

CARRIE S. ALLEN

MICHIGAN VS. THE BOYS

A person in a dark winter coat stands on a frozen ice rink. Two hockey goals are visible on the ice. In the background, a residential neighborhood with snow-covered houses and bare trees is visible under a clear sky.

No one will stop
Michigan from playing.
Not even her own team.

When a determined girl takes on the culture of toxic masculinity, it's time to even the score.

Michigan Manning lives for hockey, and this is her year to shine. That is, until she gets some crushing news: budget cuts will keep the girls' hockey team off the ice this year.

If she wants colleges to notice her, Michigan has to find a way to play.

Luckily, there's still one team left in town ...

The boys' team isn't exactly welcoming, but Michigan's prepared to prove herself. She plays some of the best hockey of her life, in fact, all while putting up with changing in the broom closet, constant trash talk and "harmless" pranks that always seem to target her.

But once hazing crosses the line into assault, Michigan must weigh the consequences of staying silent — even if it means putting her future on the line.

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VS. THE BOYS

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To my CC girls —
and to all girls who know what
ice smells like at 4 a.m.

1

It's the hardest I've ever worked for an A. Late nights. Focused studying. Constant testing.

Raw skate bite on my ankles and puck-shaped welts on my ribs.

I hold the palm-sized embroidered A up to my shoulder, even though I'm wearing a tank top instead of my hockey jersey. "How's it look?" I ask Brie.

"It goes great with mine. Matching accessories." My best friend pushes her chest next to mine, sporting a gold C safety-pinned to her cashmere T-shirt. They'll look even better when we get them sewn on our jerseys. "Of course, I expect to be addressed as Captain from now on, Mich."

She's only slightly joking. Brie has the right enthusiasm for a captain. But I suspect my A is supposed to stand for Anti-Brie instead of Assistant.

"Aye aye, Captain," I say.

She shoves my shoulder with hers. "And we'll call you Ass Cap."

I shove her back. No retort from the girl whose parents named her after her home state.

“Congratulations,” Coach says, leaning back in her desk chair. “You earned them.”

Yes, we did. We get to run this team for the next two years. I smile, thinking of the upcoming season. I can practically smell the damp air and propane fumes of the rink. My quads ache in anticipation of the killer workouts I’ve got planned for them. Last season we finished a respectable fourth in the league, but this year we’re bringing home hardware.

Brie’s grinning but I doubt she’s daydreaming about playoffs. Ten bucks says she’s mentally creating the playlist for our first locker room dance party of the season.

“Katy Perry,” she says, bumping my hip with her own. Coach rolls her eyes but I laugh. We’re a good team. I’ll lead the drills; she’ll lead the conga line. Besides, I’ll admit I’ve had our team’s welcome-back movie night planned for months (*Miracle*, followed by *Mystery Alaska*, with Ambassador’s BLT pizza and a box of Mackinac fudge I’ve been hiding from my brother since July).

I’m ready to sprint to the rink this very minute. Or at least bum a ride off Brie.

“Does this mean you want us to start captain’s practices right away?” Brie asks. It’s only the first day of school and our hockey team doesn’t usually start captain’s practices until late September. But it’s never too early to get in the weight room.

Coach hesitates. “This means that I want to know the team is in good hands.”

Brie waves her manicured fingers in the air. “The best!”

There's something in Coach's tone that freezes me in place before her sparsely decorated desk. Beside her laptop, she always keeps a current team picture and a framed, signed Julie Chu puck. And they aren't there now. In fact, the desk calendar has been torn off to a blank sheet, and the whiteboard on the wall, usually crowded with lines and drills, has been scrubbed clean.

"Why? Where are you going?" I ask. Brie's breath catches and she grips my forearm.

"I have ..." Coach exhales and flicks at the cracked laminate corner of her desk. "I am taking a new opportunity."

She doesn't sound excited. I try to read her face and wonder what's appropriate for me to ask. As usual, Brie's words are faster than mine and she ignores that line between coach and athlete.

"What? Where?" she demands. "Why would you leave us?"

Because we're a small-town team of sixteen girls who win some and lose some, and unless you grew up here, you don't stay in the Upper Peninsula forever. Coach did not grow up here.

She averts her eyes and stands. "I don't want you guys to be late for your meeting with Mr. Belmont. He'll talk about it there. I wish I could explain ..." She comes around the desk to hug me, an unusual gesture for a woman whose coaching whistle never seems to come out of her mouth.

"Good luck, Michigan," she says firmly before she lets go. "I mean it, the team is in good hands with you."

Our new captain still stands with her arms crossed, that lower lip slipping farther out by the second. Brie doesn't do well with "I wish I could explain." Coach shoots a look at Brie. I take the hint.

“Principal Belmont, Brie. Hope you’re not in trouble,” I quip.

She snorts. “Yeah, right.” There’s no trouble Brie could get in that Daddy can’t fix.

As we leave, Coach’s brows are pulled together. I can’t tell if she’s angry or sad. But I am not looking forward to Belmont.

Partly because the man is half-creep, half-Napoleon with a vengeance. He was probably always creepy, but the vengeance part had to have slipped in when he had a miserable high school career and decided to spend the rest of his life making other high schoolers miserable.

But Creepy Napoleon aside, now I’m sure something’s wrong. Did Coach get fired? It’s more likely that Brie’s Pomeranian learned to skate than Coach got herself in trouble.

As we near the cafeteria, I slip the A into the front pocket of my jeans. Brie not only keeps her C on, but puffs her chest out proudly.

“You earned that,” she says, pointing to my pocket. “Flaunt it, baby.”

I shrug, even though I’m still grinning over my new role.

“I’m serious, Mich. I don’t care which of us has the C.”

I roll my eyes at her.

“OK, I totally care. I want the C. But I can’t do this without you. I wouldn’t want to. You’re the Anti-Brie.”

My mouth slides open. “Oh, my God, I was just thinking that.”

