

UNDER THE LIGHTS

Book Six of Girls of Summer

by Kate Christie

Copyright 2021 by Kate Christie. Second Growth Books, Seattle, WA.

All rights reserved. This e-book is licensed for your personal enjoyment only and may not be resold or given away to other people. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, events, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual organizations, persons (living or dead), events, or incidents is purely coincidental.

Chapter One

Jamie blinked as the lights flashed overhead, the screams of the crowd reverberating seemingly from every direction. She couldn't believe that she was actually here, that this was really happening. In front of her, Emma and Jenny both raised their arms triumphantly as they danced in place from side to side. Belatedly, Jamie copied them, aware of the sweat gathering at the collar of her jersey, on her forehead, under each arm. She forced a smile and danced with her teammates in time to the loud music, praying she wouldn't throw up. It wasn't like this was the first noisy crowd she'd ever experienced. For most of this very afternoon, she had been atop a float navigating the skyscraper-lined streets of Manhattan, with cheering crowds all around and close to a ton of confetti floating on the breeze.

But *this*—this was different. Instead of a float out in the open in broad daylight, she was swaying side to side with her teammates on a catwalk that extended from the main stage toward the center of MetLife Stadium, home to the Giants and the Jets. At least she was in the second row, back with Ellie and Ryan who were each waving a giant American flag. Although, come to think of it, she should probably look out for those flags if she didn't want to lose an eye. Ellie and Ryan, like the rest of the team, had been drinking copious amounts of champagne most of the day.

In front of them, next to Jenny, a sequin-bedecked Taylor Swift—*holy shit, Taylor Freaking Swift!*—lifted the World Cup trophy in victory as her fans roared in approval, the catchy beat of the song “Style” nearly drowned out by the cacophony. A moment later, Swift handed the trophy back to a grinning Jenny and lifted her microphone instead.

“How would you like to see the US Women’s Soccer team take a bow?” Swift asked the crowd.

And that was how Jamie found herself executing a bow in her national team jersey and black skinny jeans, hoping she wouldn't fall on her face in front of tens of thousands of Taylor Swift fans. Because, right, she *may* have imbibed excessive amounts of alcohol that day herself.

The flashing lights made it hard to focus—or, again, that might have been the liter of champagne speaking—but fortunately, after letting the crowd wave briefly at the team members while they waved back in time to the music, Swift was soon pulling them all in for a group hug and then leading them back up the catwalk to the safety of backstage. But she didn't simply usher them up the stage; she did so while holding hands with Maddie and Angie, who flanked her on either side.

All Jamie could think was how relieved she was Taylor Swift hadn't tried to hold hands with her and Emma. If that had happened, Jamie was pretty sure she *would* have thrown up.

During a game, she didn't mind being at the center of attention. The Thorns, her professional club, routinely drew twelve or thirteen thousand fans who were passionate about the game, while the national team had sold out their pre-World Cup send-off series along with several of their matches in Canada. But during a game, she could maintain such intense focus that she barely noticed the size of the crowd. She had definitely never felt as exposed playing soccer as she had on stage with Taylor Swift, not even at the World Cup finals the previous weekend.

The previous weekend. Jamie blinked as she followed her teammates backstage. Had it really been only five days since they'd won the World Cup? In that time, Jamie had managed a grand total of fifteen and a half hours of sleep. The whirlwind Emma had warned her about the night they won the World Cup was as intense as it was unrelenting.

Backstage, Emma grabbed her hand and led her away from the rest of the team.

"Are you okay?" she asked, her own face still lit up with excitement as Swift segued into her next song barely twenty feet away.

Jamie ducked her head, poking the toe of her Air Jordan hightops at one of the many giant black cables taped to the stage surface. “I’m fine,” she said, raising her voice to be heard over the reverberating music.

“I can tell,” Emma deadpanned.

Jamie huffed, and then grabbed hold of a metal pole to steady the suddenly trembling stage floor. Or maybe that was just her legs. “I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have to be sorry,” Emma said, squeezing her hand.

“But I am. I mean, why am I the only one who seems to think the celebration is going on longer than the actual tournament?”

Emma laughed. “You’re not the only one. But maybe we should get you home. Or at least, back to the hotel.”

“No,” Jamie whined. “I don’t want to ruin your night.”

“As if you could.”

The look Emma gave her was fond, without a trace of resentment. Or Jamie thought it was, anyway. Her vision wasn’t fully operational.

“We have to fly out early tomorrow,” Emma added. “To be honest, I wouldn’t mind getting some sleep for once.”

Jamie wavered. Sleep did sound incredible... “Are you sure?”

“Of course. Let’s go back and get you sobered up. Otherwise, tomorrow is going to suck, little buddy.”

“Hey!” Jamie straightened from her slump. “Only Britt gets to call me that.”

Britt materialized at her side. “You rang?”

“Dude!” Jamie yelled and swatted her. “Where did you even come from?”

“I’ve been here the whole time.” Britt caught Emma’s eye. “You taking her back to the hotel?”

“As soon as I can find an Uber.”

“Good.” Britt nodded at Emma, who nodded back.

Jamie was about to tell them she was anxious, not blind, when Angie launched herself into their midst. “Holy shit! Isn’t this amazing? Did you guys see Taylor take my hand?”

“Yes, Wang, we saw her take your hand,” Emma replied, placing herself between Angie and Jamie in an unobtrusive move.

Angie didn’t seem to notice, though, which Jamie thought seemed about right. “I swear to god, this is the best day of my whole life!”

“Excuse me?” Maddie said as she joined the small group. “I thought the day I told you I loved you was the best day of your life?”

Angie’s head tilted as she stared off into the distance. Then she grinned at her girlfriend and said, “Nope, definitely today. But only because you’re here with me,” she added, and leaned in to kiss Maddie.

“On that note,” Emma said, tugging Jamie’s hand, “we’re out of here. Have fun, you guys.”

“Wait, what?” Angie demanded, her gaze flying to Jamie. “You’re not bailing on us already, are you, Jamieson?”

“I have a headache,” Emma said, her glare daring Angie to argue.

