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PRACTICE GIRL
Estelle Laure

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Dear Early Reader,

If you don't know what the title of this book means, I'm glad. It's an ugly term that's firmly rooted in misogyny and the idea that women exist only to serve men, and I wish there had never been a reason for it to be coined.

Jo Beckett also doesn't know what it means until she hears it for the first time—and it's in reference to her. To a seventeen-year-old girl who longs for love, it's a devastating blow. But *Practice Girl* isn't about Jo's trauma. It's about her courage, her self-reflection, and the reexamining of her relationships, which ultimately lead her to overcome her pain and become a stronger, surer person. It's my hope that Jo's empowering journey inspires in you the same hope and triumph that I experienced as I read Estelle Laure's deeply earnest novel, and that we can one day live in a world where hateful labels like this cease to exist.

Thank you for choosing Jo's story.

Warmly,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jenny Bak". The script is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of "Jenny" and "Bak" being capitalized and prominent.

Jenny Bak

Executive Editor

Viking Children's Books

PRACTICE GIRL

Estelle Laure



Estelle Laure is the author of ten published or forthcoming picture books and young adult novels, including acclaimed novel *This Raging Light* and Disney's City of Villains trilogy. She holds an MFA in writing for children and young adults from Vermont College of Fine Arts and a BA in theatre arts from New Mexico State University. She lives in Taos, New Mexico (the best place on earth), with her family, and her work has been translated into more than fifteen languages around the world.

Visit her at estellelaure.com.

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To my mother, Dhyana Eagleton, and my daughter, Lilu Marchasin.

Miracles, both.

practice girl *n.* **1** the girl in your school that everybody uses to fulfill sexual needs and nothing else. This girl is not good for a relationship.

—Urban Dictionary

CHAPTER ONE

“Frosted Flakes or Cocoa Puffs?” Ty asks, opening an extremely organized cupboard in his massive kitchen.

“Uh,” I say. I’m not hungry, but Ty seems to assume our appetites match. I am used to this type of assumption. It’s the price of having a bunch of guy friends.

“We also have some muesli. My mom says it’s healthy, but I think it tastes like ass. I don’t need pumpkin seeds in my breakfast, you know?”

I giggle. To my horror, it echoes off the quartz countertops.

This is the third afternoon in two weeks I’ve spent at Tyler’s house after school, gradually removing more and more articles of clothing until today, when it was all of them. We had naked actual sex with each other. It was pretty sweet until about thirty-seven seconds after Tyler’s completion, which is when he bounced out of the bed, claiming to be starving to death.

Now I’m sitting across the kitchen island from him while he pours us each a bowl of Frosted Flakes (note to self: I never answered him about the kind of cereal I wanted or if I even wanted any at all). He douses them in milk and I repress the desire to lecture him. Coach and I have tried so hard to get the guys on the wrestling team to care about their nutrition, even got a doctor to come in and talk to them after a kid in Denver gave himself a heart attack from dehydration and mass quantities of bodybuilding supplements. He had been using them to gain

muscle, but they were not supposed to be taken by people under eighteen, especially with too much caffeine, no water, and no supervision. It doesn't matter what we do though. I've seen Ty weigh a Snickers to see how it would move the needle on the scale. The guys obsess over calories and density but that's about it. That's how much of an impact the doc made, all told.

I try to make myself more comfortable, less self-conscious about everything that just happened between us. I definitely need to keep myself from leaping onto the countertop and yelling, "WE JUST HAD SEX. WHAT DOES IT MEAN, TYLER? ARE WE DATING NOW?"

I take a bite of cereal. It crunches loudly throughout the room and I let the spoon drop to the side of the bowl, too nervous to eat. My thighs are still warm. I can still feel him pressed against my chest.

Ty slides the box of cereal over and considers me. I'm hoping he's thinking about how we just crossed over a new relationship threshold, maybe doing a little obsessing of his own. What I really want is to believe that the tenderness he showed me as we climbed the stairs to his room, as he held my hand, took his time removing my clothes, made appreciative noises at the sight of my nude body, is still there now that we've done it. I cross my arm over my chest and grip my own shoulder even though I'm not naked anymore.

He leans over and pats my free hand. My stomach plummets into my feet. This friendly patting of the hand does not bode well.

"Beckett?" he says, his eyes deep, the color of mountain earth.

"Yeah?"

"Can I ask you something?" I recognize the look he gets when he's trying a new wrestling move—total concentration.

“Of course.” I arrange my face into its best approximation of attentive and extremely attractive.

He doesn’t meet my eyes. “Was that . . . okay?” he asks.

“Okay?”

“Yeah. I mean, am I okay? Was it . . . satisfying for you? When we . . .”

He tilts his head toward mine. “I just want to make sure I didn’t suck. That you weren’t like, ‘I wish he would hurry up and stop touching me like that’ or counting down the seconds until you could get away from me or something. I mean . . . when I put my finger on your—”

“No!” I cut him off.

“No? No, that was not good?” He leans forward, spoon in hand. Little droplets of milk hang at its edges. I would not be surprised if he produced a notebook from his pocket and started taking notes.

I put my hand over his to reassure him. “Yeah, Ty. It’s good. You’re good. Great.”

Ty’s face relaxes. “Okay, cool,” he says. “It’s hard to know, you know?” He resumes eating. Vigorously.

I want to tell him that it’s actually not hard to know, but I decide there’ll be time for that later.

Looking at him now with his pinked-up cheeks and shifty eyes, I’m pretty sure Tyler Martinez is actually into me, and what I had mistaken for ambivalence has been insecurity all along. It can’t be easy to be a guy. They’ve had to put themselves out there and risk rejection for as long as our social norms have been in place.

Now his face transforms from grave concern to his usual confidence. “I mean, I thought you liked it.” Ty chews on a huge, happy bite of cereal. “But you could have been faking or something.”

“Faking?” I mean, I was faking a little, adding some extra drama.

“I heard girls do that. I don’t know! I’ve only ever been with one other person and it was a couple years ago.” He points to my bowl. “You’re not eating.”

“You’re great, really.” I take a soggy bite. I hope more reassurance will take us out of the sex-talk zone, which is all full of skin and bodily fluids, and into the other one, where I find out where we actually stand. I know these are conversations that should happen *before*, but it’s like I forget or something.

“I’m so glad we’re friends,” he says after gulping down his sugar milk. “I want you to know that. Sincerely. You’re the coolest girl I know.”

I’m almost positive all the blood drains out of my face.

Friends?

“But I’ve been thinking . . .” he says as he goes to the sink and rinses his bowl. “Maybe we should stop this before it gets awkward. It’s been amazing, but it feels like the right time, don’t you think?”

Wait, *what?*

Less than ten minutes ago we were breathing hard, the closest two people can be to each other. The world wobbles itself upright again as I realize what’s happening here.

“Wait. Did you say, ‘before it gets awkward?’” Because on the topic of awkwardness, literally everything is already awkward. This couldn’t get any more awkward if this entire afternoon went viral in the form of a dubstep remix. That is how awkward everything *already is*.

“I mean, you’re one of the team managers and everything.” He’s still talking, but now has come around the island and is close enough I can smell his milky breath. He lays a hand on my shoulder. “We’re together

so much of the time, and I don't think Coach would be into it. And we're friends. I mean, our friendship is important to me, and it's, like, if we do this again—"

"No, totally," I say with a high-pitched laugh that makes me want to choke myself. I edge myself off the stool, which makes an ugly squeak as it rakes the floor. "If we keep on doing this . . ." I can't finish the sentence. I can't make any more words come out. He definitely didn't seem to give a crap what Coach thought when we were in his room, or any of the other times we've hooked up. My brain needs a disinfectant shower. So does my body. Did I override all the red flags and unstable feelings I had about all of it? Did I just tell myself lies so I could justify doing what Ty wanted me to do, what I wanted to do? Or what my body wanted, anyway.

"Hey, Jo, are you okay?" Tyler seems to have finally noticed I'm not exactly in the same mood I was in two minutes ago.

"Of course I'm okay, Tyler," I snap.

"Okay. I didn't mean—"

"What?"

"Um. Nothing."

Two minutes ago I was completely detached from reality and the flood of truth, and now I'm not and it's making me dizzy. I'm not going to be Tyler's girlfriend. We have just done the most physically intimate thing two human beings can do, and Tyler Martinez is already ensuring he won't ever have to deal with me again. And maybe, maybe if this were the first time this has happened, I wouldn't feel like I'm losing my mind.

