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For Leo, always.





one

I JUST WOKE UP ONE MORNING AND FORGOT HOW

to do everything. I didn't have a stroke, or an accident, or get diagnosed with a disability; it's just that one moment everything was easy, and the next it wasn't.

I'm Jenna Watson, and I'm a cheerleader. I know, I know. But it's not some Hollywood crap, okay? We are not every guy's fantasy; we are not the "popular girls" or the "mean girls" of Marsen High School. We're too busy for that. We're literally just some human females trying to live our lives and do a perfect toe touch.

Because here's something very important for you to understand: Cheerleading is a sport. I know, I know. But listen: *Cheerleading is a sport, damn it.* We get up at the butt crack of dawn, and we practice. We run laps and we drill and we jump up in the air over and over and over. We watch TV with our legs spread-eagle

to maintain our flexibility even when we're "relaxing." We go to sleep with our fingers and toes twitching in rhythm as we run through our routines in our minds. We are athletes. And our team is at the top of its game. We've advanced to the state championship every year for the past decade, and made it to Nationals three of those years. We are serious.

I'm good. I'm a good cheerleader. Okay, I'm great. You can't be on the team if you're not great. I'm not the best one; I'm maybe the third best, though I might be tied with one or two other people for that slot. And that's fine. I don't need to be the best; I mean, I'm only a junior, so I'm still working on my form.

I'm also an A student, though I occasionally get the rogue B+. I'm fine with that, too, though I'm sure my mom would like me and my brother, Jack, to get straight As. Jack, by the way, is a Goth and a senior and weird, and he gets slightly more Bs than me, but we're both good students. We have a car that we share, though I use it more than him. And Dad is in absentia in Colorado with his younger hippie-granola wife I still haven't met, so Mom's been living that #singlemomlife the past six years—all of which just adds to the pressure for me to do well as a student and cheerleader. Fortunately, I am fantastic at both; you're welcome, Mom. I'm in good shape to get financial aid or a cheerleading scholarship from a university within a six-hour drive of where I live in San Diego, and that's basically what I'm going for.

So, that's my life. School, cheer practice, and the cheer *team*, which is its own commitment. The cheer girls are basically family. Like, you have to be, when you spend so much time up in

each other's business. So when we're not at practice or games or on the road for competitions, we're usually at each other's houses or seeing a movie together or at the mall. We get our periods at the same time, we text constantly, we're always in each other's photos online—you get the picture.

Or that's how it was before I woke up and forgot how to do everything.

Okay, I didn't forget how to do *everything*. I could still ace an AP English test; I remembered all the moves to our routines; I could breathe and eat and walk around and stuff. I just forgot how to act like a normal person. And I'm not even sure if I forgot, or if the rules just changed on me. The first person I noticed it with was Raejean.

Raejean *was* my best friend, but things have been weird since we started junior year. We didn't have a fight or anything, more of an . . . incident, I guess. I don't even know if I'm the one being weird or if she is or we both are. I'm pretty sure it started at Billy's birthday party, though.

A little background: Billy Nguyen is cute as hell. He does the student announcements on campus TV in the morning, he's a little bit dorky, but he's adorable, and I'm not the only one who thinks so. He used to be a child model or something? We went to elementary and middle school together, but I just started crushing on him at the end of sophomore year after dumping my first real boyfriend, Roland Jackson.

Billy's birthday is September 10, so he always has a party right after the school year starts—I've been going to his birthday

party every year since I was, like, seven. His house has a pool, so he had a pool party in the middle of the day on a Saturday. By the time it got dark, the last eight or nine of us—Raejean, me, Meghan and Becca from cheer, some other kids from our year—had abandoned the pool and piled into his living room to watch this stand-up routine that his friend Chris said we “just *had* to watch.” I’d wanted to sit next to Billy on the couch, but this girl from my English class, Alison Boyer, sat by him instead, so I sat with Raejean on the floor.

I should clarify that Raejean wasn’t in her bathing suit anymore. She’d changed back into this bright yellow sundress; not everyone can pull off yellow, but she can.

Oh, also, I was drinking a glass of water.

After watching the stand-up, we all just sat on the floor, giggling and quoting our favorite lines. “Oh my God, and the part about the ducks? Oh my God,” I remember saying.

Raejean looked over at me and laughed. “Oh my God,” she said, imitating me. “You are such a ditz.”

It wasn’t the first time she had called me a ditz, actually. She would call me a ditz when I was confused or said something in a particularly high vocal register. But for some reason, this time especially pissed me off. I’m not a ditz. I’ve never gotten below a B+ on *anything*. I’m not shallow; I’m not even blond like Raejean—not like it’s cool to hate on blondes, either, but at least that would sorta make sense. I knew she was joking, but . . . I mean, what kind of joke is that? It’s not even funny. What’s the

punch line supposed to be? Also, we're both cheerleaders! Don't we deal with enough "ditz" stereotypes already?

Maybe it's because I like Billy, and she knew I liked him. Maybe it's because she did it in front of a room full of people, instead of when it was just the two of us. But I could feel my face flushing. (I hate blushing. It's like strapping a big neon sign to my face that says EMBARRASSING THINGS ARE HAPPENING.)

So I did the first thing that came to mind: I dumped my glass of water over her head.

I don't remember how the room reacted. I think someone (maybe Chris?) went "Ohhhh!" like guys do. But what I mostly remember is the look of disgust and confusion and betrayal on Raejean's face. My decision to pour the water on her hung in the air like a bad smell. Immediately I wanted to take it back.

"Are you okay?" I found myself saying.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" she responded.

I felt like it shouldn't be such a big deal. Weren't we all just swimming two hours ago? It's *water*; it's not like it's gonna stain her clothes or anything. But I could tell it was a big deal.

"I'm sorry," I said, and then I was mad at myself for saying it. Why should I be sorry? She's the one always calling me a ditz for no reason!

I grabbed my towel and tried to help her dry off, but it was already wet from having used it after swimming, and she waved me away with her hands. The rest of the room had moved on to discussing a different part of the comedy routine, so I thought

maybe all was forgotten, but no one really talked to me for the rest of the party. Then again, I didn't make an effort to talk to any of them, either. I just sat there, feeling my hot face burning a hole in the room, trying to disappear into the floor.

After all that, I had to give Raejean a ride home because we'd come to the party together. We didn't say anything in the car. I had music on, but I don't think that was why. She got out with a clipped "Seeya," and that was that.

Now it's nearly October, and things are still weird. It's not like she flat-out *ignored* me after that. I mean, she couldn't. But we kind of avoid eye contact, she just sends back one-word replies to my texts, and she's been getting rides home with Meghan Finnegan instead of with me. We also, for the first time, don't have any classes together this year; I'm in AP English, she's in Advanced, and they're different periods, which threw off all the rest of the classes we wanted to take with each other. So that's not helping, either.

