

Chapter One

MY FACE HURT from fake-smiling through the game's first half. The source of this pain came from the seating arrangement in Section A, Row 5 of Carver-Hawkeye Arena. My ex Anne had the aisle seat—which I didn't mind, given her legginess. What I did mind was her new partner, Orchid, who wedged herself in between us and made it nearly impossible for us to talk. She bumped my right side every time she turned to whisper in Anne's ear or to grab a handful of their organic popcorn. Things were no better on my left where I was saving an empty seat for Neale, my long-distance girlfriend. She was supposed to meet us for dinner before the game, but still hadn't shown.

Our mascot, Herky, paced the court's perimeter, his huge plastic hawk's head bobbing atop a tall, spindly body. His beaky grin looked every bit as stiff as mine felt, but that didn't stop the hoards of children who wanted to high-five him or hug him. He flapped his arms—or wings—as we scored, and Orchid clapped along.

Narrowly dodging her elbow, I adjusted my glasses and checked the scoreboard. Iowa Hawkeyes 45, Missouri Tigers 41.

“We should be way ahead by now,” Orchid grumbled.

“It's the first game,” Anne said. “We're just rusty.”

At least that's what I thought she said.

“We don't have much depth.” Orchid nodded toward the bench, which was directly in front of us. Orchid's season tickets are much better than mine, as are her luck and her job. She is the program director at the alternative radio station where I work. In other words, my boss and my constant reminder that life isn't fair.

She jabbed me in the arm, on purpose this time. “I wonder what's keeping your girlfriend,” she asked. Her eyes were the same color as her steely buzz cut and vulva-shaped pewter earrings.

I shrugged and summoned another fake grin before seeking grabbing my cell phone and punching in my own number. If my housemate Vince answered, I'd inquire about his Persian, Norma Desmond. That was our code for get-me-outta-here. Alas, Vince did not answer, so I left a message for Norma and turned my attention to the game.

Coach Bridget Stokes waved a clipboard in the air and yelled at her team to play defense. Technically speaking, Bridget was not *the* coach. She was Carol Oliver's most experienced assistant and therefore in charge while Coach Carol visited her dying brother in Pennsylvania.

Our standout point guard, Win Ramsey, dribbled the ball downcourt and heaved it to our only freshman starter. She squared her feet to the basket and nailed the three.

“Jessie March,” Orchid said. “She's gonna be good. Check out that jump shot.”

What I noticed about the freshman was that she was the only player with auburn hair. For the most part, that's how I keep track of the players, their 'dos. Granted, it's not foolproof given all the faux-blond ponytails.

“The rookie is family,” Orchid said. “Elaine saw her at the Alley Cat with our shortstop.”

For Orchid, no women's sporting event is complete unless she determines which players are lesbians. Me, I have better things to do than ponder the sexual orientations of nineteen-year-olds.

After the Tigers scored an easy two, our center, Kate Timmens, set a nice pick for Varenka White, who drove to the hoop and got hacked by the Tiger center. It was the fourth foul

on their top scorer, so the crowd erupted, hushing only when Varenka stepped to the free-throw line.

After she sank the front end of her one-and-one, there was no triumphant riff from the pep band. Except for some scattered applause, the arena was freakishly quiet.

Anne gasped, her eyes fixed on the other side of the arena. I followed her gaze past the players lined up at the key for Varenka's second shot. There, sprawled in the front row, right across the court from our women's bench, was the infamous hoopster, Dave DeVoster. With his disconcertingly blond hair, the star forward looked like a Nordic model for Abercrombie and Fitch. His outstretched legs grazed the out-of-bounds line as he laughed with two guys who looked like linebackers.

Why shouldn't he laugh? Not only had the senior forward just avoided jail, but he had also gained an extra year of eligibility when the university granted him a red-shirt season and the remainder of his scholarship. This, after being charged with raping one of its female athletes.

A basketball player, if you believed the lesbian rumor mill.

Some fans glared at DeVoster, some averted their eyes, and some grinned—God knows why. As murmurs filled the arena, Anne fingered her necklace. The familiar gesture made me want to reach out and stroke her hair. I studied her necklace, her largest crystal. It would take more than that to dissolve the negative energy in Carver-Hawkeye.

"He's just here to gloat," Orchid said.

I couldn't argue. I'd never seen DeVoster at a women's game before.

