

# TRAINING GROUND

Book one of  
Girls of Summer

by Kate Christie



## DEDICATION

To the kids and the not-so-young who still think of themselves  
as damaged. You're not. We're not. We are *fierce*.

## CHAPTER ONE

### ~JULY 2003~

“I’ll be right back,” Jamie called through the closed bathroom door.

The doorknob rattled and her mother poked her head out. “What did you say?”

“I’m going out to grab some Gatorade.”

“Oh.” She ran a hand over her hair, still damp from the shower. “Give me a minute. A walk sounds nice.”

*Seriously?* Jamie offered what she hoped was a neutral look. “7-Eleven is a block away, and I have my phone. Okay?”

Her mom hesitated, glancing toward the sunlit window at the opposite end of the hotel room before returning her gaze to Jamie’s. “Fine. But be careful. And come straight back.”

“I will. See you later.”

As she ducked into the corridor, Jamie released a long breath. The act was sometimes difficult to maintain, especially on a night like tonight—the last night of the tournament. Only a few teams remained, mostly ones with early flights the following morning. Her own team had piled into SUVs and Subaru wagons shortly after their last game and started north up the five, headed back to the Bay Area. They would have been home tonight, too, if Jamie’s mom hadn’t scheduled a

meeting at a gallery in San Diego the following morning.

She jogged down the hotel hallway, tying her sweatshirt around her waist as she went. At least her mother hadn't noticed she was overdressed for a one-block stroll. Otherwise her plan might have failed before she even left the room.

As she bypassed the elevator and reached the stairwell door, she caught sight of a girl in a purple T-shirt and faded jeans in the vending alcove on the opposite side of the corridor. She looked familiar, and Jamie cycled through the past few days. Her T-shirt had a husky on it, so Washington. That was it—the Shoreline club. Jamie's team had knocked the Seattle side out of contention the day before.

As if feeling the weight of her stare, the girl glanced up and smiled. "Hey."

Jamie nodded at her. "Hey."

"Apparently the ice machine's out of ice."

"There's another one in the lobby. I can show you if you want." She held the stairwell door open.

"Cool." The girl followed her down the stairs. "I'm Emma."

"Jamie. You're from Seattle, aren't you?"

"Yeah. NorCal, right?"

"Right." They reached the first floor and Jamie led the way down a side hall. "Nice game yesterday."

Emma made a face. "No, it wasn't. You guys are really good, though."

"Thanks. If it helps, you were the best player on your team."

Emma smiled at her again, dimple flashing as she brushed back a few strands of honey-blond hair that had escaped the omnipresent soccer girl ponytail. "I'm a center back. No one notices me usually."

Jamie doubted that, but she let the comment slide.

The ground floor machine had plenty of ice, and Jamie lingered while the other girl filled her bucket.

"Why are you still here?" she asked over the sound of crashing ice.

“My dad has a work thing. What about you?”

“Same, only I’m with my mom.”

As they headed back to the lobby together, Jamie slowed her gait. After four days of round-the-clock teammate bonding, she’d been looking forward to a few hours to herself. Now somehow the idea of being alone wasn’t quite as tempting as it had been when she hatched her escape plan.

“I’m on my way out for a walk,” she said, watching Emma out of the corner of her eye. “Would you maybe, I don’t know, want to come with me?”

As soon as the words were out, she held her breath. Why had she even asked? It wasn’t like they could actually be friends. They might be in the same ODP region, but that didn’t mean their paths would ever cross again.

Emma stopped beside her in the lobby. “Where are you going?”

“There’s a park on the water about a mile from here. I thought I’d watch the sunset.”

“Alone?” Her brow creased adorably.

“Well, yeah. Although I told my mom I was going to 7-Eleven.” She wasn’t sure why she admitted that last part. Something about the other girl—her clear, gray-green eyes maybe, or her lips that turned up at the corners even when she wasn’t smiling—invited confidence. She seemed like someone Jamie would be friends with, assuming she didn’t live a thousand miles away.

Emma squinted toward the main entrance. “I guess I could use a walk. Let me go tell my dad.”

“Awesome. But, um, maybe don’t mention the park?”

She glanced back at Jamie, eyes still narrowed. “You’re not planning anything that would get us in trouble, right? No drugs, no spray paint, no secret gang affiliation?”

Jamie laughed at the image of herself as a tagger looking to leave her mark on the Del Mar country club scene. “Not a chance.”

Emma’s dimple flashed again. “In that case, give me a few minutes.”

As she waited, Jamie replayed the previous day's game in her mind. If not for Emma's steady play at back, the score would likely have been higher. As it was, Jamie's team had only won by one—a goal set up by a corner kick she'd placed on a teammate's head just outside the six. According to Pete, her club coach, Jamie was an assist magnet. While other players might have a nose for scoring, she preferred to work behind the scenes. Honestly, there was less pressure on the person who set up a scoring opportunity than on the player who found herself in front of the goal with only the keeper to beat.

After five minutes and no Emma, she started to wonder if the other girl had changed her mind. It was possible she only seemed nice and was actually one of those pretty, shallow girls who typically wouldn't give someone who looked like her the time of day. Even Jamie's high school, fairly chill as far as public schools went, had them in droves.

She was about to bail when Emma appeared in the lobby, a sweatshirt looped over her shoulders. "Sorry about that," she said as she reached Jamie. "Ready?"

They set out along the main road, stopping briefly at the convenience store to pick up snacks and sports drinks. Then they resumed their trek, chatting about family, school, and soccer as they walked the short distance to the beach, the evening sun setting slowly in the distance. It was easy to talk to Emma, and soon Jamie knew quite a bit about her companion: She was about to start her senior year of high school; her parents were still married, though they had come close to divorce a year earlier; she had a thirteen-year-old brother who was more into skateboards and online gaming than organized sports; she was a member of the under-17 national team; and she had already verbally committed to play soccer at University of North Carolina.

"The national team *and* UNC?" Jamie shook her head. "I thought you said people don't usually notice you."

"Just wait. In another year your house will look like a college recruiting office exploded in it, too."

“Even if it doesn’t, my sister and I are double legacy at Cal, and they have a decent women’s program.”

“Both of your parents went to Cal?”

“That’s where they met. They’ve been together forever, but they still act all sappy.” She shook her head, remembering how her mother had called and talked to her father for half an hour before bed every night since they’d arrived.

“You must be smart if you can get in there.”

“Smarter than I look, you mean?”

Emma laughed. “I didn’t say that.”

“You didn’t have to.” Jamie smiled a little. She liked being responsible for the other girl’s laugh. “What do your parents do?”

“My mom’s a pediatric nurse and my father is a peds surgeon. What about yours?”

“Dad’s a software engineer and Mom’s day job is in graphic design.”

“Day job?”

“She’s a textile artist, but it doesn’t pay as well as the tech industry.” She started describing her mother’s work, mostly dioramas and quilts made from reclaimed materials like vintage fabrics, books, photographs, and maps. Emma nodded and asked questions in the right places as if she was genuinely interested.

*Hmm.* Not a shallow, mean girl after all, apparently.

By the time they reached the park, the sun was barely hovering over the horizon. Jamie led the way along a bluff overlooking the ocean, and they sat down on a bench with their chips and Gatorade and watched in comfortable silence as the hazy, orange ball slipped over the horizon, bathing feathery clouds in pink and gold. Just as the sun disappeared into the sea, Jamie’s cell phone rang.

She read the name on the screen and hesitated. Then she hit the call button. “Hi, Mom.”

“Where are you? I thought you would be back by now.”

“Sorry. I ran into a friend from another team and we’re heading back to watch TV in her room. If that’s okay?”

There was silence at the other end. Meanwhile, at this end, Emma was frowning. Jamie could understand why the other girl might not want to lie for someone she had just met, but she couldn't spend another night trapped in that room. She needed motion, fresh air, the company of someone who wasn't watching her every move. Television wasn't enough to distract her from the images waiting to flood her brain as soon as the lights went out. At home she could take a puff of weed and read herself to sleep by flashlight if she needed to, but here neither tactic was possible, not when they were sharing a room.

Probably she should have told her mother the truth from the start, but she hadn't wanted her to worry any more than she already did. Besides, talking was overrated.

"Which friend?" her mother finally asked. "And what room will you be in?"

"Emma from Seattle, and she's in room number...?"

"265."

"265," Jamie finished, flashing Emma a grateful smile.

"I guess that'll be okay, then," her mother said slowly. "But be back by eleven, and keep your phone on."

