

SUMMER SKIN

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FEIWEL AND FRIENDS
NEW YORK

A FEIWEL AND FRIENDS BOOK

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For Jeanette

1.

I Go Over

Jess Gordon reached the third story of Gallagher Wing and paused for a breath on the landing, taking the opportunity to tie the laces on her high-tops and pull up her tube socks. She only knew it was Gallagher Wing because a smug gold plaque near the bottom of the stairwell had told her so. It was typical of Knights' pretensions. At Unity, Jess's residential college, they didn't have wings; they had blocks. Knights had been built using bricks and sandstone and something indefinable that suggested learning and Latin mottoes, while Unity was constructed from concrete and steel, with the unfortunate appearance of a jail. Unity was coed; Knights was all male. Just act like you're meant to be there, Jess had been told—advice that completely ignored the fact it was technically impossible without a penis.

Jess wondered if Leanne, giver of said sage advice, was having better luck. Then she forgot about it, hit by an upwelling of nausea that made her clamp a hand over her mouth. There, a wooden door with a glass insert—that had to be it. She pushed inside,

hoping for a bathroom. She was in luck. The place appeared to be empty, thank God, providing sweet relief from Brisbane's swampy heat, although it smelled faintly of ammonia and urinal cakes.

Jess made it to the nearest stall, slamming the door shut before a series of convulsions squeezed out the contents of her stomach in layers: a gush of water, more water, frothy spit and, finally, teeth-stripping, neon-yellow bile.

"Okay," she breathed to no one in particular, wiping her mouth on her T-shirt. Feeling weak and spent, she leaned back against the stall door, vowing to never drink again—and she meant it this time—absentmindedly patting down the front pockets of her denim cutoffs. But she'd forgotten her Zippo lighter. Damn. Her palm itched for it.

Then someone shuffled their way inside, and Jess froze. She turned her head, listening to the footsteps pass the toilet area. Much closer there was a sudden blare of synthesized music that made her jump. Ella Thompson's voice wailed through the space, echoing off the tiles, and Jess ripped her phone from her back pocket.

It was Brendan. She hit "ignore," cutting off the ringtone abruptly.

For a moment there was only silence, as though the other person had stopped to listen, then the footsteps resumed. A door swung shut and Jess exhaled, switching her phone to vibrate before the message notification came through. Because she knew Brendan would leave one. She wished she'd stayed calm and let his call ring out instead of cutting it off—Brendan would read all sorts of shit into that. But then she remembered that Brendan and his paranoia were not her problem anymore, and she experienced a brief, floaty feeling of euphoria strong enough to propel her from the stall as soon as she heard the splash of a shower starting.

Emboldened, Jess visited the sinks before she left, washing her hands and rinsing her mouth out, forcing herself to drink a few

mouthfuls of water. So thirsty—she hadn't been able to hold anything down all morning. This time she'd try the little-and-often approach. She patted some water on her face and rubbed viciously at the mascara smears beneath her eyes. Normally, she was okay with how she looked. Her face was a little too long and thin perhaps, but a few freckles and her slightly crooked, once-broken nose gave her something like character, while her shiny hazel eyes and smile made people notice her. But right then Jess couldn't find anything redeeming about her appearance. Her eyes were bloodshot; her smile was MIA; she officially looked like shit. On top of that, she smelled like a nightclub: beer, cheap wine, and tequila, so help her God, steaming through her pores; her hair a stale, smoky curtain. The only upside was she looked the part for the walk of shame, a plausible enough excuse for being at Knights—if you could call that an upside.

Jess left the bathroom and started down a long, gloomily lit hallway. Each time she came to a door she tried the handle. Locked, all of them locked, which probably meant the rooms were vacant. The returning student body wouldn't arrive until later that afternoon. Right then, the residential college's only inhabitants were its freshman intake and its student council. Jess was hunting for a room belonging to a member of the council. There were fifteen of them, and something like two hundred and eighty rooms in the college, so the odds weren't great. The good news, though, was that for the next hour or so she could safely assume council members were not in residence, preoccupied with hosting a ceremonial lunch.

"Leaving Home" was blasting out of an open door at the far end of the hallway. God, what was it with that song? Did they put explicit instructions in the orientation week handbook? *Thou must playest Jebediah at all times*. It had been the same at the beginning of last year, when Jess's peers at Unity had pumped it out of their rooms day and night; never mind that most of them had been

in diapers when the song was first released; never mind that playing it when they had literally just left home was possibly, just maybe, being too literal.

Jess paused long enough to tap out a text to Leanne—**U found one??? So over this!!!**—then continued on, trying doors without success. By the time she'd reached the “Leaving Home” room, she'd decided on a more direct strategy.

“Hi. I was wondering if you could . . .” Jess's voice trailed off as she took in the state of the room, noticing the lump under the sheets on the bed—probably human. The stale smell of morning after enveloped her: a fog of booze, cigarette smoke, body odor, stinky beer farts, and musty mouth. Whoever he was, this guy was in a worse way than her. The thought gave Jess an odd sense of comradeship. Clothes littered the floor, and there was a collection of empty beer bottles on the desk, along with an open pizza box displaying a pile of crusts. “Leaving Home” finished, only to start up again. It was on repeat. The place was hell.

Jess spotted an MP3 player docked on the shelf above the desk, and she killed the song. Then she opened the window in another act of mercy. To do it, she had to step around a couple of traffic cones and a road sign that had become a self-fulfilling prophecy—HAZARD AHEAD—and she wondered why Brisbane City Council never seemed to figure out that roadwork equipment shouldn't be left unattended in the suburbs of St. Lucia, Toowong, and Indooroopilly. Running shoes and turf boots were clumped in the corner of the room, leaking dirt. Knights College was big on the perfect male specimen; there was a definite preference for athletic types, especially ones proficient in the rah-rah sports: rugby and rowing.

Jess noticed the lump's schedule pinned to the corkboard over the desk and peered at it closely. He was doing some kind of engineering, and all the subject numbers started with one, so he was a freshman. He wouldn't have what she needed—at least, not yet.

Her phone started to vibrate. She checked the screen, hoping for a text from Leanne saying she'd scored and they could go home. Instead, it was another call from Brendan. Jess felt her empty stomach hollow further. She let it ring out this time, putting the buzzing phone down on the desk. The phone finally stopped, only to start up again, and, just for something different, it was Brendan. Jess gave the screen the double bird and a silent scream of agony: *Fuck off!*

At that point, a groan startled her. Pocketing her phone, Jess turned to see the lump move. She'd forgotten about him. The sheet was thrown back to reveal red hair and a flushed face, eyes screwed up against the light.

"Zat you, Griggsy?" he croaked in a hoarse voice. The guy needed water. A lot of it.

"Yep," said Jess.

"What time is it?"

"Nighttime. Go back to sleep."

The guy snuggled into his pillow, making loud smacking noises with his mouth, and a moment later he started to snore.

"Wait a minute," Jess said. The snoring caught and then stopped, so presumably she had his attention. "Do any of the student council guys live on this floor?"

"Mmm . . . tat dowine."

"Tatooine? It's not *Star Wars*. Hey, I asked you a question."

With effort, the redhead dragged himself out of sleep, squinting at her. "Who are you?"

"Not Griggsy. Look, I'm trying to find the student council guy. You know, the one in this block."

"Wing."

"What?"