But it isn't the first time.

Bowling? Movies? All those fantasies about meeting his parents and

going to parties together. *Oh my gosh, Jo. You are a complete idiot.*

I get to his mudroom at just short of a run, before the dam at the edge of my eyelids breaks. I grab my backpack, trying not to remember how I dropped it when he slid his hand under my jacket and kissed me against this very doorway, how he could barely wait because of how much he wanted me. Ty stumbles along behind me with panic splayed over his blessed good looks, his eyes wide and wondering.

“Beck, are you mad?” He sounds flummoxed. “Please don’t be. It’s for the best, really.”

“I understand, okay?” I grab my big red overcoat from his arms and fling open the back door. “Can we please not talk about it ever again? Literally forget this ever happened.” I’m talking to myself as much as to him.

Forget this ever happened, Jo. Forget this ever happened.

He nods, squints. The wind is blowing its October Colorado self right into his nice warm house and all over him. For me, it’s a welcome relief from my own stinging red cheeks, the curse of white English skin. I can never really hide distress.

I flee into Charly, the old Ford Bronco I inherited from my dad, and as I start it up the Patsy Cline I was listening to on the way here, following behind Ty’s BMW, blasts out of the speakers. I slam the stereo knob to silence her wail.

Ty, who is still watching me from the doorway, raises his hand in a wave. It takes all my willpower not to flip him off. I reverse, trying not to screech out of the cul-de-sac.

I don’t know how I could have been stupid enough to think Ty would

be different. It's not going to be different, because the problem isn't him. It's me. It's always me. Because I want to know what it's like to fall into someone and have them fall back with equal intensity, so I fall absolutely everywhere.

When I fantasize, it's not about steamy sex, close breaths, skin on skin—it's about lying side by side in a field of wildflowers, holding hands, and looking at the sky; or petting puppies together; or leaning on a shoulder in a movie theater. I have never understood what I'm supposed to do to get there, but so far everything I've tried has been a serious failure. I'm not the kind of girl guys want to introduce to their parents. I'm the kind of girl they want to introduce to the back seats of their cars.

I pull out onto the highway and attempt to gather myself, let the slate mountains, sherbet sunset, and snow guide me away from Ty, but I'm caught in Josephine Beckett's House of Romantic Horrors.

First there was Joost, a white Dutch exchange student who sent me texts during wrestling practice when I was a sophomore about how it was hard to focus with me around, about how he couldn't take his eyes off my elf ears and cute, small feet.

No one had ever told me I had elf ears or cute feet, especially with an accent.

I was practically planning our wedding. We would run away together, eat Dutch pancakes and broodje kroket, and vacation in Aruba. Everyone would think we were foolish, but we would finish high school and go on to do great things . . . together, always together. Joost and I had sex everywhere: under the stars by the river, in an actual closet at a party, even once below the stage in the orchestra pit at school. It felt like love.

It took me a few weeks to realize he only came near me in the dark, away from everyone else, and that everything he liked about me had to do with my body. It wasn't that he didn't want anyone to know because of me managing the wrestling team, which is what I thought at first. He had never asked me about myself, about who I hoped to be or who I had been up until then. My little sister, Tiffany, had been having all these tantrums, and when I said something about having a toddler in the house, he yawned. *Yawned.*

When I stopped texting him to see if he would notice or text me first, he never asked me about it. Within two weeks he was on to Delilah Vargas. In the daylight. I was so relieved when he graduated and went back to Holland. It was like I had another chance.

But then there was Lucas. Another guy from the team. A lot happens when you're a wrestling manager and you spend twenty-hour weeks with a bunch of sweaty dudes. Also, Lucas, who is half Japanese, has black hair and cheekbones that could cut a diamond. He looks like a character from an epic fantasy novel. I love epic fantasy novels and so I can't be held responsible for my actions.

Mrs. Luke Fender.

Mrs. Josephine Beckett Fender.

He spent weeks asking me out before I said yes, because this time was going to be different. I was going to do it right, and isn't there some rule about how much time you should play hard to get, at what rate kisses should occur, and when those kisses should naturally progress to the next step?

After a few dates, and prompted by various hinting gestures on his

part, I gave him a blow job in the movie theater and then told him I had real feelings for him, which in hindsight was not the most brilliant sequence of events.

He spoke earnestly, face cloudy with concern when he said, “I think there may have been a misunderstanding. I’m sorry.”

I don’t know why they apologize. Like it’s going to make anything better. It makes me feel damaged, like I’ve taken another hit and have to get back up again in spite of the fact that I am already so, so tired.

Because in the midst of all the rest of it, I am also the girl whose father died. The wrestling coach, the school’s favorite person, my most beloved guy, the legend who brought everything good and warm and understanding into my life.

Without him, there are no more pizza nights watching bad TV, there’s no more throwing on loud music and raging against the machine in the living room, no more random road trips to odd corners of the United States for dinners in hole-in-the-wall restaurants. Without him, I am unseen.

There’s that, always that.

Also, I may have cursed myself when I lost my virginity. I don’t like to think of such things, but I have to consider the possibility that that may be true.

Because before Joost and before Lucas, there was Sam.

I groan out loud even though it’s just Charly and me. I like to keep these thoughts nice and repressed and I hate when one makes it past my inner gate.

Sam and I have been best friends forever. We’d gone to the same

school for years, but it wasn't until he joined my dad's Little Wrestlers program in fifth grade that I realized he was as self-conscious and nerdy as me. He was this compact white kid who was more outgoing than me, but also liked watching cartoons. We both obsessed over Marvel, loved graphic novels, and had seen every *Star Wars* there was (including all of *the Clone Wars*, twice), so we were a perfect match.

Since then, Sam and I have been together every day. One post-season spring afternoon, we were watching *Wolverine* and he laughed at something random and the whole world lit up and I saw him like he was a different person. He was the only one who had been by my side through everything. He was . . . beautiful. Magical. I remember taking him by the hand and leading him to his bedroom, him looking at me so surprised, so *pleased*. I said we should practice with each other so someday when we did it with other people we would be ready.

So that's what we did. He was so careful, he held on to me until I was ready to let go. It was gawky and fumbly, but we got through it and I guess it was sweet in its own cringy way.

A couple of weeks later Jennifer Evans got moved into our English class and Sam opened up like a flower, turned to face her like she was the sun every time she walked by. I didn't really care, thought it was kind of cute.

I can't say I regret losing my virginity to Sam. I can't say I would take it back even if I could. Joost and Lucas—that was my bad, making assumptions that sex meant we would be in relationships. But with Sam it was different. An innocent little pocket. And I get to keep him for life.

But I still think I might have cursed myself. What happened with Sam

was a planned, one-time thing, and I've been having unplanned endings ever since.

Any therapist would tell me my search for romance is all about my daddy issues, about having a dad one day and having him gone the next, about hearing a thud and running into the living room to find him facedown on the striped rug he'd bought from Target to decorate the apartment he'd just rented a couple weeks earlier over Bailey's Furniture in the town center. Any therapist would tell me it's perfectly natural to go looking for unconditional love in the arms of boys. I mean, they *have* . . . Therapists have told me that.

But even though I know all those things and accept they may be true, I also know it would be so nice to hold someone's hand, to have someone walk down the hall with me, out where everyone could see it. I want a giant teddy bear and cheap chocolates for Valentine's Day. I want dinners with the family and to plan our weekends together and to get mad when he's tapping his toes and I'm trying to get ready to go out. I know it's basic or whatever but I want . . . *everything*, and I don't think wanting that should equal being pathetic. I always thought that's what high school was supposed to be: romance good enough to make me forget everything else. Turns out high school is mostly about homework and stress.

It takes me ten minutes to get from Ty's gated community, Willowshade Heights, to my own subdivision in the Liberty Township, Coyote Valley. I'm supposed to go meet Sam for dinner at 66, the restaurant where I work a few nights a week, but I don't think I can face him right now. He would know there was something wrong and he would ask questions. So many questions. So I drive past his house and pull around my cul-de-sac

and into my driveway just as I'm actually about to consume myself. I pause to make sure my hair isn't too messed up and that my clothes are all on straight, and mostly that utter misery can't be read in my eyes, then I take a deep breath and go inside.

