

*I unlocked the door, greeted by silence as Jared and I walked into the empty house. I continued to the living room, glancing out the door to the deck without seeing a sign of anyone.*

*“They’re playing soccer,” Jared hollered from the kitchen. I set my bag on the floor behind the couch and continued into the kitchen. Jared handed me a note with scrawling handwriting – probably Sara’s.*

*It gave directions to meet them at a local soccer field, and told Jared to wear a baseball hat. I glanced at him curiously at the request. He shrugged, not understanding it either.*

*“They left about twenty minutes ago,” I noted, glancing at my watch in comparison to Sara’s time indication on the note.*

*Jared followed me up the stairs to change before we headed out to meet them.*

*After changing, Jared and I drove to the field as directed. Jared had the baseball hat in his hands, not committing to wearing it until he knew why. They hadn’t started yet when we approached the field, but half of them were wearing hats.*

*“Finally!” Sara yelled, spotting us first. She rushed to Jared and then... I couldn’t look. It was still too much for me to have to witness.*

*Emma glanced up from bouncing the soccer ball off of her knee, wearing a dark blue Red Sox hat with her hair tucked behind her ears. I smiled at the youthful look, sending a wave of color to her cheeks when she smiled back.*

*“Great. Now we can get started,” Nate declared. “Evan, you’re on our team, without hats, and Jared, you’re on the hat team. We divided it up by who’s played, and who’s still playing in college. It worked out pretty even.”*

*I noted Emma, Serena, TJ, Brent, and Jared on one side, with Sara, Meg, Nate, Ren and me on the other – this was going to be interesting.*

*“We each have two college players,” Ren explained. I shrugged, not concerned about the matchup, although Jared was when he saw TJ doing cartwheels across the field.*

*“Don’t worry,” Meg assured him. “You have Emma. She’s two players, so you don’t really need TJ.”*

*I grinned as Emma turned the shade of the “B” on her hat while TJ tried to appear offended. TJ wasn’t much of an organized sports guy in school, so he knew he was useless.*

*Soccer was something Emma and I never played together, so I was a little nervous about it for some reason. Then when I saw her in action, I understood why – covering her wasn’t going to be easy – okay, it was virtually impossible. Our only hope for getting the ball from her was Nate, but TJ was doing a good job distracting him.*

*“Yes!” Jared exclaimed, after they scored their second goal in a row. “Are you sure the teams are even?” he taunted.*

*“We can do this,” Ren encouraged, kicking the ball to the center of the field.*

*We opted to play the width of half the field to keep it more competitive instead of running up and down the full field – regardless, we still couldn’t score. It took some time, an excessive amount of effort, and another goal scored on us, but Nate and I were finally able to break past Serena and Emma to score. On the return, Emma started dribbling past me, looking across for Serena. I knew she was going to beat me, and was done with being burned, so I grabbed her around the waist before she could send the ball across the field, pulling her back. Nate came up and intercepted it before I let her go.*

*“What?!” she scolded.*

*“Oh, you didn’t tell us we were playing full contact soccer,” Jared stated, coming up alongside Nate and shoving him with his shoulder to take back the ball.*

*This instigated more physical contact, that bordered tackling, but at least it gave me a reason to wrap my arms around Emma and keep her from getting a pass—until she stepped on my foot and got it anyway. The girls were a little more vicious than I anticipated.*

*“Sara, you’re not supposed to be out to break a rib,” Serena yelled, grabbing her side when Sara maneuvered by her. Jared approached Sara and lifted her off of the ground, kicking the ball back to Brent, who was covering the goal. Brent sailed it up the sideline toward Emma.*

*“That’s not right!” Meg hollered at Jared when he kept a hold of Sara and started kissing her.*

*“We don’t need to be seeing that,” I yelled at him, scooping up the soccer ball and pegging him off of his back. Sara laughed when he set her down and came running after me with the ball in his hand.*

“I don’t think we’re playing soccer anymore,” Serena observed with her arms crossed, watching Evan weave through the players to avoid Jared’s retribution. ~~of being pelted with the soccer ball.~~

Evan came up behind me and stopped, putting his hands on my shoulders and holding me between Jared and him, ducking his head to avoid being hit.

“Don’t get me involved in this,” I threatened, trying to move out of the way. Evan wouldn’t let me go as he manipulated my positioning to stay out of Jared’s target range.

“I’ll save you, Emma,” Brent declared, tackling Evan to the field then Jared gunned the ball at the two guys, nailing Brent in the leg.

“Ah,” he groaned. “Jared, man, I was helping you out.”

“Sorry, Brent,” Jared said, offering him his hand to help him off of the ground.

I looked down at Evan and shook my head before walking away.

“What?! You’re not going to help me up?” he yelled after me.

“You used me as a shield,” I hollered back without looking. “No way.”

“Watch out, Emma,” Meg exclaimed.

Before I realized he was running to catch up, Evan picked me up and swung me over his shoulder.

“Evan, put me down,” I demanded, pushing off of his back as he continued to jog with me across the field. I turned my head to see where we were heading. “Don’t you dare!”

Evan continued across the road and down the embankment.

“Meg, don’t just stand there,” I pleaded while she watched from the road.

“I can’t do anything,” she shrugged.

TJ and Brent came sprinting down the hill after us, but it was too late. Even dumped me in the pond. He was forced in after me when Brent threw himself at him. The water was warm, shallow and smelled of rotting vegetation. I flung the muck off of my hands with a disgusted grimace as I sat in the tepid water up to my shoulders. The guys continued their assault, discovering the arsenal that lay along the bottom and began throwing it at each other. Evan ducked under the water and came up alongside me.

“Don’t even try to use me to protect you again,” I demanded, dodging a ball of black sludge.

“Are you ready to go yet?” Sara yelled impatiently from the top of the hill.

TJ and Brent froze, looking from their hands filled with pond scum back to Sara with her hands on her hips. They dropped their weapons and rinsed their hands in the water. I was on my feet and forcing my heavy, wet cleats through the water.

The three guys followed behind me, dragging their legs as their feet were suctioned to the pond floor. We removed our shoes and socks before continuing to the cars, smelling worse than if we had played soccer all day.

“You four can sit in the back of the van,” Serena stated, scrunching her nose as we neared her.

I glared at Evan for lumping me in with the outcasts in the back of the van. He laughed, while wiping the muck off of his legs.