"I will. See you later." She hung up and turned down the ringer before tucking the phone back in her pocket. *Whew*. At least she had won herself a few hours of freedom.

"Did she believe you?" Emma asked.

"I don't know. I haven't exactly given her much reason to lately."

"What do you mean? Why not?"

Jamie looked at her, noting how the fading light played across her face.

"What?" Emma asked, returning her gaze.

"Do you always ask people to share deep, dark secrets the night you meet them?"

She seemed to consider the question seriously. "No, I don't think so. But I usually don't run away with girls I meet at the ice machine, either."

"Fair enough," Jamie said, and shivered a little as the

ocean breeze kicked up around them. The next thing she knew, Emma's hands were at her waist undoing the knotted sleeves of her sweatshirt and tugging it out from under her. Jamie froze, swallowing hard at the intimate contact.

"Good thing I'm here, though," Emma said lightly. "You clearly need someone to look after you."

Jamie pulled her warm-up over her head, staring out at the darkening ocean as Emma slipped into her own sweatshirt. How had a girl she didn't know figured out something that Jamie's friends at home hadn't yet glommed onto? It had been three months since spring break, and yet barely a day passed that she didn't find herself sliding backward in some fashion. Every time she thought she was moving on, something happened to bring the fear flooding back. This weekend had been worse than most. Surf Cup was the first tournament she'd traveled to since Europe. And while Southern California and the Rhône-Alpes region of France had little in common, soccer tournaments were soccer tournaments and hotels were hotels.

"I think the sun has pretty much set," Emma commented. "Do you want to head back?"

"Not really. Do you?"

"No." Emma scooted closer. "As long as you block the wind, that is."

"Deal."

Jamie leaned into her, amazed that a stranger could make her feel so safe. Her initial impression of Emma had been spot on. She was a good person. Cute, too, but that didn't seem nearly as important. Sighing, Jamie slid a little lower on the bench and watched waves crash on the beach below them.

#

Emma didn't usually lie. After what had happened with her father, she detested dishonesty. But when the girl from Northern California invited her on a walk and then asked her not to let on where they were going, she knew there was more to the story. Maybe it was the shadows under her blue

eyes, or the way her smile didn't quite seem genuine, but Emma kept the girl's secret as she told her father she was headed out on a snack run and then back to a friend's room to watch a movie. Unlike Jamie's mother, her dad didn't ask for details. He only told her to take her phone and have a good time, barely even glancing up from his laptop.

Now as she and Jamie sat huddled together on the bench, the ocean crashing below them and color fading from the sky, she was glad she'd listened to her gut. Jamie was shivering beside her, but Emma was fairly certain it wasn't from the cool air off the ocean. She didn't stop to think that they didn't really know each other. She didn't stop to wonder if Jamie might not want to be touched. She simply slipped her arm through the other girl's and tugged her closer, tightening her grip as Jamie glanced at her, startled.

"I'm cold," she said, even though the temperature was warmer than what she was used to. "Is this okay?"

After a moment, she felt Jamie relax against her. "Yeah," she said, and cleared her throat. "I mean, it's the least I can do, after dragging you out here and whatnot."

Emma hid a smile at the toughness Jamie was trying to project. She had noticed her during the game, of course. So had half the girls on her team. She had overheard the gay ones talking about her later: her baby dyke swagger, her light eyes and short, dark hair, her confident smile. Jamie was hot, no doubt about it. But that wasn't why Emma had accepted her invitation to check out the sunset. Back at the hotel, Jamie had looked lost somehow, and Emma had a genetic predisposition to try to help anyone in pain.

They sat in silence for a while, watching light fade from the world until the ocean and the sky were almost the same color. Then Emma asked how Jamie had started playing soccer, and little by little, life returned to the other girl's face and voice. She clearly loved the game as much as Emma did. She was describing her first AYSO experience when Emma's phone buzzed.

"Sorry," she said, checking the screen. She frowned a little

and hit ignore. Why was he calling again? It wasn't like five days away was even that long.

"Everything okay?" Jamie asked.

"Fine."

"Guy troubles?" When Emma glanced at her quickly, she shrugged. "Sorry. Didn't mean to pry."

"No, that's okay. I just didn't think you would want to talk about that kind of thing."

"Why not?" Jamie looked at her, head tilted in apparent confusion.

"Oh. No, I mean, it's, you know..." And then she noticed Jamie's grin. Finally, a real smile.

"You mean because I'm gay."

"Are you? I never would have guessed."

At that, Jamie let out a belly laugh that temporarily drowned out the sound of the ocean. Emma smiled back, pleased she had managed to coax such a response from someone who had seemed close to tears a few minutes before. *My work here is done*, she told herself, and then wondered at the pang the thought elicited.

"Do you want to talk about it, though?" Jamie asked. "My friends say I'm a pretty good listener."

"I don't know." She shrugged. "I think maybe I'm not good girlfriend material."

"But you're so, I don't know, conscientious."

"How would you know? You just met me."

"I watched you play yesterday," Jamie said, her voice only half-teasing, "and now here you are looking after me, remember?"

"Maybe I haven't met the right guy, then."

"Or girl."

Emma smiled a little. "Right."

"How old are you, anyway?"

"I'll be seventeen in October. You?"

"Sixteen. In January."

"That's like six months away," Emma pointed out.

"I know, but fifteen sounds so young."

“You don’t seem that young to me.”

“Thanks. I think.” Her eyes seemed to darken as she glanced out over the ocean.

Emma watched her profile for a moment, and then she leaned once again into Jamie’s side. She wasn’t usually this touchy-feely with someone she had just met, but the wind off the water really was chilly. “Tell me more kiddie soccer league stories. They’re my favorite.”

“You’re weird, you know that?” But there was a hint of a smile back in her voice.

The minutes slipped away and the night deepened around them as they talked about school, family, and, of course, soccer. Early on they discovered they had both been at the 1999 World Cup final match at the Rose Bowl, and each considered it one of the best days of her life. They were both also hoping to attend a World Cup match in the fall when the US hosted the tournament for the second time in a row, but neither was sure their soccer or school schedules would cooperate. Though Jamie didn’t mention a hope to someday play at the top level, Emma felt certain they were on the same page when it came to a future career in soccer as they talked coaches and team dynamics and protein diets, training schedules and game tape and the challenge of choosing between club and prep teams.

“You’re one of those girls who has a catchphrase, aren’t you?” Jamie asked, long after the sky had darkened and the nearly full moon had begun to rise through the filmy clouds overhead. “Let me guess—it has something to do with a positive attitude. Am I right?”

Emma was glad the light from the nearby lamppost wasn’t bright enough to reveal her pink cheeks. “No comment,” she said, and stood up, stretching. “And on that note...”

Jamie rose beside her, arching her back. “Damn, I must be out of shape.”

“Or it could be you played five games in four days,” Emma pointed out.

“Six, actually.”

“That’s right, you guys made it to the finals, didn’t you? Sorry you didn’t win.”

“How did you know that?”

“I stayed for the game. It was either that or hang out watching my father work on his laptop.”

“Sounds thrilling.”

“Doesn’t it? I’m actually lucky I ran you into you tonight. This was a much better way to spend the last night at Surf Cup.”

“I completely agree.” Jamie glanced at her watch. “I should probably get back before my mom kills me, though.”

They gathered up the remains of their snacks, and then Jamie held out her arm, her voice teasing as she asked, “May I walk you home, miss?”

“Why yes, you may.” Emma linked her arm through Jamie’s, wondering at her own almost giddy response to Jamie’s flirty tone. Jamie might be hot, but Emma had a boyfriend. Besides, even though she had thought about kissing a girl—quite a bit, actually—she had yet to do so in real life. Somehow the shadows in Jamie’s eyes told her that tonight was not the time to start, no matter how much she might be tempted. And here on this bluff, far from her everyday life, she was tempted. A cute girl smiling into her eyes, a beautiful sunset over the ocean, the moon rising through gently swaying palm trees—it all added up to one of the more romantic moments of her life.

But she wasn’t here for romance, she reminded herself as they retraced their earlier steps. She was here for the chance to continue to develop her game, which would help her get to the next level—the under-19s, then the under-23s, and then, eventually, if she was lucky, the senior national team. That was her goal, and nothing else was nearly as important.

She almost stumbled when Jamie paused on the paved walkway, her eyes fixed on the property that abutted the park. It was lit up against the night sky, and through gaps in the fence they could see a pool, hot tub, and wisteria-lined deck on one side of the massive house, a manicured lawn

extending toward the cliff on the other.

