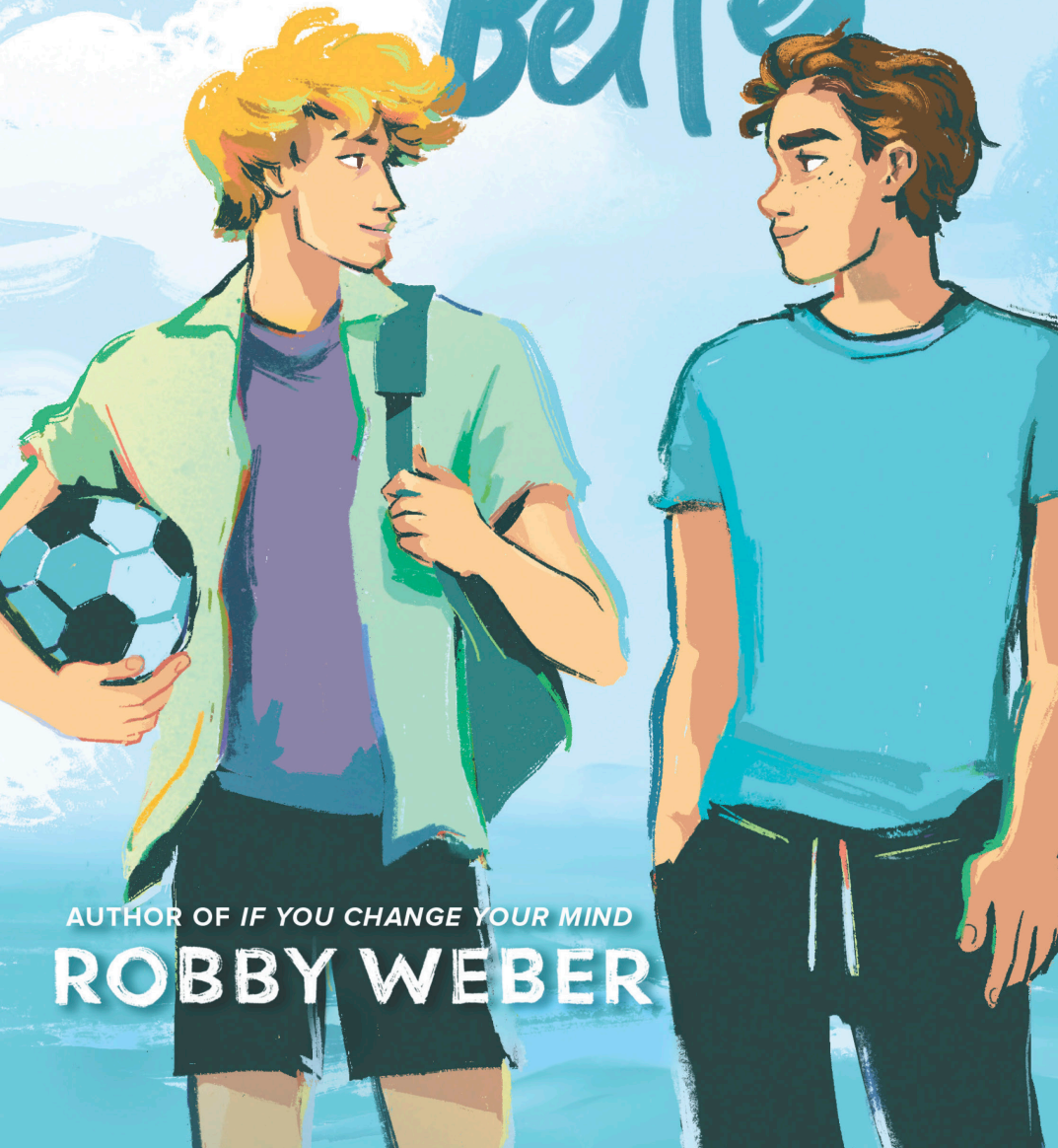


“Swoon-worthy!”

—JASON JUNE,

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
OUT OF THE BLUE

I Like Me Better



AUTHOR OF *IF YOU CHANGE YOUR MIND*

ROBBY WEBER

I Like Me
Better

**Books by Robby Weber
available from Inkyard Press**

If You Change Your Mind

I Like Me Better

ROBBY WEBER

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ISBN-13: 978-1-335-45364-8

I Like Me Better

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Inkyard Press
22 Adelaide St. West, 41st Floor
Toronto, Ontario M5H 4E3, Canada
www.InkyardPress.com

Printed in U.S.A.



