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## Balance Check

Anne Louise Hilenski

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BALANCE CHECK

by

Anne Louise Hilenski

Bachelor of Arts  
Duquesne University, 2018

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## DEDICATION

Dedicated to my father, Mark; and to Sara, Kailee, and Ryan.

## ABSTRACT

This novel-length work of fiction seeks to explore the world of women's elite gymnastics and the way it invites glory as much as it invites sacrifice, mental fortitude, physical pain, and suffering. When gymnast Rachel Wallerstein secures four gold medals at the World Championships a year before the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing, her destiny as an American Olympic hero is preemptively written into the history books. What happens in the gym stays in the gym, but not for long, as the ever-present approach of the Olympics casts light on the cracks in her parents' seemingly perfect marriage. On the road to Beijing, she encounters pro ice hockey player Kellan, who helps her widen the scope of her one-track world and sees beneath the Olympic veneer that her country idolizes her through. When a knee injury brings a lifetime of training and dedication to a screeching halt, she must decide what is more important to her: her long-term health or her life-long dreams. The American public has high expectations for their women's gymnastics team going into Beijing – expectations that the U.S. National Team Coordinator expects her gymnasts to not only achieve but exceed. Rachel, her best friend Jamie, and their teammates must decide if winning gold and achieving glory is worth the pain that gets them there. Questions and themes of gender, the body, athleticism, nationalism, sacrifice, sexuality, capitalism, female friendship, media, and family are considered within this novel.

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## CHAPTER 1

### FROM BUFFALO TO PARIS

The Americans won World team gold and Rachel had a chance to win the individual all-around, but on her eighteenth birthday, she didn't even get a cake. She tried to hide her confusion that morphed into disillusionment when dessert after team dinner turned out to be a big glass bowl of fruit salad delivered by a hotel chef. She didn't want her coaches thinking she was ungrateful or her teammates thinking she was spoiled, but they were in Paris and just won Worlds as a team. Could they not find a cake for her in a city known for its pastries?

"Happy birthday to you! Happy birthday to you!" her five teammates, their assorted personal coaches, and the national team staff sang to her.

The private dining room they spent the past week eating their three meals a day in was white with ornate, gold-framed windows and a high ceiling pierced with a chandelier. Fruit salad aside, mealtimes made her feel like the star of a Parisian movie. It became an even better imagined film when they won the gold medal they came here for as a team.

"Happy birthday, dear Rachel, happy birthday to you!" There were no candles. The crystal bowl full of sliced kiwi, melon, strawberries, and berries only had a decoration of plastic wrap. She puckered her lips and blew on the taut cling wrap, garnering big laughs from the fifteen or so people around her.

“You screwed it up. You’re supposed to make a wish,” Jamie said to her left. Her best friend of nearly fifteen years, she never hesitated to call Rachel out on her errors. This posed no issue in their friendship since Rachel was hyper-aware of anything she did that was less than perfect. Jamie never pointed out a misstep of Rachel’s that Rachel wasn’t already lamenting.

“I did make a wish.” She put her elbows on the soft white tablecloth and smiled at the golden square medal around her neck. Jamie wore a matching one, as did their four nearby teammates – Lola, Cameron, Denise, and Talia. When they walked into the hotel lobby after winning the team competition earlier that afternoon, the six of them gathered in a circle and held their medals out to knock the sharp edges of them together and create a chorus of clangs. Karen Dillard, part National Team Coordinator and part drill sergeant, yelled at them to cut it out. Rachel pressed her thumb into the *World* inscribed on the front of her medal. “I wished to win the all-around tomorrow.”

“You can’t tell us that,” Lola said in a gasp from across the table from Rachel. “Now it won’t come true.”

“Yeah, the birthday wish gods will strike down and take away her D-scores,” Jamie said. She waved her fingers outward to Lola, mocking her. “How could she chance fate like that?”

Rachel laughed and hit Jamie’s side with her elbow. Their matching team jackets rustled with friction. She knew what the competition would be like tomorrow, thanks to her longtime coach Vlad’s meticulous studying of the international field and their shared goal of winning. All her routines were upgraded in difficulty this year, and for the first



time, she was a contender to win the biggest crown in artistic gymnastics. She'd been a gymnast since she was three years old and always dreamed of reaching this tier of it, but only this year did it start to seem possible. Tomorrow, she'd find out if possibility could become her reality.

The coaches served big scoops of her birthday fruit on heavy white plates, and conversation resumed easily between very familiar people who had only one thing in common. While laughing at a story Cameron told about her three older brothers and a mistakenly broken window, Rachel felt Vlad tap on her shoulder and kneel beside her.

"When you finish up here, get some ice on that knee," he said, referring to her right one. He always seemed to know when she had pushed a little too hard or was on the verge of doing so, even when she oftentimes shielded signs of discomfort. The sport demanded her to do denounce pain and he understood that to a point – it wasn't too long ago that he raked in medals for the Soviet Union – but he often nagged her about it anyway.

