

WINNER
TAKE
ALL

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LAURIE DEVORE

{Imprint}
MAKE YOUR MARK

NEW YORK



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If you take this book, keep in mind—you're starting a game you will never win. And you're not the only one willing to play dirty.

1

I can't stop staring at the back of Jackson Hart's head.

Trust me, it's something that most of the girls (and I'm sure some of the boys) at Cedar Woods Preparatory Academy would admit to—in fact, a few have probably made it a pastime. But I have very little interest in the back of Jackson Hart's head or much else about him. I'm not staring because Jackson Hart is six foot two with hair so dark it might as well be black, or because of his pretty blue eyes and tanned skin, altogether making him look like a beautiful boy raised on the river. I couldn't care less that he's amazing at baseball or can talk any girl out of her dress faster than you can say *skinny-dipping*. And you'd never catch me saying Jackson Hart is charming, though I might admit he's too smart for his own good.

I'm staring because what's coming out of his mouth right now is so ridiculous, I can't believe it's real.

"I mean, at its heart, isn't *The Scarlet Letter* really about our worst impulses as a society?" Jackson is saying. "Puritanical viewpoints controlling female sexuality? We always seek out what's forbidden. Alcohol. Sex. Sin. And then we condemn those who want it. Commit violence in the name of hypocrisy. One could argue it's a historical dystopia."

"That's an interesting point, Jackson," Mrs. Wesley says.

I can't take it. I raise my hand.

"Yes, Miss Becker," Mrs. Wesley says.

The thing is, I can't let something so utterly, immensely wrong go unchallenged. And no one knows that better than Jackson Hart.

"On a fundamental level," I say, and the class's eyes turn to me, "calling *The Scarlet Letter* a historical dystopia doesn't make any sense, since that's how things *were* in the past. Most times in history would be considered dystopias by today's standards."

"Well, of course this kind of puritanical viewpoint doesn't feel as reality-based for Nell, but consider reading this in conjunction with something like *The Handmaid's Tale* and examining it from that angle. As for Nell, she's so perfect that she doesn't experience temptation," Jackson says, and the class laughs. I bite the inside of my cheek. "Which is, of course, an admirable quality, but maybe limits her ability to relate to the point I'm making—"

"I understand the point just fine." I cut him off. "And yes, I agree that Hester Prynne is asked to bear the sins of a puritanical society, with its secrets and hypocrisy—but your reducing the entire thing to 'keeping female sexuality down' and equating that with all of society's worst impulses is so completely intellectually lazy, especially in relation to *The Handmaid's Tale*. What about Hester's own agency? She chose to have sex, and she lives with that decision. Look at the way she isn't afraid of these men who are so terrified of *her*. She's not *ashamed*. She bears the brunt of what she and Dimmesdale did and what all the men around her have done. And that's why you're just fundamentally wrong."

Jackson looks back and grins with all of his white, white teeth, his thick dark hair effortlessly messy on his head. He's always purposely baiting me in this class. His whole face comes to life when refutes me—just last month, we had it out over the role of imperialism in the absolutely wretched *Heart of Darkness*. He enjoys it: the way our classmates always turn on me, the fact that he can pull any ridiculous interpretation out of his ass and everyone—even the teachers—will be mesmerized by his words. The way I can't ignore him.

I won't stop until I win. It's my fatal flaw, and Jackson Hart reads me like a book.

He's a monster.

"I just think if Nell were to take a step back and see things from, I don't know, *my* perspective," he continues now, "she could see why this still feels so relevant and hits home in an environment like Prep."

"Yes, let's hear how the twenty-first-century rich boy relates to the nineteenth-century man writing about feminism through the lens of male pain. Spare me."

"The isolation Hester suffers for her actions—"

"Is just a punishment for having sex and being a woman, you said that already," I tell him. "I know. *We all know*. Seriously, Jackson, no one believes you read the book."

I appeal to Mrs. Wesley as Jackson turns away from me in his seat, looking, if anything, more pleased than when we began the conversation. "Surely you can't buy this."

I can feel the rest of the class laughing at me. Know-it-all Nell Becker. Boring, perfect Nell Becker who wears her school uniform exactly as per regulations. Whose mom is head of school and whose family is hilariously middle class.

Boring, perfect Nell Becker doesn't even belong here.

Mrs. Wesley is looking at me as if what I'm doing is horrifying. "Mr. Hart is making a solid analysis, Nell. To presume he didn't read the book because he disagreed with you is not scholarly and not acceptable in this classroom."

One of Jackson's best friends, Doug Rivera, is laughing behind his hand because he knows the same thing we all do. Jackson couldn't give a shit about *The Scarlet Letter* and he certainly wouldn't waste his valuable time reading it. Not when he could be out being a Quintessential Rich Kid, drinking and getting laid and being his typical giving-zero-fucks self.

Except Jackson somehow manages to stay right behind me in

the class rankings, sleepwalking through class with perfect grades. Sometimes I swear he does it just to annoy me, too.

“I think you need to apologize,” Mrs. Wesley says.

I sit back in my seat, waiting.

“Nell?”

I almost laugh. She can’t be serious. “You think *I* need to apologize?”

“Yes, to Jackson.”

I do laugh.

“It’s fine, Mrs. Wesley,” he has the nerve to say. “Don’t worry about it.”

“*Nell?*” she repeats.

The only thing I can’t stand more than the idea of Jackson getting away with the world’s most absurd faux-feminist nonreading of *The Scarlet Letter* is the idea that I might be the one to get in trouble because of it. I bite back the thrum of anger coursing through my veins as I say, “My apologies, Jackson. Your reading of the book is certainly just as . . . valid as mine, if somewhat shallow.” A piece of auburn hair has escaped my long, messy ponytail and I moodily attempt to shove it back into place.

“Thank you,” Mrs. Wesley says. I feel the happiness radiating off the class. Perfect, know-it-all Nell Becker got what was coming to her.

“Clearly this book has inspired passion in some of you, which is all I could ever really ask for as an English teacher.” As Mrs. Wesley turns to walk to the front of the room, spouting nonsense, Jackson looks over his shoulder one last time and winks at me.

The bell rings ten minutes later and I shove my used copy of *The Scarlet Letter* into my worn-out book bag, stalking out the door before anyone else can say something preposterous to me. I stop at my locker halfway down the hall and switch the book out for my precalc and biology textbooks.