“Come on, Ass Cap.” She links her elbow in mine and pulls me through the cafeteria doorway. Our hockey team is squished around a long laminate table filled with backpacks and purses and first-day-of-school gossip. Strangely, the boys’ swim team is

here, too, sitting at their own cafeteria table.

I slide onto the bench next to Jeannie. “Are we in trouble?” she asks me. Jeannie wouldn’t recognize trouble because she’s never been in it.

“Not that I know of. Why is the boys’ swim team here?”

Kendall leans across the table. “Did I miss some crazy party with them or something?”

“Like you’d miss a party,” Jordan tells her. Kendall looks proud rather than insulted.

Brie eyes the swimmers. “I’d be up for a crazy party. Those boys have definitely been working out this summer.”

Principal Belmont’s shiny balding head draws my attention to the cafeteria entrance. He hurries to the front of the room, flipping through a thick bound notebook. He doesn’t look angry, like we’re about to spend my junior year in detention. He’s not even looking at us. “Is anyone missing from your teams?”

Brie, having been captain for approximately three minutes, stands and takes a head count. “All of our team is accounted for.” She flounces back down next to me.

“We’re all here,” says a voice from the swim table. Jack Ray. We’ve never spoken, but I know who he is. Everyone does. Jack Ray is an amazing swimmer. Olympic trials amazing. Going-to-Berkeley-for-free amazing. But he acts chill about it, so no one makes a big deal.

Oh, and he’s also hotter than noon on Mercury.

“I won’t beat around the bush,” Principal Belmont says, cradling his notebook to his suit jacket. “We’re facing large budget cuts this year. We’re halving our arts department, we’re making do with outdated technology and we’re limiting the

library's intake significantly. In looking at our budgets closely, we knew we would have to make cuts to extracurricular activities as well. It's only fair, when academic programs are cutting back. We can no longer justify —"

"You're cutting our team?" Brie screeches. She stands, smacking both palms flat on the table.

Jerk doesn't even flinch. "The school has decided it would be wiser to cut underperforming teams than to make smaller, detrimental cuts across the board to all programs."

My core stiffens at the insult. Or maybe it's soreness from the punishing workout this *underperforming* athlete woke up at five thirty for. This can't be happening. "Underperforming" is repeated in varying levels of decibels and anger around the tables. Vigorously sprinkled with question marks.

"I demand an audience with the school board." Brie flips her hair off her shoulder, and the gold threads of the captain's C sparkle under the unnaturally bright lights of the cafeteria. "My parents will demand an audience with the school board."

"The school board gives us a budget. Sometimes it's just not enough to cover our expenses." Principal Belmont articulates slowly, as if Brie is a child who doesn't understand budgets, one who's always had a credit card with a generous allowance. This treatment is probably warranted. "We go through it line by line and determine where we can apply cuts —"

"Why are we just learning about this now?" one of the swimmers asks. "We didn't get any input."

"And what can we do?" I ask. "Can we raise money for our programs?"

"I'm sorry. It's a decision that has already been made. I know

this is a difficult way for you to start the school year. A letter has been mailed to your parents explaining this development.”

Because we're too dumb to tell them ourselves?

I can actually see Brie calculating the worth of her SUV. “How much do we need?”

“What?”

“How much money?”

“This is not about putting a Band-Aid on the issue. This is a long-term decision made for the betterment of the school.”

I stand, even though I'm not sure my legs will hold me. “We're a team,” I say. “We don't have anywhere else to play. There is no other hockey program for teen girls in this town. If you take our team, we can't play hockey.” My voice quavers. I wish I could aim fury at him, like Brie's I'm-going-to-stab-you-with-my-skate stare. But all I can think of is the A in my pocket and the pride I felt when Coach handed it to me and told me I earned it. I did earn it. I biked to the weight room in August when I could have slept till noon. I did homework by the light of my cell phone, bouncing up and down on a freezing cold school bus, to play games all across the Upper Peninsula. I skated until I puked. Four times.

I'm happiest when I have skates on my feet, a stick in my hands and teammates by my side. “Please ...” My voice cracks and the rest of my plea sticks in my throat. Jeannie rubs my back, which makes my eyes flood even more.

“Please tell us what we can do,” someone finishes for me. It's Jack Ray, and I'm so grateful to have thirty eyes suddenly on him instead of my tear-threatened face.

“You can go to school,” the principal says, his expression never

straying toward sympathetic. “You can find another club to join. This is a public school, people. We aren’t obligated to provide extracurricular activities. They are a privilege, not a right.”

“But we didn’t do anything wrong,” Kara says.

He holds his hands up. “It’s not personal. It’s simply numbers. Ladies, you are an expensive endeavor. Travel, equipment, ice time.”

“But the guys’ team —” Brie begins.

“Traditionally has a larger, more competitive roster and a higher win percentage. You don’t even fill your roster, and there’s just not enough demand for your team. You only have one goalie, for heaven’s sake. What would you do if she got injured?”

I don’t point out that she played with bronchitis last year, that we’ve all played sick before. We sacrifice like the boys never have to. Yes, this school could scrape up only sixteen girls to play hockey. But we do just fine with our short bench.

“What about us?” Jack asks.

“Title IX regulations require us to offer a proportionate number of opportunities for males and females, so we have to cut an equal number from each gender.” He flinches nervously. “We, uh, have come up with an alternative option for the girls’ swim team at the Rec Center. Financially, we cannot support our pool facility any longer. The natatorium will be torn down and that space will be used for a much-needed parking lot.”

There’s a unified gasp from the boys’ table. They’re tearing out the pool? My eyes lock on Jack Ray’s face as his jaw clenches. I’ve been to the pool on several occasions. The wall behind the starting blocks is lined with pennants for league titles and team records. Jack’s impressive swim history is recorded on that wall.

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“When?” he asks.

“The pool is closed,” Belmont says. “It’s already undergoing demolition.”