Kevin Keller's house has been my house for the last five years, ever since he married my mother and then impregnated her in unreasonably rapid succession. I still call it exactly what it is: "Kevin's House." It is essentially a two-story rectangle with an entryway, living room, kitchen, dining room, laundry room, and pantry, and upstairs is my room with its own bathroom and door leading outside to a little balcony, down a long hall from the three of them. It's impeccably clean at all times and always feels empty to me. Home with my dad looked really different, filled with color and personality. Kevin said it was lucky this house came with a room separate from the rest of them, so I could have some privacy. I think he meant well when he said that.

The house is decorated with prints of famous paintings and coffee mug inspo. LIVE LAUGH LOVE. That sort of thing. It's entirely taupe, because Mom says taupe is soothing, neutral in a chaotic world. Sometimes I can't believe she was ever with Dad. Dad made messes and didn't tidy up. He had Iron Maiden and Guns N' Roses posters on his wall, even in his new apartment, and a row of shot glasses on his counter. He played pranks, like when he put plastic wrap on the toilet bowl.

Mom did not think he was hilarious or fun or charming.

She left him a year before he died, when I was twelve. I don't know whether he would still be alive if she hadn't done that. Sometimes I think so.

The timing of Kevin's entrance into our life is something I've never quite been able to figure out, but let's just say by the time Dad died, Mom was remarried and six months pregnant with Tiffany. They'd sold the house and Dad moved into a motel for a while, then his own apartment, a one-bedroom with a pullout couch in the living room for me. Teacher's salary and all that. Kevy Kev was right around the corner. She met him at her favorite Denver restaurant, Berlin, of which he is both the owner and head chef. That used to mean he was there all the time, but lately he's home most nights. By the time Dad died I was forced to inhabit Kevin's House part of the time, but at least if he'd lived I would have been able to spend weekends away, plus all of wrestling season, I'm sure. I'd take a pullout couch over this place any day.

The kitchen hums with the sounds of the mixer, some kind of horrible kid music piping out of Alexa, and my four-year-old half-sister, Tiff, singing along. Tiffany is upside down. She is always upside down, unless she is in the process of *getting* upside down. It's amazing how hard it is to have a conversation when it's always with a person's feet.

"Jojo!" she says brightly, spinning herself upright. She comes to hug me and I pat her shoulder. Tiffany is the picture of 1950s white America, with her blond hair and blue eyes and her little apple cheeks. Even I am charmed by her innocence, her simple acceptance that the universe has nothing in store for her but pure, blessed goodwill.

Mom peers at me from behind the refrigerator door. She looks like she's spent too much time studying black-and-white sitcom moms, taking notes on their dialogue and behavior, then regurgitating them at me. "Well, hello, stranger!" She shuts the door, bringing some butter and

whipping cream along with her. “How was your . . . uh . . . thing?”

My mother never has any idea what I’m doing and always looks surprised when I walk through the door, like I’m an unexpected guest.

Before I can make up a lie, she says, “Wait, wait, wait!” to Tiffany who has gone over to the counter. “Don’t touch the sprinkles without Mommy.”

Kevin comes from the pantry holding a couple of plastic jars. “Rainbow sugar crystals! Is this what you were looking for, Lou?” That’s my mom. Louise Keller.

“Yep.” Mom leans over to kiss him and he grabs her by the waist and dips her backward. Kevin is tall and blond and nice, derived from Germanic peoples. I hate when they publicly display their affection. This is shared living space, not some hotel room somewhere.

“We’re in the middle of a project.” Mom rights herself, glowing with blissy love, and lays the food on the counter. “Tiffany’s ballet class is having a bake sale.”

No one has ever offered to do anything for my team. No one has ever even gone to a match. That was all Dad. *My* dad.

The music squeaks out something rhythmic and nasal.

“If you let Tiffany listen to this for much longer, she’s going to grow up to be a pod person,” I say. “You’re just contributing to Generica and its determination to commodify everything, even childhood.”

Kevin laughs uncomfortably.

Mom sighs. “Don’t you have some social media to obsess over?”

No one asks if I want to join in the cupcake-making process.

Tiffany says, “Mixer?”

“Yes, we’re going to make the frosting. Just one minute.” Mom pulls Tiff off the stool she’s on and plops her onto the one closest to the bright red KitchenAid.

“This has been amazing, really,” I announce, “but I’m going to have to catch you all later.”

I wait a second or two for Mom to turn around, but she’s busy making sure Tiff doesn’t destroy her newly remodeled kitchen (thanks again, Kev), while Kevin checks inside the fridge for something.

I head down the hall.

Not that anyone cares.

CHAPTER TWO

In wrestling, sometimes an entire match comes down to two seconds. Two seconds to keep your opponent's back on the ground. Two seconds until the bell rings.

Two seconds and a life can be over too.

Two seconds for a heart to explode.

Two seconds to glory.

Wrestling is poetry, nothing wasted. My dad knew that. Every second counts in life and it especially counts on the mat.

Before he dropped dead of a catastrophic heart attack one sunny Sunday morning just before the start of eighth grade, my dad called me his mini-manager. Little did he know he was being prophetic. He was a World History teacher who had been the wrestling coach at the high school for fifteen years. He told me Mom had always hoped he would move on from teaching to something that paid more for his time, because as she pointed out on a regular basis, she was tired of sacrificing her entire life to his wrestling obsession. But that was his world.

After my parents got divorced, Dad and I became two peas in a pod. That's what he used to say. "You and me, kid, we're the same. Two peas in a pod." He loved it, and I loved it too. I was also one of the only girls in his Little Wrestlers after-school program. Every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday during wrestling season, after Dad was done coaching the high school team, he would give lessons to kids through eighth grade,

including Sam and a lot of the guys that are on the team now, and we would all wrestle together. That is, until Dad died. After that, I stuck with wrestling for a while . . . but without Dad's encouragement, without having him by my side, it just wasn't the same, so I quit.

I don't know if Coach Garcia felt sorry for me or what, but one afternoon during freshman year he stopped me in the hallway saying he didn't have enough help and offered me the statistician/manager position. It wasn't wrestling, but it was something in school that helped me connect to my dad, one step beyond wearing the big hoodies I rescued from the boxes of his stuff Mom had pulled together to donate. This related to the essence of who my dad was.

When I ventured back into the gym after a year away, my dad wasn't there, but even with newly painted blue-and-yellow lockers and shiny benches, the sweat and blood of his years in this gym wiped away and refurbished, I felt him everywhere. Ever since, for two hours a day, Monday through Thursday plus meets, the guys and I belong to each other and it's like I can leave everything that happened in Algebra II or English behind. Better than that, I can almost feel my dad behind me dispensing advice; I can relax and let him guide me, like he's more than a figment of someone so long gone he couldn't possibly ever reach me. I always wanted to believe he was watching over me, but in the gym I can feel it.

At those times, I can forget that this morning when I walked into the kitchen, stepfather Kevin Keller was in the middle of making pancakes in the shape of a T, fussing over maple syrup, while Tiff sat at the table on her iPad humming to herself.

There's an art to wrestling.

It's beautiful.

It's *honorable*.

Still, I have to admit I'm a little prickly today, not exactly totally in my skin. I have to see Tyler and interact with him, and every time I think about our last moments hanging out, I'm mortified. I embarrassed myself and overreacted. I made a mistake assuming he had real feelings for me.

That's the thing about sleeping with guys on the team while thinking I'm in relationships with them when they *actually* just want to see what's under my clothes: There's nowhere to hide when things go awry. I can't calmly avoid Tyler until my humiliation has worn off. I have to see him every day until the season's over and find a way to be okay with the fact that Ty has seen me naked and emotional and has rejected me because he doesn't want things to get "awkward."

Ha.

Every time I think about that, which is approximately nineteen hundred times per minute right now, I want to find him and shove his nose into a dictionary.

Awkward (adjective): *causing or feeling embarrassment.*

I spot Ty in the corner of the locker room, talking to Sam while they get ready to spar. I'm not usually in here before practice, but Coach wanted us all to meet for a minute before warm-ups. Buzz and Santiago are wrangling the guys into sort of a circle. Everyone's in regular practice clothes, sweats and T-shirts, waiting for instructions.

Ty glances up at me like he can read my mind and for just a beat I see something there. Regret, sorrow, happiness to see me. But it's only a flicker.

