

BITTER  
sweet

Winnie Mack

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## Chapter ONE

My favourite thing in the world (and this includes warm brownies, sleepovers with my best friend Emily and stacks of presents under the Christmas tree) is soccer.

I love running down the field, my cleats digging into the grass, my arms pumping as I dodge the defense. The closer I get to the other team's goal, the more excited I feel.

Because I might score.

And nothing feels better than scoring for my team, the Strikers.

So when I woke up that Saturday morning, knowing it was game day, all I could think about was getting out on the field.

I was the first one up and in the shower. As I rinsed the strawberry shampoo out of my hair, I thought

about what Coach Donaldson had told us at our last practice.

She was going to pick a team captain.

*Team captain!*

For as long as I'd been playing, the Strikers had *never* had a captain. As soon as I'd heard the announcement, a happy buzz filled my whole body. And I was still buzzing. I was ready to do everything I could to earn a white C for the shoulder of my jersey. I would run faster, shoot harder and be the best teammate I could be to make that C mine.

*Samantha Stevens, Captain.*

I loved the sound of that almost as much as the sight of the ball slipping past a goaltender's fingers.

I got out of the shower, dried off, then hurried down the hallway to the bedroom I shared with my little sisters.

When I opened the door, I groaned.

I'd only been gone fifteen minutes, max, but the clean room I'd left behind looked like it had been hit by a tornado — a tornado that had hung around for a while, bouncing from wall to wall, messing up everything in its path.

And I mean everything.

The girls had been playing dress-up again, so all of the stuff from their toy trunk was either dumped on the floor or hanging from the furniture. There was a

sparkly boa on my desk, a pink tutu hanging from my study lamp and glitter all over the place — like the tornado had been armed with a Bedazzler.

I heard giggling from inside the pink tent by the window.

“Hey, you guys,” I said. “You need to clean this place up.”

My little sisters crawled through the flap, still giggling.

Zoe was dressed in a bright turquoise vest, plaid shorts that were ten sizes too big for her five-year-old body, a tiara that was missing most of its “diamonds” and a pair of purple cowboy boots. Most of her dark hair had come out of her ponytail and was sticking up all over her head.

Kate was wearing the monkey costume she’d trick-or-treated in last year. The furry suit was so hot, her bangs were stuck to her forehead with sweat. On her feet were the red-sequined shoes I’d worn for my starring role as Dorothy when I was eight. She was only seven but her feet were already too big for them, so she hobbled instead of walked.

“Mom’s going to freak out when she sees this,” I told them.

“Sees what?” Kate asked, hands on her hips.

I stared at her, then made a point of looking over the whole room. “Really?”

“Oh,” she said quietly. “*That.*”

“And I need my uniform,” I said. It wasn’t at the end of my bed, where I’d carefully laid it out before my shower. “Where is it?”

“Uh,” Zoe said, then stopped.

“It’s game day,” I reminded her.

“I know,” she said with a huge smile. “We made pompoms.”

The next thing I knew, both sisters were waving clumps of green and yellow tissue paper in my face.

“That’s great, but I need my uniform. Now.”

They threw themselves into the search. But that didn’t mean they stuck with it.

“I’m going to wear this when I’m a mermaid,” Zoe said, picking up a shell necklace.

She was totally obsessed with mermaids and had decided to be Ariel for Halloween. *Again.* It was too bad; with her missing front teeth and pointy canines, she would have been an excellent vampire.

“I’m going to wear a jersey and shorts when I’m a soccer player,” I told her. “In an *hour.*”

“Okay, okay,” she mumbled, continuing the search.

Luckily, it only took a few minutes to find my uniform. It was buried under a pile of baby blankets the girls used as shawls, wedding veils or whatever else they didn’t have in the dress-up trunk.

The Strikers were the visiting team that week, so I put my reversible jersey on showing “away” yellow instead of “home” green.

After the jersey, I put on my shorts, shin pads and socks. I stretched the yellow knee-highs up as far as I could, then folded the tops over the elastic rings Mom had made to hold them up.

I left my sisters to find clothes they could actually wear out of the house, and I headed downstairs.

When I got to the kitchen, Dad was making pancakes, Mom was making coffee and my stomach was making a racket. I was starving, as usual. I started to pile pancakes on my plate.

