

perfected
by girls

Alfred C. Martino

**Coles Street Publishing
Union City, New Jersey**

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Martino, Alfred C.

Perfecting By Girls / by Alfred C. Martino.
p. cm.

Summary: Melinda Radford, the lone girl on her high school wrestling team, grapples family and school pressures for the opportunity to compete in a varsity match, something no girl in school history has ever done. [1. Wrestling-Fiction. 2. Family problems-Fiction. 3. Friendship-Fiction. 4. Competition (Psychology)-Fiction. 5. Michigan-Fiction.] I. Title.

[Fic]- dc22 2011934850
ISBN 978-1-59316-600-7

Text set in Sabon
Text and Cover Designed by Jenn Martino Design
Edited by Karen Grove

First edition
ACEGHFDB

Printed in the United States of America

This is a work of fiction. All the names, characters, places, organizations, and events portrayed in this book are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously to lend a sense of realism to the story. Any resemblance to any organization, event, or actual person, living or dead, is unintentional.

For Mom

Acknowledgments

In hindsight, perhaps it's not surprising that I'd write a novel centered on girls' amateur wrestling. In the mid 1980s, two of my cousins, Kari and Veda, competed admirably—and successfully—on the boys' wrestling teams of their respective New Jersey hometowns of Roselle Park and Tewksbury. At the time, a female amateur wrestler was an anomaly. Today it is most certainly not, as girls (and women) compete at every level of wrestling, including the Olympics. It is a welcomed development in our sport.

During my research for *Perfected By Girls*, I had the opportunity to speak with dozens of former and current female wrestlers about the obstacles that they had to overcome in order to compete, their thoughts on being teammates with and opponents of boys, and, ultimately, what the sport meant to them. Some were kind enough to offer comments on the book cover as it was in development, as well. Their insight helped me a great deal. Though I'm sure I'll forget a few, and apologize if I do, I'd like to thank Leigh James, Joey Miller, Rowan Pilger, Stephanie Marino, Uilani Kaneao, Jennah Brennan, Amanda Ayo-

tte, Ariel Fitzner, Alaura Seidl, Kailee Ball, Aubrae Putnam, Michele Levy, Amy Granton, Amy Fazackerley, Kiki Lane, and a special thanks to Danielle Hobeika.

Most importantly, I am indebted to Kayla Percy, the other member of our two-person writing group and a fine novelist herself; Karen Grove, masterful editor for all three of my novels; Alexes R., who generously took time from her ice hockey schedule to critique the novel; Elizabeth, for her support; my sister, Jenn, for her fine design work; and Alisa Weberman, publisher at Coles Street Publishing, for having the wisdom to publish *Perfected By Girls*.

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July 2011

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Chapter 1

Sometimes I wish I were a guy.

I know that sounds stupid, probably ridiculously stupid—my best friend, Jade, would certainly say it does. So, before word gets out at Ashton High that I might be considering “augmentation” to my south-of-the-border region, let me clarify: I wish I could be *like* a guy.

I’m envious of them. Everything about guys—the things they do and the way they do them, from irrationally impulsive to single-mindedly determined, and all shades in between—seems to originate from their bodies. It’s like watching one of those animal shows where a lion is sprawled out lazily on the savanna, then the moment strikes and he takes off, his muscular body charging through the grassy plains, mane swaying, to knock the snot out of some hyena.

I envy guys’ muscles and the arrogance those muscles give them. I envy that it seems like they don’t need to do anything special to be sturdy and broad. They don’t have to flex. Or pose. Or strut. It just *happens*. When they move; when they don’t move. They can just be, and yet it’s impossible to ignore how their bodies are so...

I'm not sure what the right word is.

Intimidating, I suppose.

Or powerful.

Alive, maybe.

Yeah... Sometimes I really wish I could be like a guy.

Chapter 2

“Oh...my...God...”

Jade is definitely the excitable type. Right now she’s squeezing my arm and squealing in my ear in one of those ways where I’m concerned she may not be able to keep her thoughts discreetly contained in her head. It probably won’t matter anyway, given that we’re sitting among my JV wrestling teammates at the top row of our standing-room-only high school gymnasium bleachers, looking down on hundreds of classmates and teachers, parents and neighbors, shouting and clapping for the pride of Ashton, Michigan: our state-ranked varsity team.