“You know, it’s really simple, actually,” says a smooth voice to my right. Jackson is leaning into the locker next to mine, watching me.

“In the environment of *The Scarlet Letter*, a man could show half the mental fortitude and bravery of a woman—if any at all—and would be praised for it. A society that praises male voices over female ones. I was only testing the text in a modern setting.”

I slam my locker door. “Are you seriously trying to make me believe you were being a jackass as some kind of clever meta statement on society?”

“I thought it was a compliment,” Jackson tells me with a shrug. “The patriarchy is keeping you down, Nell. I didn’t even read the CliffsNotes.”

“Really? Were those above your reading level, too?”

“Oh, come on, Becker,” Jackson says. “I’m one measly hundredth of a GPA point behind you.”

I decide to exit the conversation, marching away from him down the hall, my fingertips skimming the edge of my navy plaid uniform skirt. He tails me like some sort of megalomaniacal puppy. He’s got two inches on me tops, so I take the steps two at a time to make sure he has to work a little to keep up. “Do you want something?”

“You shouldn’t let me get to you.”

I stop so fast he almost walks right past me. I face him. “You honestly think *you* get to me?” I can feel the heat building, my fair skin turning red.

He grins. “I know it.”

“You’re delusional. We both know I’m the best, and deep down, you can’t stand it.”

“You can’t stop arguing with me, can you?” he asks as if he’s genuinely excited by the prospect. “You want to feel like you’re somehow superior to me even though we both know that I’m enjoying life in a way you can’t even imagine. Someday I’ll look back and have interesting stories to tell, and all you’ll be able to talk about is when you were stressing over my fake interpretation of *The Scarlet Letter*. That’s kindergarten-level jealousy, Becker.”

It is physically painful to stop myself from arguing again, but I have to let it go. It's a psychological game: If I don't let him have the last word, I'll be proving him right.

Instead, I roll my eyes, walking around him to my class. My skin is practically vibrating with irritation against the textbook I'm holding, as if the book itself is holding me together. And I realize that, by not getting the last word, he still got me—I can't win.

Dammit.

I glance behind me to see he's already engaged in something else, his arm thrown around one of his friends as they walk away, talking animatedly, as if whatever he's saying is the best thing anyone's ever said.

I hate everything about him.

2

I hit the ground hard, diving for a ball on my left side, and then roll back over my right shoulder, getting both my feet back under me as I spring up again, teetering slightly.

“Too slow, Becker,” Coach Madison yells at me, slamming the volleyball with her open-handed palm, the *crack* telling me to clear out of the way. I shake my head, running to the end of the line behind Lia, towering over her by about eight inches.

“You’re fine,” Lia Reagan says preemptively. I sigh, tugging on my ponytail. “You’re *fine*,” she repeats because she knows I need to hear it. I wish I didn’t. “You rolled over the wrong shoulder. It would’ve been faster over your left but you’re afraid to go to your weak side.”

“I’m not *focused*,” I say, my voice rising with frustration.

“Anything to do with your little tête-à-tête with Jackson Hart in Mrs. Wesley’s class today?” Lia asks, careful not to smile.

“You heard about that?” I ask, staring straight ahead as I edge back to the front of the line. Lia dives for the ball ahead of me, her curly blond hair bouncing on top of her head.

As I take my turn, I swear Coach Madison puts my ball five feet farther out than anyone else’s has been, but I do my very best to catch up to it, flipping over again. Not bad.

Lia turns around to me once I follow her to the end of the line. There’s a bruise blooming against the pale skin on her knee. “Everyone was talking about it.”

“About how I’m a freak?”

Lia doesn’t look me in the eye. “People just think you’re intense.”

“Right.” I nod. “Intense.”

Coach Madison blows her whistle, signaling the end of practice. She gathers the team in a circle and proceeds to tell us we’re “shit,” yelling so much, I’m worried she may go into labor. Spring conditioning is supposed to go through the end of the school year, but there’s no way she won’t have the baby before then. We have club ball practice—our competitive summer league—starting up soon, but not soon enough, considering our first major tournament of the summer is in less than two months. All the biggest college scouts from around the country will be there. I’ve been training overtime for it: runs in the morning and conditioning plus spring drills with the volleyball team in the afternoon.

It never feels like enough.

Coach Madison releases us, and Lia and I walk side by side back to the locker room like we always do. “Why did you get into it with him again? After the great *Heart of Darkness* meltdown of April, I thought you weren’t going to do that anymore. Because it’s not worth it, remember? Any of this ringing a bell?”

“Should I let him spit out lies, then?” I ask. “Like complete nonsensical bullshit? Is that *fine*?”

“It’s fine with everyone else,” Lia says, reaching into her locker. I can tell she’s trying not to laugh.

“Y’all talking about Jackson?” our other middle hitter, Michonne Tyler, asks from the locker next to mine, shaking her braids out of her ponytail. I yank my gym bag free.

“No,” I mutter.

“I heard you won the argument, even though no one knew what you were talking about,” Michonne says. I grin to myself.

“See?” Michonne tells Lia. “I know how to make Nell happy.” Michonne is the only other Prep player on our club team. Her dad is

an investment banker, a prominent member of the southeast chapter of the National Association of Black Finance, and her mom a well-known artist, a Taiwanese immigrant. Like most people at Prep, *Michonne* has been tapped to grow up to “be somebody.”

“*See, Lia?*” I ask.

Michonne grabs her gym bag, pushing it up onto her shoulder. Her naturally light brown skin has darkened from days on the river, a telltale sign of the upcoming summer break. “I’ll see y’all later,” she says, throwing one last look at us.

“It’s pointless, Nell,” Lia singsongs to me as her locker door closes.

I sigh, giving in at last. “I know.”

“Do you?” she asks, almost under her breath, still shaking her head.

“*What?*” I ask.

“Nell. You’re obsessed with him.”

“Oh, get off it,” I respond, closing my locker with more force than necessary. I shove my fingers through my hair, pushing it back. “Exams are in a few weeks and he’s breathing down my neck. He’s just trying to get under my skin. And his whole ‘I don’t care’ thing is such bullshit. He has to study sometime. He can’t be *that* much smarter than me.”

Lia looks at me with a slightly kinder expression, something like pity. “He’s not. You’ll beat him. Don’t stress so much.” She touches the side of my face. “It’ll get stuck like that.”