This probably doesn't sound that bad. I don't know; maybe it's not. But this is the longest we've ever gone without going over to each other's house. Raejean has been my best friend since fourth grade. Raejean calls my mom "Mom." Raejean has slept in my bed with me hundreds or maybe thousands of times. Raejean can tell when I need to eat. If me and Raejean aren't okay, then the foundation of my world is cracked and crooked.

I wrote and deleted maybe a dozen e-mails, which basically went like this:

Hey girl. I'm just writing to say I hope things are cool with us.

I love you so much and I know it was totally weird that I dumped my water on you at Billy's party. I don't know why but being called a ditz right then just rubbed me the wrong way, and I totally overreacted. I'm super sorry and I hope you're not mad. Forgive me? I'll buy you a pumpkin spice latte?

(Raejean loses her shit for pumpkin spice lattes.)

Or maybe this is all in my head and you're actually not pissed at all? I feel like maybe I'm losing it because I can't stop thinking about this and I can't tell if I'm making this weird and things are fine, or if things are actually weird. Let a girl know. I love you boo.

I never e-mailed her. It felt too needy.

That was just the beginning of not knowing how to do anything anymore. A week after the water incident, while putting our clothes on after cheer practice, Meghan Finnegan was suddenly looking at my jeans a little too closely. Meghan's white and redheaded and *loud*, and everyone loves her, me included; she's not of Raejean-level importance to me, but she's probably the funniest person on the team. She poked me in the side, her eyes firmly on my crotch.

"Jenna, are we rocking a little camel toe?"

I blinked. "What?"

"You totally are! You've got some camel toe going on!"

"What's a camel toe?"

"You've never heard of camel toe?" She was laughing, her eyes were sparkling; it wasn't *mean*, but I could feel my face getting hot.

"No," I said. "What is that?"

“Becca,” she called out. “Becca, come look at this! Does Jenna have some camel toe in these jeans?”

I’d worn this exact pair of jeans all the time. I couldn’t figure out what could possibly be different right now.

Becca Ruiz looked at my crotch. “Oh my God, you totally do. You gotta retire those jeans, girl.”

And suddenly Raejean was in on it, too. “Jenna!” she laughed. “I told you to get rid of those jeans!” No, actually, you never did, Raejean. You’ve told me repeatedly how cute you think I look in them . . .

“*What the hell is a camel toe?*” My voice wavered just a little bit, and this pissed me off even more, because it didn’t seem like anything involving my jeans could be such a big deal.

“It means we can read your lips,” said Meghan, laughing harder.

“Google it,” said Becca. “And get some new jeans!”

I waited until later to google it, because I didn’t want to give them the satisfaction of watching me standing there with my phone, discovering it in front of them. And I’m glad I waited, because I’m pretty sure my whole head turned bright red when I read the definition.

I mean, what the hell? I wore those jeans *all the time*. I hadn’t gained weight. Why were they suddenly not okay?

It started to feel like something like this happened every day: some joke I wasn’t in on, some social faux pas. “Um, did you just say *chillax*? What is this, the nineties?” “How can you still listen to that song after everyone and their mother has

played it into the ground?” “Jenna, what’s up with that lip gloss? Did you go down on Bert from *Sesame Street*?” As far as I could tell, it was just me. No one else was getting taunted for these kinds of missteps.

I couldn’t figure it out. These girls were my *family*. We joked all the time that we were a hive mind, that we all had a psychic connection with one another. Why was I suddenly always a step behind?

Two

WE'RE AT PRACTICE, AND COACH MASON IS singling out Raejean.

"Your legs are too straight coming out of the tuck jump," Coach says. "You're going to hurt yourself."

A tuck jump is basic, baaaasic cheerleading. "You can't slack off on the basics and save it all for the stunts," Coach says. "Every single move needs to be sharp and tight."

I am remembering fifth-grade figure skating lessons with Raejean; I am remembering Mrs. Rabinowitz, who thought the sun shone out of Raejean's fifth-grade ass; and I am remembering Mrs. Rabinowitz's successor, Kate Ross, who criticized Raejean's spirals. I am remembering how quickly after that Raejean decided that figure skating was for losers; I don't think she and Kate Ross lasted a month together.

Please, Raejean, don't fall out of love with cheerleading. Please don't leave me.

"Do it again," Coach says, and she makes Raejean do it alone. And then again. And then she puts her hands on Raejean, pushing her body down so her knees bend, demanding that we all watch.

We get notes all the time. It's how we've stayed at the top of our game for so long. But no one else is getting notes today, just Raejean.

Coach Mason is built like an SUV (indestructible) and makes you feel safe for the exact same reason. Her skin looks like a potato from too many suntans, and she is unapologetically demanding. Most days we are happy to sweat it all out on the mat for her, even when we complain in the locker room afterward, but this is a lot, even for Coach.

We all do the sequence again. "Good, Jenna." No no no. What are you doing? I don't want to be the good one; I don't want to be the example. I try to catch Raejean's eye to communicate all this, but her eyes are on herself in the mirror, jumping over and over and over again and making sure to bend her knees deeply on every landing. I look back at my reflection, and my face is pink. It's not my usual exertion pink. I know the difference.

Coach lays into Raejean through the whole practice. "Point that toe, Raejean." "Spine straight." "You're not moving with the group." "Get that leg up." I beg her in my mind to back off, but she just keeps going.

I put a hand on Raejean's bicep in the locker room after. "Coach is high," I say. "I don't know what crawled up her ass and died."

And Raejean doesn't even look at me as she shrugs. "She's just doing her job," she says.

"Yeah, but that was like . . . excessive."

She shrugs. Again. Still not looking at me. "Your aerials look good. You've been practicing."

It's dressed like a compliment, but she's not looking at me and she's shouldering her backpack and she's walking out without waiting for me, and when I come outside, I see her getting into Meghan's car.

I open up her name in my phone and tap out a text:

DON'T YOU DARE GHOST ON ME!!!

I stare at it, ashamed. It's clingy, it's desperate, it's terrifying. I decide not to send it.

Then somehow my thumb is pressing Send anyway. No no no noooooo, take it back take it back, but there the notification is: **Delivered**. And then, almost immediately: **Read**.

I wait for the ellipsis on her end that will tell me she's typing back. It doesn't come.

Oh God oh God, what is happening. What did I do?

I type again.

Sorry. Meant to send that to someone else.

No, that's stupid, that's utterly transparent, she'll laugh at you. Delete, delete, delete, keep hitting Delete even though all the text is gone.

