

LOVE & LUCK



ALSO BY JENNA EVANS WELCH

*Love & Gelato*



# LOVE & LUCK

∞ JENNA EVANS WELCH ∞

**SIMON PULSE**

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*To Nora Jane,  
the possessor of two exceptionally plucky feet and  
a one-dimpled smile that lit up my darkness for  
over a year. This one's for you, baby girl.*



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Dear Heartbroken,

What do you picture when you imagine traveling through Ireland? Belting out drinking songs in a dim, noisy pub? Exploring mossy castles? Running barefoot through a field of four-leaf clovers? Or maybe that old Johnny Cash song: *green, green, forty shades of green*.

Whatever you've imagined, my little lovelorn friend, I can emphatically say *you're wrong*. I'm not saying you won't find yourself singing a rousing rendition of "All for Me Grog" at a little tavern in Dublin, or that you won't spend your fair share of afternoons stumbling through waterlogged castle grounds. But I am saying that this trip of yours will undoubtedly be *even better than anything you've imagined*. Don't believe me? Wait until you're standing at the edge of the Cliffs of Moher, your hair being whipped into a single dreadlock, your heart pattering like a drum. Then we'll talk.

I know you're feeling fragile, turtledove, so let me just lay it all out for you. You are about to fall head over heels in love with a place that will not only heal that little heart of yours, but also challenge you in every way imaginable. Time to open your suitcase, your mind, and, most of all,

this guidebook, because not only am I an insufferable expert on all things Ireland, but I'm also an insufferable expert on heartbreak. Consider me a two-for-one guide. And don't pretend you don't need me. We both know there are a thousand travel guides on Ireland, and yet you picked up *this* one.

You've come to the right place, love muffin. The Emerald Isle may not be the only place to mend a broken heart, but it is the best.

Trust me.

PS: On a recent, particularly vibrant afternoon in County Clare, Ireland, I counted forty-seven shades of green. So take that, Johnny.

—Introduction to *Ireland for the Heartbroken: An Unconventional Guide to the Emerald Isle*, third edition



# Prologue



## **WORST SUMMER EVER.**

That's the thought I went over the side with. Not *I'm falling*. Not *I just shoved my brother off the Cliffs of Moher*. Not even *My aunt is going to kill me for ruining her big day*. Just *Worst summer ever*.

You could say that my priorities weren't in the best shape. And by the bottom of the hill, neither was I.

When I finally rolled to a stop, my designer dress and I had been through at least ten mud puddles, and I was lying in something definitely livestock-related. But cow pies weren't the worst of it. Somewhere along the way I'd hit something—hard—and my lungs were frantically trying to remember what they were supposed to do. *Inhale*, I begged them. *Just inhale*.

Finally, I got a breath. I closed my eyes, forcing myself to slow down and breathe in and out to the count of five like I do whenever I get the wind knocked out of me, which is way more often than the average person.

I have what my soccer coach calls the *aggression factor*. Meaning, whenever we arrive at a school where the players look like Attila the Hun in ponytails, I know I'll be playing the whole game. Getting the wind knocked out of me is kind of a specialty of mine. It's just that usually when it happens, I'm wearing soccer cleats and a jersey, not lipstick and designer heels.

*Where's Ian?* I rolled to my side, searching for my brother. Like me, he was on his back, his navy-blue jacket half-off, head pointed down the hill toward all the tourist megabuses in the parking lot. But unlike me, he wasn't moving.

At all.

*No.* I sprang to my knees, panic filming over my vision. My high heels impaled the hem of my dress, and I struggled to untangle myself, scenes from the cheesy CPR movie they made us watch in health class firing through my head. Did I start with mouth to mouth? Chest compressions? Why hadn't I paid attention in health class?

I was about to fling myself at him when his eyes suddenly snapped open.

"Ian?" I whispered.

"Wow," he said wearily, squinting up at the clouds as he wiggled one arm, then the other.