I swat her hand away playfully, and hip-bump her. I know she means well.

“Are we riding with Taylor?” I ask, putting my armor back up. The exposed cracks feel too much like weakness.

I’d ridden to school with my mom this morning—Mom made a comment about how it was probably a good idea I get in early to study and *have you thought about putting on some lipstick?*—but Lia usually gives me a ride home from practice. But her car is in the shop this week, so her brother is giving us a ride.

She nods and starts walking to the exit of the locker room. I follow her.

Outside, we hear the sound of the spring sports under way. Tennis racquets hitting balls hard, a pitching machine whirring on the softball field in the distance, and the sound of a baseball colliding with a catcher's mitt. All of the equipment state of the art, all the athletes top caliber, built on years of private lessons paid for by their parents. Cedar Woods Prep—the most hated school in lower-state South Carolina.

They pay the best athletes to come to their school—we can't compete with their facilities, the public school parents say. *They have donors; they'll always win.*

I know what the public schools kids hear. I used to be one of them.

Before Mom got the head job here, that was me, always a couple of steps behind the Prep volleyball players on the court. I may have been the cream of the crop at Cedar Woods Middle School, but that wasn't enough. I had transferred to Prep with Mom and done what I did best, risen to the top. I may have been the middle-class head of school's jumped-up daughter, rated only slightly higher than the scholarship kids in everyone's minds, but even in a world where legacy kids were always expected to win, I never went down without a fight. I still remember my first meeting with the freshman guidance counselor on my first day, staring down at my transcript.

"Smart girl," he said. "You'll fit in just fine here—keep your head down, and Cedar Woods' prestige will put you on your way to a good college."

I remember, too, scanning the sophomores', juniors', and seniors' class rankings posted right outside the admin hall. At the top, all the boys. Right next to pamphlets for the best schools in the country. Not just *good* colleges.

He'd had no idea: I don't fit in, and I don't keep my head down.

Luckily, even in a place where I didn't make friends easily, I had Lia, who oftentimes still thinks she's protecting me from myself. We'd

been best friends since I moved to Prep freshmen year and have played volleyball on the same club team for longer than that.

In the bull pen off the baseball field, Lia's twin brother, Taylor, is throwing pitches. He's much taller than Lia, almost exactly the same height as me and built skinny as a rail, like his mom. The twins' freckles, blue eyes, and curly blond hair match up perfectly, though, and their pale skin picks up color with even the most limited exposure to the summer sun. Each of Taylor's pitches hits the catcher's mitt with a loud *thwop*. Lia and I make our way over and I prop my chin up on the yellow plastic covering the top of the fence, watching him go. I've heard he throws high nineties on a good day.

He doesn't look at me, but I think he sees me when he sends one way over his catcher's head.

"What was that, Reagan?" I call with a grin, goading him.

"He doesn't perform well under pressure," Jackson, who is of course the star catcher, calls out, fetching the ball. He sheds his mask before throwing the ball back to Taylor.

Lia catches my eye, smiling. "You gonna be done anytime soon?" she asks Taylor. He catches the ball from Jackson, looking annoyed.

"Give me fifteen," he says.

"Okay," she says just to me. "In that case, I'm going to go see if I can catch Andrea before she leaves. She said she'd lend me her history notes."

I nod. She runs off, and I sit back on a hill leading down to the baseball field, admiring the grass, which is perfectly maintained by the Prep grounds crew. I watch Taylor throw a couple more pitches before I pull out my bio textbook and start reading that night's assignment.

"We're done," someone says around the time I hit the third page. I look up to see Jackson, walking up the hill with a bat bag over his shoulder. "You look pretty transfixed," he goes on. "Most exciting thing that's happened to you all week?"

"Yeah. Totally." I slam the book shut.

“Do you ever stop studying?” he asks, nudging my book with his foot. I yank it away and slide it back into my bag. “That’s cute. Almost as cute as it’s going to be when I take valedictorian.” I push myself up from the ground, putting my bag over my shoulder. “Sorry,” I tell him. “My time spent engaging with you for the day has officially run out.”

He grins. “I had a chance to speak to the illustrious Mrs. Becker today.”

“Right.”

He goes to leave, but then turns all the way around, talking to me while walking backward with an amused look on his face. “She says I’m a compelling young man.”

“I’m sure she didn’t mean it as a compliment.”

“Probably not,” he concedes. Then, with a smile like poison: “Bye, Nell.”

I go the other way down the hill, annoyed again. I hate that he knows how to get under my skin.

Taylor is coming through the gate as I reach it. “You look pissed,” he says.

“Jackson,” I reply. That’s enough. As Lia’s twin, Taylor’s known me long enough to know the way I feel about Jackson. Our lives have always intersected at sleepovers at the Reagan house, long trips to volleyball tournaments, and questionable bouts of teenage rebellion. To Taylor, I’m another one of Lia’s extremities. He gives me a half smile as we walk toward his car.

“Did you hear he broke up with Shauna?” Taylor asks.

Shauna Meyers is a cute junior with a huge house on the river. Her family has something like two boats and three Jet Skis, and she’d been latched on to Jackson like a parasite for the past three months. “Can’t believe that didn’t work out,” I say, like I absolutely can believe that.

Taylor chuckles. “I can’t help but wonder how he does it. How he gets away with it.”

“With what?”

“Shauna’s, what? His third girlfriend of the school year?”

Fourth. But I’m not going to admit I know that.

Taylor continues on. “He treats girls like they’re disposable and yet there’s always one waiting to be next in line. You know he’s not good to them. He’s way too self-involved.”

“That’s psychology I can’t even imagine digging into,” I return. I hear the arrogance in my own voice, judging those girls. “But I kind of do know how he does it. He sees through people to what they want and gives it to them. They *need* to believe him. You should have heard the interpretation of *The Scarlet Letter* he gave in class today. It was complete nonsense but he had Mrs. Wesley eating out of his hand.” I actually *have* spent a lot of time thinking about it. Too much, clearly.

Taylor laughs, running his hand through his hair. “Oh my God, are you still on about that?”

“Don’t be an asshole.”

“I heard a phenomenal retelling of the whole incident from Doug Rivera earlier.”

“This school is too small,” I say as we get to Taylor’s SUV. He hits the Unlock button.