"Do you mean Jarrod Keith? Because he's . . . he's not, um . . ." The redhead's voice trailed away, and his eyelids flickered closed.

“Wake up,” Jess hissed, poking him in the shoulder. “Where’s Jarrod Keith’s room?”

The redhead groaned. “First floor.”

“What room number? Come on, help me out here.”

“Dunno,” the guy mumbled. He added something unintelligible and toppled back into sleep.

Jess left, closing the door behind her. On the landing, she stopped dead, assaulted by the sudden glare and cicadas that sounded like summer chainsaws. Her phone started vibrating as if in response. As Jess squinted at the screen, she felt the beginnings of a headache, and she wondered which part of her not answering Brendan had trouble processing. She turned the thing off. First floor, Jarrod Keith. If that yielded nothing, she was done, she decided, starting down the stairs.

As she was passing the second floor, Jess became aware of voices below her. She rounded the landing and slowed. Five Knights boys were coming up the steps in a clump, as though relying on each other for body warmth.

“Did you see Henryk—”

“Freshman Gobbler.”

A high-pitched giggle. “That’s right. Freshman Gobbler.”

“Puked all over Tolu’s shirt.”

“But what about that milkshake thing? That was disgusting, brah.”

Freshmen. They sported camouflage paint and towel headbands, and each and every one of them was wearing their special O-week shirt, which that year featured a pumped-up-looking knight brandishing a big barbed spear, his knees bent with its weight, his pelvis thrust forward. Above it, a screaming red font proclaimed:

LIVE BY THE LANCE!

Knights and its subtle euphemisms.

The boys spotted Jess and their talk and laughter stopped

abruptly. Acting as one, they put their heads down, huddling closer so that they could pass her two abreast. *Relax*, she wanted to tell them. *Haven't you ever seen a female before?*

But what she said was, “Hope they’re taking it easy on you guys,” lowering her voice, because she’d read somewhere the lower the voice, the greater the authority. One of the leaders mustered up enough courage to look at her. “Where’s Jarrod Keith this year?” she asked him.

The question caused them to stop and go into groupthink mode.

“Do you mean the—”

“He’s president of the—”

“I think he’s at that lunch thing.”

“No, I mean, where’s his room?” Jess asked. “Isn’t he on the first floor here?”

“Not here.”

“He’s over at—”

“Turnock Wing. First floor there.”

“Right,” Jess said. “Thanks.”

They started up the steps again.

“Who was that?” one of them whispered, but none of them dared look back at her. Jess watched them go. They seemed so harmless; you’d never guess what assholes they were going to become. The backs of their shirts read ALL KNIGHT LONG. Probably the amount of time spent playing with their lances.

She sighed, about to give up. She had no idea where Turnock Wing might be, and it was too late to ask the freshman group if anyone else from the student council lived in that block . . . wing . . . whatever. She heard a door swing open on the landing below, and she glanced over the railing, catching a glimpse of a tanned forearm and a net bag full of clothes slung over a shoulder.

The laundry room. So simple. Why hadn’t she thought of that before?

Jess took the rest of the stairs two at a time. She peeked around the bottom doorway and then followed the guy down a path that stretched along the back of the next building, heading toward the river. He had an easy, relaxed gait, and she admired his wide shoulders, the muscular triangle of his back. His nice ass. It was a shame more Unity guys didn't place the same emphasis on being perfect male specimens. A lot of them had video gamers' shoulders and were pale, unfit, and grungy. This guy's blond hair was neatly cropped, the sort of cut a Unity guy wouldn't have been seen dead with, and, even viewed from behind, he had an aura of confidence.

At that point Jess's perving was abruptly interrupted, because the guy turned around and started walking toward her.

Shit, she thought. And then: *Just act like you're meant to be here. Smile, say hello.*

He was wearing the O-week shirt, too, so he was probably a freshman, but he didn't seem anything like the guys on the steps, his angry blue eyes flickering over Jess in a way that eventually forced her to look away. She felt busted, even though she hadn't done anything wrong—yet. They passed each other in a prickling silence.

Why had he turned around? Had he known she was following him? Jess risked a glance over her shoulder to see him disappear through the doorway they'd just left. Maybe he'd forgotten something. She started to run, which did nothing for her headache, and was relieved when she spotted clotheslines ahead. When she peeked inside the laundry room, she was even more relieved to find the place empty. It was similar to Unity's: a cavernous room smelling of laundry detergent and hot air, with a bank of commercial washing machines along one wall and three large dryers at the far end. One of the dryers was on, the clothes inside flopping from the top to the bottom in a steady rhythm.

Jess started with the piles of dirty clothes on the table in the

middle of the room, picking through them. Underwear and socks, shirts and shorts . . . but no cigar. Okay, the dryer then. The machine stopped as Jess opened the door and checked its contents—jeans and a couple of T-shirts—and in the sudden quiet she realized she could hear faint music. It was coming from an old clock radio on a side bench, its neon display reporting it was after one. The student council lunch would be finishing up soon, but her more immediate worry was Blondie's return. The dryer started ticking as it cooled, the sound heightening her sense of urgency.

Jess could feel the back of her throat growing slippery. Oh, not now! She swallowed furiously, walking the length of the washing machines, most of which seemed to be churning water. Except one: It was spinning. The lid made a hollow clanging noise as Jess slammed it open, and she watched the chamber grind to a halt, feeling dizzy. She leaned in and tugged at the circle of clothes, trying to loosen them, her skin breaking out in a clammy sweat.

As Jess pulled a shirt free, she noticed the name tag on the collar: MITCHELL CRAWFORD. *Mummy still tagging your clothes, Mitch? Probably a leftover habit from when she sent you away to that rich boarding school. Lord knows why she didn't just get everything monogrammed.* Then she peeled back a pair of jeans—also Mitchell Crawford's—and hit the jackpot. Attached to thick cotton was the Knights' coat of arms and the words *Virile Agitur*, which could probably be translated as *We're Better than You*. Despite the fact that she was suffering from a rush of blood to the head and was about to vomit, Jess gave a delighted laugh.

The jersey was at the very bottom. She leaned further into the machine, her fingers scrabbling to get hold of the thick cotton, trying to pull it free.

And that was when she heard someone clear his throat.

2.

Alpha

Jess froze. There was a guy. Watching her. Well, technically, he was watching her ass—of all the times to be wearing cutoffs. Worse, the guy in question was probably *that* guy. She didn't know what to do, so she did nothing, just stayed in position, her heart racing madly. Absurdly, she identified LOLO BX playing on the radio and was glad they were getting airplay.

But then he said, "Can I help you there?"

Jess turned to look at the speaker, feeling woozy as the blood drained from her head. It was Blondie, all right, his bag of clothes and a box of laundry detergent on the table in front of him. So that's what he'd forgotten: laundry detergent. His face was expressionless, but Jess had the feeling he'd been standing there for a while. She tugged at the frayed hems of her cutoffs, giving him a nervous smile.

"You really scared me!" she gushed. Then she turned around and started pulling clothes out of the washing machine, piling them onto the lid of the machine beside her. Because what else

could she do? She had to ride this one out, act like she was meant to be there. In an all-male college. Going through a stranger's laundry.

"I said, can I help you there?" The words were friendly, but his tone was not.

As Jess straightened again she finally lost it, starting to heave and retch, puking onto the concrete floor. Each contraction wracked her insides so thoroughly that on the final violent heave she thought her actual stomach might make an appearance, but no, that seemed to be it. All that came up were the little-and-often handfuls of water she'd drunk in the bathroom.