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Thank you for always cheering me on.

1

THE METAPHORICAL CLEATS

Whoever said winning isn't everything must not have won very often.

It's thanks to my winning goal at States last month that all the guys in the locker room cheer when I round the corner.

My best friend, Meyers, slings an arm over my shoulders and, in a pretty convincing Peter Drury voice, crows: "*This is summer break! Zack Martin, rising star of the Citrus Harbor High Hammerheads, has slammed home an impossible goal at States. The captain spot is nearly his, but it all comes down to this summer—one match to make or break.*"

It's thanks to my many other winning goals that Ryan, our graduating captain, has taken me under his wing and gives me an approving nod from the end of the locker room. He thinks I'm a shoo-in to fill his metaphorical cleats next year. In fact, he already nominated me for it. We'll find out officially on the Fourth of July, after the annual charity

match, when the team has a pool party and votes for the new captain—a tradition I am especially looking forward to this year.

It's also, ironically, thanks to my winning goals that Noel Hawthorne is practically glaring at me as he shoves his shin guards into his duffel bag. He's the only guy on the team who isn't ever happy to see me. His dad has put him in elite soccer camps since he was ten, and I think he's always been salty about not being the best on our team.

I've trained and worked hard—keeping my grades slightly above average, serving on homecoming court (a byproduct of being friends with Ryan), and helping with the team fundraisers, while also never missing a practice—and I now have the record number of goals for a Citrus Harbor High student since 1978.

My cheeks go hot when all the guys clap for me like I'm some kind of celebrity—it's nice and all, but I still feel like it can't be for me, like maybe there's somebody behind me everybody is actually excited to see.

Once everyone's attention is off me and back to their separate conversations, I raise a brow and Meyers grins.

"I really can't believe we're going to Ryan's party." He knocks into my shoulder as I make my way toward my locker. He looks down at his phone, running one hand through his fiery red hair. "I wonder if they're going to do, like, foam in the pool. And Hope is going to be there, obviously, and we'll finally have our second kiss, obviously."

"I don't think there will be foam in the pool," I say.

To my right, Beckett, my other best friend since kindergarten, is neatly folding his jersey.

"This isn't the '80s." Beckett grimaces and flicks a few

strands of black hair from his face as he zips his bag and stands up straight. “I don’t know, guys. I’m not sure if I’m in the mood for a party tonight, I’m wiped.”

Meyers rolls his eyes. “Dude. This is the last day of our junior year, and we’ve been invited to Ryan’s party. Us.” He makes a grand gesture with open palms, then pitches his voice lower. “None of the other guys in our grade are going.”

“Zack got invited,” Beckett points out.

“But you guys are welcome to come,” I say, balling up some socks I didn’t even realize I’d shoved into my locker. “Ryan said so.”

“It’s an honor to be popular adjacent,” Beckett deadpans.

“This is the culmination of *everything*,” Meyers presses. “Zack scoring that goal at States. Him becoming the next captain. Plus, me and Hope will finally get together. Beckett, you got your internship. This is going to be the best summer of our entire lives and it’s starting with the coolest party that we normally would only hear stories about.”

“I think it’s weird he doesn’t invite the whole team,” Beckett says, eyes shifting around to make sure none of our teammates are listening. His mouth curves into a frown and he fidgets with the wrapper of a granola bar.

Around spring break, his mom’s family visited from South Korea and brought these life-changing chips filled with chocolate. Between Meyers, Beckett, and me—and with *much* discipline—the supply lasted for a couple months, and it became a mini tradition to eat them before practice. Now that there are none left, he’s been suffering through healthy, fiber-rich protein bars for a couple weeks.

All that extra protein *might* be the reason he’s bulked up more than Meyers, who side-eyes Beckett’s bar now.

“Wait, dude.” I close my locker and pick my backpack up off the floor, slinging it over one shoulder and turning to Beckett. “You got an internship?”

“Wow, talk about a delayed response time.” Meyers rolls his eyes.