“You’re right, though,” Taylor says. “Everyone at this school fawns all over Jackson like he’s the Second Coming—and, like, just because he’s good at stuff, we’re all supposed to worship him?”

I step up onto the passenger’s side floorboard, watching Taylor over the car. “I thought you liked him.”

“I guess he’s fine,” Taylor says, hedging. It’s so aggressively Taylor—he’s the definition of nice, which will get you run over in this world. He’s all floppy hair and easygoing smiles and he wants to like everyone.

What a waste of time.

Finally, Taylor sums it up. “But he gets whatever he wants. He does whatever he wants.”

To be honest, that’s pretty rich coming from Taylor. The Reagans may not have as much money as the Harts, but they’re on the “rolling in

it” side of well-off. Their house had its own spread in *Charleston Home+Design* last year. Before his dad started making headlines for other reasons.

“I think it’s pretty simple. He believes he deserves whatever he gets, so everyone else believes it, too,” I explain to him. “I keep trying to use that strategy myself, only everyone thinks I’m an overeager bitch.”

“You’re not, though,” Taylor says sincerely, as if I wasn’t just deflecting my jealousy. “You’re smart. You can see through him and most people can’t. Even people I really like.”

I can’t help but think it then. That I want to pry underneath the surface of Jackson and tear him apart, examine the pieces. Find what makes him weak and use it. I want to beat him.

I’m *going* to beat him.

“Can you imagine that kind of power?” I ask him, hearing the longing in my own voice.

“You’ll have all the power you want one day,” he answers me confidently.

“Taylor!” Lia yells in the distance, and we both look up as she comes running from the fields. “Are you leaving me?”

I give him a smile as if Jackson doesn’t matter at all and slide into the front seat.

3

Mom's still at work when I get home, and Dad's grilling burgers on the back porch. Already changed into gym shorts and a T-shirt, with a beer in one hand, he looks more like himself than he ever does in the suits he wears to work. I dump my backpack and gym bag on the kitchen floor and go out to join him.

"There she is," Dad says as I lean over his shoulder to check out the burgers. "Don't sweat on the goods."

I laugh, falling into a chair at the table on the screened-in porch. "How was your day?"

"Finally got an offer on this house I've had on the market for the last month," Dad tells me as he flips a burger. Well. That explains the good mood.

"Congrats," I say as he chugs his beer. He's built tall and stocky, like me but with lighter hair, a rounder face. I look sharp; he looks kind.

"I think it's the worst stretch I've had since I started," he goes on, explaining himself to me like I've questioned his commitment. "Even during the recession, I was making my numbers, but with the way everyone's using the Internet now, it's different." He sighs. "But enough about me. How was school, kid?"

I start to answer him, but the sound of the door opening as Mom comes onto the porch distracts me. She's still in her Head of School Mary Becker pantsuit with a crisp white sleeveless blouse and her stockinged feet, only missing her jacket and shoes. Mom's back is always

straight. She doesn't need to ask for respect—everything about her demands it.

“Nell, can you please not throw your bags in the middle of the floor when you come in? I almost tripped over them.” She goes to Dad and grabs the beer from his hand, taking a swig, and gives it back to him. She turns to me. “Oh, honey, you look exhausted.”

I wilt under her gaze. That doesn't sound like a compliment.

She sits in the chair opposite me but I can feel her gaze all over me. “Your mascara's running,” she says after a minute.

I wipe it away with the pad of my thumb, black streaks rubbing off onto my skin. “So it is. Thank you for pointing that out.” My words are flat.

Mom's eyes flick back and forth over the rest of me, looking for imperfections, no doubt. She leans against the rocking chair, sliding her feet onto the chair so that it sways with her shift. “I got a text ten minutes ago. Coach Madison went into premature labor. She told me earlier that she thought it would be a good idea to give you girls the rest of the spring off, and with so little of the semester left, I tend to agree.”

I blow out a long, loud breath, tugging at the roots of my hair. “I'm going to have to figure out another way to keep in shape until club season starts.”

She levels a look at me, and I can tell I said the right thing. “I can ask Coach Montoya if you could work out with the baseball team during seventh period. I heard his conditioning is tough. And you can keep up drilling with Lia. It's not like you've got anything useful to do after school now that the yearbook's done, right?”

It's not like whatever it was would meet her definition of *useful* if I did. Besides, working out with the boys would probably be a good challenge for me. “Do you think he'll mind?” I ask, noncommittal. I don't completely love the idea that I could potentially make a fool of myself in front of them, either.

“I don't care if he minds,” she says. “It's my school and despite

what anyone in this community thinks, girls get the same opportunities as boys.” She shrugs. “Being in charge has its advantages.”

Dad snickers, but I watch her. It’s strange, but I teeter right on the edge so much of the time. Of whether I want to please her or be her.

Dad comes to stand over Mom’s chair. “I don’t know. It might not be a bad idea if Nell took a break from constant training for a couple of weeks with exams coming up. She could use the study time. And the break, to be honest.”

“Hmm.” Mom frowns. “Is that what you’d prefer?”

My eyes move back and forth between the two of them, feeling like I’m caught in some game. I grapple with the suddenly too intense feeling that I don’t know what I’m supposed to want at all, and that feeling weighs on me, my mind racing away. *Breathe. Nell. Think. Nell.* “I shouldn’t take a break this close to club season,” I say at last, and I see the way Mom’s eyes shift ever so slightly. I breathe. But Dad watches me steadily, and I almost hear what he doesn’t say.

“There’s something else I heard,” Mom continues, grabbing Dad’s beer again. “I think they’re adding another charge to Arnold Reagan’s trial.”

I try not to react. “Where did you hear that from?”

“One of the teachers. And if it’s reached them, God knows how long it’s been buzzing around.”

“How are Lia and Taylor doing?” Dad asks. I can tell he feels as uncomfortable as I do.

“I guess the good news is that rich people never have to go to prison for very long,” I say.

“Don’t be callous,” Mom says, and then I can’t stand feeling like I’m not doing right by either of them. Sometimes I don’t know how else to be but callous, to force my emotions off.

“I need to go study,” I tell them, pushing through the door back into the house.

