

***THEY'LL
NEVER
CATCH
US***

JESSICA GOODMAN





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*For Halley—
We'll always be the Goodman girls.*

1

STELLA

I HATE THE way my sister Ellie breathes. She doesn't huff or puff or pant or wheeze. No, Ellie's breath is steady and sure and it never changes. Not when she accelerates around a particularly angled turn. Not even when she sprints the final hundred yards. Her breath is as consistent as the time.

I also hate the way Ellie's ponytail never falls out of place. And that she can run in silence without wanting to crush her own brain with her hands. How can my little sister have so many thoughts she actually wants to think?

Me, on the other hand. I just want to shut everything out. That's why I run. To get away. To be free. I just want to pump my legs faster than anyone else's. To feel the burn deep within my lungs and all throughout my thighs. To win. It doesn't matter where I'm going or which course I'm on or anything. What matters is that my brain stops. Completely. And I can only get there if everything's aligned, if I ascend planes, beat records, and speed, speed, speed.

Only when I'm running can I forget about the little things—how my dark hair is so unruly it can only be tamed with a thick medical-grade elastic, or that time in the ninth grade Julia

Heller found out I didn't have my period and awarded me the nickname Sterile. I can forget that my parents are constantly worried about money and the too-big house. I can forget that Mom is a recovering alcoholic, who is always a few sips away from overthrowing the delicate balance we've found—and that Dad is constantly forcing us to avoid things that might set her off. I can forget why I'm here, how guilt and horror fizzled in my brain when I first heard the sound of bone unlatching. I can even forget the worst thing of all: that Ellie is just as fast as I am—sometimes even faster.

Shit. I'm doing it again. This happens every time I get hooked on this train of thought. I start listing all the things I hate about my sister, and then somewhere along the way the gears in my brain take a sharp turn and I'm reminding myself of everything that's wrong with *me*.

The spiral continues until I remember something Mom once said: *Everyone hates themselves a little. If you get over that, you survive*. Sure, she said it when she was drunk and I was five. But I think it holds up.

I repeat that mantra over and over as I push toward the final eight hundred yards around the track. The sun beats down on my head and I wonder if my scalp can get sunburnt through my mess of coarse curls. Ellie's fine, silky hair wouldn't protect her against *this*.

"Last one, Steckler! You got this!" Coach Reynolds calls from the sidelines. Her voice is faint, but I can still hear it. I love being called Steckler. It never happens back in Edgewater because there are always two of us.

I lean my body into the inner circle of the track as I glide around the last turn. The finish line beckons. My muscles ache. Makes sense, though. I *have* been running nearly a hundred

miles a week. That was what was promised at Breakbridge Elite Track and Field Center. Well, that and anger management courses. But still, I've never slept better. Here, my muscles ache and thrum as I pour myself into bed every night. I don't stay awake reciting my stats or obsessing over the scholarship I lost or listening for gasps in the stands as bodies collide. I just . . . sleep. Is this how I'm supposed to feel? Well rested and happy?

With only a hundred yards to go, I can feel every single lap and every single sprint that have turned my muscles into steel. I've gotten better since June. In the past eight weeks I've seen my times go down like crazy. Sure, I also learned some breathing exercises to help clear my mind and ways to keep me from spiraling with frustration. There's no way Ellie will be able to keep up on the cross country course. A slow smirk crawls across my face as I imagine the fury in my sister's icy blue eyes when I beat her.

This last race isn't really a race at all. I'm just killing time before my parents come to get me. This is my final reminder of everything I've accomplished this summer. My first without Ellie. My first away from Edgewater. I have never felt freer than I do here. Not while running in the woods, or around the lake back home, up by the Ellacoya Mountain Resort. I'm finally, desperately, alone. And I love it.

Here we go. My eyes narrow as the last few yards sneak up on me. I cross them with ease and without ever breaking my pace. I want to keep running. I would, too. If I didn't know Mom and Dad were waiting out front, eager to get home to Ellie, the landscapers, and the home office where they sell real estate to gullible yuppies looking for a second home north of Manhattan, at the foot of the idyllic Catskill mountain range. Or at least where they try to.

They used to have such a hard time closing deals, back when the cold cases were still fresh and the media called our little town Deadwater. In the span of a year, three female cross country stars went missing. Each one was found on the thorny trail up by Oak Tower. All killed in the same way: blunt force trauma, with no signs of sexual assault. They all fought like hell, and our totally incompetent police department never figured out who did it.

But that's in the past now. It's been a decade since anyone went missing. Well, that's if you don't count Shira Tannenbaum, and no one does. Now Edgewater's a place where downstate tourists come to pick our apples, buy our ceramics, and kayak on our lake. Deadwater's just a myth. Something we all lived through but try to forget.

"Steckler, that was your fastest yet." Coach Reynolds skips up to me and wraps her arm around my shoulder. "You're going to crush 'em all back home this year." She flashes a wide, toothy smile, one that I've grown fond of, even though I'm usually not *fond* of much. Her gray-blonde bun flops on top of her head, just above her neon-yellow visor, and her cheeks are flushed and round. She reminds me of Grandma Jane.

"Thanks," I say, barely out of breath.

"Your folks are here."

"I figured."

"Need help gathering your things?"

"Nah," I say. "I'm all packed."

We walk together in silence until the wood cabins come into focus. Behind them are mountains. Dozens of gorgeous, pointy peaks that ascend into the clouds. They're prettier up here, better than the ones back home. Grandeur. Closer to the

heavens. But I'm itching to get going and move on. I want to forget about what happened last year and focus on the cross country season ahead, on winning back my college scholarship. That's my only way out of Edgewater. It's not a *bad* place to live. It's just not the only place.

"There's our Stella!" Mom's cooing voice rings out over the field, echoing into the trees, and my shoulders immediately tense.

"Look at you!" Dad calls. "I swear, you're all muscle these days."

Mom's pretty face turns into a pout and she pushes her dark hair behind her ears. It's long and silky, just like Ellie's. "Sad to leave, sweetie? I know, it's been such a fun summer, such a learning experience." She's right, even though I don't want her to be.

"With the amount we're paying, I should hope so." Dad smiles, but the relaxed feeling in my chest disappears and my face turns a bright shade of crimson as I remember that Coach Reynolds is standing right there.

"I just have to get my bags, then we can head out," I say.

"You don't want to shower before we get in the car? It's a long way home." Mom pinches her perfectly symmetrical nose as if to get the message across loud and clear. *You fucking reek.*

"Nope," I say through clenched teeth. "All good."

"Well, okay," Dad says, nervous. "Shall we, then?"

Everyone nods and we begin walking to the car. "You know, Stella's improved quite a bit this summer," Coach Reynolds says. Mom and Dad look hopeful, like they'd been waiting to hear that I'm still *good*. Good enough to win State again and get back into Georgetown's good graces so I can go to college for free. Coach Gary, back in Edgewater, said if I broke my personal

record—we call it PR for short—by a full minute, they'd *have* to pay attention. They *couldn't* ignore me. He said it during one of his million-decibel screaming tantrums, spit forming at the corners of his mouth. But still. I just have to crush that time by State in November. Until then, everything is up in the air.