Challenge accepted, Jamie thought as Angie stared back at them. “Come *on*, you guys! You have to come to the afterparty! It’s going to be *lit*.”

Maddie murmured something in Angie's ear that Jamie suspected included the words "being lit" and "entire problem." Whatever it was, Angie glanced at Jamie, paused, and nodded reluctantly. "All right, fine. We'll see you guys at breakfast—we totally have to talk ESPY outfits before we head home."

ESPY outfits? *Fuck.*

Jamie groaned, but not loud enough to be heard. In the excitement of their *Good Morning America* appearance, the ticker tape parade, and now this concert, she had managed to temporarily forget about the team's invitation to ESPN's annual awards show, set to be broadcast the following week—on live television and streaming into millions of households.

She was pretty sure she was the one with the headache now.

It took longer for Swift's people to lead them out of the concert than it did for the Uber to arrive. The driver's impatient reproach died on his lips as they slid into the back seat of the Prius, his eyes widening as he appeared to recognize them. Jamie slid down on the seat and rested her elbow on the door, hiding her face behind her hand. If only the spinning would stop. She couldn't barf. Or, probably she *could*, but she wouldn't, damn it. Why had she taken that last drag from Angie's flask just before they headed onstage? Except she knew why: to assuage her social anxiety. Playing soccer took her out of her head enough that she didn't feel it. But appearing on morning television, followed by a parade, and topped off by a Taylor Swift concert? Only chemical assistance could take her out of her head enough to get her through those less than ordinary "perks" of their World Cup win.

Emma gave the driver her preferred route before settling back next to Jamie. Finally, peace and quiet. And yet, as the car pulled away from the curb, Jamie's ears struggled to adjust to the sudden lack of loud noise assaulting them from multiple angles. Was this what it meant when people

said their ears were ringing? But instead of a bell, she heard a constant hum, a low-key buzz, as if her senses were struggling to comprehend the abrupt drop in decibels.

“How are you feeling?” Emma asked, her voice thankfully soft.

“Like crap,” Jamie admitted, her own voice low. The sweat that had broken out on her skin while they were onstage had cooled, and now she shivered, her teeth chattering. She couldn’t help it. She couldn’t help any of it. There was nothing she could do to stop the swoop in her stomach, or the fear ticking up her heart rate. Soon, she knew, she wouldn’t be able to breathe, and then her eyes would bug out and she would scrabble at the door handle, needing to *get out*, to *be free*. Just the thought was enough to shorten her inhalations—

“Hey, I’ve got you,” Emma said, pulling her into her side. “Remember how you felt when you scored against Japan?”

Slowly, as if it were a bit rusty, Jamie’s mind conjured up the moment she’d scored against Japan in the World Cup final. When the ball shot into the back of the net, the sound of the crowd had buoyed her into the air, lifting her up instead of pressing in on her. The immersive memory—of exhilaration and pure joy—chased away the fog of her rising anxiety as effectively as a shot of adrenaline, only without the threat of inevitable crash. *She* had done that. *She* had scored in the World Cup final! And next summer, she would have a shot at another gold medal. If all went as planned, she would be an Olympian.

Assuming she didn’t die of anxiety first.

“Yeah,” she said, clearing her throat as she shifted closer to Emma. “I remember. Thanks, Em.”

“Of course. You’re okay,” Emma murmured, pressing a kiss against her temple. “Everything will be all right.”

Jamie wanted to say, *Will it really?* Because last she'd checked, climate change was wreaking havoc across the planet and minorities of all types were still being persecuted on a daily basis pretty much everywhere. But she only sighed and shut her eyes against the lights flashing past the little car.

"I'm sorry," she mumbled again.

"For what?"

"For my gross lack of chill."

Jamie could almost hear Emma's eyes roll. "I told you, it's fine."

"No, it isn't. You love Taylor Swift, and I ruined it for you."

"Did you not hear me the first time? *Nothing* could have ruined tonight for me," Emma said, pulling back to peer down at her. Eyes shining, she waved her free arm about the back seat, apparently encompassing their moment on stage, their singing and dancing teammates, Taylor Swift herself. "I mean, come on, Jamie! Tonight was amazing, and you know everything is better with you. *Especially* when it comes to celebrating our World Cup win."

She had a point, Jamie had to admit as Emma intertwined their fingers and settled back against the seat. There had been plentiful celebrations by now to test Emma's hypothesis, ranging from the third-star ceremony in Vancouver the morning after their win and the congratulatory phone call afterward from President Obama—PRESIDENT OBAMA—to the team's appearance at the Staples Center in Los Angeles the evening they arrived back in the States. Then there was today's ticker tape parade in New York City—the first ever in New York's history for an American women's sports team. Cheering crowds had lined the three-quarters of a mile long section of Broadway known as the Canyon of the Heroes, from Bowling Green Park (established in 1733, according to Emma's guide book) to City Hall Park. People had leaned from windows all along the route, emptying bins of confetti to add to the literal tons of tiny pieces of paper floating through the air.

The team had been spread out across several floats pulled by oversized pickup trucks, with bagpipe bands accompanying their slow progress. At one point, with the World Trade Center memorial only a few blocks away, Jamie had flashed to images of 9/11. But then the float had gone over a bump in the road and Emma had smiled at her, and a moment later she'd heard the crowd chanting the call-out from the World Cup: "I believe! I believe that we! I believe that we just won! I believe that we just won! I BELIEVE THAT WE JUST WON!"

A little while later, Jamie had been sure the parade was almost over as they approached City Hall. But then they'd turned a corner and come face to face with a huge crowd, women and men and little girls in national team gear all cheering just as excitedly as the rest of the fans that had lined the parade route, and Jamie had felt tears threatening to spill over as she gazed out across the sea of human beings. These kids were looking up to them, literally, with joy visibly shining from their faces, knowing that if they worked hard enough, they too could achieve their dreams one day. What a powerful feeling.

