

## GAME CHANGER

By Sabrina Mock-Rossi

### Prologue

#### Sophomore Year

There was a lot of amped up emotion at the breakfast table this morning. My younger sister, Laney landed the role of Dorothy in her middle school's production of the Wizard of Oz. It was the opening weekend. Friday night had gone really well, and Laney had gotten a standing ovation, so she was literally bouncing off the walls with excitement. This weekend was also the Northeast College Showcase — one of the biggest soccer weekends of the year and my premier team had our sights set on making it to the finals.

“You’re all coming to the show tonight, right?” Laney asked Dad, her blue eyes bright and wide with hope.

“We’ll see, Laney. You know your sister has the exhibition tournament this weekend, I need to be at the field doing what I can to get her noticed by the scouts.”

“But my show is at night and her games are during the day?” Her face fell as she crossed her arms. He continued to eat his Raisin Bran and didn’t answer. Why was he acting like this? My games would be over by then. I was about to say this to Laney when she jumped in.

“Of course, I forgot, it’s all about Callie.” Laney turned her angry eyes on me.

“I’ve been in touch with five scouts, Laney. Five!” He shot a look at me across the kitchen table. “This is Callie’s shot at getting a scholarship, which now, thanks to getting laid off, we need more than ever. I’m sorry, but I just need to focus on that right now.”

Laney stormed out of the house, slamming the back door. Mom turned to Dad. “Honestly, Dan. Do you have any idea how important this show is to her? We are *all* going to the show tonight!”

“Damn it. I know.” He marched over to the door and shouted after Laney. She ignored him and headed to Izzy’s house across the street. A minute later, Mom’s phone dinged with a new text. She read it out loud, “I’m never coming home.” Then she turned back to Dad. “You need to apologize and fix this. You have two daughters, Dan. Two!” Then Mom stormed out of the kitchen and up the stairs.

I sat there feeling like a total asshole. As if I was being blamed or had somehow caused it. Which I guess, I sort of did. I tried to text Laney to say I’d be at her show, and I was sorry for Dad.

“I hate you” was her reply.

Great. This was just great. Exactly how I like to chill out before a huge tournament. By the time we left, an hour later, Dad was wound tighter than a loaded grenade. Our ride to the field started out silent. Just as well. I was already nervous. Of course, I knew scouts were coming, but he’d been communicating with five of them?

Dad and I had an agreement. He only told me about recruiters after the game, assuming it was a good game. I didn’t like knowing ahead of time. I could play under pressure, but it had to be the right kind of pressure. Competitors on the field was fine. Being watched by college scouts and thinking about finances, not so much. When I put those specifics into the equation, I’d

overthink. And now, I *knew* there were five recruiters coming, so who were they? Which schools? This was a huge showcase; all the Northeastern club teams would be here.

“The good news is, the first game is a local team,” Dad said, clearly he was thinking about it as well. “You’re playing HSA. You know the players. They’re rough and strong. Especially Heims and Frederick. I heard UCONN is scouting her too.”

UCONN. So much for not giving me details before the game. Dad continued his steady stream of advice. “Use your body, shove, elbow, but down low, and move those feet. Your speed is your greatest asset. Use it.”

If UCONN was here, would UMASS be too? I had to play amazing, I needed them to notice me. After getting concussed last year and missing some of the big showcases, this was the time. As if Dad heard my thoughts he said, “You need to wow them today, Killer, because this is it for the season.”

“Wait, what?”

“Without an income, Callie, we can’t keep doing these exhibitions.” His voice cracked a little. “I’m sorry kid, but they cost hundreds of dollars, not to mention the travel expenses. This is going to be it for a little while. Just until I get back on my feet. That’s why today matters. You’ve got to play your hardest and get noticed.”