2

ELLIE

STELLA'S DUE HOME any minute from Crazy Camp. That's what all our teammates call it in the cross country group chat. Assholes. I told them to shut up earlier in the summer, but it's hard to have Stella's back when she goes and does the kind of shit that gets her sent off to a place like Breakbridge.

I try to push my big sister out of my head and enjoy my last day of freedom before preseason starts. I lean back in the plastic lounge chair and feel the slats dig into my skin. Pop music blares from the speaker next to me and sweat trickles down my stomach.

I clench my core, grateful that a summer of swimming and lifeguarding at Sweetwater Lake helped me keep my abs tight, my muscles lean. But as my mind drifts toward work, it *also* drifts toward Noah Brockston. Sweet, kind, strong Noah. Today was our last day working together, which means it was also the last day we could be *us* until he finally breaks up with Tamara Johnson.

We talked about it last night, during one of our midnight walks, after he pressed a copy of his favorite book, *On the Road*,

into my hands. I didn't have the heart to tell him I read it last year and hated it. Not after I saw what he scrawled on the first page: *For all we are and what we could be*. He signed it *N*. That's what made me bring it up again: *us*.

"I wish things weren't so complicated," I said, grabbing his hand and squeezing it. We were walking the trail up by Oak Tower, the one that's been closed since the murders happened. And by "closed," I mean "now only used by people who don't want to be found." The only thing stopping anyone from getting to the trail is a flimsy chain-link fence that's easy to squeeze through. The moon was bright and lit the overgrown path as we made our way to a clearing. There was a big rock in the center, and a deep pit off to one side. Noah sat down on the rock and motioned for me to slide in next to him. He wrapped his arm around my shoulder and pulled me closer. The stars danced in the sky above and it felt like we were the only people on earth. There's no cell reception on that trail, no laughter floating from another group of hikers. Just silence.

"After everything that happened, I just want to be *normal* with you," I said.

I wasn't sure if he was going to flinch at those words. *Everything that happened*. As if what had transpired between us had been a coincidence, a dumb stroke of luck and not a life-altering event. But he didn't. He just cupped my chin in his hand.

"I know, Ell," Noah said softly, his breath warm on my ear. "You've been through so much." He stroked my hair like he was lulling me to sleep and I nuzzled closer to him, pressing my face into his chest. I wanted to do this every day, in broad daylight, on paths we were allowed to traverse without fear of getting caught or ruining each other's lives. "I have a plan, though," he said. "As soon as Tamara's dad makes the call to

Princeton, I'll end it with her. But if I break up with her before, it'll ruin everything."

My skin prickled at his admission. It was no secret—at least to me—that he was using his perfect girlfriend for her connections at his dream school. I almost felt special that he confided in me. It was like he wanted me to know the worst thing about him, that he was capable of using someone. We all are, though. Most of us just don't admit it. But I didn't understand why he doubted his ability to get into Princeton on his own or why some fancy school in New Jersey was the only option.

I let it lie. I didn't want to push Noah. Not after what happened in August, when everything changed, when things became scary and serious. Since then, I tried to keep him close, cling to him and any sense of normalcy. So instead of picking a fight, I let him change the subject to some William S. Burroughs book he just finished. The boy loves long gibberish-y texts about random white dudes losing their minds. After a while, I stopped listening. My eyelids were heavy and I let my mind drift off toward my own future. Maybe it would exist far away, somewhere in Texas or Florida, Oregon or Ohio, where no one knew there were two Steckler sisters. Where I could just be Steckler, not Baby Steckler. Where "Ellie" wasn't always preceded by "Stella."

Last year, my possibilities seemed endless. But after Stella got herself labeled as *violent* and *unrecrutable*, everything changed. Now that I'm a sophomore, the scouts will start looking, and I have to be the one to win a scholarship, to get that full ride Stella had already secured.

But that's a future problem. A tomorrow problem. A next month problem. Now, here in my backyard, I don't have to think about it.

I drape my T-shirt over my face, blocking the bright, hot sun. If Bethany were still here and not off at her new house in Michigan, she would know what to do. She would have understood. I was always able to talk to her about *anything*. But after she told me I was too *needy* when I actually needed her the most, I think it's safe to say I no longer have a best friend.

Something splashes deep within the pool in front of me and in a split second, I jerk forward, drenched from the blowback.

"Miss me?" Stella bobs to the surface, smiling and treading water. She's wearing an EDGEWATER XC cobalt-blue sports bra and white mesh shorts. Her heart-shaped face cocks to one side, and her dark curly hair is piled high into a messy bun, now dripping wet.

"You asshole," I say, shielding my eyes with my hand. "How's your time?" It's the one thing I know to ask her, the one thing that will cut through the bullshit.

"You'll have to find out tomorrow." Stella grins wickedly and ducks below the surface, spinning around before coming up for air.

"Oh, for fuck's sake, Stell," I say. "You're not going to tell me before preseason?"

"Let's just say I improved."

I lie back against the chair, suddenly anxious. "I knew I should have trained with you this summer."

But we both know I couldn't have, that Mom and Dad could only afford to send one of us to a track camp that doubled as a mental health facility. Just like how we know they can only afford to send one of us to college. The other has to bank on an athletic scholarship, which we thought Stella had in the bag. Now it's up to me.

Stella breaststrokes to the other side of the pool and back

again, swimming in time with the pop song on the speaker. "So what'd I miss in Edgewater? Anything of note?"

I could tell her about Noah, how different I feel now, or the little ball of shame buried deep within my heart. But something holds me back. I know she wouldn't tell anyone else, but it's almost like I don't want to show weakness. Plus, Stella doesn't really care about what happens here. Stella hates Edgewater in the summer, when it quadruples in size thanks to all the down-state yuppies who finally come to fill their summer houses and pretend like they're *country* folk for a few weekends a year. She hates Ellacoya Mountain Resort, the five-star luxury hotel up the road where most of our peers work. But who am I kidding? I hate it, too, now that Noah and I are a *thing*. Tamara Johnson's family own the place.

"You didn't miss shit," I say. "Just a bunch of parties you would have hated. No one practiced much except Raven Tannenbaum. Saw her running the trails by Ellacoya basically every day. But it's not like she's competition. She doesn't even register with the scouts. You know that."

Stella chuckles. "Obviously. That poor girl's got no mental game. Too scared of everything." She bobs up and down in the water. "Any word from Bethany? How's she doing in Michigan?"

I bristle at the mention of my former best friend's name and shake my head. "Dunno. Good, I guess."

Stella doesn't say anything. She never liked Bethany that much anyway. Would probably be thrilled to know that she basically ignored me all summer after moving away.

"What time's practice tomorrow?" I ask.

"Seven."

We're both quiet for a second and I tilt my face up to the

sun and wonder what Stella's thinking. If she's running through drills in her head. It may be *her* junior year, her last chance to shine brighter than anyone else and land that spot at Georgetown once and for all, but I have to fight for myself. If I'm lucky, I'll have a spot guaranteed by the end of the season. That's the goal. That's the dream. Especially after this summer, when I saw what life would be like if I let my future slip away.

"Wanna go for a quickie tonight?" I ask, trying not to sound too desperate. "A few miles up by Ellacoya?"

"Nah," Stella says, flipping onto her back to float in the pool. "Gotta rest up."