That’s the point when the former Owl River High School boys’ swim team walks out.

2

I'll never eat Ben & Jerry's again. We should have binged on kale chips or something else I'd never miss.

We could rebuild the natatorium with the empty ice-cream cartons littering the floor of Brie's bedroom — and by bedroom, I mean her palatial chamber where all sixteen of us are comfortably sprawled on the plush carpet. I took down an entire pint of Americone Dream myself. Ironically. By the time my spoon scrapes the bottom of the container, my face is streaked with tears and snot and my mouth is numb and thickly coated in cream. I'm not sure if my headache is sugar induced, brain freeze or from too much crying. Or D: all of the above.

Brie passes me her half-used tissue. We're running low and rationing essentials at this point. She's still in the anger phase of the grief paradigm. Self-diagnosis; her mom is a psychiatrist.

“Since you guys won't help me slash Belmont's tires, my newest idea is going to be solitary sabotage. I can get access to his coffee mug, and I'm going to spike it.”

Hanna swallows nervously. “Like, with ... poison? Or just something to make him sick?”

Brie shrugs. “Depends on how pissed I still am.”

I shake my head at Hanna. Sophomore hasn’t learned yet how to ride out a Brie mood.

“Screw the school,” I say. “Let’s go out on our own. We can register with USA Hockey and play —”

“Who?” Brie asks. “No offense, Mich, but Assmont was actually right about there being no teams for us to play. None of the high school teams will be allowed to play us if we’re not in the league. And where are we going to get the money to field a team?”

I gulp.

“And no, my dad won’t sponsor us. Not that much money.”

OK, I’ll admit I’d been thinking it. But she’s right, hockey’s steep. Ice time for an hour is like \$150. Travel, with massive amounts of gear, in the middle of winter, adds up fast. Coaching stipend, officials for home games, insurance, registration. Gear and supplies. I almost can’t blame the school. Almost.

“At least my idea is more productive than coffee spiking,” I mumble.

“I got it,” Brie says, her face suddenly shining. “Oh, I got it. This is a good one, ladies.”

This is the part where we’re supposed to let Brie’s theatrics build before she tells us. Emma rolls her eyes at me, but I lean in, waiting for our new captain to save the day.

“I’m going to tryouts,” she says. Insert dramatic pause. “For the boys’ team.”

Even I didn’t see that coming. We’re all silent. I don’t even

bother to come up with a Supportive Friend Response because it's Brie and she's going to provide her own.

And she does. "You know I can skate faster than almost all those boys. And I can take a check. We'll flood their tryouts and when all the boys are pissed that they can't even make their own team, Assmont will have to give us ours back."

Cherrie, cradling her goalie helmet like a security blanket, shakes her head sadly. "Avery and Eddie are the best players on that team. I won't make it."

"Coach Henson picks the team," I say. "None of us will make it."

"If we're faster and better than the boys, he'll have to take us," Brie says. "That man likes to win." He has to, or the boosters will toss him like they did his predecessor. Coach Henson has been here three years and he's still trying to whip those boys into shape. My guess is he's getting nervous watching his game clock tick down. He can't afford to take a chance on us.

I scan the room, mentally placing bets on our odds. I have no doubt Brie could hang. She was the only girl on her teams growing up. She'd never played with girls until she moved to Owl River and joined our team freshman year.

Cherrie is right. The coach will keep his two stellar goalies, no need for a third. Laura splits time between swimming and hockey, and while our coach had allowed it, most wouldn't. Delia is tiny, which won't work so well for playing defense against bigger guys. Jordan just doesn't have the speed and skill.

I don't know where I fall. Coach always said I have the best shot on the team. I'm pretty fast. For a girl. But I've never thrown a real hit. Not on a guy, most of whom are twice my size.

Out of sixteen girls, I figure only Brie is a sure bet. And that's because I know she can bully her way into a spot. Not only does she have an unfiltered mouth and Daddy's credit card, but she did date the captain of the boys' team last year. None of the rest of us have that kind of leverage. I'm reaching for my phone to google "how to spike coffee" when Brie's parents poke their heads through her doorway.

Dr. Hampton's eyes go straight to the pile of oozing ice-cream containers in the middle of Brie's ice-colored carpet. I hastily scrub a licked finger across a drop of chocolate on the floor next to my foot. Unsuccessful.

Mr. Hampton's gaze focuses immediately on his daughter, purposely avoiding the other fifteen girls in the room. For an attorney with a killer reputation, it's funny how terrified he is of teenaged girls. As soon as Brie hit dating age, he started blood pressure meds. If you play Lady Gaga near him or talk about tattoos, you can actually see the migraine forming. It's kind of a game for us, usually resulting in a later curfew and extra money for our evening out.

But tonight he looks triumphant, like he won a big case.

"Good news, Brie," her mom says, hooking a plastic grocery bag over one hand and shuttling ice-cream pints into it with the other.

I jump up and begin collecting trash to add to her bag.

"Did you find a way to keep the team?" Brie asks. Hope rises quickly in the room, pulling the girls up to fully seated positions.

"No." Dr. Hampton eyes the rest of us. It suddenly feels like we shouldn't all be here.

“We were able to secure a position for Brie,” Mr. Hampton says. “At the Wiltshire Academy, in Chicago.”

A pink plastic spoon, dripping with caramel, slips out of my hand and glues itself to Brie’s pale blue comforter. *Chicago*. Her big-time lawyer dad didn’t even try to save the team. Around the room, girls slump back to their pillows, reaching for the nearest half-empty carton before Dr. Hampton can snag it.

“It was the last spot on the roster,” Mr. Hampton adds, his eyes on the floor, lest he glimpse a bra strap or tampon wrapper. “But if Wiltshire still had a spot available, that means there are other schools with roster spots left. Start calling around, girls, or have your parents do it.”

“Boarding school tuition? It would have been cheaper to sponsor us,” Emma whispers to me. Not as quiet as she thought she had.

