

# 1 | Lauren

**THE HOUSE** smells like  
apple pie thanks to the  
burning candle on the mantel.

Uncle Josh and  
my three cousins are outside  
throwing the football around.

Apparently this small town  
loves football  
the way ducks love water.

Once in a while, laughter  
drifts in through the open windows,  
and I wish I could bottle it up  
and carry it with me, letting out  
just a little when I need a smile.

It's a strange, magical place, this house.

Aunt Erica is in the kitchen  
making dinner, but every now  
and then she pokes her head

into the family room,  
where I'm watching a movie,  
and says, "Oh, I love this part."

It's *Pretty Woman*, where the hooker  
walks around the fancy hotel,  
trying to fit in like  
the only cat at a dog park.

Where I come from,  
there were no scented candles,  
no fun family games,  
no savory Sunday dinner.

It was a strange, crazy place, my house.

How long 'til they notice  
a cat like me doesn't belong  
in a nice dog park like this?

## 2 | Colby

**IT'S BENNY** and me, tossing the football around in my front yard, like we've done at least a thousand times. But this is the first time we've done it before the first day of practice our senior year.

This is our last chance.

Our last chance to bring home a high school championship.

I look at my best friend standing across from me, sweat glistening on his muscular black arms, and I know for him, we have to win. Taking state may be the only chance he has at catching a scout's eye.

It's been a lot easier for me. How can he not hate me for that?

"You're so good, you don't even need to go to practice, do you?" Benny jokes as the football spins toward me. "I bet you just show up so Coach will make the rest of us work harder."

It's like he can read my mind. Maybe that's what happens when you've been best friends for what feels like forever.

"You know if there was any way I could skip out on two-a-days, I definitely would," I say as I take a couple of steps to make the catch.

"Drink lots of water tonight," he says. "Gotta stay hydrated, man."

I throw the ball back. “Aw, isn’t that sweet. Big ol’ Benny actually cares about me.”

He walks toward me, half a grin on his face. “Just don’t want you passing out. Remember that one time last year when about half the team went down? That was crazy.”

“Yeah, I think it was about a hundred and ten degrees that day.” I hold out my arms and look up at the clear summer sky. Weather-wise, this is about as perfect as it gets in Willow, Oregon. Not too hot, a light breeze now and then, and no rain for days. “It’ll be all right tomorrow. I got a good feeling.”

“Well, that makes one of us.”

We walk up to the front steps of my house and take a seat. “What are you worried about?” I ask. “You got that guard spot cinched.”

“I’ll tell you what I’m worried about. Two words: Coach Sperry.”

“I think his bark is worse than his bite. Especially right now. He’s just trying to show us who’s boss. You know, establish an order.”

“What other order is there? He’s the coach and we’re the players. The end. We know where we stand. He’s got an amazing team that almost made it to the championships last year. He doesn’t need to do much except keep us on track. Let us do what we’re good at.”

“Colby,” Gram calls. “Dinner’s ready.”

“You staying?” I ask Benny as we get to our feet.

He hands me the football. “Can’t. Ma’s expecting me home. Making my favorite tonight. Ribs and mashed potatoes.”

“Jesus. You make it sound like it’s your last meal or something.”

“We got a new coach, man. Who knows what’s gonna happen tomorrow.”

“Well, aren’t you Little Miss Sunshine.” He shrugs, and I slap him on the back. “It’s gonna be all right.”

“Yeah. Ma always says when life hands you lemons, you gotta try your best to make lemonade. Nothing’s ever perfect. There’s always gonna be bad stuff to go with the good.”

“Benny, Coach might be a great guy. I mean, maybe he’ll lead us to the best year we’ve ever had. We don’t know yet. We don’t know anything. We just gotta wait and see, right?”

He waves as he walks toward his motorcycle. “Right. See you tomorrow. Bright and early!”

“Yep. You can count on that!”