

CARRIE BYRD

LOSER
OF THE
YEAR



CHAPTER 1

“ALL OF YOU ARE HERE today because I know how to win,” Jillian Reed announced.

She glared down at the soccer field’s small crowd from her make-shift podium, as if daring her colleagues and the handful of local reporters to challenge her.

No one did.

Mattie Belman narrowed her eyes in the bright morning sun, hoping she was far enough back to be out of this woman’s sightline. Jillian’s statement was telling. Nothing about the hard work and sweat her girls put into training or what they’d learned on the road to last year’s state championship. No comments about the value of soccer in teaching discipline and teamwork.

Jillian still had time. The press conference was only five minutes old.

But somehow Mattie, who’d never heard the great Coach Reed speak until this morning, had a feeling that the rest of this speech would be about exactly one person.

Mattie knew about Jillian, of course. Who didn’t know about the most notable figure to emerge from Gladbeck since the guy who’d invented cake mix in the 1940s? Years ago, Jillian had played professional soccer, with a short stint on the US Women’s National Team. Almost as soon as her career had started, she’d inexplicably returned to her hometown to coach at an all-girls high school.

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Jillian Reed came back home, didn't she? Mattie's mother had said over the phone two months ago, and Mattie knew what her mother meant: *you should come home too.*

Out of desperation, Mattie had finally done just that. And here she was, St. Rita High School's brand-new Theater Arts teacher, staring up at maybe the most arrogant person she'd ever seen—which said a lot, given that Mattie was an actor by training. Why the hell would anyone come back to Northeastern Pennsylvania if they'd had any other option?

Jillian tossed her head, shoulder-length black hair gleaming in the sunlight. She lifted her chin enough for Mattie to notice how sharp it was. "How many of you knew this school existed twenty years ago?"

No response. A few older St. Rita employees raised tentative hands, then lowered them quickly, as if they didn't want to be noticed.

"Exactly," Jillian said as if no one had moved. "That's because before I showed up, St. Rita's was a school where desperate Catholic parents dumped their moody offspring, hoping against hope their baby girls would inhale some true belief along with the mold spores procreating in these ancient walls. Now, look at it." Jillian pointed at the three-story structure behind her. "Sure, it's still falling apart. Sure, the pipes burst last May and flooded the cafeteria. But none of that matters. What matters is thirteen years' worth of Pennsylvania Girls Athletic Association championship banners plastered on top of that peeling lead paint. And it's all thanks to yours truly: the best girls' soccer coach in the history of this mediocre state."

"They let her talk like this?" Mattie asked as quietly as she could, turning her face just slightly toward Gabe Martinez, the history teacher standing next to her. "Pretty sure you and I would get fired before we had half of that out of our mouths."

Gabe laughed a little too loudly.

Another faculty member near them turned around and scowled.

"Sorry." Gabe didn't sound sorry at all. Then, when the woman turned back to watch Jillian, he leaned toward Mattie. "Jillian's in a whole different category. If you or I got St. Rita's name in the local press on a regular basis, admin would probably let us say whatever the hell we wanted."

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It was a fair point. Mattie hadn't even met her students yet, let alone done anything of note at St. Rita's. Other than spilling a soda down her white blouse during last week's orientation, which might've been much worse if Gabe—who'd been showing her around—hadn't been so quick with paper towels and a friendly smile.

Jillian, on the other hand, sure didn't seem friendly. That was a shame; she was the only obviously queer woman Mattie had seen since returning to Gladbeck. The second Jillian had stepped up to her podium, all swagger and knowing confidence, without a shred of makeup on that proud face, Mattie sensed instantly what the two of them had in common: what her mother still sometimes called *your girl thing*.

Sharing a sexuality didn't mean Mattie had to like Jillian. Or that Jillian had to like Mattie. Birds of a feather didn't always flock together. Sometimes one of them flapped and squawked, while the other bird hopped around with a broken wing.

Mattie felt pretty broken these days.

At her podium, Jillian was going over last year's championship victory and the supposedly brilliant game plan she'd concocted to win it.

Mattie found herself listening to the tone and tenor of Jillian's voice rather than the self-congratulatory words. It was a voice made for public speaking, rich and full-throated and surprisingly deep. Jillian clearly knew how to use her assets to get attention.

Maybe that explained the local reporters. It seemed slightly ridiculous for a high school soccer coach to hold a press conference, but four attentive journalists were currently huddled below the podium, all with their phones angled toward Jillian to record her comments.