"Sorry." Jess wiped her mouth, feeling dazed. "What were you saying?"

Most guys would have at least come closer and hovered helpfully, but Blondie hadn't moved a muscle. He'd just watched the free show. Unimpressed.

"Someone's going to have to clean that up now," he said with distaste.

"Oh. Right. Sorry." Jess patted her front pockets, finding a wadded tissue that she used to smear the tiny puddle. Then she suddenly wondered what the hell she was doing: squatted down, cleaning up a smidge of *water*, in a *laundry room*, while he stood over her, inspecting the job. She straightened abruptly, taking aim, and tossing the tissue at the trash can.

It missed.

Jess glanced at Blondie, expecting at least a smirk, but he was expressionless. He should have been cute, with that blond hair, that snub nose, that body. But there was a hardness to his face and a tension in the way he held himself that meant he wasn't cute at all. Or stupid, as Jess would have liked to have assumed; if a guy was rich, good-looking, and athletic, she usually drew the circle wide enough to include arrogant and stupid as well.

His blue eyes were cold, the pupils down to pinpricks. “You should pick that up,” he told her.

Jess stared at him. Blinked once. Slowly. “Sure,” she said with a sudden smile, and picked up the tissue, dropping it in the trash can with a flourish. She showed him her hand, fingers splayed, displaying her post-drinking tremors. “I had a big night, that’s all. And it’s so hot today.” She made a fist, rubbing it on her thigh, working sweet and ditzy. “I’m used to heat, not used to drinking.”

“What are you doing here?”

“My boyfriend’s at that lunch. The intercollegiate thing?” That’s it, just keep talking, Jess told herself, stepping back to the open washing machine. Spray him with stupid. “And he asked me to put his laundry in the dryer. But maybe I should have tried a Hydralyte or something first.” She giggled—a high, clear, bubbling sound. Seriously, she was like an Aero bar: full of nothing. If he hadn’t been making her nervous, she would have been impressed by her own performance.

“You’re a freshman?” he asked.

“Hmm.” Jess was expecting him to ask her which college she lived in—she’d go with one of the all-female ones, the preferred hunting grounds for knights—but instead he seemed to dismiss her altogether, picking up his things and pushing past her. She flattened against the washing machine, aware of his body, sure it would brush hers. It didn’t. He stopped in front of an empty machine and tipped in the contents of his laundry bag.

Jess watched him warily for a couple of seconds, then turned back to Mitchell Crawford’s clothes, hastily scooping them into her arms, careful to keep the jersey on top. She hurried to the dryer, walking the long way around, so she didn’t have to pass Blondie.

“I know you’re lying.”

Jess whirled around. “Excuse me?”

Blondie wasn’t looking at her; he was measuring out laundry

detergent. “The song,” he said calmly. “They’re the words, aren’t they?”

Jess realized he was referring to the song now playing on the radio. “Yeah, I guess,” she said. He’d been repeating Meghan Trainor’s lyrics, but was there a subtext?

“You should know. It’s one of yours.”

“What do you mean?”

He sprinkled detergent over his clothes, his tone dismissive. “It’s a chick song.”

There was a subtext: He was a dick. “I didn’t realize music had a gender,” Jess said.

“You want me to open that for you?”

“What?”

Blondie slammed the machine’s lid closed, and the noise made her jump. “The door. Of the dryer. Would you like me to open it for you?”

“Oh no. I’m okay, thanks.” Jess dumped her pile of laundry on the table and opened the dryer. For a freshman, he was pretty sure of himself. Come to think of it, he looked kind of old to be a freshman, but perhaps that was the stubble shadowing his jaw. Maybe he’d taken a gap year or something.

She was hoping he would leave, but he didn’t. Instead, he sat on one of the plastic chairs at the end of the table, riffling through a stack of magazines before selecting a well-thumbed-through copy of *Maxim*. Jess started shoveling clothes into the dryer, and, even though he didn’t look at her once, she felt watched. Her nerves were shot. Soon only the jersey was left. *Distract him*, Jess thought.

“How’s your O-week been?” she asked.

“Predictable.”

“They haven’t been too rough on you?”

“Not as rough as they’ve been on you, by the look of it.”

Jess slammed the dryer door closed with more force than was

necessary. The machine hummed to life, and she immediately felt bolder, shielded by sound.

“You forgot the jersey,” Blondie commented, turning a page. He looked up, meeting Jess’s gaze, his eyes weirdly bright. She noticed him swallow, and she wondered for a fleeting second if she reminded him of somebody else, if that was his problem. But then the moment passed. He raised his eyebrows, an arrogance to the gesture suggesting he expected explanation.

“He doesn’t want it going in the dryer. My boyfriend. He’s worried it’ll shrink.”

“Well, aren’t you a good little girlfriend? Running around, doing his laundry for him.”

Jess gave him a good-little-girlfriend smile and said in a good-little-girlfriend voice, “I try to be!” Then she grabbed the jersey and headed to the door.

“Who’s your boyfriend? You didn’t tell me his name.”

Jess stopped, conscious that she still had to pass him. “Oh, didn’t I? Mitchell Crawford. Do you know him?”

“Not well, obviously,” he said, dismissive once more. Did that mean he was a freshman? Jess wondered. “I’m curious, though.”

“Hmm? About him?”

“No, about you. How did you meet?” Blondie put his magazine down, giving her his full attention. “I mean, you’re”—he tilted his head to the side, eyeing her with an expression that suggested whatever she was it was lacking—“a freshman. And he’s not. So . . .”

“Actually, I met him over the holidays. We’re from the same town.”

“Yeah? Where’s that?”

“Rockhampton. We got together one night when we were out. At the Heritage. That’s a pub there. I mean, a club. Well, a pub-club.

In Rockhampton.” Jess gave a little cough, covering her mouth. “Where are you from?”

He leaned back in his chair, his hands linked behind his head, letting his gaze come to rest somewhere below her eyes. “Not Rockhampton.”

“Well, that’s lucky. For you, I mean,” Jess said, ignoring the urge to cross her arms. “You know what? I’d better go. I think I’m going to be sick again.” She said the words mechanically, pointedly, not bothering with the charade at all now. She expected him to stop her, or at the very least tell her to leave the jersey, and she didn’t even care. Let him try.

But to Jess’s surprise, Blondie did nothing, just turned his attention back to his magazine. Maybe he had bought her act after all and he was only giving her a hard time because she was a woman, and that was the Knights way. Only, when she reached the doorway, she couldn’t stop herself from turning back one last time. Because she’d won. And boys like Blondie always turned Jess into a bad sport.

“Well, I guess I’ll see you around then,” she told him, singsonging the words, a smug little smile of triumph pulling at the corner of her mouth.

Blondie looked around in a way that suggested he’d forgotten she existed. His face changed as he processed what she’d said, and he let his gaze tally up each and every facet of her bedraggled appearance, his expression somewhere between amusement and . . . yes, it was pity.

When he answered, he showed his teeth, like he’d enjoyed a joke. “I doubt it.”

3.

Pictures

Back at Unity, the first thing Jess did was take a shower. When she returned to her room, she left the door open, sliding one of the slatted closet doors across to screen the doorway instead, hoping to generate cross flow—the closet doors were on tracks for that very purpose. When none appeared, she scraped a coin from the pile of loose change on the desk and stood on the bed, setting to work on the screw that held the window's tracking. Windows at Unity were immense, stretching the width of each room and over half the height. It was probably for safety reasons that they were restricted to opening only by a foot—unless of course you busted the tracking, in which case they'd swivel to horizontal and beyond. Everybody did it.