I hate that my limbs go all floppy at the sight of him.

“Catch, Beckett!” Mason, a noodly white boy, throws me his water bottle. “Fill it up for me?”

I throw the bottle back. “Get your own water,” I say.

Lucas of the movie theater blow job and the misunderstandings makes a honking/laughing noise at him and points. You know, when the buzz wears off and you see a guy for the fuckboy he is, it’s a very liberating moment.

“But you’re the water girl . . . I mean, in addition to being a highly respected member of our team.” Mason puts his hands together in prayer and bats his eyelashes.

“There’s a giant fountain right across from your dumb ass,” I say.

“Ooooo, you made her maaaaad!” Lucas sings.

“What? She could never be mad at me.”

It’s kind of true. Mason is a complete jackass, but I love him anyway, even if Tiffany has a more advanced sense of humor than he does. It’s just sometimes I do get irked. It’s like they forget that before I was manager I was one of them for real, like I got boobs and they all totally swept their minds clean of the memory of me pinning them three nights a week.

“What are you doing this weekend, Beck?” Mason says to me. “Other than coming to Ty’s.”

Oh, right. Ty is throwing a party before his parents come back. Of course.

“Who says I’m going to Ty’s?” I say, checking for signs they know what happened. “My whole life is not you guys.”

“What’s more important than us?”

I tousle Mason’s hair. “Not a thing, Mase.”

“Don’t let her fool you,” Lucas says. “She only cares about Sam.”

“Don’t give me shit.”

“But I live to give you shit,” he says.

“Hey, did I see you making out with Dana Delaney before lunch today?” Mason says to Lucas.

Lucas colors. “So what? I like her. She’s a fox.”

“She’s pwetty,” Mason mocks in a baby voice. “She smells good and she has pwetty hair.”

I’d like to say I’ve evolved beyond the point of caring about what Lucas does, and in many ways I have. I don’t actually want to be with him or anything, but this news does make me wonder if maybe I grew my hair out long and wore body spray, things might be different for me.

“You are a giant loser,” Lucas says. “Like, this big!” His forearm slaps against my chest as he spreads his arms out wide.

“Ow!” I fold my arms around myself.

“I’m the loser?” Mason says. “I’m not the one forgetting Beckett has lady parts.”

“Oh, I haven’t forgotten.” Lucas grins, then leans against the locker. I should probably be annoyed that he ever makes reference to our moment together, but I’m not because it’s never actually that far out of memory. It’s a relief in a way—we are friends who once shared a brief crush and an even briefer blow job. No big deal. Anymore.

Everyone goes quiet as Coach stalks in with his clipboard, compact and muscular, and Sam comes from across the room to sit next to me, Mason on my other side. Squeezed between them, I wait.

Coach Garcia is one of those semi-uptight guys in his early thirties who always looks like he just stepped out of a shower. Mrs. G, who

teaches algebra, comes to all the meets with their adorable baby, Camille, and I sometimes want to ask him how he's here all the time with a family at home. I sometimes want to ask him if everything is okay.

Now he hikes one knee up so he looks like the statue of *The Thinker*, and then he begins. "As we really start in on this season, I'd like you all to keep in mind that we've built this team on the legacy of the greatest coach this school has ever seen, my personal mentor and hero, Coach Beckett."

There's the kind of silence that makes it hard to breathe, like even the dripping showers feel bad for stealing focus. It's that way whenever anyone mentions my dad, almost like they're waiting for him to reappear. A few of the guys cast mournful, empathetic glances my way. Even though some of them didn't know him, everyone knows what happened and how sad it was.

Sam wraps his arm through mine.

"I bring him up because I want to remind you that our reputation and ethics are not things we can take for granted, nor are they things I'm willing to sacrifice," Coach Garcia says. "We stand on the shoulders of our heroes. We need to remember to have one another's backs, to support one another, not just as people, but as teammates. Together, we are the Sentinels, state champions." He looks around, meeting each person's gaze. No one dares look away. "We have been able to achieve that not only because of our tremendous skill and discipline, but because of the way we treat each other. Now I'm only going to say this once, and the next time I have to open my mouth on this topic will be the last time you wear the Sentinel singlet, I don't care how important you think you are. We are leaders in this school and what we do as individuals matters. That means we take in

nutritious food, we drink our water, we get sleep, we study hard, we serve our families and our community, and we do our best in every moment of our lives.” He pauses. “And most important, there is no room for hazing or harassment of our teammates, regardless of weight class or skill level. A rising tide lifts all ships. Am I being understood?”

Everyone nods.

“Am I being heard?”

Again, yeses all around, louder.

“Good. I have an announcement. Barney Flickstein has requested a wrestle-off with Tyler Martinez.”

He didn’t tell me anything about this. I feel a ripple of consternation flutter through the room and there’s quite a bit of laughter. Ty’s pretty good and Barney’s . . . well . . . not. He’s a ninth grader, new to the team. He’s not even on the radar yet and Ty’s varsity.

“You can’t do that.” Ty points at Barney, who sits pale in the corner, slumped into himself like he’s trying to disappear.

Coach puts his hand up before Ty can say anything else. “It’s his right to make the request. He wants to wrestle at the meet, he wants to be varsity, and he can absolutely challenge you.”

Knowing Ty, I bet he isn’t worried about losing to Barney. I think Ty’s embarrassed to have to wrestle a ninth grader, especially one who’s never even been off the bench. Barney looks petrified, but he told me a few weeks ago that his therapist made him join the team so he’s been facing his fears ever since.

“No more discussion. Go warm up right now. Wrestle-off in five minutes,” Coach says. He looks from me to Sam. “Bring the timer and the chart.”

“Aye, aye,” I say.

“And remember, everyone—”

“Heart wins!” we all respond. This is something my dad used to say all the time. I think he actually believed it.

“Damn, that was intense.” Sam waits for me as he always does, while I get the towels ready and pull up the roster of who is going to be working with whom today. “Now I feel triple guilty for drinking beer last night.”

“You think Coach’s speech was about *beer*?”

Sam stares at me, clueless. He always thinks everything is about him and about things he’s done wrong. Some might say he has a dribble of narcissism running through his veins, but I think he’s so self-conscious he’s analyzing himself all the time. “What, then?” he asks.

“Think, Sam.”

He follows me into the closet and grabs some towels. “I’m thinking. It’s what he was saying about nutrition and water. I barely drank any today and I missed my workout. It made me feel like I’m not taking this seriously.”

Sam takes everything seriously lately. The guy who used to watch six hours of cartoons after school every day disappeared this year. It’s like he can’t get comfortable staring down the barrel of real life.

“You should be more like me,” I tell him.

“Yeah? How’s that?”

“Less ambition. Acceptance of a totally mediocre life filled with loss and regret. It’s extremely liberating.”

“Beck—”

“And anyway, that was just him saying the things we all know so he could say the really important thing.”

Sam's mouth hangs open in a question.

"About the hazing," I say. "It wasn't about you or your scholarship. I promise."

"Oh," he says, finally getting it. "Barney. Yeah, that was not cool what they did to his shorts. A guy needs to be able to leave the locker room fully clothed."

"You could make the rest of the team behave," I suggest. "You have the pull."

"I could try, but I don't think I'm all-powerful or anything."

Sam's a state wrestling champion in the 152 class twice over, although we don't talk about last year. He almost lost his title to a showboating guy from Denver, and losing his title is not something he can afford if he wants to live the life he hopes to. The fact that Sam has no idea how his championship and kindness and physical attractiveness translate into social currency for him is but one of the things that makes him beautiful.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" he says.

I shake off my momentary best friend adoration, load the towels on the cart, and let my hand fall across the picture of my dad that hangs on the wall. It's tradition or superstition or something. Everyone on the team touches that picture when they leave the locker room, so the glass has to be cleaned daily or it starts to grow a variety of viruses.

"Don't worry, Sam, Coach won't find out about your torrid affair with Domino's." I pat him on his six-pack.

Sam looks at me. "Speaking of, where were you yesterday? You just totally disappeared after school. I thought we were going to meet at my house and go get dinner."

"I texted you."

“Yeah, but ‘not coming’ isn’t really an explanation now, is it?”

I hesitate. I want to tell him everything, but then again I don’t really want to hear about his sex life with Jen, so the boundaries are sometimes unclear.