"I'm predicting another great year for the St. Rita Peacemakers and a fourteenth consecutive championship trophy," Jillian declared, "thanks to my brilliant leadership and endless capacity for excellence. Oh, and tryouts are after school today, for any students who want to prove they deserve my attention. Any questions from the peanut gallery? Bruce, I know what you're gonna ask, and the answer, my guy, is seven. You'll see seven different colors of cargo pants on me this season. Could be a pattern or two, who knows?"

A few of the reporters chuckled good-naturedly, and the only man—Bruce, Mattie guessed—hollered, “What about trying on a skirt this year, Coach? That’d be a nice change. We could make you a trophy for finally looking like a girl.”

Jillian’s face froze. Only for a second or two before her mouth split into a too-wide grin, but it was enough time for Mattie to feel a strong twinge of sympathy.

“I’ll wear a skirt to the party I’ll throw when your ass gets fired for public sexual harassment, Bruce,” Jillian said pleasantly. “A light pink one, in your honor, since that’s the right color for a pig.”

Muted *ooohs* hummed through the small crowd, and more than a few people laughed, Mattie among them. She couldn’t see Bruce clearly from where she stood, but it was a good bet that the current shade of his face matched Jillian’s fictional skirt.

Damn. Could Jillian really get this guy fired? That was seriously impressive and more than a little intimidating.

Bruce lowered his outstretched arm and put his phone in his pocket.

“She always wins,” Gabe said, as if hearing Mattie’s thoughts. “Always. And not just championships. Better learn that now, new kid.”

Kid. Mattie was thirty-eight. She didn’t like to think about that number or all the goals she hadn’t accomplished before reaching it. “Don’t worry. I don’t plan to get on her bad side.”

“Planning doesn’t usually have much to do with it.”

Before she could ask him to clarify, Jillian called out, “Who wants to benefit by going right after Bruce? Ask any second-rate questions now, and they’ll seem way smarter by contrast.”

One of the women close to the podium raised her hand.

“Now, this one knows how to write,” Jillian said. “Take note, scribes. What was that word you used to describe me in your last article, Angie? Transcendent?”

“Magnificent,” Angie corrected. “Coach Reed, I was just wondering if you’ve thought about asking any of your former teammates to come speak to the Peacemakers? Either from Montana Big Sky FC or the national team? Of course, we all know you played with Abby

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Wambach back in the day, and she would be an incredible role model for—”

“My Peacemakers,” Jillian interrupted, “don’t need Abby Wambach. They have Jillian Reed. Abby chews with her mouth open anyway. Annoying. And besides, I don’t keep in contact with any of them. That part of my life’s long over and done with.”

She sounded defensive, and Mattie couldn’t help but wonder if there was more to the rebuff than sheer ego. Jillian and her former teammates probably had some bad blood between them, or at least awkwardness, compounded into avoidance by years of distance.

Not that Mattie could afford to throw any stones. For months now, she’d passively distanced herself from her well-meaning friends back in L.A., unable to withstand their pity for the double whammy of a divorce and a dead-end acting career. The fading of those relationships had been painful, but not as painful as her friends’ unwarranted optimism. Over and over, they’d ignored what Mattie saw as the cold reality of her own failure, telling her she’d meet someone else, that she was too talented to quit acting.

Of course, Jillian was also talented. She had to be talented to make it that far. Yet she’d quit and come home too, for reasons Mattie probably would never learn.

“Other questions?” Jillian hollered. “You’ve got five more minutes with me, folks, before I gotta get to my yoga sun salutations. They’re spectacular to behold, and, sorry, you can’t watch.”

Yes. Mattie stared up at Jillian and tucked an errant curl of hair behind her ear. I have a lot of questions. What am I doing at this school? Why did I think it was a good idea to move back home and take this job, even temporarily, when I didn’t like growing up here? How soon can I leave again? Is that massive ego of yours real, or are you just a better actor than I am?

And then—oh. Was that Mattie’s imagination, a trick of the sun, or was—?

Jillian Reed was looking right back at her.

No, she couldn’t be. Mattie wasn’t near enough to the podium for that, and there were two dozen people around her. So many others for

Jillian to notice, to make her eyes widen and her mouth open slightly, in what seemed a hell of a lot like confusion.

“Is she looking at *you*? Why is she looking at you?”