“There is still school tomorrow,” Dr. Hampton says. “For the rest of you. Brie, even though it’s no longer a school night for you, we have a lot of details to attend to before you leave for Chicago.”

“When?” I croak. My eyes lock with Brie’s. Her hands reach out and grip mine.

“We’ll move you in this weekend. Classes start on Monday.”

Brie is silent.

And there it is. The first sign of the apocalypse.

*

The second comes the next morning.

“Silver Lake’s goalie had shoulder surgery this summer! They

don't have a backup!" Cherrie squeals. She nearly runs into my locker door as I open it.

"Sucks for them." I contemplate options for my wet raincoat. Drip all over my locker or wear it to class until it dries? "Wait, why do we care about Silver Lake's goaltending situation?"

Cherrie's excited expression ebbs into one of guilt.

I freeze, immune to the raindrops splashing from my coat onto my shoes. "Cherrie. You didn't."

She holds her hands up. "Don't be mad. Their coach offered me the backup. What else are we supposed to do?"

I shove my wet raincoat into the bottom of my locker. Who cares if it won't dry, I'm going to get soaked walking home anyway. "Congrats, I guess."

Cherrie grips my biceps. "Listen, Mich. Their coach agreed to get approval for us to play with them, but he won't cut his own players. So there are only three roster spots left. He'll take anyone who's willing to drive."

My heart rate quickens. We're not dead yet. But it's only three spots. How will we choose who gets them? And what about the rest of the team? The words "willing to drive" knock against my skull. Over an hour to Silver Lake. And an hour back. If the roads are good. Five nights a week. And that's just for practice.

"I don't have a car," I remind Cherrie.

"So carpool with us."

"Wait, who's 'us'?"

"I'm going to ask Di and Hanna."

Obviously, our two best players, besides Brie and me. This all seems wrong, though. Shouldn't there be some kind of a team discussion? A tryout? Who's running this team if Cherrie's

suddenly in charge of doling out roster spots like a hockey Santa?

She crosses her arms and pouts at me. Rainy walk to school and a cranky goalie. Great start to my day.

“Do you want to play this season or not?”

I do want it. I am craving ice time. Which is stupid because it’s September. We wouldn’t be practicing yet anyway. But knowing I have nowhere to play this season makes me want it even more. I stuck my nose into my hockey bag last night, just to get a whiff of that stale-sweat hockey smell.

And then I’d started crying again for the thirty-eighth time.

I don’t think Coach would have given me that A if she’d known this was how I’d lead her team. But what if walking away from them is the only way I’ll get to play this season? I need time to figure out another solution before Cherrie starts selling the team for parts like a car thief.

“Let me check with my parents,” I say, digging my phone out of my backpack.

*

“Yes or no?” Cherrie asks, setting her brown bag next to mine at our usual lunch table.

“Nothing yet.” I’m pretty sure I know what Mom will say about driving to Silver Lake every day. So I texted Dad. But when he’s out on patrol he doesn’t answer unless it’s an emergency. Literally. Didn’t think I should go through the 911 operator for this one.

Di and Hanna squeeze in next to Cherrie, as if they’re already their own team. Traitors stick together, I guess.

“So who’s coming with us?” Di asks Cherrie.

Cherrie nods at me. “Hopefully Mich. She’s working on it.”

Across from me, Jordan inclines her head. I meet her eyes reluctantly. “Cherrie found a couple of spots on Silver Lake’s roster.”

“You’re leaving us?” Whit turns on Cherrie, sitting across from her.

Jordan’s glare slips from Cherrie to Di to Hanna. “Snap up the best players we got left and get the hell outta Dodge?”

Cherrie shrugs and primly picks onions out of her tuna wrap, dropping the purple squares onto her napkin.

“Do you have a better idea, Jordan?” Di asks, her eyes narrowed and voice sharp.

Instead of answering, Jordan sticks two fingers in her mouth and whistles loudly. She aims her perma-glare behind me. I pivot on my seat to see Laura, Delia and Emma pass by, carrying their own bagged lunches.

“Uh, hello?” I gesture to the same table where the girls’ hockey team has always eaten lunch, at least for the last two years.

“Oh,” Laura says. She fiddles nervously with the tab on her pop. “I’m introducing Delia and Emma to the other swimmers today.”

Delia nods. “Laura convinced us to go out for swimming with her. Since the team is ...” She shrugs. “I’m pretty good on backstroke. And Emma lifeguarded for the coaches this summer.”

“It’ll actually be much easier for me this year, only balancing one sport,” Laura says defensively.

“But we’re still upset about the team,” Emma adds. “And we’ll still sit with you whenever we can.” They wave and hurry off. Run away while they still can. Or swim away.

Plague, pests, swimming. And the four horsemen galloping off toward Silver Lake. I growl into my yogurt.

“So, Cherrie,” Jordan says, her voice thick with Cheetos and poison. “Thanks for inviting the rest of us to play on your shiny new team.”

Cherrie’s cheeks match her name as she stares down at her lunch. There’s a reason Jordo’s always been our team enforcer. And that goes for verbal fights, too.

“There’s no way to save our team,” Di says. “It’s over. And Brie’s leaving.”

“And our goalie,” Jordan says. “So even if we did figure out a way to keep the team, we’re screwed.”

“Well, I’m still waiting to hear your great idea,” Di says.

The entire table looks to me. And I don’t have a single answer. I left the A Coach gave me in my dresser drawer this morning, but I still feel it burning against my left shoulder.

“What’s the point?” Jordan asks, tearing into a packet of Oreos. She crams a whole one in her mouth, still staring down Cherrie. Jordo’s like a Chow dog; once she gets her jaws around someone, she won’t let go. Cherrie’s lucky the Oreo is taking the beating. So far.

