

# THE SWEET SPOT

ELAINE  
VICKERS

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PEACHTREE  
ATLANTA



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*For Robbie—*

*the person he was,  
and is,  
and wants to be*



# CHAPTER

## I

It's not the first time Dad's left us. When you're a Marine, and you've promised to serve your country, sometimes deployment is part of the deal.

Even if they don't tell you where you're going or exactly when you'll be back.

Even if the whole point of switching to Reserve was so you could be home more and your family wouldn't have to move around so much.

Even if your son is about to start his last season of Little League on the same team you played on when you were a kid, and you were supposed to be the third-base coach like last year, and you've both been looking forward to it forever.

This time, Dad has a gift for each of us at dinner: his old laptop for Shar to use while he's gone, since she's the oldest; his old iPad for me, since I'm next; his box of vintage T-shirts from when he was a kid for Marley, because she

loves that kind of stuff. A plush bean for Bean, plus a bunch of recordings of him reading her favorite books for her to listen to on Mom's phone when she's missing him.

But after dinner, he has something else for me too. "I found it when I was looking for those shirts for Marley," he says. He hands me an old shoebox, full of his stuff from way back when, with his name on the top in kid handwriting. *William Henry Roberts II* it says, and I draw one more line at the end with my finger because that makes it my name. *William Henry Roberts III*. That whole "the third" thing is why people started calling me Triple, which eventually turned into people calling me Trip. Sometimes I almost forget *William Henry Roberts III* is my full name, but not in this moment.

"Take care of your mom and your sisters," he says, and I nod and pretend like that's something a twelve-year-old kid can do.

"I love you, Dad," I say, and he wraps his strong arms around my skinny body so tight, I can barely move my arms to hug him back.

When I wake up the next morning, the box is still there, but Dad is already gone.

# CHAPTER

# 2

**T**he day the season officially starts, I walk to the ballpark since Dad's not around to give me a ride. We used to pick up my friends Dylan and Andy, but Dad being gone means we all have to walk. When Dylan sees me coming, he gives me a cool up-nod—and chucks something in my direction.

“Think fast,” he says as a baseball stings my left hand. I drop the ball and shake my fingers out, wishing my reflexes hadn't taken over. I look down at the skin of my palm, which is already turning red.

“Sorry,” he says. “I thought you could handle a curveball.”

“Speaking of curveballs . . .” says a voice behind me. I spin around, and there's Andy Nelson, our first baseman, who likes dramatic entrances and dramatic pauses and I guess just drama.

Dylan rolls his eyes. “If you're going to say ‘speaking of,’ you have to actually keep speaking.”

“I’m getting to it,” Andy says. “Speaking of curveballs, did you notice they added a new player to the roster? My mom had to make some last-minute changes.” (Andy’s mom is the league president this year.) “It’s some new kid from out of town. The coaches had a meeting last night about whether he could actually be drafted or not, even though it already happened.” Andy’s ahead of us now, walking backwards so he can face us for maximum dramatic effect. I don’t even think he’d care if he fell, because, you know, more drama. “Isn’t that weird?” he asks. “This new kid could be a total wild card. Aren’t you nervous?”

“No,” Dylan says.

“I am now,” I say, because this is a lot, even for Andy. “What do you know?”

He’s so much shorter than Dylan that he has to take twice as many steps just to stay ahead of us. Andy drops his voice. “I heard my mom telling my dad that having her as president isn’t the only thing that’s going to be different this year. That it’s the twenty-first century, and it’s past time for Cedar Valley to catch up with the rest of the world.”

I look around at the shady sidewalks and quiet streets. It’s definitely not as busy as where we used to live in North Carolina, but I’ve been here four years now, and this place has never felt like it’s behind. Just different.

“What does that even mean?” I ask.

“I don’t know.” Andy raises an eyebrow. “But I can’t wait to find out.”

Dylan flips his hat around backwards. “I’m not worried. Only Jax aged out last year, and we would have won if that stupid ump hadn’t stolen it from us in the semifinals. Otto’s Auto Parts is going all the way. Whoever the new kid is, we’ll win the championship and get our names on that sign.”

We can see the ballpark now—including the sign on the side of the concession stand where the names of every champion team have been painted since this ballpark was built. Everybody on the winning team gets to sign their name below their year. I still remember Dad showing me that sign when we moved here—and his faded signature from the year he played for Otto’s Auto Parts and they won the championship.

Even though Dad won’t be around to help coach this season, his signature being on the wall makes me feel a little less alone. At least I’m not the new kid anymore—and at least we have almost exactly the same players as last year. The same guys that are piling out of their parents’ cars right now.

