

CHAPTER 1



My gym shorts burrow into my butt crack like a frightened groundhog. Note to self: remember shorts from home so you don't have to wear scratchy school loaners ever again. I can fix this. I pull up my kneepads, adjust my wristbands, and tighten my ponytail with a yank. Ready for battle, a.k.a. seventh-grade spring P.E.

Half a cheek hanging out, I glance around the locker room to make sure the coast is clear. I casually place one foot up on the bench and make a stealth grab, yanking my underwear down.

Samantha Pinkerton slams her locker so loud the entire room of girls looks in her direction. "Find anything good up there, Lupe?" She laughs and half the class snickers with her.

I almost respond with, "Yeah, your mom," but stop myself at the last possible second.

Samantha takes a step toward me and puts her nose inches from mine.

“Oh, yeah?” I say instead. This time the words are out before I can help it.

Samantha scrunches her face and scratches her temple, my comeback obviously stunning her into confusion. My best friend, Andy, cringes behind Samantha. Smack talk is not one of my strong points.

Coach Solden’s whistle pierces the air. “Guadalupe Wong . . . Samantha Pinkerton!” Arms folded over her chest, she takes up the entire doorway of her office. “Anything you care to share with us?”

I clench my teeth and shake my head. I can’t risk getting points off. I need to ace this class.

Samantha’s voice is suddenly as sweet as her fruity body spray. “Just admiring Lupe’s shorts, Coach Solden.”

“Well, do it after class,” Coach says, motioning for Samantha to get in line.

Samantha squints her eyes toward mine in some sort of staring standoff, but I can only focus on the cartoon salmon on the front of her shirt giving a thumbs-up. Someone forgot to tell the kid who designed the school mascot that Sammy Sock-eye should have fins, not fingers. Samantha slithers into line behind me.

“Oh, yeah?” she says, mimicking me under her breath.

Thank God Andy is with me this quarter. “Ignore her,” she mutters calmly from the next spot in line, shooting me a glance.

“I can bring you my extra soccer shorts tomorrow.” Andy’s mom has probably made sure she has four pairs to “ensure her academic success.” To go with her new laptop and private tutoring.

I crack my knuckles in front of me. “Nope. I got this. I won’t forget mine again.”

We wait in a row to shuffle into the gymnasium for basketball or volleyball or whatever unit we have now. Coach wheels a TV out from the equipment closet in the back of the locker room. “No one moves; no one talks.” She pushes the cart toward the swinging door.

“Wait, something’s wrong,” I say, watching Coach walk into the gym without a single ball.

Andy’s voice sounds like it’s rolling its eyes. “I know, I know . . .” She makes a mouth puppet with her hand, trying to imitate my voice. “Kids with long arms should be able to wear shorts to their wrists instead of fingertips . . . It shouldn’t be a girl’s responsibility to worry about how our clothing might distract boys . . .” She moves her hand puppet to make its mouth extra wide. “Aaaaand there should be a separate bubble under race for people of Chinacan or Mexinese descent . . .”

“Well, there should be!” I say. “You have a bubble for Black. Why should I have to *Choose One Bubble or Other?* Why should anyone?”

Most of my causes don’t get further than a strongly worded letter to the principal. Andy shrugs.

“But that’s not what I’m talking about,” I go on, biting my lower lip. Co-ed P.E. is the one subject I should dominate. With

everything but jump rope in the second grade, I've been on the boys' team. "Did you notice the TV? What if we have to learn some antique sport, like . . . the one with mini tennis rackets and the plastic snow-cone thing?"

"It's called a shuttlecock," Andy giggles, and her dark curls bob up and down.

"Very funny, Andy. I really need this A," I say.

"I know you do. And that *really* is what it's called," she replies. "C'mon, you're the best in this class—you know you can handle anything. You'll be pitching cans of corn or whatever you call it to Fu Li in no time."

I've already filled Andy in on my uncle's promise. If I get straight As, my Uncle Hector, who works for the Mariners, is taking me to meet Fu Li Hernandez, the first Asian/Latino pitcher in the major leagues. If Fu Li can be the first Chinacan guy to pitch in the majors, maybe I can be the first Mexinese girl to throw a no-hitter.