“Yeah, I told you.” Beckett has a mouth full of protein bar and he’s uncapping a stick of deodorant and slipping it under his shirt. “Summer internship with Irving Banks. His firm does, like, ridiculous multimillion-dollar houses. The email came through in final period.”

“Making moves, Beck!” I bump the side of my fist to his.

“Get me one?” Meyers beams.

Beckett’s mouth falls open. “An internship?”

“No, a multimillion-dollar house,” he says.

“Right, of course. Coming right up.”

A few of the graduating senior guys burst in and start showing their affection for the younger teammates: putting the sophomores in headlocks, slinging a pair of briefs across the room, and rapping their fists against the lockers while howling and laughing.

Beckett leans in and keeps his voice low: “They’re an inspiration. I’m so glad graduation means ascension to a more mature existence.”

“You boys talking shit?” Lawrence hums.

Meyers laughs it off. “We just missed you guys.”

“Zack is *really* going to miss us next year,” Lawrence says. “Don’t worry, 2.0, you guys will just need some extra practices.”

“Don’t tease him, you’re going to make him cry,” Tate snickers.

I roll my eyes, though my chest gets tight, and my skull

burns. I play it off like it's not completely embarrassing—just because I've cried a couple times after tough practices and had one minor incident when the seniors hazed us. Anyone could've gotten scared and cried. Anybody could have, but of course it was me.

"Guys, shut the fuck up." As Ryan appears next to Beckett, he's smiling, but he's also making a clear point and eyeing Tate and Lawrence, who stop laughing. He arches a brow and then gives me a pointed look. "Zack, I need to talk to you."

It makes sense why Ryan would be the most popular guy in his grade, and it makes sense why the team calls me 2.0, whether I like it or not. He's nominated me to take his place next year. Now, I just have to prove I'm worthy by leading the team to victory at the Fourth of July charity match, and getting voted in.

Anyway, on the outside, Ryan and I have our similarities—only he's taller, has better skin, a whiter smile, brighter blond hair, and more defined muscles. But on the inside, I'm convinced we're entirely different people. He's so sure of himself. He's commanding, and unbothered—everybody loves him, and he knows it.

"What are you guys doing here?" Meyers grins.

Ryan hasn't been to school in weeks. None of the graduating seniors have, really. He forces a smile. "Cleaning out my locker. Same as you. They just tagged along."

He's jokingly referred to himself as the apex predator, and it's kind of true. If he's the lion or the great white shark, the other guys are more like zebras or mackerel.

Ryan looks to me expectantly. "Zack?"

"Sure," I say.

He then gestures for me to follow him a few steps away

from everyone else, toward Coach's office door, and leans in to whisper. "We have a little situation on our hands. Nothing major, but also...not great."

I swallow. "Okay."

Noel shoots me a look and gestures for Carlos and Murray to turn toward us, too. I must visibly react to their sideways glances, because Ryan whips his head around and then sighs once he's facing me again. "Don't pay him any attention, dude. You can't show him that he bugs you. You need respect to be a good captain. So, earn their respect. Confidence. No weak shit."

Ryan absolutely taught us many lessons as captain.

Tough times don't last, but tough guys do.

We can feel sore tomorrow or sorry tomorrow—our choice.

We either have results or excuses, but not both.

Ryan never showed weakness.

He blinks, and I snap to. "No weak shit." After a beat: "I mean, that is, if the vote—"

"You're my legacy here, Zack. Everybody knows I'm the one who plucked your ass from JV, and now you're the best player on the team." He gestures toward the newest trophy and then rolls his eyes. "Well, after me, obviously."

I nod. "Of course."

"Own it," he says. "You're captain. It's yours. And so is that next States trophy."

More nodding.

"There's just this...*hiccup*," he says, clearing his throat and standing up straight before whispering even lower. "You know there's always some senior prank action, it's not a big deal. I thought it'd be funny—harmless, even—to play a little joke on the Menendez Day School dorks. They were so

salty after States. So, and I know how it sounds now that it's—" He sighs. "I found this dead hammerhead over by the pier, right? I mean, it's not like I killed it. It's washed up and it gives me an idea. And so, I snuck in this morning and put it in Johnny's locker at Menendez. Only now Johnny's texting me that he knows I did it and he ratted to their coach."

My jaw involuntarily drops.

What the hell, Ryan?

