

*The  
Game  
Can't  
Love  
You  
Back*

*The  
Game  
Can't  
Love  
You  
Back*



KAROLE COZZO

*Swoon* READS  
NEW YORK

A SWOON READS BOOK

An imprint of Feiwel and Friends and Macmillan Publishing Group, LLC  
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010

THE GAME CAN'T LOVE YOU BACK. Copyright © 2018 by Karole Cozzo. All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America.

Our books may be purchased in bulk for promotional, educational, or business use. Please contact your local bookseller or the Macmillan Corporate and Premium Sales Department at (800) 221-7945 ext. 5442 or by e-mail at [MacmillanSpecialMarkets@macmillan.com](mailto:MacmillanSpecialMarkets@macmillan.com).

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.  
ISBN 9781250163899 (hardcover) / ISBN 9781250163882 (ebook)

Book design by Danielle Mazzella di Bosco  
First edition, 2018

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

[swoonreads.com](http://swoonreads.com)

For all my fellow feisty girls

## **ELECTRICAL FIRE DESTROYS GYM, SENIOR WING OF FARMINGTON SOUTH HIGH SCHOOL**

*Staff Reporter*

In a fortunate turn of events, Farmington South High School was closed for winter break when an electrical fire broke out at approximately nine o'clock Tuesday morning, and no staff, students, or family members were present at the time. The fire raged for over an hour before it was contained, ultimately destroying the gym and senior hallway of the building. Investigators report that the fire is being attributed to a wiring system compromised by age and wear.

Farmington South High School, originally the sole high school within the district, was slated for renovations at the close of the school year, which were scheduled to run the entirety of next school year as well. However, in light of the fire, students will be absorbed by Farmington East High School for the remainder of the current school year, effective January 4.

This announcement from the superintendent, Dr. Gerald Coyle, was met with concern and disappointment, especially from members of the Farmington South senior class and members of sports teams that are midseason. While sports that are currently in season will continue to represent Farmington South, spring sports athletes will also be absorbed by Farmington East teams.

“Our hearts go out to the students who will have their lives, academic plans, and extracurricular activities disrupted by this event,” Superintendent Coyle said on Wednesday evening. “However, I urge everyone to remember that while Farmington has been operating with two high schools, at heart we are one community, and I know we will all come together to support the students from Farmington South as they cope with the loss of their school earlier than anticipated.”

The superintendent announced that Farmington South students will receive their class schedules in the mail prior to school recommencing in January, and that school staff is working overtime to rework the existing Farmington East schedule to accommodate the influx of new students.

*Saturday, December 31*

Dear Superintendent Coyle:

On behalf of Farmington South varsity athletes, I'm writing to ask for your reconsideration of the decision to integrate the Farmington athletic teams for the upcoming spring season. We understand that this will put somewhat of a strain on resources and practice facilities available at Farmington East, but we are willing to be flexible and understanding if allowed to continue to represent the Farmington South Bulldogs for the remainder of the school year.

For many of us, the bulldog is more than an emblem we wear on our uniforms—it is a source of pride and a tradition of excellence that we are passionate about upholding. We have been asked to adjust to many sudden changes, and being allowed to keep our teams together would go a long way in terms of bolstering our spirits at this time.

To show my level of commitment to this effort, I have spent the last twenty-four hours of my winter break driving around the community, collecting signatures from 152 fellow student athletes in support of this petition, which are included below. We are willing to do whatever it takes to remain Bulldogs, and we sincerely hope you understand our feelings at this time, and will reconsider what seems to be the “easy” decision to collapse the teams for the spring season. Not only are team titles, personal awards, and scholarships for graduating athletes on the line, our

very identity as Bulldogs is being stripped away. We beg  
you to rethink and rework this.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Eve Marshall". The script is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of "Eve" and "Marshall" being capitalized and prominent.

Eve Marshall

Varsity Soccer—Cocaptain

Varsity Basketball—Cocaptain

Varsity Baseball

National Honor Society—Treasurer

Peer Tutor

Spanish Club

Bulldogs Go Green Club

Mock Trial

Future Business Leaders of America

Choral Club



*Monday, January 2*

Dear Miss Marshall:

Thank you for your thoughtful, well-written letter on behalf of your fellow student athletes—it is a testament to the intelligence and spirit that students from Farmington South will bring to their new school tomorrow!

However, unfortunately, I am unable to grant your request that Farmington South athletes be able to continue as separate teams for the spring season. In considering facilities, transportation, staffing, and scheduling with the schools coming together, it is simply not possible.

I assure all Farmington South athletes that you will find your rightful place on Farmington East Pirates teams, and that these teams will be even stronger when you come together. I ask you to keep an open mind and consider the benefits of our teams joining.

I wish you all the best in this transition. I'm certain you will rise to the occasion.

Go Pirates!

Kindly,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Dr. Coyle", with a stylized initial "D" and a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

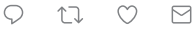
Dr. Gerald Coyle  
Superintendent, Farmington Area School District



**Eve**  
@EveM#13Bulldogs



**You've got to be kidding me. #BS**



2 Jan



**Eve**  
@EveM#13Bulldogs



**#NeveraPirate**



2 Jan



**Eve**  
@EveM#13Bulldogs



**#Bulldog4Life**



2 Jan

**Two months later . . .**

# Chapter 1

March 1

## Eve

**I** 'm seeing stars.

I wake up at six forty-five a.m. and hazy early morning sunbeams illuminate my sheer curtains, but after my eyes adjust to the light, I'm still seeing stars.

Three smaller stars shoot out from the marble base of the trophy, aspiring to reach the bigger, central star they frame, the one that's engraved with a golden basketball. The trophy is draped in the net from the championship game. The W was a team effort, and some might say the net should be displayed with the big team trophy at school. But most people would say the net belongs to me, so here it is.

I smile, the same smile I've woken with for the past week, since the trophy came home with me. My trophy spent the first night on the pillow beside my head, but now it's in its permanent

home so I can wake to the sight of it every morning. *State champions*. It has a damn fine ring to it.

My gaze drifts to the left of the trophy, coming to rest on the framed certificate commemorating my selection to the All-County Girls' Soccer First Team in the fall. EVE MARSHALL, FARMINGTON SOUTH, JUNIOR, 5'8", FORWARD. Not as newsworthy as a state championship, but the best I could hope for. Offense wins games; defense wins championships. And on the soccer field, I didn't have the defense to back me up and take us all the way. A familiar sense of satisfaction fills my chest as I look at my name. I don't say it out loud, but maybe I prefer individual accolades anyway. I was pumped I'd been recognized as an individual, at least.

And then my gaze drifts right, past the stars, to the empty spot I'd reserved on my shelf. Before, a Cy Young trophy ending up there was inevitable, but now . . . My smile disappears as I grind my molars together. Stupid fire. Stupid Dr. Coyle and heartless administrative decision-making. They've effed up everything.

I whip my covers back, my feet hit the cold wood floor, and I storm into the bathroom for a quick shower. My thick, long dark hair is so routinely plaited into two French braids to keep it out of my face, it could probably braid itself by now, and it stays in place despite the shower.