Did I mention that baseball is life?

I've worked hard to get back on track and have As in the rest of my classes. I bite on the inside of my cheek thinking of Coach Solden and some new game risking my chance to meet Fu Li. Besides making it to the majors someday, I don't think I've ever wanted something so bad in my life.

Coach Solden returns to the locker room and flicks the fluorescent lights on and off. The last few stragglers jump into line. She lifts the whistle dangling down her chest and blows

four short blasts, like she's leading an army troop out into battle.

Her shorts are riding up her butt more than mine, but she doesn't seem to care. She marches us into the gym where a group of twenty boys are already waiting.

My friend Niles waves at me from the line. I wave back and smile, but then he holds up his hand and mimics flipping on Doctor Who's Sonic Screwdriver, our signal for "we gotta talk" (and it's a "the-universe-is-in-danger" sort of emergency).

We have a half second before class starts, so I point toward a spot in between the boys and girls that's somewhat blocked from Coach's sight, and we break out of formation to meet up.

Samantha snicker-snorts and points at us.

"Hey, Lupe!" Niles says, letting out a breath.

I huddle up next to him for privacy. "What's up?"

A few of Samantha's friends follow along and start giggling at us too.

No way I'm letting this pass. I let a tiny one ooze out, a Silent But Deadly. *Three . . . two . . .*

Fumes fill the air. "Ewww!" Samantha says. "I swear, it wasn't me," she whispers to her friend Claire.

I'm relishing my successful SBD bombing mission, so I lose focus and don't remain as still as I should. A fresh cloud billows up.

Niles shakes his head at me. "Really? I'm right here too."

"Sorry," I whisper. "Collateral damage."

He nods and stares past me toward the rafters, which makes it easier for him to have conversations, especially if he's a little stressed. I lean in even closer. "Listen, I've noticed something wrong."

Coach reprimands a straggler on the other side of the gym and the class starts to quiet down. We don't have much time. "I've noticed it too. Let's see what she's got and talk after class?"

"But this is huge," he whispers back and motions toward the TV. "Coach has never not started a class bouncing a ball, or tossing a ball, or juggling balls . . ."

Niles hates change as much as I do. I glance at Coach, who's now spinning the TV remote in her hand like it's a bat. "I know, I know," I mutter, allowing a little bit of my own worry to creep in. "What do you think? Maybe she's going to show us a new sport?"

"I guess . . ."

Coach turns to face us, still spinning the remote. "In line, Foster."

"Hurry. Line up," I whisper. "Before she makes us do push-ups or something."

Once back in our spots, I hold out a pretend Sonic Screwdriver and close its top, indicating we've at least acknowledged the emergency. Niles nods back.

Samantha is still gagging on my innard fumes so she can't be annoyed by our signals this time.

Coach Solden claps her hands, taking advantage of the lull in activity. "I have an announcement, everyone! Gather round."

She motions to the cart holding the TV. My stomach feels like the inside of a bouncy house.

Forty seventh graders move at once. A gentle wind of eighty shoes and armpits fills my nostrils.

Coach Solden scans the crowd, then scans back the other way. Her eyes lock on mine. I'm about to panic, but she's on to the next victim. One by one, she's making eye contact with a few of us. By the shuffling and fidgeting of the kids she's singling out, her laser stare pattern seems to be focused on the athletic kids. My catcher on the baseball team last year, Blake, looks over and arches his eyebrows just like he does every time the third hitter in the lineup is up to bat.

Coach Solden then makes her signature move, tucking in her one-size-too-small shirt into her two-sizes-too-small gym shorts. This might be even worse than I thought. My palms break out in a sweat. She presses play on the remote.

The TV screen lights up. Men and women are standing in a circle. The men have on jeans and checkered shirts, and the ladies are wearing matching puffy skirts bloated out like a Pinterest cupcake fail. I think I'm going to puke up my lunch. They're paired off, holding hands.

The screech of fiddles echoes through the gym.