I lean back, too, wondering what kind of game Stella is playing and just how much she improved while at Breakbridge. But that's the thing about Stella. She keeps her cards so close to her chest, sometimes I wonder if even *she* knows what she'll play.

3

STELLA

“WELL, IF IT isn’t the Steckler sisters.” Coach Gary crosses his arms over his broad chest and widens his stance. He’s wearing a blue Edgewater hat over his bald head and his legs are bronze, as if he’s been outside every day for the past three months. When a breeze rustles his shorts, I glimpse his pearly white thighs where his tan line makes a hard stop.

“Miss us, Coach?” Ellie teases. But as soon as she says it, her face turns red, like she forgot she was greeting the dude who earned the nickname Coach Scary after he made a whole bunch of freshmen cry last year. But he gets results. And that’s what everyone cares about. That’s what I care about.

“You two? Nah,” he says, playing along. His dark eyes narrow and he tilts his head toward me. “Breakbridge do you right?”

I nod.

“It better have,” he says. “You’ve got a lot to prove this year.” I straighten my spine and don’t look away. “I know.”

He snaps a piece of gum. “Looking forward to seeing what you’ve got.” His eyes move over my shoulder and I turn to follow his gaze toward the bleachers. There, sitting in the front

row, is a small white woman with gray hair and sunglasses, holding a clipboard. She's wearing a polo shirt and hiking shorts. I don't recognize her from the college recruiter lists.

"What school is she from?" I ask, fear building in my stomach. Scouts aren't supposed to come to practices. Hell, we're lucky when they show up to meets.

"Ours," he says, his voice gruff and frustrated. "School board oversight. They just wanted to keep an eye on things after last year."

Ellie lets out a groan.

"Shut it, Baby Steckler," Coach snaps. "I don't have time for this. You're *my* squad. *My* girls. Just have to show 'em I still have a handle on you lot."

Ellie clamps her mouth shut and looks to the ground. Before we can say anything else, we're interrupted by whooping and hollering. I turn to the parking lot to see Tamara Johnson, Raven Tannenbaum, and Julia Heller tumbling out of a rose-gold SUV branded with a bumper sticker for the Ellacoya Mountain Resort. They pose for a selfie in their practice uniforms and break into a fit of laughter about some inside joke we'll never understand. They start to walk toward us and Tamara smiles, her box braids swinging behind her. Raven's pale, freckled arms hang by her sides like ropes and she glances at Tamara, hungry for approval. Julia's straight, dirty-blond hair is gathered into a tight high ponytail that looks like it's pulling at her scalp.

This goddamn threesome. Julia and Tamara have been best friends since kindergarten when the Hellers moved to Edgewater to open another location of their fancy sporting goods chain. They became tight with Raven a few years later, which was a good thing, considering that when her sister

Shira pulled that ridiculous stunt, no one wanted to go anywhere near the Tannenbaums. Well, no one except Tamara and Julia. They stuck by her side. It was pretty nice, I guess. Doesn't make up for the fact that Julia still calls me Sterile and continues to just be a straight-up asshole. She and Tamara aren't *that* fast. Raven, though. She nearly beat me a few times.

Coach ignores them. "Stella, stretching," he commands. "You are co-captain, after all." He flashes a menacing smile and raises his eyebrows. The school board almost took the title away from me last year, after I got suspended. But Coach got the administration to let me stay on as long as there was a co-captain for the girls' squad. It was no surprise the team voted for Tamara.

I jog onto the patch of grass in the middle of the track and stand tall, waiting for the rest of the team to circle up around me. We're fifteen deep this year, counting the few freshmen who are trying out this week, and the group looks good and lithe. It's obvious I'll make it to State, but if these dummies can get it together, we might have a shot at placing as a team, too.

"Hi, Stella," Tamara says, tossing her braids over one shoulder. "Should we give the girls a pep talk?"

"After stretching, maybe," I say. "You can do that part."

She smiles so wide her molars show, then nods to Raven and Julia off to the side. "Circle up, ladies!" she calls.

I hop up and down and drop to the earth as the others follow. "Left leg out," I call and thrust my leg long. My muscles tense and acquiesce, a familiar feeling of strain and release.

"Switch!" I yell.

But when I lift my head to swap my legs, I see everyone has stopped paying attention. Their gaze has shifted. Their heads are turned to the parking lot, where Coach Gary bounces

on the balls of his feet. He taps his clipboard nervously with a pen. A tall girl with high cheekbones stands before him in gray spandex shorts and a black racerback running shirt. An Edgewater-blue bow is tied around her dark, wavy ponytail, which hangs long down her back.

"Who is that?" Tamara asks. She pulls on one of her braids, a nervous tic.

"No clue," Julia says.

"Oh, shit, I know," Raven says softly. Of course she does. Her mom, Mrs. Tannenbaum, is the school secretary, so she knows *everything*.

"Who?" Julia asks.

"That's Mila Keene. I think she moved here over the summer," Raven says.

"Who?" Julia asks again.

My heart sinks. I've heard of Mila. Everyone who is competitive in the greater northeast has. She won the Connecticut State championship last year as a sophomore and was rumored to have been talking to the scouts at Harvard. Their cross country team is a one-way ticket to freedom. Why the hell is she here? And why the hell is she walking toward us?

"I said switch," I call out, suddenly annoyed and flushed. When I bring my left ankle in to my thigh I realize it's shaking.

"Her parents split up," Raven continues, dropping her voice to a whisper. "I think her mom got a job at the hospital, so they moved here from one of those suburbs close to Manhattan. Her dad's back in Connecticut." She bends down over her knee. "At least that's what my mom said."

"Why didn't she just stay there?" Julia asks.

"Who knows?" Raven says softly. She twists the ends of her

red hair around one finger, exposing a swath of freckles trailing down her neck.

"Shh," Tamara says. "They're coming this way."

I look up to see Coach and Mila jogging toward us. He snaps his gum loudly as he lugs Mila's practice bag over his shoulder. She follows behind him, her gait elegant and graceful. Shit, she's wearing silver Nikes—the silver Nikes. Even from here, I can see her initials are embroidered on the flat end of each shoelace. My heart drops. I have that pair, too. All the best high school track stars had them after Nike gifted them to the top five runners in each state last year. I'm furious I didn't wear mine today. Just these dumb practice ASICS. They don't even come with spikes.

Coach Gary clears his throat. "Girls," he bellows. "This is Mila Keene."

The others raise their heads and offer sweet smiles, saccharine and fake. If Mila senses the charade, she doesn't let on. She just stands there grinning, her arms loose and relaxed by her sides. She doesn't fidget or shift her weight from one foot to the other. She's just happy to be here. How, though?

"Hey!" Mila says. She even gives a little wave.

"Mila just moved here from Hadbury, Connecticut, but you girls are smart; you probably already knew that. She will be joining the junior class and our squad. If you don't watch out, she'll kick your ass." Coach looks directly at me and smirks. "Make her feel at home, will ya?"

Heads bob up and down. Raven stands up first and offers Mila her hand. "Welcome to the team!" she says. I have to suppress an eye roll. Raven has always been *nice*, in the same way vanilla ice cream is nice but you'd rather have cookie dough.

Tamara follows suit, and pretty soon, almost all the girls surround Mila, asking her questions and complimenting her Nikes.