I fell back into a relieved heap, tears spiking my eyes. I may have shoved my brother off the side of a mountain, but I hadn't killed him. That had to count for something.

“Keep moving; eyes up here.” I froze. The voice was British and much too close. “Hag’s Head is a bit farther. Ooh, and look, there’s a wedding going on up top. Everyone see the lovely bride? And . . . oh, my. I think she lost a bridesmaid. A tiny lavender bridesmaid. Hellooooo there, tiny lavender bridesmaid. Are you all right? Looks like you’ve had a fall.”

I whipped around, my body tensed to unleash on whoever had just dubbed me “tiny lavender bridesmaid,” but what I saw made me wish I was even tinier. Not only had Ian and I landed a lot closer to the walkway than I’d realized, but a tour guide sporting a cherry-red poncho and a wide-brimmed hat was leading a pack of enraptured tourists right past us. Except none of them were looking at the sweeping landscape or the lovely bride, who happened to be my aunt Mel. They were looking at *me*. All thirty of them.

You’d think they’d never seen a midwedding fistfight before.  
*Act in control.*

I straightened up, shoving my skirt down. “Just a little tumble,” I said brightly. *Yikes*. “Tumble” was not a typical part of my vocabulary. And whose robotic happy voice was coming out of my mouth?

The tour guide pointed her umbrella at me. “Did you really just fall down that big hill?”

“Looks like it,” I said brightly, the thing I actually wanted to say brimming under the surface. *No. I’m just taking a nap in*

*a manure-coated dress.* I shifted my eyes to Ian. He appeared to be playing dead. Convenient.

“You’re sure you’re okay?”

This time I injected my voice with a heavy dose of *now please go away*. “I’m sure.”

It worked. The guide scowled at me for a moment and then lifted her umbrella, making clucking noises to the group, who begrudgingly shuffled forward like a giant, single-brained centipede. At least that was done with.

“You could have helped me out with the tour group,” I called to Ian’s motionless form.

He didn’t respond. Typical. These days, unless he was cajoling me to come clean to our parents about what had happened this summer, he barely looked at me. Not that I could blame him. *I* could barely look at me, and I was the one who’d messed up in the first place.

A raindrop speckled down on me. Then another. *Really? Now?* I shot a reproachful look at the sky and pulled my elbow in next to my face, cradling my head in my arm as I assessed my options. Apart from seeking shelter in one of the souvenir shops built into the hills like hobbit holes, my only other choice was to hike back up to the wedding party, which included my mother, whose rage was already sweeping the countryside. There was absolutely no way I was going to put myself in the line of fire before I had to.

I listened to the waves smash violently against the cliffs, the wind carrying a few snippets of voices over the top of the hill like the butterfly confetti we'd all thrown a few minutes earlier:

*Did you see that?*

*What happened?*

*Are they okay?*

"I'm not okay!" I yelled, the wind swallowing up my words. I hadn't been okay for exactly one week and three days, which was when Cubby Jones—the boy I'd been sneaking out with all summer, the boy I had been in love with for what amounted to my entire teen life—had decided to crush my heart into a fine powder and then sprinkle it out over the entire football team. *Ian's* football team. No wonder he couldn't stand to look at me.

So no. I was most definitely not okay. And I wasn't going to be okay for a very, very long time.

Maybe ever.

## The Wild Atlantic Way

Me again, buttercup. Here to give you an extraordinarily important tip as you enter the planning phase of your journey. Read carefully, because this is one of the few hard-and-fast rules you will find in this entire book. You listening? Here goes. *As a first-time visitor to Ireland, do not, under any circumstances, begin your trip in the capital city of Dublin.*

I know that sounds harsh. I know there's a killer deal to Dublin on that travel website you've been circling like a vulture all week, but hear me out. There are a great many reasons to heed my advice, the main one being this:

Dublin is *seductive as hell*.