A guy with a Southern accent wails in a scratchy twang.

"If it hadn't been for Cotton-Eyed Joe
I'd been married a long time ago

Where did you come from, where did you go?
Where did you come from, Cotton-Eyed Joe?"

It's like a bizarre hillbilly rap. Arm in arm, the people clomp around like trotting donkeys.

Coach Solden taps her foot and claps her hands to the song. She's about a half beat off, and her hips are wiggling from side to side. It's eerily similar to the time my mom insisted on teaching all my friends the Macarena at my birthday party. Even though I silently beg the universe to make it end, just like with my mom, Coach isn't stopping either.

Blake looks at me like he got lemon juice in his mouth. Zola Fimple covers her eyes. Marcus, our number-two pitcher in the rotation behind me, nerves up and makes a gagging noise. How do grown-ups not know how embarrassing they are? Finally, the music stops and Coach bows to an imaginary partner, just like the dancers on the video do to their real partners.

She hits stop on the remote. It takes her a few seconds to catch her breath. My mouth and the mouths of everyone in the room drop wide open as Coach's words echo out.

"Welcome to this quarter's curriculum, class!"

CHAPTER 2



I've never associated the inside of a gym with such horror. There has to be a way to make it stop. Fu Li Hernandez wouldn't be caught dead square dancing. Dancing belongs in nightclubs and ballet studios, not a gym. And square dancing belongs somewhere far away where it can't embarrass anyone, like the 1800s.

We spend the remaining twenty minutes of P.E. watching different versions of the same routine. I'm clenching my toes inside my shoes the entire time. I glance down the line. Most faces are aghast, like they just saw their grandma in her underwear. Except Carl Trondson's mouth is slightly ajar and his eyes are closed. Is he seriously sleeping through this horror? And Gordon Schnelly, he's actually tapping his foot along with the music! Each square dance starts with a different man or woman,

all with Southern accents, wailing, “If it hadn’t been for Cotton-Eyed Joe, I’d been married a long time ago.”

When the women sing, Cotton-Eyed Joe sounds like even more of a jerk. What had he done to them that they all would’ve been married and happy if he hadn’t come along? Bad enough that Cotton-Eyed Joe had ruined their lives—now he’s trying to ruin mine.

Finally, the torture of the music and watching Coach Solden jog around flailing her arms and legs is over. But some things you can’t unsee.

“By the way.” Coach gives us a wink. “Lace up your dancing shoes. We start tomorrow.”

An icy shiver runs up my spine. A low groan echoes through the gym. I think I hear someone clap, but it must be my imagination. Shoulders sagging, we retreat to the locker rooms.

Andy and I change quickly and head to wait outside the boys’ locker room.

Blake walks out wearing our team’s Issaquah Select baseball jersey and gives me a fist bump. “Hey, Lupe. How’s the arm?”

I make a muscle, and Blake leans in squinting. I chuck him on the shoulder and we both start laughing.

He walks away and Andy rolls her eyes. “You guys are dorks,” she says.

As the last of the boys stream out, I arch my head around the corner. “Niles! We’re not going to prom!”

“Sorry!” he yells back.

Gordon Schnelly beats him out. Gordon is sweating even though we didn't do anything.

The two-minute warning bell rings. Niles walks out tying his "Annelids Unite! Save the Giant Palouse Earthworm!" sweat-shirt around his waist. I might be what my mom calls "a social justice warrior," but Niles is a huge advocate for our region's endangered species. Unfortunately for Niles, the Pacific Northwest has some bizarre endangered animals.

"And just so you know, if you *were* trying to take me to prom, I wouldn't come out at all." He motions over his head for us to catch up, like we're the ones who've made us late for our last class of the day.

We speed walk away from the gym and toward the main building. Other kids run past in the opposite direction. When the halls come into view, Andy, Niles, and I exchange a glance. Extra crammed halls mean extra danger.

In elementary school, Niles had Mr. Nguyen as his special ed. teacher back when we didn't rotate classrooms. Now Niles goes to the Learning Resource Center (a.k.a. LRC) twice a week with Mr. Lambert, or when he, his mom, or a teacher requests it. Niles is on the autism spectrum, so they've worked his schedule so he doesn't have to spend too much time in the halls. But our last class of the day takes us right down the main hallway. And this is one of those days that makes me nervous.