But I stay put on the ground. I stick both my legs out in front of me and lower my head to meet my knees, breathing deeply and leaning into the tugging sensation on the backside of my calves.

When I finally lift my head, I squint. The sun is bright, and if we don't get our heart rates up soon, the heat will destroy us.

When the rest of the circle comes into focus, I see only Ellie is left stretching on the ground. She's looking directly at me and our eyes lock in a state of fury.

We're ready for war.

4

ELLIE

EVEN UNDER THE covers, I can hear Stella grunting from her bedroom. Doing squats or push-ups or something that's not required but highly encouraged. I pull a pillow over my face, blocking out the sun, and fumble around for my phone, thumbing through my texts to find the ones Noah sent last night.

Wish I could pick you up and drive you tomorrow, he said. Like a real couple.

A dull ache pounds in my chest and I force myself to remember that he *does* want me. He *does* care for me. We'll be together soon.

Without thinking, I run my pointer finger over the thin red bracelet around my wrist. It's made of just a few pieces of thread braided together and tied in a circle. Noah gave it to me on a rainy day in July when we were stuck inside the lifeguarding shack, waiting out a storm. He retrieved it from his backpack and tied it tightly around my wrist.

"I made it," he said, sheepish. I tried to picture him, brow furrowed in concentration, braiding a friendship bracelet in his spare time. I giggled.

"I love it," I said, turning my wrist around to admire his clumsy work. And I did. It was perfect.

"I want you to look at this when you think I don't care, when you think I've forgotten all about you and that my heart is somewhere else," he said. "Know that I want to be with you."

Before I could say anything he kissed my palm, my fingers, the underside of my arm. Then he pressed his lips to mine, firmly, with intention.

The little bracelet is my only reminder that what I went through this summer was worth it. That we *will* be together in the end, after he gets into Princeton and lets Tamara down easy. I just know that if I try hard enough, I can make this relationship work, even if it means being the other girl for a few months. Otherwise, what was it all for?

I sigh heavily and throw the covers off my bed, knowing that the first day of school is only an hour away. I pull on jean shorts and a white flowy top, and shake out my hair so it falls in waves around my shoulders. I look at myself closely in the mirror and wonder if I've changed as much on the outside as I have on the inside since June. Last year I was so excited to go back to school. I had new notebooks, a fresh haircut, and Bethany. This year, all I have is a secret Noah told me I had to keep and the fear that rises in my throat when I think about sharing it with anyone.

But now I push the thought away and head downstairs to make myself a green juice. Thank god Stella convinced Mom we really did need that four-hundred-dollar monstrosity that pulverizes kale into neon-colored liquid. All she had to do was dangle that scholarship over their heads and they were ready to get her anything she wanted. I have to scream to be heard. Or at least I *had* to, until Stella lost her chance at Georgetown.

Now Mom and Dad are asking more questions about my times, my stats, my chances. It started with a few innocent comments about reaching out to college coaches over the summer, but by the time Mom started grilling me on my PR, I just wanted to curl inside myself and shut them out. Maybe it's easier being out of focus.

The blender shrieks as I throw ginger, celery, half a carrot, and a handful of kale into its bowels. Soon I'm left with a muddy green liquid that tastes like dirt.

"Ready?" Stella appears at the top of the staircase. Her hair is wet and slicked back in a ponytail, and she's wearing an Edgewater tracksuit that makes *swooshing* sounds when she walks. Dork.

"You can't put on something *slightly* cute for the first day of school?" I ask.

There it is. That stare.

"Did you make any for me?" she asks.

I've learned by now. What's Stella's is Stella's and what's mine is also Stella's. I nod and hand her a to-go thermos. She takes it with a grunt and we head out the door into the beat-up navy Subaru Outback Grandma and Grandpa gifted to us when Stella got her license. They shipped it all the way from Arizona, where they moved just before the Dark Years. That's what Dad calls them, when he and Mom were trying to get their lives together, holed up in an Airstream they thought was "cool" over in Bethel.

At first glance, they seemed like everyone else, just trying to get a piece of the mountain-life pie before the yuppies from Brooklyn bought up all the property. But the winter months were long and cold, and the artisanal gin was cheap, since they were friends with all the small-batch providers. They made

money by leading brewery tours, taking tourists around, and schmoozing for tips. It was perfect for them, until Mom got pregnant with Stella and they started fighting about money, and Mom's drinking, and their future, and . . . everything.

That's as much as they would tell me now about that time. I had to learn about the totaled car, the one that carried Stella in the back seat, from an old newspaper clipping. That happened sometime in the fourteen months before I was born.

I don't remember much about the way things were before Mom went to rehab. Only that whenever things got bad, Stella would shut the door to our tiny shared room and read to me from picture books. She'd blast the oldies station from our handheld radio. I didn't know we were on the brink of disaster. But Stella did. And for her, those memories turned into a suit of armor.

When I was four, though, Grandma Jane and Grandpa Hal came in from Sedona to stay with us while they forced Mom into treatment. Dad quit partying, too, and hung around as our grandparents basically taught him how to be a parent—how to steam vegetables for dinner and detangle our hair and sing us to sleep. I blocked out a lot of that, too. All I know is that's when the night terrors started. Sleepwalking out into the yard. Screaming in the dark. Most nights, I'd end up in Stella's bed, curled up next to her as she soothed me back to sleep with her steady breath. Everything else, though, I tried to forget.

Mom came back, tan and refreshed, spouting mantras and dancing around the yard. Dad was lighter, too. More hopeful and focused, in love like we'd never seen. They both got back into Judaism, after shunning their faith for years. Soon we were regulars at the local synagogue, where services featured acoustic guitars and all the rabbis wore tie-dyed tallit.

We attended weekly Hebrew school and studied for our bat mitzvahs. Mom and Dad got their real estate licenses and sold their first million-dollar house within a year. It was clear they were natural salespeople, with faces you wanted to trust. That's what everyone said. There was even a small article about them in the *New York Times* travel section a few years back, about how Edgewater had finally ditched its awful nickname, Deadwater, and was becoming an actual tourist destination.

A TOWN ONCE KNOWN FOR ITS GRUESOME COLD CASES BECOMES A SUMMER HOTSPOT! the headline screamed, pasted just above a slick photo of Mom and Dad laughing in front of a refurbished farmhouse over by Ellacoya.

And yeah, Mom relapsed again when I was in fifth grade, but that was minor. She got through it. And no one knew. We Stecklers keep each other's secrets.

At Grandma Jane's funeral a few years ago, Mom cried desperately at the shiva, rocking back and forth, refusing to eat anything from the platters of deli meat. When I hugged her, she held me so tight I thought my chest might explode.

"She saved you," Mom whispered, her voice warbling. "She saved you."

I thought she meant Grandma Jane, how her mother's presence in our lives was what kept us together as a family during the Dark Years. But Mom's eyes were open wide and when I followed her gaze, I could see she was looking straight at Stella.

"She saved you."

I haven't seen Noah since the night he gave me the book on the Oak Tower trail, and by the time I get to chemistry, our one shared class, my fingertips are buzzing. I'm itching to be

near him, even if I won't be able to feel the heat vibrating off his skin or run my thumb against the fine hairs on the back of his neck. I get there early, just to make sure I can grab a desk in the back so we can share a lab station all year. As the bell rings, he jogs through the door.