I nodded, still trying to process what he said. I knew he’d been laid off and that his severance package ran out. He’d been trying to find a new job without any luck. He’d been talking to Mom about starting his own landscaping business. Mom’s job didn’t pay much, and we’d all had to make some adjustments. No eating out. No new clothes. No new cleats even though mine practically had holes. I knew all of this. It was whatever, on the periphery.

But now? Now, I wasn't going to be part of the premier team? We had another five weeks left of the season. I'd been playing with Jayla, Andrea, and Molly for the last four years — school *and* club. They'd go on to the championship rounds and everything else without me. What the hell? Not to mention, today was my one and only shot left to get an offer. Was he for real? I was angry and confused and honestly, heartbroken. But mostly angry. Why would he tell me all this *now*?

“You got this, Callie. You're good enough. You're fast enough. You've got the accuracy and scope. We'll have numerous games this weekend, lots of exposure. I know you can do it.”

As soon as we got there, I ran to the bench. I wanted to be with the team, and I needed to loosen up, get away from Dad and out of my head. We ran through drills and warm ups and I snuck peaks at the other team.

Out on the pitch, things heated up quickly. Somehow everyone knew there were recruiters. Molly and Andrea cared about our team, but they didn't plan to play Division 1 in college. Jayla and I did. To her, the actual scholarship package didn't even matter, it was icing on the cake. She got to choose whatever school she liked best. Unlike me.

I needed to put that aside. Focus.

Heims was HSA's star defender. Big. Tough. Mean. And Frederick was their star forward. She was fast, but I was faster. Her foot work was impressive and her accuracy, so far, had been spot on. The scouts were going to be comparing her to me.

Dad screamed nonstop from the sidelines, laying into the refs, and chirping at the other team. Every other word out of his mouth was “Killer!” I tried to block him out. Also tried to block out the recruiters who were in a pack opposite Dad. Could they hear him? Did they know he was talking to me?

I heard Jayla scream, “Callie!” and looked just in time to see Frederick charging straight at me. I stepped in front and planted my feet. She came at me and juked at the last second. I stepped toward her and got her cleat on my ankle. I fell and grabbed my leg; the ref blew the whistle. It wasn’t bad, mostly I made a show of looking hurt, so the refs called her.

Frederick started whining at the refs that I stepped in front. It was true, but as I hobbled to stand and limped around a little, they called in our favor. Dad cheered, “Yeah, Killer!”

She glared at me and under her breath said, “Fake it much?”

Andrea jogged up to me. “You good?” I nodded. She smiled like she approved.

By the half it was 1-0, HSA. Heims kept me far from the box. Frederick moved in and around our defenders as if she was the only one out here. Coach was screaming, Dad was screaming. The scouts all stood with crossed arms and serious expressions. Jayla was pissed at Andrea and me for not feeding her more balls. She’d been trading nasty remarks with Heims too. No one was happy. No one was playing well. Except for Frederick.

After Coach’s half-time rant about passing and getting open and not giving up on the ball, we headed back to the bench. Suddenly, Dad was there, grabbing my arm. He knew he shouldn’t be over here. But his eyes were busting out of his head, and he looked sweaty, like he was having a heart attack or something, so I stopped.

“You need to get in the game and stop her,” he said.

“What?”

“Frederick. She’s running the show. Stop playing so carefully and go for the damn ball.”

He practically hissed the words. I shook my arm loose and ran back onto the field.

He was right though. She was running the show, and I *had* been playing carefully. Afraid to mess up. Afraid of the scouts. Afraid of missing the rest of the season because we had no money, missing college because we couldn't afford it.

*Focus, Callie!* Block everything out and play. It didn't matter who my opponents were or what skills they had. Put that shit in a box and play. The field was my domain, that ball was mine.

Two minutes into the second half, Heims blocked another one of my shots.

"I was wide open, Callie!" Jayla berated me.

Next thing I knew Frederick was charging up the field again. I sprinted after her. Fuck that I didn't play midfield. She was *not* going to score again. I caught her without too much effort and tried weaving in. She slowed it down looking to pass. I went straight at her. We elbowed and bumped, fighting for the ball. I heard Coach's voice somewhere behind me and "Killer!" from the sidelines.