Gabe sounded strangled, but for some reason, Mattie couldn’t acknowledge him, couldn’t wrench herself away from Jillian’s gaze.

They didn’t know each other. They’d never met before. Mattie was positive about that. Because Mattie would definitely remember this taut cord pulling between their eyes. She’d remember the way her breath went shallow in her chest as Jillian stared at her, turning Mattie’s face hot and her limbs tight, as though her entire body was preparing to launch.

Launch to where? Toward what?

“I’ve got another question,” Angie called out. “Who’s the new captain this season? Emma Brady or Emma Davis?”

The spell shattered. Jillian turned in the voice’s direction, and it was ridiculous, absolutely illogical, for Mattie to want that attention right back on her. Especially when that attention belonged to a self-absorbed soccer coach who could clearly destroy anyone who crossed her path.

“Emma Kowalski,” Jillian said agreeably, as if she hadn’t just been fixated on a stranger. “She got me almost three thousand new followers on TikTok with that video she made. Brady and Davis didn’t clear five hundred. Who’s next?”

It was a joke. It had to be. No one could really be that self-centered.

And yet Jillian, despite the pleasant note in her voice, didn’t crack a smile. She watched the reporters, waiting for them to deliver on the promise of their attention. Her gaze was uncompromising.

What color were Jillian’s eyes? Would their gaze feel even more intense if Mattie were close enough to tell?

“Watch out,” Gabe said, and this time, Mattie turned to look at him. His expression, normally open and relaxed, was tight. “She noticed you. It’s not good when Jillian Reed notices you. Might be a good idea to lay low for a while.”

“Oh no.” Mattie tried to make a joke of it. She still felt flustered, as though Jillian’s stare had stirred up something that didn’t want to stay quiet. “I don’t know how I’ll survive the morning.”

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At the podium, Jillian pointed down at another reporter with a rigid finger. “You. Yeah, the one who looks like she puts stickers on her label maker. Go.”

“You’ll survive,” Gabe said. “Probably.”

CHAPTER 2

MATTIE WOULDN'T SURVIVE THE MORNING.

Giving one-on-one public speaking lessons to the children of wealthy Los Angeles professionals was very different than teaching classes with twenty-five students each. That distinction didn't fully hit Mattie until her Theater 1 kids, the first class of the day, began streaming through her door, all clad in St. Rita's blue-and-white uniforms.

Inadequacy swamped her with nausea as she watched them take their seats. Twenty-five of them to one of her. She didn't have a teaching certificate. She'd never stood in front of a classroom. How the hell had anyone thought she was qualified to do this?

She knew the answer to that. Nepotism wasn't limited to Hollywood. As a teenager, Mattie had been the babysitter for St. Rita's principal's children.

Two months ago, she'd gotten a phone call from her excited mother, telling her that Cynthia Richter desperately needed an interim theater teacher, if Mattie would come home. No certification required, thanks to different state laws for Catholic schools.

You're lucky. You have a steady paycheck for the next ten months. Get it together.

At least her classroom looked great, thanks to the hours she'd put in last week. She'd taped up a dozen posters from famous play adaptations, mostly older ones like the Zeffirelli *Romeo and Juliet* or Poitier's version of *A Raisin in the Sun*. Strands of twinkle lights were strung

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across the walls in half-moons like velvet rope barriers. The whiteboard at the front of the room was framed by pieces of red cloth she'd gathered to look like curtains on a stage.

In the back of the room, a poster board titled *PERFORMER OF THE WEEK* offered a photo and some biographical information about Ethel Merman. Next Monday, she'd swap out Ethel for another one of her favorites, Paul Robeson.

It was a traditional classroom with five straight rows of desks and chairs, not the open floor space Mattie remembered from her own high school drama classes. Cynthia had informed her that Mattie would be required to teach theater as an academic subject, not as "some free-for-all hippie nonsense." Allegedly, last year's Theater Arts classes had spent too much time on pretending to be root vegetables.

An academic approach was fine. Mattie could write a few lectures and come up with some essay prompts, maybe test the students on theater terminology or history. She'd still center the interactive games that were the cornerstone of any drama class. But the rigid rows of desks felt ominous, like a barrier Mattie couldn't yet see her way around.

As elective courses, her theater classes had a mix of different grades. Theater 1 was filled with sophomores and freshmen—no, they called them *first-years* now—a few of whom seemed almost as nervous as Mattie felt. That helped a little. By the time Mattie introduced herself as Ms. Belman, then took roll, the tremor that threatened her voice had receded.

