



**UNCORRECTED
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ALI BRYAN

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DCB

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for *Pips*, always a fighter

also for Coach Dan (rugby), Coach Greg (football),
Coach Pam (ringette), and my own coach, Jackie Nicholl
(gymnastics), who coached me with humor, kindness,
and unflappable patience. I'm sorry I kicked you.

CHAPTER 1

He snaps me down, hand pawing the back of my head, my braids a tangle of rope, blond and frayed and doused in sweat: mine, his. He goes for my leg, reaches, reaches, misses. I snatch his wrist and we circle, foreheads crashing into each other like a pair of animals locked in a violent dance. The kind of beasts you'd see head-butting on some undisclosed hilltop, all horns and hooves, their every move narrated by some old British dude with composer-era hair, speaking in whispers.

He tries to snap me down again. Fails. We end up in a clinch, chest to chest, arms over and under. His breath is hot against my ear, his shirt soaked and smelling of breakfast. I step in for an inside leg trip. Stall. He launches me onto his hip, up and over. I'm weightless long enough to flinch, long enough to anticipate the landing. Hard. We grapple until I feel his ball sack squished against the back of my neck and I regret only putting a half-assed effort into recruiting more girls at the beginning of the wrestling season.

I try to bridge and escape but get nowhere. Leo is sixty-five kilos of farm chores and male siblings and meat and potatoes. I turn my head, expecting to see the referee on his knees assessing the pin, ensuring my shoulders are flush with the unforgiving

blue mat. Instead, I see my father's legs, the white of his sports socks, and his pristine sneakers, balancing on the footplates of his wheelchair. I hear the robotic lilt of his text-to-speech device call to me, *Rowan, get off your back, get up!* I can't. No matter how hard I try to buck Leo off, no matter how hard my brain tries to direct my body into action, regardless of my will, I can't get off my back.

And my dad can't get out of his wheelchair.

The ref thumps the mat with his hand and blows his whistle signifying the end of the match, even though it's just an exhibition. Leo wastes no time getting off me. He extends his hand to help me up, and I accept. He's being decent, not chivalrous. Besides, I'm tired as fuck. Six rounds of live wrestling, all with guys.

Leo fist bumps me. "Good job," he says, wiping his brow and adjusting himself.

I nod and step off the mat. Pia tosses me my water bottle, and I drink sloppily, my hand trembling.

"Nice whizzer," she says, cradling her arm. "You almost had him."

"Almost," I reply, catching my breath. "You see the doctor yet?"

Pia holds up her left arm, which is casted from her knuckles to her elbow. "Three more weeks," she sighs.

"You made a new sleeve."

"You like it?"

I slide down the wall, collapse onto the floor, and start untying my wrestling boots.

"Better than last week's."

"Right. The fur. Then you'll appreciate this." She waves her broken arm. "One hundred percent vegan leather. And for the

record, I salvaged that fur from a theater trunk sale. It was worn no less than three hundred times by three different actresses.”

“No doubt,” I reply, stuffing my boots into my bag. “But I’m more impressed that you managed to sew it with one arm. I can’t even thread a needle.”

“I do have a gift,” she says, admiring her handiwork.

Pia looks like an Influencer — 50k followers, pictures with palm trees in the foreground, skin so glowing it looks nuclear — because she is. Fifty-three thousand followers to be exact, all of them enthralled by her thrifting genius, her DIY style, and now her cast sleeves.

“So are you coming to Tate’s party?”

“Look at me!” The neck of my shirt is stretched so wide it hangs off my shoulder, and though I can’t see it, a scratch stings below my left eye.

“I think you look kinda hot.”

“Yeah, well. I don’t smell so hot.”

“Go shower. I’ll wait.”

“I have to go see my dad.”

Pia nods and looks over at him. Her face turns to pity. I hate that look. I don’t want anyone looking at my dad that way. Like he’s poor, or sick. Like he’s dying. I wonder if she sees it. The increased tilt of his head. It’s only a few degrees, but I know my mom saw it too, at breakfast this morning. She didn’t say anything. One minute she was lifting her fork to her mouth, and the next it was in the sink, her pancake untouched, the whipped cream a murky runoff.

“Pia!” I shout.

She flinches. “Sorry, I was just thinking about ... I found this dress at Goodwill ...” her voice drops off.

“Who’s going to this party?”

“Everybody.”

“Let me talk to my dad.”

Pia nods and sits cross-legged on a bench, cruising her phone with one hand. It’s weird to see her as she appears online, coiffed and assembled, and not as my training partner, my shadow, hair ripped from her ponytail, shirt soaked and smelling of debauchery.

My dad waits near the gym’s entrance reading a *National Geographic* clipped to a mechanical arm on his wheelchair. The magazine he’s brought from home. It’s all climate change: fires, floods, flus. Where are the features on ALS? *Lou Gehrig’s* disease. *His* disease. What good is saving the planet if he won’t be around to enjoy it?