I'm standing in the parking lot; the squad has pretty much scattered. I look around and take a big breath. It's a sunny day, and I feel like I'm dying.

My phone buzzes. Text from Raejean:

???

I decide not to answer. I put my phone in my pocket. Then I take it back out and start typing.

Sorry. Got pissed for a minute—

Nope. Delete. I type again.

Nvm

Send.

Big breath, big breath, don't cry in the parking lot.

I suddenly do the math and realize it's been just three weeks since Billy's birthday party. It feels like it's been months and months. Three weeks is such a long time for me and Raejean not to be at each other's houses or staying up texting every night. Since Billy's birthday we've seen each other almost every day and said almost nothing.

I type another text:

Sleepover sometime? Been a minute

She writes back almost immediately:

Maybe after this weekend. Mrs. H assigned a ridic 8pg paper for Mon

Me: **OK. Or you can work on it at my place if you want. Miss u**

I waver before hitting Send; I don't know if the last sentence is too much, but since when do I worry about being "too much" with Raejean? Send.

Buzz.

OK I'll let u know.

I want to set myself on fire.

I crank my music in the car. Angry white boys with electric guitars. It doesn't help.

When I get home, I make a run for the cupboard and start shoving Reese's Puffs in my mouth like I'm starving. I close the cupboard door, and there's my brother, Jack, staring at me with his bored, eyelinered eyes.

"What are you doing?" he says.

"I'm . . . eating." I thought that much would be clear.

It's seventy degrees outside, but Jack is wearing black from head to toe, per usual. Black Pink Floyd T-shirt, black skinny jeans, black Converse sneakers. He used to wear black lipstick, but he said it chapped his lips too much; I asked him what brand he was using and offered to give him tips on keeping his lips moisturized, but he was over it by that point.

"I thought you didn't eat sugar."

This is true. I have mostly sworn off sugar since I joined cheer, with exceptions for special occasions. Coach hands out meal plans and recipe books to all the girls, which are "not mandatory, but which other girls have found useful," but you're basically not going to survive cheer if you keep eating Wendy's and Pop-Tarts all the time. Lots of hard-boiled eggs, green smoothies, and coconut oil. Very few Reese's Puffs.

"I'm hungry," I respond.

“That’s my cereal.”

“So have Mom get more.”

“She doesn’t go to the grocery store until Saturday.”

“So get more yourself,” I practically yell, and I flounce into my bedroom with the box of Reese’s Puffs and slam the door.

Jack was my best friend before Raejean was my best friend. My mom loves to tell the story of how when I was three, some other kid at a park kept stealing my Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles action figures, and Jack got right in that kid’s face and bellowed, “*Don’t. Do. That.*” The kid apparently ran away terrified.

When Dad left Mom six years ago for Renee (who is twenty-eight and posts farmers’ market pictures on Instagram and who I still haven’t met), I was ten and Jack was eleven. Jack scribbled *I hate Dad* all over the walls, and I helped him paint over it before Mom found out; we would camp out in each other’s rooms, recounting the latest fight we’d overheard. Raejean was my best friend by that point, and sometimes I’d cry to her at lunch or after figure skating practice, but I’d cry to Jack, too.

But then Jack started middle school and began painting his fingernails black and listening to Marilyn Manson, and I was taking dance and gymnastics classes, and he started judging everything I did. “Why are you listening to Kesha?” he’d ask. “She’s so *boring.*” He found other kids who wore black, and I started middle school and found other girls who liked Kesha, and that was kind of that.

Jack’s room is illuminated only by a black light and whatever

sunlight his curtains don't block out, the scent of incense wafting into the hallway whenever he opens his door. My room is peaceful, a little castle. The walls are lavender, and I've got a snow-white down comforter that makes me feel luxurious, something I had to beg Mom to get me for two consecutive years. The cheer trophies, the photos, the Lady Gaga poster are all scientifically placed and generally make me feel pretty Zen when I'm in here.

Today I just keep thinking about all the sleepovers I haven't been having with Raejean lately, and it feels like jail.

I'm sitting on my bed, shoveling dry cereal, staring at my phone screen, scrolling through pictures of me and Raejean like I'm a lovesick twelve-year-old. Some of these are from over the summer, from cheer camp. We look tan. We look happy. I remember being happy.

I'm remembering the roundoff-back handspring that I landed wrong, the way my knee puffed up, and how Raejean sat with me the next two nights, changing out my ice pack, blowing off the rest of the girls to read *Cosmo* articles to me. She would find the stupidest sex tips, the ones involving saran wrap or raw steaks, and we would laugh until we were in too much pain to talk.

How could that have been just a few months ago?

Why why why did Coach have to tell me good job today? Why did she have to lay into Raejean?

Raejean has always been the better gymnast, but I'm the

faster learner. She comes out ahead in that equation, because no one keeps track of my learning process, but everyone notices her perfect flips. And that's fine. That's actually great. No spotlight has ever felt as good to me as it feels to be around a happy Raejean. The spotlight makes her happy. That's why she makes a great flyer—and that's why I'm totally happy being too tall to be a flyer. To me, spotlights are pressure; spotlights mean more people watching if you blow it.

The worst part about Raejean avoiding me is that I can't tell if it's real. Maybe she's just distracted. Maybe I'm making this whole thing up. Maybe there is literally nothing wrong whatsoever. And not just with Raejean but with the whole squad. Maybe tomorrow I'll go in, and we'll all be a hive mind again. Maybe no one will make fun of my shoes or some apparently antiquated slang that comes out of my mouth. Maybe this will disappear as quickly as it reared its head.

I'm looking at one of these Instagram photos from the summer, where I have my arms around Raejean from behind and my head on her shoulder. We've been caught mid-laugh. We're both in our sports bras and bike shorts, and you can see muscle definition in our stomachs and arms. I look a little bit like a horse, but happy, and Raejean looks perfect (per usual; she looks like a Disney princess as a general rule).

I don't remember where this was taken.

I comment on the picture: **Where was this? Don't remember this. Amazing pic.**

I hit Enter. I know she has gotten a notification on her phone, I know she is reading my comment right now, but I throw my phone on the bed, bolting out of the room so I can't look at it.

Jack's apparently gone back to his room, which means the living room is empty. Mom's at work, probably until late; she texted earlier. Mom works in public relations, and some of her clients are international, so sometimes she has conference calls at bizarre hours. On those nights she'll come through the door at nine or so, take-out food in one hand—maybe sushi or an avocado wrap—and her last Starbucks of the day in the other, which she sips at the dinner table as Jack and I eat the ginger from her sushi and we all talk about our days. Then Jack and I go to “bed,” or at least to our rooms, while Mom camps out on the couch with her laptop, answering the last of her work e-mails.

Maybe tonight I'll pretend I have too much homework to come out of my room. I don't know if I can talk about my day today.

