

At the rivals



by
Daisy
Whitney



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Chapter One

POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT

I will pretend I know nothing.

When she asks me about the Mockingbirds, I will deny everything.

I won't reveal who we are and what we do, even though she has summoned me here to her inner sanctum "to discuss matters pertaining to the Mockingbirds." That's what the note says, the one her secretary hand-delivered to me moments ago on crisp white stationery, sealed with the official emblem of the office of the dean of Themis Academy.

Ms. Ivy Merritt.

She is second in command here, and that puts her in charge of students, faculty, activities, and all disciplinary matters. Even though *discipline* is a loaded word at this school.

"Please come in," she says, and gestures to the brown

leather chair across from her desk. As I sit down, I quickly survey her office. Her desk is lined with photos of two dogs. Weimaraners. I've seen her walking her dogs around the campus. She lets them off leash, and they stay next to her the entire time, perfectly trained.

She notices me looking at the photos.

"Frederick and Fredericka," she says proudly. "Do you have dogs?"

"No," I say. When you go to boarding school, that whole "If we get a puppy, I promise I'll walk it" plea doesn't really work on parents.

"They're twins," she adds.

Twins? *They're called littermates, lady, as in brother and sister.*

"That's nice," I say, but I'm not really interested in her dogs' family tree. I'm just trying to ignore the nervous feeling growing inside me, the twitchiness of not knowing what the dean wants. I've talked to her before, heard her D-Day speeches, watched her happily overseeing student performances at the Faculty Club. Ms. Merritt is a Themis institution herself—she went to school here (the third generation in her family to attend) before returning as a teacher and then working her way up in the administration. She is the school's biggest cheerleader; she attends as many sporting events and student performances as she can, and she always cheers the loudest.

Of course, none of that gives me any insight into the *matters pertaining to the Mockingbirds*, and as far as I am

concerned, any matter pertaining to the Mockingbirds must be kept secret from any teacher or administrator, no matter how much school spirit she possesses.

Maybe especially *because of* how much school spirit she possesses.

I look around some more, hunting out clues. The shelves behind her desk are lined with books, plaques, awards, but there's an empty space on the top shelf. It seems to have been cleared out, recently dusted and polished.

She's angling for something this year. Another award.

Ms. Merritt moves from her desk to the chair next to me, scooting it even closer. I watch her inch nearer still. I force myself to focus on something else—like the tight braid in her hair or the ugly glasses she wears. Ms. Merritt is pretty, but she's one of those women who try to hide their beauty by wearing glasses and pantsuits and never letting their hair down.

“First of all, thank you so much for coming. It's such an exciting time—the start of your senior year—so I thought we could begin our meeting by talking about your college plans,” she says. I'm thrown off because I thought we'd be talking about the Mockingbirds, or at least the a cappella singing group we tell the administration we are. “Is Juilliard still at the top of your list?”

“Yes,” I say, giving her only the briefest of answers so we can get to the real agenda: not dogs, not college, but the *matters pertaining to the Mockingbirds* she called me here to discuss.

“We haven’t had a student admitted to Juilliard in four years,” Ms. Merritt continues, then places her hand on mine. My first instinct is to yank my hand away. I don’t like being touched by teachers, by adults. “But I have all the faith in the world that you’re going to change that for us, aren’t you?”

“Sure,” I say, because what can I say? Of course I want to get into Juilliard. It’s only been my lifelong dream.

“The school needs this, Alex,” she says, and I detect a note of pleading in her voice. Then she presses her hand harder against mine. I look down at her hand, its veins all fat and blue, and then back up at her. I want to know why I’m here, because it can’t just be about my college plans. But she’s not letting on. Instead, she’s just holding my hand tighter, and I don’t like it. I start to wriggle my hand out from under hers.

She looks down, noticing my discomfort, and releases me. “I’m sorry. I should be more sensitive about your—” She stops, then says, delicately, in a whisper, “*Personal space.*”

It’s as if she just dropped a tray in the cafeteria and now it’s silent, dead silent, and we all wait for someone to break the seal with a sound.

I make the first move. “What do you mean by that?” I ask, because she knows something. I want to know how much she knows.

“What happened to you last year,” she says, lowering her voice again, like this is a secret only the two of us know. “As if what you went through wasn’t hard enough, I imagine there are students who don’t really know what to think

about it, seeing as the issue was never formally brought forth. And now you're having to live with people still having all those lingering questions of...*shared culpability*," she says, shaking her head, as if the thought disturbs her. "But I hope you know that had you decided to come to me about the situation with that boy, there never would have been a question about what really happened. And, of course, you can come to me about anything," she adds. "That's my job. That's why I'm here."