“Tyler?” he says, studying my expression. “I figured you were with him.”

I glance through the doors into the gym, see Ty stretching in the corner. He looks so good stretching. I sigh louder than I mean to. “Yeah. I thought . . . I guess I was starting to like him or something ridiculous like that, but apparently he’s not into me.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” I hate so much to admit it. “I thought maybe we were going to start dating. For real, I mean.”

Sam snorts derisively. “I know Coach just told us to be nice to each other, but Ty is a loser. Look at the way he’s been picking on Barney, how he treats the freshmen. You’re too smart and interesting to be with someone like him. After he showed you his eighty-fifth workout video, you would have gotten so bored you would have dumped him anyway.”

It’s true. Ty’s hobby is making demos called Tummy Time with Tyler, occasionally accompanied by rap he writes and produces himself. Both are objectively bad, although I admire his entrepreneurial spirit.

Sam makes everything better.

“You laugh,” he says, “but I’m totally serious.”

“Let’s not talk about me and my tragic love life anymore. Let’s talk about yours.”

“Leave Jen alone.”

“If only, Sam, if only.”

“Beck.”

“Sam.” He looks genuinely sad, so I say, “Oh my gosh, okay, fine. I will not give you a hard time about your girlfriend. I just think she’s kind of a tight-ass and not that interesting.”

“Beckett!”

Barney is on the mat right now, and he is actually shaking as he jogs in place. He weighed in at 117 today and I bet he’s lost a pound in sweat since then.

Sam and I grin at each other. It’s been hard for some of the guys to accept another ninth grader, especially one who is clearly on some kind of self-help mission rather than being here because he’s actually good at wrestling or even interested in it. Ty’s been an asshole to him, but I don’t know if it’s worth Barney actually putting his life on the line.

Coach Garcia nods at me. “You ready, Beckett?”

“Sure am.” This will definitely not be completely intense or anything.

Coach huddles up with Santi and Buzz for a minute.

Ty steps toward me. “Can I talk to you?” he asks. He seems shifty and nervous, unsure of himself.

“I guess,” I say.

We move off to the side while Barney does some high kicks and runs in place next to the mat.

“Are you okay? Today, I mean?” he says.

“I’m great,” I say, forcing myself to sound chipper.

“Because you seemed . . . mad when you left my house yesterday.”

“Not mad, exactly. Confused, maybe.”

“Yeah.” He nods. “I think I should explain myself. I had a great time, really.”

Barney punches the air and Coach looks over, then shakes his head. The kid can't even warm up right.

Some of the roiling in me has settled at Ty's words. Maybe I'm not as foolish as I thought. "We can talk at your party, okay?" I say.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

He seems relieved. "Okay, because I think I might have been kind of a—"

"You *were* kind of a . . ." I say, but I'm smiling. "Let's just focus on not killing Barney right now."

Ty nods and gets into place.

"Get him, Big Daddy," Mason says. "You show him who's boss."

"Shut up, Mase," Ty snaps.

"I wasn't talking to you. I was talking to Big Daddy Barney."

"Mason!" Coach warns.

"Ty, you ready?" I say.

Ty returns his focus to Barney, who looks like he's going to stroke out.

"Let's get started then. Barney? You need another minute?" I hold the stopwatch at the ready.

He shakes his head no. With his fine brown hair, skinny limbs, and terrified eyes, he's all Chihuahua.

"Let's do it," he says bravely.

"Shake," I say.

They do, and then in a flash, Barney drops to his knee, lunges between Ty's legs, and pulls him down in a tackle, driving him straight to his back for a five count, almost pinning him until Ty realizes what's happening, fights aggressively off his back, and springs to his feet.

“Escape!” I shout. But barely.

“That was a double leg takedown and three near-fall!” Coach yells, like I don’t know.

“What the fuck?” Ty says. “How did you do that?”

Everyone around the mat is either laughing or clapping or has a hand over his mouth.

Barney adjusts his goggles. “Not wanting to die is highly motivating.”

I smile so hard my face hurts.

They stand again. Barney is shaking a little less.

“Beckett?” Coach says.

“Ready.”

In spite of Tyler’s high level of concentration, Barney is so fast Ty is on the ground in less than a second, and this time he doesn’t get away. He squirms but he can’t recover from the drop to his back.

“That’s the match!” I yell.

“What the hell just happened?” Ty has his hands over his face so his voice comes out muffled.

Coach puts his hands on his hips and leans back on his heels, glowing with joy. “Barney, you can come to my office and Beckett will give you your new varsity gear. You compete this weekend.”

“Coach—” Ty begins.

“No. No, Tyler. You can still come with us and be the alternate at the meet. Barney wrestles. That’s how a wrestle-off works. You know this.”

“Harsh,” Mason whispers.

Ty, still seated on the mat, looks like he’s about to cry.

The gym is silent. The guys can screw around a lot, but not when it comes to wrestling.

Coach folds his arms across his chest and walks over to stand next to me, never taking his eyes off Barney. “Time for drills!” he announces.

As our shocked team separates into partners, Coach is so ecstatic he’s near levitation. “I think that kid might be one hundred seventeen pounds of wonderful.” He slaps me on the shoulder. “Yup, I do.”

“Are you okay?” Barney says to Ty, offering him a hand up.

Ty shakes him off. “I’m fine!”

“This is going to be our year, Beck,” Coach says. “I can feel it. Forget one state championship. We’re going to take every single one!”

I smile. Heart wins. Maybe that’s true after all.

CHAPTER THREE

Ty's party is tonight, which is both good and bad. I keep turning the conversation Ty and I had in the gym over and over in my mind, looking at it from every angle. Did I imagine his regret? He pulled me aside in front of everyone, like he wasn't even hiding that there was something between us. Maybe he thinks he was hasty in breaking it off with me and has changed his mind.

Either way, I'm definitely not going to this shindig alone.

Sam would usually go to something like this with Jen, but I've harassed him into letting me pick them both up, so I can avoid walking into Ty's house solo. I could have gone with one of the other guys, but I don't want Ty thinking I'm into anyone else. So Sam and his very, very annoying girlfriend it is. Sigh. Sometimes, occasionally, I wish I had other friends.

Sam's house is a few cul-de-sacs away from mine, on the outskirts of Coyote Valley, which is laid out so it looks like it's resting against the bottom of one of the Rocky Mountains. It's glorious from a distance: the reddish rocks, huge green-and-gold trees, and then the sky that is almost always a cloudless blue, the houses tucked into a protective valley. There's a gas station, a Starbucks, an ice-cream shop, a breakfast place called the Happy Tortilla, 66, and a health food store. Other than that, you have to drive ten minutes in either direction past a whole bunch of cows and horses for anything.

I guess I should be glad that Mom met Kevin and we all moved into this adorable manifestation of the American Dream because it put me closer to Sam, geographically speaking. Now I can just walk a few well-planned blocks and there he is.

Sam's parents bought the very first model house in Coyote Valley fifteen years ago when Sam was two. They both work for Game and Fish and are basically poster children for the great outdoors. It's Cabela's and Carhartt all the way.

"Hello?" I call, opening the door.

The floor plan is identical to Kevin's, but the house is decorated so differently you almost wouldn't know it. Fishing trophies and cowboy hats are everywhere. Where at my house the sliding glass doors lead out to a large green lawn and a basketball hoop where Kevin sometimes practices for his weekend pickup games, here there's a huge garden, xeriscaped and brimming with red volcanic rock and giant aloes.

Sam's parents are home today, both sitting at the kitchen table with open laptops and a bunch of maps, their giant Great Dane, Ollie, lounging beside them on the floor like an enormous pillow. He opens one eye and makes a whining noise. He's either used to me by now or he's the worst guard dog ever.

"Good boy," Sam's dad says.

They just got back from a trip they had to make to the San Juan River, so there are fly rods and waders slung across the chairs and it smells a little like mossy feet. For years they couldn't go into the field as much as they wanted to because Sam was too little and it wasn't safe. But now that he's a senior, they've been leaving more and you can tell how much they love it.

Sam's dad is enjoying a Fat Tire beer and looks up from his paper-work, but only for a second. "Sam's in his room."

Sam's mom smiles. "Jo, hi! Nice to see you. Don't you look adorbs." She likes to say things like "adorbs." Sam says it makes her feel more connected.