Xander MacFarland, our pitcher, and Theo Kunz, our catcher, arrive together, because they do pretty much everything together. Xander, who everyone calls Mac, is the man on the mound. Sick slider, freaky fastball, absolute monster out there. He might secretly be twenty-seven years old, but

I'm not complaining since he's on our team. Theo is a great player too, but he goes by Cheese because one time he got into the snack cooler during the game and ate all twenty-four string cheeses and threw up behind the bleachers, and it was so funny that nobody cared that we didn't have a snack that day.

As for the infield, Andy, Dylan, and I play first, short-stop, and third, so when our second baseman Jase Ramos (aka Juice) pulls up a second later, we're all set. Juice is also a decent relief pitcher, but his real gift is that he can do a really good British accent and a really terrible Scottish accent, and I'm not sure which one I like more.

The outfielders come from all directions: Ethan McKenna, Wyatt Austin, Isaiah Flores. We give each other knuckles and ask each other what's up. That leaves our two benchwarmers, Ben Brems and Drex Larkin, who are a year younger since they played up last year, but they both look like they've grown about three inches, so they could really contribute this season. I'm willing to bet they're faster and stronger and less likely to lose a shoe (Ben, the quietest kid on the team) or a glove (Drex, the skinniest) in the middle of a play than they used to be.

When we get to the dugout, Andy looks at the roster on the bulletin board and gasps. Dramatically. "Trip," he says, "I think Coach already picked you as captain."

What in the *what*? Sure enough, there's my name, first on the list even though the rest are in alphabetical order, with a big capital C beside it.

Dylan slaps me on the shoulder. "Better you than me. The captain has to be in charge of all kinds of crap."

That's when I realize I don't exactly know what it takes to be captain. I kind of remember Jax helping out with equipment, but I thought that was because he was Coach's kid. Mostly it seemed like Jax knew stuff, so we all looked at him to be our leader. Will anybody look at me like that? It's hard to imagine Dylan will. But maybe Andy and Wyatt and Mac and the rest of the guys would. Maybe if I'm good enough. Captainy enough.

I look back at the list. "Who is Sam Callahan?"

Andy drops his voice to almost a whisper. "Sam was the last-minute adjustment, remember?"

"So who is he? And why would they let him play if he didn't come to tryouts?"

Dylan shrugs. "As long as he doesn't play shortstop, who cares?"

"Or third or first," Andy adds.

And I swear, that is right when the door of the SUV we're walking past swings open, and a girl our age gets out.

"Hey," she says, holding her hand out for us to shake. "I'm Sam Callahan."

# CHAPTER

# 3

I stare at Sam.

Who is a girl.

Who is still holding out her hand.

Luckily, Andy swoops in and shakes it. “Cool, yeah, great,” he says. “Sam.”

“Your name is Sam too?”

“No,” he says. “Andy.”

I can’t even judge him for being awkward because I’m still standing here.

Staring.

“These are the baseball fields,” Dylan says. “Softball is on the other side of town.” I can’t be sure if he’s trying to be helpful or trying to send a message, but since it’s Dylan, I have a pretty good guess.

“Hey,” Coach calls to us from inside the fence. “Come on over here. Practice started two minutes ago.”

Absolutely none of this is how I wanted to kick off this season.

“You have to talk to Coach,” Dylan hisses as we jog toward the field.

“About what?” I hiss back.

“You know what!”

But he must not totally trust that I know, because he jerks his head in Sam’s direction. “About her! She can’t play on our team!”

“Why?” I ask. Even though I’m surprised to have a girl on our team, I don’t think it’s actually against the rules or anything.

“Because this is our last season, and we have a shot at the championship. How do we know she’s any good? They probably just let her play because her family was going to sue the league or something. And even if she can play, she’s going to be a distraction. She’s distracting us from playing right now.”

The last part is true, even if I’m not totally sure it’s Sam’s fault. But I won’t convince Dylan. Once he gets an idea in his head, he never gives up.

“Why me?”

“You’re the captain, remember? The fearless leader?”

I definitely don’t remember saying I was fearless, and suddenly I’m not sure I want to be a leader. I just want to play baseball.

But then I think how proud Dad will be when he finds out. Wasn't he captain of his team too?

Meanwhile, Coach is standing in front of the team in gym shorts and a Yosemite T-shirt. When we walk up, he turns to Sam and smiles.

"Now that we're all here, let's get started! We have one new player on the team this year," he says. "Sam just moved here, but she submitted a tryout video, and we were lucky enough to land her on our team." He clears his throat. "As you can see, Sam is a girl. I'm not sure if she's the first girl to play in our league, but from what I can tell, she's the first girl in the history of Otto's Auto Parts."