Any remaining melancholy wisps had immediately floated away—just as they were doing now, here in the back seat of a Prius racing crosstown to their hotel. The federation had booked the same hotel where they'd stayed during the send-off series before the World Cup, but Jamie kept thinking how much had changed since then, in only the space of a month. So much had shifted, so many old expectations realized and new ones formed...

Be in the moment, she reminded herself now, just as she had done that morning when she'd somehow managed to narrow her focus on the World Cup trophy in the float just ahead. *Be in the moment, and breathe.*

Her tentative focus held until the Prius pulled into the hotel drive. People were lined up outside the entrance with cameras and camera phones, undoubtedly hoping to catch a glimpse of—

well, *them*. Tonight wasn't close to being the end of it, either. There was more to come, from a *Sports Illustrated* photo shoot to the ESPYs, where they would be competing for the top team award. Jamie was beginning to wonder if life would ever go back to normal.

It was only their fifteen minutes of fame, she reminded herself as Emma settled with the driver. Not, like, a year or anything, right? In the meantime, Ellie kept reminding her that all this visibility, all this attention, was only helping legitimize their demands for equal treatment from their bosses at US Soccer. 26.7 million people had tuned into FOX and Telemundo to watch the broadcast of their World Cup final match against Japan, making it the most watched American soccer game in history—women's or men's. The final match had also drawn a larger audience than every NBA game since Game Seven of the 2013 NBA Finals, every Major League Baseball game since Game Seven of the 2011 World Series, and every hockey game since the Canada-United States final in the 2010 Olympics. The eyes of the world were upon them, as the players union rep had reminded them recently, which made now the perfect time to push the federation for equal pay.

As Jamie slid out of the Prius and faced the gauntlet between her and the hotel entrance, it definitely felt like the eyes of the world were upon her and Emma. She didn't check to see if Emma was behind her, concentrating instead on not tripping—a theme of the night, really—as she smiled and waved her way inside.

Emma caught up with her at the elevator bank at one end of the lobby.

“Don't worry about me or anything,” she teased, pressing the elevator button Jamie had somehow forgotten to push.

“I'm sorry,” Jamie said yet again, chewing the inside of her cheek.

Had the fans noticed she was drunk? Had she walked like she was drunk? Would her photo be all over Twitter and Instagram? That wouldn't exactly be new. She couldn't go out for an early

morning cup of tea or a late afternoon walk without someone snapping her picture and putting it online. The comments were mostly positive these days—at least, on the few posts she’d checked.

“It’s fine,” Emma repeated, ushering her into the empty elevator car. “Want to hang out in my room?”

“Can we?” Jamie asked. “I don’t think...”

“We won the World Cup, Jamie. What are they going to do—fire us? And before you say it, need I remind you that *you* scored in the World Cup final, not me? I’d say both of our jobs are pretty safe at this point.”

Which was probably true. The federation had grumbled over Emma’s coming out photo from early June, but the only measurable repercussions had involved the skyrocketing popularity of #Blakewell. Emma had followed up with a photo of the two of them posing together in a mostly empty BC Place, holding the World Cup trophy after their win, gold medals draped around their necks, and their fans had exploded in another frenzy. This week, though, the tenor of some of the comments had changed from supportive and happy to more entitled and demanding. A handful of vocal queer fans were apparently growing impatient for Emma to label herself.

Can’t please all of the people all of the time, as the saying goes.

Still, the guy who had stalked Emma the year before seemed to be staying quiet. Or, at least, Jamie assumed he was. She no longer spent any time on Twitter, which had been strange at first, she and Emma had agreed. But once they got through their initial withdrawal phase, they had both discovered that they were happier and less anxious without the little blue bird in their lives. Their marketing team handled their professional social media while they both kept apprised of family and friends—and important Internet memes—through their private Instagram and Facebook feeds. Jamie spent more time on Insta and Tumblr while Emma preferred Facebook, but they’d turned off

notifications for their social media apps and were religiously sticking to the rules of online engagement that Caroline and Mary Kate—the team’s PR rep and sports psychologist, respectively—had set for them. If Emma’s stalker was making waves, they didn’t know about it. Frankly, they’d agreed, that was so much for the better.

Anyway, the world’s attention would shift elsewhere as soon as they stopped partying, wouldn’t it? Because Jamie assumed they *would* stop partying. Wouldn’t they have to in order to rejoin the NWSL? The league had taken a two-week break during the World Cup, but Colin, Portland’s head coach, was already impatient for the team’s World Cup stars to return. Jamie couldn’t wait for things to settle down into a more normal routine herself.

Except that a return to normalcy meant she and Emma, after being together every day for months, would have to go home to their separate cities.

With that thought in mind, Jamie allowed Emma to lead her down the hotel corridor to the room she shared with Maddie. There, Emma helped her get ready for bed, which included borrowing sleep clothes and drinking most of a bottle of water before settling into the bed farthest from the window. The air conditioner hummed lowly, keeping the hot, humid summer air outside where it belonged, and Jamie arranged herself carefully apart from Emma. The spinning had mostly stopped now, but she still felt slightly ill as she lay in Emma’s bed in her borrowed T-shirt and shorts, sweaty and feverish at once.

Alcohol sucked. She hated it. She was never drinking again.

“You okay?” Emma asked one last time, turning on her side to face Jamie.

“Fine,” Jamie said, forcing a smile.

“It’s okay if you’re not.”

Jamie gazed into Emma's eyes, taking in her freshly scrubbed skin, the hair curling about her face damp from her bedtime routine. She looked tired, but her eyes were clear in a way that Jamie knew her own weren't.

"Does it get any easier?" she asked.

Emma nodded. "For most people, I think. For some, it's not their thing, but they learn how to pace themselves. Go easy on yourself, Jamie. Joining this team just before the World Cup isn't a small thing, and joining it right before *winning* the World Cup? It's okay to be overloaded."

"Right."

Jamie closed her eyes against the understanding in Emma's, against the lights managing to track under the curtains across the room, against the feeling in her chest of—what, exactly? Of wanting to run out of the room and down the hall and out into the night, running and running until she couldn't breathe anymore? She hadn't kicked a soccer ball since the whistle blew on their match against Japan, and she missed it. Missed the release of channeling her anxiety and anger into a ball, missed the release of losing herself in a drill or scrimmage, missed the empty stands at their practice field in Carson where no one was watching her, waiting for her to fail. Because she would fail at some point, or her body would. It always did.