"Thank you, Mrs. Sloane. Nice to see you too."

"Sam seems kind of off. You know of anything?"

"No."

"Maybe he's fighting with Jenny. I tried to lure him out here with some pineapple upside-down cake we got from 66, but not even that would do the job. Whatever it is, he won't say a word to me about it."

"Party will do him some good," his dad says.

"May I? Go find Sam?" I say.

"Of course, sweetheart," Mrs. Sloane says.

Sam is lying on his bed with the headphones I gave him for his birthday beside him. Sam's room is the opposite of his house, just like mine is the opposite of my house. It's almost austere in here. No posters, a small bookshelf, a neat desk with a computer on it, and a full-sized bed. If you went in his closet, you would find his clothes hung with a two-finger distance between each hanger. He's kind of a monk. For just a second before he knows I'm there, I see him staring at the ceiling with a worried expression. There is definitely something going on. He scoots over as soon as he sees me in his doorway and puts his arm up, folds it under his own head. I slide into it, fitting myself in the crook. I put my feet over his. Otherwise our bodies don't touch.

"How's it going?" he says, glancing to the side. Then he stops and really looks at me. "Hey, you look kind of hot, Beck."

“Shut up.”

“No, really. Take a compliment. You look utterly decent.”

I’m in a black bodycon dress with tights and combat boots. I even painted my nails and have butterfly earrings resting on my lobes. I want to be ready for anything. I want to be ready to be kissed, if it comes to that.

“You look all right too,” I say.

Sam’s traded his T-shirt for a button-down and his hair is semi-styled.

“How are Tiff and the gang?”

“Okay,” I say.

“Peachy as ever, eh?”

“You know it.” I’m fine, actually. Home is the same old thing, and to be honest, the whole Barney revelation and the fact that Coach is now grooming him to be our secret dark horse has left me feeling downright chipper. As long as I can avoid my family, I’m good. But Sam. I can read him so well. He’s hiding. The thing about him is he’ll never just come out with it.

“What’s going on with you?” I ask. “And don’t tell me nothing because I won’t believe you and then we’ll have to go in circles until you tell me the truth.”

His breathing accelerates but he doesn’t say anything.

“Samuel Sloane,” I say. “I am your best friend.”

“Fine. If I tell you something, do you fire-promise not to say anything?”

“Oh, dang. Fire-promise? That serious?” In eighth grade, we decided if either of us broke a fire promise, we would have to pay by being burned at the stake. I nudge him. “Go on. I’m a vault. Spill.”

“Well . . .”

While he hems and haws, my brain fills with all my worst nightmares. I can't imagine what could be so bad he wouldn't be able to say it out loud. Then it hits me.

"Oh my gosh." I sit up and poke him in the chest. "Jennifer's pregnant. You impregnated Jennifer Evans and now I'm going to have to take care of your devil spawn during meets. I'm going to have to pretend to like her for the literal rest of my life! This is a monumental disaster."

He laughs and sits up too. "No, doofus, although if I did actually impregnate her I would expect you to have the decency to not call the fruit of my loins devil spawn."

I am truly relieved to hear there has not been Jen impregnation yet, so I lean back against his headboard. "What is it, then? Don't leave out any good parts. I want all the blood and guts you got."

"Jo," he says, "have you ever thought about being less edgy?"

"I don't know what you're talking about. I don't do drugs. I get good grades. I'm a perfect angel."

He rolls his eyes but keeps going. "Okay, I'm telling you, but I'm serious about not telling anyone else."

"Okay, okay!"

"One of the scouts contacted me from Duke. They offered me a scholarship." Scouts were around so much of last season we got used to seeing them typing out notes on iPads and talking on their phones. By the end of last season Sam had gotten paid vacations to three different schools. He came back silent and pale every time, like it wasn't a total thrill. I would have been ordering up lobster and geeking out on college life but he just seemed worried. And now he's acting like getting a full ride is a curse or something. I'll have to be enthusiastic for both of us.

“*What?*” I stand on the bed and jump on either side of him, then finish with a happy dance. “That is *amazing!* Why aren’t you dancing? Why are you looking so grim, for God’s sake? This is incredible news. *I am freaking out!*”

“Shut up,” he hisses, but he’s smiling a little. “My parents are going to hear you and then they’ll want to know what’s going on.”

“They already want to know what’s going on. If you want them to stay out of your business, you should be subtler about your low-grade depression.”

“I’m just not ready to have them know yet, you know? Not until I know how I feel about it myself.”

I jump down and sit next to him, look at him closely. I determine it’s not a great time to explain to him how I’m applying to five schools and have no idea if I’ll get into ANY of them. I’ll have to wait until December to know anything at all. I keep my mouth shut because he’s an odd shade of green, like he might actually spew.

“Explain.” I gently pull back his hand and he relaxes, leaving it in mine.

“It’s just . . .” He forces the words. “I’m not actually that smart, you know.”

“Oh, I know. I’ve been keeping you afloat for years,” I say seriously.

“Fuck you,” he says.

“Exactly.” I nudge him. “That’s not true and you’ve been doing fine.”

“I know, but Duke is, like, a really good school.”

“Sam.”

“And I keep having these dreams where they tell me it was all a mistake or something goes horribly wrong and I flail this season—”

“Sam, Sammy boy, Sammela, come *on*.” I squeeze his hands. “Listen to me, for I am wise.”

He looks at me openly.

“You are smart. You got into Duke for a reason. You are in the top of the top, the cream of the cream, and they want you to be a Blue Devil like you’ve always wanted to be. And how much do you have to pay?”

“Nothing.”

“Not even room and board?”

“Nope.” He cracks a grin, finally.

“Well, then, you just saved your parents literally tens of thousands of dollars. Maybe *hundreds* of thousands.”

“If.” He sits up next to me.

“Yeah, if. Of course there’s always an if, but it’s going to be great! And if you aren’t ready to tell anyone about it, then don’t. In the meantime you can know inside your heart that you have already mostly conquered the world!”

“Yeah?”

“Yes, and I’d say that calls for a major party. Epic, even.”

He wraps an arm around me and tugs in. “Oh man, if you would just get along with Jen, you’d be the perfect woman.”

I’m not going to point out the various issues with what he’s just said, because pulling Sam out of a funk isn’t especially easy, and I have to get him out of the house before he sinks into his stagnant self-destructive brew again.

“Let’s go!” I say.

He eyes me cautiously. “I’m not ready for anyone else to know, still. Fire-promise.”

"I already told you."

"I know, but you have to promise. Fire."

"Oh, fine. Fire."

We do our super-ridiculous, burning-in-flames faces, and then shake and I pull him up.

I pick up my bag from where it's lying in the corner.

"Hey," Sam says. "You sure you want to go to this thing tonight? I could call Jen. We could order pizza, eat pineapple upside-down cake, watch something?"

I get a brief but powerful image of myself spending the rest of the evening on the couch with Sam, Sam's parents, and Jen. "Hard pass."

It's not just that though. I know I'm supposed to have given up on Ty and that his workout videos are stupid, but I feel like this party will be the true determining factor of what happens with our relationship. I don't trust myself to read other people correctly, especially not after my most recent assumptions about him, but I know I'm not imagining that Tyler cares. Maybe he was scared because his feelings are too strong for him to handle. He seemed so relieved to hear I'd be over there tonight.

"I'm wearing *mascara*," I say. "I refuse to waste my efforts on trash TV. Anyway, you need to get over it and have a good time tonight. We are young!"

"I do love you, Beck." Sam looks at me like I'm something breakable. "I don't know what I would do without you."

"Love you too," I say, trying to shake off Sam's strangeness, because it's making me feel even more nervous than I already do. "Now let's go party."

Of course we have to pick up Jen on the way. Sam gets in the back with her so I play chauffeur and we take most of the trip in silence. I *might* hit a speed bump a little too hard while Jen's reapplying her gloss and fixing her perfectly wavy chestnut hair, and Sam *might* give me a little bit of a knowing dirty look, but otherwise the ride is okay. It's not that Jen isn't a decent person. The fact that she and Sam are so sickeningly in love combined with the fact that Sam actually can't function without me creates this vortex where it's like we speak two completely different languages. As soon as we get to Ty's she basically leaps into Leah Herrera's arms and they run off to reapply their makeup (again) or whatever.