Half of us are staring at Sam, and half of us are staring anywhere but at Sam. Sam is the only one looking straight at Coach.

"I'm sure none of you have a problem with the fact that Sam is a girl, but if you have any questions about our new player, now is the time to ask."

Now Dylan looks right at Coach and raises his hand. "What position does she play?"

Which is a decent question because unless he says center field (which is what Jax played), she could mess everything up.

Coach stands up a little straighter. "I didn't mean to imply Sam can't speak for herself, but I'm actually glad you asked me that one. Because we're going to do things a little

differently this season.” My heart skids. Everything feels different enough with Dad gone—and Sam here. Coach paces in front of us like a drill sergeant. “I wanted to hit the ground running this season, so I’ve already named Trip as our captain. He’s a strong, experienced player who showed me how dependable he can be by never missing a single game or a practice last season. Don’t be jealous; he’s going to have a lot of extra responsibilities. I just wanted to get a few things squared away since there will be a lot that’s fluid. For example: During these first few practices, every player will play every position.”

Well, that sounds like a recipe for disaster. Wyatt at shortstop? Cheese on the mound? No, thank you.

“This season,” Coach says, “we’re all about effort and experimentation. Playing every position is better on your bodies because it helps avoid overuse injuries, and it’s better on your minds because it helps you develop a more comprehensive understanding of the game. I’m willing to bet it’ll be more fun too.”

Dylan leans in. “Aren’t we supposed to be all about winning?” he mutters. “Isn’t that the point? Did Coach turn into a wimp just because his kid aged out?”

“Excellent questions, Dylan,” Coach says. How did he even hear that? “Let’s give you some answers. I hope we win some games along the way. I think we will. But winning isn’t the only thing that matters, and I think that will become

clear to you as the season goes on. In the meantime, I'm going to ask you to trust me. I don't know that I 'turned into' anything, but I like to think people can change, and I have. So, once again, we're going to do things a little differently this season."

I look around at my teammates. Cheese and Mac are whispering, Dylan and Juice are grumbling and shooting Coach looks. This is not how things were supposed to go.

If I'm captain, am I supposed to do something? What *can* I do about it? Am I supposed to change too? The idea of it feels right as I roll it around in my mind. Then I think about Dad, who's always talking about trusting his commanding officer and following orders. And I know what to do: I'll trust Coach, even if I don't totally get it yet. I can be a leader, even if in this moment that means following somebody else.

"We trust you, Coach," I say. "What's next?"

He breaks into a smile. "Let's get this team out on the grass."

We start with fielding drills, and I go where he tells me, even when it's not third base. Everybody's a little rusty in the beginning—except Sam, somehow—but we get into a rhythm pretty quickly.

When it's time for pitching practice (which is usually something only the pitchers and catchers do, but I guess we are all pitchers now?), I throw terrible pitches from the

mound and drop even worse pitches from Andy, but I try to have a good attitude about it.

“Let’s do some hitting, huh?” Coach says after Cheese throws an extra-wild curveball that nearly beans Ben.

When it’s my turn to bat, I picture myself hitting a home run—my first one ever—for Dad. I whiff the first one, but the second one makes it pretty deep into left field. “Nice,” Coach says. “That’ll get you on base every time, and that’s what we’re going for.” I don’t tell him that a base hit is not at all what I was going for. That I was aiming for the fence.

“Thanks, Coach,” I say, but I’m thinking, *You have to get better, Trip. And stronger. Way stronger.*

So I swing away for the rest of my turn at bat, and I play my guts out for the rest of practice, even though it’s blazing hot out here. I hustle for every ground ball. Finish first on every drill.

When it’s time for conditioning, I go so hard on base running that I start an extra lap. So when it’s time to pair up for cool-down stretches, I’m the last one back to the dugout. Dylan already grabbed Andy, and Wyatt grabbed Juice, and everybody grabbed somebody until there’s nobody left for me.

Except Sam.

I remind myself that it’s not a big deal. That I was the new kid a few years ago, and that’s probably even harder if

you're the only girl. So I nod when she looks at me. Sure, I'll be her partner.

“Partner one, lie on your back and lift up your right leg. Partner two, push their ankle straight back until you feel a little resistance.”

Sam lies on her back and lifts up her right leg and I grab her ankle and push straight back until I feel a little resistance—and then I hear Dylan whistle behind me. The guys are all sneaking looks at me and Sam, and my face starts to burn. Dylan was right. I've never felt this uncomfortable on the field. As captain, it's my job to trust Coach—but I have to trust my team too. And this time, it means I have to do something about this.