Jade leans in. “Did you hear me?”

We’ve been sister-tight since we terrorized Brownies Troop 77 together, like, eight years ago. She comes to every wrestling match and even watches the action on the mat as intently as I do, though usually for much less sports-related reasons.

“Do you *see*?” She’s downright giddy.

I roll my eyes.

It’s the third period of the 170-pound match. Trey Fignorelli, our team co-captain (my brother, Cole, is the

other) and three-year letter winner, just hit a standing switch that took him and his South Lyon opponent out-of-bounds.

“No points,” the referee shouts. “Same way.”

Trey, reddish floppy hair sprouting from under his headgear, picks himself up and shakes out his hands. The South Lyon wrestler stands up, as well.

That’s when Jade blurts into my ear, “Are you even *looking?*”

I am. At Trey.

He’s tired. He always shakes out his hands between drills near the end of practice. It’s his little quirk. Why I notice these things, I’m not sure. But I do.

I take a gulp from my water bottle. I’m still in my singlet and warm-ups. My sweat isn’t totally dry. Bet I’m a bit smelly, too. Our JV team won, but I didn’t. I wrestled in one of the “exhibition” matches after the regular lineup was done. Got my clock cleaned. I don’t think my opponent was too thrilled to be wrestling a girl, so he dispensed with any semblance of chivalry and took me down with a double-leg, then cross-faced me, without any respect for my button nose, into a far-side cradle. I was behind 5–0 before my brain unscrambled. I did have an escape in the second period—for what it was worth (very little)—but then gave up another takedown in the third for a 7–1 shellacking.

I glance at the clock. Fifty-four seconds left; Trey’s up 4–2. But that’s not what Jade sees.

“He’s *huge*,” she says, giggling.

I purse my lips but don’t look at her—that’ll just egg her on.

“I know you notice,” she says.

“I don’t.”

“You do.”

“I’m watching my *teammate*.”

Jade laughs. “Teammate?”

“Yeah,” I say, without any conviction whatsoever.

“Mel,” she says, “if it wasn’t for Cole, Trey wouldn’t even know your name.”

“Yeah, well—” I start to say, but I know she’s right.

Trey kneels down at the center circle, taking a last deep breath before he sets himself in the down position. His opponent is facing the South Lyon coach, who sits on a folding chair at the corner of the mat.

“Gotta turn him,” the coach shouts. “Off the whistle, grab an ankle and Turk. Then put in the half.”

Reasonable, but rather obvious, suggestions.

When the South Lyon wrestler turns around, Jade’s distraction is more than apparent. His white singlet with a gold-colored band running diagonal across his chest, at just the right angle, seems as sheer as satin and, for a moment, it’s as if he’s standing on the mat wearing only red wrestling shoes, a yellow sash, and an abundantly filled jockstrap.

Jade squeezes my arm harder and practically howls. I glance around us. Thankfully, the crowd’s cheering has begun to swell in anticipation of the referee’s whistle and nobody seems to notice.

Ashton’s a wrestling town, has been for decades—that’s what our legendary Coach Hillman reminds us of in practice every day. And if he didn’t, the long list of

state champions and place-winners displayed prominently in our wrestling room would certainly hammer the idea home. Ashton fans know what they're seeing. They're seeing their co-captain, less than a minute away from securing an early December season-opening team victory, in the bottom position in the center circle, while his opponent waits for the referee to motion him on top.

"Mel—" Jade says.

I shush her.

"Don't shush me."

"Watch the wrestling," I say, gesturing down toward the mat.

Jade purses her lips and goes into pissy mode, pulling a cell phone from her handbag.

"I'll just check my messages," she says in an annoying way. "Why don't you check yours? Oh, that's right, you can't."

I offer my best bitter smile. Mom put the kibosh on my texting and calling when I went a little overboard one month (actually, two) last summer. So now I'm practically the only person at Ashton High who doesn't have a cell phone.

"Just watch," I say to Jade.