“Rowan!” my coach calls.

I jump over the slick band left by the mop Leo uses to clean the wrestling mat. My socks leave behind a trail of prints.

My coach grabs my wrist. “Next time he takes your arm like that, you have to circle in, not out. Circling out leaves you vulnerable. That’s how he was able to get under your hips.”

I nod. He makes me do a few reps before slapping me on the back.

“Good work,” he says.

I shake his hand. The look on his face reminds me of my physics teacher, my middle school softball coach, and the guy running the whack-a-mole game. A look that mixes pride and surprise as if they’re still getting used to the idea that girls can solve complex equations, pitch, or get the high score in a game that calls for savagery.

“Thanks.”

He runs through the drill again until his face starts to redden and he has to hike up his sagging track pants. “There’s a huge girls’ tournament in New York next month. Tons of recruiters’ll be there. Teams from all over the world. You’re going.”

“Sounds good.” I should be more enthusiastic, but recruiters make me nervous, New York makes me nervous. All those musicals and cabs. Times Square. Ozzy is going to be so jealous.

Coach pauses to look at my dad. Sunlight pours in from the glass front windows, illuminating his hair, the sheen of his magazine. “Your dad doing okay?”

Don’t notice the head tilt, don’t notice the head tilt. “Yeah, he is.” I brave a smile.

The bell above the gym’s front door jingles. My dad reverses his wheelchair to make room. The guy who comes in looks like a *Call of Duty* character, head shorn and neck covered in tattoos, cinder blocks for shoulders. He might be thirty.

Coach nods sympathetically and gestures toward the entryway.

“Who’s that?” I ask.

“That’s Axel ‘The Fist’ Barrett.”

Axel wears gold aviator sunglasses and clutches the kind of leather portfolio you’d expect with a lawyer. His sneakers are expensive.

“The *Fist*?” I reply. “What kind of fighter name is that?”

Pia sidles up beside me.

“I’m not fussed about the name if he pays rent.” With his foot, Coach nudges the industrial-sized bucket being used to collect water from the leaky ceiling. “If we don’t fix this place up, we’ll be wrestling in the parking lot next to the KFC.” He smiles and then looks at Pia. “Hurry up and get the cast off, eh?”

Pia lifts her arm. Coach runs the oldest wrestling club in the city. It *smells* like the oldest wrestling club in the city. He owns the building too — if you can still call it that. It has more issues than a high school senior.

We watch him hustle over to Axel and follow behind. Outside, I see my mom back the van toward the door. You'd think she'd be good at this by now. Wheelchair parking spots are wide for a reason, but she always finds an angle.

"Hey, Dad." I bend to kiss him.

Nice practice, he types into his device. *Stance was looking great. You were moving fast.*

Not fast enough, I think, a mystery pain blowing up my knee.

Mom suggested we go for Italian. You coming? He looks at Pia. *You're welcome too.*

The last thing I want to think about right now is eating. Especially something as heavy as pasta. I just want water. And a massage. And physio. And a nap.

"I think I'm going to go to Pia's. We might hit up a friend's house later."

Okay, he types. *No drinking.*

"I know, Dad. Elite athletes don't drink."

Or vape.

"Yes, Dad." I roll my eyes.

Mom rushes through the door, her hair a bird's nest, heels clicking on the tile floor. "Sorry, I'm late." She kisses my cheek and then wrinkles her nose.

"I know, I stink."

She waves and grabs the handles of my father's chair. "How was practice? Your brother's game went into overtime. They lost in the final three seconds."

She has a nice whizzer, Dad replies.

A nice whizzer's not going to get me to college.

"Good job, Rowan," Mom says.

I hold open the door, and she wheels Dad up the ramp into our converted van. It seems like yesterday Dad was lifting our mountain bikes and backpacks into it. Now it looks like a hearse.

Dad attempts to glance over his shoulder. *You and Pia want a ride?*

"We'll walk," I say, airing out my shirt.

Pia drapes an Adidas jacket over her shoulders. The print reminds me of a circus. Her followers love it. Behind the front counter, Axel and Coach shake hands.

"Looks like *The Fist* is moving in," Pia says.

"But who is he?"

Pia holds her phone up to my face. She's already googled him.

Axel Barrett is an NCAA wrestler, American mixed martial artist, and former UFC Bantamweight champion.

"Bantamweight," I repeat.

"Perfect," Pia says, sticking her phone in her pocket. "If my arm doesn't heal, you have a new training partner."

"Ha." I shoulder my way out the front door. The air is humid, like the gym, the sky a blazing flamingo pink. We pass an Audi the color of champagne, a pair of miniature boxing gloves dangling from the dash, and walk the length of the strip mall parking lot toward Pia's.

"You know if we go to this party, I'll have to borrow something."

"I got you, Row," Pia replies as if it wasn't completely obvious.

And I know she will because Pia's *got me* since sixth grade.