Chill, she told herself. Then she felt Emma lean into her, slowly and carefully, and press a kiss against her forehead. Eyes still closed, Jamie leaned into the contact, savoring the way Emma felt. For a moment, her internal alarm went off, blaring "Team time! Team time!" But she ignored it, and soon it died away entirely, lost in the hum of her blood singing to life at Emma's touch.

Until she belched up alcohol fumes, and then an entirely different internal alarm started up.

Emma pulled back, but she was smiling slightly as she brushed a hand against Jamie's cheek.

"Sleep?"

“Yeah,” she agreed weakly.

“Sweet dreams, sweet girl.”

Jamie closed her eyes again. “Sweet dreams to you, too.”

She heard the rustle of Emma putting in her ear plugs and tugging her eyeshade into place, but she didn’t watch. Instead, she waited for the bed to stop shaking, hoping her dinner and all that damned champagne wouldn’t make a return trip through her esophagus anytime soon. US Soccer might look the other way at them spending the night together—especially if they never knew—but if the hotel charged them for extra cleaning, Fitzzy’s anger would be difficult to avoid. The national team manager had made her feelings on such matters known *very* clearly.

Sleep tugged at her, or maybe it was unconsciousness, but every time she started to slip away from reality, a sound in the hallway startled her, or a car horn in the distance shook her awake. She knew they were safe, knew that Emma had texted Maddie asking her to stay with Angie in Jamie and Angie’s room, but every sound still made her heart rate spike, still jolted her into wakefulness. Every night this week had been the same. Each time she closed her eyes, a bright light seemed to flash against her eyelids, and suddenly she was reliving some recent moment or another. Tonight, she couldn’t escape the Taylor Swift light show. That, or the ticker tape parade, with the sound of bagpipes playing as the pickup truck pulled her float along Broadway in the shadow of the huge buildings rising on either side of the street.

Another flash, and she was seeing the 9/11 Memorial & Museum, difficult to miss from the parade route. Amy Rupert, the legendary ’99er who was now an attorney, had spoken to the team in June about how sports had helped the country unite and start to heal in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. She would know—while she was captain, the national team had been scheduled to play Japan, of all opponents, in Columbus, Ohio, in the Nike US Women’s Cup on the night of 9/11.

That match never took place, but sports teams—including the national team—ended up rallying around their communities and bringing the nation together in the aftermath of the attacks. Amy had led them on a tour of the Memorial shortly before their final send-off match, and Jamie didn't think she would ever forget the chills from that visit.

Different from the chills she'd experienced tonight, of course.

I'm never drinking again, she swore to herself once more, eyes closed so tightly that tiny pinpricks of light burst against her eyelids.

Chapter Two

As the stretch limo navigated the downtown Los Angeles traffic, Emma checked her make-up in the compact she'd stashed in the purse one of the federation's stylists had given her. It was the smallest clutch she'd ever carried, barely large enough to hold the compact, a tube of lipstick, and a hotel key card. Regretfully, her mace hadn't fit. Then again, seeing as they were about to spend the evening schmoozing with a horde of sexist, patronizing male athletes, that was probably just as well.

Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed Angie holding her flask out to Jamie. "Come on, James," the diminutive midfielder was saying. "Just take a sip. It'll help, I promise."

Jamie's glance flicked to Emma, who was self-aware enough to recognize how badly she wanted to smack the flask out of Angie's hand. Jamie had been so miserable after the Taylor Swift concert the week before that she'd vowed never to touch alcohol again. But the ESPYs, the live awards show that gathered top American athletes together to celebrate the past year in sports, was considerably more public than even a Taylor Swift concert. In fact...

"Give me that," Emma said, lowering the compact and reaching for the flask. She took a swig, tasting cool metal and—was that wine? And here she'd thought all flasks were required by law to carry whiskey. "Is that pinot noir?"

Angie nodded. "Maddie has good taste in wine."

That she did. Her taste in women, on the other hand... Though in truth, Angie was growing on Emma. Despite her outward pretensions of assholery, the U-23er was a kind and caring friend. Sometimes. When she wasn't tempting Jamie with alcohol.

Of course, now that Angie was a World Cup champion, Emma should probably stop thinking of her and her cohort—including Jamie—as U-23ers.

Nah.

Emma started to hand the flask back to Angie, but Jamie stopped her. “If it’s only wine...?” She made it sound like a question, eyes still on Emma as if seeking permission.

“Totally your call,” Emma said as neutrally as she could manage.

Jamie hesitated only briefly before taking the flask and swallowing a generous pull.

On the seat across from them, Ellie paused in her conversation with Phoebe, her co-captain, to half-frown at Emma. And yes, Emma understood that Jamie plus alcohol was a dangerous equation, but Emma was her girlfriend, not her mother. Besides, the ESPYs were scary, especially tonight, especially for Jamie. Caitlyn Jenner was being given the Arthur Ashe Courage Award—Ellie would actually be the one introducing her—and Jamie would likely be one of only a handful of people in the room tonight who identified as trans. Emma couldn’t blame her for wanting to dull the sharp edge of her anxiety.

As they neared the LA Live complex, Emma took a deep breath, trying to maintain a positive outlook. From experience, she knew that the next three hours would be markedly different from their recent World Cup victory celebrations. The ESPY Awards show was like a giant frat party, one where attendees arrived sober and dressed to the nines, a comedian host was paid to mock members of the crowd, and cameras in every direction recorded the goings-on for millions of viewers at home. The plethora of testosterone-drunk male athletes and their teams would of course be centered (this was ESPN, after all), and while there would be many amazing women athletes present, they would be vastly outnumbered by football, basketball, baseball, and hockey players. As a professional athlete, Emma was accustomed to feeling powerful. But at previous ESPY Awards shows, she’d felt small and even, at times, intimidated—*not* a feeling she enjoyed.