*Get in the game. Stop her.*

Her footwork was amazing. Even with my hips and shoulders pushing her, she hopped around me, got clear, and was about to boot the ball toward the goal. I couldn't let her. This was my ball, my chance. But my feet weren't moving as fast as my hands. All my anger and emotion came flying out through my hands. One grabbed her jersey and the other reached for whatever I could grasp — her ponytail. Dad losing his job, missing the last few tournaments, not being able to afford college, knowing these recruiters were all here and I wasn't playing well. At Laney who was pissed at me because Dad was a dick, at Jayla who kept screaming at me to pass, at Heims and Frederick, and those unimpressed scouts. I pulled so hard she screamed and flew back. Her

feet went up and she hit the ground head first. It happened in slow motion, suddenly out of my control.

There was a gasp from the crowd. The whistle blew.

Frederick held her neck and laid there. She looked shocked. And hurt. And what the hell did I just do? The ref was in my face before I could apologize to her. Red card.

I walked off the field catching sight of the scouts shaking their heads in disbelief and making notes. Before I reached the bench, both teams took a knee while the trainers came out to look at Frederick.

*Holy shit. What had I done?*

After several long minutes, they helped Frederick up, and she limped off the field. Thank you, God, she was walking.

The moment I stood, Coach was in my face. “What the hell has gotten into you?”

I shook my head.

“That’s the most flagrant display of unsportsmanlike behavior I’ve ever seen. And from one of my players?” I stared at my cleats, I didn’t have a response or an excuse.

“Take a seat and keep your mouth shut the rest of the game.”

I sat on the end, away from everyone’s disbelieving stares. I grabbed a towel and buried my face in it. My breath, hot and heavy, felt like lead instead of air. I dragged it from the deep recesses of my lungs, but it took forever to get up and out and back in. I just screwed over my team, too. I had the league record for assists and was one of the top scorers. Their chances of winning this game and advancing toward finals just drastically diminished.

I wasn’t a dirty player, though the scouts wouldn’t believe that now. They saw me do the worst thing a player could do. No one wanted a toxic player like that on their team. No one! In

one fell swoop, I blew my shot at getting recruited for a major D1 school. Dad was going to kill me. I just destroyed my dream, the dream we'd been fostering since third grade, but also, I was repulsed with myself. Actually, I was nauseated. How did I have *that* in me? Where did that dirty player come from? Was I so competitive and driven that I'd resort to violence?

Who was I?

## Chapter One

### Senior Year

My nostril, eyes, throat, and belly are all burning, watering, on fire, but I get it down. I hate vodka. I hate shots all together, but I'm a team player.

"You go, girl!" Jayla says.

"Like a pro, Callie!" Andrea pats my shoulder.

The four of us are in my kitchen, going around the circle, *pre-gaming*. Molly's next. Jayla pours it, Andrea pounds her fists on the Formica table. Molly throws hers back.

We *are* a teenage drinking cliché.

"To my senior-year squad," Andrea hands us each another shot. "My besties!"

"To a kick-ass season!" Molly toasts.

"We'll *rule* the school and *lead* the league!" Jayla says.

"Soccer State Champs, four years in a row!" I say, suddenly realizing how precarious it all is. If we get caught, we're dead. And it's not the police I'm worried about. It's social media



biting us in the ass or one of us doing something stupid. It's the idea of getting suspended from the team and then destroying our chances for a great season. It's something, *anything*, that might fuck up my DI scholarship. I've worked ten years to earn it, and fought for the last three to secure it, so, why am I doing this? Why are any of us doing this?

We down our shots in unison. Teammates to the end.