Then, feeling subversive—and ready, willing, and able to show it—I tug a Farmington South Bulldogs hoodie over my head and pull on a pair of black sweatpants. My sneakers are the only clothing I put any time into selecting. Studying all eleven pairs of Nikes, I finally select the black-and-fluorescent-green Cross Bionics. They're badass. Superhero colors.

After bounding down the stairs, I'm in and out of the kitchen in a flash, grabbing a Clif Bar from the pantry and a bottle of Minute Maid from the fridge. Marcella's already behind the wheel of the cheery red Jetta parked in the driveway next door. She's bobbing her head, shiny brown hair gyrating right along with her, and her lips are moving. Taylor Swift. I inhale a deep breath. I just *know* it's Taylor Swift.

I sling my backpack onto my shoulders and cross the narrow patch of grass that separates our houses. As I climb into the passenger seat, she quickly swipes her index finger across the face of her iPhone to silence the music, but not before I get a glimpse of the cover art on the screen, a wild mass of blond curls and red lips. Swifty. Knew it.

"Good morning, Eve," she greets me.

I glance at Marcella's colorful outfit. Mustard wool miniskirt, tight red sweater worn over a shirt that she'd referred to as "chambray" when I'd questioned if jean shirts were really in style outside of Nashville. She should look like a walking advertisement for hot dog condiments, but somehow, on Marcella, it works. It always works. "Why are you so fancy today?" I ask.

"It's not fancy, it's classy. There's a difference." She gives me a once-over and scrunches her face up. "Why are you so unfancy? You look like you just rolled out of bed."

"Look at my face." I give her my death stare and toss my bag onto the floor with more force than necessary. "Does it look like I'm in the mood?"

Marcella shrugs once and backs out of the driveway. I'm pretty sure she knows better than to take my moods personally.

For the record, probably the only, and I mean *only*, reasons Marcella and I became best friends are (1) we were born exactly

one week apart, and (2) we have lived next door to each other our whole lives. There's no undoing a friendship that was an entire childhood in the making, regardless of how totally different we've always been.

So we drive in comfortable silence the two and a half miles to Scott's house, finding him sitting at the curb, eating a sausage-and-egg breakfast sandwich. A second one is wrapped in foil on the sidewalk beside him. His face breaks out in that wide, patented Scott grin the second he sees us, for no damn reason at all. Scott's always smiling for no damn reason at all, and usually the sight of his smile makes me smile, too. Scott MacIntyre's my other best friend, the "mac to my cheese" as he likes to say, but nothing can shake my surly mood today.

Scott is short and squat, as if his body's been compressed from all the time he's spent behind the plate, catching for me, and he lumbers into the backseat. He leans over the headrest and grips my shoulders with both hands. He shakes me a little bit. "Pitchers report today, baby!"

I twist in my seat and give him my best *Really?* face.

He collapses back with a sigh and buckles his seat belt. "The team is going to be stronger than ever," he says. "You just need to get with the program."

"You're delusional if you think it's going to be that simple." I flick my braids over my shoulders and reach down to pull my chem binder from my bag, promptly ending the conversation. I have an exam today, and it won't hurt to work out a few more practice equations now, especially since I'm supposed to be picking trash up with the Go Green Club during my study hall. And it's a waste of his breath to try to convince me that what's happening today is a good thing.

I inhale sharply as I remember last season's first practice. I jumped out of bed that day, counted down the minutes of every single class. The memory brings a stabbing pain of loss to my gut. I used to relish the first day of practice. Today I'm dreading it like nothing else. I clench my fists around the binder edges, my mixed-up emotions simmering down to a bitter anger as I consider—for about the hundredth time—the injustice of it all.

.....

**When we enter the lobby, which still smells and feels** unfamiliar—even two months in—an invisible magnet draws Brian to Marcella. Literally. Their bodies make contact at several points, simultaneously. Fingertips. Hips. Lips. It's all a little bit too much for 7:40 in the morning. Okay, a lot bit too much. I should be used to it by now, since Brian and Marcella are pretty much an institution. Brian and Marcella. Marcella and Brian. They've been together for so long now, sometimes it's hard to tell where Marcella ends and Brian starts.

They turn back toward me and Scott. We huddle close together in the crowded space, still working at recognizing faces, trying to find friends among strangers. The lines are starting to blur some, which aggravates me. Hands in fists, I fold my arms across the bulldog on my chest, just as a rowdy group behind me shoves its smallest member, a short girl with pink hair the color of Bazooka gum, right into my back, pushing me into Scott.

"Whoa, sorry." She giggles as she attempts to right herself, pulling her oversize black hoodie back up on her shoulder.

I get a better look at her. In addition to the cotton-candy-colored hair, she has pink-and-blue gauges in both earlobes.



Two round studs pierce the skin above her lips. Underneath the heavy eye makeup, she looks like she's about twelve.

Then she scampers off, losing herself among the group of ripped-black-shirt-wearing guys who were jostling her about.

I quirk an eyebrow and shake my head.

"Your judgment is showing." Scott grins, nudging me in the ribs. "You might want to tuck that back in."

"No judgment," I lie. "I just don't get people like that. Who works so hard at not fitting in?"

Marcella snickers.

"What?"

I swear her gaze flicks to my Bulldogs sweatshirt, but she just smiles at Brian and shakes her head. "Nothing." She tugs on his hand. "We should go. The student council meeting's all the way down in Mrs. Trimble's room. And today we're taking the final vote on the prom theme!"

"Okay, babe."

Marcella, the eternal good sport, is handling the loss of her presidency over the junior class of Farmington South with grace and dignity, jumping right back into school politics at Farmington East without missing a beat. She separates herself from Brian for a quick second to give me a hug, the scent of her trademark Burberry perfume washing over me. "See you at lunch." She tugs on a braid before reaching for Brian's hand again.

"See you."

My gaze follows them as they're swallowed up by the sea of bodies, and I catch a glimpse of some of my friends from the South girls' basketball team in the alcove near the ramp. I gesture toward them and Scott nods, down for whatever. I take three

steps in their direction . . . and then stop in my tracks, fingers tightening into an angry claw around my black backpack strap.

Blocking my path is the Farmington East baseball team. Its members are loud and amped, several of them dressed in last year's T-shirts, bearing the words THERE'S NO "I" IN TEAM. And as I watch them, they get even louder and more amped, calling out and slapping fives. Because their captain has just arrived, whipping them into a frenzy.

And God grant me patience. Because if his entrance wasn't so damn *irritating*, I would walk over and *laugh* in his pretty face.

Jamie Abrams.

He swaggers across the lobby with the air of a rapper who's sustained a gunshot wound or something. I mean, I swear, he might actually be faking a limp. It's early March and partly cloudy, yet he has sunglasses on. Inside. Jamie's got his East baseball cap on backward, and he's wearing his Windbreaker, embroidered with his cocky nickname—ACE—in gold over his chest.

Jamie Abrams, God's gift to Farmington baseball. God's gift to Farmington girls.

I can't stand him.

Not that I've ever spoken to him. I've been avoiding him like the plague the past couple of months.

But that doesn't stop me from hating him, or more specifically, hating the idea of him. From what I've observed—discreetly, of course—his prime objectives for coming to school include flaunting his overhyped image and finding his next hookup. He's always talking, always laughing, always whispering in one girl or another's ear. I can't really believe he takes anything that seriously, so I highly doubt that baseball is an exception.