"I will."

"I mean it." He patted her shoulder before pushing himself up to stand. "Happy birthday, Rachel. Tomorrow's the big day."

And so it was, at least for her and Lola. They were the only Americans who qualified into the all-around, Rachel in second and Lola in ninth, but later that week, a few more of them had qualified into event finals, which would feel a little more communal and joyous like today had. Tomorrow was her time to focus on her individual glory, and she was as nervous about it as she was excited.

After her celebration, Karen Dillard told them to go upstairs as curfew was soon approaching. Rachel checked her phone and saw that it was already 8:30 at night, or 20:30 as her phone had calibrated to read instead. On the way out, she received another reminder from Vlad about icing her knee, accepted more birthday wishes from her peers' personal coaches, and was stopped with a tug on the wrist by Karen herself.

"Get your rest tonight. I know how much you and Jamie like to stay up and gossip," she said. Her blonde ponytail shined two shades lighter than the gold around Rachel's neck, but looked severe and uncomfortable. Sometimes Rachel wondered how Karen didn't have a much more exaggerated forehead, like some girls she knew who pulled their hair back so tight and so often that it began to recede their hairlines. Maybe Karen's hair was afraid of defying her, too.

"I will," she said with a nod.

"Good." Karen surveyed her with a quick onceover, landed on her medal momentarily, and then relocated to meet her gaze again. "Tomorrow, I want to see you do bars just as well as you did today. No issues like you had in podium training the other day."

"Yes, ma'am," Rachel said. Earlier today, she scored a 16.625 on bars during the team final. It was the highest score of the entire competition so far on any apparatus, or so she'd heard from Vlad. She wanted nothing more than to replicate it tomorrow, but doing so wasn't quite as matter-of-fact as Karen sometimes made it seem.

"Good," she said. She lifted the corner of her mouth in what could have been the distant relative of a smile. "Go get some rest. I'm doing bed checks later."

She nodded one more time and Karen released her wrist at last. Rachel jogged out of the dining room and into the hotel's lobby. Longer and narrower than hotels in the States, a chandelier hung from the ceiling just like the one in the dining room. So far, Paris only existed in the competition arena and in their hotel. They had no time to go explore or sightsee and doing so without supervision was barred. As of today, she was a legal adult, but with the insular nature of competition abroad, she felt no different now at eighteen than she had at twelve.

"Rach, hurry up," she heard.

She looked away from the chandelier and to the elevator bay. One car was held open by way of Jamie standing on her hands between the doors, her legs split so that one was airborne inside the car and the other hovered out in the lobby. Rachel jogged over and held onto her medal to keep it still. Denise and Lola's high-pitched laughter greeted her when she scooted past Jamie to enter the elevator. Jamie stepped out of her handstand split back into the elevator and raised her arms overhead to present to nonexistent judges.

"You should get that named after you," Rachel said. "The elevator doorstep beam mount."

"Like Karen Dillhole would ever put me up on beam," Jamie said.

It brought about maniacal laughter from Lola and Denise on the other side of the car. The door slammed shut and they ascended to the fifth floor. It was late and she was exhausted, and maybe they were too, but it was the level of exhaustion that made everything funny, even when it wasn't.

“I still can’t believe we won,” Lola said. She tugged on the blue silk connected to her copy of their medal. “We’re the World Champions the year before the Olympics.”

“By over two points, even with the falls,” Jamie added.

Rachel nodded before she could stop herself. The falls in question, one on beam from Denise and one on bars from Talia, probably shouldn’t have been discussed in front of Denise. She stilled her head and felt her palms sweat in the awkward silence that followed, just like they had on the competition floor earlier that afternoon. The look in Karen’s eyes the moment Denise wobbled on her standing Arabian and fell to the floor haunted her. She wasn’t immune to that look, either. Rachel made her fair share of mistakes and errors over the years, all of which she catalogued in her mind to pull out and re-analyze during sleepless nights or long flights. She didn’t want her teammates to make any mistakes under any circumstance, and she did feel guilty about it after the fact, but she felt a little relief every time those mistakes happened and it wasn’t her perpetrating them.

“Not that it’s your fault or anything,” Rachel told Denise, backtracking for Jamie. “If I tried to do an Arabian, I wouldn’t even land on the beam.”

“At least we won,” Denise said. She pressed her thumb into the gold plate she wore, but the tone of her voice was clear: she was happy they won, but mostly because she didn’t know what any alternative would’ve meant. Rachel reached forward to hug her, feeling grateful once again that they won and maybe a little more grateful that she performed well today and didn’t have any new material to add to her mental archive of failure – yet, at least.