As the vodka scorches my insides, I force a smile. Fake it till you make it, right? I need to just relax. This is the start of our senior year. I'm committed to play at University of Vermont. There are no real games for two weeks and it's over a month until the Premier team kicks in. Niko's having a huge party tonight. Add to that, my parents drove to Rhode Island to see my grandmother for the next three days. It's as if I've been given a completely free pass to let loose. But even with three shots down, I'm still anxious.

Just then Laney walks into the kitchen with a scowl on her face and a new streak of black in her hair. Her best friend Izzy is by her side, as usual. The two of them have been inseparable since birth, back when our moms pushed strollers together.

"Hey there, girls!" Jayla says in a sing-song voice. "Either of you want to join us?"

"No! They don't." I shoot Laney a look that screams *Don't you even think about it*. She's only a sophomore and doesn't need to be drinking. Not with my friends, anyway.

"Are you worried Dad won't approve?" Laney says, knowing full well my father would behead me. Both of us. Ours are the type of hard-core parents who keep a guillotine hidden in the basement for immoral children who drink underage. Okay, maybe I'm exaggerating. Maybe they're only hard-core in their *expectations*: good grades, family meals together, excel at sports and after school activities. Plus, with all the training Dad's helped me do these past ten years,

he's worked as hard as me to get this scholarship. He'd be beyond disappointed, and that's worse than the guillotine.

"Relax, Callie!" Laney must see the panic on my face. She scours the fridge for veggies, which is what she lives on. Apparently, she's a vegetarian now.

"What are you guys doing tonight, Laney?" Molly asks. Molly's the nice one in our group.

"Meeting some friends for a movie."

"What film are the drama freaks going to see?" I'm not really sure why I'm so nasty to my sister. I didn't actually intend to say it like that, but the black streak in her otherwise blonde hair annoys me. The row of silver earrings crawling up the outside of her ear annoys me. Her always trying to get attention in weird ways annoys me.

"Screw you, Callie." Laney and Izzy walk out of the kitchen empty handed.

"Should we go?" I say. We're late, and Connor, my boyfriend, keeps texting me. Really, I just want everyone out of my house. The mention of my dad further dampened my mood, as if he can suddenly see what we're doing.

"Let's do it!" Jayla stands. If Jayla agrees, we all agree. It's an unspoken truth in our group. We pile into the Uber and spill out at Niko's front door. He lives on a remote street up near Quincy Lake. The canopy of hundred-year-old oak trees, winding roads, and two-acre lots add plenty of cushion from the neighbors, making it the ideal party location. That, and the fact his parents are always in New York.

The guys are in the kitchen. Connor lifts me off my feet in a gigantic hug, which isn't hard considering he's 6'3" and West Hatfield's star linebacker. "Finally!" He kisses my neck.

Niko, Seth, and Jase move the party into the dining room and set up beer-pong on his parent's mahogany table. Why should the clichés stop just because we're in mixed company? Connor and I are a team, which is good because he's a rock-star at beer-pong. I suck. A total injustice, considering I can kick a ball into a net from fifty yards out.

After one complete round and downing a full solo cup of beer, Andrea pulls out the bottle of Smirnov her sister bought for her, the one that's half empty from our pre-gaming. The table cheers. Shots go around a couple more times. Who am I to object?

Finally, I grab Connor's hand and say, "Let's take a break!" My words stick to my lips and tongue. It's clear I'm well past the perfect buzz I usually aim for. At least, I've relaxed.

We head outside. Niko has a huge backyard and tons of landscape up-lighting on the gigantic trees and tall grasses, so it feels like a hotel or something. We climb onto the trampoline and stand in the middle. The heat from the day has shifted, and it's the perfect warm-but-not-too-warm temperature outside. The sky is a blackish-blue, there's a dark green canopy overhead, with the stars peeking through. Not that I can see them exactly. Mostly I see streaks of light that zig and zag.

"Shit."

"What's wrong?" Connor says.

"I can't get the stars to stay still!" I laugh. I'm trashed, and somehow that's funny.