I lock elbows with Niles on one side and Andy on the other. The school hallways are outside, so even when it's barely

sprinkling (which is nearly every day in the Northwest), everyone rushes more. Kids jostle past one another like salmon in the river by our school. So our lame school mascot is appropriate for more than one reason. Someone even painted the halls mud and algae colors to make us feel like Sammy Sockeye too.

“Let’s go,” Andy says, just before we plunge in. We huddle close together and ease into the main hall.

A mechanical pencil falls out of Andy’s unzipped bag about two seconds in and I grab her before she bends down. “What are you doing?” I squeak out. I hand her one of my pencils and keep things moving. “Let it go. You could end up with a concussion or lose a limb.”

Andy stares back longingly as her pencil disappears in a twister of legs and feet.

Even though my brother, Paolo, routinely threatens to “return me to the zoo where my parents found me,” he liked me enough to warn me about the mortal dangers of the halls before I started middle school. “If you die, more food for me. But if you want to live through middle school, keep moving, and, never, ever stop to pick up something you’ve dropped.”

It’s like a *Fast and the Furious* speed track, but half the people are racing in the wrong direction. On the first day of middle school, Gordon Schnelly ran head-on into a kid with a scoliosis brace and chipped one front tooth and lost the other. He never did find the tooth that flew off the cement path into the mud sludge.

I dodge two chatty girls who are not respecting the passing

lanes. When I see a quick break in the traffic, I whip around to face Niles and Andy and start walking backward.

“So, what do you think our plan should be?” I ask.

“Plan for what?” Niles says. Andy also looks puzzled.

“Weren’t you there?” My voice is higher than usual. “To get rid of square dancing. I’d do almost anything else than bounce around like a doofus wearing a picnic blanket. Besides, P.E. is not the place for dancing.”

Andy rolls her eyes. “I see a new cause coming.”

Niles executes an impossible last-minute side step before he gets pummeled by a sprinter. “Would you rather eat raw maggot puke or learn the dance?” he says.

“Raw maggot puke for sure,” I say.

I come up with the two most disgusting things I can at the moment. “Would you rather dance with Samantha or eat locker room drain hair?” I ask.

“Drain hair, not even close,” Niles answers, and we burst out laughing.

Andy scoffs. “That’s not really helpful, you guys.”

Niles and I can’t get enough of our “would you rathers”; they’ve always been our thing. But they’re not really Andy’s. Between her mom’s mandated after-school computer coding and Colloquial Japanese for International Business classes, Andy probably doesn’t have room left in her brain for pondering much of anything else. And right now, she’s probably right. We have more important things to focus on.

“So how are we getting rid of square dancing?” I ask.

“Is this because of your grades thing?” Andy asks.

I shrug. Never mind that I still have As in math, language arts, and social studies. But a little mind-wandering in the past year led to a B or two. Now every aunt, uncle, and second cousin who expects you to be the first doctor in the family knows about it, and “knows you’ll do better next year, Lupe!”

“I still don’t get why your Uncle Hector won’t just take you to meet Fu Li. He knows how important it is to you.”

“It makes sense,” Niles answers. “He knows exactly how to make Lupe work harder.”

Andy nearly trips on a rogue water bottle but keeps walking. “Well, I don’t think square dancing will be that bad. I bet your uncle will buckle anyway.”

Andy has no idea what she’s talking about. She’s never met my Uncle Hector either. His motto is, “We’re Mexi-cans, not Mexi-can’ts.” And as cheesy and stupid as it sounds, he’s not joking. Plus, Uncle Hector apparently told Fu Li about my grades slipping. Fu Li even gave Uncle Hector a handwritten note to give to me: *Anyone can pitch a good inning, pitching an entire good game takes character. Work hard so I can meet you!*

I’m not even sure what his note means, but Fu Li must have a Mexican uncle too.