Hanna nudges Di, who reaches over to scoop up the remains of Cherrie’s picked-apart lunch. “I so don’t feel like getting into a Jordo fight today. Let’s go raid the donuts at the Gas ‘n’ Snack.” Cherrie scrambles out of her seat and the Silver Lake trio stalks off.

I sigh at Jordan, but really I’m angry at myself for sitting like a pylon on the ice instead of stepping up to lead what’s left of this team. “So what now?” I ask the sparse table.

“Sorry, Mich,” Jordan says. “It’s not like I expected them to ask me. I’m not good enough to play anywhere else. Don’t know why Coach kept me as long as she did.”

I’d argue, but it’d be a short debate. Jordo’s never been in great shape. She has too many bad habits: greasy food, cheap beer, purposely throwing body checks when she wants to rest for two minutes. Instead, I ask, “Kendall?”

Kendall’s shoulders droop. “My parents said I need to concentrate on grades anyway. So I guess I’m done. Retired at the ripe old age of seventeen.”

“But don’t you want to skate?” I ask the whole table, but I’m looking at Kendall especially. She and I have been on every team together since we were nine. I don’t know what a hockey bench would smell like without her rotating seasonal perfume collection. Don’t want to know.

Whit holds her palm up to Jordan. “Beer league, baby. Eighteen’s old enough to play pickup on Sunday nights.”

Jordan doesn’t look too upset about that concept. She high-fives Whit. “Finally. I can combine the two things I love best. Senior year’s not looking so bad.”

“I’m starting a skate club at my church, if you want to join,” Jeannie says to me. For some reason, her Yooper accent gets even thicker when she talks about church. She really puts the “eh” in “amen.”

“It sounds like toe picks might be involved.”

“Oh, you can skate in your Vapors. It’ll mostly be me teaching the kids how to stop or do two-foot spins.”

“Plus the added benefit of going to heaven,” Jordan says.

“Mich.” Kendall slides into Cherrie’s empty seat next to me.

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“You should go to Silver Lake with them. We won’t be mad. We understand.”

Jordo just nods, her mouth full of cookie again.

“You’re too good to retire to Sunday beer league,” Whit agrees.

Not to mention too young. I know I still have goals left in my stick. Silver Lake is my last chance.

Mom and Dad, please say yes.

3

“No.”

Mom drops two aromatic bags of Louie’s takeout on the kitchen table and scowls at the pile of mail at her spot. She kicks off her scuffed pumps while doling out the food. Dad slides his newspaper over to make room for a condensation-filled plastic box of pasta. Trent charges into the room and crashes into his seat, simultaneously flipping open the lid of his pasta and the tab on his pop. He stabs a piece of sausage and is chewing before I’ve even finished my sentence.

“Dad?” I plead.

The man carries a gun for a living but he still exchanges a look with Mom before he answers. “Sorry, kiddo.”

“Why?” I stick my hands on my hips and stare them down. “This is my only chance to play hockey this season.”

“That would suck,” Trent says through his mouthful.

“It already sucks,” I say. “What about college, Dad?”

“You don’t need hockey to go to college,” Mom says. Not

that she knows anything about real college. Or hockey.

“It sure would be nice.”

Dad sets down his fork and gives me his full attention. This is the man who put me in my first pair of pink Bauers when I was two years old. I let my eyes well with tears, which have been on standby all day anyway. “Mich, I know that’s what you want,” he says. “And I want — we want — that for you, too. But college hockey is a long shot. This team in Silver Lake, they’re an OK team. They’re nothing special. We’re talking full days of school, a long drive, practice, another long drive and then homework. Late nights with not enough sleep. Are you willing to live like that, just to play hockey? Spending your evenings in the car, your weekends in the car, no social life.”

“That would be my social life. Hockey is my social life. Those are my friends.”

“You’d only be with three of your friends,” Mom reminds me. Wounds from Brie’s impending departure reopen in my chest.

“I’m used to traveling a lot. I can handle it. And we’ll do homework in the car.”

Mom snorts. “You won’t do homework in the car. Does that Di even do homework? You know she’ll be driving fast with the music loud. You won’t get anything done. You’ll put your life in danger every day just to practice with a mediocre team.” She plops into her seat, her chicken-topped salad and the TV remote on the plastic placemat in front of her. I know what she’s doing, playing the dangerous-teen-driver card for my state trooper dad. I up the ante with the ace of grades.

“I’ll maintain all A’s. Promise. If I slip, you can make me quit.”

“No,” Mom says, already scrolling through the TV guide.

But Dad makes a humph-sigh sound. I turn on my weakening prey.

“Dad, I’ll take on extra chores around the house when I’m home. To offset gas money.”

“No,” Mom says.

“Sleep on it?” I plead. “Please? You know how important this is to me, right?”

Dad jumps in before Mom can. “We’ll sleep on it.”

“All I’m asking.” I pick at my dinner to avoid Mom’s frown.

*

I text Cherrie while I should be keeping my end of that all-A’s promise I made. Still maybe. Keep your fingers crossed for me.

It kind of sounded like you were a no.

Well, they said no. But then Dad agreed to sleep on it.

The thing is, at first you said they said no.

Wait. Does this mean ...???

Kara’s parents said yes. We thought you were a no.

I type: Kara? She barely scored a point all last season.

And then I delete it. This is not the time for our team to fall apart.

What team? I toss my phone onto my desk without replying to Cherrie. Two days ago, I had a team and a coach and a best friend who lived less than a mile from me. I had a shiny new A for my jersey, an off-season conditioning program and a lot to look forward to.

There’s a knock from my open door. Trent leans on the door-frame, because apparently eighth-grade boys need something to hold them upright at all times.

“Coach Norman said to call him.” Trent holds out his phone. News travels fast in a town where the biggest building is the ice rink.

“What for?” I realize I’m wiping my eyes yet again. They’ll be permanently raw.

He smirks. “We need a backup goalie and you look like you could pass for a thirteen-year-old boy.”