"It was just harmless," he says, as if reading my mind. "Just a reminder that, I don't know, they can't escape the Hammerheads. There's some kind of symbolism there."

And as if on cue, the door bursts open and there is the red-faced coach from Menendez Day School.

"Yeah, symbolism." I shrug. "That the Hammerheads are dead."

2

TAKE ONE FOR THE TEAM

The locker room goes dead silent as Coach Greenfield and the Menendez Day coach walk right past us into the office to have a closed-door discussion. There's a lot of tension in the room, but nobody seems to know why, based on the way whispers start out hushed and grow to a confused panic.

"So, what's going to happen?" I ask Ryan.

He shushes me and looks around to make sure nobody is listening. Luckily, even Noel is preoccupied.

"It's just..." He pinches the bridge of his nose and shuts his eyes tight, like he's really in pain. "I'd love to tell them the truth, but you know Duke would axe my ass if I had some disciplinary shit like this..."

"No, of course, you can't lose Duke." We *all* heard the entire saga of his recruitment. We all know how hard he worked for that scholarship.

Ryan sighs. "I know. But if I don't confess, then the whole

team is going to be punished. And who knows what that looks like. Not playing on the Fourth? Something way worse? What if the team is disqualified from competing for titles next year? I don't want to see that happen."

He looks away and seems lost in thought before snapping his fingers together. "Maybe we ask Meyers to do us a solid. He's a loyal dude. He can just say he did it, that he didn't mean it, and take whatever punishment they give him. It's summer, so I bet the whole thing blows over before the Fourth."

I consider this.

"You really think so?"

"Definitely. This is just a dumb prank being blown way out of proportion. And if it's an incoming senior, Coach is going to want to angle for as little punishment as possible. Plus, Meyers is a striker, so he's definitely not going to let them kick him off the team or anything."

I nod. "But the team will think..."

"Once we're in the clear, I'll tell the team the truth. I just need to make sure I'm good with Duke and all that.

"Look," Ryan says. "Meyers will be totally fine. You'll lead the team to the charity match on the Fourth, and at the party, you'll be named the new captain. By the end of the summer, none of this will even matter."

I nod again, more slowly this time.

Someone has to take the fall. And like Ryan said, it's summer—how bad could the punishment be?

I can't help but think Ryan is right: if someone doesn't take the blame, the whole team is going to be punished. And then this becomes a huge thing. And what does that mean for our future as a team? How does that affect literally everything we do moving forward?

Not having soccer would ruin my life.

Nobody makes fun of you when you're a soccer star and homecoming prince. They don't notice the little things about you that used to be funny when you're hanging out with the cool seniors, your TikToks are going viral, and the local news treats you like a celebrity.

But if there's one thing I've learned about being the best? Once you're on top, people stop noticing. They only ever seem to pay attention when you're doing better or worse.

Which is why I need to make captain. Onward and upward.

Ryan came up with a whole game plan for me. When I'm captain, I'll lead the team to another state championship win and score an NCAA D1 scholarship, which will lead to Stanford, then the US men's team before Chelsea. Then I'll be the second American to win the Ballon d'Or, after him. We'll be a duo so popular we make the cover of FIFA.

"I'll talk to him," I say.

Ryan nods, grinning. "This is an opportunity for him, Zack. A chance to really take one for the team."

I walk back over to the guys and plaster a huge smile on my face.

"What did he say?" Meyers looks over to make sure Ryan's not watching us.

I shrug. "Just that I should be more confident."

"You're so lucky—he's always looking out for you, man," Meyers says, rummaging through his locker. He's the only one with a bloodstain on his jersey and it stands out against the orange-and-white material, but he says he likes it because it scares the other teams. He sprays an ungodly amount of Axe toward himself. "Oops, thought it was empty."

“Jesus,” Beckett coughs, waving his hand through the deodorant cloud.

“I just cannot wait—our best summer ever,” Meyers sings with a smile brighter than I’ve seen in a while.

There’s only one way Meyers gets his amazing summer, Ryan gets to keep his spot on the Duke team, and the rest of the guys don’t get punished.

I take a deep breath and run my hand through my hair, shaking out a wave of nerves that has just come over me.

“Wish me luck.”

Meyers and Beckett both give me strange looks: “With what?”