Even if he has been the star pitcher for two years and

counting, securing the position his freshman year, which is pretty much unheard-of. He's good, sure, but there's no way in hell he's as dedicated as I am.

Yet I'm willing to *bet* he feels entitled to that Cy Young trophy. Because everyone makes him out to be such a rock star. Because this team is more his than mine.

*That trophy belongs on my shelf.*

And there's only one for the taking now.

My natural competitive impulses flare, and I realize I'm glaring at him. I shake my head in frustration. I'm used to glaring at the person in the batter's box, not the one wearing the same uniform.

As I stand there, shooting daggers, something weird happens. I see the muscles in his back tense beneath his Windbreaker and he stops running his mouth, midsentence. He turns and looks right in my direction, as though he can feel my fiery gaze upon his back.

Slowly, he removes his hat, running one hand over the top of his close-cropped light brown hair. The glasses come off next, and before I'm ready for it, his cool, steady, slate-blue eyes are piercing mine. The look on his face bears no trace of the sleepy-eyed, cocky smirk combo I usually see him using when he focuses on other girls.

All laughter has drained from his face, and his glare is as ice-cold as the one I've got trained on him is hot.

I think it's the first time he's ever really looked at me. And in that instant, it's crystal clear—as crystal clear as those blue eyes of his—that he feels the same way about me as I feel about him.

This is why it doesn't matter that I'm wearing a Bulldogs

hoodie. Why I couldn't embrace Marcella's cheerful mood this morning and why I dismissed Scott's contention that our teams coming together will make Farmington baseball even stronger.

At the end of the day, it doesn't matter where we go to school or what mascot I wear on my shirt now. Locked in a staring contest with Jamie, I know I'm right. We're not on the same team. Not at all.

# Chapter 2

March 1

## Jamie

“**M**orning, handsome.”

My mom’s in the kitchen when I come downstairs, standing at the counter, stirring artificial creamer into this huge travel coffee mug. She tries to assault me with a hug as I pass her, but I shrug her off. She knows I’m not a morning person.

“Morning, Ma,” I mutter, opening the pantry, considering my options. Half-empty box of Target-brand reduced-fat granola. Probably half-stale, too. Unopened box of Froot Loops. No-brainer. I grab Toucan Sam and rip open the cardboard.

When I turn back around to get a bowl, I see the tension in her shoulders. “What?”

Her lips twitch nervously. “What’s wrong with granola? It’s healthier.”

“I like Froot Loops.”

She doesn't say anything right away, but eventually she gives me the usual reminder. "You two can't keep letting open boxes of cereal go to waste."

I stare down at my full bowl of cereal, wishing she wasn't standing there making me feel guilty about my breakfast. "It's just cereal."

"Everything can't be 'it's just.' "

I pick up the box and set it back down on the table for emphasis. "It's just cereal," I repeat.

She takes a big swig of coffee and resets her smile, backing off. "So practice starts today, huh?"

I shovel cereal into my mouth, nodding while I chew and swallow. "Yep."

My mom approaches me again, smiling warmly, and rubs at one shoulder. "You feeling good?"

"Always."

Then she leaves her hand there. Lately, it's like she's always trying to make contact, like she needs someone to hold on to. I don't really like the way it feels, being that someone, but she's trying to do things differently these days, so I let her lean on me sometimes. "Text me and let me know how it goes, okay? I have to work a double today."

"Okay."

"Have you gotten to know some of the guys from South?"

"Yeah, I knew a bunch of them already from summer ball. You know Brayden and Noah Turner, right? And Jake Pawlings, who was on the Padres with me back in the day?"

"I recognize those names."

I shrug, pouring some more cereal into my bowl. "The other guys, I met them at tryouts this past week. They're all right."

A half smile lifts her left cheek, and her eyebrow goes up at the same time. “Any threats?”

A *psssh* sound escapes my lips. “Not even close.”

Although . . .

I narrow my eyes at the milk, thinking of the one person I *didn't* meet at tryouts last week.

*Not even close*, I think again.

There's an obnoxious clatter on the stairs, and a second later, O appears. My hand freezes, spoon halfway to my mouth. My half sister has done lots of things to make herself look silly, but this takes the game to a whole new level. I stare at her as I chew my last spoonful of cereal. Shaking my head as I take the empty bowl to the sink, I murmur my opinion to no one in particular. “You look completely ridiculous.”

She rolls her eyes comically. “Annnd, good morning to you, too, Sunshine.” Olivia glances at the table and claps her hands. “Yay, Froot Loops!”

Mom's pursing her lips again, over the cereal or O's latest makeover, I don't know. But she chooses not to comment on either and digs around in her purse for her keys. “All right, kid-dos, I'm off.” She squares her shoulders and lifts her mug, ready to take on the working world.

In actuality, I've been a part of the working world longer than she has. George is a good guy, and he let me start taking shifts at Best's Burger Barn and Shake Shack, paying me under the table before I could legally work.

Mom plants a kiss on the top of my head, and then more hesitantly on the top of my sister's—God only knows what chemicals were responsible for that train wreck—before opening the back door. “Hit the road. Don't be late.”

I pull my Windbreaker on and look down at my half sister. She looks more like a caricature of Olivia than her actual self.

I inhale through my nose, trying to see past the pink and the piercings. “You need a ride?”

Olivia shakes her head absently, concentration focused on arranging her Froot Loops into a rainbow pattern inside her bowl. “Justin’s getting me.”

I bite my tongue rather than voicing my opinion on her latest guy, who’s a senior, and really has no business “getting” her. “All right. See ya later, O.”

It’s not till I’m out the door that I feel like I can breathe again. I’d always thought our home would feel better if my mom got herself a backbone, but now that she has one, there’s a whole bunch of new issues. Single parent means single income, and hers isn’t very substantial regardless of how many hours she works the checkout at Target.

My Jeep Cherokee’s parked on the street, all prettied up, rims shining. It’s a bitch to keep the tank filled anymore, but at least I still have my car. Just about the only good thing Doug contributed around here.

Used car salesman. Such a perfectly fitting job for that jerk-off.

I climb behind the wheel, checking my reflection in the mirror as I adjust my hat, grab my Ray-Bans out of the glove compartment. They’re sitting on top of a purple hair tie someone left behind. Probably Naomi.

That’s when I remember she texted me late last night, to see about me picking her up on the way to school. But I know it’s not transportation that she’s really interested in on the way to school, and I have to focus today. The season is officially under



way, and baseball means more to me than any girl could, that's for sure.

I take the long way to school, stopping at Wawa for some gum. The school lobby's overcrowded when I get there, with all the kids from South here, but still I'm spotted the minute I walk through the door.

Lise scampers over to me, wrapping herself around my biceps like an eel. "I'm pulling some major strings to make sure I get picked as your spirit girl," she hisses in my ear.

"That'll be sweet." I give her an easy smile, cracking my gum.

One time Naomi told me that maneuver makes my jaw look sexy. I didn't know that was a thing, but hey, whatever works.

Out of nowhere, I feel someone damn near grab my ass. It's one of the new girls, and I can't remember her name. I do, however, remember *her* ass, which is encased in a pair of supertight cream-colored cords. "Thanks for saying hi to me," she says with a pout.