So after practice, I go over to help Coach load his bags in his truck. He smiles and thanks me and launches into a list of my responsibilities as captain (come to practice early to help set up the big equipment, send out reminders to the team, stuff like that). He doesn't seem to get that we need to talk about something else too. So I clear my throat, which ends up sounding like I'm about to spit a chunk.

“You okay, Trip?” he asks.

“I wanted to talk to you about . . . our team,” I say.

Coach stops loading and looks straight at me. “What about our team?”

“It's just, we played so great together last year,” I say. “And a bunch of us were hoping we could do even better

this year. And I think we could. Except I'm worried we might not have the same chemistry as usual, you know? Because of . . ." I kind of trail off, and Coach just watches me squirm. Like he's going to make me say it.

So I do. "Because there's a girl on our team." The words feel wrong even as I'm saying them. But aren't they true? Doesn't having Sam change things? I shove my hands into my pockets, trying to make it all make sense. "I mean, I get that we probably got the last draft pick because we had the best regular-season record last year, but wasn't there anybody else?"

"Of course there was. And none of them were half the player Sam is. The only reason she was still available when it was my turn to choose is the fact that, yes, she is a girl. I have to say, I'm a little disappointed in you. I made you captain because I thought you'd support all of our players. That's the kind of leader I'm looking for."

My gut tightens. Of course a captain should support all the players. But Coach has to know that with Dad gone, I'm surrounded by girls. Stuck between three sisters and Mom. The ballpark was supposed to be my one place away from it all—and then Sam showed up.

But I don't get a chance to say any of it, because right then, Dylan comes running over.

"Not bad out there today," Coach says to us. "We have a long road ahead if we want to reach our full potential this year, but I know you can do it."

“Thanks, Coach,” Dylan says.

But when Coach climbs in his truck, Dylan rolls his eyes.  
“Did you fix it?” he whispers.

“He picked her on purpose,” I say. “This is the team. We’ll just have to make it work.”

# CHAPTER

# 4

I start walking home with Dylan and Andy and Cheese. Dylan's house is first, and when we get there, he stops outside the gate. "You want to come inside and play Need for Speed?"

Cheese and Andy are in before he's even done asking the question, but I hesitate. Mom hasn't texted, but the last words she said to me before I left for practice were, *I could really use some help today.*

But couldn't I use a break after working so hard at practice? It'll only be for a few minutes.

"I'm in too," I say, and then I follow them through the door.

Once we're in Dylan's basement, nobody talks about Coach's new strategy or Sam Callahan or me being captain or practice or baseball in general. Eventually, I stop thinking about that stuff too, mostly because we're all obsessed with

tight turns and power-ups and it's hard enough just to stay alive with four of us competing for first place, even in my signature red Mustang.

So I accidentally stay at Dylan's longer than a few minutes. Or even a few hours. I end up staying until my mom calls his mom and tells her to send me home because my phone slid between the couch cushions, and I kind of didn't notice her texts.

Mom is waiting for me the second I get through the door.

"Sorry," I say.

She sighs and closes her eyes, like she's too tired to even be mad. "Did you bring home the asparagus?"

This would maybe not be a normal request for normal families, but my family is not normal. Because even though we have enough money to buy asparagus from the store like normal people, we pick ours from the ditch that runs alongside the creek when it's asparagus season. And even though I have absolutely no memory of it, apparently Mom asked me to pick some for dinner.

I look down at a smudge on the floor. "Was I supposed to?"

It's the wrong question. If she's asking, that means she asked earlier, and I just admitted I wasn't listening then.

So I put it in reverse. "I mean, I know I was supposed to. I forgot, but I can go get some now."

"It's too late," she says. "You were supposed to bring home asparagus. And you were supposed to come straight

home after practice to help with the laundry. Do you seriously not remember?"

It doesn't seem like a good idea to point out that picking asparagus would mean not coming straight home, and she's contradicting herself. So I don't. "I can go now," I offer again.

Mom sighs and looks back toward the kitchen, where my older sister, Shar, is chopping potatoes. "No. I'll just open some beans." Which is better than eating asparagus, but only barely. "Go get cleaned up, then you're on Bean duty until dinner."

"Okay," I say, trying to back away slowly. "Sounds good."

In our family, Bean duty doesn't have anything to do with beans. Bean duty means I'm in charge of my five-year-old sister. Upstairs, I peek through her door to check on her. Bean's lost in her own world, playing with her Barbies. For a second, I think about going in because there's something lonely about her playing by herself, even though she does it all the time. But I shake off the feeling. Bean playing Barbies means I can relax until it's time to eat. I sneak away so I won't break the spell.