I lie on the blue couch in our living room. The new one that Mom insisted we needed because the old one was faded. It always looked fine to me. There were certain ways you couldn't sit on it without feeling the springs, but I'd mastered the perfect way to lie down for a catnap, and it would be the most comfortable place in the world. I've never been able to sleep on this one. I stare at the ceiling, breathing deeply, trying to run through the routine in my head to drown everything else out.

Up, plié, toe touch, strut strut strut strut, arms to T, arms low V, hands on hips, body roll, back back front, high kick, run run run run,

soloists do backflips, back into formation four five six seven prep, tuck jump, spread-eagle, up, plié, toe touch, duck down back line middle front line, pike . . .

Hours later Raejean replies to my Instagram comment with three letters:

idk

Three

I NEED TO BACK UP A SECOND.

The first day of freshman year, Raejean and I were walking around—as we often did—holding hands. We had gotten through five years of friendship holding hands without ever thinking twice about it.

But, freshman year. High school. New games with new rules, which no one bothers to tell you before you enter the ring.

So we were walking down the hallway between first and second period, and these two sophomore guys started following us. We didn't notice until one of them began making kissy noises, the way you might try to summon a cat or a dog. We weren't sure it was aimed at us until one of them yelled out, "Hey, lesbians!"

I wanted to just keep walking and pretend I hadn't heard. But Raejean stopped and turned around, still holding my hand.

They were acne-smearred generic white boys, but they were upperclassmen and we were freshmen and my heart was going at light speed.

But Raejean's lips formed a calm smile as she asked, "What did you say?"

"How's it going, lesbians?" said Generic Sophomore White Dude #2. I don't remember if this really happened, but in my head, a small crowd started gathering.

"We're great," Raejean replied coolly. "How are you?"

They poked each other in the ribs and grinned, big eyed, hands covering their mouths. Raejean rolled her eyes and turned to go, but then one of them yelled out, "Dyke!"

In my mind, the crowd that had gathered by this point all started snickering. I remember some girl yelling, "Oh shit!" but, again, I don't know if that really happened. But here is what I absolutely know to be true: Raejean turned back to the two boys, walked up to the one who had called her a dyke, and punched him in the mouth.

There probably was a commotion. There probably was shouting. What I remember is that the guy had a trickle of blood streaming down the side of his chin. What I remember is the look of pure disoriented shame and awe in his eyes. And I remember that Raejean turned around, grabbed my hand, and walked away.

We never got in trouble. There are some advantages to being female. Raejean calls it the "girl card." Girls can punch boys in the hallway, and no one says shit.

No one ever called us names after that, either, and we kept holding hands in the hallway. She hasn't been holding my hand this school year, though. Not since the Billy incident.

I need to say something else about Raejean.

Ever had a friend that you wanted to crawl inside? Just to hear the noise in their head, feel the movement of their body, the shape of their skin? For as long as I can remember, I have wanted to crawl inside Raejean Winters. And sometimes, I feel like I do.

We went through a summer once when we did trust falls with each other all the time. There'd be no warning. We'd be standing in line for a movie, or at the food court at the mall, and one of us would just cross our arms over our chest and start falling backward. The other person would have to jump into position immediately and prepare to catch the falling girl. We could easily have fallen and cracked our skulls if we hadn't been so inside each other's heads, but we always caught each other.

There was also the time we became blood sisters when we were eleven, feeling our fingers pulse against each other until we weren't sure whose pulse was whose. There were all the times we spotted each other on lifts and jumps, all the times we held each other as we fell asleep and I felt like her heart was beating inside my body.

But the night I felt most like I could crawl inside Raejean was the sophomore-year homecoming dance.

Sophomore year was the year of Mikey Wall. Mikey was six two and biracial with pale green eyes, and he was British—with

the accent and everything. Every single girl had a crush on Mikey Wall, but Raejean and I were professionals at it. We would sneak pictures of him on our phones at lunchtime, pretending to take selfies while secretly turning the camera around and zooming in on him. We both kept extensive journals of our every interaction with him, which we would read out loud to each other at night—sometimes on the phone, sometimes in person. We had very, very comprehensive conversations about what oral sex with him would be like.

“I bet Mikey takes his time with a girl,” Raejean said. “He must be one of those guys who puts the woman’s pleasure first.”

“Oh my God,” I said, “I think I wrote those words exactly in my diary.” I found the passage and showed it to her. One brain, two bodies.

There was no competition. Neither of us had exchanged more than five sentences with him. He was in English class with us, and that was it. But in our fantasy lives, both of us were living a deliciously hedonistic sex life with Mikey Wall. We would write out our fantasies about him in explicit detail—the softness of his lips, nibbles on the earlobe or inner thigh, dirty talk with his hot British accent, the whole thing—and read them out loud to each other. The listener would clutch a pillow, occasionally moaning into it or biting her own fist at a particularly toe-curling passage. We did this for months.

At homecoming that year, Mikey and Raejean started talking at the punch bowl. I remember her laughing radiantly, while I stood by her left elbow, looking down at my drink, wishing I’d

picked a different dress. Raejean's dress was crystal white and just low-cut enough to show off her complete lack of tan lines. She looked like a fairy bride. My dress was stone gray, a choice I'd thought was unique and edgy at the time, but the slight shimmer of the fabric was lost in the darkness of the gym, and it was a little too baggy in the waist, and I felt a little bit like I was wearing a trash bag. I wanted to crawl inside her then, to feel what it was like to sparkle like that, with Mikey Wall's warmth enveloping her like a heat lamp.

The DJ changed the track to a slow song, and Mikey asked Raejean, "Would you like to dance?"

She turned to me and giggled, her eyes wide with a kind of *Can you believe this is happening?* But she must have seen something in my face, because her eyes changed and she turned back to Mikey.

"Only if Jenna can come."

He smiled, as only Mikey Wall could smile. "I wouldn't have it any other way."

He took both our hands, and we strode onto the dance floor together. I didn't think it was really happening. I thought there must be some mistake. But we took our place amid all the swaying couples. We each put a hand around his neck, and he put an arm around our waists. "Raejean and Jenna," he said. "Raejenna." And it wasn't as though it was the first time we had heard the joke, but we laughed like it was because his accent made everything funnier.

For the length of a John Legend song, Raejean and I felt

Mikey Wall's hands on our bodies and looked into his round green eyes. We pressed our foreheads against his. The three of us giggled as we swayed back and forth. Over the course of the song, he drew us closer and closer to him, until our thighs brushed against his. We could smell his breath, sweet with a faint trace of whiskey.

From time to time I would look over at Raejean, and we would laugh, smooshing our foreheads and noses together. "Are you two a couple?" Mikey asked.

