
PITCHER
Perfect

By Tessa Bailey

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PITCHER Perfect

a novel

TESSA BAILEY



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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I did not expect Robbie Corrigan aka Orgasm Donor #1 to get his own book. Believe me. But one thing about me is that God forbid a secondary character show an ounce of depth, they will demand a story until they get one. This time, I believe that fatal flaw of mine paid off, because I can no longer imagine a world without Robbie Corrigan. Mailer's moment is coming, too . . . it's just a little ways down the road.

That being said, this book is dedicated to female athletes who are getting more and more well-deserved recognition lately. Athletes like Ilona Maher, Simone Biles, and Caitlin Clark have been ruling my social media timelines, strong and uncompromising while under tremendous pressure. They gave me inspiration for Skylar Page, starting with her opening "fuck you" and ending with her finding balance with a partner who understands, appreciates, and encourages her in the same way he wants/needs to be encouraged.

After all, balance, respect, and understanding go hand in hand with love. I'm so proud to share these characters, Robbie and Skylar, who demonstrate those qualities . . .

After a little push and pull, of course.

Love, Tessa


PITCHER
Perfect



CHAPTER ONE

Skylar Page sat cross-legged on her twin-sized bed enjoying the moments before sunrise. That stillness just before dawn when Boston would begin to stir outside of her window, sounds and scents penetrating the brick walls of her studio apartment. For now, it was just her and the quiet thoughts she needed to envision the day ahead, calculate travel times, and prioritize errands.

After taking a medium gulp of coffee, she opened her white leather planner, her gaze bouncing between underlined reminders and to-do lists, releasing a satisfied sigh over the carefully blue-inked letters. There was nothing like knowing exactly what the day, week, and year had in store.

Currently, it was Saturday morning and she planned on pampering Future Skylar by knocking out some tasks over the weekend—in between practices, of course.

First up—

Her phone rang.

Brow creased, she transferred her attention to the lit-up iPhone where it sat beside her thigh on the raspberry-colored comforter.

Elton, her brother, was calling? At 7:00 A.M. on a Saturday?

Immediately, her heart kicked into a sprint. No one called this time of day with good news. Was something wrong with one of their parents?

Skylar answered on speakerphone, then gripped her knees. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. What's wrong with *you*?"

That wasn't the tone of someone in the middle of an emergency. Her relieved exhale shifted the pages of her planner. "Why are you calling so early?"

"Because I'm on my way to pick you up."

Furiously, she flipped through a mental calendar, followed by the physical one in front of her, wondering if she'd missed a significant date. Had they made breakfast plans and she'd simply forgotten? That would be a massive rarity for Skylar, but maybe an email had gone to spam. "We're not going to visit Mom and Dad until next Sunday. Did you mix up the dates for spring break?"

"Nope. This is something else."

Skylar waited for her older brother to elaborate, but there was nothing but the sound of his turn signal ticking in the background. "Explain or I'm hanging up!" she shouted at Elton, the way only a sibling could do. Technically, they were only related by marriage, but they bickered like it was their birthright. "I'm in the middle of something."

"Shut up. You're writing in your planner."

"I wasn't writing anything," she mumbled. "I was admiring what's already there."

"Whatever you do, don't put *planner gazing* in your dating profile." She heard a shift of clothing. "I've got some good and bad news, sister of mine. Which one do you want first?"

"The bad news. Obviously."

"Whatever you scribbled down in your planner for this morning? Canceled."

"Hanging up on you seems like a good idea."

"Wait for the good news," Elton rushed to say. "You're pitching this morning."

A beat of silence passed. "That's it? I pitch every morning."

"Not against the Boston Bearcats, you don't."

Slow blink. "Elton, when did you start taking edibles?"

A deep, husky laugh reached her ears from the other end of the call. One that didn't belong to her brother. No, she knew that laugh like she knew the raised seams of a softball. And her heart was back to pumping, her gaze boring into the phone like she could see the source of that laughter through her blank screen. That perfect sound belonged to Madden Donahue, her long-standing crush . . . and her brother's best friend. "Madden is with you?"

"Who else is going to catch your pitches?" Elton responded.

Skylar picked her way backward through the wild conversation, her concentration splintered just knowing *Madden* was apparently on his way to *her* apartment. Snatching up the phone, she jogged to the bathroom, set the device on the sink, and found her toothbrush, applying a swipe of Crest. "Okay, wait. Did you say I was pitching against the Bearcats?" she asked, just before sticking the brush into her mouth, scrubbing.

"Correct."

"As in, the professional hockey team?"

"Yup."

Her incredulity reflected back at her from the mirror. "How and why?"

Elton had the nerve to sound impatient. "I'll explain on the way. How soon can you be downstairs? We're here."

