

One

My section was having trouble following directions, and it was totally not something I wanted to deal with on the most important day of my marching band career.

“Hello? You’re *supposed* to be at attention!” I yelled. All of them immediately stopped fidgeting around and stood as motionless as sixteen surly, sweaty statues. I glared at them and sighed irritably. “Come *on*, guys! Focus!”

I wasn’t about to let anyone screw with my first public performance of my kick-ass senior trumpet solo. Especially not underlings who clearly hadn’t taken my threats of death-by-brass-instrument seriously. After waiting three years to get here, to be the trumpet section leader, to have the featured solo, I wanted nothing less than perfection.

This was mostly on account of the fact that fantasizing about this very day had gotten me through years of high school hell. Each time I got treated like a social pariah by non-band kids or felt like I was missing something obvious that every other girl my age seemed to get, I would think about how it would feel to be the one with the power on the field. When all eyes would be on *me* and my flawless section.

And now that my supposed day of glory was finally here, and we were waiting to go on the field for my very last band camp performance, my section was acting like they forgot anything important was going on.

The occasion for which they couldn't manage to stand still was Final Inspection. The rest of the section leaders and the drum major, who happened to be my best friend Jake Armstrong, were moving through the ranks, checking everyone over to make sure their uniform polo shirts were tucked in and their instruments were sparkling.

The ninety-five-member band was expectantly silent, standing rigidly at attention in ruler-straight lines, the pre-performance energy shimmering off of them like waves of heat. Sweat rivers from the late-August sun were already dripping down my back and seeping through my shirt, but I was too stomach-bubbling excited to be bothered.

After a final scowl at the now motionless heads of my section, I couldn't help shooting a grin at Jake, who was walking down my row.

He and I had started as freshmen trumpets together—

anxiety-ridden Jake Armstrong in the shadow of his senior-trumpet-star brother, and me, Ellie Snow, the girl whose junior high report cards consistently said she had problems with cooperation and outright failed at working well with others. Despite that, for me and Jake, marching band had turned out to be the pivot upon which all of high school had turned, the precise place on the chart of everything where we *belonged*.

I remembered the first time we lock-stepped down the field next to each other as freshmen, feeling for the first time the power of being surrounded by a hundred other people all moving the exact same way in the exact same direction. And how when the drum major called “at ease,” we put down our trumpets, turned and looked at one another with startled eyes, and raced each other back up the field to do it again.

I guess we had our own reasons back then for getting sucked into band. I appreciated the contrast between safe, military-like band and my crazy parents. And Jake’s jittery nerves seemed to be completely cured by the right-angle lines and predictability of marching in formation. We became best friends as freshmen, two over-achieving peas in a pod.

And three years later, we had managed to make it to here, to being the leaders who everyone else looked up to, the ones everyone listened to and *needed*.

Jake seemed to have felt my eyes on him and glanced over to give me a quick grin as he methodically paced up and

down the rows, looking fierce with fists clenched and his silver drum-major whistle glinting on a chain around his neck.

Behind us, I could hear the murmurs of the sizable audience that had driven two hours from town to see us perform. For the past week, we had all stayed in sticky-hot cabins at a backwoods Michigan camp, our time split equally between endless marching drills and lip-aching music practice. I noticed the eyes of some of the band flitting over to the stands, no doubt ready to get home to decent food, central air, and daddy-longlegs-free showers.

I knew that my mom and dad were in the bleachers, sitting awkwardly on the sun-scorched metal benches, older than everyone else's parents and looking slightly puzzled as to why they were here, like they wandered in from an organic farmers' market by mistake. My mom would be dressed in something brightly colored and billowy, and Dad would probably be wearing his Birkenstocks with dingy white socks. They faithfully turned up at my performances, but what a marching band actually *did* seemed to surprise them every time.

"Honey, why do you have to look so angry when you're out there marching around?" my mom asked after the first time she saw me perform and pretty much every time since. "Would it hurt you to *smile* a little? You just look miserable! Are you sure you like band?"

Yeah, I'm not sure if it's possible for someone to miss the point quite so much as my mother does when it comes to band. The concepts of perfectly ordered lines, smooth and controlled movements, army-like discipline ... all that

means nothing to people like my nauseatingly laid-back mom. If she had her way, no one would ever be told what to do. No one would ever have to take direction.

I honestly don't know *where* I come from. Hospital mix-up, apparently.

Snapping out of my reverie, I turned and looked over my fifteen-person section again with a critical eye, feeling very much like a handler with a pack of very whiney and unpredictable show dogs. Because, in addition to worrying about my own solo, as their section leader everything they did, right or wrong, was my responsibility. For the past week, I had worked hard ingraining the fact that I *hated* looking bad into all their obstinate, distractible heads. I was already infamous for my love of making my subordinates run laps if they got out of line. They all knew they had to be at the top of their game that day or else they'd face my wrath.

In fact, the opportunity to be wrathful was one of my favorite things about being a section leader. It's not exactly encouraged in many places, you know.

