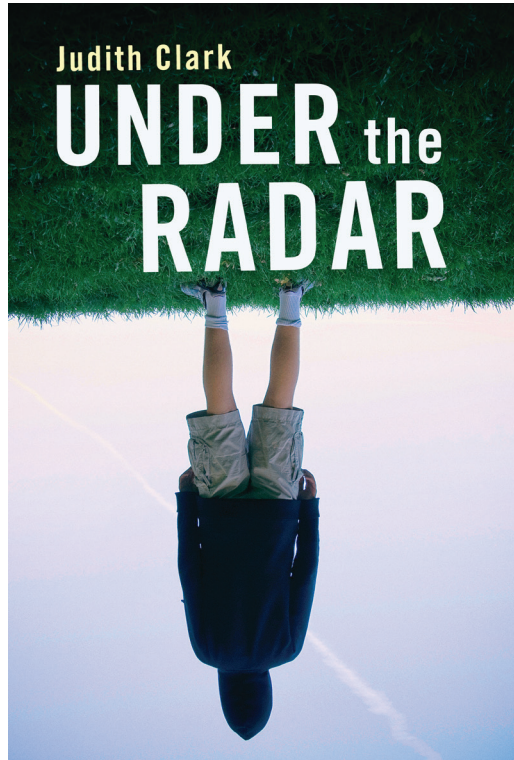


Excerpt from *Under the Radar*
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Somewhere Under the Rainbow

ON SUNDAY AFTERNOON, I did bicep curls in our walkout basement while I waited for my friends to show up. I wondered if they'd heard about what happened at the party. My stomach fluttered.

My little brother Tor sat on an old beanbag chair in the corner playing a game on a tablet. The last thing I wanted was for him to listen in. "Myk and Jason are coming over," I said, hoping he'd take the hint.

"So?" He didn't look up from his game. Every time my twin sister Elin and I thought he'd hit peak pain-in-the-ass, he exceeded our expectations. If I gave him the smallest sign that I wanted him to get lost, he'd make a point of sticking around. I let it drop. He'd get bored and take off eventually.

Bang bang. Myk's usual *I'm here* courtesy knock. He threw open the heavy back door and entered, gym bag hanging over one shoulder. "Hey." He tossed it onto the battered couch near the door and propped himself against the wall to take off his shoes, pausing long enough to brush his curly, dirty-blond hair back from his face. If he let it grow too long, he looked like a poodle.

Jason followed Myk inside. "Hi." He toed off his shoes, put them on the heavy rubber boot tray, and stowed his stuff under the row of sturdy coat hooks. Then he crossed to the wrestling mat and started stretches.

Myk dropped onto the couch. "Dude. You didn't text." They had heard.

"Mum has my phone." Locked in Dad's desk all weekend. Dinner table infraction. It was just one text. I didn't know she could see me from the kitchen.

"Sucks. So — tell."

I racked my dumbbells and draped my hand towel around my neck, stalling for time.

Myk leaned forward. “I heard Cari Van Pelt started grinding on your crotch —”

“Whoa. Whoa. Whoa. She sat on my lap.”

“She’s grinding. No way she isn’t.”

Jason looked over my shoulder, and I didn’t have to follow his gaze to know Tor’s eyes were huge. I just hoped he could keep his mouth shut.

“So she’s grinding on your crotch and lays a lip lock on you and you make her stop?”

“She was wasted.”

“And your point is?”

“Dick move.” I pulled my sweatshirt off and tossed it aside, revealing the old T-shirt underneath.

“Are you kidding? If Cari Van Pelt wants to kiss me, I’m not stopping her.”

I jumped to my feet. “I can spot somebody. Who’s first?”

Myk held up a hand. “Dude. Deets.”

I wasn’t going to get out of this, so I sighed and dropped back down on the mat. “Brody was trashed, and he was doing his usual wrestlers-are-pussies-football-players-rule schtick.” And Ryder was goading him on, the way he always did. Ryder loved starting fights — as long as it was someone else getting punched. “And then Cari came over.”

Laughter and squeals and camera flashes put me on alert. Cari Van Pelt headed toward me, weaving and staggering across the big back yard, accompanied by her giggling entourage. Before I could escape, she straddled my lap, clamped her mouth to mine and pried at my lips with her tongue. I stood, attempting to disentangle myself from her without dumping her on the ground, but she draped an

arm around my neck and hung off me. "Why don't you want to kiss me?"

"So that's when things started with Brody? You made Cari stop and he called you a f—" Myk cut the word off with a glance toward the stairs. If Mum was close enough to hear him from upstairs, he'd be in deep shit.