She was the adult here. Her students didn't have to know Mattie felt like the world's biggest imposter. Or that less than two months ago, she'd still been in the second bedroom of her ex-wife's Los Angeles condo, staying in bed until noon or later, with her cheese puff orange-stained fingers clutching the phone that she couldn't put down in case it finally buzzed with an audition callback.

They definitely didn't need to know that.

"Ms. Belman?" someone asked.

Mattie swiveled from the whiteboard where she'd been listing some basic terms.

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A girl stuck her hand high in the air. Her blonde hair had the kind of soft, gentle wave to it that Mattie had always envied.

“Yes? Uh, Emma?”

“Ella. Is it true you grew up here? That’s what my mom said.”

The Gladbeck gossip mill was already churning away. “I did.”

“But your family isn’t actually from Gladbeck. My mom said that too.”

Mattie managed not to wince. That was an old sore spot. Most families in Gladbeck had been there for a century or more. Her parents had moved to the area about five years before Mattie’s birth to help her dad’s grandmother, who needed care at the end of her life. More than four decades later, they still didn’t fully belong.

Mattie had spent most of her childhood feeling as if she were on the other side of a chain-link fence. For more than one reason.

“Two of my great-grandparents were born here,” she said. *And all their children left as soon as they could.* “Tell your mom their name was Sadowski. As in Sadowski’s Bakery?”

Ella showed no sign of recognition.

Mattie couldn’t blame her. That bakery had closed down under its new ownership about fifteen years ago.

Another girl, this one with frizzy, red hair and glasses, waved her hand in the air. Her skin was so white, it was almost translucent.

Okay, *this* girl was Emma. Mattie was almost positive.

“Is this a question about the class, Emma?”

“Emily,” the girl said politely. “Is it true you were on Broadway? Someone told me you used to be on Broadway. Do you know Sutton Foster? I love Sutton Foster. She changed my *life*.” Her head tilted forward in assumed humility, the gesture of someone about to brag. “I saw *The Music Man* in fifth grade.”

Ah. Right. A theater kid. This was much more comfortable territory. Mattie would bet every cent of her meager bank balance that Emily had saved her *Music Man* Playbill as the first in a treasured collection.

The thing was, Mattie did know Sutton Foster. Sort of.

Should she tell this eager-eyed kid she’d appeared in *Anything Goes* alongside Sutton’s Reno Sweeney, in the pivotal role of Ensemble #2?

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Or should she tell her that Sutton hadn't glanced Mattie's way even once but that Mattie really didn't hold it against her even though it still felt bad all these years later?

"Ms. Belman? Um, are you okay?"

Great. She was already fucking it up. "I'm fine. No, I don't know Sutton Foster. Yes, I had a couple of ensemble roles on Broadway. A long time ago."

"Wow." Emily exhaled. "An actual Broadway performer for a drama teacher. I can't believe how lucky we are to get a real education from you—"

"Suck-up," someone coughed in the back row.

"Because it's not like there are any other theater professionals in Gladbeck who know what they're doing," Emily continued, undeterred. "I *heard* that, Olivia."

The comment was directed at a short, dark-haired girl—Olivia Aguilar, the first name on Mattie's roster—slouched in her back-row chair, brown legs splayed underneath the desk. She smirked at the girl next to her before meeting Mattie's eyes directly. Confidence blazed in her unflinching stare.

Mattie was brand-new to this teaching thing, but she wasn't clueless either. Olivia could be trouble. Best to head it off at the pass. "Olivia, please raise your hand if you want to say something."

Immediately, Olivia raised her hand.

Mattie really should've seen that coming. "I'll revise that. Raise your hand if you want to say something productive."

Olivia's hand remained in the air.

Mattie sighed. "Yes?"

"First of all, Emily *is* a suck-up—she always has been—and every single one of us who was at Our Lady of Last Agony with her knows it. Second, I'm gonna make Coach Reed's team, and this class is during sixth period on Fridays, so you'll need to excuse me early every Friday for pregame practice."

At some point, maybe Mattie would stop running after every one of her students' sentences. "Don't call Emily a suck-up, and you're *what*? How are you already on the team? Tryouts haven't even happened yet."

“I was the striker on the middle school varsity team at Our Lady. There’s no way Coach won’t take me on when she sees what I can do later today.” Olivia grinned widely with pure self-confidence, and Mattie was struck by it. She remembered what it was like to be that certain of yourself.