I often thought about the first time I got yelled at in marching band, back in freshman year. I hadn't realized standing at attention actually meant you weren't allowed to swat a bug away from your face, and the drum major at the time, Vicki, had made an example of me to the rest of the band. Three laps around the field, alone, in front of *everyone*.

I had been angry and bitter and embarrassed as I ran those laps, of course, fighting back hot tears, but I *never*

screwed up standing at attention again. It became a challenge, a competition with myself. A swarm of mosquitoes could show up and attempt to bodily carry me off into the thick woods surrounding our practice field, and I wouldn't break form.

And I demanded no less from my section now that I was in charge.

So I couldn't resist pausing to hiss into Brandy Jenkins' ear that her trumpet better be fully fingerprint-free for the first game or else there would be a lap with her name on it back home. Though her mousy face hardened, she was well acquainted with my opinions about standing at attention and she didn't move.

Brandy was a senior, like me, and we used to be friends forever ago. Back in junior high we sat next to each other in band and giggled every time the clarinet player in front of us picked his nose. I was happy when she joined high school marching band along with me, and thought maybe I'd found a high school ally.

But that all ended freshman year, when in a fit of fourteen-year-old-girl bitchiness she told everyone who would listen about my first-ever crush. Which happened to be on Jake's older brother Nathan, who also happened to be the trumpet section leader and my secret personal hero. Long story short, the whole band found out, mercilessly teased me for several weeks, and I found it necessary to repay Brandy's favor by putting a giant dent in the bell of her trumpet "on accident" and never being nice to her again.

Which was especially delicious now that I was technically her superior.

I knew it killed Brandy that now I was in charge of the section, but everyone thought I was a massively better marcher than her. And had many more natural leadership abilities, too ... especially now that I didn't have to harm perfectly innocent musical instruments when people got out of line.

When I was finally satisfied that my trumpets were in order, I gave the all-clear thumbs-up sign to Jake and got in place. At the top of my section, on the left. The position of honor, where I was meant to be. The rest of the section leaders followed suit.

And there was a toe-curling pause as we all stood motionless, heads locked straight and high. I shut my eyes for a moment, feeling my fingers tense on the three valves of my trumpet, the muscles in my back arched into the artificially exaggerated posture of attention, the sun glaring off the brass on my instrument and through my closed eyelids in hot white spots. Around me, there was nothing but the soft sounds of people breathing, gathering themselves to begin, and the out-of-place trilling of a bird in the trees high above us.

And then there was a piercing whistle from the front of the band, and we all inhaled together.

"Mark! Time! Mark!" Jake roared from up near the flutes. The percussion section leader, Aaron, responded with a crisp tap on his snare drum to get everyone on

beat. The rest of the drum section launched into a booming cadence that felt like a solid, two-handed push on the shoulder to get moving.

And like a perfectly engineered and minutely adjusted machine, the band roll-stepped onto the performance field.

The last week of intense rehearsal had pressure-cooked us into something bigger than just the sum of each individual, error-ridden person. We were a unit, a *force*. Our feet moved precisely in unison, heel to toe, our chins stuck up in the air, our instruments glaring in the sun like dangerous weapons, our brains all focused on the same movements and in perfect sync.

It was like going to war, like we could effortlessly mow down anyone who got in our way without even glancing at them. My heart pounded in beat with the bass drums. Since freshman year, this was when I was most happy—when I was marching.

We formed a series of arcs on the field for our first set, curved lines practiced and faultless. Mr. Barr, our director, nodded at Jake, indicating that we could begin. Then Jake climbed up a sturdy metal ladder to conduct. He found my eyes in the block and nodded, and I stepped out from my place in the arc and into the center of the band to start the performance with my long-awaited solo—a crazy piece of Latin-themed music that ran up and down my range and ended on an *insane*, glass-shattering high note that I had practiced all summer to get consistently pitch-perfect.

As I stood on my mark, I softly buzzed my lips to

warm them up, clicking my fingers on the valves of my trumpet, unconsciously fingering through the first bar of music over and over.

This moment was three years in coming, and every fiber of my body and brain was humming with anticipation.

I stood there, totally alone, the rest of the band twenty feet behind me, waiting for me to begin. Everyone present had their eyes on me. The whole performance hinged on *me*. This ... was it.

And then, before I put my lips to my trumpet, my eyes scanned the audience directly in front of where I stood. I always found it thrilling to see the faces of the people I was about to blast away, even if it always seemed to be the usual crowd of parents and siblings. It would be fun to see their eyes go wide when I belted out that first wailing note, to pretend like I could see their hair blow back from the air out of the end of my trumpet.

And at that moment, right as I was taking a deep breath to begin, my mouth already touching the cool metal of my mouthpiece ... I saw *him* staring directly into my eyes with an alarmingly intimate look, like he already knew me. There was a slightly worried expression on his gorgeous golden-tanned face, a wrinkled brow and the hint of a grimace, as if he were aware of what was coming next and wished he could stop it from happening.

I flubbed the first note.