"Meandering in after half-time," she grumbled, "like he's the main event."

At the line, Varenka waited for the ball, arms dangling at her sides. A starting forward, she was our leading rebounder and the only player who always wore kneepads, one black, one gold.

The ref with the ball glanced at his comrades before bouncing it to her.

She spun it in her hands and dribbled three times. Then she hesitated and looked to her right. You could tell when she saw DeVoster. She clutched the ball to her chest and stepped back from the line. The Hawks who were crouching at the key stood and eyed her nervously. The Tiger rebounders shot each other puzzled looks, and our guards whispered to each other.

Finally, a whistle blew.

Bridget was still signaling time-out as our players dragged to the bench. She gathered them around her and patted Varenka on the back.

"Get out, DeVoster!" Orchid shouted. She stood, her pudgy fingers cupped around her mouth.

In a rare moment of solidarity, I followed suit. Soon, half our section was chanting, "Get out! Get out!"

Underneath the basket, Herky gazed at us, his arms hanging limply at his sides. He was, no doubt, stymied about his role. Cute antics don't cut it when there's a rapist in the house.

The announcer trotted out the sportsmanship spiel he made at the beginning of every game. "Hawk fans are some of the best fans in the Big Ten." As his hyper-energetic voice boomed over the P.A. system, the chanting grew louder. "Please show respect to *all* fans."

"He's no fan!" Anne stood and yelled. "He's a rapist!"

"Innocent until proven guilty," a voice called back.

I fell silent. Anne never yelled negative stuff at games.

“We have a special guest tonight,” the announcer boomed. “The man who led the Hawkeyes to three Big Ten Championships and an Elite Eight.” A dramatic pause. Then he stretched his vowels to the limit as he intoned, “Da-a-ave De-e-e Vos-s-ster-r!”

As DeVoster held his hands aloft like a champion prize-fighter, half the crowd actually stood and cheered.

“I can’t believe this,” I said. “A standing ovation for a slime who raped one of our players.”

“That’s a rumor,” Anne said, “the part about our player.” She scanned the section to our right.

A handful of Tiger fans started chanting, “No means no! No means no!”

“How do you like that?” she asked. “The opposing fans are doing what we should be.”

“R-A-P,” I shouted, “I-S-T.” It rhymed, and it was true. My voice quickly attracted others, and the pep band’s drummer matched our cadence. Trumpets squawked and trombones farted, despite the director’s desperate cut-off signals.

A few grandfatherly men in muted gold polyester jackets surrounded the court, their faces stern. Usually these guys took tickets and watched the game from the top of the arena. On a wild and crazy night, they might escort interlopers out of the season ticket section. They weren’t exactly equipped to hold the forces of chaos at bay.

Bridget left her team and strode toward the announcer. A star point guard back when I was a student, she was short for basketball, but her compact frame brimmed with energy and authority. She rested both hands on the announcer’s table and leaned toward him, her blazer falling open. After he nodded eagerly and asked the crowd for quiet, she marched back to the bench, never once glancing at DeVoster.

I’d encountered this same stalwart refusal to acknowledge conflict or controversy every time I’d interviewed her on my radio show, *Issues in Iowa*. I’d ask about Title IX, and she’d tout the university’s support of women’s athletics. I’d ask about the difficulties facing female coaches, and she’d detail Coach Carol’s accomplishments. Homophobia in women’s sports? She’d sing her team’s praises. No matter that we’re both lesbians, I got the same PR-perfect answers the one time we had coffee together too.

Now she squatted in front of her team and pounded her fist into her hand. The Hawks would need her drive if they were going to keep their lead, but they seemed sluggish, trailing behind Varenka as she headed back to the line. Ball in her hands, she stared at the hoop and took a deep breath. The fans fell silent, and the cheerleaders wiggled their fingers in the air, arms raised high, anticipating the shot.

It bounced off the back of the rim and arced toward center court.

“She’s a ninety-three-percent free-throw shooter.” Orchid frowned and marked her stat sheet.

Bridget replaced Varenka with a much shorter player.

“Varenka’s regular backup is out with an ACL,” Orchid said.

She could also tell you the exact date of the girl’s injury, the ins and outs of her rehab, and her shooting percentage. Probably her astrological sign and the date of her last cold too.