I am floored. I don't even know where to start, because I'm thinking ten things at once, but the first one is this: *Ms. Merritt knows I was date-raped by another student last year, even though I never told anyone in the administration.* I try to open my mouth to speak, but words refuse to take shape, and all I manage is "How?"

"There are many students here who share things with me," she says as she leans closer, patting my hand as if trying to set me at ease. But I'm not at ease. I'm not cool with students talking about me, and I'm definitely not comfortable with them telling her—especially since she doesn't seem very *sensitive* about my personal space after all. "And you should know that you can trust me too."

For a second I can feel the walls of her office looming closer, falling toward me as if they're going to enclose me too tightly. But the very thought of *anyone* insinuating I was somehow to blame for the assault strengthens me, and I push back. "How can you say there is any shared culpability?"

"Alex, you have to understand I'm not saying there was or

wasn't. But you and he never came to me, so I don't know the details. How am I to know whose fault it actually was?"

"Fault? It was *his* fault."

She waves this away, then nods to the desk photos of her dogs. "I find that positive reinforcement works best," she says, and I expect her to break out a basket of dog biscuits and maybe offer me one. "And that's why I say it's time to simply move on and focus on the good stuff. Like Juilliard." Now there's a beaming smile on her face. "The fact of the matter is, you are extraordinarily talented. You have an opportunity before you with Juilliard, and it's one we both want. Your admission there would mean so very much to me, and to you, of course. So let's not focus on the past, or any past troubles. Let's celebrate your talents instead, since not only are you our star piano player, but I see that you're also heading up the Mockingbirds singing group," she says, tapping a piece of paper on her desk. It's a list of the students who head up the various groups and clubs at Themis. I had to submit my name last week to qualify for a mailbox in the student-activities office and for the right to post flyers around campus. But does she know singing is just a cover for what the Mockingbirds really do?

"And that is why I have decided I want the Mockingbirds to perform in two weeks at our first Faculty Club event this year," she adds. "It's part of my purview to select the students who will perform, and it's imperative that the faculty have a good year. I want our headmistress to be happy, and I want all our teachers to be happy. We want them to love

teaching here, and part of that comes from things like the Faculty Club performances. I do hope you will say yes.” There’s that hint of pleading again.

This is the reason she called me to her office? This is the matter pertaining to the Mockingbirds? It’s not to tell me she knows I was assaulted, although she does. It’s not to tell me the Mockingbirds need to cease and desist, as I’d thought. Instead, it’s simply to invite us—*the a cappella singing group we’re not*—to sing at the upcoming Faculty Club event in front of the teachers as they eat warm chocolate-chip cookies and drink hot cocoa and wax on about how wonderful it is to teach at Themis Academy? *Oh, the perks! Aren’t they great!*

Call it positive reinforcement. Call it turning the other cheek. It amounts to the same thing: she knows what happened to me and she’s dismissing it, wiping her hands clean. I’d like to say this makes me sad, or mad. But instead, I feel like it’s business as usual at Themis Academy, where the record matters more than the reality and where the Mockingbirds are undoubtedly needed.

And if all she wants to see is one side of our story, if all she wants is the happy, chipper, cheery face of high school, then we’ll give it to her.

“Ms. Merritt, it would be my pleasure to perform with my merry band of Mockingbirds before your Faculty Club,” I say with a broad smile.

As she thanks me and says good-bye, I wonder whether she knows that we’re not singers at all—that our true job is

to police, protect, and prosecute other students. That we are the school's underground student-justice system.

I don't know which thought is more troubling: that the Mockingbirds are here in the first place to uphold the code of conduct because the school won't, or that she'd willingly let us exist to do just that.

Chapter Two

MOVIE IMAGES

“Can you sing?”

“Not to save my life,” Martin says as he opens the door to his room and lets me in. “You?”

“Nope,” I say.

He laughs.

“What’s so funny about that?”

“Well, I have an excuse. I’m a science geek,” he says. He’s right. I even pilfered his favorite gray shirt with *Science Rules* in red letters to sleep in during the summer. It’s well worn and reminds me of him. I wore it nearly every night, and still do. “But aren’t *you* supposed to have every sort of musical talent known to humankind?”

I shake my head, because my musical talents stop cold when I step away from the bench. Despite being able to pick

a note, any note, out of an aural lineup, my voice is an untamed instrument. “I am afraid my musical abilities are very specialized,” I say, feeling momentary relief as I shift away from thoughts of Ms. Merritt.