I put my hand over my heart in apology. "I'm sorry, sweetheart," I say. "Won't happen again."

Finally I make it through the gauntlet and see my boys in the center of the lobby. I nod confidently and saunter toward them. I insert myself into their circle, jostling a couple of sophomores, giving fist bumps to my fellow upperclassmen. Everyone turns to greet me, a few with enthusiastic slaps to the back, ready for today to get under way. Ready for this season to get under way. It's about damn time.

Throughout the rest of the lobby, people are packed like sardines, but they give my team—most members dressed in gold and black, too—plenty of room. They get it.

This is our turf. My turf.

Then I feel the hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

It's a weird, disturbing sensation, like a sudden drop in atmospheric pressure or something. I actually feel someone's eyes on my back.

I turn in the direction of the feeling, toward the owner of the eyes. *Of course*. I'm tempted to laugh, except she's so ridiculous, I can't. She's the worst joke I've heard all year.

Eve Marshall. Female baseball player.

*The Phenom*.

They actually called her that, the city paper that featured a front-page story on her athletic prowess. And not just our local bullshit paper, but *Sports Illustrated*, when they featured her in their recent monthly segment on standout high school athletes across the country. When I saw her face on the cover of my favorite magazine as I pulled it from our mailbox, I launched it into the recycle bin without a second glance.

She's difficult, you can tell just by looking at her. She's staring me down right now, those huge amber wolf eyes taking me on *as if she can*. Bucking tradition, just for the sake of being difficult. I mean, both schools had perfectly respectable softball teams.

Exceptions are already being made for her. State championships for girls' basketball overlapped with pitcher tryouts, and she got an automatic spot. You wanna tell me there wasn't some kind of favoritism at play there? No new guy would have had it so easy.

And already . . . everyone's talking about her.

She's not backing down, and it's pissing me off. So I let her know, with my eyes. *I'm not gonna make this easy for you*. I fold

my arms across my chest and glare at her, hopefully driving the point home.

My school, my turf, my mound. My time in the spotlight. My second Cy Young trophy.

*Bring it on, sweetheart.*

# Chapter 3

March 1

## Eve

**I** change for practice in the girls' locker room. I've never really minded being separated from my team in this sense. The girls' locker room smells like powdery deodorant and floral body sprays with only subtle undertones of sweat. The boys' locker room must smell like . . . I don't even want to know. Various funk mixed with other funk.

Usually, the only times I mind my separate-but-equal status are game days. Back at South, I could actually hear my team on the other side of the cinder-block walls. Getting pumped. Making memories. Telling jokes. By the time I joined them, I'd usually missed the punch lines.

I set my bag on a bench in front of an empty row of lockers and start changing. The softball team is on its way down to the field. Some of the members of the team from South call hi to me. I've never gotten the sense that they resent me or

anything—my choice to play with the boys—but they’re a tight unit, and I’m just not part of their group.

Members of the team from East . . . they stare at me like an alien as they pass. The girl wearing catcher’s pads mutters something under her breath, and her teammate snickers in response. Shaking my head, I tie on my cleats. I just wish they got it, that it was never a choice. It just was what it was. Having three athletic older brothers, I spent my weekend afternoons during the spring at Little League games. My mom, already frazzled with the family’s hectic schedule and my dad working a lot of weekends, had just shrugged when I reached an age when I, too, could play. “You want to play ball, you play baseball,” she’d said. “We can’t be four places at once.”

My mom had been a star forward at UConn and even played basketball internationally until she met and married my dad. She wasn’t exactly dying to schlep me to ballet or cheerleading.

So I learned to play a game that had nine innings instead of seven, learned how to catch a ball that was nine inches around instead of eleven. I learned to pitch it overhand instead of under.

And I learned I was good at it, really good. Better than most of the boys.

I found out I could stare down those boys who had three inches of height and twenty pounds of muscle on me. From the mound, I could take them down, take them out. I still can. It’s an awesome feeling, exhilarating and powerful and fun as hell.

So why would I ever even think about going out and learning how to “throw like a girl”?

*Phenom.*

*Exception to the rule.*

*Freak of nature.*

As long as I'm winning, I don't really give a hoot what they call me. I love this game.

And suddenly, in the locker room, the mound only moments away, reflecting on all this, my sour mood dissipates. Feeling invigorated, I jump to my feet and tie my lucky bandanna around my head.

I'm ready.

Catching a glimpse of myself in the mirror, I inhale a quick breath. Except for one thing.

I walk to the end of the aisle, craning my neck back and forth, making sure I'm truly alone. When I'm certain I am, I retrieve the thick Ace bandage from my bag, push up the elastic bottom of my sports bra, and wrap the bandage around my chest.

The Ace bandage is a recent addition to my uniform. It wasn't necessary before. My mom's been warning me for years about how she was a "late bloomer," but I'd looked down at my flat chest and scoffed. This past summer, I stopped really being able to scoff anymore. I have boobs, and as far as my form goes, they suck. I've learned to work around them, but there's a part of me that really wishes I didn't have to.

Plus.

The idea that any of my teammates would be *looking at my boobs* when I'm trying to concentrate . . . oh hell no.

After turning sideways and studying my silhouette in the mirror, convinced I've minimized the problem, I grab my dusty glove and head down to the field. It still feels more like winter than spring, and goose bumps instantly break out on my thighs as I jog down the hill to the diamond. Wind whips the hood of my Windbreaker against my braids and flips my bandanna, and I pick up the pace, hoping to warm up. I'm relieved to see

members of the team gathering inside the dugout, which blocks the chill.

I'm not the first to arrive and I'm not the last. Scott scoots over on the bench to make room for me, and I smile gratefully at him. He stays close enough that I can feel the warmth of his body and wraps a thick arm around my shoulders for good measure. It doesn't escape my notice that you could easily divide the dugout in half: players from East on the left, players from South on the right.

Our three coaches appear over the crest of the hill, and my heart starts pounding against my chest, even though my old coach from South is part of the group. The pounding makes my entire rib cage vibrate, constricted by the tight elastic of the Ace bandage and sturdy Under Armour sports bra.

I feel a lingering sense of gratitude as I study Coach Karlson, my new head coach. He did me a solid by letting me try out in private because of the overlap with states, which gave me hope that those of us from South would get a fair shot as Pirates. But now it's time to prove myself for real. Prove that I can hang, that I actually belong here. Not in the quiet gym, but out here on the field. Where the pressure's real.

As the group comes into view, I recognize a fourth figure walking with the coaches.

Jamie.

They come closer still, and his face is more serious than I've ever seen it. It transforms him, and I can't help but stare, heart hammering anew in a way I can't make sense of.

Until he catches me staring, and he lifts his chin and narrows his eyes at me at the same time. *What the hell are you looking at?*

I drop my head and concentrate on the dusty cleat prints on the ground. I don't even know what I'm looking at. Or why I bowed out of our staring contest.

I can't let this boy intimidate me. I pick my chin back up, staring grimly out at the mound instead. It's time to focus.

Coach Karlson comes to stand in front of us, clipboard against his chest, legs spread hip-width apart. He looks left. He looks right. He looks left and right again. He chuckles once and shakes his head. "Here's the deal, guys," he tells us. "I'm not gonna force you to sit next to someone new on the bench. I'm not gonna recite some *Remember the Titans* team-building bullshit." He raises one shoulder. "Frankly, we don't have time for that, not if we want to win ball games. We have real work to do."