My heart stops as his eyes find mine in the classroom, bustling with that first-day-of-school energy. A slow smile spreads across his face and he darts through the rows of desks to slide into the seat next to me. His sandy hair flops down over one eye and he raises his hand to push it back.

"Hey," he whispers as he drags his forefinger down my bare arm. I shiver.

"Hi."

My heart races and I can't stop looking at his round green eyes. Or his taut biceps, which are now just out in the open as he unzips his varsity cross country hoodie. He crosses his arms over his chest and presses his knee against mine beneath the desk. I swear I might faint.

"Missed you," he says.

"Me too. At least I have this," I say, nodding toward my wrist.

Noah's brow furrows and his eyes dart around the room. He leans in toward me. "Yeah, Ell. I was thinking. I don't know if it's such a good idea for you to wear that anymore. Maybe you can just keep it in your pocket or something, you know? What if someone sees?"

My face suddenly feels hot. "What do you mean?" I ask, trying to keep my voice steady. "It's not like it says 'Noah Brockston made this.'"

"You never know. I'm just worried, I guess." Noah looks away and part of me feels for him, knows this is hard. But the other part of me is just plain mad.

I open my mouth to protest, but Noah pouts. "Please, Ell. Just for a little."

I soften. He always has this power over me. "Okay," I say, and untie the string from my wrist. Noah looks relieved as I slip it into the pocket of my shorts.

"Ellie Steckler?" Mr. Darien calls. He's standing at the front of the lab wearing a long white coat. He reminds me of that doctor who saw me sixty miles away in Newburgh, where I knew no one would recognize me. The one who pursed his lips when I told him why I was there. He patted my hand and smiled with his eyes. "It's going to be okay," he said as I wiped tears from my cheeks. It was only a few weeks ago, but it feels like years.

"Here," I call, masking the tightness in my throat.

For the next forty minutes I try to listen to whatever Mr. Darien is droning on about, but with Noah's knee suctioned so firmly against mine, it's hard to think about anything. When the bell rings, it's like a spell has been broken.

Noah turns to me as he quickly packs up his bag. "I gotta hit Coach's office, but I'll catch you at lunch, okay?"

"Okay," I say. I don't mention Tamara or how she'll be there, too. I let myself pretend that we're a real couple, a normal couple.

"Bye, babe." Before he stands, he wraps his palm around my thigh and squeezes. I clench my body to remember this feeling.

"Bye," I whisper as he walks out the door.

When I get to the cafeteria, the cross country table has already assembled toward the back of the room. Last year, I hadn't earned a spot at the main table, even though I was the only freshman to make varsity. Now that I've come in the top ten at State and proved myself independent of Stella, *thankyouverymuch*, one of those seats is mine. And now that

Noah's the captain of the boys' team, maybe he'll plop down next to me. Maybe.

"Yo, Baby Steckler. Think fast!" I drop my tray to the table and open my arms to receive something damp and heavy.

"What the hell is this, Bader?" I hold up the ball of fabric and try to shake it out.

"My sweaty boxers," says Todd Bader. He's one of Noah's best friends, but he's still just a dumb jock, dopey and boob-obsessed. Lucky for him, he's blessed with thick golden surfer hair, perfect teeth, and a six-pack that he shows off a little too often at practice. Too bad he's a total dick.

"Ugh, fucking gross," I spit, and toss them to the floor. "Who has hand sanitizer?"

Raven Tannenbaum throws up her fist, which is wrapped around a small plastic bottle. "He did it to all of us," she says. Raven flips Bader off across the table and he responds by turning two fingers into a V and wiggling his tongue between them. "Ugh, gross," Raven says, shuddering. "Wanna sit, Ellie?"

Despite Raven's basicness, I have to applaud her for how nice she is. Stella calls her *vanilla*, the ultimate diss, but she was always sweet to me in Hebrew school. Plus, she trains hard as hell.

Honestly, though, it kind of sucks to be Raven. Her older sister Shira was an Edgewater golden girl until she ran away a few years ago. The police spent all their resources looking for her, canvassing every trail for miles. Everyone thought she was another murder victim, and that whoever turned Edgewater into Deadwater had finally come back. We were in middle school then and the whole town went under lockdown. No bike rides or walks to the diner. No jogs around the lake. We weren't allowed to be alone anymore—well, *the girls* weren't allowed to

be alone anymore. The boys could do whatever they wanted.

But a month after she went missing, Shira came back with some older dude who ran the goat-milk yogurt stand at the farmers market. She was wearing a ring and made some apologetic statement about how they had gone to Atlantic City to get married since she had just turned eighteen and knew her parents wouldn't approve. She said she just needed a break from everything. From SAT prep, cross country meets, and her parents' demands to get into a good college. No one forgave her, though. How could they? The whole town was *pissed* the police department had spent so much time and money looking for her—and that she had turned Edgewater into a news story again, a haunted town that drove away tourists and homeowners and attracted killers.

Shira moved to Philadelphia after that, leaving all the drama behind, and her parents split up, unable to deal with the media attention or the stress. Raven and her mom had to move from their fancy farmhouse to a one-bedroom cottage by the pizza place. No one's heard from her dad since then. Raven stopped going to track camp that summer and started wearing cheap running clothes from the secondhand store in town instead of Julia's parents' shop. Even though Tamara and Julia stuck by her side, everyone talked shit behind her back for a while. It's been five years and Raven never mentions that time. At least not to me.

Now Raven looks at me expectantly. "This seat's open," she says, motioning beside her.

"Thanks," I say. "But I gotta save room for Stella." She turns back to her turkey sandwich. A wilted piece of lettuce hangs over one side.

I make my way around the long rectangular table and find

a seat at the end, where Stella will be able to fit. But when I see who's already sitting there, I groan.

"Mila Keene." Her name comes out of my mouth like a statement, not a greeting.

She looks up at me with wide eyes.

"Uh, hey. I'm Ellie Steckler," I say, like a normal person. "Sophomore on the team. Didn't get to say hi at practice."

Mila's face brightens into a warm grin as she unwraps her lunch. "Nice to meet you. I just moved here."

I bite back the words *I know* just as Stella shows up. "Ell, we have to remember to pick up more heating—" She stops when she sees Mila. "Oh," she says. "Hi."

"Hi!" Mila says. But her smile disappears when she sees Stella scowling. "I can go if this is your seat."

I roll my eyes. "No way. Scoot down, we'll all fit."

I can feel Stella seething, like she wants to drag her nails down my skin, hoping to draw blood. She's done it before. And so have I. But let's be real. This girl's new and has no friends. We can at least be nice to her during lunch.

"So, when did you get to town?" I ask.

"Last week," Mila says. She takes a bite out of what looks like an expertly wrapped burrito and chews slowly.

Stella grunts beside me. "Drama back home?"

I kick her under the table. Seventeen years old, and this idiot will never learn any social skills. But Mila just laughs.

"You could say that. Fights with Dad. Mom and I chose each other. They're getting a divorce, blah blah blah, same old sad story. Boring, huh?" She takes another bite.

"I'm basically falling asleep," I say.

Mila swallows and laughs again, a deep hearty one that's actually nice to hear.

