



Draced

ALYSON GERBER



ARTHUR A. LEVINE BOOKS

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and terrified that she will not be able to hide her condition from her friends
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I'M ON THE FIELD in my navy-and-white uniform, tapping my cleats lightly on top of the ball in front of me—*right, left, right, left*. The air smells like just-cut grass and brand-new rubbery soccer balls, and I've got that pre-game feeling: happy and sick to my stomach and laughing so hard my muscles hurt, all at the same time.

I'm in the back row next to Hazel, and Frannie is up front with Ladan leading the warm-up, because they're the captains for this scrimmage, which also means they're both definitely starting. No surprise there. They're the best players on our team. Frannie, Hazel, and I are best friends, but we're usually split up during soccer, because Frannie plays forward, and Hazel and I play defense.

Ladan leans over and whispers something to Frannie. Her shiny black hair falls over her shoulder in a never-ending

ponytail. The whole time Frannie and Ladan are talking and tapping, it's like they aren't even thinking about what their feet are doing.

"Toe taps to the right," Ladan shouts.

I follow her lead, running in place, moving the ball between my feet like I've been practicing with Frannie all summer. Then I slide the ball with the sole of my shoe, turn, and keep tapping, staying in sync with the rest of the team. I love the way it sounds when everyone moves together.

"Great work," Coach Howard says. "Let's take a quick water break, and then we'll huddle up."

We all jog over to the bench. Frannie and I both chug from our water bottles. Hazel applies another layer of sunblock to her peachy skin. Coach Howard is standing at the other end of the bench, scribbling on her clipboard.

I know I shouldn't sit, in case she calls my name, but I'm getting nauseous standing here waiting to find out if I'm starting. I never have before.

Today is our first scrimmage. It's my chance to prove I'm ready to start and maybe even play forward this year, and I have to leave at halftime to see the doctor. Mom waited until last night to tell me about it. She said she couldn't change the appointment, because Dr. Paul's schedule gets booked up months in advance and going to see him is more important than soccer in her opinion, which means I have to make every second of the first half count.

“All right. Come on over,” Coach Howard says.

Everyone huddles around her. I stand at the edge of the circle, because I feel like I might puke. Hazel grabs my hand. “Fingers crossed for you,” she whispers.

“For you too,” I whisper back and hold on tight.

“As far as I’m concerned, this is the most important game you’ll play all year,” Coach Howard says. “I want you to get out there today and give it your all. Stay focused. Work together. Work hard. Hydrate. It’s hot out here. If you don’t hear your name right now, that means you’ll be playing a bigger role later in the scrimmage. But everyone will be on the field today.” Hazel and I look at each other and smile. “We’ll start with the forwards: Ladan on the right, Frannie center, and Saaya left.”

I feel my heart speed up. I need to stop freaking out for no reason. It’s not like there was a chance I was going to start on offense, since I don’t even play offense.

“Midfielders: Lauren on the right, Zeva and Emily in the middle, and Katrina on the left.” *Breathe*. “Now, defense.” Coach Howard stares at her clipboard like she can’t read her own handwriting, or maybe she’s changing her mind about who she thinks should start. “Brianna in goal,” she reads off the page. “Let’s go with Josie on the right. Hazel left.” I squeeze Hazel’s hand. She squeezes back harder. There’s only one more spot.

“And last but not least—” Coach Howard’s eyes travel

around the circle of girls like she's searching for someone. They land on me. "Rachel, I'd like you in the middle."

"Really?" I cover my mouth as soon as the word spills out. I hear someone giggle.

"Really," she says.

Yes! Yes! Yes! This is happening: I'm starting in the first scrimmage of the year.

"Let's get out there and win," Coach Howard says. "Hands in."

Everyone reaches into the middle of the circle. "GO BULLDOGS!" we shout as loud as we can.

We win the coin toss, and I jog out onto the field.

The ref blows the whistle, and Ladan kicks off, passing to Frannie. She dribbles down the field, and our offense owns the ball for most of the first half. No one scores, but it feels like the whole game is happening somewhere far away, on the other end of the field. Even though no one on defense has touched the ball, Coach Howard swaps Hazel out for Angela right before the end of the half, which doesn't seem fair. I smile at Hazel and cross my fingers. I hope I don't get taken out before I have a chance to do something.

Ladan and Frannie swerve through green jerseys, passing the ball back and forth, landing where the other person needs them to be at the exact right moment. It's like they're in on a secret.