“Ha ha.” I could *not* pass for a thirteen-year-old boy. I shower too often.

“Just call him. It won’t fix anything but it’ll make you feel better.”

I could use a Coach Norman pep talk. He coached me when I was Trent’s age. He’s the best coach I’ve ever had. His practices are actually fun and he treats his players like they’re real humans, not just hockey players or kids. Or girls.

He’s also really hot and young (-er than my parents at least). I still have a major crush on him. Sadly, Coach Norman has a gorgeous girlfriend his own age and gives me noogies through my helmet.

I take Trent’s phone, with Coach Norman’s number on the screen.

“Hey, I need that,” he says. “Use your own phone.”

“You gave it to me.”

“Yeah, to get his number.”

I tighten my grip on the phone. “Get out. I’ll give your phone back when I’m done.”

Instead he flops onto my bed and rubs his sock feet on my pillow.

I push the number to dial from Trent’s phone. “I’m telling

Coach to give you sprints at practice. Russian circles. Backwards. I know you loooooove those.”

“Like you loooooove Coach.” But he lifts his feet from my pillow and sits like a normal human being at the foot of my bed.

Coach answers. “Manning, what’s up?”

“Hey, Coach.”

“Did I not kick your butt around the rink enough at practice?”

“Um, it’s not Trent.”

“Mich! Make sure you tell your brother he sounds just like you.”

I look over at my brother, who scowls. He’ll be talking like Vader for the next week. I do feel a tiny bit better already.

“Well, this sucks, doesn’t it?” Coach says. “What’s your plan?”

“I’m thinking of taking up knitting.”

“I could use a sweater.”

“I might only be up to scarves by Christmas.”

“So I guess this means you’re hanging up the skates.”

The framed team picture on my desk catches my eye. I can barely stand to look at Brie next to me in the back row, both of us proudly wearing our green-and-gold jerseys. We would have been at the center of the team, in the place of honor, at this year’s team picture. And the next year’s. Two years of my life have been taken from me.

I sigh. “I don’t have much of a choice.”

“Well, what are your choices?” Coach asks.

“I wasn’t kidding. I have no options. Principal pulled my team out from under me. Closest school team is an hour away, and four of my teammates took their last roster spots because my parents said no. Don’t have the money for tuition at a fancy

private school like Brie, unless you want to spot me fifty grand. And that's it. I'm out."

I feel his empathy through the phone. "I'm sorry, Mich."

"Want a forward? I'm quick on the draw and I cycle fast."

"Absolutely. You're hired. Just drop three years from your age."

"So, hang a half-naked Selena Gomez poster in my room and obsessively check my chin for hair growth in the mirror?"

Coach laughs again. "You been stalking me, Michigan?"

Well, hell, I do need a new hobby.

"How about a consolation prize?" he says.

"What's that?"

"I can take one more assistant coach on my bench. Come coach with me."

With my finger, I trace an X over Brie on our team picture. Over the swimmers. The Silver Lake girls. The early retirees. My own photo is the only one left, hanging on to nothing, all by myself.

Or I could spend my afternoons yelling at eighth-grade boys. "I'm in."

*

"You're my new coach?!" Trent uses his hip to block me from the bathroom sink. Our nightly ritual. Morning ritual. Anytime-either-of-us-needs-something-from-the-bathroom ritual.

I manage to get my fingertips on the toothpaste and slide it across the blue tile. "Ha!"

Trent digs in to his stance, angling his body between me and

my toothbrush. “How ’bout I’ll actually listen to you at practice if you let me have the bathroom first?”

I plant my bare feet firmly on the linoleum and sink my weight into my lower body. “How ’bout I won’t make you do extra push-ups if you let me get my toothbrush?”

“Only way you’re getting that toothbrush is if you push me out of the way.”

So I do. It takes longer than I’d like to admit and we’re both panting and red-faced, but I win. For once this week.

*

Saturday morning. Departure day for Brie. It’s a seven-hour drive to get to Chicago, six if Mr. Hampton lets Brie drive. She’ll stay at a hotel with her parents tonight and they’ll move her into her dorm room tomorrow morning. She’s going to have a roommate and a new team and a bathroom she won’t have to check her way into when she needs to pee.

It’s a brutal goodbye. There’s crying and Kleenex and croaked promises. And yet, somehow, there’s excitement. On Brie’s part. Me, I’ve got nothing. Except a long trek home by my car-less self.

As I walk past the high school, I’m drawn to the closed-off pool. It’s not an area I go by often. It’s attached to the farthest edge of the school, an afterthought by the building committee back in the days when education regularly included things besides math and language arts. I took swim lessons there when I was younger, but I’ve spent more time in pads than swimsuits in the last eight years.

I wonder if the pool looks as empty and lonely as I feel.

A ragged chain-link fence runs the perimeter of the building, with yellow construction tape hanging from it in uneven swags. One whole wall is missing, offering a glimpse inside the natatorium. The pool is empty of water but filled with construction debris. Black lane lines jut up through piles of drywall and cinder blocks, all covered with a thick layer of dust. Straight across from the hole is the wall I'd remembered, painted green with large gold varsity letters proclaiming it the home of the Owl River Muskrats. The gold threads no longer sparkle under the construction dust, and wires dangle in front of the pennants. The list of titles won spans the years back to 1968, but the longest stretch of pennants is at the most recent end of the wall. They almost all belong to Jack Ray.

It is exactly as empty as I feel.

But not as lonely. The chain-link fence dips forward as hands grip it next to mine. Jack Ray leans over the metal rail, his eyes on the wreckage.

It doesn't matter that we've never been introduced. That we've never spoken. He's an ally. "They didn't even take your pennants down," I say.

He shrugs. "They're just pieces of cloth."

"Where do you swim now?"

"I'm lucky," he says. "I've been with a regional club for years. I train with a private coach over at the university or the Rec Center. I just swam here because I liked the guys. It gets lonely training by yourself."

