

# PRIVATE

A NOVEL BY  
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## WHERE BEAUTY LIVES

Where I come from everything is gray. The bland, square strip malls. The water in the lake at the center of town. Even the sunlight has a murky quality. We barely get spring and we never get autumn. The leaves fall off the sickly trees early each September before they even have a chance to change, tumbling down on the shingled roofs of the standard-issue houses, each one exactly the same as the last.

If you want to see beauty in Croton, Pennsylvania, you've got to sit in your ten-by-ten bedroom in your boring split-level house and close your eyes. You have to use your imagination. Some girls see themselves walking red carpets with movie star boyfriends while flashbulbs pop. Others, I'm sure, go the princess route, conjuring up diamonds and tiaras and knights on white horses. All I imagined my entire ninth grade year was this:

Easton Academy.

How I found myself there, in the place of my daydreams, while the rest of my classmates were entering the dank dreariness of Croton High, I still am not totally sure. Something to do with my

soccer and lacrosse skills, my grades, the stellar recommendation of outgoing Easton senior Felicia Reynolds (my brother Scott's older, cooler ex), and I think a little bit of begging on my father's part. But at this point, I didn't care. I was there, and this place was everything I had dreamed it would be.

As my dad drove our dented Subaru through the sunny streets of Easton, Connecticut, it was all I could do to keep from pressing my nose to the dog-slobbered window. The shops here had colorful cloth awnings and windows that gleamed. The streetlamps were the old-fashioned kind that were electric now, but had once been lit by a guy on a horse toting a pole and a flame. Potted plants hung from these lamps, bursting with bright red flowers, still dripping from a recent dousing with a garden hose.

Even the sidewalks were pretty; neat and lined with brick, topped by towering oak trees. Beneath the shade of these trees, a pair of girls my age chatted their way out of a boutique called Sweet Nothings, swinging clear bags stacked with neatly folded sweaters and skirts. As out-of-place as I felt in my worn Lee jeans and my blue T-shirt, I had never wanted to live anywhere more than I wanted to live here, in Easton. I couldn't believe that very soon I actually would. I felt something warm inside my chest. Something I had felt less and less over the last few years since my mother's accident. I recognized it dimly as hope.

Easton Academy is accessible by a small two-lane road, which winds up from town into the hills above. A small wooden sign on a short stone base marks the entrance to the school. EASTON ACADEMY ESTABLISHED 1858 it reads in faded letters. The sign is obscured by

the low branch of a birch tree, as if to convey that if you belong here, you know where you were going and if you do not, they aren't going to great lengths to help you find your way.

My father turned the car under the iron and brick archway and I was sucked in. Hard. Here were buildings of brick and stone, topped by shingled roofs and spires, tradition and pride oozing from every dated cornerstone. Here were ancient, weathered, arched doorways, thick wooden doors on iron hinges, cobblestone walks lined by neat beds of flowers. Here were pristine playing fields of bright green grass and gleaming white lines. Everything I saw was perfect. Nothing reminded me of home.

"Reed, you're the navigator. Where do I go?" my father asked.

Easton's orientation map had become a sweaty, crumpled ball in my hand. I flattened it over my thigh as if I hadn't memorized it ten times over. "Make a right by the fountain," I told him, trying to sound much calmer than I felt. "The sophomore girls' dorm is the last one on the circle."

We drove by a matching set of convertible Mercedes. A girl with blond hair stood idly by while a man—her father? her butler?—unloaded a huge set of Louis Vuitton luggage onto the curb. My dad whistled.

"These people sure know how to live," he said, and I was instantly irritated by his awe, even though I felt it myself. He ducked his head so he could see up to the top of the clock tower, which I knew from my many hours of paging through the Easton catalog marked the ancient library.

What I wanted to say was, "*Da-a-ad!*" What I said was, "I know."

He would be gone soon, and if I snapped at him I would regret it later when I was alone in this strange, picture-book place. Besides, I had a feeling that girls like the one we had just seen never said things like “*Da-a-ad!*”

Outside the three imposing dorms that stood around the circle at the midpoint of the hill, families kissed and hugged and checked that everyone had everything they needed. Boys in khakis and white shirts kicked around a soccer ball, their blazers tossed aside, their cheeks blotched and ruddy. A pair of stern-looking teachers stood near the dry stone fountain, nodding as they spoke toward each other’s ears. Girls with shimmering hair compared schedules, laughing and pointing and whispering behind their hands.

I stared at the girls, wondering if by tomorrow I would know them. Wondering if any of them would be my friends. I had never had many girlfriends. Or any, actually. I was a loner by necessity—keeping people away from my house and my mother and therefore myself. Plus there was the fact that I wasn’t interested in the things most girls seemed to be interested in—clothes and gossip and *Us Weekly*.

Back home I was always more comfortable around guys. Guys didn’t feel the need to ask questions, to check out your room and your house and know all the intimate details of your life. So I mostly hung out with Scott and his friends, especially Adam Robinson, whom I had dated all summer and who would be a senior at Croton High this year. I guess the fact that I had broken up with him and come here, thereby *not* being the first sophomore girl ever to have

a senior boyfriend driving her to school on the first day, would be just another thing that would mystify the girls in my grade.

Of course, they were easily mystified.

I hoped it would be different here. It *knew* it would be. Look at it. How could it not be?

My dad brought the car to a stop at the curb between a gold Land Rover and a black limousine. I stared up at the ivy-covered walls of Bradwell, the sophomore dorm that would be my home for the next year. Some of the windows were already open, raining down music on the students and parents. Pink curtains hung in one room and inside a girl with jet-black curls moved back and forth, placing things, making it hers.

"Well, here we are," my dad said. There was a pause. "You sure about this, kiddo?"

Suddenly, I couldn't breathe. In all the months that my parents had argued about my coming to Easton, my father was the only person in my entire family who had never expressed a moment of doubt. Even Scott, whose idea it had been for me to follow Felicia here in the first place—she had come for her junior and senior years, finishing up last spring before heading off to Dartmouth and, undoubtedly, glory—had balked when he saw the tremendous tuition. But my dad had been on board fully from day one. He had sent in my lacrosse and soccer tapes. He had spent hours on the phone with the financial aid department. And all the while he had constantly reassured me that I was going to "knock 'em dead."

I looked into my dad's eyes, exactly the same blue as my own,

and I knew he didn't doubt whether I could make it here. He doubted whether *he* could make it back home. Images of pill vials flashed in my mind. Little white and blue tablets spilled across a waterring stained night table. A bin full of empty liquor bottles and crumpled tissues. My mother, wiry and pale, grousing about her pain, about how everything bad happened to her and none of us cared, tearing me down, tearing Scott down, telling us all we were worthless just to make us feel as miserable as she did. Scott had already made his escape—he had packed up and gone off to Penn State last week. Now it would be just Dad and my mother in that tiny little house. The thought depressed me.

"I don't have to go here," I said, even though the very idea that he might agree with me made me physically ill. To see this place, feel what it was all about, and then have it all taken away within the span of five minutes would be painful enough to kill me, I was sure. "We can go home right now. Just say the word."

My dad's face softened into a smile. "Yeah, right," he said. "Like I would really do that. But I appreciate the offer."

I grinned sadly. "No problem."

"I love you, kiddo," he said. I already knew that. Getting me into this school and out of that hellhole was about the most obvious display of love any parent could have produced. He was pretty much my hero.

"Love you, too, Dad."

And then he hugged me and I cried and before I knew it, we were saying goodbye.

This book is a work of fiction. Any references to historical events, real people, or real locales are used fictitiously. Other names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.



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