Certainty wasn’t a memory for Jillian Reed. That much had been made clear by the press conference. Jillian’s boldness, Jillian’s grin, Jillian’s stare that had lasered right through Mattie’s equilibrium, had made her feel unsettled, pulled, warm...

“So you’ll need to let me out of class,” Olivia continued. “And anyone else who makes the team. All the teachers let out Coach Reed’s players early so they have time to practice before games on Wednesdays and Fridays.”

Oh, “all the teachers” did, did they? The casual assumption embedded in Olivia’s statement annoyed the hell out of Mattie. In other circumstances, she’d assume Olivia had tried to get one over on the new teacher, but if anyone seemed capable of making the entire school bow to her schedule, it was Jillian.

It was one thing when Jillian’s power got a sexist asshole fired. That, Mattie appreciated. Pulling her students out of class was something else. Mattie was pretty sure it wasn’t standard practice to assume your extracurricular activity took precedence over actual classes.

No, Jillian didn’t get to assume. Not this time.

“If you make the team, Olivia”—Mattie did her best to stay calm—“then you can feel free to tell Ji— Coach Reed that Ms. Belman’s students aren’t going anywhere when they’re scheduled to be in these seats. And she can take that up with me if she has a problem with it. Okay?”

Olivia’s eyebrows lifted to the middle of her forehead. Mattie could read her thoughts as plainly as if Olivia had spoken them out loud: *Okay, fine. If you want to make her mad, that’s on you.*

“Ms. Belman?” It was Emily again. “I’ve been dying to ask all summer: What’s the musical going to be? I really hope it’s *Legally Blonde*. Or *Into the Woods*. Ooh, or *The Pirates of Penzance*.”

“Uh, the musical?” Cynthia hadn’t mentioned a musical during Mattie’s fifteen-minute Zoom interview.

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“You didn’t know about the musical?” a button-nosed student in the second row—Riley? Kaylee?—asked. The question dripped with incredulity. “Everyone knows about the musical. Last year, it was a play; this year, there’s a musical; next year, it’s a play again. It happens in the spring.”

“Except there wasn’t a play last year,” Olivia cut in. “The last drama teacher got fired, and they had to get substitutes. I saw her video. My sister showed me.”

A few of the other girls shrieked in barely repressed laughter.

At least Mattie knew enough not to ask Olivia for clarification as to what this video contained or why the previous Theater Arts teacher had been fired. Mattie could probably make a decent guess anyway.

“You’re the teacher,” Riley-or-Kaylee continued. “Isn’t it your job to, you know, direct it or whatever? What kind of a theater teacher doesn’t know she’s supposed to direct the musical?”

Another fuckup. Fantastic. “Of course I know about the musical. I’d just forgotten about it. And watch your tone”—shit, she couldn’t use Riley-or-Kaylee’s name if she didn’t know it—“in class. When you’re in class.”

Twenty-five pairs of eyes stared at her, and Mattie could see reflected back their dawning realization that this new teacher didn’t know anything about her job or how to do it. Which, to be fair to them, was mostly true.

“So when is this musical thing getting started?” another girl asked. Mattie actually remembered this one’s name, since it was ludicrously on the nose for a Catholic school student: Trinity. “I really want to go to Penn State, and just being on the Peacemakers won’t cut it for my extracurriculars. Can I do something that isn’t acting?”

“I’ll let everyone know when I have more details. Promise.” That sounded better. As if Mattie already had some details, instead of a fistful of questions and leaking insecurity. “But if you want to be on the crew, I’m sure we can make that happen.”

“Good.” Trinity seemed satisfied.

“Coach Reed won’t like you doing something else after school that isn’t soccer,” Olivia said pointedly.

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A small knot of unease tightened in Mattie's stomach. She did her best to ignore it.

"You don't know that," Trinity said, but a thread of uncertainty underlined her firmness. "I'm a sophomore. I've played with her for a whole season. You're just a first-year who hasn't even tried out yet. You have no idea what you're talking about."

"Wanna bet?"

"Okay!" Mattie could feel the classroom's collective attention stampeding off toward a more interesting subject than the whiteboard's contents. "That's enough for now, all right? Let's get back to work."

Teaching. She was supposed to teach. There were about thirty-six minutes left in the class period to get through Mattie's fifty-minute lesson plan.

So she was supposed to put together a musical. And teach five periods a day while learning how to teach. And avoid making Jillian Reed angry.

