



BACKCOUNTRY

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ISBN 978-1-338-85788-7

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 23 24 25 26 27

Printed in the U.S.A. 40

First printing 2023

Book design by Maithili Joshi

CHAPTER 1

The day everything changed, I was playing in a regional volleyball tournament. The gym's fluorescent lights seemed harsher than usual. The buzz of the crowd, which I normally found energizing, was having the opposite effect. Each yell and cheer seemed to drill into my head and drain my stamina away. As we huddled up, I felt the pressure mounting. I was the starting outside hitter. Our team's entire offensive strategy was structured around me, the lead attacker. My teammates were counting on me to bring us to victory in the third and final game of the match. Win this match, and the tournament was ours. The problem was my stomach was off. The inside of my mouth felt like it had been rubbed dry with a cotton rag, and as slowly as my legs were moving, you'd think my kneepads were made of lead.

"Coach, I need a minute," I said. I didn't give her a chance to respond before making a beeline for where my parents were sitting in the bleachers.

Dad spoke first, and he sounded a little aggravated. "What's going on, Em? Why aren't you with your team?"

“I don’t feel good,” I said.

Mom immediately placed a hand to my forehead. “You do feel a little warm.”

“Of course she does,” Dad said. “She’s been working up a sweat out there.”

My parents glared at each other. No doubt, Dad didn’t like the way Mom was babying me, and Mom didn’t like the tone of Dad’s voice. A groan of regret slipped through my lips. Why had I said anything? Dropping dead on the court might’ve been preferable to getting caught in the cross fire of one of their spats.

But, judging by the way their scowls quickly transformed into looks of concern, it seemed my groan was mistaken for one of physical discomfort. I didn’t correct them, because it very easily could have been, the way I was feeling.

“Maybe you should sit the last game out,” Mom suggested. And there it was again—another comment I knew would get under Dad’s skin.

My eyes flicked to his face. Sure enough, the vein in his neck popped out and his cheeks turned a light shade of red. He’d played some college basketball before a knee injury ended his career. As much as he liked to talk about it—the comebacks, the buzzer shots—you’d think his baller days had taken up a quarter of his life instead of a few short years.

One thing was certain, he hadn't missed a single minute of playing time by choice. I could only imagine how disappointed he'd be if I asked to sit out the championship match. My stomach roiled and I shifted my weight from one foot to the other. I really did feel awful, but Dad had torn himself away from work to be here. I didn't want to let him down, and I didn't want him to leave if he decided it wasn't worth his time to be here.

"Sports aren't everything," Mom said almost pleadingly as she brushed Dad's forearm with her fingers. The three of us knew that Dad didn't share her opinion. Even if he wouldn't come right out and say it, sports meant the world to him. He'd given up interest in practically every other aspect of my life.

When Dad's business took off, he'd started drifting away, and it wasn't until I started playing competitive sports that he'd made any real time for me.

I was glad he never missed any of my games, but we used to enjoy just hanging out together. Anyway, he only seemed to care about how I performed on the court. That was one reason I was so excited for the cross-country ski trip we planned to take over winter break. Out in the wilderness, I knew I could remind him that my skills went beyond what I could do in a gym. This trip was the first time he was going to take me

into the backcountry for more than a day. While we were off the grid for close to a week, I wouldn't have to compete with his real estate clients for his attention. I wanted to show him that I wasn't just sporty. That I was also strong and adventurous and tons of fun to be around.

Dad had bristled at Mom's touch and the reminder, but he softened when he spoke to me. "Think you can fight through?" he asked.

I weighed my options. If I went back on the court, it would make him glad that he'd rearranged his schedule to be here. If I sat out, he'd be counting the potential income he'd lost by canceling an open house so he could watch my matches. Still, I couldn't remember the last time I'd felt so rotten. My head felt wonky, I thought I might puke, and my energy was completely zapped. If I said no, I knew he wouldn't make me play. But if I said yes, I'd make him proud. He thought I was a fighter, and ultimately, I couldn't stand the idea of that changing.

I nodded at last. "Yeah, I think I'm just a little dehydrated," I said. "Can I have another Gatorade?"

"Atta girl," Dad said at the same time Mom dug into the small cooler she'd packed for the tournament.