4

When one of the richest families in town is prosecuting one of the most established families in town, school functions get complicated fast. Lia and I are at Taylor's baseball game the next night, seated on the opposing team's side to avoid the Proctors. Columbus Proctor is Cedar Wood's starting shortstop, six and a half feet tall with a smile that could break your heart. The Proctors are one of the few black families at Prep, but we aren't supposed to talk about it. Besides Michonne, who is mixed race, there is only one other black student in the entire junior class, and I'd heard white classmates make jokes in front of all three of them that they wouldn't dare make in polite company. The lack of diversity was old, ingrained into the walls, and chipped away only little by little. Columbus's dad, Everett, is a retired NFL lineman and current motivational speaker, twice as big as most of the parents in Cedar Woods, with a laugh to match. I'd seen so many of the other parents suck up to him to his face, reliving his best college and professional plays, and then mock his rags-to-riches story and family barbecues behind his back, as if he wasn't as smart as them despite the fact he'd graduated cum laude from Georgia. Columbus's mom, Carla Proctor, is the lead solicitor for our district—the lead solicitor who brought corruption charges against the mayor two months ago.

That would be Mayor Arnold Reagan. Lia and Taylor's dad.

The truth is, these little soapy family dramas aren't exactly uncommon in Cedar Woods. Mom jokes that she has to track shifting

allegiances and newly formed enemies among the parents like a list of dramatis personae in the front of a fantasy novel. But this one had shaken the community—the Reagan family had always had a pristine reputation; Lia and Taylor’s dad had followed in the footsteps of Reagan mayors before him, an upstanding rich man who still cared about the little people.

And there, on the other side of the field, fiercely independent Carla Proctor, dressed in her Cedar Woods Knights best. I can still remember her election commercials—her smiling, someone who actually felt like a real person, like you or me, who’d married into money and was going to use that influence to take down the self-satisfied Cedar Woods government. The Cedar Woods electorate—who, up to that point, had always been smart enough to do what they’d been told—had rebelled and elected her, and she’d done exactly what she promised.

I’d never tell Lia, but I so admired her.

Mom would say it was a low goal to aspire to: to *marry* into your wealth and then choose to be a public servant. I guess that’s true. But, I think, as I so often do, that the chance to bring down these people who’ve had the world handed to them on a platter would be worth it, especially boys like Jackson. There had been a scandal in Cedar Woods when I was in middle school—a hazing by the now-defunct Cedar Woods lacrosse team that had left a scholarship student named Bryce McCabe dead, with no one sure exactly what had happened. His teammates said Bryce had been walking along the railing of the bridge across the river and fallen in, hitting his head on the way down. His family said he’d never have been on the railing if he wasn’t forced.

Tensions had been high at the time, but the boys were never charged with anything, despite the family’s pleas. I saw one of them had been hired at a prominent tech company recently.

Prep hired Mom the next year, mostly to get the town off its back, to look like they were cleaning up the toxic-masculinity culture that had permeated the school for years. She was the first ever female head

of school. Since Prep had gone coed only twenty years earlier, it was an even bigger deal.

I still think about Bryce sometimes when I'm driving over the river, crossing that divide. I wonder if Carla Proctor does, too.

I wonder if she was thinking of Bryce when she filed the charges against Mr. Reagan.

I pull myself back into the present as Taylor throws the final pitch of the game—I could tell it would be from the way it left his hand. The batter swings desperately but the ball is already hitting Jackson's glove. Jackson throws off his helmet, running forward and giving Taylor a high five before literally jumping into Columbus's arms. Of course, Jackson has to display his best friendship like he's performing in an exceptionally entertaining movie about himself. Taylor and Columbus avoid each other as the rest of the boys congratulate one another on their natural winner genes and superiority. I glance at Lia and catch her watching everyone cheering on the Cedar Woods side of the field with longing. Without thinking about it, I reach my hand across to hers and grab it. She looks down gratefully.

"It's fine," she tells me. It's her common refrain.

Normally, Taylor's girlfriend, Amanda Yee, would at least come over during the game and sit with us for a couple of innings, but she's already left for the weekend to visit her little brother, who has been in the hospital in Charleston for the past two weeks, receiving treatment for leukemia. Somehow, without her bubbiness around, the whole thing feels even more miserable.

As the team exits the dugout, Lia and I hang back waiting for Taylor. I haven't seen either of their parents at a game this season. Mr. Reagan is still for all intents and purposes the mayor, but completely out of the public eye. Annie Reagan, on the other hand, has fallen back into her worst habit. Namely, the project of replacing her entire bloodstream with white wine.

But still, there are plenty of Cedar Woods residents on the Reagans'

side because well-off and white doesn't fold easily—they weren't likely to say it out loud, but Mom told me many of the Prep parents implied to her that they thought Carla Proctor had taken it too far. I tried not to take sides, here more for Lia's emotional support.

The boys file out slowly. It's the usual crowd of parents; I've been to enough games to have a pretty good idea about exactly who is too checked into their kids' lives, who isn't at all, and the small few with good sense. But tonight there are two I don't recognize: A tiny little waif of a woman with salon bottle-blond hair, her skin still a little pallid under makeup, and her tall, dark, and handsome husband. He'd been on his phone for the entire game.

Jackson and Columbus come out of the dugout together. I find myself studying the easy way Jackson carries happiness on his shoulders, always seeming so carefree. Columbus's parents go over to them, Mrs. Proctor giving Jackson a hug. Then I see Jackson seeing the other couple, and shake the Proctors off in the nicest, easiest way before approaching the other two. Of course, now that they are next to one another, the relationship comes into stark focus. He's an older version of Jackson, the way his mouth moves, his gestures. His hair is graying slightly, and he's wearing a jacket with no tie. Jackson stands straighter in front of his dad than I've ever seen him.

"You were great, honey," his mom says, her voice slight. He gives her a smile that would probably melt a lesser person's heart. He glances over at his dad and then averts his eyes.

"I'm glad y'all came," he says to them. Even though I can acknowledge something deeply depraved in it, I can't stop watching him. Like I'm looking through a funhouse mirror at a different version of Jackson Hart, one who's missing color around the edges, who lacks clarity. "Hungry?" he asks then, putting his arm around his mom like a person who's overcompensating. "I'll take you to dinner. My treat. Maybe Dad will even look up from his phone when the food comes out."

His mom is totally enthralled by him, I can tell, but his dad's face

doesn't twitch in the slightest. "Do you have to be cute about every goddamn thing?" he asks, as if he's been holding it in the whole time.