Jess secured the window in its new position, using the belt of her robe as a temporary tie, flooding the room with sky. As she did so, the sprinkler system on the lawn below flared into life. Her room looked toward the river. An afternoon breeze pushed through the

room, bringing with it the scent of water and a hot smell Jess associated with restlessness. Summer. It made the schedule she'd pinned to her corkboard dance.

She ate some chips from the open packet on the shelf above her desk—salt and vinegar, good hangover food now that her nausea seemed to have finally abated—and looked at the bags clumped on the floor. She should finish unpacking. Outside, she could hear the voices of her floormates in the process of doing just that, doors open so they could shout to one another from their rooms—ten of the twelve of them had been on T-floor the previous year, so it was a reunion of sorts. But what Jess did instead was blow-dry her hair properly, using a large rounded brush, stopping from time to time when her arms ached. When she was finally done, her long toffee-brown hair was at its full-bodied best, her fringe feathered. Then she tweezed her eyebrows, her robe gaping as she leaned toward the mirror above her dresser. She stopped suddenly, studying her reflection. Made a face.

I doubt it. Her tone was sour.

Dropping her gown to the floor, Jess rummaged through one of the bags and pulled on undies and a tank top. Then she slumped in her chair, legs up on the desk, examining the stolen jersey while she finished the last of the chips. It was still damp. The funny thing was, according to the tag, it wasn't Mitchell Crawford's but, rather, Julian Lloyd's—whoever the hell he was. The person Jess's thoughts kept returning to, however, was Blondie. *I doubt it.* Using nail clip-pers, she carefully unpicked the label and then pitter-pattered her hand across the desk like a spider, finding her Zippo. She opened it with a flick of her wrist, spinning it around her middle finger before hitting the flint-wheel with her thumb. *Flick-spin-scratch!* Jess did this so quickly it wasn't a party trick anymore but a twitch, a nervous condition.

She smiled at the flame, feeling an answering glow somewhere deep inside her. Then she burned Julian Lloyd's tag to a blackened, charred crisp, holding it with her tweezers.

She'd just dropped it in the empty chip packet when a military *rat-a-tat-tat* shook the frame of her closet door. Jess hastily scrunched up the jersey and shoved it in the pigeonhole above her desk.

"Still burning shit?" Leanne asked, shoving the door aside with such vigor it rattled along its track and smashed into the wall. "You should get that looked at."

"Do you have to do that?" Jess asked with a pained look at the door. She exhaled. "I thought you were Farren. Are you just now getting back?"

Leanne nodded, pushing inside the room with some difficulty, a large canvas bag slung over one shoulder. She pulled off the cap she was wearing, ditto the sunglasses, then slung the bag onto Jess's bed and unzipped it.

"Check this out," she said, sounding pleased. "It's one of those cool retro ones." She held up an aqua-colored toaster, showing it to Jess. "What? I needed a new one."

"You're getting crumbs all over the floor. Did you even look for a jersey?"

Leanne glanced at her, her face untroubled. "Yeah." Her voice suggested it was obvious. Over the holidays she'd had her dark hair dyed Rihanna-red and undercut. It made her startling green eyes even more startling. "Didn't find one, though. Look! Got this for Allie." She held up a sandwich press, and Jess groaned. "Relax. No one saw me."

"There are cameras."

"I was incognito. Anyway, I went out by the river." Leanne stepped backward so she could peer at Allie's room, directly across the hall. The strumming guitars of Wish emanated from her open doorway. "Damn. Where is she?"

Allie always turned her music up as she was leaving her room—like she could take the music with her, or she didn't want her plants to feel lonely while she was gone. Jess wasn't even sure it was a conscious decision. Leanne would know: She and Allie were both from Mackay and had gone to the same high school, back when Allie was Allison.

"No idea," Jess said.

"Check Instagram."

Jess laughed. "Funny one."

"Yeah, because it's true." Leanne snatched Jess's phone off the desk. "Why's it off? Who turns their phone off?" She pushed the side button, and Jess's Nokia returned to life with a series of little chimes. Leanne studied the screen and laughed. "Okay, that makes sense." And Jess knew she'd seen the missed calls.

"Use your own phone," she said sulkily.

"The screen's wrecked. I need a new one. Hey, on that—I think we should sell the Telstra shares."

"You don't sell shares in Telstra just so you can buy a phone. That's a terrible trade. This way you're making money off all the suckers who do own phones."

"My share is only a couple hundred bucks. Not like it matters. I'm broke."

"It will matter, though. Trust me," Jess said patiently. "They've just announced they're doing dividend reinvestment. Do you know how big that is?"

"I don't even know what that means," Leanne said, her eyes still on the screen. "But, okay, Buffet, I'll take charity then." She tapped away for a very long time before Jess processed what she was doing.

"What are you up to?" Jess tried to snatch the phone from her, but Leanne moved away. She showed Jess the screen, and Jess peered at it, starting to laugh at the comment Leanne had left on

Allie's latest upload: *Show us yer personality!* Then realization hit her. Jess's eyes widened, and it was Leanne's turn to laugh. "She'll think I said that!" Jess protested.

"How'd you do, anyway? Score?" Leanne asked.

Jess felt a surge of pleasure that blew away the vestiges of brooding. She pulled the jersey out of the pigeonhole and unfurled it like a flag, trying to play it cool. Usually, Leanne did all the daring shit.

Leanne gave an admiring whistle. "Way to go, Flash."

"Just got lucky," Jess said modestly, feeling stupidly pleased.

"Here, put it on." Leanne held up the phone. "Let's take a snap."

"What if Farren sees it?"

"She's not even on Instagram."

A slow smile spread across Jess's face. "Okay. But make sure it's not obviously a Knights' jersey." She frowned. "And I want to look good. *Allie* good."

She pulled the jersey on and posed as Allie would have done: looking seductively over one shoulder, her long hair teased and arranged around her face, pouting even—and Jess never pouted.

"Filter?" Leanne asked when she'd taken the shot, like you might say, *Sauce?*

"*All* the filters," Jess said. "I told you, I've got to look good. And caption it. Say, 'Doubt this, asshole.'"

"That's a bit strong for you, Smiley," Leanne mused, tapping the screen.

"Private joke."

"Done and done," Leanne said, finally handing over the phone.

Then both girls froze, because from out in the hallway, a booming voice said, "Where's Jess? Is she in there?" Another voice answered in the affirmative.

"Farren. *Fuck.*" Jess ripped the jersey off, shoving it back in

the pigeonhole. “Quick, hide that bag! It’s got the Knights’ crest on it.”

But what Leanne did was throw the bag down on the floor with the others, kicking it over so the crest couldn’t be seen. Just in time, because Farren Ghosh came through the doorway like the human tornado she was—a tornado wearing purple Docs, a galaxy-print miniskirt, and a Unity jersey from two years ago—entering the conversation as she always did: as if they were midway through a different conversation.

“Now, look, don’t make it difficult for me. We’ve got half an hour to have that barbecue set up. I want the freshmen to meet their mentors before the headmaster starts making speeches.”

“Use your minions. What’s the point of being president if you don’t?” Leanne said, sidestepping her with a smoothness Jess admired.