Ty's place looks like a different house from the other afternoon. There's music bumping and people are dancing in the living room, and girls are strewn across the counter in the kitchen while others jump in the heated pool outside. I'm sure Ty has an emergency cleaning scheduled for the morning, but this house is getting wrecked.

I search for him, hoping to run into him somewhere private, eventually making my way down the stairs to his refinished basement, which has a huge TV, sound system, and ping-pong and pool tables. It's filled with people, and as a cluster moves off to the side to start up a new game of beer pong, I spot Ty wedged into a love seat across from a full couch.

My stomach lurches like I'm going down a hill at high speed when I see what Ty is doing, smiling widely, listening with full attention to what the person next to him is saying. Amber. Amber who is the only Black girl in our school, whose high-waisted jeans and cropped shirt presently look painted on to total advantage.

I should leave. Everything about their body language says they're having a conversation they don't need anyone joining, but I go over to them anyway, pulled as though by an invisible string.

Mason emerges from the pile on the couch. "Hey, Jo!" He extends his arms, knocking Kailey Lee off of him and sloshing some red liquid over the edge of his cup. "Come sit down with us!" He's slurring fuzzily.

I pat Mason's hat, which seems to satisfy him, and he takes another swig of the red drink he's holding.

"Hi, Tyler," I say, trying to keep all emotion from my voice. It still comes out accusatorily.

"Oh, hey, Beckett!" He doesn't seem fuzzy, or upset to see me, and he doesn't look guilty either. He just looks up.

"Hi, Jo." Amber moves an inch away from him.

Tyler doesn't make a move to get up and hug me or to invite me to sit with them. He pauses, then looks at Amber and back at me, a question on his face.

The question is *Why are you standing there, Beckett?* Followed by, *Please go away, Beckett.*

I can hear it like he's said it out loud.

"Right here, Beck." Mason pats the spot next to him again. "Come join our love-in!"

"You're literally so dumb," Kailey says, but she doesn't push him away when he pulls her back to him. Instead, she boops him on the nose and then leans forward for a quick kiss.

Mason pulls back, goofily surprised.

"Did you need something?" Ty says. "The keg's outside."

"Oh, it is?" I say. "Thanks."

“Sure,” Ty says. “Help yourself!” And with that, I’m dismissed.

I climb back out of the basement, push my way through the upstairs crowd and out the back door. I’m sweaty and jittery, so the cold air feels great. It’s surreal. All the people around me, shrieking and having fun while I can only contemplate that reality feels like a moving target.

With Sam playing pool and the rest of my friends mating, I have nothing to do but wander over to the keg, which is currently being supervised by Jen and Leah under one of the outdoor heaters Ty has peppered all over his yard. It’s a relatively nice night anyway, but the heaters mean people aren’t out here in winter coats shivering at each other.

Much as I don’t want to talk to either of these girls, I don’t know what to do with my hands other than wrap them around a plastic cup full of flat beer. I am so, so deeply regretting not having taken Sam up on his offer of pizza and pineapple upside-down cake. Although I guess Jen would have been there too.

“Jo!” Jen says in a surprised voice, like we weren’t recently in the car together and she’s shocked to see me materialized in front of her.

“Hey,” I say.

She hands me a cup.

“Hi, Jo,” Leah says. She’s in a super-cute, navy-blue midi dress with a princess cut and has traded her cowboy boots for flats, a silver horse hanging daintily from her neck. There’s not a hair out of place, her nails are done, and she somehow looks chic and clean and innocent all at once, right down to her delicately placed freckles and single dimple.

I glance down. My outfit suddenly seems cheap and ridiculous.

I wore too much eyeliner.

“Hi, Leah,” I mutter.

We all three look at each other for a minute and I have to stop myself from being like, *helluva party, right?* and then Jen and Leah gaze off into the distance like maybe their clear disinterest will make it easier for me to take the hint and skulk away.

I know we're almost done with the torture that is high school, but we have history that's hard to forget, even now. Leah was once my best friend, the kind where you braid each other's hair and let each other read secret journals. But as I got more into wrestling and boys, she got more into horses and girls, and one day it was like she developed an allergic reaction to everything that was me.

In seventh grade, Amber scooped her right up, and then a couple years later when Jen came to town, their event-planning coven was formed. They were sending each other Snaps all day and wearing matching outfits and deciding to give up dairy and I never knew about any of it. She just stopped being my friend. And I never forget that when my dad died, I waited for her to reach out to me, to give me a hug, to do anything to show me she still cared or understood at all what I was going through. But she never did.

I don't know if there's any coming back from that.

It was kind of awkward when Leah started working at 66 with me a few months ago, but Brenda's been scheduling us for different shifts, and Leah hasn't said anything. I'm pretty sure she doesn't care.

"What are you going to be for Halloween?" Leah asks Jen.

"Sam and I are going as Thing 1 and Thing 2."

"A solid choice."

"A little basic, but I want to be warm. I freeze my ass off every Halloween and I'm not in the mood this year. How about you, Jo?"

"I don't know yet," I say. "I'll probably just whip out my trusty old cat ears."

Halloween was my dad's thing. Since he's been gone I try to work if I can, and just stay away from any festivities.

"Cool," Leah says. "You've had those since sixth grade."

"I always forget you guys were elementary friends," Jen says. "Cute."

We stand around and are just about to dive into another embarrassing silence when Dax Furlong appears, a white kid holding a red cup that appears to already have been put to some use.

Dax Furlong.

Leah and Jen and I all exchange looks and for once I'm not on the outside of this. Dax is. Because he is Sam Sloane's biggest rival, one of the Denver Rockets and the only person to easily dominate Sam. An actual bona fide Sentinels enemy. In fact, Dax is the one who almost beat Sam last year. It went into OT. Sam escaped in the last millisecond and won on points. If Dax hadn't been so busy hamming for the audience, he probably would have taken the title. I feel like a traitor just having the thought, but it's true.

Dax seems to have no idea he's causing any kind of stir. He merely presents his cup for refilling. "Hey," he says to us generally.

"Hey," we all answer.

He glances at me, then does a double take and smiles. It's of the gleaming variety. "Hey, I know you. You're the scowly one from the matches." He extends his hand. "Dax."

"I know who you are." I shake his hand anemically.

"Ouch," he says. "Did I murder your cat or something?"

I snort and semi-laugh. This is the first non-terrible moment I've had

at this party so far, so I soften a little. “It’s my job to be scowly at the likes of you.” I lean toward him. “You’re the enemy.”

“I know, right? I wasn’t sure I was going to make it in the door, but no one’s said anything so far. I mean, except for you, of course.” He grins.

“Of course.”

He takes a sip of beer. Jen and Leah gawk and he definitely doesn’t notice. “You know, you’re kind of scowly right now,” he says to me. “Is it because this party sucks and everyone is boring?”

A laugh forms in my belly but I manage to repress it.

“Ah,” he says, “the corners of her mouth *do* move in an upward direction.” He squeezes his eyebrows together. “Noted.” He looks around. “Well, I’d better get on with my exploration of rival culture. As you were.”

He saunters off like he’s got nothing to do and nowhere to be, and I’m filled with questions. Why is he here? Who the hell brought him? And mostly, why is he so sure of himself?

“You want to dance?” Leah asks Jen suddenly.

“Sure,” Jen says. “Let’s go.”

Leah hesitates, Jen’s hand in hers. “You can come with us if you want,” she says to me. I could almost laugh.

Dax was an effective momentary distraction, but now I’m right back to wishing a portal would open up and suck me literally anywhere else. I’d take a planet of starved, brain-sucking zombies over this. Curse me for insisting on driving.

“No thanks,” I say. “I’m going to do a little stargazing.”

“Um, weird, but . . . okay?” Jen says, with a little laugh.

Leah waves goodbye and follows Jen.

I slump down around the corner in the shadows where hopefully no

one will see me ever again. After a few minutes, during which I do genuinely look at the sky, which is *amazing*, Sam shows up. “Here you are! You okay?”

“Yeah, totally.” I consider. “Wait, why did you come find me? Did Jen say something to you?”

“Leah,” he says. “She just said you seemed a little upset or something.”

“Nope, I’m excellent.”

Feelings are such a drag and right now I have way too many of them.

“Sam.”

“Yeah?”

“I’m not totally excellent.”

“I know.” He takes my hand.