“No, I think he’ll hold me to it,” I say. “I have to talk to Coach Solden after school. I only have one hour to figure out how I’m going to convince her to eliminate square dancing forever.”

“Like I said, she has a new cause.” Andy makes a hand puppet.

“Square dancing leads to foot fungus and toe jam,” she mimics my voice again. “It must be abolished before the entire seventh grade class is footless.” She winks at me and takes a sharp left into her social studies class.

Even though the halls are thinning out, it’s still about as loud as it was on the field when Fu Li threw a no-hitter two seasons ago. Niles motions toward our science class and we both hustle to get out of the chaotic hallway. Burnt chemical smell greets us as we walk in.

Niles and I barely make it into our seats before the bell rings. Somehow we got teamed with Gordon Schnelly Spring quarter in our lab group. Gordon insists on wearing his protective goggles even though we haven’t started any experiments yet. He spouted off something about remnant toxic fumes and his corneas on the first day.

Gordon speaks with the lisp he’s had since that fateful day with the scoliosis brace. “Howth it going guyth?” Sometimes he’s difficult to understand, but luckily Niles speaks Gordonese, and I’m learning. We’ve never really spent much time with Gordon before, but if he’s going to be our lab partner for the rest of the year, we need to figure each other out.

“Lupe hates square dancing,” Niles says.

“I, for one, am looking forward to it.” Gordon sits up taller.

Now I know who clapped back in P.E. during the announcement. How can someone actually like square dancing?

“My grandma says we make perfect dance partners, both

being single and all,” Gordon continues, making a little dance move. “She also says I have natural rhythm.” He looks more like a seal swallowing a fish, but I don’t say anything.

Niles nods approvingly. “Music and rhythm are well docu—” Niles’s eyes suddenly go wide. He points to an emblem in the center of Gordon’s shirt that looks sort of like arched wings with a Christmas tree star in the center. “Jedi?”

Gordon claps his hands together like he just got the top gift on his birthday list. “*Star Wars* fan?”

“Trekkie,” Niles counters. He makes a gesture that looks like some of his fingers are stuck together in a hand cramp.

“Interstellar game on, Niles.” Gordon narrows his eyes in challenge, for what I’m pretty sure is some sort of galactic turf war. But they both look pretty happy.

Mr. Lundgren, our science teacher, starts speaking and the mumbling around the classroom stops. His voice never shifts out of the low tractor gear of monotone. “Today class, we will be studying the miracle of the Krebs cycle.”

I pull out a piece of paper. Instead of writing *Krebs Cycle* like everyone else, I write *Square Dancing*, then draw a circle around the word and a diagonal line marking over the word. I put my head on the desk. Years of chemicals are probably seeping into my brain. I don’t care. It seems hopeless. I peek at Gordon who’s already drawing arrows coming into and off a circle on his paper. Letters and gibberish go into the circle and more gibberish comes off.

Niles pats my arm. “Want me to take our notes today instead?”

I look up to see him grinning. Growing up four houses down from mine, Niles and I have always teamed up, from selling lemonade to buy me a new glove, to painting address numbers on curbs so we could pay for his latest graphic novel.

But today was my turn to take notes.

“Would you?” I ask.

Niles answers by taking out his notebook and hurrying to catch up with the rest of the class.

Mr. Lundgren starts drawing the same picture on the whiteboard that Gordon has already finished. While Niles takes our real notes, I pretend.

-Square dancing is not a sport. (Use Olympics as example if necessary.)

-Handholding is unhygienic.

-Look for stats on deaths during square dancing.

-Square dancing is

The lights in the room are on a motion detector, and turn off every so often during the lecture, interrupting my thoughts. Mr. Lundgren waves an arm at sloth speed to make them go back on. But after forty-five minutes, I've only come up with a few bullet points.

Still, I grip the paper tight in my hands so I don't lose it in the after-school scuffle. After the final bell rings, I wait in the doorway for Niles to finish talking to Gordon about something.

As we walk toward the bus, I review my talking points in

quiet murmurs. Should I present my list to Coach Solden now, or go home and create a PowerPoint for emphasis?