From the corner of my eye, I glimpse Jamie. He hasn't joined the team on the bench; he's leaning against a side wall instead, like he's above the rest of us somehow. We're not going to be forced to get along.

Good.

"So if there's any drama going on about two teams becoming one, I don't want to hear about it," Coach continues. "And I damn sure don't want to see it, not on my field. You got personal problems, you work them out. Off the field. This is the situation that's been handed to us, and I expect every one of you to be mature enough to rise to the occasion."

I feel a mild warmth in my cheeks, thinking that if Coach had been inside the car this morning, I wouldn't have made the best impression.

"One thing those of you who don't know me very well will quickly realize is this: I'm fair. And I don't play favorites. Obviously, with the recent changes, some people aren't going to be able to



lay claim to positions as easily as they may have before. That's life, my friends, and my personal belief is that this can boost everyone to their best performance. There's no room for laziness anymore. You get lazy, there's going to be another talented player breathing down your neck, ready to take your spot in the starting lineup."

*Ready to steal your accolades, I think.*

"Our first game is less than two weeks away. The lineup won't be set until the night before. So I expect to see everyone busting their asses for the next two weeks if you feel that lineup should have your name on it. I don't play favorites," he repeats. "This will be a new lineup." He gestures over his shoulder, in the direction of the diamond. "Now hustle out there and earn it."

But as the rest of us stand and scoop up our gloves as quickly as possible, I notice that Coach wraps his arm around Jamie's shoulders, giving him a squeeze. So much for not playing favorites. As if I don't already have enough hurdles to overcome to secure time on the mound, I have to deal with the fact that Coach and Jamie appear to be pretty buddy-buddy.

The structure of practice is pretty similar to what I'm used to, especially with Coach Parsons from South still on the field. Jamie and the senior cocaptains lead us through stretches and warm-ups in the outfield. Then we break into groups and rotate through fielding drills, hitting practice, and base running. Scott and I are in different groups, and I don't say a word to any of my teammates during the drills, not even my teammates from South, even though others are chatting during rotations. I stay laser focused, hang on every word from our coaches, and bust my ass every time my name is called to step forward. Despite the slight tremble in my hands, I do okay. I hold my own.

Then, in the final half hour before wind sprints, Coach Jackson calls the pitchers and catchers together. “Let’s run through this rotation twice. We’ll start off slowly. Fifteen fastballs from windup, rotating to the inside and outside each pitch,” he says. He twists toward the outfield, pointing to my old shortstop from South. “Jamison, right?” Chris Jamison nods. “Grab a helmet and come stand in at the plate.”

As he takes position, grabbing a bat and adjusting his helmet, my heart starts pounding. This is getting real. Then I notice the other assistant coach setting up the video camera on the tripod, ready to record our throws so we can review and discuss mechanics later. My heart threatens to escape my chest altogether, and it’s downright painful, thanks to the damn Ace bandage.

Coach Jackson looks back at us. “Line up, gang.”

I end up third in line of the four pitchers who made the team—two of us from South, two from East. Jamie ends up behind me, and even though he definitely keeps his distance, I swear I can feel the tension and anger radiating off his body.

I’m surprised at his positioning. From the way he seems to like to steal the show, I would have assumed he’d be first in line.

To the left of the plate, I see Scott move so that he’s third in line of the catchers. I catch his eye and smile, and he gives me a thumbs-up in return.

The rest of our teammates keep busy in the outfield as the first two pitchers take their turns on the mound. I can’t help but be impressed by Matt Sanders’s speed, but he definitely pays the price in accuracy. Pat Bechtel, my former reliever from South, goes next. He’s solid, but his range is somewhat limited.

Thirty pitches from the two of them, and I’m up. Scott must

notice the way I close my eyes for a minute, blowing deep breaths through my pursed lips, because he takes a moment to lift his mask. He doesn't say anything out loud, but I'm practiced at reading his lips. I've been seeing Scott behind the plate for almost a decade. *You got this.* He raises his index and middle finger, pointing at my eyes, then turns his fingers around, pointing into his own eyes. *Eyes on me. Right here only. You got this.*

But despite his command to focus, I glance behind me in the final moment. I realize there are about twenty pairs of eyes on me. My teammates have abandoned their drills, and no one is redirecting them. Coach Karlson is standing in the outfield, bat across his shoulders, watching me, too. The occasional breeze across the infield is the only sound for miles. I look down and realize the ball is quaking in my trembling hand.

Pissed and frustrated, I force my fingers into a vise around the ball. I mean, how the hell am I going to face our opponents if I can't even face my own team?

I stare into Scott's steady green eyes and repeat his words to myself. *You got this. Eyes on me. You got this.*

I take a final deep breath and let the rest of it go blurry. Chris at the plate, holding his bat in position. The coach with the video camera in my peripheral vision. Jamie, glowering from the third baseline.

I close my eyes so I can't see any of them, and then right before I wind up, I open them. I refuse to let my focus shift even minutely from Scott's glove, at the ready. Muscle memory kicks in before my mind even tells my body what to do, and I fire. Mere seconds later, I hear the familiar, satisfying *thwack* of leather pummeling leather. Scott's glove hasn't moved at all.

He nods once, all business, and rises slightly to return the

ball to me. Fourteen more times I fire, fourteen more times I nail it.

Only then do I breathe, shoulders going lax, a wide, gleeful smile lifting my cheeks. I point at Scott and raise my arms in triumph. He pumps his fist in the air three times.

That's when I hear it, behind me, surprising the hell out of me. Applause. I whirl around, finding that most of my teammates—my teammates from both South and East—are clapping. Even Coach is clapping.

Any trace of this morning's gloom is obliterated. The mound still feels like home, and my team is making me feel welcome there.

Before they can see my smile, I wipe it off my face and adjust my bandanna as I trot off the infield and get back in line. The look on Jamie's face as I approach him tells me, in no uncertain terms, that he has not been clapping along with the rest of them. He storms past me, eyes narrow slits, our shoulders bumping as I leave the mound and he claims it for himself.

# Chapter 4

March 3

## Jamie

Cutting my headlights, I turn into the school's back parking lot. I don't think there's any monitoring or recording going on, but the stealth aspect's cool.

I'm the first to arrive. So maybe I'm overeager—I dragged myself off Kaitlyn's couch, out from under Kaitlyn, about twenty minutes sooner than I probably needed to. Kaitlyn, owner of the tight cream cords. My hand grazes my neck; I can still feel her teeth. Yeah, I don't think I'll forget her name again.

I head down to the track, glancing over my shoulder after every few steps to make sure no one's trailing me. They're not, so I hop over the chain-link fence, unlocking it from the inside so my teammates have no trouble getting in. We made sure they all got the text. *Pirate newbies. Practice track. Ten o'clock. Be there, or don't bother showing up for practice on Monday.*

The night is completely still as I make my way to the middle

of the track, right around the fifty yard line, and wait. Nathan and Brendan, my cocaptains, show up next, arriving together. They're both dressed in black, and Brendan has a knit beanie pulled low on his forehead.

"What are you fuckers doing? This isn't *Mission: Impossible*."