Stella is silent next to us, save for the obnoxious crunching sound she makes snapping baby carrots between her teeth.

"What do you think of Edgewater so far?" I ask.

"It's okay," she says, looking around the cafeteria. "Everyone seems pretty nice, but it's a little creepy, I guess."

"Ah, so you've heard about the cold cases." I pop a grape in my mouth.

She nods. "When I told people we were moving here, that was the first thing everyone brought up." Mila pauses and looks at me, curious. "Do you ever worry the killer will come back?"

I shrug. "Honestly, no one really brings it up." I lean in toward her. "We try not to mention the murders around Raven Tannenbaum. Her sister went missing a few years after the last murder and everyone thought she was another victim. It was a whole *thing*."

Mila raises her eyebrows in surprise. "Weird. But things are okay now?"

"Seems that way," I say. "Right, Stell?"

But Stella's looking right past me. She pushes her chair back and stands. "Noah." Her voice is gruff and loud when she says his name, so unlike how it sounds when I roll the letters around in my mouth. She turns it into noise.

Noah walks to us and stands directly behind my chair so I can feel his heat. I want to tackle him right here in the caf.

"Hey, Stella," he says, a little annoyed, like talking to my sister is a chore.

"We need to talk about the Fall Cross Country Formal," she says.

Noah wraps his hand around the back of my chair and I so desperately want to place my fingers on top of his. I sit on them to stop myself.

"Coach already reserved the gym and the caterer," Noah says. "Tamara is on decorations. We just have to figure out the program."

Stella crosses her arms. "Fine. Tomorrow? First period? I have study hall."

"Yes, ma'am," Noah says, doing a military salute. "Whatever the great Stella Steckler wants." Bader and some of the other guys laugh and I force myself not to join in. Noah may be a little bro-y in public, but, ugh, it's kind of endearing.

"Are you talking about the formal?" Tamara asks, appearing next to Noah. "The customized banners just arrived this morning."

"That's right, babe," Noah says. "You're so good at this stuff." He flashes her a wide, toothy smile and my insides curdle as he leans in to plant a wet kiss on her cheek, and then her lips. She rests a hand on his chest and I try not to leap from my chair and yank them apart as they shove their tongues down each other's throats.

I turn back to my lunch and make a mental note to ask Noah to please not make out with his fucking girlfriend in front of me anymore, though I know it's no use. Noah Brockston will do whatever he wants. But most of the time what he wants is me.

The doorbell rings just after dinner, when I'm icing my knee on the couch in front of a brand-new episode of *The Bachelor*. Praise be this dumbass show for making me forget how Noah barely looked at me during lunch and that I don't even have anyone to complain about it to now that Bethany's on my do-not-call list, population: one. I'm also zoning out to try and take my mind off the fact that I came down too hard during

jump squats at practice and my knee is killing me. Coach Gary even winced while barking out orders. He didn't let me stop, of course, but I could tell he noticed.

"Who is that?" Mom yells from her office. "Ellie, can you get it?"

I heave myself off the couch and drop my dripping ice pack into the sink. By the time I hobble to the door, Stella is already there. "Move, I'll get it," she says.

"Sure, your highness," I mumble.

She reaches for the handle and throws back the door. "Coach Gary," Stella says like she's been expecting him.

"Ah, there she is," he says, arms outstretched. He's wearing the same neon tracksuit he had on at practice and looks like he's spent the past few hours holed up in his office, watching tapes and writing down drills.

Mom basically sprints into the foyer. "Coach! To what do we owe the honor?" She clasps her hands together like he's the rabbi coming over for Yom Kippur break fast. "Can I get you something? Water? Seltzer?"

Coach throws up his hands. "The most hospitable home in all of Edgewater. No, no, I'm fine. I won't be long. I just wanted to talk to Stella about the team. Mind if we post up here?" He motions to the stools at the breakfast bar.

"Not at all!" she practically shrieks. No one asks why this conversation couldn't happen at school or why Coach Gary makes unannounced house calls. But then again, no one questions him. After all, he's brought the team to State all five years since he's been here. His girls—and we're always called *his girls*—have placed every time. People credit him for keeping the program on track, keeping us safe.

But now, after Stella's incident with Allison Tarley, he's on

thin ice. Why else would the school board have assigned someone to watch over practice?

Stella and Coach settle into their chairs and I hang around just in case I'm part of the conversation. But then he turns to me. "Give us a sec, Ell, okay?"

I slink back to the living room, but I can still hear them thanks to our home's open-concept plan Mom loves so much. *Assholes.*

Coach waits until he thinks I'm out of earshot to continue. He's one of the only people who knows—or at least *thinks* he knows—how to get through to Stella. But he's a pusher, and a yeller, and what works with my big sister often breaks everyone else. "Listen, Stell. We're both on the chopping block this year," he says. "They're watching us—the school board—making sure we *both* stay in line."

My shoulders tense and I suspect Stella's do, too. That's supposed to be behind us now. Coach promised. I want to ask him what that really means.

"You've got to behave," he says. "And with Mila being here, I'm not going to pretend that your number one spot is safe, that you're guaranteed anything," he says.

Stella kicks against the stool and I can feel her fury from here. He's riling her up, making her question herself, making her doubt her abilities, her strength. I've seen him do it a million times before. But usually to Raven or the others who don't have Stella's grit.

"You've got to be ready to challenge Mila. Her being here is a good thing, you know."

Stella groans, unconvinced.

"You're going to learn how to push each other, to use your skills to make each other better. You might learn a few things

from her, too, like how to control yourself, to channel that fire." He grows serious. "Stella, you have to remember this is a *team* sport. I can bring this squad to State with or without you, but I'd rather do it with you. You just need to show the scouts you know how to be sportsmanlike and that you won't crack under pressure. Can you handle it?"

"Of course," Stella says in her clipped voice. She sounds pissed, rage curling inside her.

"I know you can," he says. "I see that in you."

I force myself not to turn around and look at their faces, but my heart starts pounding.

"I just don't know why you didn't tell me that she was coming to town. I was caught off guard," Stella says.

Coach laughs and claps Stella on the back. "But wasn't it more fun this way?"

"No," Stella says.

"Come on. You always perform better when you're on your toes."

"I don't like surprises," she says. "You know that. It messes with my brain."

My eyebrows shoot up in surprise. Stella never would have admitted that last year. Maybe Breakbridge really did work some magic.

"Well, you're going to have to learn to deal with it," he says. "Plus, you also have Ellie hot on your tail." My skin burns at the mention of my name. "You can't discount her. She's a fighter and she's got talent. She's hungry, I can feel it."

Stella doesn't say anything. A mixture of pride and fear swells in my stomach. All this will do is fuel Stella. Thicken the lines between us. Coach knows that.

"You know you can win regionals, maybe even State on

your own. But don't you want a team title, too? Mila can help with that. Ellie, too. You can show the scouts that you can be on a team. College coaches value that."

Stella pauses and I can just barely hear her cautious breathing. "Sure," she says.

"Your head needs to be in the game."

"My head is *always* in the game unless you do something to throw me off."

"Stella," Coach barks, his voice hard and sharp. I flinch like I'm bracing for impact. But then their voices drop and all I can hear is murmuring and the scratching of stools against the floor. Suddenly, Coach is towering over me on the couch, arms crossed over his barrel chest. "G'night, Ell. See you tomorrow."

