” Jamie commented, and strolled in, cheeks pink and hair damp from her own recent shower.

Soon they were stretched out on the bed beside each other, backs against the pillows, hands clasped loosely as Emma flicked through the channels. Her room meant her remote, a rule they adhered to even more closely than they did to US Soccer’s team time policy.

“Hockey?” she asked.

Jamie made a face.

“Basketball?”

“Who’s playing?”

“Does it matter?” As Jamie gazed at her, one eyebrow lifted meaningfully, she sighed and squinted at the screen. “Michigan State and Penn State.” The game had just started, which meant it had to be a replay, given the time difference.

Jamie shrugged. “That’s fine. I’m more interested in hearing about your meeting with Caroline, anyway. What did she have to say?”

Emma kept her eyes on the television. If she looked at Jamie, she might be tempted to blurt

out everything that she and the team's PR rep had discussed that morning. The fallout, however, was not something she particularly wanted to deal with on team time. The longer she kept her online stalker situation from Jamie, the worse the outcome would be, but right now Jamie was playing well and seemed happy, and Emma didn't want to jeopardize that. The coaches would name the official World Cup roster in April. Jamie deserved to have the next couple of months go as smoothly and un-angstily as possible.

After Jo named the roster, Emma promised herself. She would tell Jamie everything then.

"She said a lot, actually," Emma admitted, watching as MSU's point guard stroked home a three. "I told her the social media contract requirement has been stressing me out a bit, so she suggested I reduce my official online footprint and focus on one platform. She also thinks I should hire one of the vendors on the federation's approved list to manage my social media presence."

She would probably end up keeping Twitter. Caroline had recommended withdrawing slowly from Facebook and Instagram so that she didn't provoke a corresponding "nuclear" response from her unstable fan. Emma had shuddered at the thought, and Caroline had reached across the conference table in the business suite at the National Training Center to pat her hand and assure her it wouldn't get to that.

But she couldn't promise that, Emma thought. No one knew what an online stalker was capable of until it was basically too late.

Jamie sat up straighter beside her. "Wait. You're going to pay someone to run your official social media accounts for you?"

Emma could feel Jamie's gaze boring into the side of her face, but she only shrugged. "Well, yeah. I really want to focus on my game, and trying to remember what to post when is distracting. We didn't all grow up in Silicon Valley, you know."

“Berkeley is like an hour from Silicon Valley.”

“You know what I mean,” Emma said, and elbowed her lightly.

“You don’t seem to have any problems with your private accounts.”

“That’s different.” And it was. On her private Instagram and Facebook accounts, she could control who could see what, which was why she had never once experienced any sort of harassment on either platform. But Twitter was a social media free-for-all, in more ways than one. “Mary Kate said it might be helpful to withdraw from my public accounts, too. Reducing online presence is helpful for people who are experiencing anxiety, which I definitely am at the moment.”

At the mention of the team’s sports psychologist, Jamie leaned back against the pillows. “Oh. Well, if Mary Kate thinks it’s a good idea, you should definitely listen to her.” She paused. “Would you want me to run your public accounts? I mean, that is what I used to do for the guys at Arsenal.”

“No,” Emma said, probably too quickly. She glanced at Jamie and squeezed her hand. “That’s really sweet of you, but I think I’ll have one of the vendors do it. I don’t really want to waste any of our time together talking about sponsorships and tweet impressions. Okay?”

Jamie nodded, brow slightly furrowed. “Okay. So was that it? She didn’t mention anything else?”

Emma hesitated. Caroline had had quite a bit else to say, in fact. Namely, that Emma needed to collect a dossier on her would-be stalker. Screen shots, dates and times, proof that she’d reported violent or threatening messages to the social media powers that be—basically anything connected to her interaction with the guy (or, more accurately, his fixation on her) needed to be documented. That way if law enforcement needed to get involved, there would be a trail of evidence.

But Emma wasn't about to tell Jamie that. Instead, she said, "She did mention we might want to keep our relationship quiet on social media."

Jamie recoiled slightly. "She told you that? Why? Because US Soccer would rather not acknowledge the queerness of this team's players or our fan base?"

"No," Emma said, "it's not like that." At least, she didn't think it was. Caroline had said that displaying personal photos might be like waving a cape in front of a bull, which made sense to Emma. She didn't want to risk taking any action that might trigger the unstable man who seemed to be fixating on her.