“*Specialized*. That’s such a PC way of putting it,” he says, then turns the lock on the door. It clicks shut. He reaches for me, wrapping his arms around my waist.

“Decontaminate me, please. I was just in Ms. Merritt’s office,” I say, and Martin obliges by pressing his lips softly against my neck and his hands firmly against my hips.

I relax into the feeling of him, something I didn’t get nearly enough of when school was out for the summer. I saw him yesterday when I returned to school, and last night, and this morning, but we’re still making up for lost time.

As his lips make their way up my neck, I let his hair fall through my fingers, remembering the first time we kissed, the first time I wanted to touch his soft brown hair, and how I still love the way his hair feels on my hands. As I watch the strands fall gently through my fingers, he pulls me to him, my chest against his, his mouth nearing mine, closing the space between us. Then his lips are on mine and all I can think is, how did I go a whole summer with hardly any of this? This kissing, this closeness, this boy.

And that’s how the next hour goes by in about ten seconds, it seems. When we finally come up for breath, tucking in shirts and adjusting shorts that didn’t quite come all the way off, because we haven’t gone all the way yet, I tell him everything about my meeting with the dean. I don’t leave out

a single detail. Martin cringes, cursing her as I repeat the words *shared culpability*.

“But the thing is, I still have moments when I think I could have done something different. Like I could have shouted louder or pushed him off me,” I say, and then tuck my face into his shoulder.

I feel Martin’s hand on my hair, his whisper in my ear. “It wasn’t your fault. It’ll never be your fault. It was one hundred percent his, and I don’t care what Ms. Merritt or anyone says to the contrary.”

I breathe him in, the familiarity of him, this boy I know, comforting me. “And this is how people see me now. As the girl who was . . .” I stop because no matter how many months have passed, I feel like I’ve been marked with an *R*. “How do you see me? Is that all you see when you look at me?”

He laughs, but it’s a reassuring one; he’s not laughing at me. “It’s the thing I never see. Because I see you, only you.”

I can’t help smiling, but inside I want to be where he is. I want to see me the way he does—without seeing *what happened* first. Sure, I can be all tough and *how dare you say it was my fault?* to Ms. Merritt, but she touched a nerve inside me that’s still tender. Because as much as I don’t have any lingering questions whatsoever, I know some students probably do, and the thought sickens me.

“And then I also see a totally hot piano player, because there is no way I can look at you and say *pianist*. Sorry, but too weird a word for a guy to say. And then I see this girl who still likes me and still listens to my science stories after

six months. Which is pretty awesome. And I also see the head of the Mockingbirds, and then I remember, *Oh crap, Alex is in charge of me. I'd better be a good helper Mockingbird.*"

Then it's my turn to laugh, only I am definitely laughing at him and the way he's making fun of himself, since he's on the board of the Mockingbirds too—which means he helps decide which cases we take on. He's been a Mockingbird since he was a sophomore, working his way up to membership on the board. He's in the Mockingbirds because he believes in them, because he wants to help others.

But I'm brand-spanking-new to the group. And I'm the leader for one and only one reason—because I was raped. I didn't earn the post by putting in my time. I didn't work my way up or campaign. It was handed to me because the leader is always someone who brought a case and won it. And while *that night* when Carter Hutchinson took my virginity while I was passed out was many months ago, the memory of it can all come roaring back in an instant.

After Carter was found guilty by the Mockingbirds, I was sure I'd survived the hardest part. But then I went home for the summer and found that being away from school made me think about that night even more. I no longer had the buffer of classes, the daily regimen of a schedule. It was summer, lazy time, just the piano and me, and in that empty space the memories started surging again, like the sound of a fire engine that starts one town over, then grows steadily nearer, until it's blaring in your ear.

I thought I had moved on from victim to survivor, but

there I was feeling victimized all over again—this time by my mind, which betrayed me by replaying *that night* whenever it wanted, the memories turning on and off with a vengeance, like flashing neon lights. My sister, Casey, who's four years older, took me to a counselor, someone she found back home in New Haven. The counselor helped, told me it wasn't unusual for *survivors*—she always called me a survivor—to go through a period of time when the assault feels closer, fresher. It's like right before the wound can close, it has to be reopened one last time and flushed out.

With salt water, it seemed.