I know what you're going to do next, sugar. You're going to argue with me that there isn't anything particularly seductive about hell, to which I would counter that it's an excellent place to meet interesting people, and those fiery lakes? Perfect for soaking away stress.

But let's not get sidetracked.

Bottom line, Dublin is a vacuum cleaner and you are one half of your favorite pair of dangly earrings—the one you've been missing since New Year's. If you get



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too close to that city, it will suck you up and there will be no hope for unmangled survival. Do I sound like I'm being overly dramatic? Good. Have I used one too many metaphors? Excellent. Because Dublin is dramatic and worthy of metaphor overuse. It's full of interesting museums, and statues with hilariously inappropriate nicknames, and pubs spewing out some of the best music on earth. Everywhere you go, you'll see things you want to do and see and taste.

And therein lies the problem.

Many a well-intentioned traveler has shown up in Dublin with plans to spend a casual day or two before turning their attention to the rest of Ireland. And many a well-intentioned traveler has found themselves, a week later, on their ninetieth lap of Temple Bar, two leprechaun snow globes and a bag full of overpriced T-shirts the only things they have to show for it.

It's a tale as old as time.

My firm recommendation (command?) is that you begin in the west, most particularly, the Wild Atlantic Way. Even more particularly, the Burren and the Cliffs of Moher. We'll get to them next.

HEARTACHE HOMEWORK: *Surprise!* As we traipse across this wild island of ours, I will be doling out

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little activities designed to engage you with Ireland and baby-step you out from under that crushing load of heartache you're packing around. Assignment one? Keep reading. No, really. *Keep reading.*

—Excerpt from *Ireland for the Heartbroken: An Unconventional Guide to the Emerald Isle*, third edition

**"YOU WERE BRAWLING. DURING THE CEREMONY."** WHENEVER my mom was upset, her voice lowered three octaves and she pointed out things that everyone already knew.

I pulled my gaze away from the thousand shades of green rushing past my window, inhaling to keep myself calm. My dress was bunched up around me in a muddy tutu, and my eyes were swollen drum-tight. Not that I had any room to talk: Ian's eye looked much worse. "Mom, the ceremony was over; we—"

"Wrong side, wrong side!" Archie yelled.

Mom swore, swerving the car over to the left and out of the way of an oncoming tractor while I dug my fingernails into the nearest human flesh, which happened to belong to my oldest brother, Walter.

"Addie, stop!" he yelled, pulling his arm away. "I thought we agreed you weren't going to claw me to death anymore."

"We almost just got into a head-on collision with an oversize piece of farm equipment. It's not like I can control what I do," I snapped, shoving him a few inches to the left. I'd spent the last seventy-two hours crammed between my two largest brothers in every variation of transportation we

encountered, and my claustrophobia was hovering around a level nine. Any higher and I was going to start throwing punches. Again.

“Mom, don’t listen to them—you’re doing great. There were a good three inches between you and that tractor,” my other brother Archie said, reaching under the headrest and patting her on the shoulder. He narrowed his blue eyes at me and mouthed, *Don’t stress her out.*

Walt and I rolled our eyes at each other. The man at the airport car rental desk had insisted that it would take only an hour, two tops, for my mom to get the hang of driving on the opposite side of the road, but we were more than forty-eight hours in, and every time we got in the car, I got the same sinking feeling that rickety carnival rides always gave me. *Impending doom.* I held the airport car rental man personally responsible for all the emotional and psychological damage I was undoubtedly going home with.

Only Ian, whose perpetual car sickness made him the unspoken victor of the front seat, was unfazed. He rolled down the window, sending a cool burst of cow-scented air into the car, his knee doing the perpetual Ian bounce.

There are two important things to know about Ian. One, he never stops moving. Ever. He’s the smallest of my brothers, only a few inches taller than me, but no one ever notices that because his energy fills up whatever room he’s in. And two,

he has an anger threshold. Levels one through eight? He yells like the rest of us. Nine and above? He goes silent. Like now.