“I *am* using them. But we need more hands,” Farren said, swiveling around as she spoke because Leanne was already at the doorway. “Allie’s helping,”

That made Leanne pause. Jess, too, was surprised. “She is not,” Leanne said.

“She is. Come on, don’t make me beg.”

“Okay, I won’t then,” Leanne said, and left.

Farren made a huffing noise and turned her attention back to Jess. Frowned. “Don’t you want to get dressed first?”

4.

Known Better

“Okay! There are several ways to tie a toga, but I’m only going to show you one. If you don’t listen, you’ll have to work it out yourself, because I am not your mother and I don’t repeat myself,” Farren bellowed.

Jess, standing beside her, snickered. “Rehearse that much?”

“Start by making a loop,” Farren said loudly, giving Jess a look. She clicked her fingers impatiently, and Jess handed over her sheet.

As Farren started winding the tail of the sheet, Jess looked around, pressing her beer to her cheeks and neck. The first few days of the term had been oppressively hot, the air syrupy thick, but for the first time that week there were clouds in the sky, and, now that the sun was setting, the stillness seemed charged, expectant: a thrumming beneath the murmur of music and voices. Ahead of that night’s intercollegiate toga party, Farren—president of Unity’s student council—had decided to split the college for the pregame.

The girls had gathered on Unity's flat concrete roof; the boys were down in the bunker.

Most of the freshmen were paying rapt attention, sitting directly in front of Farren and Jess, sheets bundled in their laps, all of them in bikinis or one-pieces—a sea of summer skin. The older girls had already wrapped their togas and were further back, only pretending to listen. The T-floor girls, Farren and Jess's floormates, weren't even pretending. They had their backs to the presentation and were absorbed in pouring their drinks over the railing—presumably they hit their target, too, because there came a distant shout.

Farren turned to Jess. "Arms up, sunshine." She was British Indian and still had traces of her English accent despite having lived in Australia for eleven years. Jess, accordingly, held her arms out wide as Farren started wrapping the sheet around her trunk. Tightly.

"Jesus, Farren, it's not a corset," Jess said. A mistake, because if anything Farren pulled it tighter. Farren was yet to tie her own toga, or maybe she didn't intend to. It was draped around her shoulders like a cloak, paired with a black crocheted bikini top, red velvet shorts, fishnet stockings, and her purple Docs, her long dark hair in two braids. Jess wished she could work a look like that. She felt conservative by comparison in her cutoffs and Black Milk Pixie Dust zippered one-piece (limited edition, thank you very much).

"When you've wrapped it, loop the roped tail around your neck and tie it off with the other tail." Farren stood back to admire her handiwork. "If you want more shape, tie some cord around your waist, or under your boobs."

The freshmen broke into a polite round of applause.

"You're kidding," Jess said.

"They're terrified of me," Farren murmured, looking pleased.

Jess glanced past her at the T-floor girls. Leanne finally seemed

to have remembered she had a part to play and had stopped dick-ing around. Giving Jess a theatrical thumbs-up, she shouted, “Hey, Farren!”

Farren turned, and Leanne held up her phone. Jess’s phone, actually—Leanne had demanded a working prop. “Mikey called. He needs you down in the bunker.”

“Why didn’t he call me?”

“That’s what I asked him. Do I look like your secretary?” Leanne said, appealing first to Farren and then to Vanessa Ng, who actually was Farren’s secretary. Vanessa shook her head.

Farren left, muttering dark things about the usefulness of her vice president. Jess knew they didn’t have to worry much about their cover story, because when Farren reached Mikey she probably would discover he needed her help with something. As soon as Farren was gone, Allie, standing near the sound system, dropped the volume on Meg Mac.

“Okay!” Jess shouted, trying to get the girls’ attention. “We’re going to have to make this quick, so listen up. Guys? Hey!”

“Shut the fuck up, bitches!” screamed Leanne, joining her in front of the group, and there was a sudden silence.

Jess coughed, nodding her thanks, feeling nervous with all attention now focused on her. It was different standing up there beside Farren; Farren just sort of filled a space. “So, last year, at the toga party, the guys from Knights ran the inaugural Dragon Slayer Sweep.” With those words, the quiet seemed to take on a different quality. The girls had not only stopped talking, they’d stopped moving.

“Yeah. Most of you know what I’m going to say. But for those of you freshmen who don’t—it was a cash prize that went to the first knight who slept with a Unity girl. Given that we don’t actually have a herald, take the dragon label as a further insult.”

“The guy who won it slept with Farren. She went back to his

room. Obviously, she knew nothing about the sweep—none of us did.” Jess’s voice grew raspy, her face starting to burn. She cleared her throat. “And she also didn’t know that the asshole was going to stream everything to two other guys—the judges—in another room. Thanks for that, Skype. So, you can imagine how she felt when—” Jess broke off, unable to finish the sentence, shaking her head. Even now, it made her so angry she wanted to kill somebody. Because she’d been there when Farren returned to Unity, been witness to her distress.

One of the freshmen put up her hand, which reminded Jess of high school, and in that moment she was aware of the vast distance between who she’d been back then and who she was now.

“Speak,” Leanne scolded. “Don’t put up your hand, just speak.”

“Did Farren take action?” the freshman asked, and it wasn’t really a question so much as a prompt, an expectation.

Jess opened her mouth, then closed it again, glancing at Leanne, who made a don’t-look-at-me face. “Um, no, she didn’t,” Jess said eventually. “It was kind of complicated. She didn’t want— Like, she felt that if she did, she’d be admitting there was something to be ashamed of, and . . .”

A different freshman started to raise her hand, realized what she was doing, and lowered it again. “Are they still living at the college?”

“The guys who did it?” Jess shrugged. “We don’t know. She never told us who they were. And no one from Knights would say anything—they protect their own like that. The whole thing kind of got hushed up. So . . .” Her voice had grown raspy again, and she coughed. “The thing is, tonight brings it up again. We want to make tonight about something else—”

“Cutting it short, we’re holding our own competition,” Leanne said, putting Jess out of her misery. “The inaugural Knight Rider challenge. I came up with that, by the way, so feel free to clap.” That

broke the tension. A wave of laughter passed through the girls, followed by applause, hoots, and cheers. “But don’t be misled by the name,” Leanne continued. “To participate, you do not ride a knight. In fact, under absolutely no circumstances are you to—”

“Sit on their lance,” Jess finished for her.

Leanne barked an appreciative laugh. “Exactly. No sitting on their lances, no letting them *Virile Agitur*. Do not sleep with a boy from Knights—”

“Ever,” Jess added, extra vehemence in her voice because she’d had a sudden memory of Blondie standing over her while she swabbed a concrete floor. “Because if you do, you’re like a traitor to Farren, and every other girl in this place. And—and—well, just every girl. Full stop.”

“That was so beautiful,” Leanne said, patting her on the arm. “So we’ve all got the point? If you make jiggy-jiggy with a knight, Jess will ask you to leave the college. Obviously, tonight you won’t get them back here on the promise of a coffee alone, though, so you are going to have to pretend you’re up for it. Then, when you’ve got a live one, the first thing you’ll need to do is restrain him. If you pick a freshman, chances are he’ll pass out anyway, but we’ve also got a whole bunch of these.”