“Can you imagine living like that?” Jamie asked, wrinkling her nose.

“No,” Emma admitted. “Even if I had that kind of money, I wouldn’t spend it on a house.”

“What would you spend it on?”

“I don’t know. Probably medicine for third world countries, or education reform or animal protection. No one needs that much stuff.”

Jamie was smiling again. “See? I knew you were the conscientious type.”

“Whatever.” Emma tugged her back onto the trail. “Let’s get you back before you turn into a pumpkin.”

They returned to the lamp-lit main road, arms still linked, chatting easily as they passed in and out of the shadows. A little past the halfway point, an approaching car slowed and a guy leaned out the window.

“Muff divers!” he shouted, pairing the insult with a crude gesture.

Beside her Emma felt Jamie stiffen, and she quickly held her back as she made a move toward the car. “Let it go. They’re jackasses. Not even worth it.”

After a moment, Jamie gave in and kept walking. The car speeded up again and roared away, and Emma let out a breath of relief. *What the hell?* Guys could be such assholes. Usually she thanked the gods she had been born in the US instead of some tiny country where women weren’t even allowed to go to school, let alone play soccer. And yet, that kind of crap happened here, too.

They walked on separately, the narrow space between them somehow huge now. Jamie’s brow was furrowed, and it seemed like she had retreated into the remote place inside her own mind that Emma had temporarily lured her from.

“I’m sorry,” Emma said, trying to move closer on the sidewalk.

Jamie maintained the buffer between them. “Why are you sorry?”

“Because that’s probably not the first time something like that has happened to you.”

“Yeah, well, probably won’t be the last time, either.”

“Seriously, that sucks.”

“Sticks and stones,” Jamie muttered, her voice as dark as the look that flickered and faded across her face.

Emma wasn’t sure what to say, so she remained quiet as she walked along the suddenly perilous-seeming street, Jamie pacing coolly beside her.

When the hotel was within sight, Emma stopped and said, “Give me your phone.”

“What?” Jamie looked over at her, blinking as if she’d gazed too long into a bright light.

“Give me your phone.”

“Um, okay.”

“Add yourself to mine too, okay?”

Nodding, Jamie took the phone and started to peck at the extended keyboard. Emma went to work on Jamie’s flip phone, typing in her full name, both her cell and home numbers, and her email address. As she saved the info, an alert popped up on Jamie’s screen: four missed calls from “Mom.” That couldn’t be good.

“I had fun tonight,” she said, checking her phone surreptitiously as they traded back. Jamie Maxwell. That explained why she’d heard Jamie’s teammates calling her “Max.”

“So did I.” Jamie started walking again, a ghost of a smile flitting across her lips. “You’re okay—for a Washingtonian.”

“You’re not so bad yourself, Miss California.”

“Hate to tell you, but I’m not exactly the beauty pageant type.”

“If you were, you would totally win.” Emma winced a little. Flirting with the cute gay girl was not cool, especially when she’d ignored a call from her boyfriend while hanging out with the girl in question.

Fortunately, Jamie took her comment as a joke. “Because fauxhawks and painter’s pants are the stuff of beauty queen

legends.”

They were still smiling at the image when they entered the hotel lobby, eyes on each other. Before the door had even closed, a middle-aged woman in a flowing skirt and Birkenstocks was rushing toward them. Without thinking, Emma stepped forward so that she was slightly in front of Jamie, but the woman only brushed past her and grabbed Jamie’s shoulders.

“Where have you been? Why didn’t you answer your phone? Do you know how worried I was?”

“Mom, we’re fine. It’s barely eleven.”

Emma smiled and held out her hand. “Hi. You must be Jamie’s mom. I’m Emma.”

The woman reluctantly released Jamie to shake Emma’s hand. “Yes, your father and I have been getting acquainted,” she said, her voice cool.

For the first time, Emma noticed her father standing in the background. His shirt was untucked and his thick hair disheveled, and he did not look pleased.

“I’m sorry I kidnapped Jamie,” Emma continued, her eyes back on the other girl’s mother. “We were going to come back to watch TV, but I really wanted to see the sunset and then we lost track of time. It was my fault, really.”

“See?” her father put in, coming to stand beside her. “It was just a misunderstanding. I’m sure they were being careful. Weren’t you, girls?” His hand on her shoulder was a little heavy, and Emma glanced up at him. No, he did not look pleased at all.

“Yes, sir,” Jamie mumbled.

“Good,” he said, and started to steer Emma toward the elevator bank. “And now, I think it’s time to call it a night.”

Jamie and her mother followed, and they all rode up to the second floor together in awkward silence. Beside her, Emma could feel the unhappiness rolling off Jamie in waves. She didn’t want the night to end like this. She wanted to tell Jamie’s mother to go easy on her, but judging from the way she’d reacted to their disappearing act, the woman was well-

acquainted with the shadows in her daughter's eyes. Emma, on the other hand, had only known Jamie for a matter of hours. And yet, she didn't feel like a stranger.

Their rooms lay at opposite ends of the hotel. When they got off the elevator, Jamie waved a little and said, "See you, Emma."

"Bye, Jamie," she replied. Then she and her father headed in one direction while Jamie and her mother went the other.

Emma stalked along the corridor. This was ridiculous. They weren't children. They may not be adults, either, but they should at least be able to speak to each other without their parents' interference.

"Hang on," Emma said to her father, and jogged back toward the elevator. "Hey!"

Jamie turned, smiling a little as she moved to meet her halfway. "Hey yourself."

"Thanks for keeping me company tonight," Emma said softly. "Give me a call sometime, okay? I want to hear how your fall season goes."

"Really?"

"Really."

"Okay, then. I will."

"Good." Emma hesitated, and then she reached out and pulled Jamie toward her for a hug. "Take it easy on yourself, Max. Got it?"

"Got it," Jamie murmured, her breath warm on Emma's neck. Then she pulled away and gave her a cocky grin. "Good luck finding the right guy. Or girl."

Emma rolled her eyes. "Call me," she said over her shoulder as she walked away.

"I will. See you."

"Later."

Her father was frowning when she caught back up, his slightly lined brow furrowed.

"What?" she asked as they continued down the hall.

"We both know that little excursion was not your idea."

"Whatever," she said, feigning boredom.

“I’m serious, Emma.” He held their room door open for her. “I don’t want you hanging around with someone like that. You don’t need that kind of trouble.”

Emma swallowed against the slow burn his words evoked. He didn’t know Jamie. She may be troubled, but she wasn’t trouble. Or was it that she didn’t look or dress the way he thought a girl should?

“Really? Huh. I think I forgot how much you care about what I need.”

He sighed, and when he spoke again, his voice sounded tired. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You know exactly what it means. You’ve barely been around the past few years, let alone paid attention to what I do. You wouldn’t even have come along this weekend if it wasn’t for your stupid conference.”

He shook his head and walked toward the door that connected their rooms. “I’m sorry you think that. The truth is, I came with you because I thought it would give us some quality time together. Apparently I was wrong, once again.”

She watched the door swing shut behind him. It wasn’t fair. He was the parent, and yet he was always the one who walked away. She and her brother had been grasping at him for so long that she couldn’t remember what it had been like before he’d begun perfecting his vanishing act. Except that wasn’t entirely true. It was just too painful to remember the man he had once been before his work had taken him away from them. From her.

Her mind cycling from the walk with Jamie to her father and back again, she got ready for bed and sat propped against the hotel bed pillows, trying to concentrate on the novel she’d brought along. Normally reading calmed her, but tonight the words left barely any impression. She was about to give up when her phone buzzed. *Whoops*. She hadn’t thought about Josh even once since the park.

But it wasn’t Josh. Emma smiled as she read Jamie’s text: “Wanted to say thanks for taking the blame back there. I’m not grounded, so props to you for that minor miracle.”

“No problem,” Emma typed back. “What are friends for, right?”

“Friends, huh?”

“I’m in if you are, California girl.”

“Sounds good to me. Good night, Blake.”

“Good night.”

Emma set her phone on the bedside table and clicked off the lamp. Jamie had used her soccer nickname, short for Blakeley, her last name. Apparently she had been paying attention during the game yesterday. Was it strange that they had connected in such a short time? But no, the same thing had happened with a handful of the girls at the inaugural U-17 national team camp the previous fall. Within the first few days together, it had seemed like she knew those girls better than some of the kids she’d grown up with. Each subsequent time they’d been called up for training or a match, it was like they hadn’t been apart for long, even though months might have passed. Maybe it was that they were more alike than they were different. Back at home, there weren’t that many girls who lived for soccer the way she did. But on her club team and even more so on the youth national team, they all shared the desire to be the best at the sport they loved most.