3

MILKSHAKES FIX EVERYTHING

“Well, damn,” Meyers says as we slow to a stop. He taps on the steering wheel and points to the car ahead of us. “Come on, Grandma. Honda Accord *Sport*, really? What’s the freaking sport? Badminton?”

We’re riding through the residential streets right outside of the high school. It’s only a couple blocks from the ocean, but with all these four-way stops, it feels like it takes a million years to make it half a mile to Blue’s. The sky’s a hazy, golden potion of oranges and pinks, and at every stop sign, I stare past Meyers to the ocean.

Just thirty minutes ago, I blew up my life to make sure my life didn’t blow up. The logic is a little muddy, but Ryan said I absolutely saved his ass. That if there was ever any doubt about me being voted captain, once the team found out I took the fall for them, there was no way I wouldn’t get it.

Still, I'm not stoked that, for the time being, everyone thinks I'm the one who pulled that horrible prank.

"I can't believe you have community service," Meyers says to me. "It's just gnarly."

Beckett rubs his forehead in the back seat. "And I can't believe you *did* that. Such a gnarly prank. This is one of the dumbest things you've ever done, Zack. And I say that as your best friend, but come on."

"This summer has become a nightmare and it's barely getting started." I groan and throw my head back, shutting my eyes. "What have I done?"

What I haven't done is text my parents. I'm not even sure what to say. I almost send a message to a group text that we only really use for emergencies, but I decide against it. I'll have to tell Mom and Dad individually, and it's going to suck.

"If you ask me, you got off light with just community service hours. But how are you going to fit in summer practices before the charity match?" Beckett asks.

"It's all too much..." Meyers frowns as the grandma in front of us slows to another stop. He rests his forehead on the steering wheel. "Maybe we should still go to the party tonight. It'll be good for you."

I sigh. "Dude. My mom is not going to let me go to a party tonight."

"It's just I was really hoping I'd get a chance to see Hope," Meyers says. "But I'm not going without you."

"Why not?"

Meyers shrugs. "You were invited, not us."

Beckett punches him in the shoulder. Then he sighs. "Zack, this is unbelievable. In what world was this prank a good idea? You did this when you had everything at your fingertips."

“I don’t like bad-cop Beckett,” I say, sinking into my seat. Lying to the two of them is already shaping up to be one of the worst parts of this plan. “It was dumb. Okay?”

“And it’s just *so* not you.”

I shake my head. “It was a mistake. I thought it’d be funny or something.”

“Right. Whatever you do, don’t tell me you did this to impress Ryan.”

Meyers groans. “Okay, this is not the vibe for the last day of school. The prank is done. The punishment is set. Beckett, will you crank the tunes? Pump up the vibe in here? It’s like doomsday.”

Beckett reaches up from the back seat and pulls the aux cord back, plugging his phone in, and moments later, Young MC is thumping through the speakers. Meyers’s older brother, Monty, listens to ’90s music, so Meyers listens to ’90s music, which means Beckett and I also listen to ’90s music.

“Guys, I just want to forget any of this crap happened,” I say over the music.

“Probably for the best,” Beckett huffs. “Though it’s going to be hard to forget when you’re spending your summer volunteering at the library, just thinking about how you got there. Kind of the whole point of community service.”

The library. I could have had a million punishments. There are so many places in Citrus Harbor I could be doing community service, but somehow I’ve been stuck with the *library*.

“What will you even do there?” Meyers scratches the back of his neck.

Beckett doesn’t bother pretending he’s not annoyed with the entire conversation. “Probably shelving books, dusting, working events, reading to kids...”

“Putting those little plastic sleeves on books!” Meyers acts like this one is exciting.

“And, again, thinking about how you got there,” Beckett adds.

Meyers turns the music down. “Okay, Beck. We get it. But it’s giving judgment, and we don’t judge each other.”

I turn back to face Beckett, and he lifts a shoulder and blinks. “I’m slightly judging you for this one.” But then he rolls his eyes. “It’s just so profoundly dumb of you, Zack. So incredibly dumb.”

“Do you think the rest of the guys feel the same?”

“I don’t think they care too much,” Meyers assures me.

Beckett shrugs. “I can’t believe Coach is still letting you lead the team until the charity match.”

“Dude, Ryan *chose* him,” Meyers says, with a clap on my shoulder. “Even Coach can’t undo tradition.”