Leanne nodded at Allie, always her willing assistant, who stepped forward, holding a plastic bag. Her sheet wasn’t fashioned in a toga. Instead, she’d wrapped it around her like a towel, securing it with a badge of the Aboriginal flag, displaying her ample cleavage. She probably had a strapless bra or bikini top on beneath it, but you couldn’t be sure—nothing like suspense as an attention getter. Jess glanced around the faces in front of her, saw all those eyes focused on Allie, and she knew the thoughts going through their minds as they toted her up: Wearing her sheet that way might have showed off her rack, but it didn’t do anything for her chunky shoulders. With her golden-brown skin and blond hair worn loose

and tousled, she had the beach-girl look down pat, though. Her makeup was minimal, smoky eyeliner and glossy lips. And her legs were good, but were they good enough for the slits she'd cut up the sides of her costume, nearly to her waist? Wasn't she a little too girl-next-door to be acting like she was a goddess?

And driving all these questions was their real question: What did she have that they didn't?

The answer was the kind of self-fulfilling prophecy that messed with girls' heads. Allie had the numbers: a mind-blowing following on Instagram.

Leanne reached into the bag and held up a plastic cable tie; such a small object to be greeted with such a loud round of applause and cheers. And Jess realized, with some surprise, that the girls were onside—always a fifty-fifty proposition with a Unity crowd.

Leanne smiled, pleased with the reaction, and said conversationally, "If you need to use them, I find they work a lot better if you secure the person's arm to an object, like the leg of a desk or the arm of a chair, instead of just binding their wrists together." Jess and Allie side-eyed each other. "If you're worried about going one-on-one, go two-on-one. Tell the knight that you and your friend are going to make all his schoolboy fantasies come true. But the main idea here, in case you haven't already worked it out, is to give him a makeover."

Jess listed some of the many ways they could get creative, drawing hoots and cheers with each point—it was heady, really; she was starting to understand why Farren liked giving speeches so much. "Oh, and don't forget to record your efforts. Allie will be your judge this evening—" Allie bowed to the gathering, one arm clasped to her cleavage, scoring whistles and whoops "—and she's going to need photographic evidence. In fact, we all want to enjoy it, so load it to Instagram or Facebook."

Leanne took over: "Goes without saying, the person who does

the most impressive job will become an instant legend, but they'll also be awarded tonight's prize, kindly borrowed last Sunday by Flash here—"

"*Ah-aahh!*" the second and third years chorused on cue, echoing the song by Queen, and Jess grinned. She'd always secretly loved her college nickname.

Allie held up the Knights jersey with a flourish, showing its front and then the back to the crowd. UNITY KNIGHT RIDER WAS NOW SCREEN-PRINTED ON BOTH SIDES.

When they saw it, the gathering erupted. Allie turned the music back up. Everybody was definitely pissed, but it was hard not to get caught up in the energy of the occasion. Jess and Leanne glanced at each other, laughed, and then looked away.

"You and your stirring emotions," Leanne said, nudging her with a shoulder.

"Oh, fuck off," Jess said placidly. "Farren's my best friend." They watched Allie, handing out cable ties. "Hey, what's *Virile Agitur* mean, anyway?"

Leanne made a snorting noise. "'Do the manly thing.'"

"Oh God. That is so funny."

"It gets better," Leanne assured. "Do you know what our motto means?"

"Didn't know we had one," Jess said, surprised.

"Read your handbook. It's *Nemo me impune lacessit*." Leanne paused for effect. "'No one wounds me with impunity.'"

5.

Boys Like You

By ten o'clock, the downstairs part of Building 33 was jammed with sweaty, frenetic, sheet-clad bodies, many of them drunk, which was to be expected when the ticket price to an event included all the alcohol you could drink. Somehow, the DJ pulled off a segue from Arctic Monkeys to 360 and Gossling, and a fresh wave of people pushed onto the dance floor—Jess, Farren, and the Z-floor boys among them. The Z-floor boys hadn't bothered with togas but had cut holes in their sheets, wearing them poncho style. They seemed to be hearing their own music, floating around in a knock-kneed kind of way, probably on something—Jess could never tell with that lot—but Callum left his bubble long enough to pat her on the back and ask, "You all right, little fella?"

He was a cherubic-looking engineering student, with an odd blend of shyness and high excitability. He was also, apparently, suffering some sort of short-term memory loss, because he'd asked Jess that same question five times in as many minutes.

"Why wouldn't I be?" she asked, shouting to be heard over the

music. Then she frowned, distracted. “What’s going on with your glasses?”

He obediently bent toward her. The lenses were smeared with what looked like Vaseline, although Jess was pretty sure it was actually lubricant. She cleaned them using his sheet, and he put them back on, blinking at the world around him with an air of revelation.

“Thanks, Jess! The guys must have done it. I was really scared. Thought something was wrong with my eyes.”

“Right,” Jess said. Some nights you just weren’t drunk enough to deal with drugged people. Then she noticed Brendan, and she stopped moving. Callum’s size-eleven boot stomped on her sandal, causing her to double over in pain.

“No, I’m okay,” she muttered, hobbling. Callum hadn’t even noticed.

Brendan’s presence explained why Callum had kept checking on her. He must have known Brendan was there—they used to be floormates, after all—and assumed Jess did, too. But it hadn’t even occurred to her that Brendan would go. He’d left Unity.

She tried to dance again, feeling like a puppet pulling its own strings. Brendan’s arms were slung around a pair of Unity girls, and he lurched them from side to side like he was having the best time in the world, his pretty eyes hidden by his long fringe. His sheet was wrapped around his waist, probably to show off the tattoos on his neck and chest. He was lean, without an ounce of body fat, and Jess knew it was the hungry, restless energy burning in him that had whittled him down to muscle, sinew, and bone. She’d been attracted to that energy. And she’d escaped from it, too.

She watched him, he ignored her, and after a moment she realized that most of the surrounding Unity crowd was sneaking glances at the two of them. So nothing had changed; they were still providing the entertainment.

Jess glanced at Farren, who was dancing with Davey Walters, Z-floor boy and her boyfriend. Farren frowned, as if to say, *What the hell are you still doing here?* It was all Jess needed. She turned away, pushing through the crush of bodies to reach the outside area, where there were fewer bodies and more air. Brendan hadn't followed her—if he had, his hands would have been on her already. Parting the skirt of her toga, she dug her Zippo out of the pocket of her cutoffs and flicked it on. She watched the flame, desperate for some kind of relief. *He's left Unity, you're out of the relationship, so breathe,* she told herself.

When she was calmer, Jess headed back inside, but through a different doorway, one further down.

“Flash.”

Jess turned to see Allie, leaning against the doorway, clutching an empty plastic cup, and a naughty little voice in her head captioned the moment: *Just hanging at the toga party, looking miserable.*

“Hey, what are you doing here by yourself?” Jess asked.

But Allie only gave her a funny smile, as if she didn't trust herself to speak. She reached out, touching Jess's cheek, and Jess caught her hand, squeezing it.

“You okay, Allie?” she asked, concerned now. Allie didn't seem like herself at all. Definitely not the girl who racked up hundreds of comments every time she posted something online.

Allie shook her head. “I'm okay, I'm just . . . You know.”

“Did somebody say something to you? Who?” Jess asked, her voice sharp now. It happened from time to time—guys who recognized Allie and seemed to think that because she was accessible online, she was just as accessible in the real world. Jess put an arm around Allie's shoulders. “I guess, if you put yourself out there, you're going to cop the wrong sort of attention sometimes, too.”