As she lay alone in her hotel room, she wondered if she and Jamie would ever play on the same team. It seemed like a longshot, but Emma had a saying: “Plan like you’ll live forever; live like you’ll die tomorrow.” As long as they both kept working hard and managed to stay injury-free—always a big if when you played competitively year round—it could happen.

See, not a word about keeping a positive attitude, she congratulated herself, remembering the way Jamie had teased her about being the kind of person who would have a catchphrase. At least there was that.

## CHAPTER TWO

“Jamie, Emma’s on the phone,” her mother called from the kitchen.

Ignoring her older sister’s raised eyebrows, Jamie grabbed the receiver from the coffee table and stepped outside onto the back patio. It was September, her favorite month of the year, and the early evening air was warm and dry.

“Hola,” she said as she headed for the hammock strung between a pair of beech trees.

“Hola, *chiquita*. How was your game?” Emma asked.

“Awesome. We won by two.”

Jamie was a couple of weeks into fall travel league with her club team based in the East Bay burbs, which meant carpooling with various SF and Oakland teammates half an hour to practice twice a week. She also had a game each weekend somewhere within a two-hour radius of home.

“Did you get on the board?” Emma asked.

“One assist. What about you? You guys were at home, right?”

“Yeah. We crushed our crosstown rivals.”

Unlike California, where girls’ prep soccer was a winter sport, Washington schools offered girls’ soccer in the fall. Emma’s squad was currently ranked second in the state of Washington in their division, and Emma had been named a

pre-season Parade All American for the second year in a row. So much for not being noticed.

After a brief comparison of game notes, they moved on to Saturday night plans. Both of their school teams were planning to get together. In a matter of hours, alcohol and other recreational substances would be flowing freely at whoever's house was parent-free that night.

"Are you taking Josh?" Jamie asked.

"Not exactly. I, um, might have broken up with him last night."

"Might have?"

"No. I did."

"Finally. I can't believe it took you that long."

"Happy now?"

Jamie rolled her eyes even though Emma couldn't see her. "The better question is, are you?"

"I think so. I mean, it'll be hard to see him every day at school, but it's kind of a relief, to be honest. He was always giving me those puppy dog eyes. Now I don't have to feel guilty for forgetting our three-month anniversary, or some other supposedly major moment that somehow slipped my radar."

"Are you sure you weren't the guy in that relationship?"

"Ha ha. What about you? Did you talk to that girl in your Spanish class? What's her name?"

"Faith. And no, not yet."

"What are you waiting for?"

"Honestly? I think I have plenty to worry about right now without adding dating drama. It's hard enough juggling classes and my high school team and club stuff. Not to mention driver's ed."

Emma was quiet for a moment, and Jamie wondered if she would press her for the real reason she was dodging her latest girl crush. But she didn't, a fact that Jamie appreciated more than Emma knew. Someday, if they stayed friends, she would probably tell her about France. But not yet. She still wasn't entirely sure how to talk about it to herself, despite the

therapist she'd been seeing for the past five months.

"Driving is fun," Emma said finally. "If you can skateboard, then something with brakes and air bags will seem easy."

They talked about Emma's little brother's new skateboard, and then the conversation swung back to soccer, as it always did. With their fall seasons in full swing, there was endless fodder on that front. Plus the English Premier League (EPL) season had just started up again with Champions League soon to follow, and World Cup group play was set to begin this very weekend. US Soccer, the official governing body for the sport in America, recommended that youth players watch as much quality game film as possible, and Emma and Jamie were only too happy to comply. Over the summer they had discovered they could spend hours on the phone watching the matches they'd taped off satellite television. This involved staking out the TV at a prearranged time, calling each other up, and hitting play at the exact same moment. Jamie's sister thought they were crazy, but Emma said their behavior was normal given their shared aspiration to one day play at the highest level.

It had been two months since Surf Cup, and barely a day went by without a text, email, or phone call. Jamie's Berkeley friends kept teasing her about her girlfriend up in Seattle, but it wasn't like that. She and Emma had things in common that none of her other friends cared about. Like the Food Network—sometimes they made plans to watch cooking shows together instead of game tape. But that was their secret. Not even their parents knew about their shared obsession with Giada De Laurentiis, the star of *Everyday Italian*.

"Do you still want to watch the games tomorrow?" Emma asked.

"Of course," Jamie replied, swinging the hammock slightly. The following day boasted not only an early season match-up between Arsenal and Manchester United but the first match for the US women at the World Cup. The first-

round games for the American side were all on the East Coast while the semis would be in Portland and the finals in Los Angeles. Jamie wasn't going to be able to attend any games, thanks to school and soccer, but Emma was going to Portland for the semis.

"The women are going to kick Sweden's ass, but your boys are going down!"

"They are not," Jamie said, though she knew there was a good chance Manchester United would carry the day at Old Trafford. "I still don't understand how you can root for Man U. It's like being a Yankees fan."

"We can't all be champions of the underdog."

"Why not?"

"Because we can't. Anyway, what do you think about watching both games live?" Emma asked.

"The guys kick off at seven."

"And?"

"And it's my only day off all week? I was planning to get up for the women."

"Aw, come on," Emma cajoled. "It'll make the time before the US game go so much faster. Pleeese? Think of it as an early birthday present."

"Your birthday is like a month away."

"Duh, that's why I said early."

"Fine," Jamie grumbled. "I'll set my stupid alarm. But you're not getting anything else for your birthday."

"Right." Emma snorted.

"Excuse me?"

"You know you can't resist sending me stuff, dork."

"I think you overestimate your charm, nerd."

"No, I just know how much you like giving presents."

That was true. Jamie had sent Emma two care packages so far, one for a national team tournament in Texas and another to mark the start of her senior year. In fact, Emma's birthday CD was already burned and waiting to be mailed.

They chatted for a little while longer, and then Jamie's sister Meg poked her head outside to tell her it was time to

set the table for dinner.

“Have fun tonight,” Jamie said.

“You too. Talk to you tomorrow?”

“Bright and early.”

“Cool. See you...”

“...Later.”

They always hung up the same way. If it was late, they wished each other sweet dreams, and if it was earlier, like now, one would start their standard farewell phrase and the other would finish it. Jamie couldn't remember exactly how the tradition had started, but it had become habit by now.

“How's Emma?” her mother asked as Jamie entered the kitchen, humming the chorus from Avril Lavigne's “Mobile,” one of the songs she'd put on Emma's birthday CD.

“Great. They won their game, too.”

“Good for them,” her mother said politely. She attended most of Jamie's games, but unlike her husband, she wasn't exactly a sports fan.

As they set out napkins and silverware, Meg asked, “What did your long distance girlfriend have to say?”

“She's not my girlfriend.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“I am capable of being friends with a straight girl. Homophobic much?”

Meg shook her head. “Don't play the homophobia card just because you don't like what I'm saying. You have to admit, you talk to her more than you do any of your other friends. I bet you already have a plan to talk to her tomorrow, don't you?”

“Well, yeah. There are two games on so we had to make a plan.”

“You *had* to?” Meg enquired as their father walked in, open laptop in hand.

“Yes, we *had* to. The World Cup starts tomorrow.”

“No wonder she hangs out with you. No one else she knows could possibly be as much of a soccer junkie.” A newly minted senior herself, Meg had wondered aloud more

than once why Emma would want to bother with a lowly sophomore.

“You say that like it’s a bad thing,” Jamie commented.

“Last time I checked, addiction is pretty much always a bad thing.”

“Meg, leave your sister alone,” their mother said, “and Tim, you know the rule. No computers at the table.”

He glanced up, glasses sliding down his nose, and offered an apologetic smile. “Sorry, honey. I wanted to show Jamie something. It won’t take long.” He set the laptop on the sideboard and waved her over. “I think I found the shirt you were looking for, kiddo.”

“Really?” She stood next to him, gazing at the web page open to eBay. “Is the back blank?”

“According to the images. Take a look.”

“Can’t this wait until after dinner?” her mother asked.

“It’s an online auction,” he replied, “so no. What do you think, Jamie?”

She touched his arm. “It’s perfect. Thanks, Dad.”

“You’re welcome, sweetheart,” he said, and started typing.