"There it is," Jackson says. He glances over at me, and I look away. "That was fun. What did that take, Dad, only two minutes?"

His dad sighs, takes his phone back out, and starts walking toward the parking lot. His mom hardly falters at all. "Don't be like that. He always looked up when you were coming to bat." She touches his cheek. "You're so talented, my dear."

His eyes are soft. "Thanks, Mom." He kisses her on the cheek. "I'll meet you in the car," he says in a way that is clear he is dismissing her, and she seems more than happy to be dismissed. She walks the way his dad went, and Jackson stands there, alone. He smiles at Columbus's parents as they file by and grabs on to Columbus's hand as he passes. I see Columbus's eyes go to Lia and me, and as if he can't help it, he says, "Hey, Nell. Hey, Lia. Hope y'all have a nice night," and then his mom puts her arm around him and they head in the direction of the cars.

Lia sighs, rubbing her hands over her arms. "Where is Taylor?" she asks.

I glance at Jackson again, standing still, eyes on the ground. His hands are working at his side, his fingers twisting around one another. And then he sees me watching him; a light clicks into place behind his eyes.

Taylor comes out of the dugout and Jackson looks away, staring down at his hand, flexing it into a fist. "Hey," Taylor says, bending to give his sister a hug. "Thanks for waiting."

"Nice pitching, Reagan," I compliment him.

He gives me a weak smile. "Thanks." Then to Lia, "You okay?"

She shakes her head and says something quietly back to him, and I step over to give them their space.

"What'd you think?" Jackson calls to me then, his voice low.

I look off, away from him. "About what?"

He puts both hands out at his sides. “The show.”

I know he’s referring to his parents and I force all my features into a straight line. “You’re always exactly who I think you are, Jackson.”

He tips his cap at me and then follows everyone else, whistling all the while.

It’s unfair of him, really, even at his worst, to barely flinch at all.

• • •

My family has always jokingly referred to the Reagans’ house as the White House for obvious reasons. Namely that it’s white—shining white—and because their status as the First Family of Cedar Woods has been around longer than I have.

It’s less funny now, with the Reagan name so tarnished.

Lia, Taylor, and I are spread out on Mrs. Reagan’s exorbitantly expensive white couch eating pizza and watching a movie. Taylor has mixed himself a vodka and something, and he’s finding the lines in the movie funnier as time goes on.

After a particularly loud guffaw, Lia cuts her eyes at him. “You need to put that back in the liquor cabinet,” she tells him. “And lock it.”

“So she can drive to the store? Brilliant idea,” Taylor says, his voice meaner than usual.

I’ve seen the current look on Lia’s face often—it’s when she’s ready to destroy someone. “I think this type of behavior is called *mimicry*.”

Taylor stares at her, his eyes narrowed, and sips his drink.

“You’re going through a stressful situation, so you’re drinking to deal with it. Like Mom,” Lia goes on, as if explaining it to him will help.

“Lia,” I start.

“What?” She throws her hands up. “I’m the bad guy for pointing out the self-destructive tendencies in this fucking family?”

“No, Lia, as ever, you’re the one true hero for us all,” Taylor replies.

“Oh, you’re one to talk,” she snaps. “It’s not like people didn’t notice you not speaking to Columbus the entire game.”

Taylor laughs, flattening his back on the couch. “Or you sitting on the opposing team’s bleachers. I mean, poor Columbus. How does he make it through his day knowing the family his mom’s ruining won’t talk to him?”

“We need to maintain appearances.”

“And that’s what I do,” Taylor says, “for the other twenty-two hours of the day. I won the game for us, didn’t I? Look at me. I’m fucking perfect. Now let me have a couple of minutes to not be.”

My eyes go back and forth between the two of them. My family is all passive-aggressive insults and usually the Reagans work the same way, so this outright hostility between Lia and Taylor isn’t something I’m used to.

There’s been a lot of it lately.

Lia turns off the movie, flouncing through the family room and out the back door. I give Taylor a look and move to follow her.

“It’s *one* drink, Nell!” he calls behind me. I hear him reaching for the remote as I follow Lia outside.

The Reagans’ backyard is pristine, the local landscapers visiting once a week to keep everything clean. Mom keeps a garden in our backyard, but it’s a mess of mismatched plants and trees growing in unexpected directions, twisting around one another, the pruning somewhat sporadic. But in Mrs. Reagan’s garden, everything has a place: rows are planted carefully, and shrubbery is maintained as if it’s open for public viewing. There’s a table and chairs on the patio, with a brick path cutting through the garden and leading toward a koi pond.

Lia is standing at the pond, staring down into it. I go stand beside her and look down, but the fish are doing the same old thing they always are. I wait a moment.

“I’ve always hated these fish,” she says to me, not looking up. “Whenever Mom is sober, she becomes obsessed with them. She’s always all, ‘But what about the fish?’ and ‘Who will take care of the fish?’ and out here feeding them and shit, and I’m like, you know, where is that

ounce of care for me? Would she like me better if I was a fucking fish? Because then I wouldn't be quite so complicated, right? I would just swim around and eat. That'd be ideal for her, don't you think?" She glances up at me. "If Taylor and I didn't feel anything, and were just here to calm her and be perfect. And we both try. So. Damn. Hard."

"Do you want to kill one?" I ask her. "We could get like a fishing rod or something."

Her whole face shifts into disgust. "*What?*"

I shrug. "I don't know. You hate the fish, and I'm a problem solver."

She laughs. A little bit at first, and then it keeps building until she's laughing so hard she doubles over, taking in small hiccups of breath. The more she laughs, the funnier it gets, and then I can't stop laughing, either. We collapse next to each other on the ground beside the pond, Lia's curly hair tickling my skin. Our laughter fades out slowly, along with the sunlight. Finally, Lia manages to say, "You are so twisted." She pushes a tear from under her eye. "And that was a really poetic speech, too."

"I know," I tell her. "It was good. I was honestly moved."

"To commit fish murder," she says with another laugh. "Which you'd rather do than talk about my feelings, apparently."

"I'm sorry." I squeeze her shoulder. "I didn't know what to say."

"Clearly." Her smile fades slightly. "Do you think Taylor's okay?"

"He's fine," I tell her, confident. "Taylor's so even-keeled all the time, of course he needs to act out every now and then. If he didn't, he would explode."