"This is the last one." She held out a bottle of Riptide Rush. "How many have you had?"

I snatched the drink from her hands and shrugged. "I don't know," I said. "I lost count." Then I took off before Mom had a chance to fuss over me some more. Which I knew would only set off another round of endless irritability between my parents. Just thinking about it worsened my stomachache.

I could see the relief in Coach Vega's eyes as I returned to the sideline. My teammates had drifted apart and were scattered around the bench. Ignoring their curious glances, I lifted the Gatorade to my lips, tipped my head back, and drained the bottle dry.

"You okay?" Coach asked when I'd finished chugging.

"Yeah," I said. I wasn't, but I forced a smile anyway, hoping she'd find it convincing.

"Impalers, circle up!" she yelled. We'd decided on our team name during the first practice, when Deanna failed to dig one of my spikes. She said it stung so bad where it struck her that it was like being impaled. Once everyone had gathered around, we stacked our hands together before swinging them upward. "Bump, set, impale!" we all shouted.

I knew we needed something to get us fired up, and normally, I'd be the one encouraging my teammates and boosting morale. But I was just too exhausted. I could hardly lift my arms into the ready position. There was no way I could raise anyone else's spirit when mine was so low.

It was a struggle to focus. I tried to keep my eye on the ball as it volleyed around the court, but my head was in a fog. Every time I ran, it felt like I was trudging through mud. Still, I somehow managed to score a few key points, keeping victory within reach. I wanted the win so bad; I could practically taste it.

Ayra's pass from the back row fell right into Brooke's outstretched fingers. She cradled the volleyball for a split second before returning it to the air. It was a perfect set, high and close to the net. This was it. I clenched my teeth and began my approach. I wanted to crush the ball. I craved the rush of adrenaline and power that I'd felt countless times when spiking the ball onto the opponent's court.

But . . .

My feet barely left the ground. My swing was weak and after meeting my hand, the ball formed a high, slow arc. It hung in the air so long my best friend Tanner's three-year-old sister could've kept it from landing on their side of the court. As it was, a girl in the back row easily slid her forearms beneath the ball and bumped it to the player closest to the net. The setter returned the ball to the air, and seconds later their outside hitter sent it careening back in my direction. The seconds ticked off like minutes. I was filled with dread when I saw how, unlike my spike, her hit was sharp

and exact. I mustered what little energy I had left and dove forward with my arms outstretched. All I had to do was get there before the ball did—something that normally wasn't that difficult for me. But with the game on the line, I didn't have it. I came up about a mile short, and just like that, it was over.

While I peeled myself off the floor, my eyes landed on Dad. My heart sank when I saw the disappointment in his face. I wanted to fall back onto the court and disappear into the cracks between the maple planks. But somehow, I stumbled to my feet and walked toward the sideline.

Coach Vega huddled the team together. There was an awkward silence, and I could feel everyone's eyes on me. Stunned. They all looked stunned. The championship should've been ours. It *would* have been ours if I hadn't blown it for everyone. I thought my stomachache couldn't get any worse, but it did. Not only did I feel nauseous, but now it felt like a knot was tied in the middle of it. The Impalers would never say it out loud, but I knew they'd been counting on me, and I'd let them all down.

Eventually, Coach snapped back into it. She pushed a smile onto her face and faked cheerfulness as she mumbled something about it "being a close one," and that we'd "come out on top next time."

I went through the motions. The faces of the other team's players blurred together as we walked into two opposing lines and slapped hands. Then they screamed, and celebrated, and collected the first-place trophy.

Dad was gone by the time Coach released us to our parents. Mom said he had to get back to work. The thing was, I knew he would've stuck around to congratulate me if my team had won. My shoulders drooped farther, and Mom wrapped an arm around me. "Like pouring salt in a wound," she said. Her voice was mostly sympathetic, but it was laced with a rage I knew wasn't meant for me.

"At least he came," I said. I don't know why I felt the need to jump to Dad's defense, but I did. I also didn't know exactly what salt in a wound felt like, having never experienced it, but I knew it meant making a bad situation even worse. That was accurate.