"No, we're just the same person," Raejean responded.

"Raejenna," we said in unison, and then we all laughed again.

I saw Raejean softly stroking the side of his neck with her fingernails, so I decided to do the same, running my fingertips over his earlobe. We'd smuggled in a flask of Smirnoff under piles of tampons at the bottom of Raejean's bag, and we'd been sneaking sips from it in the bathroom all night. I was feeling bold. He responded by smiling and closing his eyes with a warm "mmmmmmmm." I felt his hand tighten on my lower back, slipping down just a couple of inches below where the waistband of my pants would fall. I felt Raejean inhale sharply at the exact moment that I did. His lips were so close to mine, and to hers.

Then the song ended, and the DJ transitioned into Kanye. Mikey pulled away. "Thank you, ladies," he said. He kissed Raejean on the cheek, then me, and he walked away into the crowd.

Raejean's eyes were huge. I was sure mine were, too. We grabbed each other's forearms and screamed, drowned out by the bass of the sound system. I pulled her into my arms, and we

squeezed each other so tight it was like we were trying to pop each other. “I’m just trying to absorb as much of his sweat from you as possible,” she said, running her hands all over my back. “Oh my God. Did that just happen?”

“I think it did,” I said. She pulled back and looked at me.

“You’re glowing,” she said, and I was sure I was, because she looked like a lightbulb. “Like you’re pregnant.”

“I think I might’ve gotten pregnant just now,” I replied, laughing.

We danced together for the next five songs, straddling each other’s thighs and pressing into each other, far enough into the center of the dance floor that the chaperones around the edge wouldn’t see us and tell us to cut it out. We were trying to dance something out that we couldn’t release, trying to break through this feeling of restlessness and anticipation in our bellies but just building it up instead. We always moved in perfect rhythm with each other. We could predict each other’s moves. We almost merged.

In an alternate version of that night, in a parallel universe that I have imagined a million times, Raejean (Raejean, not me, because she is bolder) whispers in Mikey’s ear while we’re dancing with him: “You can have both of us, if you want.” And Mikey laughs until he sees that she’s serious, and that I’m serious, and then he whispers, “Meet me out back,” and walks away, and our faces are identical in our utter disbelief, and we gather our purses and our coats and we go out back behind the gym, where his car is idling at the curb. We smoosh into the front seat together, and

he drives to a side street and parks the car. Somehow we all get into the back seat, and he kisses one of us, then the other, back and forth, our breath speeding up and filling up the car, fogging up the windows, his hands disappearing up our dresses, while Raejean and I try to keep quiet and fail.

Raejean and I never touch in this scenario. Or maybe we, like, clutch each other's arms, but we don't *do* anything to each other. We come at the exact same time.

Mikey Wall transferred after that semester. I kept following his every move on Facebook until I realized that Raejean no longer jumped in her seat when I showed her a new picture of him, that she had moved on, that now there were soccer players and young substitute teachers on her mind. As soon as I realized that, I stopped thinking about Mikey almost overnight. I couldn't sustain it alone.

I used to tell Raejean point-blank that I wanted to crawl inside her. All the time. She would say it back, or say it first.

I don't think she wants to anymore.

four

IT'S THE NEXT DAY AFTER PRACTICE, AND MEGHAN

Finnegan is putting her hand on my shoulder in the locker room.

“Hey, you all right?”

I look up at her. My eyes fill with tears for a second, and I quickly blink them away.

“Yeah, why?”

“You just seem a little stressed.”

I don't particularly want to vent to Meghan, Meghan who's been driving Raejean home lately when I've been the one driving her home since the minute I got my license. Meghan *obviously* knows that, right? There's no way she could not know that, right?

“I probably am.” I shrug and try to laugh.

She sits down on the bench next to me, all confidential. “Just school and Coach and stuff?”

“Yeah,” I say, “yeah, same old.”

“Well, if you *want*,” she whispers, leaning in closer, “me and Raejean are gonna go smoke a joint in my car. If you wanna join.”

I’m sorry, but this is bullshit. *Meghan* is inviting *me* to hang out with her and Raejean? What kind of power-play ridiculousness is this? No, I do not need a friggin’ invitation from *you* to see my best friend. Go sit on a public toilet and get herpes.

Also, is this a setup? Isn’t this how every single D.A.R.E. PSA starts? I’m probably gonna take a hit from this joint and immediately be swarmed by police and my family and every teacher I’ve ever had and go to jail for eight billion years. I don’t need that shit in my life right now, no, thank you, bye.

Except . . .

I’ve only tried pot once before, and it didn’t really affect me, but who knows? Maybe *Meghan’s* is different. Maybe it would actually relax me. Maybe it would help.

And I miss Raejean.

“Okay. Sure.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, just let me finish changing.”

“Oh my God, awesome! Okay, see you out there.” She bounces out of the locker room.

So this is what Raejean’s been doing instead of going home with me. Maybe if I had joints in my purse like *Meghan*, she’d want to hang out. Maybe I should get on that.

Meghan’s car is all the way at the back of the parking lot, a dented blue Chevy Metro from the early 2000s. I suddenly feel

better about my four-year-old red Volvo, still pretty much in perfect condition; then my stomach drops again when I realize Raejean must really like Meghan to hang out in this thing.

Raejean and Meghan are already in there. It's a two-door car, so I have to knock on Raejean's window to get in. She looks surprised to see me. Did Meghan not tell her I was coming?

"Oh, hey." She opens the door and scoots her seat forward so I can crawl into the back. They already have the joint lit.

"So he didn't text you?" Meghan asks, passing the joint to Raejean.

"No. I deleted his number so I wouldn't text him first—I don't wanna look desperate." Raejean exhales smoke, stifling a cough. "It's killing me. Like, why did you tell me you like me if you're not gonna text?"

I stick my head forward between their seats. "Who is this?" Am I really asking this? Is there really a guy in Raejean's life who I don't already know about in excruciating detail?

"Marcus Carlsberg," Meghan responds. "My family's foreign exchange student."

"I didn't know you had an exchange student," I say.

"He's a senior, so."

Meghan shows me a picture. Marcus is impossibly gorgeous, with chiseled features and a blue-green stare. My stomach drops. "He's German. From Hamburg," Raejean says. "I call him the Hamburger."

They've got nicknames and everything.

Raejean passes me the joint. "Maybe it's a cultural thing," I

offer, trying to meet her eye. "Maybe they don't text the same way in Germany." Raejean keeps looking out the windshield.

"That's racist," Meghan says.

". . . What?"

"Are you racist against Germans, Jenna?"

"No, I'm actually part German . . ."

"I'm totally just messing with you, girl!" She and Raejean crack up. I force a laugh.