Jamie pulled her hand free and folded her arms across her chest. "Really? Then tell me: What is it like?"

Emma stared at her, wishing she could redo this sensitive conversation at a time when she wasn't exhausted from double training sessions and video reviews and virtual reality training and more fitness sessions than she could ever remember in her life with the national team. Not to mention when she'd had better sleep. At least she wasn't rooming with Britt. That girl's snoring could be heard two rooms away.

"It's more about keeping a low profile, that's all," she said, trying for a placating tone. "She and Mary Kate both said that if I was worrying about being distracted, I should probably keep my official accounts professional and leave the personal posts to my private pages."

This time invoking the team psychologist's name didn't have the desired effect. Jamie only continued to stare at her, arms folded, before saying, "And you don't see any other possible motivating factor for a US Soccer rep to recommend that, Emma? Seriously?"

Of course she did. But she'd decided not to fill Jamie in on the details of the situation until

April, and she was going to stick to that self-imposed deadline, damn it.

“It’s different for you, Jamie. You’re publicly out.”

“And you’re not. Yes, I am aware of that fact.”

At the bitterness in her tone, Emma leaned away, putting space between them. “Do you have a problem with me not announcing my sexuality to the entire world? Because I have never lied to anyone about who I am.”

“I know that, and it’s totally your decision. But you could help so many kids, Emma. Can you imagine how many girls like you—and boys, for that matter—are out there right now hiding who they are and hating themselves for being different?”

“There are other bi and pansexual role models, you know,” Emma pointed out. “Evan Rachael Wood, for one.”

“Yes, and Michelle Rodriguez,” Jamie said, waving a hand. “But there aren’t any current athletes, Emma. No one with your profile.”

“I don’t think Greta would appreciate hearing you say that.” Greta Nilsson was the Swedish national team goalkeeper—and Jamie’s teammate on the Portland Thorns.

Jamie rolled her eyes. “I meant American athletes, and you know it. You could do so much good. We both could.”

Emma couldn’t believe that her conversation with the team’s PR rep had turned into a referendum on whether or not she should announce her sexuality—and, by extension, their relationship—to the world. And yet, here they were.

She turned to face her girlfriend more fully, leaning her shoulder against the pillows. “There’s a reason athletes don’t come out, Jamie. Actors aren’t available to the public the way we

are. They work on closed sets with security, but we announce months in advance that we'll be in a certain place at a certain time. You know as well as I do that safety has been a concern for female athletes ever since Monica Seles was stabbed in the '90s."

"But that's just it," Jamie argued. "None of us is ever fully safe. That's why I don't understand your obsession with privacy. We're already public figures."

Obsession? It was hardly that. Emma shook her head. "That's easy for you to say. Not only are you the heart on the sleeve type of person, you're like a thousand percent gay. You couldn't hide who you are even if you wanted to."

"And that's somehow easier? Because in case you wondered, it isn't easy being called a dyke or queer for most of your life."

"I didn't say that part was easier. I just mean I get why you don't understand my privacy thing. You don't have to deal with male fans the way I do."

Jamie shook her head. "The guys in the crowd either call me names or ignore me. Meanwhile, they're shirtless with your name spelled out on their bodies."

"Exactly. They write my name on their bodies. And why is that? Because they think I'm such an amazing soccer player? No, Jamie, it's because that's what I am to them: a body on display. And if they knew I slept with women and men, my Twitter feed would be a hundred times worse than it already is." She stopped, because she hadn't meant to mention social media. *Damn it.*

"Because they would think they had a shot at a threesome with you and some hot girl," Jamie said, sounding resigned. "Which, as we know, is every straight man's fantasy."

"Exactly." She hesitated, because again she was approaching territory she would rather not enter right now, but it couldn't hurt to tell Jamie this part. "You may not know this, but Maddie had

a stalker a couple of years ago. Not a game or open practice went by that she didn't worry about that guy appearing with a weapon. All she could think about, she told me, was that some little girl in the stands might get hurt because Maddie had somehow attracted this insane person."

That was the same fear that Emma lived with now, the same horrible fantasy that flickered before her eyes before she left the tunnel at most of their US-based friendlies. The idea that she could be the reason someone else—Jamie, a little girl in the crowd, an unwitting soccer mom—got hurt was almost unbearable at times, especially late at night when worry refused to let her sleep.