She rinsed and spit as quietly as possible, barely refraining from chucking the phone into the toilet. "Ten minutes."

"Five."

"Ten, shithead." She yanked her long brown hair up into a ponytail. "You're lucky I only set aside this morning to work on next week's to-do list."

"Do me a favor."

"In *addition* to this one?" she sputtered, running to her bedroom

closet and hunkering down in front of the stackable drawer holding her multitude of sports bras.

"Yeah. When you get into the car, sit as far away from me as possible just in case sucking is contagious."

"I'm going to sit close enough to choke you to death. You won't even see it coming."

"Choke me after the game. Save your energy for pitching."

"We'll see."

Nightshirt off. Quick underwear change.

Sports bra on. Yoga pants up.

Socks.

It was that weird turning point between winter and spring when the temperature was chilly in the morning and absolutely baked Boston in the afternoon, so Skylar wasted a full minute trying to decide between a tank top or a sweatshirt, finally pulling on both. Then she snatched up her sneakers, keys, phone, and her softball glove where it sat on a shelf of honor by the front door. A minute later, she sailed out of the building, flashing her brother the middle finger through the windshield of his car, a gesture that he gleefully returned.

"Hi, Madden," she said, climbing into the back seat. "That bird wasn't for you."

She watched his profile for that signature lip twitch, her stomach turning over when she got it. "Good morning, Skylar."

"Why *doesn't* Madden get flipped off?" Elton complained while pulling into traffic. "You've known him too long to be polite."

Heat crawled up the back of Skylar's neck, carrying into her cheeks, so she ducked down to lace up her sneakers—and hopefully hide her infatuation at the same time. "I don't know. It probably has something to do with the fact that he's a decent human being. You should be taking notes."

"Take note of this." Elton hit the brakes and Skylar almost tumbled off the seat.

"Hey!" She rubbed her noggin where it had connected with the back of the driver's seat. "Are you trying to injure me right before the season?"

"That was too far," Madden said evenly. "She could get hurt."

Elton continued to drive, unperturbed. "You're right. Then who would pitch this morning?"

Madden grunted.

It took all of Skylar's concentration not to hurl herself down onto the seat in a full body swoon. And to keep her eyes from cataloging the breadth of Madden's catcher shoulders, that little whorl where his dark hair ended just above the nape of his neck, the utter stillness of him. The solid dependability he'd projected from the moment he arrived to live with their next-door neighbor when Skylar was fifteen.

Elton and Skylar both lived in Boston now, but they'd lived most of their lives in Cumberland, Rhode Island. The summer she earned her learner's permit, the elderly Irishwoman who lived beside their two-story colonial had knocked on their door to introduce her grandson, Madden, who'd come all the way from Belfast to visit her in Cumberland for the summer.

For some reason, he'd never actually left Rhode Island.

Or her heart—which he'd owned since the moment his guarded eyes met hers.

"Um." She ordered the fluttering in her chest to cease its torture. "Are you going to explain why we're randomly playing ball with a pro hockey team?"

"If you insist." Elton sighed. "Couple weeks back, I took Bubba to the dog park." Bubba was her brother's beloved bichon frise, which he'd inherited from an ex-girlfriend who'd realized

after adopting Bubba that she was allergic to dogs—and Elton, too. "While I was at the dog run, I met this girl."

"I had a feeling this is where our story would begin," Skylar inserted dryly.

"Things were going well—or so I thought. She gave me her number. Then four hockey players showed up and started hassling me about it. Fine, whatever. She's taken. I get it." Elton rolled to a stop at a red light, glanced back at Skylar over his shoulder. "Then they start talking shit about baseball."

Skylar turned to stone. "Excuse me?"

"They said it's boring. Easy. Not a real sport. Background noise for a nap."

She opened her mouth, but the outrage prevented actual words from coming out.

"I know," her brother said, regardless. "Naturally, I challenged them to a game."

"Who else is coming?"

"Few of our old teammates from Brown, plus a couple of guys I met at spring training last week in Florida." Elton and Madden had both played baseball for Brown and were now preparing to enter the minor leagues in May. "They were driving distance and pissed off enough by my story to give up their Saturday."

"I haven't thrown a baseball in a few months. Only a softball." Skylar stretched her fingers in her lap. "Not since the last time we were home."

"That's why we're getting to the field early. So you can warm up that arm." Elton chuckled. "I can't wait to see their faces when you throw your first pitch."

Madden made a sound of agreement that sent a wave of warmth through her chest.

"Speaking of going home . . ." She strove to sound casual. "Madden, you're coming to Rhode Island for spring break, right?"