As Varenka buried her face in a towel, a fiftyish woman behind me said, “I bet she’s the one.”

“Looks that way,” her husband mumbled.

Anne wrenched around, her face flushed pink like her sweater. “How about minding your own business?”

The hapless couple had pushed her buttons. Maybe they'd hit upon the truth, or close to it. Anne directs the UI Women's Center, which sometimes assists rape victims. Of course, even if the Center weren't helping DeVoster's victim, Anne would want to protect the young woman's identity—to protect the woman herself—from the many idiots who worshipped DeVoster and staked their personal well being on his jump shot.

The crowd groaned as Varenka's sub lost the ball to a Tiger who zipped down the court and took it to the hole. The woman who'd inspired Anne's wrath slurped at her souvenir cup and asked her hubby to scoot down a few seats so they could enjoy the game in peace.

Anne didn't seem to notice. Instead, she stared at Varenka's parents, a tall blond couple sitting two rows down in the section to our right. Mrs. White seemed more focused on her husband than on the game. She patted his shoulder as he pointed at the scoreboard and shook his head.

The Tigers stole the ball and cut our lead to two. Jessie March got called for her third foul and slammed the ball against the floor.

"She better watch it," Orchid said. "She got four technical fouls in high school."

After the Tigers missed their free throw and two chippies, Win rebounded the ball and pitched it to Varenka's sub, who got trapped at mid-court. Bridget called another time out and sent Varenka to the scorer's table to check back in. The pep band started playing "Thriller." Tubas twisted side to side, and the director's arms jerked like a puppet's.

Next to the seat where we'd piled our coats, "Neale's" seat, a young boy attacked an ice cream cone. His third snack of the evening, it melted down his forearm, a long and winding chocolate road. I didn't bother to protect the coats since Orchid's was on top.

"Maybe Neale isn't going to make it tonight," Orchid said, resting her hand on Anne's thigh.

Across the court, DeVoster signed autographs for a group of Cub Scouts.

I really needed to go home.

"Help her, help her," Orchid barked.

Varenka's elbows and braid swung through the air as three Tigers swarmed her in the key. Jump ball. Alternating possession—Tigers.

"She was fouled," Orchid yelled.

Varenka herself showed no reaction to the call.

Herky clambered into the stands and knelt next to a toddler who burst into tears and buried himself in his mother's arms.

A Tiger slipped past Varenka to the basket.

"Let's go, Hawks!" I called.

The entire crowd tried to rally the team. The pep band stomped its feet, and the cheerleaders bounced around like popping corn.

Varenka took a quick shot and missed everything. Fortunately, there was an officials' time-out. She collapsed on the bench, oblivious to her teammates' hugs and pats.

Orchid marked the miss on her stat sheet, and Anne continued to watch Varenka's parents.

Mr. White gazed at the bench, at his daughter's slumped shoulders and sweat-soaked jersey. He scowled at DeVoster and worked his jaw as his wife glanced at the media section behind them. When she leaned toward him, cupping her hand to his ear, he jerked away and leapt to his feet. Before I knew it, Anne was right next to him. He would have towered over most women, but Anne, without her Birkenstocks, stands six feet two inches. She seemed to be

pleading with him. The band started the fight song and everyone stood, so I missed the rest of the interaction.

But I'd seen enough to guess that Varenka was DeVoster's victim and that Anne knew it.

When the song ended, Mr. White was back in his seat, his wife eyeing him warily, and Anne was back in hers. "I'm fine," she said before Orchid or I could ask. "I just need to center myself." Even though the players were back on the floor, she closed her eyes.

The Tigers brought the ball downcourt, tied the game with a pick and roll, and launched their full-court press. Varenka inbounded the ball to our lone African-American starter, Henna Jennings. She tossed it to Kate, who tried to get it to Win. But a Tiger got a piece of the ball, and it veered right in between Win and Jessie. They both hurled themselves after it. Win crashed into the front row, and Jessie landed on her ass at DeVoster's feet.

The official's whistle pierced the quiet, and the players froze, all eyes on Jessie and DeVoster. Smirking, he stood and extended his hand to her. She looked like she wanted to spit on it, her face a knot of fury. As the refs rushed over, she sprang at him, but Win grabbed her and pulled her back. DeVoster kept standing there, his arms folded over his chest, just asking for it.