It would be one thing if she thought the national team actually had a shot at the team award, but ESPYs were voted on by fans, and the USWNT was up against a bevy of heavyweights: the Golden State Warriors, who had won the NBA Championship earlier in the year for the first time since 1975; the Stanley Cup-winning Chicago Blackhawks; the NFL Champion (much as it still pained her to say) New England Patriots; the perennial powerhouse and National Champion three years running UConn women's basketball team; and the Ohio State football team. It seemed like too much to think the national team had a chance in the fans' minds against such talent, even if they had brought home the World Cup title and earned themselves a New York City ticker tape parade.

The actual winning/losing portion of the ESPYs wasn't the worst, though. It was sitting through the opening monologue waiting to see if the host would make fun of you or your teammates in some obnoxious, politically incorrect way. Being roasted publicly was a sign of respect, Emma had heard people claim. But for women and queer people who played a sport regularly ridiculed by fans of the big four American sports, a public roast carried a more ominous tone than it might for straight, cisgender male athletes entrenched at the top of the American sports pyramid.

Tonight's host would be actor Joel McHale, and Emma didn't have very high hopes. Rob Riggle—another middle-aged white actor—had hosted in 2012, the year the national team took home the gold in London, and Emma still remembered how he'd pointed out Danica Patrick for the sole purpose of asking her to stop making commercials for Go Daddy because his wife was pissed at him for buying up useless domain names. Hilarious—or, at least, the mostly male crowd had thought so. The only time Riggle had referenced an actual women's sports team had been to make fun of a lower tier men's NBA team for not being as good as the Baylor women's basketball team. Riggle may have intended the comparison as a backhanded compliment to Britney Griner and her teammates, but it came off as a typical playground put-down of male athletes for “playing like a girl.”

Another less-than-stellar moment of the 2012 monologue had been Riggle's assertion that Rob Gronkowski was a hero and that all men wanted to be like him because he had taken a public photo with a porn star. Reducing women to sex objects and comparing them to second-rate male athletes wasn't exactly welcoming to the women athletes in the crowd. Admittedly, it was entertaining to see celebrities and fellow athletes all glammed up, but Emma had vowed that night not to return to the ESPYs.

And yet, here they were in one of the limos US Soccer had booked for them, slowing to join the line for the red carpet. Some contractual obligations couldn't be avoided.

Attending the ESPYs offered strategic significance, too. Athletes usually only had a narrow window to use their fame to promote their favorite causes—or, say, their own sport. While the limelight was theirs, they could and should try to make a difference. That was why Ellie had volunteered to introduce Caitlyn Jenner tonight: to lend her own current status as hero athlete of the moment to Caitlyn Jenner's goal of raising awareness of and respect for trans people. Emma wasn't sure how Ellie identified gender-wise; they'd never really talked about it. But the team captain was visibly gender nonconforming, and standing up on this particular stage as an out lesbian dressed in a men's suit to introduce the most famous transgender athlete in the world definitely sent a message.

The theater wasn't far from the outdoor stage where they'd attended the rally the day they returned from the World Cup, but to Emma it felt as if a month had passed instead of only ten days. At that first event, the national team had been the main draw, and they had taken the stage in jeans and matching World Cup Champion T-shirts. Any make-up or styling had been minimal, unlike tonight when the federation had rented a hotel suite so that hair, make-up, and clothing stylists could turn them into nearly unrecognizable versions of themselves. Emma liked the dress the stylist had helped her pick out, red and strappy and nicely emphasizing her lats and tris, and Jamie looked

amazing in her suit with a cream-colored jacket and an open-necked shirt beneath. She'd said she might wear a tie, but in the end had decided against it. No need to incite the "I thought it was a women's team" crowd on social media any more than tonight's show already would. It wasn't just people on social media who Jamie was nervous about, Emma knew. On one hand, the ESPYs took place in LA, where almost everyone knew someone queer or trans. But at the same time, the crowd would feature athletes whose sports were not known for tolerance. There was a reason not a single male athlete in any of America's major leagues had come out publicly during their playing career.

Before they could brave the audience, though, they would have to run the gamut of the red carpet.

As they slid out of the limo, Emma glanced back at Jamie. "Ready?"

"No," Jamie said, and then she grinned, her expression more forced than genuine. "But let's do this."

Right away Emma realized that tonight wasn't going to be a repeat of 2012. Back then, the photographers jockeying for position behind velvet rope barriers hadn't cared much about the national team. Now they visibly perked up, calling out commands in unison that made it difficult for Emma to parse what they were saying. Some voices carried above the others, however: "All together! Tighter, ladies! Squeeze together!" The team members did as they were asked, flashes popping all around them. Emma blinked against the light and sound, grateful she didn't get migraines like Maddie. Speaking of... A few steps away in the line of soccer players, Maddie was displaying what Emma recognized as a fake smile, bare shoulders in her A-line gown visibly tense. Emma caught her eye, and they exchanged a loaded glance.

Right. Emma couldn't wait for this part to be over, either.

Once the photographers decided they'd had enough of group shots, they loudly dismissed anyone they didn't deem important—which was most of the team, as it turned out. As Phoebe led the other players away, Emma wished she were with them. But she and Maddie had been asked (ordered, really) to pose separately, and Angie and Jamie had paused to wait for them.

Gritting her teeth when her turn came, she forced a smile, turning this way and that as directed. To her surprise, the call rang out, soon echoed by a half dozen voices: “Jamie Maxwell, join her! That's it! Pose for us, girls!”

Girls? Emma turned to Jamie, who approached her a tad uncertainly. Emma pulled her closer, forcing another bright smile as they posed together. Blakewell fans would apparently be receiving a happy surprise this evening.

When it was Maddie's turn, the photographers called her “Sweetie” and bossed her around shamelessly, just as they had Emma.

“Jesus,” Emma heard Angie mutter angrily to Jamie. “They're treating her like a piece of meat.”

When an overweight white man in a wrinkled suit told Maddie to “push out your chest, honey,” Emma was certain Angie was going to lose her shit. But as Angie stepped forward, fists clenched, several photographers called eagerly for her to join Maddie. After a moment, Angie complied, her anger seeming to fade as she posed with her girlfriend on the red carpet, all confidence and swagger in her black tuxedo jacket paired with bedazzled black capris.