That's how it *still* feels at times, because randomly, out of nowhere, I'll see flashes of Carter's white-blond hair, his lips I didn't want on me, his naked chest I never wanted to be near. The worst part is when those awful images collide with Martin. Because here in Martin's room, where we've returned to kissing, I flinch as Carter's hands flicker in front of me, as I recall how they pressed down into the mattress on either side of my naked body.

I squeeze my eyes shut and try to push the unwelcome visitor away with more of Martin, like I can expel the memories through more contact with the boy I *want* to be with. But as my lips on his achieve a new urgency, he sees through me. He knows what I'm doing, so he extricates himself from my kiss to ask, "You okay?"

"Of course," I say quickly. Too quickly.

"Hey," he says softly. "We can slow down."

I shake my head and lean in to press my lips against his

again. He responds but then pulls back once more. “Alex,” he whispers, “are you thinking of that night?”

“No,” I say, closing my eyes and shaking my head, but soon, very soon, I’m nodding, managing a yes. Then more words. “I don’t want to picture him when I’m with you. I hate it.”

Martin props himself on one elbow. “I don’t want you to either, but it takes time, right?” he says, reminding me of what the therapist said this summer. Time, time, time. Be patient with yourself. Be gentle with yourself.

Enough patience.

I want to be *healed*, not *healing*. Especially here with Martin. I hate that I cannot completely erase Carter from my mind. I want to own this space with Martin. I want it to be mine; I want it to be pure.

But I am not always in charge.

“But I want to . . .,” I start, then trail off. I try again, saying the words out loud this time. “I want to be with you. All the way.”

His eyes sparkle. I look into them, deep brown, with these crazy green flecks twinkling, flashing. He pulls me closer, pressing his body against me to let me know he wants what I want. But he’s more than just a *guy*. He’s a *good* guy. “I’ll wait for you. However long it takes. You’re worth waiting for,” he says, twirling a strand of my brown hair around his finger.

And with those words it’s like one more of the dark shadows peels off the wall and leaves the room.

Another kiss, and there’s only Martin and me here for this one. Then I whisper, “We’d better go.”

Chapter Three

A LINK TO THE PAST

We leave together for D-Day, and the quad is bustling. We pass the bulletin board in front of McGregor Hall. It's stuffed with flyers for groups, clubs, and teams, including ones I posted this morning before the sun even rose. I posted them early because we're not supposed to be in-your-face, all swagger and bravado. The Mockingbirds are here to help, but the less we're seen doing our work, the better off we all are.

Obviously.

Running just as fast as you can, you'll find your way to the New Nine. Can you hit the right notes for the Mockingbirds? Let's hear your best song....

It's a recruitment poster; we're looking for new runners for the Mockingbirds. They're our on-the-ground members,

and they're also the only ones who can move up to form our council, the New Nine. We pick the jury for student trials from the council, so we like to remind potential runners of the path up in the Mockingbirds.

Of course, the question really should be this: can *we* hit the right notes for Ms. Merritt in her Faculty Club show? And if we don't, will she see through us? And if she sees through us, then what? Will she just clap and cheer and keep looking the other way?

"Ironic, isn't it?" I say to Martin.

"Or a self-fulfilling prophecy," he quips.

Then I hear someone behind me.

"If it isn't Alexandra Nicole Patrick. The girl who just couldn't say no."

I grit my teeth, take a deep breath, and then turn around. It's Natalie Moretti. She testified against me last year in the Mockingbirds courtroom, painted me as some animal in heat. *She was kind of rubbing up against him*, she told the council. Her eyes are every bit as cold as they were that day. Her brown hair is pulled tight at her neck, and she's wearing a sleeveless shirt, showing every smooth, toned muscle in her arms. Natalie is the überathlete here. Lacrosse superstar in the fall, track goddess in the spring. I don't think her lean muscles would even permit an ounce of fat to reside on her body. They'd attack any fat molecule that dared appear, eating it up and spitting it out like a victorious cannibal.

"Hello, Natalie," I say coolly, determined to be the picture of poise, even though I'm burning up inside because her

name, her face, her voice dredge up the worst memories of the trial. She is the face of judgment and, worse, the judgment of another girl. She is more living, breathing proof that there are people who think I asked for it. She is the reminder that I wasn't raped in an alley at gunpoint, that I was drunk, that I flirted with Carter, that I kissed him.

Before I said no. *Before* he went too far.

She is the face of all my shame.

I bet she's the one who tipped off Ms. Merritt.

"How was your summer? Plenty of time to think about all the stories you told, or were you too busy entertaining more young men?"

"You can shut the hell up, Natalie," Martin says, staring hard at her as he clenches his fists.