He turned his head just enough to send her a sidelong glance. "You think I'd miss the Page Stakes?"

"No." She laughed breathlessly. "Of course not."

She ignored her brother's watchful gaze in the rearview, schooling her features and quickly tightening her ponytail. On the inside, though, was another story.

A full week with Madden.

Anticipation sparked in her wrists, her fingertips.

Maybe Madden would finally start looking at Skylar and see more than Elton's tomboy younger sister? Please, universe? After all, she was now a senior at Boston University and dude, she cleaned up *nice*. Pretty nice.

Decent, at the very least.

There had been times over the past six years when she'd thought maybe, just maybe, Madden was looking at her as if he found her attractive, but she usually just had ketchup on her face. The annual Page Stakes might be the perfect opportunity to show her brother's best friend that she'd become a capable woman, not the nosy tagalong from days of yore. Maybe she could even convince him to be her teammate at the yearly competition?

"So . . ." Skylar slid her hand into her glove, crushing the worn leather with the opposite hand. "Speaking of the Page Stakes, have the teams been locked in?"

"Uh, are you fully awake yet, Sky? The teams are always set in stone. Otherwise, how would Team Foul Balls be defending champs?" Elton and Madden exchanged a quick fist bump over the console. "Mom and Dad pair up. You and Eve round out the teams," Elton continued, referencing Skylar's best friend who still resided in their hometown. "That's how it has always been. Don't fuck with tradition."

"Wouldn't it be fun to shake things up, though?"

"No," Elton replied without missing a beat. "Stay in your lane."

Skylar sniffed. "I'm going to throw the game this morning just to spite you."

"Sure." Her brother's skepticism was on full display in the rearview. "When you meet these assholes, you'll want to beat them as much as I do."

For once, Elton was right.

The trio arrived at the Langone Park ball field on Boston's North End fifteen minutes later. Skylar must have subconsciously assumed she was being pranked by Elton—and it would be far from the first time—so she was a little stunned to find an assembly of giants awaiting them in the overcast distance.

"Holy shit," she murmured, slowly climbing out of the car, hand in glove. "Those are the actual Bearcats, aren't they? You weren't lying."

Elton barked a laugh. "You think I could come up with a lie that creative?"

"No, you're right. You're not that smart."

Madden, clearly amused, tucked his tongue into his cheek and looked down. "The Page Stakes are going to be extra interesting this year."

This was her opening. "Come on, Mad. Abandon ship while you still can and join Team Skylar. I've been fine-tuning my talent show performance—"

Elton elbowed her in the side, knocking her off-balance. "Quit poaching my teammate."

"Offer's on the table, big guy," she whispered, patting Madden on the shoulder. Forcing herself not to squeeze or run her palm down the hills and valleys of his triceps. Had he been working out extra hard lately?

Madden laughed in that low, chugging way of his, then joined Elton picking his way across the ball field. As they walked, car

doors began slamming in the parking lot and soon enough, they were flanked on all sides by various baseball players carrying bats, some of whom Skylar recognized from her brother's former squad at Brown. Others were unfamiliar. The ones she'd never met perused her curiously, as if wondering what the hell a girl was doing at this national summit of penis power.

She hid an eye roll.

Her pitching would speak for itself. It always did.

Usually.

The scouts from Brown passed on you, didn't they?

Much to her parents'—die-hard Brown alums—everlasting disappointment.

Skylar cleared her throat of discomfort and notched her chin higher, a conversation taking place among the hockey players reaching her ears, carried on the morning air.

"You should have seen this girl I brought home last night. Legs up to her fucking eyeballs," said one of them to the group. A mountainous redhead in a wrinkled shirt and the cockiest posture to ever exist. Chest puffed, chin up. A standing manspread. "I had to peel her off me this morning so I wouldn't be late and she's already blowing up my phone."

"You going to call her later?"

"Only if she brings a friend next time. I like a little variety."

The ensuing laughter soured Skylar's stomach. Then and there, she decided to pitch as though life itself was hanging in the balance. A hockey player with a shaved head scoffed, shoving the offensive jackass and, along with the group, they simultaneously realized their opponents had arrived. The handful of Bearcats went from playful to intimidating in the blink of an eye, bristled jaws flexing, arms crossing over their huge pro athlete chests.

The one who'd been bragging about his exploits didn't even have the grace to look embarrassed over being caught talking

about women like they were trading cards, though he visibly jolted upon realizing a lady was among them, his copper head ticking to one side, an interested gaze narrowing in on Skylar, a shaft of sunlight briefly highlighting the green moss hodgepodge of his eyes.

Fuck you, she mouthed at him.

A smile spread across his bearded face.

Oh. She couldn't *wait* to strike this guy out.

This one's for the girls.