Nathan grins as we slap hands. "You're right. It's better."

"You ready for this?" Brendan asks.

I grind my heel into the gravel of the track. "Absolutely."

"It's a lot more fun as an upperclassman, right?"

Laughing, I nod. I've paid my dues already. And now, even as a junior, I've been elected as captain. I'd be lying if I said I didn't like the authority.

As the others arrive, I stand with my arms crossed, following their path to the bleachers with stern eyes. We don't greet them, and they don't talk to each other. Without being told what to do, they figure it out. The other juniors and seniors from East, who are exempt, join us on the track. The sophomores and the kids who transferred from South take to the first row of the bleachers, arranging themselves in a solemn line.

She arrives with her buddy, the catcher, at the last minute. I guess they thought there was strength in numbers. I'm almost gleeful, thinking about how wrong they are. There's no way to take cover tonight. My eyes stay on her as I envision her discomfort. Serves her right. She asked for this.

The resentment flares like a lit match, leaving me scowling down at my feet.

I think about the way everyone went back to the outfield when she had done her rotation on the mound. I'd gone last, expecting to steal the show, redirect their attention back where it belonged. When her turn was over, no one even looked up.

I swallow hard, thinking of how Coach had hugged her, frea-kin' *hugged* her, at the end of our first practice. The memory feels like a steel boot to my lungs, kicking the air out of them, and I refocus my attention on the bleachers, gritting my teeth, glaring at her.

*Let's do this.*

Nathan spits into the gravel beside me, cups his hands in front of his mouth, and calls up into the bleachers. "Good evening, gentlemen." He doesn't adjust his language for her, and I notice her rolling her eyes.

It's a subtle response, but for whatever reason, it increases the pressure inside my chest. It's a baseball team. *Get over yourself.*

"Let me explain why we're here tonight, for you sophomores or transfers who might not know." He pauses for effect. "Tonight is about the spirit of tradition alive and well within the Farmington East baseball team." He nods at Brendan, who pulls a folded piece of paper from his pocket.

Brendan raises his hand. "But before we go any further," he tells the group, "I need to read something to you guys." He squints at the paper in the darkness. " 'Farmington School District Administrative Guideline 5213, Student Anti-Hazing.' "

Eve swallows hard and a second later, her hand goes to her throat, trying to hide her reaction a beat too late. There's a sudden trace of fear in her eyes. As I survey the guys beside her, it's evident she's not the only one starting to worry.

" 'The purpose of this guideline is to maintain a safe learning environment for all students and staff members at Farmington schools. Hazing in any form is neither tolerated nor consistent with any educational goals of Farmington schools.' "

Brendan goes on to read from a list of examples of activities referred to in the policy. I catch phrases like “degrades or risks emotional and/or physical harm,” “physically abusive, hazardous, or sexually violating.” Eve’s shoulders jump, and I wonder what she’s imagining. We’re not *that* depraved, for Christ’s sake.

“‘ . . . any activity that subjects a student to extreme mental stress, embarrassment, shame, or humiliation that adversely affects the mental health or dignity of the student or discourages the student from remaining in school.’ ”

He looks back up into the bleachers. “Y’all got that?” he asks.

The newbies nod.

Then Brendan nods, too. “Good.” He turns in my direction, hands the policy to me.

I keep my eyes on the bleachers as I rip it into tiny pieces that fall and litter the ground.

“Get down here,” Nathan orders them.

Heads down, the group drags their feet as they make their way to the track and huddle together before us. Even though they’re only a year younger than me, the sophomores look like kids, nervous and small. The juniors and seniors from South still look more annoyed than anything else.

“This long-standing tradition,” Nathan explains, “is known as the half-naked mile.” He smirks. “Or to some—the brave, those confident in their manhood—it’s known as the naked half mile.”

“You have seven minutes to finish the run,” Brendan chimes in. “If you don’t finish the run in seven minutes, you’re on equipment duty the whole season. There’s no rotation, no trading off.



If your ass isn't across the line in seven minutes, it's you and anyone else who's dragging."

"A seven-minute mile?" one brave, stupid sophomore asks. "Come on, man, that's nuts."

"You have a choice." Nathan shrugs. "I said half-naked mile . . . or naked half mile."

We wait for their understanding to set in, but none of them really seem too swift.

Impatient, I step forward to explain. "You do the run in your boxers, you have to run a mile in seven. You go commando, you only owe us two laps around the track. Half mile. Which is plenty easy in seven minutes."

A senior from South crosses his arms and cocks his head at me. "You're serious? I'm a senior. I outrank you. This is a joke."

I flash him a tight-lipped smile. "No, it's not a joke. It's an East tradition. You want to play ball at East, you're a part of the tradition."

"Whatever. Let's just get this done so we can go home. I have better shit to do." Chris Jamison pulls his shirt overhead and tugs off his sweats. He's undecided about his boxers, I guess waiting to see what everyone else will do, and stops there.

Slowly, following his lead, the rest of the guys do the same. Moving unnaturally slowly, they pull shirts overhead, hop on one foot as they remove pants. Then stand self-consciously before us in their underwear.

They're in a circle and end up taking a few steps back, turning inward and staring at the last two people in the group, who are still fully clothed.

This is the moment I've been waiting for. I wonder if she's

going to cry. Most girls cry so easily. “I’m sorry—is there a problem?”

My words don’t register on her face, which is carved from stone. All but her eyes, which blaze with disdain.

“Come on, Jamie,” Scott says, his voice small. “You can’t possibly ask her to do this, too.”

Scott seems like he’d be an okay guy—friendly and easy-going and shit—if he didn’t live so far up her ass. But he’s making a mistake right now.

“Why can’t I? She wants to play with the boys”—I turn and meet her gaze—“then she needs to be willing to play with the boys.” I shrug. “It’s not like we made this up on her behalf. The naked half mile’s been around a lot longer than she has.”

“This is different,” he protests. He extends his neck, but it does nothing to intimidate me. “It’s not cool and you know it.”

Those eyes of hers are still on fire, but you’d never know it from the chill of her voice when she finally speaks up. “It’s cool, Scott.”

“No, it’s n—”

“Scott, I said it’s cool,” she repeats, cutting him off. And before I know what’s happening, her shirt is off. My eyes widen in shock, but before they even process what they’re seeing, her pants are off, too.

And there stands Eve, in the middle of a group of twenty or so guys, in her underwear. Not surprisingly, it’s not any kind of pink lacy shit. She’s just wearing a black sports bra and red boy shorts. But holy shit. The length of her legs and the muscular curve of her ass and her . . . Where the hell did *those* come from? They definitely had not been there during practice.

She looks at me, seething with anger. “What? Haven’t you

ever seen a girl in her underwear before?” Her hands go to her hips. “Who knew? Maybe your reputation is as overinflated as your ego.”

A few of the guys behind her start laughing.

My temper flares to life, jaw twitching as I try to keep my rage from showing itself on my face. This is not how this was supposed to go! This was supposed to *break* her. This was supposed to put her in her place. But she’s standing there, all haughty and shit, even in her underwear, like she’s trying to put me in mine.

She is, far and away, the most aggravating, loathsome female I’ve ever encountered.

“Line up,” I growl. “Scott, get your clothes off.”