“Just one at a time, Samantha.” Dad laughed and looked me over from head to toe. “I don’t know where you put it all!”

I grinned and watched as he hung up his apron and kissed Mom goodbye. He had to work on Saturdays, which meant he missed my games, but he was always happy to listen to a play-by-play afterward.

“Either you’re heading for a growth spurt or you’ve inherited your dad’s metabolism,” Mom said, shaking her head.

“A growth spurt would be nice,” I said, loading my pancake with a ton of blueberries.

While I ate, Mom moved behind my chair to braid

my hair. She always wove it super-tight, so not even one strand would come loose at the game.

She finished just as I popped the last blueberry into my mouth.

“Can you please get the girls?” she asked. “And let your brother know we’re leaving in,” she checked her watch, “twenty minutes.”

“Aiden is coming?” I asked, surprised.

He barely ever came to my games. He thought ten in the morning was too early to be anywhere but in bed. Ever since he’d turned fifteen he slept more than our tabby, Tony. (And cats nap for something like fourteen hours a day!)

I ran upstairs to pull my family together so they could cheer me on.

I bumped into Aiden in the hallway. He was wearing the dark blue hoodie that never made the laundry, and he had so much product in his hair it looked like he’d just showered. It was kind of gross. Even worse? He smelled like the green toilet-bowl cleaner Mom kept under the bathroom sink. I’m sure his aftershave (does a guy who doesn’t shave need it?) was driving the girls crazy, but not in the way he wanted it to.

He was overdoing it, but I didn’t say anything. He’d have just told me I didn’t understand because I’m not in high school yet.



Like twelve wasn't old enough to know when a guy was trying *way* too hard.

Kate and Zoe came out of the bedroom carrying their wilted pompoms and giggling, as usual.

"Ready for breakfast?" I asked everyone.

Aiden nodded, leading the way downstairs.

"Will you score a goal for me?" Kate asked, grabbing a plate and a pancake before settling into her usual seat.

"Yup."

"And one for me?" Zoe begged, sitting next to her, already searching for the syrup.

"One each," I told them. "I promise."

After all, two goals would only help my chances at making team captain.

\* \* \*

I love every single minute of soccer. I love practices, pre-game warm-ups and the game itself. I love the moment when it's all over and we chant, "Two, four, six, eight, who do we appreciate?" I love walking single file past the other team, high-fiving everyone while we all say, "good game, good game, good game." (The Strikers usually say it a lot louder when we win.)

So when our minivan pulled into the Eastview parking lot that morning, I was out the sliding door before my family had unbuckled their seat belts. I took off running toward the rest of my team, smiling at the sight

of all that yellow in the middle of the bright green grass.

“Samantha!” Mom called after me. “Oranges!”

Oops.

It was our turn to bring snacks for halftime. I turned around and jogged back to the van to grab the plastic tub.

When I carried it over to Coach Donaldson, I was glad she could see me doing my part for the Strikers.

“Thank you, Samantha,” she said with a smile. “Are you ready to take on the Ravens?”

“Definitely,” I told her, hoping I sounded like good team-captain material.

“I’m glad to hear it. They’re a tough team, so we’ll have our work cut out for us. Go ahead and join the rest of the girls for warm-ups, and I’ll be over in a minute.”

I grabbed a ball from her mesh bag and dribbled toward my teammates.

Most people were stretching, but I saw Alyssa and my best friend Emily passing a ball back and forth. Nearby, Brianne and Kylie were practising shots on our goalie, Mai.

I waved to Emily and joined Brianne and Kylie to take some shots of my own.

Before I took my first shot, I closed my eyes and took a deep breath of fresh fall air. I could hear my teammates calling to each other and the soft thuds of their

cleats kicking balls. As I opened my eyes, I could feel a grin taking over my face.

*Game day.*

I tapped the ball into prime position, took a few steps back, then ran forward and kicked it.

The ball soared through the air, heading exactly where I wanted it to go: the top right corner.

I'd spent a lot of time in our backyard working on my shot. Aiden was never around to practise with me anymore, so I'd been aiming at chalk Xs on our fence. I was glad to see it was paying off.

We spent a few more minutes shooting before Coach Donaldson blew her whistle and got us started on five laps around our half of the field.