The referee blows the whistle and the third period continues. Trey holds his base for the first few seconds, arms braced against the mat, triceps totally bulging. The South Lyon wrestler grabs a near ankle and drives Trey down to the mat. Then he forces in a half nelson.

Ashton fans yell, "Look away! Look away!"

Trey manages to get to an elbow, but he's obviously tired. I *knew* it. Now, both sides of the gymnasium are really rocking.

It's as if the South Lyon wrestler wants to wrench Trey's arm out of his shoulder more than try to turn him to his back. He's driving as hard as he can, while Trey fights to get back to his base. The willpower from both guys is amazing—one using every bit of his energy and strength to pull the upset, the other enduring pain and fatigue to hold off the challenge.

As the clock ticks down, I imagine myself in Trey's place and wonder: In front of a packed home crowd, could I be as tough and gritty as I'd need to be to get the win? My stomach tightens. I doubt it. I don't know if it's a girl-guy thing. Maybe it is. Maybe if I had ripped arms and broad shoulders and thick quads that stretched out my singlet... Maybe.

"Come on, Trey!" Jade shouts.

She's doing her best impression of an interested fan, though I know she's more concerned about whether we're going to hang out later tonight than Ashton winning this dual meet.

"Get to a base," I say.

I'm surprised to hear my own voice. I'm not one of those wrestlers who cheers on every teammate. I'm usually silent. I like to analyze what's happening on the mat, wondering why a takedown setup worked, or which wrestler had better balance in a certain position. My dad told me once that I'd make a good coach someday. I'd like to make a good *wrestler* first.

I watch Trey get to his hands and knees.

“Crank down on the arm!”

It’s my voice again, but this time it’s loud and comes at a lull in the crowd’s cheering, so my words are as clear as a boat horn on Whitmore Lake.

Trey suddenly raises his body a little, then cranks down on his opponent’s arm. The South Lyon wrestler falls to his hip, allowing Trey to step over smoothly for the reversal.

I can feel the know-it-all grin on my lips. A few Ashton fans glance over their shoulders and nod their approval, though none of my JV teammates do. That’s fine. They probably figure I only know this stuff from being around my brother. Or, maybe, they just don’t want to admit a girl can have more wrestling smarts than them.

Back on the mat, Trey rides his opponent for the last half minute of the period, jumps to his feet at the buzzer, then has his arm raised in victory.

I still feel flush, sitting straight up with my chest puffed out. I’m sure people are listening to hear what I’ll shout during the 182-pound match.

“Uh...hate to disappoint you,” Jade says, putting a hand on my shoulder, “but no one’s waiting for your next moment of brilliance.”

I roll my eyes to deflect her snarkiness, and then finish the rest of the cheese sandwich that I hadn’t eaten after weigh-ins.

Soon enough, the dual meet is over. The Ashton varsity has started the season with an important, but expected,

victory. Jade and I stand, then wait for fans to move down the bleacher steps. It takes a few minutes.

“Hey,” Jade says to me. “Good job earlier.”

“With what?”

“Your match.”

“I got my butt handed to me.”

“Maybe,” Jade says. “But you had a nice escape in the second period.” She steps down a row, then another.

“You saw that?” I say, following her. I think she’s smiling. “I figured you’d be too busy watching other *things*.”

“Mel, my darlin’, I promised you over the summer I’d make it to every one of your JV matches *and* pay attention. I’m keeping that promise.”

Well, that’s kind of sweet.

“Besides, I’m waiting,” she says.

“Waiting?”

“Yes.”

“For what?”

She gestures down to the mat.

“And?”

“You, the first chick to wrestle varsity for Ashton,” she says. “And I’ll be able to say, ‘I knew her when she was regular ol’ Melinda Radford.’”

I can’t tell if Jade’s teasing me or she’s serious. Either way, our conversation makes me majorly uneasy. I look around to see if anyone’s heard what we’re talking about. They’d probably think Jade is out of her mind.

“Things are fine the way they are,” I say.

“Fine the way they are?”

“Yes.”

“That’s it?”

“Yes, that’s it.”

“You don’t ever think about it?”

“No,” I insist.

“Liar.”