But if she's making us dance tomorrow . . .

When we're almost to the bus, my hands suddenly break out in a sweat again. "Niles, I gotta go talk to Coach now. Will you wait for me?"

Niles shrugs. "Sure. I'll let my mom know we're walking home." He's already pulling out his phone. "I might pop into LRC and ask Mr. Lambert what he thinks of the square dancing thing. If I'll need anything if I decide to do it. Come find me in the library when you're done."

I pick up my pace. The outside door to her office has a "Coach S" plaque under a little window near the top.

I put my ear to the door. Coach is singing along to "Dancing Queen" by ABBA. I knock and wait.

"Come in," she says.

I open the door and poke my head in. The aroma from years of coffee and musty P.E. gear fills the room. "Hey Coach."

She turns the volume down on the music. "Lupe." She motions for me to sit.

Painted on the wall behind her are the sit-up, pull-up, and standing long jump records for our school. University of Washington purple-and-gold pennants plaster over any empty space like wallpaper, and a stuffed Huskies mascot stares back at me from the front of her desk.

I sit across from her and try to act casual.

"Can I help you with something?" she asks.

I hold my chin and stare out her window toward the cafeteria like I've seen professors and philosophers do in movies.

"Spit it out," she says.

I drop my hand to my lap and face her. "Why didn't you mention at the beginning of the year that we'd have to dance in P.E.?"

"You do know it's standard curriculum, right?" she says.

I lift my hands, palms up. "No."

"Yes. Since 1938, the Sockeye Salmon of Issaquah Middle School have enjoyed a lively square dance." Teeth bucked out, Coach rocks her arms in front of her like a square-dancing squirrel. "Official state dance of twenty-four states in our union."

The pit in my stomach grows to the size of that squirrel's entire winter nut supply. How can I fight something nearly half the country has been brainwashed into?

"But . . . this is *physical* education," I say.

She folds her hands in front of her like she's in a business meeting. "It is. And, I think if you do a little research, you'll find that square dancing is a standard part of P.E. curriculum across our great nation."

This is going in the wrong direction. I need to strike. "Didn't you take some sort of P.E. teacher oath to test our actual athletic ability?"

Coach's cheeks turn a little red. I hope it's just from a busy day of jiggling around. "Physical education is just as much about coordination and willingness to learn something new as it is about sports. And trust me, it's a workout." She still has beads of

sweat on her brow and I realize she must've had another class right before this.

I glance down at my list. "Is square dancing even a sport? I mean, it's not in the Olympics, is it?"

"Some might argue ping-pong and sailing shouldn't be Olympic sports, but they are." She leans in. "By the way, baseball is currently *off* the list in the Olympics."

Heat runs up the back of my neck. I need to sidestep that revelation completely. I clear my throat. "Have you considered the hygiene aspect—"

Her laugh startles me. "This coming from the girl who holds the snot-rocket distance record," she says.

I wring my hands together, paper clenched between my fists. The words *stats on deaths* are crinkled. My list is toast.

Not only are my arguments completely shut down, Coach isn't taking me seriously at all.

I stare behind her at the school records. You can still see where they painted over *Becky Solden* under *Pull-ups*, and where *Guadalupe Wong* replaces it.

"But you have to know this is wrong, Coach. Jocks like us—"

"That's enough, Lupe." Her lips tighten together like a bear trap. She straightens up in her seat. "Sometimes we have to do things that are uncomfortable. Besides, it will build your character." She lowers her voice to almost a whisper. "I'll even let you in on a little secret. Spring quarter is special." Her voice is gaining strength. "The best dancers not only earn As, but a select

few perform in front of the school for the Issaquah Salmon Days assembly.” She claps her hands together. “Isn’t that grand!”

I go to swallow and there’s no spit. I can’t think of anything much worse than dancing in front of the school.

“Work hard and you could be one of the eight students from your section to get this honor,” she says.

“Honor?” I cough out.

She stands and opens the door.

“But Coach. What if—”

“Don’t worry, Lupe,” she calls back. “I’m sure you have what it takes to make a marvelous do-si-do-er.”