He seems just as stunned by Eve’s little striptease as I am and nods robotically as he loses his clothes. He lines up beside her, in shamrock boxers. I shake my head at what a mismatched pair they are. I steal another quick glance at Eve, eyes roaming her body. I bet he’d give anything . . .

I whirl away from them, agitated. Why the hell am I thinking about this?

Brendan is setting the stopwatch on his phone, so I step back and out of the way. Some of the guys—mostly seniors from South and sophomores from East—have the nerve to lose their boxers at the last second. I don’t really want to see that shit, and my eyes are drawn to the red of Eve’s underwear. I try to tell myself I really don’t want to see that, either. It’s not so easy.

She and Scott jostle for position near the front of the pack. A new look of concentration and concern takes over her features. Unless in addition to being a baseball wunderkind she’s also the next Lolo Jones, she’s going to be hard-pressed to run the full mile in under seven.

“Go!” Brendan bellows, and the pack takes off.

As they run their first lap of the quarter-mile track, all I see is flashes of flesh against white socks, flying appendages—I tell myself I’m only seeing arms and legs—and a spot of angry red in the middle of the pack. They make the turn and sweep by us, creating a cold breeze in the dark night.

The sprinters lose some momentum on the second lap, especially those who are naked and know they’re almost done, easing across the finish line and making beelines for their pile of clothes before collapsing and panting against the fence. I glance over Brendan’s shoulder at his phone. Three-eighteen down when the first naked runner crosses the line.

A pack of eight remains on the track for the final two laps. Each of them seems to be doing everything in their power to stay near the front, lest they fall behind and out of luck. Eve’s holding her own—she’s not out front, but she’s not bringing up the rear, either. Her buddy Scott is.

Taking another look at Brendan’s watch as they finish their third lap, I decide they’re in decent position to finish under seven, all of them, which is fairly impressive. Eve’s gait doesn’t seem strained; she sort of runs like a deer. She’s just behind the leader going into the fourth lap.

But she breaks her own stride as she passes us, glancing back over her shoulder, looking for Scott. It’s obvious he’s struggling, that he went out too fast, and that his stubby legs are churning and churning but not getting him very far. I look down at the phone again. He’s not gonna finish in time.

One teammate passes Eve. Then another. Then a third. She is not breathing heavily and her face isn’t red—she hasn’t even

broken a sweat. Falling back is by choice, purposeful, for Scott's sake.

I can hear her clear across the track, encouraging him. "Homestretch, MacIntyre. Homestretch now."

He tries to respond to the motivation, but he's got nothing left. The timer starts beeping on Brendan's phone just seconds before they cross the finish line, together. Scott instantly bends forward, mouth open like a fish, gasping for air, while Eve is unaffected. Her hands are back on her hips and she stares into the distance.

Nathan approaches them and claps them on their backs. "Valiant effort. Congrats on equipment duty."

Brendan flips open the top on the cooler he dragged down to the field with him, which is filled with cold bottles of water and cans of Natty Ice. "Welcome to the team, gentlemen. You're officially Pirates now."

Eve doesn't roll her eyes this time. Her brows come together in the middle, and there's something I can't read in her expression. Her gaze falls to the ground.

When Scott's regained his breath, he seems to get his spirit back at the same time, and good-naturedly endures some ribbing and accepts pats on the back from the guys. He doesn't bother putting his clothes back on, but ambles over to the cooler to pop open a beer in his bright green boxers and running shoes. Then he fishes out a water bottle and holds it up in the air. "Eve. You want?"

She's already put her T-shirt back on and is fiddling with the tie on her sweats. "Nope," she says succinctly, pulling on the drawstring with unnecessary force. "I'm good."

She looks over at Nathan, Brendan, and me. “Are we excused now? Or is the party mandatory, too?”

“Uhh, parties are supposed to be fun?” Brendan says.

“Yeah, come on, Eve, stay and hang out,” Scott coaxes her. He sits down on the cooler. “We all survived, right? Come have a drink.”

She just presses her lips together and shakes her head sternly. “Thanks, but I’m good.”

Scott stands and walks over to double-check with her. “You want me to come with?”

She shakes off the offer, and he takes her arm and pulls her aside. It looks like there’s some back-and-forth, but Eve must win out, because Scott eventually returns to his buddies on the team while she fishes for her keys. She offers a vague wave to the group, and several people take a break from their beers and conversations to say good-bye. I’m not one of them.

Then Eve turns on her heel and marches off toward the gate. She doesn’t look back.

Good. She’s gone. Things can be normal now, for a few minutes at least.

But even fifteen minutes later, I can’t get into the party. Frustrated as hell, I down a second beer in thirty seconds, crushing the empty can in my fist. This was supposed to be the thing that would break her spirit. And if this didn’t do it . . . then what the hell will?

# Chapter 5

March 3

## Eve

**P**arked in my driveway, I look at the front door of my house. Then I glance over at Marcella's. There's only one car in the driveway—her parents aren't home from date night yet, and Brian's surprisingly not taking advantage of the empty house. I look at my front door again. Evan and Eric, my two oldest brothers, have been out of the house for a few years, and Ethan left for NYU in August. Which means I have the *full* attention of our parents now, and they'll probably ask questions about where I've been.

It's a no-brainer. I climb out of my car and head toward Marcella's, opening the door without knocking. Even though I clomp up the stairs, she doesn't hear me coming over the noise from the television in her room, and she practically jumps off her bed when I open the door, whatever she's holding in her hands flying into the air before her.

"Good Lord, Eve! You almost gave me a heart attack!"

“Sorry.” I flop down onto the other side of her queen-size bed, which allows me to identify the chicken-cutlet-looking things that went flying into the air a moment ago. Marcella’s squishy, plasticky falsies. The ones she shoves inside her bra for pageants. And, I suspect, most normal school days. She’s hand washed them and was apparently drying them with a towel.

“I didn’t expect you back so soon.”

We’d been having a perfectly nice Friday night, fighting over the remote to tune her TV to Bravo (her choice), or TBS, which was showing *A League of Their Own*, when the text came in.

My lips form a hard line, and I stare down at the familiar floral pattern of her quilt, tracing the stitch work with my finger. “Didn’t take long.”

“What happened?”

I tell the story, Marcella’s eyes growing wide when I get to the part about the captains ordering us to lose our clothes.

“Oh my God, what did you do?”

I shrug. “I went ahead and took my clothes off.”

Marcella’s hand flies to her mouth. “Are you freakin’ kidding me? They probably could’ve gotten suspended or even kicked off the team for something like that! Why didn’t you say *no*?”

My chest tightens. “Because screw them.”

Screw *them*. Maybe they’ve done it for years, to humiliate everyone. But no way in hell I was going to let them find a way to humiliate me *more*. My underwear covered up just like—better than—a bathing suit. I refused to let them, *him*, see me hesitate for more than a second before following their stupid instructions.

Marcella shakes her head, looking frustrated. “Sometimes I really don’t understand how your mind works, Eve Marshall.”



Screwing my face up, I point to the falsies, which she's patting dry with inordinate care. "Same."

This makes her crack a half smile, and she prompts me with her hand. "So? What happened? Did you smoke 'em?"

"I would've, but . . . Scott was struggling. I couldn't let him go down like that. I dropped back to finish up with him."

"You went through all that and still ended up losing out?"