I put the joint to my lips and suck in. It's harsher than whatever I smoked the one other time I did pot. That was the last night of cheer camp, when we all sat in a circle on the floor learning how to shotgun. Raejean blew the smoke into my mouth, and I immediately exhaled it; she doubled over laughing: "You're supposed to suck it in! Ditz."

So this time I make sure to suck it in hard, and it scorches my throat and I start coughing, deep chest coughs like when I had bronchitis. I should've refilled my water bottle before I left the locker room, but since I didn't, I just cough and cough. No one offers me a sip of their water.

Meghan is unfazed, taking back the joint and pulling on it flawlessly. "I dunno, Rager," she says, and it takes me a minute before I realize she's talking to Raejean and not talking about a rager of a party. "He keeps asking when you're gonna come over again. He's, like, too much of a gentleman to say flat-out that he wants to hit that? But I think he totally does."

"I dunno," Raejean sighs, leaning her face on her hand and staring out the window. "I just don't get it."

“When *are* you coming over again?” Meghan asks. “My mom’s like obsessed with you.”

“What about Friday?”

YOU CAN’T GO TO MEGHAN’S ON FRIDAY, RAEJEAN. YOU HAVE AN EIGHT-PAGE PAPER DUE ON MONDAY, REMEMBER? AND WHY IS MEGHAN’S MOTHER OBSESSED WITH YOU? THAT’S CREEPY.

The pot is making the top of my head tingle and the edges of my vision kinda fall away, and everything feels like it’s happening in slow motion.

“Yeah, that could work.” Meghan lets the smoke float out of her mouth, like Frenchy in *Grease*. Raejean watches and giggles.

How are these girls able to carry on conversations like normal people? I feel like I’m made of bricks.

Why didn’t Meghan invite me to come over on Friday?

“Jen, you want some more of this?” Meghan’s holding the joint out to me.

My name. Is not. Jen.

I’m way too high, but I don’t know how to say no, so I take it. I try not to inhale, but I still end up coughing and feeling it harsh in my lungs again. I pass the joint back.

Without my noticing, their conversation has shifted to AP History, which I’m taking, but with Mr. Lee in sixth period, not Mrs. H. in third. I stare out the window. It’s raining. The raindrops sound more metallic and all-encompassing than they ever did before.

I realize that I'm gonna have to drive home stoned in the rain.

I feel completely disconnected from reality. I look back at the front seat. Raejean is laughing hard at something, throwing her head back and showing all her teeth. Meghan is . . . freestyling? I guess? About . . . the Civil War?

I lean my forehead against the back of Raejean's seat. I am so, so high. I don't know how to talk or move like a normal person.

It occurs to me that I am going to have to ask one of them to get out of this two-door car to let me out.

Raejean's seat is way too close to my legs. I look at her outstretched legs in the front seat. Why does she need all that leg room? Is she cramping me back here on purpose? To punish me? Show me who's boss?

I try to listen to what they're saying, suddenly terrified that they tried to address a question to me and I missed it. I can't catch the full context—something about period cramps—but it's clear that they are not talking to me.

I look at the clock on Meghan's dashboard. I've somehow only been here for twelve minutes. How is that possible?

It's another thirty before I decide to get out of the car. I don't speak once in those thirty minutes.

They are mid-conversation. Something about vegan recipes. "I'm gonna go home," I announce.

"Oh. Okay," Raejean says. She doesn't look back at me; she doesn't move her seat. I sit there for a moment.

“Can you . . . move your seat up?”

“Oh! Oh right, duh.” Who’s the ditz now, bitch? She scoots forward but doesn’t open the door.

“The door,” I say.

“Yeah, yeah,” she says, maybe snapping at me a little? I’m too stoned to care. I crawl out. My foot catches on the seat belt a little bit.

Meghan makes a sad *aww* noise as I go. “Bye, girl! Let’s do this again!”

I just wave and make my way to my car, raindrops pelting me as I walk. In my driver’s seat, I take deep breaths, knowing that I will probably die if I try to drive home.

I have to do something drastic right now, and I don’t want to do it, but I really have no choice.

I text Jack:

Are you still at school?

He often stays for several hours after school, playing some vampire version of Dungeons & Dragons with four other seniors who also wear black. My phone and keyboard seem to be in another language, and it takes me about three tries before I overcome the overzealous autocorrect, but I proofread it several times before sending, and it’s error-free.

Almost immediately:

Yeah.

I type: **Can you come to the car and drive me home?**

Jack: **Why?**

Me: **Please?**

When he gets in the car, he clocks what's going on immediately and can't stop laughing. I personally don't find it funny. "Oh man, do you owe me," he keeps saying. "You owe me so hard for this one."

"Don't tell Mom," I say.

"I know, Jenna. I'm not a snitch. But you so owe me."

The motion of the car makes me queasy. I roll down the window. "You're gonna get the passenger side wet," he says.

"I don't care."

I let the rain and the cold wind hit me in the face, and I feel a little bit less like I'm going to throw up.

"Wow," he says. "You are so stoned."

"Yeah."

I feel like crying, but my machinery is so slowed down and disconnected that I literally don't know how.



five

HEATHER IS REVIEWING OUR HOMECOMING
routine with us.

I know I haven't mentioned Heather yet. Heather is many things, among them: a first-generation Polish American, a senior, a beacon of fierce stage presence when she's cheering and often barely audible when she speaks, pale as milk, bad at small talk, a magnificent choreographer. We're not particularly close.

Competition season doesn't really start until next month in November, and Coach Mason (her real name's Louise, but no one calls her that) always choreographs those routines, but homecoming is *ours*; it's always choreographed by a student. In competition dances, there are certain moves you just have to do if you want to even be considered—certain spins, flips, stunts, whatever. Judges frown on too much cross-pollination of dance genres or anything too sexual.

But at homecoming we can do whatever we want.

Heather is standing in front of us demonstrating the moves. Rather than “and five and six and seven and eight,” she’ll clap the numbers. “And [clap] and [clap] and [clap] and [clap].” I think it’s because talking in front of people makes her nervous. And when she has to explain the move to us in her slight Polish accent, we all have to lean forward to hear her, to understand, holding our breaths so we don’t miss a word. I used to be frustrated by her soft voice, but I’m no longer bothered by it; I find it hypnotic, even soothing. “So we begin in a handstand . . .”

As awkward, as whispery, as weird as Heather is, her choreography is the exact opposite. When you do Heather’s choreography, you feel like a pop star. It’s got hip-hop and jazz and some things I don’t even know the name of and a million lifts. It’s guaranteed to be a crowd-pleaser. Even for people who think cheerleading is stupid.

(I’ve heard Heather talking to her mom in Polish. She’s much louder when she speaks Polish.)