Mom waited until we were on the road to ask, "Are you feeling any better?" She was doing that thing where she pretended her eyes were totally on traffic, while really, she kept glancing sideways at me. Being an only child, I got to be the star of the family. But I also got Mom's undivided concern, and she tended to worry about everything.

"Yeah," I lied. I didn't have the energy to talk about how crummy I felt. And I didn't know how much of it was

physical discomfort and how much was disappointment.

I'd used the restroom before we left the gym, but I had to go again already. "Can you drive a little faster?" I asked.

Mom pressed her lips and exhaled loudly through her nose. If she hadn't known before, she knew now that I hadn't been telling the truth. She didn't call me on it, though, and instead stepped on the gas.

Once we got home, I hit the bathroom, after which I filled a water bottle and then melted into Dad's recliner. No matter how much I drank, I was still parched. And my head felt too heavy for my neck to support. *I must be coming down with the flu. I just need some rest and then I'll be okay.* Even as I was thinking it, I knew it wasn't true.

Mom asked a question, but it sounded like gibberish to me.

"Hmmm?" I mumbled. "What?"

She came close. She looked into my eyes while worrying her lip and fussing with my hair. "Are you achy?" she asked as she pressed her hand against my cheek. "Is your throat sore?"

I shook my head, which caused a wave of vertigo to wash over me. "Dizzy," I said wheezily.

"Something's not right." Her voice sounded constricted, like she was the one having trouble breathing. "I'm calling an ambulance."

“No. I’ll be okay,” I said, but Mom was dialing 911 before the breathy words finished leaving my mouth. She had rushed me to the ER once for a chipped tooth. And with the way she reacted to me having something as small and insignificant as a splinter, I guess it wasn’t a surprise that she was freaking out now. Dad took a calmer approach to, well, everything, but he wasn’t here.

Maybe I’d sponged up some of Mom’s anxiety. Or maybe whatever was wrong with me caused my heart rate to go berserk. Either way, my chest was thrumming wildly by the time the ambulance arrived.

A man wearing a dark blue uniform and a stony expression strode into our living room. He came directly to my side. While he cuffed my arm and took my blood pressure, he exchanged words with my mom. I couldn’t follow their conversation, but what I did understand was that nothing he said erased the fear splashed across Mom’s face.

Whatever was happening to me, I sensed from this moment on, my life would never be the same.

That wasn’t something I wanted.

Sure, I wanted *some* things to change. I wanted my parents to get along better. I wanted to see Dad more than just when he came to my games. I wanted another shot at winning the tournament, and I wanted to get rid of all the

pink in my bedroom and decorate in grays and teals instead.

But I was aware enough to know that I wasn't holding a winning lottery ticket. My life wasn't changing for the better, and I wished more than anything that I could do something to hit the brakes. *Sameness* was safe. It was comfortable.

"You're going to feel a prick." Before I could register the paramedic's words, something sharp pierced the tip of my ring finger.

"Ouch," I cried. The sting wasn't that bad, but I hated needles.

The paramedic frowned. He and Mom exchanged more words. They spoke to me, too, but beyond my head feeling fuzzy, I was totally maxed out. Nothing sank in.

I could barely keep up with the flutter of activity around me. The unhurried air about the paramedic seemed at odds with how quickly he accomplished his tasks. Next thing I knew, I was being rolled out our front door. Fear engulfed me as I took in my changing surroundings—the gurney I was lying on, the medical equipment, the chill of the night air followed by the confinement of the ambulance. When I felt the rumble of the engine starting and then the jostle of the road, I began to understand just how rapidly things were changing, and *sameness* felt like the most desirable thing in the world.

Mom sat on the bench behind the paramedic. The expression on her face had gone from fearful to stricken, and that did nothing to silence the alarm bells going off in my head. My gaze trailed downward to the smear of brilliant red blood on my recently pricked finger before shooting back to the paramedic. I'm sure he saw a mixture of fear and confusion in my eyes. I'm sure it was a look he got a lot. "When I tested your blood sugar levels, they were dangerously high," he said. "You're being transported to the hospital for further evaluation."

It was easier to track what he was saying than it had been a minute before, but I still struggled to make sense of his words.

"Diabetes." Mom filled in the blanks as she fought to keep her voice steady. "We think you have type 1 diabetes."