"I couldn't do that to Scott. He's always stuck up for me. I owe him."

Then I'm quiet for a minute, outlining a peony on her quilt with my finger. "And . . . I guess some dumb part of me was trying to prove something." Looking up, I stare out Marcella's window. "Hanging back with Scott, I guess I thought maybe it would . . . show them something. Someone they want to have around. A team player, if they'd just give me the chance to be. But then when the stupid run was over"—I shake my head—"it just became obvious again that I'm odd girl out, no matter what I do. Maybe I was never 'one of the boys' back at South, either, but it's like starting back at square one now with all this East bullshit." My shoulders slump. "It's a crappy feeling. And it's an even crappier feeling that I fooled myself, for five minutes, into thinking it was worth it to try to prove myself to them," I finish.

She stares back at me helplessly, big brown eyes sympathetic, finally putting the chicken cutlets down. Marcella has no idea what to say to me. She's always played with the girls; she has no idea what it's like playing with the boys. "I have Phish Food downstairs?" she says.

"Sure," I tell her, smiling wanly. "Why the hell not."

Marcella hops off the bed and returns five minutes later, carrying a tray holding two ceramic cups shaped and painted to

resemble ice-cream cones. The ice cream is scooped artfully and topped with swirls of whipped cream.

“Your presentation never fails,” I tell her, taking my cup off the tray.

She smiles broadly.

“What time are you going with my mom tomorrow?”

My mom has arranged a meeting for Marcella with the owner of the fitness and nutrition center that she manages. Marcella’s deep into fund-raising mode at this point. The Girls Across America Miss Pennsylvania Teen Pageant has been Marcella’s dream since she started competing. At the end of the year, she’d gotten “the call” that she’d been selected as a contestant. Sponsors help cover entry costs and related pageant costs, and Marcella needs to come up with nearly three thousand dollars.

She nods. “Ten o’clock. I’m all set.” A fierce look of determination takes over her face. “I just want to reach my goal. Until then, the waiting is driving me mad.”

I refrain from sharing my belief that she’s already mad, actually *fund-raising* to participate in something as antiquated as a beauty pageant.

I arrange myself against her pillows, digging into my ice cream. “So where’s Brian tonight?” I ask around a full mouth. “I thought he’d be here.”

Her smile falters minutely, but it doesn’t escape my notice before she plasters it back into place.

“He must’ve gotten hung up. He was supposed to be here at nine thirty, but”—she picks up her phone, which is sitting beside her on the bed—“he hasn’t texted me to say he’s on his way yet.”

“That’s weird.” The words are out of my mouth before I consider their potential impact. But it is weird. Brian’s usually stuck on Marcella like white on rice.

Her smile falls away altogether. “Is it?”

“Or not,” I say quickly. “It’s just one night. People do get sidetracked. It’s only because Brian’s such an attentive little puppy dog that it seems odd.”

She hits me with a stuffed pink poodle wearing a beret. “He’s not a puppy dog.”

“He sort of is. And I mean”—I shrug—“you kind of keep him on a tight leash.”

Irritation—or worry, I’m not sure which—glints in her eye. “What do you mean?”

“Come on, Marcella,” I start, trying to keep my voice light. “You run his shit, and you can’t deny that. There’s this look you give him, when he says or does something you don’t entirely approve of, that instantly puts him back in his place. It’s funny.”

She doesn’t seem to see the humor. “Brian’s never once complained about how things are between us.”

I notice the way her arms are suddenly tensed at her side, how I can see the tendons in her neck.

“Marcella, I’m just joking. You guys are going to be Class Couple, Most Likely to Get Married and Have a Million Babies, and all that jazz,” I assure her, dragging my spoon along the bottom of my cup. “It’s a given.”

Then I set the cup on her nightstand and start undoing my braids. I ended up letting my mom schedule a haircut for tomorrow, after she actually looked at the calendar and pointed out I haven’t had even a trim in nine months. I’m not sure the last time

I actually combed my hair before putting the braids back in, and if I don't at least try to detangle it tonight, I won't be able to sleep in like I want to.

I stare at Marcella's face as my fingers busy themselves on my braids. She's still not laughing and has set her ice cream aside.

"I'm just teasing," I say. Then I pause. "You're not honestly concerned, are you?"

She considers for a minute. Then she waves her hand. "No. You're right. It's fine. I'm sure it's fine."

She's lying. But if she doesn't want to say whatever's bothering her, I'm not gonna press.

"Want me to help?" she suddenly asks brightly.

I nod and she crawls behind me, some oddly shaped purple plastic rock in her hand. She tries to bring it near my head, and I recoil. "What the hell is that?"

She rolls her eyes. "It's a Tangle Teezer. I can't believe you don't have one of these. All that hair."

"Somehow I've survived," I answer dryly.

I let my best friend brush my hair. It feels good, actually. We sit there in silence as Marcella works; she has a nice rhythm going, except for when she stops, every two minutes or so, to check her phone.

When she's done, I shake out the wild, crimped mass that is my hair. It's longer than I remember, ghosting over my shoulder blades.

Marcella slides back over to the side of her bed, lying down and propping herself up on one elbow. She stares at me and smiles. "So did your new teammates totally lose their minds when you got all nekkid? I bet their eyeballs popped right out of their heads."

Funny thing is, the only person's reaction I can remember is Jamie's. I don't know what anyone else did. And yeah, there'd been some eyeball popping going on, but that was only because I'd obviously surprised the crap out of him. He'd underestimated me, again.

"Hardly. It was a test. It wasn't, like, a sexual thing."

"Oh my God, Eve." Marcella huffs in exasperation and yanks on my elbow, pulling me off the bed. She directs me in front of the full-length mirror attached to the back of her door. "Look at you. With your hair all down and wild? And your *body*? You look like a before picture from the makeover show on *America's Next Top Model*. All fresh-faced and naturally gorgeous. You're like a young Adriana Lima or something."

This actually makes me chortle, even though I don't know who Adriana Lima is. This look is not gorgeous—my hair is its own entity right now. "More like someone who just stuck her finger in an outlet."

"You don't always have to make a joke out of it, you know," she informs me. "When you get a compliment. You're such a confident person. Why's it so hard to acknowledge that part of you that's beautiful?"

I roll my eyes. Marcella's practically made a *career* out of acknowledging the part of her that's beautiful. She doesn't get it.

"That's just not the way I see myself. When I look in the mirror, I just really don't see . . . that."

The packaging. The body. Rather, I've always looked in the mirror and seen what my body can *do*. Its strength. Not its . . . beauty.

"Yeah, well, Eve, my friend? Those teenage boys with the raging hormones you just got half-naked in front of?" She regards

me, eyes serious. “I can assure you . . . they do. And I know you probably hate it, but it’s only going to get harder and harder for them to accept you as one of the guys.”

Looking at myself in the mirror, seeing the way my tight T-shirt hugs my new curves, noticing the way my sweats cling to my butt, suddenly I can actually feel Jamie’s gaze on me in that second I shucked my clothes. It’s an uncomfortable feeling, the remembering, and I turn from the mirror to get away from it.

I can’t control the way my shape is changing and how it impacts my game; I can’t control how my teammates respond to it. And after being forced to change schools and become a Pirate, I’m just about sick to death of things beyond my control.