I don’t know why I get like this. I could go play beer pong or pool or get in the hot tub and maybe I would have fun. But my stomach is cavernous and my heart is hollow, and I don’t know how I got here.

Even with Sam there are things I don’t want to talk about, and I’m too raw to let him in on the extent of all this. “It’s like I’m never going to fit anywhere, except maybe in that stinky gym.”

“Which is why we’re going to keep you there permanently.”

“Ugh, may I escape such a fate. By the way,” I say, grateful for the change of subject, “you know Dax Furlong is here?”

“Yeah, we played some pool. He seems all right. A little full of himself, but whatever.” Sam shakes his head, then nudges me. “Come on, it’s cold. Let’s go play! I’ll let you win.”

Sam pushes himself off the wall to stand up, hand still in mine, but before he can, Ty and Amber stroll out in front of us like they have all the time and space in the world, feet kicking softly against the grass.

I don't want to stay but I also don't want to emerge from the shadows of the wall, so I tug on Sam's arm for him to keep still and be quiet. It only takes me half a second more to realize that by not moving I have now become the creepster I was trying to avoid being, but it's already too late. We'll have to wait them out.

Amber settles on a swing, and Sam gives me a look like if swinging is involved it could take a lot longer than it seemed it was going to a few seconds ago and also that I'm potentially ruining his life because Jen will be looking for him and he's stuck hiding with no beer.

"Did you bring me out here to watch me swing, Tyler?" Amber's voice is the voice of all the girls who have ever known a boy was into them and also knows how to tease it out of them.

Ty watches as she twirls the swing from side to side. "No, I didn't bring you out here to watch you swing." The aw-shucks in his tone reminds me that all boys are just as scared of everything that can happen with a girl as we are of them. He's nervous. I can tell by how he shoves his hands in his pockets then grips the side of the swing set like he's looking for somewhere to put them and they won't stay still.

Nausea rolls through me and I focus on my breathing. It's bad enough knowing this is happening without having to witness it in person.

"Actually," he says, "I brought you out here to see if you might want to hang out."

"We're hanging out right now." She lets her fingers trail over his wrist.

"Well, yeah, but you know that's not what I mean."

"No, I don't." She's so smooth and soothing.

I cringe thinking about Monday afternoon in Ty's bed. We were so close. We gazed into each other's eyes.

Mental note: *This* is what it looks like when a boy has his heart caught in a net. He's watching her as she rocks herself as though he's in exactly the right place with exactly the right person. I wish everything wasn't so illuminated by floodlights.

"I have tickets to a show this Friday at the Ogden," Tyler says.

"A show?"

"Yeah, I got VIP tickets to Lucy's Diamond. I thought . . . if you wanted to . . . we could go to dinner before. There are some good places in that neighborhood. One of them has a menu that's all based on famous book titles. A Tale of Two Sliders, Catcher in the Pastrami on Rye." He trails off as she watches him. "Never mind, it's stupid."

"No, it's not. It's super sweet."

It *is* super sweet.

"What about Jo?" Amber says.

I start at being brought into this situation when I'm in full voyeur mode. But also, yeah. What *about* me?

"Jo?" He looks completely perplexed at the mention of my name.

"You mean Beckett?"

"Yeah. I thought you guys were maybe a thing, but then it didn't seem like it . . . I don't know . . ."

"No." He cuts her off quickly.

Sam squeezes me and I am caught between wanting to slap him away and lean in closer to him.

"No?" she prompts.

"Definitely not."

No? Definitely not?

“No. I swear. I mean we did hook up but it’s not like that.”

We hooked up several times. And we had sex.

“Well, last time I checked, people hook up because they like each other, so . . .”

Tyler leans against the green frame. “It’s complicated.”

Amber laughs. “Try me.”

It seems like even the grass under me is waiting for his explanation. “She’s just a . . . practice girl. You know?”

Practice girl?

Amber narrows her eyes. “A what?”

Yes, a *what?*

“Okay . . . well, a practice girl is someone you practice, you know, hooking up with.” Ty seems to check Amber for disgust level. She’s listening carefully so he goes on. “So you don’t get emotionally attached and you aren’t going to ever get in a relationship with them. That’s what Beckett is. And it’s totally different than you. You’re someone to . . . you know . . . date. And it’s over with Beck, I swear.”

Amber furrows her brow. “But you did sleep with her, right?”

His shoulders deflate.

I’m still trying to understand what I just heard . . . *you don’t get emotionally attached and you aren’t going to ever get in a relationship with them.*

Every fear I’ve ever had about myself and how I’m perceived is being confirmed in real time and I can’t absorb it fast enough.

“Yeah.” He delivers this admission like it’s going to end his life. “I did.”

“But you aren’t into her?” Amber says.

He perks up. “No! I’m into you.”

Oh my God, I’m actually going to die. I can’t breathe. I can’t feel anything except my entire body pulsing.

Amber pulls herself up and wraps her arms around his waist. He hugs her, and his eyes flutter shut, like it’s sheer bliss. “I’m going to need to have a little chat with you about this practice girl situation, but okay.”

“Okay?”

“Yeah. Okay, I’ll go to the show with you.”

She looks up at him and then they press their lips together and a little sound escapes me, a breath of pain.

Romance isn’t dead. Romance is only dead for *me*.

A crash comes from inside the house and Ty groans.

“We’d better go in,” Amber says.

“Yeah, I can’t leave those animals in there unsupervised.”

She makes a sound of consent and they disappear from view.

Another silence follows and I can feel Sam searching me for damage.

I look at him and his sincere green eyes and all at once I realize: He *knew*. He isn’t surprised. He’s just worried.

“Sam, did you know he calls me that?” I say.

Sam doesn’t say anything. He looks down. I swallow.

“Sam.”

“Jo.”

Uh-oh. Sam never calls me Jo. A new and terrible thought is occurring to me now. “Does *everyone* call me that?”

He looks like he’s about to dissolve, like he’s trying to crawl out of his own skin. It’s all slowly coming together. Joost, Luke, Ty . . . All of it, total and complete nothing. Every time my heart leapt at the idea of being

with them, every time I held them close to me and reassured them when they were uncertain, every time I guided them to the right places and told them what they could do to make it even better. Every time I smiled and laughed and shared and gave. Every time I let them in.

Garbage. Fake, disgusting garbage.

I might as well be a blow-up doll.

“Joost and Luke called me that too, right?”

Practice girl.

He nods reluctantly. “Yeah. I’ve heard them say it too. It’s just a thing guys say. It doesn’t mean anything.”

“You didn’t tell them to stop? Point out how incredibly disrespectful and demeaning that was of them to say *about your best friend*?” I wait. “Nothing? What? Did you laugh along at my stupidity?”

He’s like an animal caught, frozen and looking for a path to escape. “It sounds bad now but it didn’t seem . . . In a way it was kind of like what happened with us,” he says. “I thought . . . You said you just wanted it to be practice.”

That was years ago. We were so brand-new at this. I can’t believe he thinks this is connected to that. “Sam, we mutually lost our virginities to each other for the sole purpose of not being virgins anymore. It was a practical decision. How is a bunch of guys passing me around, acting like they were into me when they were just using me for sex practice until girlfriend material came along *anything* like what happened between us? This is *not* the same.”

“I wasn’t thinking of it like that. I knew you liked them. I didn’t want to upset you . . .”

I am so filled with rage I could set this whole place on fire with a flick

of the wrist. “You let them turn me into nothing.” My voice darkens so much Sam actually takes a step back.

“Jo,” he says.

“You let them make a total fool out of me. And you never said anything to me, ever.”

“I was trying to keep it separate, not interfere.”

“No.” I hold up my hand. “Stop talking. You don’t get to say any more words. I need to think.” But I can’t think. Not now. A new round of people spills out of Ty’s house, hooting. Someone throws someone into the pool. It’s all such a blur I can’t see. Everyone around me is having the best time ever, and meanwhile it’s like I’m not even here, like my feet are not on the ground, like I could just float away. And then it hits me, and I look Sam square in the face. “Shit. You are not my friend.”

“What?” Sam is an emotional kaleidoscope. “I only heard the guys say it a few times . . .” He trails off weakly.

I don’t know what else there is to say. I need to get out of here.

“Find another ride home.” My voice cracks.

Before he can respond, I speed through the house and out the front door, back to the shaky rumble of my car. I need to be alone right now.

No one is going to see me cry.