“I’m serious,” I say. “I don’t.” But maybe I don’t sound very convincing.

“What about someday?” Jade says.

I roll my eyes. “Okay, someday.”

“Or sooner.”

“Jade...”

“Suit yourself,” she says, with a shrug.

Then she grabs my hand and we hurry down to the bottom row. “Now, let’s go find Trey and Cole,” she says, her almond eyes sweeping across the gymnasium floor. “While they’re still in their wrestling outfits.”

“Outfits?” I say, incredulous. “They’re called singlets, Jade. *Singlets.*”

But she’s not listening.

Chapter 3

Jade dives onto my bed with this week's *People* magazine, sweeping the pages to check out the latest Hollywood breakup, or starlet arrest, or celebrity rehab. She's enthralled.

"Keep it if you want," I say.

"You're finished?"

"You know I don't read that trash."

Jade gives me a look. "Excuse me, Einstein."

"My mom got it," I say, pulling off my warm-ups. I'm standing in my singlet. "There's a dress in there she thought would look good on me."

"Which one?"

"I forget."

The magazine hits my butt. "Don't BS me," Jade says. "You know *exactly* which dress." She jumps up and walks to my closet, pulling open the mirrored sliding door. "I'm the one who got you interested in fashion and now look—a black strapless dress from, hmm..." She turns out the label. "BCBG. And this? A Calvin Klein sleeveless." She pushes aside more clothes. "Galliano... Another Galliano... Anne Klein, St. John Collection, DKNY..."

“Okay, okay,” I say.

“So?”

I sigh. “It was a BCBG black satin halter dress that hits here.” I show Jade—a few inches below the bottom of my singlet, just above my knee.

She says, “I’d totally look fabulous in it.”

I hear my brother coming down the second-floor hallway. Jade apparently does, too.

“Hey, Cole,” she calls, as he passes by. “Really great win tonight.” She gives him one of those gee-aren’t-you-wonderful looks, and I think her already-full lips suddenly become poutier.

Cole stops. He smiles at Jade and his eyes lock onto her as if she’s the only person in his world. It’s enough to make me sick.

“Oh, please,” I mutter. “Just go away.”

“I’ll be downstairs in five minutes, chubby,” he grunts at me. God, I really hate when he calls me fat. “Be ready,” he says.

“Do I have a choice?”

“What was the score of your match?” he says.

“Never mind.”

“Did ya even score a point?”

“Yes, actually,” I say.

“Whoa, break out the champagne,” Cole says, with a forced laugh. “Mel scored a whole point.”

I shake my head. “You’re such a supportive, loving brother.”

Cole grins, in that obnoxious way that only he can do, then looks toward Jade and, with a cowboy-on-a-white-

steed wink, says, “Coming to my next match?”

Jade feigns being coy. “Maybe...”

“Leave us alone,” I interrupt and slam my bedroom door closed. It’s not like I haven’t seen Cole flirt with Jade before, he does it all the time. I know it doesn’t mean anything (and it better not). I’m just not in the mood to see it right now.

Jade turns to me. “Anyway, what were we talking about? Oh, yeah, all these gorgeous clothes.”

I pull the straps of my singlet off my shoulders, then roll it past my underwear and down my legs.

“Whoa, Mel...”

“You better not say I’m chubby.”

“No, you’re *way* muscular,” Jade says. I can’t tell if she’s impressed or busting on me. “Starting to look like *that* chick.” She gestures toward the poster on my wall.

“I wish,” I say. “That *chick* is Tricia Saunders. She’s, like, the best female amateur wrestler from the US, ever.”

“Yeah, yeah... You’ve told me this a million times. And a million times, I’ve told you, ‘whatever’.”

“Not ‘whatever’,” I say. “Four-time world champ, eleven-time national champ. Never lost to another American female wrestler. Not once. She, my dear Jade, was a bitch in a singlet.”

She looks at me, unimpressed.

“Anyway,” she says, “soon you’re not going to fit in these dresses anymore. It’d be a shame to have to get rid of them. Guess I’ll have to be the benevolent friend and take them off your hands.”

“Benevolent,” I say. “That’s an SAT word. I’m

surprised you knew how to use it properly in a sentence.”