As we ran, I kept an eye on the Ravens. Their black-and-white uniforms made them look tough, but that didn't mean anything.

Anybody could *look* tough.

But it turned out the Ravens actually *were*.

The first half passed in a blur of black and white, yellow and green. By the time we broke for water and a snack, we were hot, sweaty and only ahead by one goal.

A goal scored by Kylie.

"Nice shot," I said, wishing like crazy it had been mine.

"Thanks," she said, grinning. "That's seventeen so

far this season.” I watched as she ran over to Brianne for a high-five, her ponytail swishing.

“Seventeen goals,” I repeated quietly.

“You’re playing awesome, Sam,” Emily said.

“I need to score, though.” I bit into an orange slice, then wiped its juice from my chin with my sleeve. “That number six is really fast.”

“But you’re staying a step ahead of her,” Emily said, smiling.

“Barely.” It was true. My legs were more tired than usual, and I was still trying to catch my breath.

“Barely’s enough.”

I grinned back. “Thanks, Em.”

\* \* \*

During the second half, I scored my first goal, so I was halfway to keeping my promise of one each to Kate and Zoe. But the Ravens were giving us a run for the money. They’d scored two goals back to back!

Before I knew it, there was less than a minute left to play. We were tied and I had the ball, thanks to a beautiful pass from Emily.

“Go, Samantha!” I heard Zoe scream from the sidelines as I dribbled down the field.

I squeezed between two Ravens and saw the goalie raise her gloves in my direction.

She was ready for me.

I tapped the ball one more time with the toe of my cleat and took a deep breath (which was hard to do because I'd been running like crazy). I eyed the goal, lined up the shot and kicked the ball as hard as I could.

It sailed through the air, and I bit my lip as I watched it squeak just out of the jumping goalie's reach.

"Yes!" I shouted as the ref blew his whistle and ended the game.

The rest of the Strikers ran over and pulled me into a half-hug, half-huddle, slapping me on the back. And they didn't let go until they'd pulled Coach Donaldson in.

When we'd finished high-fiving the Ravens, Coach told us what a fantastic job we'd done on the field and that she'd see us at the next practice.

"That was an amazing goal, Sam," Emily said.

"The amazing pass came first. Thank you."

"My pleasure," she said, bowing and laughing.

I started laughing, too. Playing was always fun, but winning was the cherry on top.

"See you at our place at five," I called to her as I joined my family.

"You won!" Zoe shouted.

"We did," I agreed.

Aiden gave my braid a tug. "Nice game, Triple S."

That was my family nickname (it stood for Samantha

Sophia Stevens), but Aiden hadn't called me that for a long time.

"I didn't think you were watching," I said, proud that he'd seen my winning goal.

"I was watching. You know—"

"Hey, Aiden!"

We turned to see three guys standing by the basketball court.

Aiden dropped my braid like it was on fire and moved away from me.

I felt my face turn red.

Now that he was in high school, Aiden didn't like talking to me in public anymore. And "public" could be the bus stop, the mall or even our own front yard.

Sometimes our own *kitchen* was too public for him.

It really hurt my feelings, but I didn't know how to tell him that.

I pretended I didn't care and caught up with Mom.

"Ignore it," she said, patting my shoulder. "He's a teenager."

"He's a jerk," I muttered.

"He's your *brother*," she said with a bit of a warning in her tone. Mom hated name-calling.

"I know, but I wish—"

"If wishes were nickels, we'd all be rich," she said with a little smile.

“If wishes were fishes, we’d eat them with chips,” I answered like I always did.

“If wishes were kisses, I’d have chapped lips.” She leaned over to give me a smooch on the cheek.

And that was all it took for me to forget about Aiden and my hurt feelings.

As we walked back to the van, Kate and Zoe collected red, orange and yellow maple leaves to make bouquets, and I told Mom about Coach’s plan to choose a team captain.

“The C would go right here,” I said, pointing to the spot on my jersey. “And I’d get to wear it for the whole season.”

“Very impressive,” Mom said, eyes twinkling.

“What’s so funny?” I asked, hoping she didn’t think I was kidding myself.

“Nothing.” She put an arm around me. “I’m just picturing what a great captain you will be.” She gave my shoulder a squeeze.

What a great captain I “will” be. That was one of the things I loved most about Mom. She believed I could do anything.

And so did I.