In my room, I pull out the old iPad Dad gave me just in case he sent me an email already.

He didn't. So I try to write him one to get things started, but what am I supposed to say? That Coach is already disappointed in me? That I'm captain, but it kind of seems like I'm bad at it already? That I'm not sure if I'll be able to hit a home run after all?

Instead, I pull his old shoebox out from under my bed.

*William Henry Roberts II* it says across the top. I think of Dad the Little League champ and Dad the Marine and Dad the high-school science teacher everybody wants to get and Dad the hero. It's great that he's so great, but it's a hard act to follow. Sometimes it feels like a lot of pressure to be William Henry Roberts III.

There's not much in the box, just some action figures and an old paper bag with a few firecrackers. "I know you're too old for some of this," he'd said, gently picking up one of the action figures, "but I like the idea of you having this stuff, you know?"

I did know, and having him say it made me feel warm inside.

"Whatcha doing?"

Bean's standing in my doorway. I flip the shoebox lid shut, but it's too late. She saw the action figures. "I remember those! Can I play?"

I'm about to say no when I realize what felt off earlier when she was playing by herself: Before dinner is usually Dad's time to hang out with Bean. They play Go Fish or Jenga or watch Bean's favorite show, *Bella Vanilla*. Sometimes I forget that I'm not the only one who misses him.

"Okay," I say. "But shut the door."

Bean gets frustrated by the Transformers after about three seconds and moves on to Ninja Turtles.

"Leonardo is the boss," I say, because I watched some old episodes with Dad one time and I remember that part.

Bean brightens right up. “I’ll be her, because Leonardo sounds like Lena.”

(Bean’s real name is Lena. Don’t even ask me why we started calling her Bean, because I honestly don’t remember.)

“Him,” I correct. “Leonardo is a boy.”

She stares at me. “Leonardo is a turtle. How do you tell?”

Honestly, I don’t know how to tell with turtles.

“Because he’s a ninja.”

Bean stares. “Girls can be ninjas.”

“Okay, but these ones are all boys, just like they’re all turtles.”

She holds up Battle Cat.

“*This* is a turtle?”

“No, that’s Battle Cat. He goes with He-Man.”

“He?”

“He-Man.”

“No, you said ‘*He* goes with He-Man.’ So the cat is a boy too? How do you tell on cats?”

“You just know. From the . . . parts. Or no parts.”

Bean wrinkles her nose. “Parts?”

I regret this whole conversation. “Look, Battle Cat is just a cat. And he doesn’t talk or anything like the turtles do. Just so you know.”

Bean sighs and starts digging around in the box. “Where are the girls?”

Now I’m getting bugged. “I told you. They’re all boys.”

“That’s not fair.”

“Why? All of your dolls are girls.”

“Not Ken.”

“You never play with Ken.”

“Well, at least we *have* Ken.”

“Do you want to play or not?”

Bean considers the question. “Yes,” she says. “But Leonardo is a girl.”

There’s no use fighting with her, so we just start playing. Leonardo being a girl actually doesn’t change things that much. The turtles still battle the bad guys and come back to the sewer for pizza afterward.

That part makes me realize how hungry I am, and luckily, that’s when Mom calls us to dinner.

“Thanks, Trip,” she says. “That was fun.”

And the thing is, it kind of was, even if I’d never admit it in a million years.

# CHAPTER

# 5

**W**hen I come downstairs, Mom hands me a stack of plates and a pile of forks and asks me to set the table. I take a quick lap with the plates first, setting one down at each spot on the scratched-up wood. Our kitchen table is just about the only piece of furniture that moved with us from North Carolina. Mom can work anywhere, so when Dad switched to Reserve, they were ready for a change of scenery. They were deciding where to move when they saw on the internet that the house right next to Grandpa's house—the house Dad grew up in—was for sale. Once Dad saw that Cedar Valley was *also* looking for a new high-school science teacher, that pretty much decided that.

Grandpa walks in and sits in Dad's place so we don't have to bring the extra folding chair from Mom's office. (As much as I like Grandpa, I can't wait until we have to bring

in the chair again.) By the time I finish with the glasses, everybody else is already at the table.

“What have you and Trip been up to?” Mom asks Bean as I take my place next to Marley.

“Playing in his room,” Bean says. “Turtles are people but cats aren’t people, and not everybody has to be boys all the time.”