Beckett says, “I just don’t think this is great. Optically.”

“What do you mean?” I ask. “Something to do with glasses?”

He laughs. “No, optically, as in keeping up a good appearance. From a PR perspective, you really could have done without this whole ordeal. Like, your reputation is going to be what now, exactly?”

Meyers claps. “Zack is in his *reputation* era.”

“I am not,” I say. “I’m not in any era.”

I’ve learned better than to push back too much on any Taylor Swift tangents Meyers goes on, because if he thinks I’m at all dissing her, he’s going to launch into a tirade about how talented she is as a songwriter and how she portrays emotions and how it’s totally normal for him to love her so much because he, too, is a romantic. Based on the number of times

Meyers has sent a Taylor Swift song to our group text and related it to something we're going through (though, let's be real, usually it's about Hope), I think it's safe to say he's the Hammerheads' biggest Swiftie.

"You kind of did do something bad," Beckett says under his breath, which makes Meyers grin.

"This will all blow over." I exhale. "Definitely before the Fourth. It's fine."

Pulling into the parking lot and turning the key, Meyers turns to me, face screwing up. "So, you don't need a milkshake to distract you?"

"Of course I do." I open the door and slide out. After an exaggerated set of stretches, I start up toward the door. "The need for a milkshake is unwavering."

Truth be told, I'm not planning on wallowing over the optics or this community service stuff. Even though I'm helping Ryan out, it feels like crap right now, and the best way to get over negative feelings is to become consumed with positive ones. So, I'm going to consume a fat-ass burger and a chocolate shake and then go skate, run, or swing at the punching bag in the garage until I'm all filled up with endorphins. There's simply no time for bad vibes.

When we walk into Blue's, we're met with a familiar photo. Blown up extra large and plastered on the wall behind the to-go counter, there we are—the boys soccer team a few days after we won the state championship this spring, an assortment of goofy grins and a table covered in fries, burgers, and shakes. Then there's Ryan and me, front and center, holding up the trophy.

They ran that photo on the front page of the local paper that

weekend, and the great Blue himself put it up in the diner. He joked about it being the start to his very own Hall of Fame.

We slide into a booth in the corner where one window frames the Neptune Theater and the other a stretch of main road. Meyers sits next to me and Beckett sprawls out across from us, pulling on a RISD sweatshirt he got from a campus tour. We *always* get cold at Blue's but only Beckett ever remembers to prepare.

I'm slightly jealous he's been on college tours already. I've thought about touring Stanford, but I feel like most people would just laugh because I'm not smart enough to get in. Our guidance counselor, Ms. Wilson, says, though, that if I play well enough and keep my grades decent, I might have a shot. Still, I'm not going to advertise what school I want to go to until I have that scholarship and there's no room for people to question my ability to get in.

I look around the diner, wondering if any of the guys might be around—it wouldn't hurt to try and keep on everybody's good side.

There are plenty of our classmates scattered around the mismatched chairs and the freestanding tables in the center of the diner that are fenced in by booths with ripped red-and-blue vinyl cushions. No teammates, though. Only the swordfish on the wood-paneled wall above the kitchen door staring at me with its beady plastic eyes.

I tap my fingers on the glass table, which lies atop a collage of surf competition newspaper articles.

"All right." Beckett reaches across the table and lightly pretends to slap my cheek. "Anybody in there?"

I hold up my hands. "I'm fine!"

“I was probably too harsh.” Beckett tilts his head and purses his lips. “A little too much tough love.”

“It’s all good. I’m thinking about the charity match. Going over the team’s strengths and weaknesses,” I say, which is actually a lie, because I’m still replaying the moment I signed my life over to doing this community service.

“Do I wanna know my weaknesses?” Meyers frowns and pulls a sugar packet from the little ceramic dish at the end of the table. He flicks it across the table, and Beckett rolls his eyes, flicking it back at him.

Lois comes over and takes our orders—three cheeseburgers with fries and a milkshake for each of us. She doesn’t have to ask to know it’s a strawberry for Meyers, cookies and cream for Beckett, and chocolate for me.

“Maybe focusing on strengths is better,” I say. “You’re great at reading the opponents—they never get anything by you.”

“Love that for me,” Meyers says.