"I didn't know that." Jamie reached for Emma's hand again. "But she didn't attract him, Em. He fixated on her. That's different."

"Maybe in theory, but not so much in practice." The TV crowd erupted, and Emma used the sound as an excuse to turn away from the empathy in Jamie's eyes. It would be so easy to unburden herself, so nice to share her worries with her girlfriend and execute Operation Reduce Social Media Presence with Jamie firmly on her side. But she had involved Sam the last time and look how that turned out. She wasn't about to take the same risk now.

April, she reminded herself. There would be plenty of time to deal with everything then. Besides, hadn't Jamie once said Emma didn't owe her details about her past? The present was a different matter, but they would figure it out together. Eventually.

Sighing, she tilted her head and rested it on Jamie's shoulder. "Can we be done with this conversation? I mean, is that okay? I'm tired, and we only have a little time until curfew."

Beside her, Jamie shifted closer again, her cheek against the top of Emma's head. "Yeah, of course."

They were quiet for a little while, Emma watching the TV screen but not really taking in the

blur of moving athletes and the streak of partisan colors. Was she doing the right thing? Was there any way to be sure? Probably not until well after the fact.

“Hey,” Jamie said softly, pressing a kiss into her hair, “I don’t want you to think I don’t respect your decisions. You’re right, I don’t know what it’s like to be you any more than you know what it’s like to be me. But I’d like to understand.”

She was so sweet and open, and Emma was pretty sure she would never be good enough for Jamie. As teenagers, Jamie had used her assault to learn improved mental function while Emma had run away from the loss of her father, choosing instead to sprint toward her future goals: a national championship with UNC, a permanent spot on the national team, a gold medal at the Olympics, and now another chance at gold at the World Cup. And yes, Emma had done some work on herself in the intervening years, but still. She couldn’t help feeling that Jamie was so much better at all of this than she was.

Fortunately, the electronic door lock beeped just then, and Jamie and Emma automatically moved apart so that by the time Gabe had come in and shut the door behind her, they were seated side by side watching television like the romantically uninvolved teammates they definitely weren’t.

“Hey, guys,” Gabe said, and flopped down on the foot of the other bed. “How goes it?”

“I’m so tired,” Jamie admitted, laughing a little. “I don’t think I’ve ever run so much in my life, and that’s saying something.”

“Right?” Emma agreed, relieved to think about something other than her pathetic emotional skills.

“To be fair, Lacey did warn us ahead of time,” Gabe pointed out. As an outside midfielder, she routinely placed at the top of the charts in any competition that involved endurance.

“Yeah, but I didn’t realize how serious she was,” Emma said.

“Same.” Jamie smiled at her, and Emma smiled back.

They would be okay, she told herself, trying one of the deep breaths Mary Kate had suggested she learn to cultivate. Apparently research showed that deep breathing calmed the mind, even if researchers weren’t entirely sure why. Maybe Emma would even learn how to meditate. Jamie swore by it, and MK had assured her that the practice offered many promising returns for elite athletes. For now, though, Emma was satisfied exploring the new visualization exercises MK had offered.

The basketball game continued on in the background as they chatted with Gabe for a little while longer, the white noise of the cheering crowd familiar and almost comforting as they gossiped about teammates and discussed families and friends in common. Then Gabe collected her things and disappeared into the bathroom for a shower, leaving them alone again.

“Guess I should say goodnight,” Jamie said, snuggling back into her side.

“Guess so,” Emma agreed. Curfew wasn’t far off now, and Jamie had said she wanted a shower, too. But even so, Emma tightened her grip on Jamie’s hand. “I wish you could stay.”

“I know. Think Gabe might want to trade rooms for the night?”

“Um, I think people might notice. And by people, I mean the coaching staff.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right.” Jamie sighed audibly.

Emma nudged her shoulder. “Don’t worry. We’ll be home soon.”

“Home, huh,” Jamie echoed, giving her a definite side-eye.

“You know what I mean. The Pacific Northwest.”

“Right.” Jamie was still watching her. “Feel like company in Seattle?”

“Of course. Feel like staying with me?”

“I would love it.”

“Good,” Emma said, “because I love you.”

“I love you too,” Jamie replied, her smile unabashedly sentimental.

“Awesome,” Emma said, smiling back.

“Excellent.”