"This is going to be the death of us all." She sighs, staring up at the pink-streaked sky. "Sometimes, I wish I could be more like you. Know what I want, not be so caught up in appearances."

I glance at the back of the house, at Mr. Reagan's dimly lit office window and then at Mrs. Reagan's dark bedroom window. I don't see much of either of them anymore, even less than before—which still hadn't been that frequently.

“It’s not as great as it looks,” I admit to her at last. But Lia knows. That’s why she’s always trying to pull me back from the edge.

“You get to be your own person in the world. Not so tangled up in who your parents are. Do you know what my mom would say to me if she found out I was telling off Jackson Hart in English class? ‘No one wants to marry a girl like that.’”

I laugh, loud. “To be fair, she’s probably right.”

“‘Be smart but not too smart. Be a leader but step aside. Be an athlete but never look too strong.’ It isn’t all about the trial. It’s about playing a part, and I’m tired of it. Taylor, too. Mom and Dad can go make a scene whenever they like, but we’re not worth anything unless we look good.”

I shrug. “You don’t have to play a part for me.”

“It’s nice,” Lia answers. “To really feel like myself sometimes.” She sits up, hugging her legs.

“Why don’t we watch a really bad movie?” I suggest. “Or you could tell me more about all your feelings. I don’t know. Whichever.”

She laughs again, a crisp sound in the settling dark.

5

Smoke curls into the air, fire reaching out and grabbing at every last bit of wood on the bonfire at the Waccamaw River shore. I watch it go up up up in flames, everyone stepping back as much as they can from the heat because it's way too damn hot on an April Tuesday night this close to the beach.

"Burn, baby, burn," Lia says, falling into my side and pushing me away. I laugh, shoving her back.

The bonfire marks the beginning of spring sports playoffs this week, when the proud Knights of Cedar Woods Prep will destroy every poor bumpkin school in the state of South Carolina who deemed themselves worthy to put another team on the field. It is a metaphorical funeral, really, for the hopes and dreams of those sickeningly average kids who would never be asked to stand in the heat with Prep's best and brightest.

"You look like you're having a dark thought," Lia says to me then. The flames dance in my eyes. "No more than usual."

"Are you girls having fun?"

We both turn around to find Lia's mom over our shoulders, dressed in all white. The bonfire is a storied occasion, too important to miss. I'd also heard her say something about not being scared off by a bunch of sanctimonious low-country Democrats. Mrs. Reagan's red Solo cup of Chardonnay sloshes to and fro as she puts an arm around Lia's shoulder.

“So much fun,” Lia says in a clipped voice as she pushes Mrs. Reagan’s cup of wine aside to give us a wider berth from any spillover. “The time of our lives.”

“Nell, you look very nice,” she says, removing her arm from Lia’s shoulder and resting a hot hand against the side of my face. “You put yourself together very carefully, don’t you?”

I look at her, not sure if it’s some sort of passive-aggressive insult or not. Her eyes are kind of sharp, the way she’s always looked at me, even during her sober stretches. I have on a tasteful sundress and a headband holding my auburn hair in place, understated, unlike what some of the other girls showed up in.

“Jesus Christ, Mom,” Lia says, pulling her mother away from me. “I’m taking her back to Dad.”

“Well, Nell knows it, sweetie,” I hear Mrs. Reagan still saying as Lia ushers her off. “She’s perfect. She’s got everything all planned out.”

I roll my shoulders, staring into the flames. Mrs. Reagan has always been like that, since I met Lia in seventh grade. I was never sure if she liked that Lia and I were best friends when there were so many better-bred options around the halls of Prep. But Lia and Taylor had adopted me, given me a place in this world, and never looked back.

Sometimes, I think that I should appreciate what they’ve given me more.

“Perfectly Planned Nell.”

Goose bumps rise all over my body. I glance over my shoulder, then back out at the fire and the water. “God, are you following me?”

Jackson steps beside me. I can smell the alcohol in the cup he’s holding. “You wish I was following you.”

I press my lips together. Sigh. “Do you want something?”

“She’s right, you know. Annie Reagan might be turned up to ten, but she’s right about you.”

“Oh, yes, please psychoanalyze me some more,” I say. Then I look him over. “Are my feelings toward you not clear enough?”

“You’re so dull,” he says, sipping on his drink, continuing to stand next to me.

I laugh. “And you’re so obvious.”

“What does that mean?”

I shake my head.

“What, Becker?”

I face him. He has on a nice light blue button down, a pair of khaki shorts, and ridiculous boat shoes. His dark hair is perfectly tousled, sticking up at angles as if the wind helped him plan it. “You’re doing this on purpose. You’re antagonizing me because you’re bored.”

His eyebrows go up.

“Your fan club isn’t entertaining enough for you so you have to come over and pick a fight with me. You guys are all the same—your games can only entertain you for so long. But please, go on about how *I’m* the dull one.”

Jackson opens his mouth for what I’m sure he thinks will be a devastating rebuttal, but I never hear what he would’ve said because at that moment, Taylor calls my name.

“Nell!” He’s jogging over to the two of us. “Lia just texted me. Everything all right?”

I shrug, stepping back from Jackson.

Taylor nods at Jackson the way boys do. “Hart.”

Jackson sips his drink in a maddeningly superior way. “Reagan.”

“Sorry about Mom,” Taylor says, looking only at me.

“I’m used to her,” I say. “It’s not a big deal.”

Taylor gives me this look and I realize *I’m used to her* probably wasn’t a thing I should have said.

“Are you coming to the game on Friday?” he asks me. He sips from a cup of water.

“Yeah, for sure.” I look around at everything but Jackson. “I’m wondering how long before it will be socially acceptable to leave this thing. I’ve got a bunch of work to do before tomorrow.”

Jackson laughs. "Of course you do."

I narrow my eyes at him. "I have a lot going on," I say.

He offers me his drink and I bat it away.

The wind carries a voice up from down near the water where most of the parents are standing. It takes a minute before I'm able to track it to a woman yelling. All I can see from here is that she's petite and blond, which puts her in the majority of women at this event, and that quite a few people are looking at her in alarm. The tall dark-haired man with her looks to be on the receiving end of her anger.

"Oh shit," Jackson says next to me. He drops his cup right in the sand and takes off running toward the fray. Taylor exchanges a look with me and we walk after him, watching with interest. Us and everyone else in the general vicinity.