I leaned forward to get another look at his black eye. A slash of mud crossed under his ear, and grass peppered his hair. His eye was really swollen. Why was his eye so swollen already?

Ian gingerly touched the skin under his eye, as if he was thinking the same thing. “Brawling? Come on, Mom. It was just an argument. I don’t think anyone even saw.” His voice was calm, bored even. He was really trying to convince her.

“Argument’ implies that there wasn’t any violence. I saw fists. Which makes it a brawl,” Walter added helpfully. “Plus, everyone, look at Ian’s eye.”

“Do *not* look at my eye,” Ian growled, his Zen slipping away.

Everyone glanced at him, including my mom, who immediately started to drift to the opposite side of the road.

“Mom!” Archie yelled.

“I *know*,” she snapped, pulling back to the left.

*I really hurt Ian.* My heart started in on a dangerous free fall, but I yanked it back into place. I had exactly no room for guilt. Not when I was already filled to the brim with remorse, shame, and self-loathing. Plus, Ian *deserved* that black eye. He was the one who kept bringing up Cubby—poking me with Cubby was more like it. Like he had a ball of fire on the end of a stick that he could jab at me whenever he felt like it.

Ian's voice popped into my head—the broken record I'd been listening to for ten days now. *You have to tell Mom before someone else does.*

Hot, itchy anxiety crept up my legs, and I quickly leaned over Archie to unroll the window, sending another rush of air into the car. *Don't think about Cubby. Don't think about school. Just don't think.* I was four thousand miles and ten days out from my junior year—I shouldn't spend my remaining time thinking about the disaster scene I was going back to.

I stared hard out the window, trying to anchor my mind on the scenery. Houses and B and Bs dotted the landscape in charming little clumps, their fresh white exteriors accented with brightly colored doors. Lines of laundry swung back and forth in the Irish drizzle, and cows and sheep were penned so close to the houses, they were almost in the backyards.

I still couldn't believe I was here. When you think destination wedding, you don't think rainy, windswept cliff on the western coast of Ireland, but that's exactly the spot my aunt had chosen. The Cliffs of Moher. Moher, pronounced *more*. As in more wind, more rain, more vertical feet to traverse in a pair of nude high heels. But despite the fact that my brothers had to Sherpa my aunt's new in-laws up to the top, or that all of us had sunk to our ankles in mud by the time *dearly beloved* had been uttered, I completely understood why my aunt had chosen the place.

For one thing, it made for great TV. Aunt Mel's traveling camera crew—a couple of guys in their late twenties with exceptionally well-thought-out facial hair—forced us to do the wedding processional twice, circling in on her as the wind whipped around her art deco dress in a way that should have made her look like the inflatable waving arm guy at a car dealership, but instead made her look willowy and serene. And then once we were all in place, it was all about the view, the overwhelming *grandiosity* of it. Big hunks of soft green ended abruptly in sheer cliffs, dropping straight down into the ocean, where waves threw themselves against the rocks in ecstatic spray.

The cliffs were ancient and romantic, and completely unimpressed with the fact that I'd spent the summer ruining my own life. *Your heart got publicly stomped on?* the cliffs asked. *Big deal. Watch me shatter this next wave into a million diamond fragments.*

For a while there, the view had crowded out every other possible thought. No cameras, no Cubby, no angry brother. It was the first break I'd had from my mind in more than ten days. Until Ian leaned over and whispered, *When are you telling Mom?* and all the anxiety pent up in my chest had exploded. Why couldn't he just let it go?

Walter rolled down his window, creating a cross tunnel of air through the back seat. He sighed happily. "Everyone saw

the fight. There was a collective gasp when you went over the edge. I'll bet at least one of the cameramen caught it on film. And then there was that group of tourists. They were talking to you, weren't they?"