A few hours later, Jamie sat outside on her friend Ari’s patio, nursing the same mostly full wine cooler she’d held all night. Since France, she couldn’t bring herself to drink beer. Even the smell was enough to turn her stomach. Inside the house, the party was going on without her. There were more guys than she remembered from past team parties, and more weed, too. The cloud inside had been a bit much, as had been the coupling off of her teammates with male soccer players she barely recognized after a summer spent traveling for club tournaments and the Olympic Development Program. Girls didn’t change all that much over such a short period of time, but guys were different. Their faces, torsos, voices, even their hair was constantly evolving now that they were all in high school.

The lyrics from “Mobile,” her current favorite song, came

back to her again. Everything really was changing around her, and she felt like a mobile, spun out of control by feelings she couldn't always name. How much of it was France, and how much a normal part of being a teenager? Not that she would ever know. What had happened couldn't be taken back. The images began to replay in her head, as they still occasionally did when she paused in one place too long, and she shook her head, hoping motion would help.

Lights from the pool area blurred in her vision. This property was unreal. Ari's father was a venture capitalist, her mother a partner at a corporate law firm in the city. Their house in the affluent Claremont Hills neighborhood was a "modern monstrosity," according to Jamie's mother—all concrete and glass panels that seemed destined to rain death upon the house's occupants when the next major earthquake struck.

As she watched, two guys and a girl wandered out of the house and made their way to the pool, where they wrestled around until, predictably, all three ended up in the water, laughing and shrieking. It was warm out, but it wasn't that warm.

Pulling her phone from her pocket, she texted Emma: "How's your party? Mine's not quite my style..."

She waited a few minutes, but no answer. Maybe Emma was coupling off even now, taking advantage of her newly single status. No doubt there were guys lined up waiting for a chance to hook up with her. After all, she was cute, smart, and a nationally ranked soccer player headed to the opposite coast to play for a storied athletics program. Some of the biggest names in American women's soccer had graduated from UNC. Personally, Jamie couldn't imagine moving to the East Coast for college, but then California offered significantly more opportunity than Washington as far as collegiate soccer programs went.

Still restless, she texted her sister: "Where are you?"

A minute later her phone lit up: "Becky's."

"Can you come get me? Please?"

“Of course. When and where?”

“Ari’s. Is now okay?”

“Be there in fifteen, James.”

“You rock.”

Jamie set aside her unfinished wine cooler and made her way around the side of the house to the front porch. She was lucky to have Meg as a sister. Some of her friends had older brothers and sisters who picked on them or, almost as bad, pretended they didn’t exist. But even before France, Meg had looked out for her. Since Jamie had given their parents permission to tell her what had happened in Lyon, Meg had been even more attentive. They had a deal that if Jamie was ever someplace that made her uncomfortable for any reason, Meg would find a way to come pick her up, no questions asked.

Ten minutes later, Becky’s ancient Datsun chugged to a stop in front of Ari’s house.

“Hey, loser,” Becky said as Jamie slid into the back seat.

Meg smacked her best friend in the back of the head. “My little sister is not a loser. She is awesome. For a sophomore. Right, James?”

“Whatever you say.” She fastened her seat belt. “Thanks for rescuing me, guys.”

“You’re welcome.” Becky winked at her in the rearview mirror as she pulled her beater car away from the curb and guided it downhill toward the city.

“You okay, kiddo?” Meg asked, watching her from the front seat.

“Fine. Wasn’t in the mood for the ultra-hetero make-out session, though. What were you guys up to?”

“Working on a song. It’s almost done.”

“Awesome. Can’t wait to hear it.”

“Actually, you could pay us back,” Becky put in. “You’re good with computers, right?”

“Sure.”

“We were wondering if there’s a way to record electric piano tracks directly to my Mac.”

“I don’t see why not, depending on what kind of line out the piano has. Let me take a look and talk to Dad. I bet there’s something out there that would even score the music for you.”

“I told you she’s not a loser.”

“Yeah, yeah, your sibling bond is the envy of us all.”

Meg glanced back and smiled at Jamie. “No lie, homey.”

Jamie nodded. “True dat, yo.”

Becky huffed. “Stop with the white girl appropriation of Black English! Otherwise I’m going to make you both get out and walk.”

“Touchy, much?” Meg said. “You know, your brother calling you an Oreo is not our fault.”

“Oreo?” Jamie echoed.

“You know, black on the outside, white on the in?”

“What does that make him then? Double stuff?”

The two girls in the front seat cracked up. Becky’s younger brother had never been thin, but since joining the middle school football team the previous year he had bulked up substantially.

“Nice one, sis.” Meg held up her hand for a high five. “But all this talk of cookies is making me hungry. Who’s up for ice cream?”

“I am!” the other two called out in unison.

They parked downtown and walked to Ben & Jerry’s. The line was out the door on this, a warm Saturday evening, but they didn’t mind. Becky and Meg sang their new song for Jamie, she told them about her game in Central Valley strip-mall hell, and they all agreed that the crowd at Ari’s was way too fast.

“Julie Hanford was totally snorting coke in the downstairs bathroom,” Jamie told them as they paid for their ice cream cones.

“I don’t ever want to hear about you doing anything like that,” Meg said, staring at her.

“As if. Hard drugs and soccer do not mix, in case you hadn’t noticed.”

“Good,” her sister said, and tugged her closer for a second. “Make sure you remember that.”

“Yes, Mom,” Jamie said, rolling her eyes.

They took their cones to go and walked around downtown Berkeley, taking in the sights. College kids and Silicon Valley yuppies mingled with tourists, hippies, and Rastafarians on this warm weekend night, and every once in a while the scent of weed drifted past. Jamie loved people-watching in her hometown. San Francisco was fun to explore and only a short BART ride away, but to her mind, you couldn’t beat Berkeley.

Jamie’s curfew was earlier than Meg’s, but the older girl didn’t complain as they finished their cones and headed home to Elmwood. When Becky grumbled about babysitting sophomores, Meg gave her a look that Jamie recognized as their mother’s infamous no-sass-allowed stare. All at once, she could see her sister a few years down the road with kids of her own. And she wondered—would that be her someday, too? Being queer meant she wasn’t automatically expected to pine after the white picket fence and two and a half kids. Which was just as well—at the moment, she couldn’t imagine going on a date with anyone, let alone settling down and starting a family. When you’re working on surviving, it’s hard to picture a future where you might be responsible for the lives of others.

Becky dropped them in front of their house and tooted her little car’s horn as she drove off. They headed up the front walkway together, Meg’s arm around Jamie’s shoulders.

“I’m glad you called, kiddo.”

“Me, too.” Jamie rested her cheek against her sister’s ponytail. “But you know, I *am* taller than you. Maybe you should stop calling me kiddo.”

“Perish the thought!” Meg flicked her shoulder.

“Ow.” Jamie rubbed the spot, laughing as they climbed the front porch stairs.

“Oh, did I hurt the big, strong jock?”

“You’re such a bully.”

Their parents were in the living room reading as they

walked in. Or their mom was reading, anyway. Their father had his laptop perched on a wooden lap desk and was typing away as usual. He looked up and smiled when he saw them.

“Hi, girls. Did you have a nice night?”

Meg nodded. “Ice cream and songwriting—what more could anyone ask?”

Their mom was frowning at Jamie. “I thought you were playing mini-golf with the soccer team.”

She shrugged, toying with the zipper on her hoodie. “We got done early so Meg and Becky came to get me.”

“Thanks, sweetie,” their dad said, his eyes on Meg.

“No problem. What are big sisters for?”

There was a brief silence in the room, and Jamie could almost hear the thought circulating: Big sisters looked out for little sisters, the same way friends were supposed to watch out for friends. Chocolate ice cream and lime-flavored wine cooler rumbled in her stomach, and she swallowed back an alcohol-infused burp. Nothing a little CBD oil couldn’t fix.

“Anyway,” she said, and headed for the stairs, “I have to be up early to watch soccer with Emma. Good night.”

“Good night,” her family echoed.

She would have bet good money they were going to discuss her emotional state the second she was out of earshot. Sure enough, as she creaked about the second floor of their 1920s Craftsman, she heard the low murmur of voices below. She could have eavesdropped through one of the heating grates in the hall floor, but honestly, she wasn’t sure she wanted to know what they were saying.