We all knew she’d be choreographing homecoming. A lot of us thought she should’ve choreographed last year’s homecoming, too, but Anna Marquez had gotten it because she was a senior. Anna’s style was more ass shaking, less skill. But now that Heather’s a senior, there was no reason for her not to get it this year. Even the girls who find Heather annoying, who privately imitate her quiet accent and her doe-eyed gaze, can’t deny her brilliance. Even those girls—snooty sophomore Evelyn Rice and her doppelgänger, Melissa Markham, mostly—will suck it up

and lean in to hear Heather's soft voice for the sake of her choreography.

We start on our hands—me, Jodi Lin, Ebony Starker, and Raejean. You do a handstand, but instead of your legs straight up in the air, you bend them at opposite angles like you're riding a bike. You switch your legs back and forth really fast, and then on the seventh beat you hold for eight. Switch switch switch switch switch switch switch HOLD, switch switch switch switch switch switch switch HOLD . . .

Then we dismount, and Meghan and Becca and Mandy Lockley all do the worm across the stage while the rest of us do this casual skip-saunter thing into formation . . .

Then it gets fast: arms high V, then daggers, then hands to your forehead while you pop your ass back, right leg over left, turn around 360 degrees and smack your hips, snake your head right, straight, right elbow and left knee to the chest, step down, arms in a pike and hips go right, left, right, clasp, half the girls do center splits down to the floor, roll onto your tummy and bring your legs together behind you, roll to the right, onto your back, and then the other half of the girls do a front walkover above you as you bring your legs up in the air and spot her with your hands—

And then your partner is lying flat on your feet, suspended in the air, while you lie on the ground beneath her, your legs holding her up, looking up at her back. She floats.

I love this move. It feels like magic every time it happens, whether I'm the flyer or the base.

But today I'm worried that I will drop my partner, Evelyn Rice with the resting bitch face.

It's one of the easier lifts; Coach told us that women naturally have more lower-body strength than upper, so any lift where you can use your legs instead of your arms is a dream.

Still.

We practice the lift without incident, and without smiling. Heather watches us and smiles for us. "Good job."

Then there are the one-armed push-ups. ONE-ARMED PUSH-UPS. Everyone bitched and moaned when she introduced that part of the number. But when there's an army of teenage girls doing one-armed push-ups in unison, you kind of just have to stand in awe.

There are also four basket tosses in unison. Four groups, four flyers—Raejean, Evelyn, Jodi, and Becca—all soaring into the air at once with a toe-touch jump before descending safely to the arms of their bases.

I love this routine.

I am trying to focus on how much I love this routine.

We've been learning this routine for the past week, but today for some reason I can't stop staring at Heather, wondering what it's like to walk around in her paper-white skin, to talk through her whispering mouth. Is she okay? Is she happy? Have I ever seen her have fun offstage?

Everyone respects Heather, but I don't think anyone *likes* Heather. Not actively. Like, people are *fine* with Heather. She wears the same gray baggy sweatshirt every day, with her fine

dark bangs sticking to her forehead, and she'll smile at you when you say hi, and that's the end of it.

Is this what my future looks like?

Am I going to be a Heather?

Is this squad going to inside-joke me into a pale, whispering loner?

With Heather, I can at least justify it because she's a genius. Geniuses are loners all the time. Geniuses find their people later in life, and it's fine.

I am not a genius.

I'm just a fast learner who can do the splits.



Six

OUR FOOTBALL TEAM IS A JOKE, BY THE WAY. THE

Marsen High School Puffins. No, I'm not kidding. The Puffins. The friggin' *Puffins*. I cheer for a football team that calls themselves the *Puffins*. Let that sink in.

It wouldn't be so funny if they won more often. On the rare occasion that they do win, Meghan will often shout, "You just got demolished by the Puffins!" Alas, our football players are only slightly more intimidating than a bowl of cereal.

I would say that at least half our crowds come to see the cheer squad, not the football team. Even Jack has come tonight to the homecoming game, mostly because Mom dragged him here.

I look into the stands and see Mom bedecked in purple and yellow, a sharp contrast to Jack's black couture. She screams and screams: "Go, Puffins!"

Hovering at the sidelines with our pom-poms vibrating, we yell across the field at the Centurions' cheerleaders.

"Be! Afraid! Be, be, afraid! Be! Afraid! Be, be, afraid!

"Centurions, be alarmed! Centurions will be! Dis! Armed!

"P-U-F-F-I-N-S, can't touch us 'cause we're the best! P-U-F-F-I-N-S, pride and joy of MHS!

"Centurions are goin' down! You know Puffins run this town!

"Be! Afraid! Be, be, afraid!

"Centurions! Run and hide! Feel that purple-yellow pride!"

Raejean wields her pom-poms like weapons. I wield my pom-poms like I'm holding a wet dog.

Heather belts it out confidently on the cheers. I wonder if she had to train herself to project her voice. I look over at her, and she's all sassy hips and beaming smiles. I try to channel her.

We're only a quarter in, but the Puffins are losing. They're probably gonna keep losing. Gary Takahashi screws up a tackle, but then he takes off his helmet and shakes out his shiny black hair, and all the girls in the bleachers scream.

At halftime we finally get to do Heather's routine, the only thing I like about being here anymore. The music feels like it's lighting a fire inside me: *Boom boom boom boom boom boom kick it . . .*

When we perform, we are one. We are an octopus, all just limbs of a greater whole. Our timing and our balance and our smiles are all so effortlessly perfect, and I can feel the crowd just losing. Their. *Minds*.

This is my drug. Screw alcohol; screw pot. Regular substances can't hold a candle to the sound of a crowd roaring after four simultaneous basket tosses. The exhilaration of getting the jump exactly right, of when the timing works out flawlessly and we're all in a triangle formation kicking our legs to the exact same height.

Alas, my drug of choice only ever lasts for three minutes at a time.

The routine ends. The crowd goes ballistic. And then we have to go back to the sidelines, back to yelling chants at the Centurion cheerleaders, back to feeling totally alone in my own body.

The Puffins, improbably, win the game.

seven

AT THE PARTY AFTER THE GAME, I DRINK AS quickly as possible. I scoop bright pink-purple punch into my clear plastic cup, and then I grab the vodka and spike my already-spiked concoction.

We're at Becca Ruiz's enormous house, with a backyard that goes on for days and a kitchen with white marble counters. I don't know what her parents do, or why they're not here, and I don't care.

Everyone but me is high from the game, high from the win, but no one is talking to me unless I talk to them first, and I'm tired of initiating. So I wander.

I learned the party-wandering trick as a freshman on JV. If you're a loner at a party, but you just keep moving, no one will notice. They're too engrossed in their own conversations and

choreography and tonsil hockey. You move until someone gives you a reason to stop.