The Ian bounce stopped, replaced by angry fist clenching. He whirled on Walter. "Walt, just shut *up*."

"All of you—" my mom started, but then she blanched. "Oh, no."

"What? What is it?" Archie craned his face forward, his shoulders shooting up to his ears. "Roundabout," he said in the exact tone a NASA scientist would announce, *fiery Earth-destroying meteorite*.

I anchored myself onto both my brothers' arms. Walter clutched his seat belt to his chest, and Archie reverted into coach mode, barking out instructions. "Driver stays on the inside of the roundabout. Yield when you enter, not when you're inside. Stay focused, and whatever you do, *don't hit the brakes*. You can do this."

We hit the roundabout as though it were a shark-infested whirlpool, all of us holding our breath except for my mom, who let out a stream of loud profanities, and Ian, who carried on with his regularly programmed fidgeting. When we'd finally cleared it, there was a collective exhale from the back seat, followed by one last expletive from the driver's seat.

"Great job, Mom. If we can handle every roundabout like



that, we'll be golden," Archie said, unhooking my claws from his upper arm.

Walt leaned forward, shaking himself free of me also. "Mom, please stop swearing. You're *awful* at it."

"You can't be awful at swearing," she said shakily.

"You have single-handedly disproven that theory," Walt argued. "There's a science to it; some words go together. You can't just throw them all out at once."

"I'm going to throw *you* all out at once," Mom said.

"See, that's good, Mom," he said. "Maybe stick to the clever quips. At least those make sense."

"It's about context. And respect for the form," Ian added, his voice back to calm. I dug my fingers into my muddy skirt. Now I was confused. Was Ian angry-calm or *calm*-calm?

Archie glared at all of us. "She can use whatever combination of words she wants. Whatever gets us back to the hotel safely. Remember what you practice in your business meditations, Mom. *Go to your powerful place.*"

"Great," Ian groaned. "You've invoked the Catarina."

"There's no reason to bring her into this," I added.

Mom scowled at us dangerously. Thirteen months ago my mom had traded in her yoga pants and oversize T-shirts for a real estate wardrobe and a bunch of *Be the Business, Feel the Business* audio recordings from a local real estate guru named Catarina Hayford. And we couldn't even make fun of her for it,

because in one year she had outsold 90 percent of her more seasoned fellow agents, even landing a spot on her agency's billboards. This meant that I could be almost anywhere in Seattle and look up to see her smiling imperiously down on me. And with her new busy schedule, some days it was the only time I saw her at all.

"Remind me why I paid to bring all of you to Ireland," Mom snapped, her voice rising.

Walt piped up. "You didn't pay for it—Aunt Mel did. And besides, if it weren't for Addie and Ian's performance back there, that would have been an unbelievably boring wedding, even with that crazy scenery." He nudged me. "My favorite part was the moment when little sis here decided to shove Ian off the cliff. There was this *deliberateness* to it. Like that scene in *The Princess Bride* when Buttercup shoves Wesley and he's rolling down the hill yelling, 'As yooooou wiiiiiiish!'"

"Two things," Ian said, his long hair brushing his shoulder as he looked back. His gaze skipped right over me. "One, great reference, seeing as the Cliffs of Moher is where they filmed the Cliffs of Insanity scenes. And two, did you even *see* what happened?"

Walter drew his breath in sharply. "Why didn't anyone tell me that before we went? You're right. We were totally at the Cliffs of Insanity. We could have done a reenactment—"

“Stop *talking*.” I laced my voice with as much menace as I could muster. When Walter got started, he was a human diesel train. Loud and really hard to stop.

“Or what? You’ll throw me off a cliff?”

“It was more of a chambered punch,” Archie said. “Or maybe a right hook. The technique was actually really good. I was impressed, Addie.”

Ian whipped back, and this time his bruised eye stared me down. “She didn’t knock me off the cliff. I *slipped*.”

“Yeah, right.” Walter laughed. “Way to save your ego there, buddy.”