"No," I said, wondering who'd told him about the "f" word. "Brody told Cari he'd kiss her, and then he grabbed her and started macking all over her."

Cari shoved Brody hard and he staggered back, his sense of balance long gone. Some of the guys standing around laughed. He flushed in anger and lurched toward Cari. I got between them. "Leave her alone."

"I told him to stop, and he took a swing at me."

I'd parried his wild hook easily, snapping a straight right into his solar plexus. Fastest way to end a fight. He went down, gasping like a fish on land. A second later he was spewing all over the grass.

"Dude, seriously, you need to kick Brody's ass. He's always calling you —" Myk glanced at the stairs again. "You know."

This kind of conversation was exactly what I was trying to avoid. I didn't want to lie. I didn't want to deny who I was. But I wasn't ready for this. What could I say? *He says that about anybody he doesn't like.* That felt a lot like lying, even though it wasn't an outright denial.

Jason rolled to his feet. "Maybe he should be telling everyone that Gunnar's a good guy who doesn't take advantage of people who are shit-faced. And Gunnar did kick Brody's ass."

"One punch," said Myk. "One punch is not an ass-kicking."

"If I kick Brody's ass, Mum will kick mine." That was so obviously true it stopped the discussion. I didn't dare look at Tor. He had major dirt on me now, and the more casual I could play it, the

less blackmail power he would think he had. I didn't *really* think he'd screw me over on purpose, but Tor does his worst damage by accident.

Jason took off his sweatshirt, retrieved hand wraps from his gym bag, and perched on the end of the couch. "I'm starting with the heavy bag." He hooked a loop over his left thumb, hand splayed, and began wrapping.

My shoulders relaxed. I'd tensed up without realizing it. I jerked my head at Myk. "Come on, let's go."

Myk sighed, heaved himself to his feet and hopped on one leg to pull off his track pants. Underneath he wore Valgard Vikings wrestling shorts, like me and Jason.

Official wrestling practice wouldn't start until mid-October, but the team would be doing conditioning in Phys Ed. Myk, Jase and I had wrestled and sparred and worked out together all summer. Lifting and boxing built the kind of stamina you needed for wrestling season. When I started at Valgard High, coaches tried to convince me to play football or rugby or even basketball, but my big brother Gary and his best friend Sam were wrestlers. And Mr. MacKennon, the wrestling coach, was the only coach who didn't give me shit about my hair in Phys Ed: he just said if I wanted to be on the team, I'd have to wear a hair slicker.

I liked wrestling because you're on a team, but your battles are your own. Coach Mac talked about the mental game, and some guys believed that meant psyching out the competition. I thought it meant not letting your head make you lose. That's the real battle — the one with yourself.

Myk didn't try to talk during his reps, and he didn't expect conversation while I did mine, which was a relief. Finally, we all stopped for a break, poured glasses of water from the pitcher in the beer fridge, and collapsed onto the floor. Tor's chair was empty.

Just as well. He already knew way more about last night than I wanted him to.

“I thought Cari had a boyfriend,” said Myk. “So why was she climbing all over you?”

I groaned. “Can we not talk about this?”

“He’s irresistible.” Jason winked and stage-whispered, “It’s the hair.”

I flipped him off, and he laughed.

My hair is honey blond with highlights from the sun — heavy, thick and straight, down to my shoulder blades. Last night I had ponytailed a fistful at my crown, with a couple of braids on each side and the hair in back left loose. Kind of like Orlando Bloom playing Legolas, except I’ve got way more hair and mine is real. Girls really go for my hair, which is ironic when you think about it.

“I can’t believe Brody swung at you,” said Myk. “He must have been wasted.”

He’d had more than a few, but he wasn’t blackout drunk. More like envious — and mean with it. People like Brody don’t bully others because they feel strong. The louder the talk and the bigger the swagger, the smaller they feel inside. And with his buddy Ryder right there egging him on, once he started, he couldn’t back down.

It felt good sitting here with my best friends. For a second I had a crazy impulse to just tell them. *Guys. I’m gay.*

But wrestling was the only thing I was looking forward to this year, and I couldn’t risk it being awkward. I just couldn’t. There’s enough potential humiliation built in already. Like your body making embarrassing noises. Or smells. The worst is a hard-on in a match. Any guy can get one. Dick malfunctions are no picnic in practice, but in a match that people are recording, that total strangers can see, that your parents might spot ... There’s a *just let me sink through the floor* moment sooner or later for everyone.

Right now, I'm just another guy on the team. No one thinks twice about all the sweaty groping on the mat, but the second I'm out, all that could change.

Being out would be a relief for about one minute, and then everything would go to hell. I would just keep my secret for now.