“They're jeweled, not bedazzled,” Angie had insisted in the limo.

They were definitely bedazzled.

Lisa and Andre, her fiancé, got the same treatment from the photographers, as did Ellie, Jodie, Jenny, and her date, a longtime friend of her older brother's. Finally, though, an NFL star stole the

photographers' attention, and they were through the gauntlet. While Jamie detailed her irritation over the male gaze, Angie suggested circling back around so they could teach the photographer who had ordered Maddie to push out her chest a lesson.

"I don't think we want to make those headlines tonight," Maddie said, linking arms with Angie and tugging her toward the theater's entrance. "Besides, he's an insignificant jackass who doesn't deserve your energy."

Angie tossed her head. "Whatever. I'd go back there and kick his ass if I had other shoes on." Her low heels were bedazzled—*Jeweled, you guys!*—too.

"Right, Scrappy Doo," Jamie said. "You would totally clean the sidewalk with that two-hundred-and-fifty-pound dude if you were wearing your Doc Martens."

"He was two forty at most, and I totally could have taken him."

"I doubt he's the only douchebag we're going to run into here," Jamie said. "Maybe you should let me hold onto your flask for a little while."

Angie started to protest, but then, to Emma's surprise, she handed the wine over. "You're probably right."

Maybe she really was growing up.

Jamie had just started to tuck the small bottle into an inside pocket of her jacket when a woman's voice sounded from behind them. "Nice flask, US soccer ladies."

Jamie glanced back, frowning (probably at the term "ladies," Emma thought), but then she froze, eyes even wider than they'd been the night they'd met Taylor Swift. Emma followed her gaze and suddenly realized why the voice had sounded familiar: a certain brunette actor of *Pitch Perfect* fame was smiling at them, stylish in a little black dress with a hipster dude on her arm. As Jamie gurgled incoherently, Emma quickly returned the surprisingly petite woman's smile.

“Hi!” she said, elbowing Jamie in what she hoped was a subtle manner. “It’s really nice to meet you. We’re total fans.”

“The feeling is mutual,” the former Broadway star said. “Congrats on the World Cup. I don’t even like sports, and I watched the whole tournament. You guys are the reason I’m here, actually—I was hoping I might run into you.”

“You were? I mean, thanks,” Emma said, noticing Maddie and Angie backpedaling to join in the first celebrity encounter of the evening.

“It’s my flask,” Angie announced, and then winced slightly as if she couldn’t quite believe she had just said that.

The actress nodded at her. “Well, as I said, it’s a very nice flask. Angie, right? And Maddie?”

“That’s right,” Angie said, recovering enough to offer one of her characteristic smirks that Emma felt certain she must practice in the mirror.

The *Pitch Perfect* star had to be an actual fan if she recognized them all made up as they were. Emma could barely believe it, and Jamie, she was pretty sure, had yet to take a breath in her fave’s presence.

“It’s nice to meet you,” Maddie said, rolling her eyes slightly at her girlfriend.

“You, too. By the way, this is Rich. Rich, say hello to the US soccer ladies.”

“Hi,” the bearded hipster said, smiling.

“So, Jamie,” the actress said. “I hear you’re a fan of Beca and Chloe.”

Jamie stared at her some more. “What? Oh, right. Yes! But how did you—um, what?”

Emma bit back a laugh at Jamie’s current inability to breathe *or* think.

“Twitter knows all,” the actress said, and winked exaggeratedly.

“Which is why most of us have someone else run our social media accounts,” Maddie put in.

“Do you really?” The *PP* star looked intrigued, and for a while the conversation revolved around trolls and stalkers. When Angie mentioned the delusional fan in St. Louis who’d actually believed he was dating Jenny, the actress commented, “I know actors experience this sort of thing, but athletes? That seems insane.”

“Don’t you remember Monica Seles?” Rich put in. “You know, the tennis player who got stabbed by the guy in the crowd?”

“Oh, right,” his date said. “I do remember hearing about that. Though not at the time. I was more into musical theater than organized sports back then.”

“Back then,” Rich said, snorting slightly.

She elbowed him, and then shrugged. “Fair.”

“Jamie dated a pitch in college,” Angie volunteered, grinning as Jamie shot her a decided scowl.

“Ah,” the *PP* star said. “Now it all makes sense.”

The conversation skewed toward the nerdy joyousness of acapella music, and the actress was just beginning to share the singing history of her *Pitch Perfect* co-stars when the in-house event announcer let everyone know that the awards program was about to start.

“That’s our cue,” the *PP* star said. “Good luck tonight! I voted for you guys, and so did the rest of the cast, if that helps.”

“Wow, thanks so much,” Jamie said, finally sounding more like herself.

“You’re welcome. Don’t give up on Bechloe just yet,” she added, squeezing Jamie’s arm in a move that almost made Emma jealous. Or, no, it totally did.

Jamie bit her lip. “Oh, yeah?”

“There’s always *Pitch Perfect Three*,” the Hollywood star said conspiratorially. And then she was waving slightly as she and Rich headed off arm in arm to find their seats.

Beside Emma, Jamie waved back dazedly, still appearing to be frozen to the spot. Emma’s brief jealousy faded, and she laughed and tugged on Jamie’s arm, following Maddie and Angie to the nearest auditorium entrance.

“Oh. My. God,” Jamie murmured as an usher pointed them to their seats near the front of the auditorium. Emma had never sat this close to the stage at the ESPYs. But then again, she’d never been on a team nominated for Best Team of the Year, either. “Did that really happen? Did she actually say she was only here to meet *us*?”

“She did,” Emma said, smiling fondly at Jamie even as she felt the crowd’s eyes on them. She definitely didn’t like sitting this close to the stage.

Angie leaned across Emma and held up her hand for a high five, which Jamie responded to promptly even in her dazed state. “Best celebrity encounter ever!” Angie whispered loudly.

“Taylor Swift literally brought us out on stage,” Maddie said.