Okay. Mattie could do all that.

Probably.

"Aristotle's six elements of drama." She gestured at the whiteboard with her marker, where a list of terms patiently waited. "Anyone want to try and define *plot* for me?"

Emily's hand shot high into the air, an eager arrow. No one else volunteered.

"Emily," Mattie said after a moment. She mostly paid attention to the girl's answer.

So much for a smooth start to her temporary career.

CHAPTER 3

BY THE TIME FOUR O’CLOCK approached, Mattie sat at her classroom desk, swallowing yawns with the last of her soda. A Diet Coke wasn’t enough caffeine to get her ready for her first after-school faculty meeting. Not by a long shot.

Actually, a shot might’ve been better.

“Mattie?” A rap sounded on the frame of the open door. “Still alive?”

She looked up from her school-issued Chromebook, in the middle of a paragraph written by a student who clearly thought capitalization was optional, and shut the lid. “Hey, Gabe. Still alive. Sort of.”

Gabe grinned at her. He was tall and broad-shouldered, with an easy smile and the kind of face that made you want to be honest with him. “You’ll have to tell me about it on the way. Come on. Jillian hates it when she’s not the last person to enter the room. Looks great in here, by the way.”

“Wait, *Jillian* hates it?” Mattie stood and shoved the laptop into her bag, along with a few manila folders and a semihelpful book titled *How to Teach Drama Without All the Drama*. “Doesn’t Cynthia run the faculty meetings? She’s the principal.”

“Cynthia chairs the faculty meetings. Jillian runs them, whether she talks or not. That’s why we’re meeting at four today instead of three thirty, by the way. Peacemaker tryouts. Hey, did she stop by your classroom yet today? Jillian, not Cynthia.”

What an odd question. Mattie flipped the light switch. “No. Why would she?”

“Jillian likes to make an appearance in every newbie’s class on the first day of the school year. She says she’s the welcome wagon, but honestly, it’s more like reconnoitering. Or a dog marking its territory. Anything to make sure you know what’s hers. So she didn’t come by, huh? That’s interesting.”

“Good interesting?” Mattie closed the door behind her as they stepped into the hallway. “Or bad interesting?”

On both walls near Mattie’s classroom were large signs made from torn butcher paper with hand-drawn soccer balls and huge gold lettering that looked like a written scream:

*ST. RITA PEACEMAKERS NUMBER ONE IN PA!!!!
OUR GOAL IS TO BLOCK YOURS!!!!
WE MAKE PEACE, YOU REST IN IT!!!!*

Gabe inhaled loudly enough for Mattie to hear. “She noticed you at that press conference this morning. Clearly. Between that eye lock and no visit today, I’d say it’s the kind of ‘interesting’ that should be accompanied by the *Jaws* theme. So, how’d it go with the kids? We should compare rosters so I can tell you who’s great and who’s a handful.”

They made their way down the mostly empty hallways, past rows of faded blue lockers, their paint chipped and peeling. Mattie had only managed to tell Gabe about two of her five classes by the time they arrived at the faculty meeting room, and as they entered, the heavy silence seemed to swallow up their conversation.

The large rectangular table in the center was already populated with other faculty members, most of whom Mattie recognized from the press conference crowd that morning. She wondered at first if anything had happened to throw them all into gloomy quiet, but, no, nothing appeared to be wrong. Just about everyone was looking down at their phones, seemingly uninterested in conversation.

She took a seat next to Gabe on the far side of the table, away from the door, and scanned the room, taking in her new coworkers.

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Mostly women, although that was expected. All of them were white too, with the exception of Gabe.

The lack of diversity wasn't a shock either, given Gladbeck's overwhelmingly Irish, Italian, and Polish population. Only a few of Mattie's students were people of color. The racial homogeneity felt jarring after fifteen years in New York and Los Angeles.

It was still completely silent. Weird. She was about to ask Gabe if St. Rita's had some rule against talking before meetings when the door slammed open and made all of them jump.

"Good afternoon, faculty!"

Cynthia Richter bustled through the door in a cloud of teased blonde hair and sickly-sweet perfume she must've bathed in that morning. Mattie could smell it from more than five feet away: Eau de Catholic High School Principal.

Mattie straightened up in her chair, as if good posture were in the contract she'd signed. Time to act like a professional.

Cynthia plopped down a large stack of folders in front of an empty seat and looked pointedly around the room. "I *said*, good afternoon, faculty!"