“Whoa, teachers.” Beckett points as Mrs. Rushmore and a few other teachers sit down at one of the booths across the restaurant.

My heart quickens at the sight of Mrs. Rushmore. Does she totally hate me now?

“Are teachers still teachers on summer break?” Meyers squints.

“Philosophical.” Beckett nods. “Yes, they are.”

Meyers raises his shoulders. “Trippy.” He sighs. “Man, I’ve been thinking... Beck, you have your internship, and Zack, you have your community service, so what am I supposed to do all summer?”

“You could get a job.” Beckett shrugs. “Or, I don’t know, take a class.”

This seems to trouble Meyers and he scratches the back of his neck. “Take a class?”

“Yeah,” Beckett says. “Pottery, cooking, painting, parasailing, I don’t know.”

“Those are things my grandma does,” he whines.

I lift a brow. “Your grandma takes parasailing classes?”

“Okay, the other ones. Honestly, what even is parasailing?” Meyers taps his chin. “Maybe I’ll take a poetry class. Is that a thing?”

“*You* want to take a poetry class?” I ask. “Why?”

“You know,” Meyers says, “to, like, express myself. No reason.”

“No reason?” Beckett asks. “Meyers, come on, man. I don’t want to be the one to ask this.” He closes his eyes, wincing. “Hope’s graduated. What if things don’t—”

“No, no, no.” Meyers wags a finger. “Not even worth going there.”

Beckett sighs. “I just don’t want you to get your feelings hurt if—”

“La la la.” Meyers plugs his ears and shakes his head. “Look, when she kissed me last summer, I learned what *romance* is. And I know she felt it, too.”

Beckett nods slowly. “Okay, just wondering. Hear me out. Logistically. Have you considered if she will realistically want to start a new long-distance relationship while she’s off at college and you’re a senior in high school? I mean, you know how we are about the sophomores on the team. Imagine how college kids are about high schoolers.”

“You need to learn to believe in love, Beck.” Meyers swoons a little. “It’s, like...it defies logic. I’m telling you;

I don't think a kiss like that has *ever* happened. I know she hasn't ever had that with Tristan. It just cannot be possible."

"Why didn't she dump him then?" Beckett is somewhat strained—tired of trying to reason with Meyers, to fight heart with head.

Meyers doesn't budge. "Come on, I get it. They'd been together forever. It was her senior year. They had prom and all that stuff. Relationships are complicated."

"Well, now it's not complicated," I offer. "Right? They're officially broken up?"

"Exactly," Meyers says. "But I don't want to seem like I've been, like, waiting for her to be single. I just want to run into her at the party and let her remember the sparks on her own."

He's lost in dream world again, imagining their beach bonfire kiss from last summer. I've kissed plenty of guys and never felt like one was more special than another. It's definitely never felt like love defied logic. Ryan always says there's plenty of time for relationships later in life—they're just distractions right now.

I hang my head.

"I need to figure out my hours at the library so we can adjust our summer training schedule before the charity match. Slight complication, but no need to panic."

When Mrs. Rushmore is getting up to fill her cup at the sweet tea dispenser, I weigh my options and realize I have no choice. Mrs. Rushmore is my favorite teacher, and I need to make sure she doesn't hate me for whatever she might think I've done.

I turn to the boys. "I'll be right back."

I could use the ten seconds it takes to cross the diner to think this through a little more, but I'm suddenly standing

next to her and unsure of where exactly to begin. There's got to be a right and a wrong way to approach this.

"Hey, Zack." Mrs. Rushmore's heels squeak against the floor as she turns to face me, and she raises a thin brow.

I stand up straight and my hands get a little clammy.

She's been trying to get me involved ever since I wrote an essay about ocean conservation in her environmental science class sophomore year. And I did really well in marine science this year, too. All my other classes were such snooze fests, and Mrs. Rushmore makes school as fun as it could be, given the circumstances and that the beach practically *begs* us to skip out on the back half of the day.

Now she's gotta hate me. She probably thinks I'm some delinquent after the prank.

"Hey, Mrs. Rushmore," I say, immediately forgetting every other word in the English language.

"Any fun plans for the summer?" she asks.

Any fun plans? The look on her face isn't one of disappointment or anger or anything even remotely negative. In fact, she just seems like a teacher talking to her student, maybe even more excited to be out for the summer than said student, in his present circumstances.