Jade flares her nostrils. “Thanks. Let me try it again. That South Lyon wrestler wasn’t very *benevolent* when he wiped the mat with you today.”

Then she gives me the fakest of smiles, and we both laugh.

While Jade sifts through my closet for more of what she hopes will be hand-me-downs, I pull out a T-shirt, long-sleeved shirt, two pairs of sweatpants, and a hooded sweatshirt from my drawer. Soon, I have them all on.

“Hey, are we still getting a mani-pedi tomorrow?” Jade asks.

“Yep,” I say.

“Good, my nail polish is chipping.”

I look at my own. My nails are a mess. “I’ll be back in twenty-five minutes,” I say, before leaving my bedroom.

“Take your time,” Jade says. “There’s no way I’m going home.”

Then she gives me a look that I know all too well. Her father must be in one of his moods. It doesn’t help that her mother hasn’t been around for years. We never talk about that. Jade doesn’t like when I feel sorry for her. But I do anyway.

Cole and I run almost every night. After practice. After matches. On Sundays. He never lets me off the hook, no matter how I feel or whether I want to or not. He waits in the laundry room off the kitchen, where we keep our running shoes. When mine are on, he tells me where we’re going. He’s got four routes. One is hilly. Another is long

and mostly straight. The other two are a combination.

Together, without talking, we walk from the back of the house down the driveway, stretching along the way. Once we get to the street, Cole takes off sprinting. After he's a quarter mile or so down the road, he stops and bounces on his toes until I catch up. It's the same every time we run.

"Keep going," I want to tell him. "I'll make it home."

He doesn't need to make sure I'm all right every step of the way. I'm fine. I mean, not completely—my legs feel totally heavy and I'm pretty sure my period's going to start tomorrow or the next day. But it's not like something's going to happen to me running—or more accurately, slogging—a couple of miles.

But I know he'll never leave me behind. And not because of some sense of brotherly love. I'm pretty sure it was a parental edict. "Look out for Mel," Dad probably said. "She's your sister, and a *teammate*." I'll bet Cole laughed at that. There's no way in the world he considers me a teammate. It's clear I'm not one of the guys.

As I approach my brother, I do my best to pick up the pace. The moment I'm close, he sprints away again.

A small part of me wishes he'd wait. I could use the company. We wouldn't have to talk or anything (like he'd ever want to), we could just run side by side in silence. But, the truth is, I really don't mind facing this drudgery by myself. It allows plenty of time for thoughts to rattle around in my head, if sometimes obsessively.

Like, properly capturing the far knee when finishing off a hi-crotch...

(Working on it.)

Or making it through the season without a teammate or opponent “accidentally” copping a feel...

(Unlikely.)

Or drilling with Brook Evans in practice, who smells as good with a little sweat on him as he looks wearing athletic shorts and a tight T-shirt...

(Very, very distracting.)

I push through the back door into our laundry room, leaving my brother to run a few more miles. I bend down to untie my running shoes, then I pull off both pairs of sweatpants, sweatshirt, long-sleeved shirt, and T-shirt. My mom comes in from the kitchen.

“Put whatever you need washed in the wicker basket,” she says.

I’m standing in my underwear and sports bra, sweating. Not a lot, but enough. I notice Mom eye me up and down.

“What?” I say, though I know what she’s thinking. Probably doesn’t like that she can count each of my ribs, or that my skin looks as thin as a silk top, or that I’d asked her to buy me a few bras—a size smaller than usual. “Mom, my ribs seem like they’re showing because I just got done running,” I say, though I know that makes no sense at all.

“I didn’t say anything.”

“And I probably look a little thin because I’m sweaty.” Which makes even less sense.

“Not a word,” she says.

I put my hands on my waist and frown. “I *needed* new bras, mine were totally old. I wanted a smaller size because”—I hold my boobs—“these get in the way. You try wrestling with them.”

“Yes, I’m sure it’s a problem,” Mom says. She pulls a bath towel from a shelf and puts it over my shoulders. “Jade’s staying over?”

“Yeah.”

“If you two want something to eat, let me know. Now, get upstairs, my little warrior princess, before you catch a chill.”