I catch some snippets of what the woman is saying as we approach. Something about how *no, I won't calm down* and *no, I don't need a drink* and to *get out of my face before I throw it on you*. Jackson grabs her before she can say something else and he's mumbling to her and then she bursts into tears, and he momentarily pulls her into his chest. He pushes her through the crowd of staring people, right in our direction, and the man trails behind them. I recognize his parents from last week's baseball game. As the trio approaches us, I hear Mr. Hart say, "You two always have to go and make a damn scene." Jackson laughs at that, and I watch the lines of his face, the way he doesn't think it's funny at all. He's rubbing his mom's back.

"It's just the antidepressants," she's saying to him. "Throwing me all off."

Jackson's eyes catch mine as he brushes past Taylor and me. I open my mouth like I'm going to say something helpful but then close it and let them walk away. For a moment, everything around the bonfire stays quiet, but slowly the conversation builds back up, leaving the incident forgotten and Jackson long gone.

Just another night in Cedar Woods.

“What was that?” I ask Taylor.

“The Harts,” he says darkly. “I’ve never seen them do *that*. They’re usually the most normal parents at any given party.”

I swallow the sympathy bubbling up in my chest. For Jackson. *Screw that*. “Do you think they’ll be all right?”

“Yeah.” Taylor nods. “I saw Doug running after them. I’ll shoot him a text, though.”

That’s Taylor—he wants to help everyone. I watch him type up the text, refusing to show any curiosity.

“I know what that’s like, you know? When your parents become the scene,” Taylor says at last. It isn’t polite for me to agree with him, so I don’t. Progress.

I stare off at where Jackson’s mom was standing, remembering the wind whipping her blond hair around her face. I wonder if she’s okay.

But I don’t ask Taylor. I get the feeling from his expression that the answer is probably no anyway.

• • •

Our street looks cheerful as we pull back into the driveway. Cozy, even. It would seem like a nice place if you hadn’t just been on the other side of town with all its landscaped lawns and beautiful architecture and perfection.

After that, our street looks inferior.

I get out of the backseat and follow my parents into the house.

“Are Lia and Taylor okay?” Mom’s asking me as we walk up the steps. I eye her cautiously as Dad fits his key into the lock. Everyone saw Mrs. Reagan at the bonfire, sloshing her wine.

“They’re . . . fine.” It’s the polite way to say it, I guess. Nothing out of the ordinary here. “Lia got her mom out of there before she could really make a scene.” Then I absentmindedly tug on my dress, thinking about what Mrs. Reagan said to me.

“Thank God those two were born with some sense,” Mom says as

she kicks her heels off at the staircase. “Because neither of their parents have a lick of it. One can only assume it’s recessive and nature prevailed over nurture at some point.”

“We should have them over for dinner sometime,” Dad says. He presses his fingers into my back in a way that feels protective.

I don’t answer.

“I’m opening a bottle of wine. I hate those godforsaken events,” Mom says. “Nell, honey, can you unzip my dress?”

I do as she asks and the zipper exposes her freckled back. She rolls her shoulders up and down in a familiar motion and then saunters off into the kitchen, coming back with a bottle of white and two wineglasses, her entire back and her bra just exposed like that’s good enough.

“You’re in a good mood,” Dad says as if it’s an unusual thing, taking the wineglass Mom passes to him. He flips the television on.

“Must you watch TV?” she asks, and he resumes ignoring her. Mom narrows her eyes, twisting the top off the wine bottle rather aggressively. “Only three more ridiculously overproduced ceremonies to go before this school year’s over. Nell, why are you standing there? Why don’t you come sit down?”

I look over at her, already drinking her wine, and Dad, already watching something like there’s nothing in the conversation for him, sipping absentmindedly on the glass she poured him.

“Did you see the Harts tonight?” I ask her.

She sips her wine slowly, not answering.

“I have seen more ridiculous fights between adults in front of their children in Mary’s three years at Prep than I have in my entire life,” Dad says, not looking away from the TV. “The maturity level. What my dad would think of that, if he were still alive.” He whistles and shakes his head.

Mom continues sipping her wine. Her not having an opinion is unusual. She loves judging people.

“Taylor said he’s never seen the Harts act like that,” I continue, stuck on the point.

“Are you concerned?” Mom asks as if she’s uninterested. “You see the Reagans like that all the time, don’t you?”

“That doesn’t make it okay,” Dad replies to Mom, a challenge in his voice. “I can’t stand that Nell has to be around that. It was never like that where I’m from.”

“Oh, yes, life was so much better in Buckley, South Carolina,” Mom says sarcastically. Mom grew up half an hour outside of Cedar Woods—her family was old money, but her dad had lost most of it in business ventures—while Dad is from a small town a few hours away. They met in college.

Them ever having been in love isn’t something I can imagine.

“People respected family,” Dad bites back at her. “They respected privacy.”

“*Look*,” I cut in between the two of them, hoping to defuse. I know Dad doesn’t see why I need to go to private school, why we’re suddenly too good for the public school our taxes pay for. He didn’t grow up middle class, and even though he never actually says it out loud, it’s clear he thinks this whole town and this Cedar Woods world is a betrayal of his values. “I wasn’t trying to start something. I was just wondering if something happened with the Harts. I don’t know—it seemed hostile.”

“Nell,” Mom says, cutting a sharp look at Dad before she continues, “you’re going to see people like the Harts for the rest of your life. You’d do best to forget it. It’s none of our business what goes on behind closed doors.” Dad looks like he wants to say something but doesn’t.

I think about that, nodding my head slightly. “So I should pretend it never happened? That doesn’t seem right.”

“It doesn’t,” Dad mumbles. “Maybe you should check on the kid tomorrow.”

Mom sighs. “I don’t think Jackson Hart needs our help. You know he’s the one right behind Nell in the class rankings,” she informs Dad.

“I don’t see what that has to do with anything.”

Mom sips her wine. “Only that our daughter has a chance to be the third female valedictorian in Prep history, so I don’t think she needs to be wasting her time cheering up Jackson Hart. Or had you forgotten that?”

I don’t see how he could. I’ve heard it so many times, it’s basically carved on my brain.

I watch Dad’s unimpressed face and then start, “Maybe I should—”

“Nell,” Mom cuts me off with a tone of finality. “Mind your own business.”