“That sounds fun,” Mom says as she puts the potato bowl on the table, even though nothing Bean just said sounded fun or even made sense if you weren’t part of the game.

Grandpa lets one rip, which apparently he’s allowed to do because he can’t hear well enough to realize it’s happening anymore. Shar and Marley look like they’re about to explode with laughter, but we’re all smart enough to know that in Mom’s eyes, the only thing worse than farting at the dinner table is laughing about it.

Grandpa frowns into the bean bowl. “I thought you said we were having asparagus.”

Mom smiles, but it’s a stiff one. “Well, we made a last-minute change.”

Shar pats Mom’s arm gently and shakes her head at me like I’ve really let them both down, which is ridiculous because Shar hates asparagus too and is totally capable of picking it herself. Why does it feel like the girls in this house are ganging up on me? I sure wish I had another teammate around here.

“Has anybody heard from Dad?” I ask.

Mom and Grandpa look at each other, and right away, I know there’s bad news.

“He called us while you were at practice,” Mom finally says. “But he’s not sure when he’ll be able to call again. They finished training, so they’re shipping out tomorrow. It sounds like they will be under a communications blackout, at least for a while.”

Shar sits up straighter. “Wait, I missed that part. I thought he’d be able to talk at least once a week.”

This time, I’m with Shar. “That’s what he promised us,” I say. “That’s what *they* promised *him*.”

Grandpa clears his throat. “Well, now, the change is probably for operational-security reasons, so it must be because that’s what needs to be done. You wouldn’t want to him to put himself and his company at risk just so he can call home, would you?”

I shift in my seat. “I guess not.”

“Well then. We’ll all have to be strong and carry on without him. Especially you, Trip—you’ll have to be the man of the house while he’s gone.”

Mom looks like she might have something to say about his comment, but Grandpa just turns back to the beans and scoops some onto his plate. “Sure wish we had asparagus instead. Did I ever tell you the story of the asparagus in the ditch?”

“One million times,” Marley mutters under her breath.

“You planted it,” Shar says, an angelic smile on her face even though she can’t possibly want to hear this story again any more than the rest of us. “Back when you were a boy. And because you planted it, you single-handedly saved your family from starvation. Anybody want more potatoes?”

Then I realize Shar’s genius: The asparagus story is over in two sentences instead of two hours. And I have to give her credit for that.



Before he leaves, Grandpa asks me to come sit with him on the front porch, which makes me a little nervous for bean-related reasons.

“I thought you could use a little guy time,” he says, settling down on the porch swing. “We’re way outnumbered by the girls, with your dad gone. I know it’s tough when he’s deployed. But when tough things happen, it’s always good to ask, ‘What can I learn from this?’ That’s the kind of thinking that will help you become the person you want to be.”

I sit down next to him. “What if I don’t know who I want to be yet?”

“Then you pick somebody you look up to as a starting point—maybe somebody like your dad—and you ask your-

self what they might do, or you try to steer yourself in the same direction. It was brave of him to volunteer for this deployment, you know.”

“Wait, he volunteered?” I ask. “I didn’t know he had a choice.”

“Now that he’s a reservist, he does,” Grandpa says.

I let that sink in for a second. Dad chose to leave. He chose to miss my last season. Am I supposed to look up to him for that?

“Now, don’t look so sad,” Grandpa adds. “Don’t you want him to be out there, fighting for freedom?”

Another curveball. “Isn’t he on a peacekeeping mission?” We’re not allowed to know where Dad is stationed this time, but I definitely remember the peacekeeping part.

Grandpa holds his hands out like, *Whoa, slow down*. “I just meant, he’s one of the good guys keeping people safe and free over there. And the way things are headed, they may need him more than ever these next few months.” He sits up straighter. “Here’s the point: A man’s got to make his mark in the world. Leave a legacy, you know? That’s what they call it in the Marine Corps when your parents or grandparents served too: legacy. Did you know that?”

I nod. I definitely knew that part. I don’t know if I want to be a Marine someday, but I know I’m *supposed to* want to.

“Take me, for example. I fought in the first Gulf War. It was quick but brutal, and it set the stage for decades

of instability—and that’s just the effects on my digestive system.” Grandpa pats his stomach and waggles his eyebrows. “Of course, everyone knows my real claim to fame—my baseball career—happened even before that. I played in the minors for five years before it was finally my time to shine. Until your dad was born, and I realized it was time for me to grow up, so I bid farewell to baseball.”

I know these stories well enough I can finish them myself—and I’d rather do that than listen to them for the seven millionth time. “Even though the whole team was begging you to stay.”