"Oh, so cute. Your boyfriend defends you," she says to me in a sickly sweet voice. Then she turns to Martin. "If I were you, I'd be careful, though. She might turn around and prosecute you next."

It's my turn to get a word in, so I say to her, "You don't have a clue about us or me or anything, Natalie. And you never will."

"Are you allowed to talk to me that way, Alex? Isn't that bullying? Should I file charges with the Mockingbirds?"

I want to slug her. I picture a fat red welt appearing across her cheek courtesy of my fist. I've never hit anyone, and have no clue how to land a punch, but it's a nice image. Somehow I rein in the overwhelming urge to practice a right hook for the first time. "Feel free," I mutter.

“Maybe I will, then,” Natalie says, leaning closer to me, her breath now inches from my face. “Maybe I’ll be your case this year, and I’ll accuse you. How would that feel, Alexandra Nicole Patrick? How would it feel for you to be the accused?” Then she lowers her voice, her mouth coming closer to me, and more words slither out in a low hiss. “You’re only leading the group because you couldn’t keep your legs closed.”

My entire body coils, every muscle and nerve ending tightening and then snapping as I start to raise my right hand to slap her, to whack her across the face for real this time.

But before I can even lift my hand, there’s another voice.

“Who’s excited for D-Day!”

I turn around and see McKenna Foster. I stuff my hand into my pocket. I brush my other hand against my shirt, like I’m wiping Natalie off, getting rid of the coat of filth she breathed onto me. Even though neither Martin nor McKenna could hear the last thing Natalie said, I can’t help but wonder if other students will blame me for what happened last year. If they’ll think I asked for it, if they’ll think I don’t deserve to lead the Mockingbirds.

If they all believe in *shared culpability*.

I wonder if McKenna knows why I’m a Mockingbird and if she has an opinion on it too. But for now I’m just glad she’s here, defusing Natalie. McKenna and I have had a few classes together, including government in our sophomore year, which she killed in. She’s a senior and on the student council, maybe VP or treasurer, I’m not sure. She has wild,

curly black hair, and she's always pulling it back, putting it up, wearing sunglasses on her head to keep her hair off her face. Today she's twisted the crazy strands with a pencil, though a few errant ones have come loose. She's standing next to a younger version of herself.

"C'mon, guys! It's not as if *your* parents are going to embarrass you by making a dumb speech," she says, and rolls her eyes, cutting through the tension. Her parents are world-renowned research doctors—behavioral psychologists, I think—who get big bucks to travel and lecture around the world. McKenna's mom is a Themis alum, and our D-Day is on their lecture circuit, though I'm pretty sure it's the one pro bono stop.

The girl next to her clears her throat.

"Sorry," McKenna adds, with a nod to her companion. "Alex, this is my sister, Jamie, but you'll probably get to know her soon enough because she's in the orchestra too. She plays flute," McKenna says, and there's a touch of pride in her voice.

"I'm a freshman. I just started here," Jamie says, and she has an eerie confidence for a fourteen-year-old. She looks like McKenna except her hair is straight, the follicular opposite.

"And Alex here is the kick-ass leader of the Mockingbirds," McKenna adds, and somehow I manage a combination of "thanks" and "hi" before McKenna keeps going. "C'mon, enough gabbing. We've got to go see Mommy and Daddy. Oh, and don't forget to check out my awesome signs for student council," she adds, this time to me, as she points a

thumb at a poster positioned right next to my Mockingbirds one—on hers is a drawing of a gavel with a smiling cartoonish face on it.

She heads off with her sister to the assembly hall. I notice that Natalie is right behind them. It crosses my mind that McKenna only introduced her sister to me, not to Natalie. Please don't tell me McKenna would be friends with that evil witch. McKenna's got to have better taste than that.

Martin turns to me and sees my jaw set tight, my lips pressed together hard. "What did Natalie say when she whispered to you?"

"I don't want to repeat it," I say quickly.

"But I already heard the first thing she said."

"And the second thing she said was far worse. Which is why I don't want to repeat it," I say, but I wonder again if people see me as someone who stood up for herself, or if they picture me in Carter's room, drunk, legs open, on his bed?

Either way, I have become fused to the crime against me. That's what happens when you take a stand, because then everyone knows what you were taking a stand for.

Martin and I walk into the auditorium together, and I see McKenna slide into a seat near the front and say something to Jamie. Jamie glances quickly back at me. I look down at the hallway into the auditorium, feeling a pang of longing for the way my life was before my past became public.

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