Angie shrugged. “I said what I said.”

It was Jamie’s turn to lean across Emma for another high five, nearly squealing as she did, “She said *Pitch Perfect Three*!”

Angie’s grin looked like it hurt as she smacked Jamie’s palm. “I know!”

“All right, high five club, that’s enough,” Emma said. But she was smiling. Maybe meeting her favorite Hollywood star would keep Jamie and Angie distracted from the shitshow the opening monologue was guaranteed to be.

Afterward, the only good thing Emma had to say about Joel McHale’s monologue was a Minnesota-ism her mother was fond of repeating: *Could have been worse*. He opened with a joke about Russell Wilson handing off the mic instead of throwing it (ouch) and transitioned into a tasteless crack about jockey Victor Espinoza. But then the tenor seemed to improve slightly as McHale started down the list of winning athletes and teams in attendance—including the US women’s national soccer team.

“Team USA took home the first Women’s World Cup since...” McHale paused as the audience gave a huge cheer and the cameras focused in on Ellie and Phoebe smiling proudly, only to add, “...since we started caring about it eleven days ago, haha. Thank you, ladies.”

Emma had been expecting the punchline, so she only rolled her eyes. But beside her, Angie sat up straighter. “What the actual fuck?” she said loud enough that Emma wondered if it might have been caught on video. The midfielder leaned forward to catch Jamie’s eye.

“Seriously, what the hell?” Jamie whispered back furiously.

Emma wasn’t sure which was worse: the denial of the national team’s current popularity among American sports fans or McHale’s choice to address them as “ladies.”

“Means so much coming from a washed-up forty-something practice player,” Jenny snarked, voice carrying. She had looked up McHale’s athletic history on the flight back from New York—probably knowing as Emma did that he would most likely take a pot shot at the team—and had shared Wikipedia’s description of his walk-on practice team days on the 1990s U-Dub football squad.

At this, Jamie snorted, and even Angie smiled reluctantly. Tension broken, the team snickered amongst themselves, egos momentarily soothed by the reminder that their host was not an actual athlete. Besides, their team had gotten the biggest cheer so far. For a moment, Emma imagined

McHale eating his words if Team USA were to win the ESPY. But then she remembered who they were up against and dismissed the notion. It was ESPN. There was no way they were going to win.

The Best Team Award was usually announced near the end of the program, which meant they had to sit through nearly three hours of other awards. In among the onslaught of celebrities like Rachel McAdams, Halle Berry, Britney Spears, and Jake Gyllenhaal handing out the usual prizes—best male and female college athletes; best NBA and WNBA players; best NFL, MLB, and NHL players; and so on—were the special awards. Many of these brought the crowd to tears: Robin Roberts, who the national team had hung out with on Media Day, spoke about her good friend from SportsCenter who had lost his battle to cancer six months earlier. A little later came the heartbreaking speech by the Bengals player who accepted the Jimmy V Perseverance Award on behalf of his young daughter, who was courageously fighting cancer. The Best Moment Award was conferred posthumously on a college basketball player who'd died of a brain tumor only a matter of months after her first NCAA game. Finally, a US Army veteran who had played basketball at Notre Dame appeared to accept the Pat Tillman Award for Service—and to challenge the audience members to ask themselves what they wanted their legacy to be.

As the applause for the veteran died out, Jamie leaned in and squeezed Emma's hand.

“How're you doing?”

“Good,” Emma said, returning the pressure. She didn't pull her hand away even though her instincts told her to. She could hold her girlfriend's hand in public, damn it. She *could*. But when Jamie pulled her hand back, Emma had to admit that she breathed easier.

Small steps, she reminded herself. As long as she kept moving forward, that was the goal. Anyway, it wasn't like she had to face the level of vitriol and opposition that some people did—for

example, Caitlyn Jenner, who had come out as transgender only a few months earlier and was now getting ready to address the ESPYs crowd.

Beside her, Jamie chewed her thumb nail as Ellie introduced the winner of the Arthur Ashe Courage Award. Emma resisted the urge to take Jamie's hand again, focusing instead first on Ellie and then on the video that played behind her. Before now, Emma had known nothing about Jenner's coming out story. Emma wasn't a reality TV fan, and although she couldn't quite claim like Jamie to never have seen an episode of *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, she definitely hadn't seen more than a few. The video didn't focus on Jenner's public life, though. Rather, the narrator described the famous athlete and television personality's inner life, specifically the secret she had carried for decades: that although she had been assigned male at birth, she was a woman. Now, at last, with the support of her mother, daughter, and sister, she had decided to come out after realizing she could use her platform to help others by promoting awareness and understanding of transgender people's lives.

Emma glanced at Jamie's profile. A desire to help others—that certainly sounded familiar.

As Lifehouse sang in the background, "No more running, no more hiding, no more hurting, no more crying," Jamie turned her head. "What?"

"Nothing," Emma assured her, and reached for her hand again because no more hiding sounded really, really good.

It had been a month and a half since Emma had posted the photo of herself kissing Jamie on the cheek, and in that time, she'd come to realize that coming out hadn't much changed her life other than making her feel lighter, clearer, less anxious about who might see them together. She had already been out to the people who mattered, and she had never actively tried to hide who she was. The only outward change was that queer fans now regularly expressed their gratitude to her for

being more open and visible. She wasn't sure why she'd worried so much—except that wasn't entirely true. Being told to buy a gun in case an online stalker decided to take things from virtual to real life was enough to make anyone paranoid about sharing their private life with the public.

Emma suspected that a similar fear had prevented Caitlyn Jenner from coming out publicly. That, and possibly losing the love and support of her family members. But she had been lucky on that front. In the video, Jenner's mother pronounced that she wasn't losing anything but rather gaining a closer relationship with her child. And then the video ended, and as the audience applauded enthusiastically, Jenner—looking stunning in a white gown that Emma had heard Angelina Jolie's stylist had picked out—kissed her mother, climbed the steps to the stage on Ellie's arm, and positioned herself before the microphone at center stage.