Emma leaned in and kissed her, slow and soft, but even the light pressure of Jamie’s lips against hers made her body vibrate with restless energy. It was just as difficult as ever to be around Jamie so much without being able to really be with her except for brief, rushed encounters. At that moment, Emma couldn’t wait to get back to Seattle, where they would have nearly a week together before they flew to France. Or, she would have a week, anyway. Still remained to be seen if Jamie would make the roster for Europe.

The water shut off in the bathroom—Gabe was legendary for taking the fastest showers of anyone on the team—and Emma pulled back, resting her forehead against Jamie’s. “Let’s camp out in my apartment when we get back and not go anywhere. I mean it. Nowhere at all for at least forty-eight hours.”

“I’m in,” Jamie said, and kissed the tip of her nose. Then she slipped from the bed, pausing to stretch her arms over her head and make the sweet puppy squeak Emma had always loved. “See you at breakfast?”

“Absolutely.”

Emma didn’t walk her out tonight, simply waved and watched as Jamie ducked out of the

room before returning her attention to the game. The teams seemed well matched. Out of loyalty to her mother's Midwestern roots, she decided to cheer for MSU. With the Penn State sex abuse scandal not all that far in the past, she found it difficult to imagine ever cheering for that particular program ever again. Jamie's dad took an even more extreme view and insisted that Penn State should never have been allowed to compete again. Not ever.

Tim, Jamie's dad, was a good person. Emma wished he had met her father. She wished, too, that Jamie's mother had met her dad more than that one, emotionally fraught time. The old, bittersweet ache at the thought of what could have been rose inside her, and Emma hugged her knees to her chest. She doubted the feeling would ever go away entirely, which wasn't a bad thing. She would never fully forget her father, not until she was old and gray and had begun to lose who she was the way her grandmother had before she'd died—assuming concussions didn't get her memory first. She was lucky. She'd only ever had one concussion at UNC, knock on wood. But it was a common fear among the players she knew, both on the national team and in the pro league. Most soccer injuries were treatable, but she'd heard of more than one player who had been forced to quit the game due to concussion symptoms that never fully went away.

Gabe came out of the bathroom already dressed in the boxer shorts and T-shirt she wore as pajamas, her long brown hair curling damp around her shoulders. Originally from Colorado, she had played in college at University of Portland and now played professionally with Emma for the Reign. In the off-season, though, she went back to Denver where her family still lived.

“Did Jamie take off?”

“Yeah. She wanted to grab a shower.”

“How are you two doing? I know it isn't easy to manage a relationship while on this team.”

Emma looked over at Gabe, who was arranging herself on her bed. “We're doing okay.” She

hesitated. “Can I ask you something?”

Gabe glanced up. “Sure.”

“Have you ever had any problems with social media? Like threats or anything?”

“No, I haven’t. But Ellie has, and so has Maddie. Jenny, too, I think. Why? Is it happening to you and Jamie?”

“A little.” The list Gabe had provided matched the one Emma had compiled in her head. Caroline had told her that she wasn’t the only person struggling with this issue, which wasn’t a surprise, but still. Wouldn’t it be nice if men online weren’t assholes? Then again, they were assholes in real life. Why would they be any different online, where they could be anonymous?

“I’m sorry,” Gabe said, giving her a sympathetic grimace. “Is there anything I can do?”

“No. But thanks.”

“Of course. My apartment is yours if you guys ever need it.”

“Thanks, Gabe,” she said, touched by the offer. “I hope we don’t, though.”

“Same,” Gabe admitted.

They turned off the lights a little while later and Emma lay in bed like she had been doing lately, listening to her heartbeat speed up as the late-night anxiety swept through her. Would *she* even make the roster for Europe? What about the Algarve? Her contract renewal was scheduled for March or April. What if the federation decided not to renew her? What if she got cut in a World Cup year? And even if she didn’t, what if the stalker came after her in real life? Worse, what if he came after Jamie?

For eff’s sake, she thought, trying to breathe deeply and chase the unreasonable worries away. It wasn’t like she could do anything about these irrational fears. Why couldn’t her mind just shut the

hell up? But it wouldn't, and so she lay there with ear plugs in and eyeshade on, fighting her brain's unnecessary injection of adrenaline into her system and wishing she was home in Seattle with Jamie curled up beside her under the covers, her touch leeching peace and calm into Emma's system as surely as the constellations shifted overhead in the night sky.

Soon, she told herself, picturing her secure building, her multiple deadbolts, her quiet bedroom. *Soon.*