"You *are* lucky."

"So that was all true about you guys having nowhere to play?" He looks at me, and I feel concern coming from this stranger.

Concern that I wish my parents had shown. Or Brie's parents. Even Brie.

I nod. "Yep."

He turns back to the empty pool. "If I didn't have a team or a pool, I'd still have to swim. I'd jump in a lake if I had to. Guess it doesn't work that way with hockey."

"I like skating outside. But you can't play a real game without a team."

"True. It wouldn't be as fun if I never got to race."

"What was — is — your event?"

"Mostly freestyle sprints."

I nod; I do know what that means.

"One hundred and two hundred fly. Two hundred IM occasionally. Free relay and medley relay whenever I can."

"OK, now you lost me." But that explains the plethora of pennants on the wall.

"I hear Laura's recruiting former hockey players for the girls' swim team." I don't miss the hint of bitterness in his tone. It's how I feel when I see the male hockey players wearing their team jackets in the school hallway.

"Yeah, but she was smart enough not to invite me."

He squints at me, his face relaxing almost to a smile. "You can swim, right?"

"Well enough to tread water until a lifeguard gets to me. You can skate, right?"

"Well enough to ... aw, who am I kidding. But I'm not afraid to fall."

Oh, dear Lord, that smile. Please tell me that was flirting because I am swooning hard. I always knew Jack was crush-

worthy, with his dark hair and matching eyes and what could be assumed, from his swimming statistics, to be a solid swimmer's body under that hoodie. Added benefit: I've never seen him act like a buffoon in the school hallways.

But mostly this conversation is the first time all week I've felt like someone was on my side. Even my own team doesn't seem to understand what I'm going through. What we're supposed to be going through together.

"Brie — Gabrielle Hampton, my best friend, from hockey —"

"I know who she is."

"Yeah, she's kind of hard to miss."

He does this eyebrow-lift head-nod thing that conveys I've got that right.

I sigh. "She left this morning. Like thirty minutes ago. To play for a private school in Chicago." My throat tightens again.

His head droops. "I'm sorry, Michigan."

And he knows my name. My inner cheerleader does a few high kicks and shakes her pompoms. The roller coaster of emotions over Brie leaving and Jack arriving has me so dizzy I'll never walk straight again.

"Are you thinking of going, too?" he asks.

I snort. "At twenty-five grand a year? Who has that kind of money?"

"Geez, that's worse than most colleges."

"Yeah. If her dad thinks fifty grand is going to finally buy Brie an A, he's mistaken —" I swallow the end of my sentence. Trashing my best friend and she's barely out of town. *Well done, Mich.* "Anyway, no private schools for me. I'm going to help coach my brother's bantam team instead."

“If you’re good enough to coach boys, why don’t you go out for the guys’ team here?”

“Oh! No. I mean, we all joked about it the other day. But no, it’s a different game. Girls don’t check.”

“But you’re wearing all that padding, right? So you must be used to some kind of hitting.”

“Oh, yeah. There’s plenty of physical contact. And we hit the ice hard sometimes. Checking is more of a strategic thing.”

“So learn.”

“I doubt they’d let me play.”

“You don’t know unless you ask.”

“I’m sure they’d say no if I asked.”

Jack flashes a full smile that paralyzes me. “Then don’t ask.”

4

Walking into the rink is bittersweet. Walking into the rink next to my brother, pubescent stink wafting off his hockey bag, well, that part just sucks ass.

At least I still have my home rink. At least it's not a pile of rubble like Jack's pool.

Although an outsider might not agree with me. The Owl River Community Ice ain't The Joe. A handful of the low-hanging lights burned out sometime in my youth and haven't been replaced yet, leaving a couple of dim spots on the ice. It smells musty in here, too, especially on the damper days in springtime. And the locker rooms are fricking freezing.

But it's the same faded green carpet and yellowed bleachers that my friends and I played tag on while Dad's P.D. buddies played against the fire department. The familiar buzz of the old scoreboard, the Say No to Chew poster in the locker room hallway, permanently flecked with — of course — chew stains. The spot on the home bench where Brie's sophomore-year

boyfriend Daniel etched his initials. When they broke up, she and I sneaked a bottle of purple nail polish onto the bench and painted over them.

This will always be home. Even though home is currently overrun with belching bantams.

Today is only tryouts for the season. The boys will get split into two teams, AAA and AA. They'll start real practices next week. Coach Norman wants me in half-pads so I can demonstrate drills safely, which is the most on-ice action I'm going to see this season. I push into the women's restroom with my bag.

"Oh!" I start to back out of the one-seater bathroom. There's a half-dressed girl sitting on the floor, taping up her shin pads. "Sorry. Didn't realize anyone was in here."

She shrugs her blond hair over one shoulder and unwinds a roll of pink tape around her pad. "No worries. I'll be done in a minute."

"OK if I throw some pads on?"

"Of course. I don't care if you see my sports bra."

"Ditto." I'm used to sharing not only a locker room but also a shower room with my entire team. Modesty left us back in junior high. I know exactly who has the biggest boobs, who has the paunchiest tummy and who I'll never share a razor with because I know where it's been.

I pull down my warm-ups to shove shin pads into my pant legs. My mind is on Coach Norman's practice agenda, on how good it feels to breathe the cold damp air of the rink again. I'm admiring my shiny new whistle when something occurs to me. "Wait. Are you trying out for bantams?"

The girl looks at me like I'm a moron. "Well, I'm not here for figure skating practice."

I grin. “No, you are not. I don’t remember seeing a girl on Trent’s team before.”

“I’m new to town.”

“You’re not going out for the U14 girls’ team?”

“I checked out their practice. They’re kind of a lot younger than me.” She shrugs. “It’s OK. I’ve always played with guys.”

That’s the non-ego way of saying *I’m too good*. I’m curious to see how she fares out there. Best of luck to her. If she doesn’t gag on their stench, she’ll be fine.