I dug my elbows into Walter and Archie’s legs, but they both grabbed hold of my arms, locking me into place until I struggled free. “We went down the complete opposite side of the hill. No one was actually in danger.”

Walter shook his head. “Lucky break. Auntie Mel would have never forgiven us if you’d ruined her dream wedding by committing *murder*.” He whispered *murder* the way the narrator always did in his favorite true crime TV show.

“But could you imagine the ratings on the wedding episode if that happened?” Archie quipped. “HGTV would love you forever. They’d probably give you your own reality show. It would be like international wedding crasher-meets-hired hit man. Or hit woman.”

“All of you, *stop*.” My mom risked taking her hand off the

steering wheel to massage her right temple. “You know what? I’m pulling over.”

“Mom, what are you doing?” I yelled as we bumped off the side of the road, a parade of cars honking behind us. If I had to stay sandwiched in this car for even a minute longer than was completely necessary, I was going to lose it. “There’s a whole line of cars behind us. And the shoulder’s almost nonexistent.”

“Yes, Addie, I know that.” She shakily threw the car into park, wrenching us all forward. “This can’t wait.”

“The fight at the cliffs was one hundred percent Ian’s fault.” The words screeched—unplanned—out of my mouth, and all three of my brothers turned to stare at me in horror. I had just broken Bennett sibling code rule #1: *Never throw one another under the bus*. Except this Cubby thing was on a whole new level. Maybe old rules didn’t apply.

Ian’s face tightened in anger. “You’re the one who—”

“ENOUGH!” My mom’s voice reverberated around the car like a gong. “I don’t care *who* started it. I don’t care if Addie drenched you with honey and then threw you into a bear den. You’re teenagers, practically adults. And I have had it with your arguments. You fell off a hill. In the middle of a wedding.”

*Bear den? Honey?* Mom had a great imagination. Walter started to laugh, but Mom wrenched her neck toward him, and he fell silent. Next she zeroed in on Ian.

“There is one year standing between you and college, and if you think I’m going to put up with how you’ve been acting, you’re wrong. And, Addie, you’re sixteen years old and you have all the self-control of a ten-year-old.”

“Hey!” I started, but Archie shot his elbow into my ribs, and I doubled over. It was a saving gesture. If I had any chance of surviving this, it was going to involve the subtle art of *keeping quiet*. And Mom was right. As my outburst had just so aptly demonstrated, I did struggle with impulsivity. It got me into trouble a lot.

“You two are so close,” Mom said. “The closest of any of you. There were years when I thought that neither of you knew that anyone else existed. What is going on this summer?”

And then suddenly the car was quiet. Horribly quiet. All except for the windshield wipers, which chose this exact moment to become sentient. *This summer, this summer, this summer*, they chanted, sloshing water across the window. Ian’s knee slowed, and I felt his stare, heavy on my face. *Tell Mom.*

I raised my eyes to his, my telepathic message just as insistent. *I am not. Telling. Mom.*

“Fine. Don’t tell me.” Mom slammed her palm down on the steering wheel and we all flinched. “If Dad were here, you know you’d be on the first flight back to Seattle.”

Ian and I simultaneously levitated off our seats. “Mom, no! I *have* to go to Italy. I have to go see Lina!” I shouted.

Ian’s measured voice filled the car. “Mom, you’ve got to think this through.”

She threw her hand up, deflecting our emotion like one of the backhand shots that ruled her tennis game. “I didn’t say you’re not going.”

“Geez, chill, Addie,” Walter whispered. “You almost went headfirst through the windshield.”

I sagged back into my seat, panic filtering out of my veins. The only good thing about Aunt Mel’s wedding—besides the gorgeous location—was that it had gotten me to Europe, the continent that had stolen my best friend from me at the beginning of the summer.