"Good afternoon," everyone muttered, mostly in unison.

"We all here?" Cynthia took her seat, not waiting for an answer this time. She opened her three-ring binder, stuffed haphazardly with multicolored papers. "All but Coach Reed. Guess tryouts must be going long."

Mattie was pretty sure this wasn't the first time Jillian had been late to a faculty meeting. No matter Cynthia's private feelings about it, apparently there weren't any real consequences for tardiness. Jillian's tardiness, specifically. Yet again, Coach Reed operated by a set of different rules.

"Well, welcome, ladies and gentlemen of the faculty, to a brand-new school year!" Cynthia's voice had all the cloying qualities of artificial sweetener. "As always, we'll begin our meeting with a moment of silence, followed by a prayer."

She crossed herself, one long red acrylic nail moving quickly up and down, then side to side. With fresh discomfort, Mattie watched the others around the table follow suit.

This was, presumably, her introduction to the Catholic side of Catholic education.

Mattie was definitely not Catholic. About the only thing she had in common with Catholics, as far as she could tell, was a cultural predilection for guilt.

She was Jewish, although not especially observant. For the most part, Mattie thought of her ethnoreligious identity as a patchwork quilt made out of Ashkenazi culture, family traditions, wry humor, asking a million questions, and a light sprinkle of intergenerational trauma.

Spaces like this one, though, made her feel the pull of her Jewishness much more strongly. Sure, she hadn't properly celebrated Shabbos since Grandma Ruth's death, and in sixth grade, she'd chosen the class play over studying for a bat mitzvah, but Mattie always felt most Jewish when other people brought up Jesus.

She placed her hands in her lap and lowered her eyes. Hopefully, that was respectful enough to escape anyone's attention. At least Cynthia already knew she was Jewish. The Richters had been semi-friendly with the Belmans back when Mattie had been the Richters' babysitter.

No, Cynthia hadn't outright stated that Catholicism was required for faculty members, but she also hadn't told Mattie that prayer would be so prominent. Maybe Mattie was horribly naïve for not realizing it beforehand. She'd just, well, sort of assumed that Catholicism was like cake icing when it came to St. Rita's: easily scraped off the substance of her job.

Was Jillian Catholic? If she was, how did she square that with her sexuality? Of course, you could be queer and religious, but—

"Heavenly Father," Cynthia began loudly.

Mattie almost jumped in her seat.

"We in this room praise you for our opportunity to educate young hearts and minds. Guide us as we navigate the mysteries of your universe. Remind us that teaching is a form of worship. Help us lead these girls toward real devotion to their studies and to lead them especially to you, who is the root of all knowledge. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen."

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“Amen,” a chorus of voices added, and everyone but Mattie crossed themselves again.

Mattie nearly mouthed *yikes* instead of *amen* but caught herself just in time. She could handle a little harmless prayer once in a while, right? It didn't have to mean anything to her. Right?

Oy vey iz mir.

At least Mattie's contract at St. Rita's was only for the academic year. She could get through just about anything for that long, even if being noticed by Jillian was actually as awful as Gabe seemed to think.

Then, as if on cue, the door opened, and there she was. Jillian Reed, in all her glory.

Plenty of glory to take in too. Jillian was taller than Mattie had guessed during the press conference, much taller than most women. Statuesque, even, with defined, muscular arms and a high-neck athletic tank top that refused to keep her shape a mystery. She had cheekbones that could slice through unripe fruit. Her shoulder-length hair was ink-black and straw-straight. Each detail joined to create the impression of a human exclamation point.

Mattie's cheeks flushed. She shouldn't be noticing the details of Jillian's body, especially not right now, in a room full of her colleagues. It wasn't professional.

“Here's our athletic director!” Cynthia exclaimed. “You're just in time.”

No answer, as if Cynthia weren't even there.

Jillian was frozen in place, just past the open door, and she was staring back at Mattie. In her expression was a whole facial language Mattie had never encountered before and couldn't even begin to translate.

But she'd wondered, that morning, about Jillian's eyes. This close, with Jillian only a few feet away, Mattie was able to see exactly what color they were.

“Coach Reed,” Cynthia said pleasantly, “I was just about to introduce our newest colleague.”

Dark. Her eyes were darker than Mattie could have imagined, and hungry. The color of the night sky without stars. The inside of a wolf.

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BY CARRIE BYRD

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