It wasn't the right thing to say because she felt Allie tense.

Dropping her arm, she tried to smooth things over. “Well, just so you know, I’m in hiding, too. I just saw Brendan.”

Allie finally looked at her, giving her a pinched smile of sympathy. “Bet that went well. What’d he say?”

“Nothing. He didn’t get a chance. I ran off—very mature of me. But we’ve talked about it, and talked about it, and I can’t keep explaining myself. It’s over. Does he really think that if he keeps pushing I’ll change my mind?”

Allie didn’t seem to be listening, her attention fixed on someone in the crowd of people outside.

“Um, so, anyway,” Jess finished lamely. She sighed, leaning back against the wall beside Allie. Then she straightened, spotting Brendan through a gap in the crowd. He was looking around, as though searching for someone. “Shit. There he is. Come upstairs with me?”

ON THE TOP level things were less feral, but the line for the bar was five deep. Jess joined the back of the line and felt exposed and vulnerable until a pair of boys took up position behind her. She didn’t know what was more shocking: seeing Brendan for the first time since their breakup during summer break four weeks ago or her reaction to seeing him again: a hot panic that made it hard to think. The problem with Brendan was when he’d been drinking he liked to escalate things, typically in ways that were humiliating for her.

Then someone grabbed Jess’s toga, jerking her backward and temporarily choking her.

“We’ve got drinks,” Leanne said, dragging her through the crowd and out onto the deck, where a couple of Unity girls were sitting on one of the heavy outdoor tables, bracketing a large collection of white plastic cups filled with black liquid. They were

playing admiring audience to four knights holding lightsabers, who staged a mock battle in front of them.

Jess glanced around the deck, realizing that a large proportion of the people there were either Unity girls or knights—easily identifiable as such because they'd painted their faces with blue zinc cream. "I forgot about that."

"We invented it!" Leanne sounded offended.

"I know, but . . . I want out. Any chance you'll walk me back to the college?"

"Not unless I'm riding a knight," Leanne said. "Why?"

"Brendan's here."

"He probably just wants you to get better," Leanne said, a smirk pulling at the corner of her mouth. Leanne, like Brendan, was doing psychology. With the fullness of time, Jess had come to wonder at how that course was full of truly fucked-up people. "Come on, drink it out, bitch." Leanne handed her two of the cups, then took two for herself. They clinked and downed each drink, one after the other, and Jess made a face. Bourbon.

"Here, this will cheer you up. Meet this guy." Leanne grabbed one of the dueling knights as he passed them. "Jess, this is Richie. Richie, Jess."

"Richard," the guy corrected good-naturedly. He was tousle-haired, rosy-cheeked, and wet-lipped—a freshman, for sure.

"Now, now, better Richie than Dick," Leanne admonished him. "Richie is studying economics, Jess. Just like you. Maybe you should take him home tonight and find out whether he's micro or macro."

Jess watched Richie/Richard flick rapidly and vigorously at his eyelid with his fingernails. "Maybe you should," she told Leanne.

He gave them an overexcited laugh. "Maybe you both should!" Then he did the thing to his eyelid again. The skin above it was purple, Jess noticed. Birthmark?

“Richie has eczema,” Leanne explained.

“Yeah, something’s set it off. This place is really dusty.”

“Richie, do you mind?” Jess asked. “I want to talk to my friend.”

“Sure,” he said, and skipped back to the duel.

“I feel sorry for him,” Jess hissed at Leanne.

“I don’t,” Leanne said. She tapped her ear spike. “In fact, I’m going to use this to pierce his—”

“Uh, uh, uh!” Jess warned, shaking a finger. “Nothing they can sue over. We talked about that, remember? Listen, what’s up with Allie?”

“Don’t tell me there’s no Wi-Fi.”

“I know you know. You’re the only person she trusts, the only one she talks to.” *And that’s the paradox of people*, Jess thought. Because before her eyes, Leanne seemed to soften, basking in the words like a cat in sunshine.

“Don’t. Say. Anything,” she warned, handing Jess another two drinks and taking two for herself. She led Jess across to the spot where the deck’s siding met the wall. From there, they had a clear view of the grassy area downstairs, and Leanne pointed at one of the outdoor tables. Michael Azzopardi, Knights’ student council vice president, was there, alongside his best bud, Duane, the two of them talking animatedly, entertaining a group of girls from one of the other colleges.

“Who am I looking for?” Jess asked.

“You’re looking at him. Mikey.”

“Okay, what about him?” Jess asked. Mikey may well have had liquid brown eyes and been tall, olive-skinned, and athletic—the sort who wouldn’t be out of place at Knights—but he’d never done anything for Jess. Well, he might have once: in the moment during O-week last year when she’d first spotted him, right before he’d opened his mouth. She frowned, trying to decode the situation. Mikey’s attention seemed focused on one girl specifically. Was she

a clue? Was she connected to Allie somehow? Jess had seen her around but didn't know her. She was laughing at something Mikey had said, flicking her glossy black hair over her shoulder, gripping his arm.

"Work it out," Leanne growled.

Jess blinked. "Mikey?" Her voice rose. "Mikey?"

Leanne shushed her. "They got together on Sunday night."

Jess giggled. "But it's . . . Mikey."

"Oh yeah. This from the woman who ended up with Brendan."

Inexplicably, that made Jess giggle more. "Thing is, Allie really likes him. And Mikey . . ."

"Is Mikey." Jess tried to get it together. "Oh man. So that's why she was helping set up for the barbecue."

"She's liked him for ages."

"Really? I never knew."

"How would you? Allie just howls inside."

"You think?" Jess had never really seen Allie as being that way. Allie never complained, never explained. A lot of people took her as being aloof, but Jess, never able to stop herself from letting it all hang out, admired Allie's restraint.

"Shit, yeah. If her Instagram account isn't the most passive-aggressive demand for attention ever, then what is it? Social media was made for introverts."

Both girls froze. Down below, the girl who'd been flirting with Mikey had turned to one of her friends, their hands sliding over each other's shoulders. With Mikey and Duane watching on admiringly—the whole thing was for their benefit, after all—the two girls shared a slow, lingering kiss.

"Oh yuck," Jess said crossly.

"Evolve, bitches," said Leanne.

Without pause or hesitation, each threw a drink. And in one of those precise, perfectly orchestrated moments of fate, the plastic

cups traced twin arcs through the air before smashing into the head of the girl who'd been the object of Mikey's attention.

"Yeeewww!" With that, Leanne disappeared into the crowd.

"Oh shit," Jess breathed, ducking down behind the siding.

"Good shot."

Jess turned to see the guy from the Knights laundry room standing against the wall a short distance from her. She should have been shocked to see him, but she was actually more shocked by what she'd just done. He also seemed interested, craning his neck to see what was happening below.

"Are they looking up here?" she asked, watching his face for clues.

"Why? Are you having regrets?"

"Not really," Jess admitted.

"Well, you're in the clear. Because despite all laws of trajectory, they seem to think it came from somewhere downstairs. She's not happy, though. You've messed up her hair."

"Good."

Blondie gave her a questioning look. "Don't tell me you like Michael Azzopardi?"

"Not me."

"Are you going to stay down there all night?"

"I don't know. What's happening now?"

"She's leaving. Mikey's not very happy about it."

Jess snorted. "Mikey. That's what we call him, too. Hey, how do you know him, anyway?"