We don’t even get through warm-ups before the first idiot makes a comment to me. While leading team stretches, I instruct the boys — and one ballsy girl — on a frog stretch.

“Ooh, Mich,” Trent’s best friend moans. “Just like that. That feels so good!”

I get to my feet, stride over to him and look down. “Start pushing.”

“I’m kidding! It’s a compliment, Mich.”

“Ten push-ups. Now. Or it goes up to fifteen. And that’s Coach Manning to you.” So cool. I’ve always wanted to say that.

As the kid drops to his gloves, the team counts aloud, giggling into their facemasks. Coach Norman nods approvingly in my direction.

The girl is good. I realize I wanted her to be. I wanted her to come out and rise above their crap and outskate them and out-skill them and she does it. She completely kills tryouts.

“Do you think we’ll get to share a locker room with Megan?” Trent asks, as I drive us home in Mom’s car. Making a note to hang an extra tree off the rearview mirror because one is not going to cut it for Trent’s bag this season.

“Definitely not.”

“Do you think she’ll smash us if we hit on her?”

“Definitely yes.”

Coach Norman didn’t even hesitate to put Megan on the AAA team. The guys are thrilled she’s there. Whether that has to do with her gorgeous blond hair or her gorgeous wrist shot, I don’t know.

*

I’m antsy this evening and a long list of math problems is not holding my attention.

My mind keeps returning to the ice. I wasn’t even playing tonight, just demonstrating drills. But I desperately craved the opportunity to demonstrate one more drill so I could take another shot, dish another pass, let my heart race against my feet on another sprint. I’m like a dog who gets a whiff of barbecue from the neighbor’s yard and paces the fence hoping for another whiff, even though there’s no chance someone’ll drop a burger on my side.

My phone is maddeningly silent. Nothing from Brie for two days now. I texted her about tryouts earlier, but I guess her fancy new boarding school is more interesting than eighth-grade boys. Shocker.

A run is what I need, although it’s not like I have anything to train for. My mom will give me hell about homework if she sees me slip out, but by this time she’s usually zoned out in front of the Lifetime channel, dulling the pain of another day in a job she hates, in a town she hates even more. I bang around in the

laundry room a bit, pretending to look for something, before sneaking out the back door.

The sky is turning dusky; the sun is gone, but its remnants are enough to run by. I didn't bring music because nothing fit my mood: post-practice adrenaline plus post-team depression. Instead I listen to my breath, faster than it should be because I haven't been training properly in the last few weeks. And my solitary footprints, not as fast as they should be because I haven't been training properly in the last few weeks.

I wonder if Brie's running right now with her new team. If the Silver Lake defectors are running with their new team. Or lifting weights or even having a captain's practice. I wonder if Laura and the other swimmers are training right now, although I don't think swimmers do much running.

I'm not used to training on my own. I need to know that somewhere, someone else is running. Matching my pace, pushing me forward. Spotting me from a distance.

Of course they are running. They all have a season to prepare for, whether it's on frozen or chlorinated water. I'm the only one with no destination at the end of this run.

Swimmers make me think of Jack, and before I realize it, my feet have led me to the empty pool again. The open building gapes like a cavernous mouth in the twilight. I stop at the fence and replay our conversation.

Pathetic. I'm so pathetic, running at night by myself, swooning over a boy I barely know. I never would have done this before losing my team.

OK, I still would have swooned over a boy I barely know. But at least I'd be running with my best friend.

They didn't even take his pennants down. If they tore the rink down, I'd like to think someone would remove the ancient team trophies in the glass cases lining the lobby, tarnished and dusty as they are. Even if it's first place for the local beer league — a cheesy plastic skate glued to the front of a stein — someone worked for that trophy. I climb the fence, carefully lifting myself over the pokey metal fringe at the top. I drop to the ground and tiptoe through the pockmarked, debris-strewn site.

I make my way to the pennant wall, my sneakers crunching concrete pebbles into the tiled pool deck. I can just barely make out which pennants are Jack's. They're only cloth, he told me. They don't matter to him. Assmont can tear the building down, but he can't take away what Jack has already achieved.

There are no ladders or benches, but eventually I find a large cinder block — by stubbing my toe on it. I drag it, scraping loudly across the floor, to the base of the pennant wall. Stretching up from my tiptoes, I snag the only pennant I can reach. It pulls off easily. I step down, holding it away from my face to shake the dust off it.

Jack Ray, Michigan High School Athletic Association, 2017 U.P. Finals, 100 Freestyle, 42.68

Jack stood alone on a starting block, dived into the water and relied on no one but himself to push across the finish line before the other seven swimmers. He accomplished that.

Megan moved to town. She needed a hockey team. She tied her skates like a big girl, sitting on the floor of the women's bathroom without whining about it. She beat out at least half of those boys and earned her spot on the AAA team.

Cherrie was desperate to play. So she found a team. Di, Kara and Hanna were desperate to play. They jumped at the chance.

MICHIGAN VS. THE BOYS

Brie ... It hurts, but Brie got in that car and went. For the first time, she went without me. I've been part of a team for so long that maybe I've forgotten how to do something by myself.

I roll the pennant up and carry it home, jogging like a track athlete with a baton. At home, I open my hockey bag and slide the rolled pennant into my skate.

There's one high school hockey team left in this town. Tryouts are in two days. I'll be there.

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Carrie S. Allen is a Colorado girl who wears flip-flops year-round and never skips dessert. She is retired from sports medicine and extra-tired from chasing around two kids and two dogs. She writes contemporary YA about girls who kick butt in sports.

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“Michigan vs. the Boys is a mature exploration — with no sugarcoating — of some of the struggles a female goes through playing male-dominated sports. A must-read for those who want to break down barriers in sport.”

— CASSIE CAMPBELL-PASCALL,
the only Canadian captain, male or female, to
lead two Olympic hockey teams to Gold