I wander my way through my first glass of punch, watching as my teammates grind on the living room dance floor, watching jocks sneak their arms around bare shoulders like they think the girl won't notice, watching a beer fall sideways onto the hardwood floor and Becca yelling in Spanish; then I go back and refill.

I don't know where Raejean is, and this bothers me more than it should. I'm sick of hearing myself think about it.

I resume wandering, second extra-vodka punch in hand, and this time I wander outside. Lots of lit cigarettes, girls dangling their pedicures in Becca's pool, and Meghan and Raejean huddled together in a corner of the lawn, thumb wrestling.

I watch for a while, trying to catch either of their eyes, but they're focused. Meghan keeps winning.

"Hey," I finally say.

"Jennaaaaaaa!" Meghan squeals.

I'm pissed off by her niceness, but I saunter over to them all casual, like this is just one of many social stops I have to make tonight, like we're just gonna have a chill three-minute conversation like friendly acquaintances and then move on with our lives.

"What's up?" I say, like a douche.

"Meghan was just kicking my ass at thumb wrestling," Raejean giggles, addressing it to me but still looking at Meghan.

"Well that's not fair," I say. "Meghan's hands are bigger. Of course she won."

“Are you making fun of my hands, Jenna?” Meghan stares at me incredulously.

I think she’s doing her thing, that thing where she makes you feel like you’ve said something awful and then laughs at you for believing her, so I just stare at her. Sure enough, she busts up laughing and points in my face. “Just kidding!”

“It’s not a good joke if you have to explain that it’s a joke,” I say.

Meghan stops laughing and just looks at me. Raejean is looking at me, too. Like I farted or something.

I don’t care. I hold out my hand. “Can I play winner?”

“My hands are sore from beating RJ here,” Meghan says, and what IS it with these two and their effing nicknames?!

“Or you’re just worried you’ll lose,” I say, trying to laugh as I say it.

Meghan laughs a little, too, but suddenly we’re fifth-grade boys or something, and now this is a real competition with real stakes. It’s thumb wrestling, for Pete’s sake, but as she smiles, her eyes get harder.

“Hell no. I’d beat you with my big man hands.”

I shrug. “Best two out of three?”

“What does the winner get?” she responds.

I think for a second, and I don’t know why, but this is what comes out of my mouth:

“Nothing. *Loser* gets a slap in the face from Raejean.”

Raejean looks a little bit like she did the afternoon I poured

water on her head, but Meghan is laughing and clapping her hands together. “Yo, that’s *sick*, dude!”

Raejean laughs nervously, “Don’t drag me into this,” but she can see that Meghan loves the idea, and *that* is what’s convincing her to go along with it.

“All right, let’s do this. Let’s go.” Meghan adjusts her sleeves, crouches down, holds out her arm. I hold out mine. We lock eyes.

“Guys, I don’t wanna slap you,” Raejean whimpers from the side, but we act like we don’t hear her.

“One two three four I declare a thumb war!”

Meghan’s victory is almost instantaneous, her long thumb clamping down on mine and staying put for the required ten seconds. We shake it out; we exhale; we lock eyes; we join hands.

“One two three four I declare a thumb war!”

This time it’s more of a wrestle, more of a back-and-forth. Her long thumb hovers perpendicular, like a skyscraper, occasionally swooping down to try to take down mine, but I keep mine stretched as far back as I can. After she’s done this three or four times, I catch her off guard, pinning her down. “One two three four five six—” And then she wiggles out, but I dive-bomb again almost immediately, and this time I press down hard, really hard; I don’t care if I break her thumb. “One two three four five six seven eight nine TEN!” And I win.

We break. We shake it off. “Best outta three, best outta three,” Meghan mutters to herself.

“I really don’t wanna slap either of you,” Raejean says again, but Meghan is so focused I’m not even sure she hears Raejean. Eye contact, hands, go.

“One two three four I declare a thumb war!”

Another standoff. Thumbs straight up. She makes a couple of swipes for mine, but I hold back. I realize I could beat her again. And then I realize, almost in the same breath, that what I really want is to lose.

I make a swipe for her thumb, I’m clumsy on purpose, and she slams my thumb into my hand. “One two three four five six seven eight . . . nine . . . TEN! Boom!” She even stretches the last three numbers out, like pointing out how long she was pinning me, like I hadn’t let her win.

Raejean is making a pouty face, and I kind of hate her right now. “I don’t wanna hit you,” she says.

“But Meghan won,” I respond, almost scaring myself with how calm I am.

I can tell that Meghan wants Raejean to slap me but doesn’t feel like she can say so. “You don’t have to do it, like, *hard*,” she says.

“No, do it hard,” I say. “Really hit me.”

“You are like . . . *sick*,” Raejean says, smiling, trying to make it a joke.

“Just do it,” I say. “Just do it, and get it over with.”

She gives me a teeny girly excuse for a slap. “There,” she says.

“No, come on,” I say. “You can do better than that.”

She does it again, a little harder. “That’s not a real slap,” I say.

A couple of guys nearby have started watching us (because if there's one thing guys love to see more than girls kissing, it's girls fighting). I smile as I realize two things simultaneously: One, Raejean can't back out now; two, I am *dah-runk*.

She slaps me, and this time it actually stings. "Do it again," I say.

"What is *up* with you?" she hisses.

"Do it again!" I say, smiling bigger. "It's fun! Do it again!"

Boys are softly chanting: "Fight, fight, fight, fight." "Hit her again!" "Do it!" She hits me once, twice, three times, each time harder than the last. An all-consuming belly laugh overtakes me, and I bend over a little, I'm laughing so hard. I don't know why I'm laughing, but I ask her to slap me again.

This time she hits me so hard I actually lose a little bit of my vision for a moment. When my sight comes back to full, I look at her and see that her eyes are red. She's scowling in a way I've only seen her do when she fights with her mom.

"Why are you so *weird* lately?"

And she stomps off into the house.

Boys are shouting at me: "Yo, what'd you do to her?" "That was nuts!" "Hooooooo shit, son!" But I feel very quiet, very still, watching her walk away. I half expect Meghan to follow her, but she's addressing our audience, trying to disperse them. "All right, show's over, boys. Come on."

One of them pokes me in the ribs as he walks away: "Yo, I dunno what you did to piss that girl off, but that shit was *awesome*."

Meghan pulls a cigarette out of a box I didn't even realize she was holding. "You want one?" she asks me.

I don't answer. I walk inside, pick up my purse, and walk out the front door.

Okay then, I keep saying in my head. *Okay then. Okay then. Okay then. Okay then. Okay then. Okay then.*

I guess I've lost her.

Okay then.