"Come over here and I'll tell you all about it."

Jess did no such thing. Instead, she sat on the siding, turned sideways to see him, her back against the wall. For a moment, they just stared at each other. Unlike last time, Blondie was clean-shaven, but his toga was awry, his hair stuck up in tufts, and his blue eyes glittered. He seemed a little loose. Jess wasn't displeased

to see him. In fact, she'd been hoping for it. If this was round two, bring it on.

She frowned, noticing the way his fingertips were digging into the brick. "What's wrong? Are you afraid of heights or something?"

"Yeah, so come over here. I can't talk to you while you're sitting there."

"It's not even high," Jess said, leaning over to check.

"It's more of a structural thing," he said quickly. "Like, the railing might—Do you have to do that? Just come here."

"Your voice is different," Jess said, without moving.

"Yeah? How?"

"Sort of chummy. You didn't strike me as chummy last time we met." Jess tilted her head to the side. "Old chap."

"When you were showing me your ass?" he asked. Jess took a sip of her remaining drink, aware her face was betraying her, flushing. "Not that I minded," he added. "You've got a great ass."

"You're not really a freshman, are you?" she asked, deciding to change the subject.

"I never said I was. You did, though. And you failed to mention you were from Unity."

Jess was glad he'd figured it out. It made the stolen jersey sweeter. "You failed to ask."

"What'd you do with it, by the way?" he asked, as if reading her mind.

"Wouldn't you like to know?"

"What I'd like is for you to get off that ledge. Please."

"No, thank you. Why were you back at Knights early then? If you're not a freshman, are you on the student council?"

"No. I just needed to be reindoctrinated. You're looking more glamorous this time around."

"I pulled myself together in the hopes of seeing you again."

"I would have preferred your hair down."

“I’ll make a note. Got any cigarettes?”

He shook his head. “Filthy habit. I’m sure your boyfriend says the same thing.”

“Mitch? Mitch loves me smoking.”

“That’s right. Good old Mitch. What do you think of him?”

“That’s a very personal question.”

“Only for Mitch. I bet he’s a fucking asshole. Actually, I know he’s an asshole. It’s a fact. Coroner certified.”

“Coroner certified?”

“It means it’s official. He’s not the guy for you.”

Jess narrowed her eyes at him. “Are you only pretending to be drunk?”

“Haven’t had a drink all night. What are you pretending to be this time?”

Jess thought about it, then smiled. “Interested.”

Blondie tipped his head back and laughed into the night. “And she’s funny.”

Jess took note of his muscular neck, the width of his shoulders, and the V of his chest, and she felt something flutter in her stomach. She’d never been with a body like that. It was what girls were supposed to want, but she’d always been attracted to the personality, not the package. And maybe it was also because when a guy looked like that she automatically counted herself out.

Blondie hadn’t moved, taking a deep breath and exhaling slowly, staring at the stars like if he joined the dots he’d find an answer. And the moment pierced Jess, because it told her something about him she hadn’t expected. But then City Calm Down came on, and his head snapped back.

“Great song,” they said at the same time.

“Wow, one thing in common,” Jess said.

“Let’s go back to your room and find the second.”

This time it was Jess who laughed. “And he’s quick. But we haven’t introduced ourselves.”

He shook his finger at her. “No names.”

“Okay, Blondie.” Jess considered him, tightening her ponytail. “I take it you’re after the jersey. Or are they holding another sweep?”

“What sweep?”

His face was blank, but she wasn’t buying. For all she knew, he could have been one of the three. “The one where the first knight to sleep with a Unity girl wins.”

“That’s a bit presumptuous, Jersey: thinking I want to sleep with you.”

“Not at all. It’s true to your type.”

“My type?”

“A fully paid-up member of the boys’ club. You’d be doing it to teach me a lesson.”

“You’d secretly want it, Jersey. Your type loves my type.”

“Really?” Jess asked, one eyebrow raised. “And what’s my type?”

“Competitive.”

Jess opened her mouth and then closed it again, conceding ground with a smile.

Blondie laughed, but in a nice way, like he appreciated her honesty. “And the smile! It’s all right, Jersey. I guarantee you’ll finish the night disappointed. I’m a reformed man. You won’t be getting any.”

Jess made a coughing noise, searching for a putdown, but was distracted by Leanne and a couple of the other Unity girls taking Richie-the-knight’s arms and pulling him inside. As they did, she spotted Brendan standing in the doorway.

“Oh shit.” She dashed across to the wall beside Blondie, flattening against the bricks.

“You keep saying that. What’s wrong now?” he asked, turning

toward her, which was good because it meant she was blocked from view.

“Nothing, I just—Nothing.”

“Something’s wrong. You’ve gone white,” he said. Jess snuck another glance at Brendan. “Are we hiding from someone?” Blondie asked, looking over his shoulder.

“Don’t,” Jess said in a terse voice. “Please.”

“Indie squid in the doorway?” Blondie asked, his voice sharp. “You should have told me you were with someone else.” He went to move away, and Jess, terrified that he’d leave her exposed, grabbed his arm.

“I’m not with him. We broke up a while ago, but he’s not taking it very well, so please just . . .” She stared at him in a mute appeal, her eyes wide, and eventually he settled back against the wall.

And while they waited for Brendan to go, or to find them, Blondie watched Jess the whole time. But she didn’t care. Because how many times had Brendan accused her of looking at other guys when they’d been together? How many drunken arguments had they had? Him needling her for hours and hours and hours, until she’d wanted to lie and say, yes, he was right, just to get some peace, just to get some sleep. And all those times there’d been nothing, only drama he’d invented. So what would happen if he saw her talking to this guy? Because this time, despite her better instincts, despite even the fact of him being a *knight*, there was more than a flicker of attraction, and Brendan would know it. No matter that they were no longer together, he was still capable of making a scene.

“He’s gone,” Blondie said, and Jess realized he’d swiveled to take another look.

“Are you sure?”

He nodded slowly, eyes narrowed like he was trying to work her out. “That was quite a reaction, Jersey. I’ve got to say I’m surprised.” He paused while Jess finished most of her drink in one

go, the cup rattling against her teeth. “I didn’t think you’d take shit from anybody.”

Jess met his eyes, her expression raw. “You’ve only seen me at my best.”

Something changed then. The tension that was in him released, his face no longer seeming guarded. He studied her with curiosity in his eyes, as if she’d somehow changed shape. And Jess, in turn, remembered how he’d stared up at the night sky, that drawn-out release of breath. She realized he’d told her the truth when he said he hadn’t been drinking, and he hadn’t painted his face blue like the other knights. She wondered if these things meant anything, and the swirl of the world around her quieted.

I doubt it.

He glanced down at his arm, and she saw she was still holding him, but she didn’t let go. He was keeping her grounded. Then he moved, leaning forward until his head was near hers, and she could smell the hot, woody tang of his aftershave. They looked down into the space bracketed by their bodies; they watched him take her drink.

“Do you mind?” he asked. But he didn’t drink from it, just dropped it so he could pull her closer, and there was the warm shock of his skin. He pressed his mouth to her ear, and murmured, “You want me to walk you home?”

“Be my knight in shining armor?”

“Why not? You need one.”

It was all to script, but still Jess hesitated. Then she sighed, heavily, because there was no way to forget about sweeps and challenges and examples that needed to be made. At least it was easier like that: not looking at him.

“Okay,” she said.