"Night, Coach," I say. The door shuts and Stella comes back into the living room. "What was that about?" I ask, playing dumb.

But Stella busies herself fluffing pillows like she's Mom or some bullshit. "Nothing," she says. "You wouldn't get it."

"Wouldn't get what?"

Stella throws the pillow down with a violent thud and her fingers dig into the side of the couch. "I said, nothing." Her eyes are dark and for a second I see a flash of something scary. Something I thought was in the past. "Just forget it, okay?"

"Fine."

Stella heads to the stairs and I can hear her footsteps stomping overhead as she moves around her room.

I sink further into the couch and flex my leg. It's all red and tight, like a piece of raw meat. It's only then that I realize Coach didn't even ask about my knee.

5

STELLA

I FUCKING HATE parties. The dark lighting, the over-excited music, the nervous energy pulsing through the air. And it's not just because there are so few other people like me in Edgewater. It's just so sad, like these people have nothing better to do, no goals to achieve, other than to get fucked up and grind on each other. Pathetic. The only one I can stomach—well, have to stomach, since I agreed to plan it—is the annual Fall Cross Country Formal.

"You're wearing that?" Ellie asks, leaning up against my doorframe. Obviously she looks amazing, with her shiny, bouncy hair and off-the-shoulder royal blue dress. She's even put on some sort of lip stuff. It glistens.

I look down at my own getup. A simple black sheath. It hangs off me like a sack. "This is the *team* formal, not the Oscars."

Ellie rolls her eyes. "So?"

I pull my hair up into a high ballerina bun. Whatever.

"Let's go." I brush past her and call to Mom and Dad. "We're gonna be late!"

They scurry behind us, Mom in a sleek navy cocktail dress and Dad in a dark suit. It's basically black tie for Edgewater.

"I heard the Keene girl and her mother are renting over by the farming museum," Mom says once we're on the road.

Ellie groans. "Please do not use tonight to try and upsell someone a house." She doesn't mention that Dad always calls the homes over there "fixer-uppers no one wants to fix."

"I never said I was going to do anything!" Mom whines, getting all defensive.

"No networking," I say harshly. Mom and Dad exchange a look in the front seats and I can't tell if that means they'll abide or just do it behind our backs. They can be *so* annoying. And pushy. And gross.

I try to cut them slack like Ellie does, but it's almost impossible. When they do something—anything—that reminds me of the Dark Years, it's like my brain short-circuits and I'm five years old again, shielding Ellie from the clanking of Mom's empty bottles and Dad's frantic gaze. We were living in the Airstream then, and I can still remember every inch of it. Before we were born they had hung up dumb hippie art, posters of the Grateful Dead and Woodstock memorabilia. Even when Grandma and Grandpa shipped Mom off to rehab, we kept everything, living among the incense holders and the beaded curtains. Ellie walked into them every time she sleepwalked and the noise would wake me. That sound will always remind me of pulling my little sister back to bed, soothing her with head pats and back rubs—of waiting to see if Mom would come back alive, if they could turn into the parents we always wanted.

When Mom did return, Ellie helped Dad make cut-out cards and paper chains. She welcomed Mom with tight hugs and neck nuzzles. She told Mom to never leave her again. But I was cautious. Distrustful.

Ellie was too young to understand why Mom left or what it

was like before. She only got the good stuff. The after. The determined, hardworking duo who busted their asses to get their real estate licenses. The parents who worked together as a team to build something, to move us from a home that reminded me of aluminum foil to their favorite house on the market.

She was proud of them and what they accomplished. She wasn't even that upset when Mom relapsed. She trusted Mom would get better, like the last time. I didn't, though. Now it's always in the back of my mind. The fact that Mom's always teetering on the edge of destruction and we're the ones waiting to deal with the fallout.

That's what I kept thinking about when I came out last year. I sat both of my parents down and read a letter I had written, like I saw on YouTube, fear and unease churning in my stomach. But when I reached the end of the page and lifted my gaze, I was expecting one of the classic reactions I read about on an LGBTQ+ resource website—something resembling disappointment or rage, surprise or excitement. I was worried my admission would send Mom into a tailspin, our family into turmoil. But instead, they both just smiled pleasantly, unfazed.

"Oh, Stell, is that all?" Mom asked.

"Uh, yeah," I said.

"I think what your mom is trying to say is that to us, it's just not that big of a deal," Dad said, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees. "We love you unconditionally."

Mom nodded beside him, but looked a bit distracted, like she wanted to check her phone or prepare for another open house.

"Oh," I said, my heart deflating. "Okay." Suddenly, I wanted the conversation to end. I knew I should have felt things like relief or joy. But the whole encounter was just so underwhelming. I was glad I had done it. It was a good thing. I knew that

in my bones. But nothing changed between us. We all just continued on with our lives.

Yeah, they were happy when I told them I joined the LGBTQ+ alliance at school, but it wasn't like I was going to confide in them that it felt like I was being stabbed when I was crushing on Lilly Adams and saw her making out with Jade Kensington at practice. I just kept moving about the world, my queer heart another thing that made me whole, and my mind focused on the one thing that could propel me forward: winning.

I press my forehead against the car window and fog the window with my breath. As soon as we pull into the high school parking lot, I pop open the door. "Gotta find Coach and Noah," I call over my shoulder. Even though Noah is completely useless, Coach has always told me that people feel more included when they're . . . uh, included. So I've been trying to make an effort. Doesn't help that I constantly want to punch his face. Or that he looks at Ellie like she's an ice-cream sundae, even though he's basically married to Tamara. Gross.

I walk through the dark hallways toward the gym until I see a light illuminating Coach's office doorway. It's my first time back here since the spring, when I was summoned by Principal Pérez. It smells the same as it did then, like sweat and Lysol. I have to stop to catch my breath for a second.

I thought things had settled down then, that Pérez, Coach, and I were just going to talk about logistics, like assigning booster club roles and fall training schedules. But when I arrived and dropped into the metal chair, Pérez's face was stern, her mouth a straight line.

"Stella, this is serious," she had said. Her dark shoulder-length hair was flecked with gray and she pushed a pair of

reading glasses up on her forehead. She had come to Edgewater High after Shira Tannenbaum disappeared. Apparently the school board organized a statewide search to find a principal who could help raise fundraising numbers, increase safety, and send students off to college at an above-average rate. They were determined to make Edgewater a happy place. A safe place. A place that didn't make you think of dead girls.

The superintendent found her in Westchester County, where she had been the principal at some snooty suburban high school for fifteen years. Her district was number one in the state. Mom told me Pérez wanted to move to Edgewater because she liked a challenge. She's the one who recruited Coach Gary to revamp the cross country program *and* persuaded the town council to expand the education budget. She even organized fully funded trips to Mexico City, where her parents were born and her brother works as a curator at the big anthropology museum. In a matter of two years, Principal Pérez was 100 percent beloved.

"Lauren," Coach said. "What are you really worried about here? Stella intentionally breaking someone's neck? She's a *kid*, not a monster. This whole Allison Tarley thing was an accident." His bald head was shiny under the fluorescent light and he gave me a soft smile. *I'm on your side.*

Pérez ignored him, and turned to me. "Stella, there's no easy way to say this. You are a liability. Keeping you here on the team is a risk for all of us."