Her evening routine took only a couple of minutes—the perks of being a tomboy. Brush her teeth, rinse her face, smooth down her hat-head, and voila. Dressed in boxers and an old YMCA soccer shirt, she slid between her sheets and reached for the pen case in her bedside table. The vaporizer her buddy Blair had given her looked like a pen and, even better, didn’t leave any telltale scent behind. She drew it out and puffed once. The effects were almost immediate. As the cannabis oil hit her bloodstream, her shoulders relaxed, her

face softened, and even the tight knot in her stomach eased. She smiled a little and put the pen case away. Thank the gods for medicinal marijuana.

She was closing the drawer when her phone's alert sounded. Her smile softened as she read Emma's text.

"Sorry, forgot my phone was on silent! Are you still there?"

"I'm here," Jamie typed back.

"Party here was lame too. Left with Dani and Sian and rented a movie. You?"

"Went for ice cream with my sister and Becky."

"Ooh, even better! Jealous..."

"Next time I see you, I'll take you out for a cone. Or are you a cup person?"

"Cone all the way, and you're on. Now go to bed. You have to be up early."

"So do you. Go USA!"

"Go USA!!!! Sweet dreams."

"Sweet dreams to you too."

Jamie turned off her phone and lay back in bed, staring up at the glow-in-the-dark constellations she and her father had hung on the ceiling years before. Why did she feel closer to a girl she'd only met two months earlier than to the classmates she'd known since kindergarten? Maybe it was that she'd met Emma after France. She couldn't see how Jamie had changed, not the way her Berkeley friends could. And here she'd thought coming out the previous year would be the hardest thing she'd have to face.

She closed her eyes and tried to slow her breathing. Emma was right. They had to be up early. As the usual flood of memories tried to hijack her brain, she took a calming breath and reminded herself that she was safe; memories couldn't actually hurt her. To distract her mind, she mentally listed the twenty women on the US World Cup squad, including college and pro teams. Then she tried to remember Arsenal's starting line-up, overall record, and current standing in the first division of the EPL. When that was done, she was still awake,

so she pictured Emma in her house in Seattle. Emma had emailed a few photos, and while the house was nothing like Ari's, it was significantly posher than Jamie's. The view out over the water toward islands and mountains was incredible, and Jamie wondered if she would ever see it in person.

Wondered, too, if this friendship could possibly last when their lives were so different. Emma was leaving for college in less than a year. When she was in North Carolina, would they keep emailing and texting? Would they still get up early on weekend days to watch TV together? Somehow she doubted it. But she would take what she could get for now. Her friendship with Emma made her feel calm, normal even. It gave her hope that someday she would be able to fall asleep without the vaporizer.

Small goals, she reminded herself. It was always best to start small.

#

The day before she turned seventeen, Emma received a phone call from the manager of the under-19 national team. There was a training camp scheduled for the third week of November at US Soccer headquarters in Los Angeles. Was she interested in attending?

“Yes,” she said quickly, even though the timing wasn't ideal. Mid-November marked the end of her high school season. If they made it to states, she risked missing part of the tournament, possibly even her last ever high school game(s). But this was the next step on the road to—she hoped—playing for the senior side. She couldn't say no. She didn't want to, anyway, even if it meant possibly letting down the girls she'd played soccer with her entire life.

As soon as she hung up the land line, she grabbed her cell phone. It was a Sunday, and for once no one else was home. Her father was away on one of his many work-related trips, and her mother had taken her brother, Tyler, to a skate park to work on his middle school science fair project, which apparently involved measuring the effects of speed on the distance and height of his favorite skateboarding trick. Leave

it to Ty to find a way to combine science with his love of skateboarding.

“Hey. Call me!” she texted. Less than a minute later her cell rang. She picked up, laughing. “Okay, that was fast even for you.”

“You better not have opened your presents early,” Jamie said.

“Presents? As in, plural?”

“Apparently you didn’t or you would know that. What’s up? I thought we weren’t going to talk until tomorrow after the family thing?”

Emma’s father was planning to fly home from Nevada—or was it Oklahoma?—in time to whisk them all off to a fancy birthday dinner in downtown Seattle. She would believe it when she saw it. Although maybe that wasn’t entirely fair. He had been trying much harder recently, and Ty at least had forgiven him for any past transgressions.

“I couldn’t wait for tomorrow,” she told Jamie. “Dude, I got called up to the under-19 team camp next month in LA! Can you freaking believe it?”

“Of course I can,” Jamie exclaimed, her voice nearly as excited. “I told you, you are one badass soccer player. When’s camp?”

Emma shared the little she knew. More details would arrive via a formal letter of invitation sometime in the next few days.

“I can’t believe it’s happening!” she added. “I mean, I’ve worked really hard, but so have a thousand other girls our age, you know?” As soon as the words left her lips, she realized that one of those thousands was on the other end of the telephone line.

“Well, I’m not surprised,” Jamie declared, and Emma could hear the smile in her voice. “You’re totally going to show those SoCal biatches how it’s done.”

One of the things they’d bonded over was the annoying supremacy of Southern California teams. No matter how far their own club teams went, they inevitably encountered and

usually lost to a team from SoCal populated with taller and stronger than average players who tugged on jerseys and threw elbows and kicked you when you were on the ground. They were the quintessential mean girls—except that they could play soccer better than almost anyone else.

Unsurprisingly, the junior national program had significant representation from LA and its environs.

“Anyway, what are you up to?” Emma asked, sitting down on the tan corduroy rocker in the living room. Their house was situated at the top of a bluff above Spring Beach, and three wide picture windows offered an expansive view of Puget Sound, Bainbridge Island and, on a clear day, the snow-capped Olympic Mountains.

“Homework. Did I tell you my chemistry teacher pulled me aside the other day and told me she thought I was one of her most talented students?”

“No way. That’s awesome.”

“I don’t know,” Jamie said. “I kind of think chemistry is mostly memorization, and I’ve always been good at that.”

“She probably knows what she’s talking about. Didn’t you say she’s your favorite teacher?”

“Yeah. She’s really funny and smart, and she wears these kickass shoes and these really cute glasses...”

“Sounds like someone has a crush,” Emma teased.

“Ew! She’s like twenty years older than us!”

“Ooh, so mid-thirties? Sounds hot.” She could almost hear Jamie’s blush over the phone line.

“She’s straight and married. Get your mind out of the gutter, Blake.”

“Not everyone who’s married is straight.”

“I think my gaydar would have pinged by now.”

Emma paused. This would be the perfect time to tell Jamie about her own—flexibility, as she liked to think of it. When she’d started having crushes on girls in junior high, she had assumed it was a passing stage. But the crushes didn’t stop. If anything, they’d only grown stronger. She still liked guys, and she still saw herself settling down with one. Despite

the roller coaster of her parents' marriage, she'd always wanted kids; a man seemed like a necessary part of her future. And yet, she couldn't pretend that girls didn't fascinate her—the way they smelled, the softness of their skin, the ease with which they shared their feelings. Most of the boys she knew got stuck on the surface of things, as if it didn't matter what was going on underneath.

"Earth to Emma. Are you still there?"

"I'm here," she said, and let the moment pass.

They talked about schoolwork and soccer, team dinners and gossip. A girl on Jamie's team was pregnant and keeping the baby even though her boyfriend didn't want to. As a result, she wouldn't be able to finish out the season.

"I can't believe she was so careless," Jamie said. "It's 2003, and there's a Planned Parenthood only a few miles from our school."

"At least you've never had to worry about that, right?" Emma commented. Another advantage to dating girls.

It was Jamie's turn to go radio silent. Emma looked at her cell screen, but the timer kept ticking away. Maybe the call had dropped at the other end? Then Jamie's voice returned, sounding strangely far away.

"Right. Good thing."

Something about her tone took Emma back to the night they'd met, when Jamie had stared out at the ocean looking like she might cry. Weird. All Emma had said was that she'd never had to worry about getting pregnant. Jamie had told her she'd never had a boyfriend, so why would that upset her? Unless—Emma stopped the thought. Clearly she'd seen too many Lifetime movies, heard too many cautionary tales about teenaged girls.

But still... "Are you okay?" she asked softly.

"Totally."

But neither of them spoke, and Emma couldn't stop thinking about what might have happened to the girl she could hear breathing over the phone line.

"Anyway," Jamie said at last, "I should probably get back

to my homework.”

“Yeah, I should go, too.”

She didn’t really want to hang up, but she also didn’t know what else to say. Jamie was open in so many ways but not about this—whatever “this” was. What had she called her issues with her mom the night they met? A deep, dark secret? Apparently she preferred to keep it that way.

“Congratulations again,” Jamie said. “I’m really happy for you, Em.”