It was a good speech, equal parts humorous and serious, though Emma could have done without the comment about the “ladies” of the US soccer team cleaning up nicely. She didn't need the reminder that while they were here to be celebrated for their athletic skill, they were still being judged on their outward appearance. On their femininity, really. Male athletes didn't have to deal with the same attitude; she couldn't imagine McHale commenting on how nice LeBron James looked in his tux. But put a woman athlete in even the most basic of little black dresses and the “compliments” about her appearance practically drowned out the discussion of her athletic prowess.

Still, Emma had to admit that Jenner's words moved and impressed her. Jenner seemed confident up on stage, as was befitting someone who had once been labeled “world's greatest athlete,” and she did her best to educate her audience on the experiences of people that Emma was fairly certain most of them had only ever mocked. Whereas Ellie's introduction had focused on the issues that transgender people face, Jenner's speech got personal. Each time she shared a story of a

transgender American who had been murdered or committed suicide, Jamie gave a low sigh, and Emma squeezed her hand.

Jenner talked about the power of the spotlight, too. Attention could be overwhelming, she said, but with attention comes responsibility. In the case of athletes, what they said and did was observed and absorbed by millions of people, especially impressionable young people. In her case, Jenner felt the responsibility to tell her story, to keep learning, to try to change how trans people are viewed and treated, to promote the simple but powerful idea of acceptance. Emma and Jamie both nodded as Jenner asked those watching to join her and make acceptance one of their goals, too.

And then Jenner did something that Emma thought was brilliant: She compared the effort required to complete her gender transition to the effort required to master a sport. She said she knew how the people attending the ESPYs respected hard work, training, and going through something difficult to achieve an outcome they desired. As a decathlete, Jenner had trained hard and competed harder. But her transition, she told the crowd, was more difficult than anything she'd ever experienced, and the same was true for many other trans people. For that reason alone, she told the quiet audience, trans people deserve respect. From respect grows compassion and empathy, she added, and Emma found herself nodding along again.

After thanking her family and those in the trans community who had come before her, Jenner challenged the audience one more time. If they wanted to make fun of her or doubt her intentions, that was fine. She could take a little bullying. She had been an accomplished athlete for much of her life, so they weren't going to hurt her. But all the young trans kids out there in the process of discovering who they were—the thousands of kids who were finding their true selves—they shouldn't *have* to take it, Jenner said, gazing solemnly around the auditorium.

“Exactly,” Jamie said, clenching the hand Emma wasn’t holding while the crowd applauded noisily.

Somehow, Emma had a feeling it was more the Hollywood “elite” driving the spontaneous roar of approval.

At the end of the speech, the crowd rose to give Jenner a standing ovation. As she stood up, Emma glanced around at the football, basketball, hockey, and baseball players clapping without much enthusiasm, surrounded by Hollywood celebrities whistling and cheering in genuine support of Jenner and, presumably, other trans people. This was how change happened. Some people had to be shamed into not being assholes, and Emma didn’t mind doing the shaming. Caitlyn Jenner, she suspected, probably didn’t mind, either.

As Jenner returned to her seat, Emma watched in surprise as half the crowd, still murmuring amongst themselves, headed for the exit.

“What the hell?” Jamie whispered while McHale reminded everyone there were still more awards to hand out.

“Bathroom break?” Emma suggested.

“More like a bar break,” Angie said, leaning in. “That was awesome, wasn’t it?”

Jamie slapped the hand she’d extended. “Totally.”

With attention comes responsibility. Those words echoed in Emma’s mind long after Caitlyn Jenner’s speech had ended—probably because it felt like a continuation of a conversation she and Jamie circled back to frequently. Their team had just won the first World Cup for US Soccer since 1999, which meant their usual platform had grown tremendously. The previous generation of American women’s soccer champions had used their platform to promote women’s soccer, and

Emma, of course, wanted to do the same. But wasn't there an opportunity here to promote issues and ideas that transcended sports? Couldn't they set their sights higher?

The goal of the SheBelieves campaign they'd started in the run-up to the World Cup had been to empower girls and young women to achieve their goals, both on the pitch and off, but US Soccer had tightly controlled the tone and content of the campaign, preventing anything that could be remotely political from being highlighted. What would their legacy be? What would Emma's legacy be? Maybe Jamie was right. Maybe she should use her platform to advocate for bisexual and pansexual people, the same way Caitlyn Jenner was using hers to try to make things better for the trans community. Emma's visibility probably wouldn't get much higher than it was right now—unless they won the 2019 World Cup, of course. But that tournament was a long way away. For now, she would try to enjoy the current moment.

Well, maybe not the *current* moment. But the ESPYs would be over soon.

Enjoying the night became much more probable a little while later when Brett Favre and Vince Vaughn took the stage to present the Best Team Award. Emma squeezed Jamie's hand tightly as Vaughn opened the envelope and announced, "And the ESPY goes to... US Women's Soccer!"

For a moment, Emma didn't move. Then Maddie, Angie, and Jamie were pulling her into the aisle and up to the stage, buoyed by a wave of applause and cheers. She couldn't believe it. They had won. They had actually won the ESPY award for Best Team.

Later, she didn't remember Ellie's speech or whatever words Phoebe Banks shared. She didn't remember the faces in the front row or the music playing in the background. She only remembered the brightness of the spotlights and the cluster of her glammed-up teammates as they stared, stunned, out at the clapping and whistling athletes and celebrities, half of whom had probably had

never even heard of them before a few months ago. Emma had often thought people threw around the term “life-changing” too casually, but the past ten days had been just that.

As Ellie’s speech ended and the crowd cheered for them one last time, Emma wished Joel McHale had been on stage to hand them their award. But there was always the after-party to rub in their win. Emma, after all, had never pretended to be a gracious winner. She faked it for the fans and the press, but behind the scenes at the ESPYs? Not a chance. She was pretty sure her teammates felt the same way. They might be different people with competing goals and values, but a love of winning was something they all shared.

The after-party really was going to be lit, she thought as she descended the stairs, Jamie right behind her. The fans had voted *them* the Best Team, and Tom Brady and the Patriots could suck it.