Connor chuckles and holds my hands, gently bouncing us. I barely maintain vertical with the mat beneath us being all shifty and squishy. My strong, reliable legs, the ones that can run a 6:40 mile, feel like rubber. My body is made of rubber. I see my arms reaching across, holding Connor's hands, and they seem to stretch thinner and thinner like silly putty.

We bounce higher and higher, and then Connor double-bounces me, which leaves me in a puddle at his feet, giggling. He pulls me upright once more.

“Okay, your turn,” he says and sits on the padded edge along the side.

“My turn?”

“Do something. Show me what you got!” He beams his teddy bear grin at me. Do teddy bears grin? Well, if they did, they’d look like him.

“You just want to see my boobs bounce,” I say, not liking this idea of having to perform. The only spotlight I like is on the soccer field.

“Maybe.” He smirks.

Having no idea what to do, I start slowly, bending my knees, and straightening my legs. I’m terrible at tricks, but at least my legs are getting the hang of it. I’m bouncing, feeling impressed. I’m so impressed with myself. See, I’m not that drunk. I get some air and laugh. Connor laughs. I watch the black netting, and the black woods, and the black sky all blend together.

“Looks good so far,” Connor says. “What else you got?”

“Okay,” I say, still laughing. My laughing makes me sound drunk. “Okay,” I say more firmly, tamping it down. I’m bouncing higher and higher. I notice the top edge of the netting, feeling proud that my eyes could distinguish that detail. Maybe this is sobering me up. I reach my arms up, thinking I must be jumping high enough to touch the tree branches above. I don’t. But then I decide what to do. A flip.

Down, bend, bounce, spring, up, up, up. I throw my whole body forward. My head goes round, feeling like a thousand-pound ball. My body hurdles, forward. I see the sky, the mat, the net, my legs, all at the same time. Spinning, spinning, spinning. But it’s off, I’m off. I crash, not

even sure into what. I'm on my back and Connor's face is over mine. His eyes are wide, and he's saying things.

*Listen, you need to listen, what is he saying?*

"Callie. Callie — are you okay?"

"I guess." Really, I'm one notch below total mortification.

"Come here," he says, helping me sit upright and smoothing down my hair. I lean into him, hoping the dizziness subsides. "That was quite a... flip?"

"I'm sure it was impressive." Who do I think I am — a gymnast, a cheerleader, someone who can do any form of acrobatics?

"You always impress me." He gazes at me, but my eyes still can't focus. Then he kisses me. I'm relieved to close my eyes. It's a steamy kiss. Dizzy? Who's dizzy? Once again, I start to think I'm not that drunk — I mean, this feels pretty good. I climb onto his lap, straddling him. His hand slides up my shirt, then he gently flips us over and lowers us down. My arms wrap around him, pulling him on top of me. The springs help absorb some of Connor's weight as our bodies grind against each other. His hand is under my bra and I'm about to undo the button on his shorts.

"Whoa! What's this?" One of the guys shouts.

"Whoop, whoop! Go, Connor!"

"You mean, go, Callie!" I hear Andrea's voice.

We look over to see the group of them streaming outside and hooting like owls on crack. Maybe Niko's trampoline in the middle of his backyard isn't the best idea.

"Okay, settle down," Connor says, sitting up. "Show's over!"

We scootch off the trampoline and join them at the patio table. My legs still feel kind of rubbery. Not sure if it's from the trampoline or from Connor or all the shots. Everyone seems to be talking at once, but my eyes won't focus on any particular face. I rest my head in my hands, hoping the spins will stop.

"You okay?" Connor says to me.

"I think so."

He lifts my chin, but as my head goes up and my eyes try to follow, it's too much. I pull away, grab the table for support, and lean over the side. I throw up. As my stomach clenches and I puke, all I can think is what an idiot I am. And what the hell is wrong with me? I knew this was a bad idea, but I went along with it all anyway.

Teenage brains are not fully formed. Vodka shots are evil. Karma is a bitch.

Pick the cliché, they all work.