My tongue became heavy and I swallowed the venom building in my throat.

"But you are also our best chance at winning State next year. And we *have* to win."

Coach let out a puff of air, relieved.

"Cross country is the only team we have that can bring in the PTA money we need to keep this school as the best in the county," Pérez said. "You saw what happened to Tremont a few years back when that new coach ran their football team into the ground. Numbers plummeted. They lost their IB program. College matriculation declined. Families *moved*." She fiddled with the gold wedding band on her ring finger. Her nails were freshly painted, pink and shiny. "All I'm saying is if you fly off the handle again, I'll have no choice but to remove you from the team. And I really don't want to do that."

I nodded. It was the only motion I could make.

"But before that, we need to show the community that you've *changed*, that you've put in the *work*." Pérez reached down into her slick leather briefcase and pulled out a brochure for Breakbridge. She handed it to me. The paper was thick and glossy, heavy to the touch.

"What is this?" I asked, my voice scratchy.

"Where you'll be spending the summer," she said. "It's a track camp that focuses on anger management. Group therapy three times a week. A personalized counselor attuned to your needs. Plus, there's a grueling training program."

I flipped through the pages. It didn't sound so bad. In fact, it was kind of perfect. Until I got to the final page, where a bunch of numbers smacked me right in the face.

"I don't think we can afford this," I said softly, heat creeping into my cheeks.

Pérez and Coach exchanged a look.

"We've spoken to your parents," Coach said. "You're going."

My heart raced, thinking about how much this would cost them, how much I had already cost the whole family. "Okay," I said, and looked at Coach, then Pérez. I had no other options.

"You're good, Stella, but you're not untouchable. No one is," Pérez said. She stood then, and left the room, her yellow linen dress swishing around her calves.

Now, right outside Coach's office, I can still feel the warm air from last spring, how it was heavy and hot as I tried to figure out what it all meant. But I made it through. I survived. It's time to get back to work, to get to State, to show them all who I *still* am.

I knock on the door and push it open with my knuckle. "Ready, Coach?"

He looks up expectantly from behind his desk, a stack of papers in his hand. "Stella!" He smooths his tie over his crisp white button-down. "Let's do this."

Together we walk to the gym. My hands shake as I throw open the door, and when I actually see inside, I'm blinded by school spirit.

It barely looks like a gym, with round tables set up at odd angles, plastic folding chairs tucked under them. Each table is covered in a blue or white plastic tablecloth, decorated with big balloon centerpieces. The lights are low and Tamara's customized banners hang from the walls. Members of the team and their families mill about, breaking off hunks of cheese from a mountainous appetizer board and plucking roasted artichokes from an antipasto platter. The soccer formal consisted of take-out pizza and grocery store cupcakes. No surprise, though. Neither the men's nor women's team had won anything in decades. But we're different. We win. We earn this farm-to-table catered dinner for sixty people. I turn away from everyone to the front of the room, where a small podium and microphone are set up.

"Queen Stella, we're at your service," Noah says, approaching with Tamara. He takes a bow.

Tamara rolls her eyes at him and tosses her braids behind her back. "Dork," she says, and runs her hands over her lilac dress, which flares out around her hips. She turns to me. "Ready for this?"

"Obviously." I must say it harshly because she takes a step back.

"Hey, hey. Be nice," Noah says. "We're all captains. Let's just not make a scene."

Before I can respond, Coach comes up behind us and slaps my and Noah's shoulders with his palms. It's warm and sweaty on my bare skin. All I want to do is pry him off.

"Ready, guys? My A-team. My captains. Shall we begin?"

"You know it, Coach," Noah says.

"Suck-up," I whisper as we walk to the mic.

He smirks in my direction and strides toward the mic so he gets there before I do, forcing me to stand next to him like a sidekick. As soon as people see Noah at the podium, with his broad shoulders stretching the seams of his collared shirt, the room goes quiet. People tiptoe to their seats. Respect. That's what Noah has. Must be nice.

I scan the room and find Ellie, Mom, and Dad sitting just off-center. An empty seat waits for me next to Ellie. But then I see who else they're with. Mila. She's wearing a simple sleeveless red dress, laughing with Ellie like they already share inside jokes. I don't know why Ellie doesn't get it. You're not supposed to befriend your competition. Keeping them at arm's length is the only way to win.

I clench my fists and only realize I'm staring when Mila offers her hand up in a little wave. Her mouth is stretched into a smile. I avert my eyes and turn my attention to Noah, who's

probably been fucking up this whole speech while I wasn't paying attention. Great.

"And that's why this year will be the best we've ever had!" he screams into the mic. The boys erupt in cheers, hoots, and hollers. They pound their fists into the air and their parents clap, thrilled at their male displays of aggression. Nobody wants to see that from the girls.

"Now you get to hear from Edgewater's favorite fighter . . . Stella Steckler," Noah says. My skin grows hot but I can't let my fury show. Not toward Noah. Everyone knows what he's insinuating with the word *fighter*, but that doesn't mean I have to acknowledge it.

I nudge him out of the way and take my place in front of the microphone. I know I should try to savor this moment. I'm finally the captain, even though I'm only a junior. But it feels hollow, like no one really wants to listen to me, like I shouldn't be up here. At one point I thought I earned this title. I toiled away, running drills and lifting weights until I became the best. But now I just see people who roll their eyes when I call out stretches during practice. Ellie's the only one I can count on—and only sometimes.

"Welcome," I say into the mic, ignoring the low chatter in the back of the room. "I just want to welcome Mila Keene to the team." I grit my teeth as I motion to Mila sitting with her mom. "Coming from a great squad in Connecticut, she's sure to be an asset and we're glad to have her." Mila pushes her chair back and stands, turning and smiling at the room.

A titter of applause breaks out and Coach nods approvingly.

"We have a lot to accomplish this year," I say. "Our first meet is next week and we have so much to do before then." I

spot Raven and Julia just in time for them to exchange a knowing glance. "So let's have fun tonight and get ready to put in the work."

Tamara leans in and pulls the mic toward her. "Emphasis on the *fun*, right, guys?" The tables erupt in cheers and claps and I slink back, letting her take center stage.

"See you all at the after-party!" she yells. "Cross country forever!"

The crowd keeps cheering and I want to melt into my too-tight heels as I rush back to my seat. Ellie barely looks up when I drop next to her. She's deep in conversation with Mila, laughing and talking closely over a basket of dinner rolls.

"Give a shit much?" I whisper.

"Sorry," she mumbles, turning to me. "You were great."

I pull my napkin to my lap and turn away.

"Let's go to the party this year," she says. "I want to."

"So go," I say. Famously, I refused to drive her and Bethany last year and she pouted for a whole week, miserable that she missed out on a bunch of Jell-O shots and some unsavory time in a hot tub filled with germs.

Mila, who's sitting on Ellie's other side, leans over. "Are you talking about the party?"

Ellie nods. "Want to go? I'm dying to."

"Sure," Mila says a bit too enthusiastically.

Ellie glares at me and then smiles at Mila. "Cool."

"I can drive if you want," Mila says.

Ellie's eyes light up and she nods with actual happiness.

"Great," Mila says, and pops a piece of buttered roll into her mouth.