“Thanks, Jamie. I’ll call you tomorrow, okay? I don’t want to open presents without you. Not that being on the phone is the same.”

“My dad says a company in Belgium is working on software that will let people connect through video chat. Wouldn’t that be cool?”

“Heck yeah. Keep me posted.”

When they finally ended the call a little while later, Emma stood up to pace the living room. Lucy, the family’s aging black lab, thumped her tail against the couch each time Emma reached one end of the Oriental rug and spun on her heel to start back.

She talked to herself as she paced. “I can’t ask her straight out, can I? I mean, what’s the etiquette here? ‘From things you have said—and haven’t said, really—I’m wondering if there’s something you want to tell me...’ But that’s stupid. If she wanted to tell me, she would have. Or what if she’s waiting for me to ask? Aargh!”

Suddenly she flung herself onto the couch and leaned into Lucy, resting her cheek on the old dog’s warm fur. Lucy’s tail thumped again and she reached out a paw. Obediently Emma rubbed her belly. Why did life have to be so complicated? When she was younger, everything had seemed so easy. Her parents had loved her and Ty and each other, and she had loved soccer and school and sunny summer mornings, and someday she would grow up and play soccer all over the world before settling down and having a family of her own. But then she had become a teenager and her parents had

seemed to stop loving each other, at least for a time, and now Ty was becoming a teenaged boy—*bleh*—and while soccer was definitely looking up, she wasn't sure anymore who she was or what she wanted.

If she wasn't girlfriend material, if she cared more about soccer than anything else, then how would she ever manage the family bit? Who wanted a wife or mother who was never around? That role seemed reserved for men. Look at her own parents. Her father's career had taken off eight years earlier when he'd developed a surgical technique that simplified the treatment of complex airway disorders in pediatric patients. His technique had saved the lives of thousands of children, and he traveled the country and world consulting on difficult cases and teaching his technique to other surgeons. Her mother's career, meanwhile, had always come second. For one thing, her job was here in Seattle. She was the one who kept the household running, who made sure Emma and her brother did their homework and got to lessons, practice, and games on time.

Speaking of being on time... She glanced at her watch. It was almost five, which meant she had to get going. Dani and Sian, her two closest friends on the soccer team, were taking her out for a pre-birthday dinner. *Good*, she thought, rising to her feet. A night out with the girls was exactly what she needed to take her out of her own head.

An hour later she was seated at a table in a sushi bar in the International District, munching edamame and mixing wasabi and soy in a dipping dish. She had dressed up in a red scoop-necked shirt and striped jersey skirt, pairing them with flats that wouldn't hurt her feet if they decided to take an after-dinner walk. Her friends were similarly clad in comfortable skirts and light make-up and were currently discussing the rumor they had heard that Justin Tate, captain of the boys' soccer team and newly single, was planning to ask Emma out.

"You guys would be like soccer royalty," Sian said, her cheeks flushed from the walk up the hill to the restaurant. She was in shape, but her fair skin colored at the slightest

exertion. After every practice and game her entire body was pink and shiny, a fact she bemoaned regularly.

“High school royalty,” Dani corrected, her olive skin blush-free as usual.

“Whatever. Do you like him?” Sian gazed at Emma expectantly.

“I don’t know. Even if I did, I just broke up with Josh. I’m not ready to date yet.”

“That was like a month ago,” Dani said, “and it was your call.”

“Well, I’m not sure I have time, then. I got a call from US Soccer today. They want me to go to an under-19 camp in LA next month.”

“Oh my god!” Sian squealed.

“No fucking way.” Dani shook her head, smiling.

“I know, right? I hoped I would make it to the next level, but I wasn’t sure it would happen.”

Dani rolled her eyes. “Oh, please, Miss Modest. You started almost every match for the seventeens.”

“Yeah, and you made a bunch of all-tournament teams with them, didn’t you?” Sian asked. “You had to know it was only a matter of time before the nineteens called.”

Emma shrugged. Nothing was guaranteed when it came to the national team pool. Coaches and scouts were human, and their decisions were unpredictable and subject to change.

“Wait.” Dani frowned. “Next month? When exactly is this camp?”

“That’s the thing...” She stopped, grateful for the reprieve as their server delivered several trays overflowing with colorful rolls and plates of nigiri sushi. They divvied up the food and dug in, Dani’s question momentarily on hold as they oohed and ahed over the melt-in-your-mouth quality of the fish.

Finally Sian circled the conversation back around. “When do you have to go?”

Emma tapped her chopsticks on her plate. “November fifteenth through the twenty-second.”

“But that’s during states!”

“I know. I’m really sorry, guys.”

Lips pursed, Dani nodded slowly. “I guess you’ve gotta do what you gotta do.”

“You know I don’t want to miss the end of the season, but this is the next step. If I do okay, it’s on to the under-23s. And if I do well there...”

“You could get called up to the senior team,” Dani finished for her. “We get it, don’t we, Siani?”

“Yeah, sure,” Sian mumbled, and took a sip of ice water.

“It’s just shitty timing,” Dani added, her eyes on Emma’s.

“The shittiest,” she agreed.

They were quiet for a few minutes while they continued to demolish their sushi. Japanese food was Emma’s absolute favorite. Did Chapel Hill even have sushi restaurants? And if they did exist, would they be any good? Somehow she hadn’t managed to ask that question when she’d visited campus the previous spring. Occasionally she wondered if she was making the right decision to move three thousand miles away from home, but UNC was a perennial national championship favorite—in fact, they’d won it two out of the last four years and were expected to win again this season—as well as a feeder school for the national team. More UNC graduates had participated in the national pool than any other school in the country. As soon as the coach had made it clear he wanted her, her decision had been made. She would be crazy to turn down the opportunity.

After they’d gotten some food in their systems, the other girls seemed to recover enough to ask about her plans for the next day. She filled them in on her father’s promise to take the family out to Canlis, a landmark restaurant situated at the south end of the Aurora Bridge. Then she paused, wondering if she should tell them about Jamie. But why shouldn’t she? They knew she had gotten close with “Surf Cup Girl,” as they called her.

“And then when we get home,” she finished, “I’m going to call Jamie and open the package she sent.” She popped a

piece of salmon nigiri in her mouth and chewed slowly, enjoying the taste sensation as her friends exchanged a look. She swallowed the bite and regarded them across the table. “What? If you have something to say, spit it out.”

“It’s nothing.” Dani fiddled with her chopsticks. “Except, I don’t know, you’ve been talking about this girl a lot lately.”

“So? We’re friends.”

Sian elbowed Dani, who said, “Are you sure that’s all you are? Tamara pointed her out in some of the Surf Cup photos, and I totally remember her now. She’s cute, if you like that sort of thing.”

Emma stared at her. “You were looking for pictures of her?”

“No. Tamara happened to point her out, that’s all.”

“Okay,” Emma said, leaning away from the table. “Well, you’re right, she is cute. And smart, and nice, and a good soccer player, and we’re friends. Not sure how else to say it, and frankly, I’m a little pissed I have to.”

“Sorry,” Sian offered immediately.

“Well, I for one am glad you’re not lezzing out on us,” Dani said. “Not that there’s anything wrong with that. I just didn’t believe what people were saying.”

“Wait. People have been talking about me being gay?”

Since when did being friends with a lesbian automatically make you one? Not that the gossip was that far off base. Or maybe it was. God, did she really have to figure it out right this second? Why couldn’t people mind their own freaking business?

“Some of Josh’s friends are saying you broke up with him because of Surf Cup Girl,” Sian explained. “I think because of the timing.”

“That, and wounded male pride,” Dani added.

“I broke up with Josh because I thought he was a douchebag, and this conversation only confirms it.”

“Um, duh,” Dani said. “Took you long enough to figure that one out.”

“Jamie said almost the same thing. You guys would really

like her. Assuming you could get past the *lezzying out* thing.” And she stared hard at Dani.

“Don’t get your panties all in a bunch. You know I don’t have anything against the gays.”

“Then maybe don’t call them ‘the gays?’” Emma shook her head, trying not to smile.

Dani smirked. “See? I can always make you laugh.”

Emma threw an edamame shell at her. “Sometimes I think being born in New Jersey ruined you for life.”

“Hey, don’t be taking pot shots at my family,” Dani said in a heavy Jersey accent. “Otherwise my boys might have to come over and teach you some respect.” She stuck out her bottom lip and held up a fist.