It feels good to make Grandpa laugh. “Well, well,” he says. “You’ve been listening after all.” Then his face turns serious again. “By the time I was your age, I’d already set my sights on playing in the majors and decided to enlist.” Grandpa slaps his thighs. “So I guess the question is: What will your legacy be? What will you leave behind when you’re gone?”

Then he stands up with another blast of gas that about knocks me out.

“Chew on that for a while,” he says and shuffles off into the night.

# CHAPTER

# 6

**B**ack in my room, I find a basket of clean laundry on my bed that Mom must have done for me. I start folding it and putting it away, partly so she won't have to remind me and partly so I won't have to feel guilty every time I look at it.

At the bottom of the basket, a pair of Dad's socks are mixed in with mine, and they stop me in my tracks.

He was here, not that long ago, wearing these socks.

And now he's gone.

I imagine Dad, all done with his pre-deployment training and getting ready to fly out tomorrow to some far-off part of the world. I wish more than anything I hadn't missed his goodbye call. But Dad wouldn't want me to miss practice, right? Like Coach said, I didn't miss a single one last season.

I wish I could just toss Dad the socks and tell him about my talk with Grandpa, especially the "chew on that" line.

So even though they're probably too big, instead of taking them to his dresser, I put the socks in my drawer with the rest of mine.



As the weeks go on, my wishes don't stop. I wish Dad could be there for my second practice, when I play catcher for the first time (and hopefully the last). And my third practice, when Sam announces that girls get four strikes and nobody can decide if she's serious until she starts laughing and says, "You should see your faces," and then we all laugh too. I reeeeeally wish he could be there for the fourth, when Drex slides home but overshoots by about three feet and so much dirt goes up Cheese's nose that he has to take a break because he can't stop sneezing.

On my way to bed that night, I pass by Shar's room, where all my sisters are piled on her bed watching some reality dance show, because my sisters are obsessed with dance. (Mom only lets each of us do one activity at a time, and lucky for her, all my sisters choose dance. All the time.)

"Trip!" Bean shouts. "Come watch! They're doing a baseball dance! They have bats and everything!"

The music starts, and I'm *thisclose* to going in—but Bean's already looking back at the screen, and Shar's bed is pretty small, and maybe it would be different if I had a

pile of brothers, but . . . dance is their thing. Baseball is mine.

“No thanks,” I say, even though Bean’s not really listening anymore. “I’m going to go play video games or something.”

I head to my room and close the door. There’s pretty much no chance I have an email from Dad if they’re under a communications blackout, but I can’t help checking, just in case.

Nothing. I sigh and open up Need for Speed on Dad’s iPad instead. Dad is the one who taught me to play this game last year. When we race our matching Ford Mustangs, I swear sometimes it feels like we’re actually out there on the road. Together.

I play a few rounds against random people online, but it still feels kind of like I’m racing alone. Through my closed door, I hear Shar kick everybody else out of her room and Bean and Marley start getting ready for bed. I’m about to log off the game when a new racer pops up at the top of the screen: oorah276.

That’s Dad!

I don’t think he’s been able to play on his other deployments, but I don’t really know. Maybe they’re letting them play since they can’t do anything else?

When a red Mustang pops up beside me at the starting line, I know for sure it’s him. Dad’s a little slower out of the start than I expect, but he does his signature

sneak-inside around the first turn, totally cutting me off—which just makes me do the same to him a few turns later. When we cross the finish line (with me barely ahead of him), I throw open the chat while we’re waiting for the next race to start.

**tripleplay:** I didnt expect you to be on here

**oorah276:** surprise

**oorah276:** thought you could use some company

**tripleplay:** yeah thanks

**oorah276:** too bad now I have to leave you in the dust

I hadn’t noticed the countdown clock, but the race is about to start. I don’t even have time to reply before the flag drops, and we’re off.

This time, I’m even faster out of the gate, and I’m too far ahead for Dad to pull any sneaky moves. Out of eight racers, I end up in third, and Dad’s a sad sixth. I’m barely across the finish line before we’re chatting again.

**tripleplay:** did you forget how to drive or something

**oorah276:** haha dont get too smug ill get you next time

The next round is about to start, but Dad doesn’t opt in, so neither do I. I sit and look at our messages and think how

cool it is to be racing and chatting with Dad all the way in . . . wherever he is.

Maybe I can catch him up on what's been going on.