Oh.

Thank God. She doesn't know!

"We'll see," I say, relief washing over me. "What about you?"

Mrs. Rushmore shrugs. "The usual. I'm doing a bunch of beach cleanups this summer."

Hopefully she won't hear and by the time she does, everyone will know it was Ryan, not me, and I'll be in the clear—my favorite teacher will have no reason to totally hate me.

“I’m going to be working at the Marine Institute,” she says. “I know we’re expecting a lot of new volunteers to help with the sea turtle nesting, too.” She says it the way a parent tells their kid that if they yank out a tooth, the tooth fairy will come. She’s trying to elicit an excited reaction but I blink. “You should come out and see if there are any roles that interest you.”

Real deal, I love the ocean—it’s one of my favorite things ever—but I never have had time to do things like volunteer. And if I’m honest, I don’t think I’m going to make that much of a difference by picking up a few pieces of trash anyway.

I don’t think Mrs. Rushmore needs to know that, though, so I nod. I’ve heard her conservation spiel enough times to know she’s an optimist. “Yeah, I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Okay, good,” Mrs. Rushmore says. “It really is a great way to make a difference and learn about conservation and our community’s efforts for the ocean—think of the impact young people can have. Especially these days, too; look at Greta Thunberg.”

She pauses and I nod slowly.

“You’re familiar with Greta Thunberg?”

“Sure,” I say. “She’s the director of the *Barbie* movie.”

Meyers has such a crush on Margot Robbie, I know way more about *Barbie* than I ever wanted to.

Mrs. Rushmore laughs. “No, no. Look up Greta Thunberg—she’s an activist.”

“Yeah, okay, I’ll look her up.”

“Good.” Mrs. Rushmore finally smiles and then looks past me, waving to Beckett and Meyers. “Hope to see you at the beach, Zack.”

That means this conversation is over, so I nod and turn on my heel, hurrying back over to the guys.

“What was that?” Meyers whispers, like Mrs. Rushmore has supersonic hearing.

“Dude, you know me and Mrs. Rushmore are like this.” I cross my fingers as I slide into the booth. “I was just saying hey.”

Beckett chews a fingernail. “Hey, listen, I know how important the charity game is to you, and obviously I want to be there for you, but I don’t know how much time I can spend practicing. With this internship, I’m going to be super busy.”

I put my palms on the table. There’s no time for focusing on what can’t work in life, only what can.

“All right, look, Beck, it’s only a month. I’m gonna be able to practice, and I’m going to be a librarian.”

Beckett rolls his eyes, but at least this time he seems amused. “You will not be a librarian by any means, there is so much school that would be involved with that.” He shakes that away and then: “Our team is already solid... Maybe we could come up with a weekend training schedule instead of the usual?”

“You know that won’t be enough,” I say. “I’ll bet a hundred bucks Menendez hires some fancy coach. Even for a charity match.”

“They are so desperate to beat us,” Meyers agrees.

Beckett considers this. “Then do we really even stand a—”

“Beck, we’re going to win because we’re better. Doesn’t Coach always say that it doesn’t matter what the other team does? Just what we do? This is just a month. One month of practicing—improving—and we will crush the charity match, keep up our winning streak, and we’ll have an awesome time at the party afterward.”

“Where you will be named captain.” Meyers nods. “As long as the guys don’t think this is bad.” He looks to Beckett. “Optimistically.”

“*Optically*,” Beckett corrects.

I remind myself not to take that to heart—by the time we vote, the guys will know I did what I had to do to keep Ryan in good standing with Duke. They’ll know I took one for the team and that’ll only work out in my favor.

“This is going to be fine.” I drum my fingers on the table. “Actually, not only fine, but Beckett is gonna smash this internship, Meyers, you’re going to find something to do, and I’m going to crush community service and make captain.”

Beckett narrows his eyes. “Oh, I really think this is going to be quite the summer.”

The way Beckett’s been taking this news is with more disgust and judgment than he’s ever shown me. And I get why... I just wish I could tell him the truth.

But there’s no way Beckett would ever let Ryan get away with his prank while I took the fall. So I just nod quietly.

“It’s only one summer,” I say. “Half a summer. Honestly, how much can even happen in half a summer?”