Emma wanted to stay annoyed at Dani, but she couldn’t keep a straight face at the sight of her best friend channeling Tony Soprano. Friends since kindergarten, they had always had each other’s backs. When Emma’s parents were separated the previous year, Dani had been there for her, lending a shoulder and doling out tissues as needed. The year before that, when one of Dani’s brothers had caused a car accident that had seriously injured a young boy, Emma had stuck by her despite the stares and whispers that followed them through the school halls. Now, as seniors, they had realized their childhood dream of captaining their high school team together.

An all-state striker, Dani was headed to UCLA on scholarship next fall, so soon enough they would be living on opposite coasts. But Emma couldn’t imagine not being friends with her. Dani knew her better than anyone. And yet, she didn’t know that the rumors about Emma’s sexuality weren’t entirely unfounded. No one did.

That was going to have to change, Emma told herself as she drove home that evening. They had gone for a sunset walk at Alki Beach in West Seattle, throwing rocks into the water and talking about soccer and families and boys and how impossibly fast their senior year seemed to be moving. Despite several chances to come clean, Emma had kept her

secret to herself. She didn't want to risk losing her closest friends over something that may or may not ever happen. What was the point? She thought of Jamie, who had come out to her family and friends when she was thirteen and to everyone else—teachers, classmates, aunts, uncles, cousins—a year later. Emma couldn't even imagine the courage that whole process must have taken.

Then again, maybe coming out was easier for someone like Jamie. No one would look at her and think, "Wow, that chick looks totally straight." But that was exactly what people saw when they looked at Emma. To be honest, it was what she saw when she looked in the mirror, too. How could she be attracted to girls? She simply didn't look like the type. That was partly why she kept waiting for it to pass—life would be so much simpler if she'd only ever thought that way about guys.

Her mother was in the living room when she got home, curled up on the couch with a book, Lucy asleep beside her. She glanced up and smiled when Emma wandered in.

"Hi, sweetheart. How was dinner?"

"Fine." Emma walked over to the couch and squeezed between the dog and her mother, leaning her head on her mom's shoulder. She smelled familiar, of vanilla soap and lemon ginger tea.

"You sure about that?" her mom asked as she set the book aside and slipped an arm around her shoulders.

"Not really." For a moment, she thought about telling her mom. But then she pushed the idea away. Why traumatize her parents when she hadn't figured things out yet for herself?

"And here I thought you would be on cloud nine."

"What do you mean?"

"US Soccer came up on caller ID. I assume you have news to share?"

She filled her mom in on the call, as well as Dani and Sian's—and her own, of course—disappointment at the timing.

"Ah, I see," her mother said, pulling her reading glasses

off and setting them on top of her book. “You have to choose between your past and your future, and that’s rarely a stress-free task.”

Except that Emma hadn’t stressed over the decision at all. She didn’t bother correcting her mother, though. The fact that she had thrown her high school team’s post-season under the bus without hesitation was not one of her prouder moments. But she was only being pragmatic, which as an American of Scandinavian descent—her mother had grown up in Minnesota, land of ten thousand lakes and a million or so Swedes—was her birthright.

“Is that why you’re not celebrating the call-up, or is something else bothering you?”

“Something else,” she admitted, and leaned her head on her mother’s shoulder again.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Her hand ran soothingly over Emma’s hair.

“If you don’t mind.” But she wasn’t sure how to broach the topic of her conversation with Jamie. The farther she got from the call, the more she wondered if she wasn’t reading into things. What if she was wrong? Then again, what if she wasn’t? “It’s about Jamie, actually.”

The hand on her hair froze. “I see,” her mom said slowly. “I have to admit, your father and I did wonder.”

Emma glanced at her. *What...?* But then she realized and pulled away, frowning. “Not that. God, Mom, we’re just friends.”

She held up a hand. “I’m sorry. You seem very close with this girl, and when you mentioned she was gay, the thought did enter our minds.”

*You and everyone else.* Emma shook her head. “Jamie being gay is not the issue.”

Her mom took her hand and gave it an encouraging squeeze. “What is, then?”

Haltingly, she told her what she knew and what she only thought she knew. Her mom listened closely, her face growing more and more serious as Emma described their

assorted interactions.

“I already know she’s never had a boyfriend, and she’s been out since she was thirteen, so unless she hooked up with a guy at a ridiculously young age, which I totally doubt, then that would mean...it would mean she must have been...” She trailed off, looking at her mother.

“Are you saying you think she could have been assaulted?”

Emma nodded, swallowing against the knot in her throat. The idea of some strange man doing terrible things to sweet, funny Jamie made her want to go out and slam a soccer ball against the garage door as hard as she could. Or what if it wasn’t a stranger? What if it was someone she still had to see regularly, like a coach or a teacher or even a relative?

“From what you’ve said, it does sound possible.” Her mother tightened her grip on her hand as Emma exhaled noisily. “I’m so sorry, sweetie. I had hoped you wouldn’t ever have to deal with something like this, especially not in such a close friend.”

“What do I do, though? Should I ask her about it or do I wait until she brings it up?”

“It’s up to you, sweetie. You could bring it up or you could wait for her to raise the topic herself. Either way, the main thing is to let her know that you care about her and that you’re there for her.”

Emma rubbed a hand over her eyes. “I really don’t want to do or say the wrong thing.”

Her mother slipped an arm around her shoulders. “I have some material at the office you can read to prepare for if and when she tells you. Would you like to look through it together?”

“That would be great,” Emma said.

Her mother kissed her forehead. “You’re a good person and a great friend, you know that?”

“I really care about her.”

“I know you do.”

They were quiet for a few minutes, their eyes on the ferry and barge lights blinking between the mainland and the

island. Then Emma said, “Life is going to keep getting more complicated from here on out, isn’t it?”

Her mother nodded. “It is. And with your big heart, I’m afraid you’re going to feel like it’s your job to protect the people you care about. But the fact is, you can’t save anyone else, honey. The only person who can do that for Jamie is Jamie. If and when she’s ready, she’ll let you in.”

“What if she isn’t ever ready?”

“I doubt that will be the case. From what you’ve said, it sounds like she has a very close, loving family. They’ll help her through it. Assuming they know?”

“Um, yeah.” Emma remembered the panicked look in Jamie’s mother’s eyes when they’d returned five minutes late to the hotel in Del Mar. “I’m almost positive.”

“Hopefully they’ve got her in counseling. Research shows that the sooner a rape victim begins to heal, the better their long-term chances are at overcoming depression, self-hatred, and everything else that comes with sexual assault.”

Emma’s throat tightened again. *Rape victim, depression, sexual assault*—her mom sounded so detached. This was Jamie they were talking about, the first person Emma talked to most mornings, the last person she talked to at night. Jamie, who listened quietly and somehow always knew the right thing to say.

“Ah, geez.” Her mother squeezed her tighter. “I didn’t mean to go all clinical on you, sweetie. I know you’re worried about your friend, and I’m here for you, okay? It’s important that you have support through all of this, too.”

“Thanks, Mom.” Emma kissed her mother’s cheek. “You know you’re pretty great too, right?”

Her mother shook her head. “When did you get so grown up?”

“I am a senior, Mom, remember?”

“How could I forget?”

Her mother’s smile was lopsided, and Emma was pretty sure she knew why. Even though her parents understood her dream to go to UNC and supported her decision a hundred

percent, it would be difficult to watch her go so far away when most of their friends' children were headed to U-Dub or Western, Whitman or Reed. Pacific Northwest kids typically stayed closer to home. They didn't pick schools that were thousands of miles away.

"I'll be home for holidays," she reminded her mother, "and summers, too. It's not like I'll be gone forever."

"I know, sweetheart. Don't worry about us old folks. You worry about you."

They talked a little longer, and then Emma jogged up the stairs in the center of the house, one hand on the wooden railing that lined the wall. They had moved to this house when she was ten, and by now she knew every creaky stair and floorboard like the back of her hand. It was hard to imagine that there were other houses, dorm rooms, apartments that she would grow to know equally as well. Hard to imagine that anyplace else would ever feel like home.

But for now, home still meant her cream-walled room and her window overlooking the Sound, her parents and brother down the hall, the wind off the water carrying with it the scent of salt and seaweed. Her heart was still here, although that wasn't entirely true anymore. Part of it was eight hundred miles away in another city on a bay with a girl who was broken but trying her best not to be. Emma hoped Jamie would give her a chance to help in any way she could. Because even though she understood rationally that she couldn't save anyone who didn't want to be saved, that didn't keep her from wanting to try.