**tripleplay:** so this season has been kind of a curveball  
so far

**oorah276:** what do you mean

**tripleplay:** im the captain

**oorah276:** wow I did not see that coming

**tripleplay:** me neither

**tripleplay:** and also coach has a new philosophy and  
we have a new player named sam

**oorah276:** curveball for sure

**tripleplay:** yeah especially since sam is short for  
samantha

**oorah276:** does that matter?

I'm about to type *no* when I realize that it's maybe more complicated than that. I mean, I'm fine with a girl being on our team. If there's anybody who understands that girls can do anything they want, it's a guy with three sisters. But for me, baseball has always been one place where girls weren't around. And don't I deserve that every once in a while? I'm trying to figure out how to say all that when another message from Dad appears.

oorah276: in the real world most teams youre on wont  
be all boys

oorah276: did you know 42 percent of marine corps  
officers are women?

tripleplay: no but that's cool

oorah276: maybe you can learn something from her

oorah276: everybody's got something to teach you if  
youre willing to learn

Dad's been saying that to me all my life. I can almost hear his voice, which is huge, because sometimes when he's gone, I start to forget how he sounds and walks and that kind of stuff. It makes me want to chat a little longer and not let him go.

tripleplay: ready to race again?

oorah276: Ive got to go but soon

tripleplay: when?

oorah276: whenever Im free and youre ready to learn  
some humility

I scroll back through our conversation. The chat was great, but I still miss having my actual dad in the same room.

And then I hear Dad's voice from Bean's room next door. I'm about to bust in there, but then I realize it's just one of

Bean's story recordings. I close my eyes and listen to the sound of his voice reading the gentle rhymes. I can imagine the pictures, because Dad used to read me this book too. And I can picture Bean, curled up in her bed, turning the pages. Missing him.

I listen to his voice for the rest of Bean's bedtime story, hoping somehow I'll hear some message for me in his words. But it never comes.

# CHAPTER

# 7

**B**y some kind of miracle, nobody is in the bathroom when I get out of bed the next morning, so I go in and close the door. After I do my business, I'm washing my hands at the sink when I catch my own reflection in the mirror. I lift my chin and think about legacy. Maybe living up to Grandpa's and Dad's legacies would actually be easier than figuring it out from scratch. Isn't that the whole point of being William Henry Roberts III?

"My name is my legacy," I say, squaring my shoulders in the mirror.

A tiny voice from behind the striped shower curtain makes me jump.

"What's legacy?"

It's Bean.

And she's not alone. "Legacy?" Marley asks. "The only legs *I* see are Trip's chicken legs."

They peek out from opposite ends of the shower curtain, wearing swimsuits and huge, happy grins. Have they been in here the whole time? They must have gone silent when they heard me come in.

“What are you guys doing?” I ask. Marley and Bean are six years apart and don’t play together all that much.

“Beach party!” says Bean, and she throws back the shower curtain to show me a bunch of her Barbies in the bathtub with about four inches of water.

But it’s not just a Barbie beach party. All of Dad’s action figures are mixed in there too.

“Bean!” I yell. “How did you get those?”

Bean smirks. “I borrowed them. You weren’t using them, so Mom said it was okay.”

“Dad gave them to me,” I say. “It doesn’t matter what Mom said. Besides, they’re boy toys.”

Marley laughs. “What’s a ‘boy toy’? It’s the twenty-first century.”

I hold up a turtle. “Look, these guys don’t belong with Barbies. Okay?”

“Why not?” Bean asks.

“They just don’t!” I start grabbing the action figures and tossing them back into the box.

Bean starts wailing and clutches He-Man to her chest.

I hold my hand out, but Bean shakes her head. “He can’t go. He’s married to Bella Vanilla.” She holds up what I

thought was Barbie but is actually Bella Vanilla, the fake pop star from Bean's favorite show.

"Who married them?"

"Marley."

I turn my glare on Marley, but she just shrugs. "They seemed very much in love."

I reach across the bathtub and try to take He-Man, but Bean drops Bella Vanilla and grabs him with both hands.

"No!" She tries to kick me, but I dodge it. "THEY'RE MARRIED!"

"So what?" I yell. "Dad gave him to me. Plus, Mom and Dad are married, and it's not like they're together right now!"

Marley and Bean both go perfectly still, and then Bean's chin starts to wobble. Marley's eyes go wide, and I don't even have to turn around to know who's standing in the doorway.

"Give your brother back his toy." Mom's voice is so calm it's creepy. Suddenly I remember that Dad *chose* to go on this deployment. He *chose* to leave us this time. I never asked Mom how she felt about that, but I really, really wish she hadn't walked in at exactly that moment because now I'm pretty sure I know.

Bean hands me He-Man *and* Bella Vanilla. I throw them in the box, Marley unplugs the drain, and the water starts gugging down as Mom turns and walks away.