My aunt had arranged for a postwedding tour of Ireland that was supposed to include all of us, but I’d managed to talk my parents into letting me skip the tour in exchange for a few days in Italy with Lina. I hadn’t seen her since she moved to Florence ninety-two days ago to live with her father, Howard, and every single one of those days had felt like a lifetime. Not seeing her was not an option. Especially now, when it was very likely she was the only friend I had left.

Ian slumped forward in relief, twisting the back of his hair into a tight corkscrew. I swore he’d grown his hair out just to give him more fidget options.

“Don’t get me wrong,” my mom continued. “I should be sending you both back, but we spent way too much on those tickets to Florence, and if I don’t have some time away from the two of you and your constant fighting, I’m going to have a breakdown.”

A fresh dose of anger hit my system. “Could someone please explain to me *why* Ian’s coming with me to Italy?”

“Addie,” my mom snapped. Ian shot me a wide-eyed look that said, *Shut up NOW*.

I glared back, our stares connecting. Despite the fact that I definitely should have been *Shutting up NOW*, it was an extremely valid question. Why did he want to come on a trip with me when, by all accounts, he couldn’t stand me?

“So here’s the deal,” my mom said, inserting herself into the middle of our staring match. “Tomorrow morning, Archie, Walter, and I will leave on the tour, and the two of you will continue on to Florence.” She spoke slowly, her words lining up like a row of dominoes, and I held my breath, waiting for her to topple the first one.

But . . . she didn’t.

After almost ten seconds of silence, I looked up, hope lifting the edges of my voice. “That’s it? We just get to go?”

“You’re just going to send them to Italy?” Walter asked, sounding as incredulous as I felt. “Aren’t you going to, like, punish them?”

“Walter!” Ian and I both yelled.

My mom wrenched herself around again, focusing first on me, then Ian, her spine swiveling seamlessly. At least she was putting all her yoga classes to good use. “You’re going to Italy. It will force you two to spend some quality time together,” she said, barbing the word “quality.” “But there’s a catch.”

Of course there was. “What?” I asked impatiently, pulling a particularly stabby bobby pin out from its favorite spot in the back of my wilting updo. If it wouldn’t completely set him off, I’d stick it in Ian’s hair, try to get some of it out of his face.

“Here we go,” Ian muttered, just loud enough for me to hear.

Mom paused dramatically, her eyes darting back and forth between us. “Are you both listening?”

“We’re listening,” I assured her, and Ian’s knee bounced receptively. Couldn’t he ever just hold still?

“This is your chance to prove to me that you can handle yourselves. If I hear anything bad from Lina’s father, and I mean *anything*—if you fight, if you yell, if you so much as look at each other cross-eyed while you’re there—both of you are off your teams.”

There was a moment of dead air, and then the car exploded. “*What?*” Archie said.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa!” Walter shook his head. “Are you being serious, Mom?”



“We’ll be off our teams?” I asked quickly. “Like soccer and football?”

She nodded, a self-satisfied smile spreading like warm butter across her face. She was proud of this one. “Yes. Like soccer and football. And it doesn’t even have to be both of you. If one of you messes up, you’re both getting punished for it. And there will be absolutely no second chances. One strike, you’re out. That’s it.”

I thought I had no space for fresh panic, but it squeezed in with all the old stuff, turning my chest into an accordion. I leaned forward, putting my hands on the front seats to steady myself. “Mom, you know I have to play soccer this year.” My voice was high and stringy, not nearly as reasonable sounding as I’d intended. “If I don’t, college scouts won’t see me play, and then there’s no way I’ll get onto a college team. This is the year that matters. This is my *future*.”

“Then you’d better not mess up.”

Ian’s eyes met mine, and I could see the words ping-ponging through his head. *You already messed up, Addie.*

I shot lasers at him. “But—”

“This is in your control. And Ian’s. I’m not backing down on this.”

As if she needed to add that last part. My parents never backed down on anything. It was one of life’s constants: the shortest distance between two points is a line, root beer floats