When the elevator dropped them off on their floor, she and Jamie said good night to Denise and Lola and retreated to their shared room. Bed checks were usually around ten, so they still had time to try and wind down after the high of competing. Jamie belly-flopped onto the bed by the door with an impressive thump. Their narrow room mostly consisted of white – white sheets, white nightstands, white walls, and white city lights beyond their dark window. On the first night, they discovered that if they squinted and pressed their heads against the glass, they could almost see the Eiffel Tower in the distance. Only one of its legs was visible to the left of the hotel about a mile away, but at least she could go back home to Buffalo next week knowing that she had technically seen the Eiffel Tower.

“I wasn’t even thinking when I said that in front of Denise,” Jamie said. Initially muffled by the bedspread pushed into her face, she turned her head to the side to speak unimpeded. “She’s probably pissed at me now.”

“I don’t think Denise knows how to be pissed,” Rachel said. She sat on the other bed a foot away from Jamie and exhaled. She kicked her white sneakers off and wiggled her toes, which felt swollen and tight after the abuse they withstood today. Pulling her left foot onto her right thigh, she pressed her thumbs into her sore sole and closed her eyes.

“It’s weird sometimes. I love Denise, don’t get me wrong, but doesn’t it sometimes seem like she just... doesn’t want to be here? Even at camp and stuff. And I know we’re all miserable at camp, but I don’t think she really even likes gymnastics.”

Rachel switched legs. Denise was younger than them by two years. Jamie, Lola, and Rachel were the oldest girls on the national team at seventeen and eighteen, an anomaly. The girls from the last quadrennium faded away from the elite scene after the Athens Olympics, all either injured, retired, or thriving in the low-pressure, high-fun alternate universe of college gymnastics. Rachel didn't feel like a veteran, but she supposed they were the veterans now. Denise only qualified into elite gymnastics within the last year, so Rachel didn't know her as well as she knew girls like Lola, Talia, or Cameron, and especially Jamie. She agreed with Jamie, though. Denise never seemed like she enjoyed anything about gymnastics, be it the long, hard days at national team training camp or the victories at meets. She seemed happiest whenever it was time to leave for the airport, but Rachel didn't know her well enough to speculate. They lived across the country from one another and only saw each other once a month at camp.

"Sometimes I don't even like gymnastics," Rachel said after a long silence.

"Same."

She dropped her foot and leaned back onto her bed to stare at the white stucco ceiling. Too bad there was no chandelier in here. She pulled the red scrunchie from her bun and slipped it onto her wrist. The scrapes of Jamie's warm-up pants as she swung her feet back and forth in slow, lazy rhythm were the only sound. Silence so often spoke for them. After a lifetime of constant companionship, there was very little she could think of that they hadn't already said to one another.

"I can't believe you're eighteen. I'm so jealous," Jamie said.

“It’s not like anything is different.” She could buy cigarettes now, but she wouldn’t even know how to smoke if handed one. She tried to think of more things that signaled the start of adulthood but came up with nothing. Her whole life was gymnastics. Even her schooling was online to accommodate the amount of time her training required. Her life didn’t organize itself in terms of legal milestones or years since birth, but rather by competition season. This year didn’t matter nearly as much as next year, and even then, turning nineteen would mean nothing compared to hopefully going to the Olympics in Beijing and winning all-around gold.

“You can buy lottery tickets now,” Jamie reminded her a moment later.

“Yeah, true.”

They exhausted the list of her newly earned freedoms and Rachel yawned. She pointed her toes onto the soft white carpet out of habit and felt her right knee protest with a tiny twinge. She sprained her ACL about once a year, and every so often it liked to threaten a repeat or remind her of its storied past. She recalled Vlad’s demand that she ice it. Lifting her foot, she poked Jamie’s nearby head.

“Can you go get ice?”

“Get your foot out of my face,” Jamie said, smacking the top of her white sock.

“You’re the adult. Go get your own ice.”

“I’m the adult and I’m telling you to go get ice for me.”

“Ha.” She rolled over and away from Rachel. “Don’t take too long. Dillhole is probably coming around with her master key soon.”

“Fine,” Rachel said with no real animosity. She sat up with an easy lift of her abs and picked the ice pail up off their shared dresser. It shined silver and reminded her of a champagne bucket like in the old movies she liked. She whacked its thin construction against Jamie’s back on her way out. Jamie held her middle finger up. When she left, she propped the heavy lock on the doorframe to let herself back in.

At the ice machine, the deafening tumble of refrigeration spitting out ice cubes made her think of the crowd from earlier today. The French team hadn’t qualified into the team final, so the crowd cheered on the Americans the most as a substitute. Her routines from the day played back in her mind move by move. There were only three to pick apart since she didn’t compete on vault for the team. Her bar routine felt great, and she stuck her double layout dismount, yet they still deducted almost a full point from her. She must have missed her handstands on her pirouette elements. Beam was good except for a big hop on her triple twist dismount and a small wobble on her Onodi-double turn combination. And floor was almost perfect, with no major out-of-bounds or steps. She’d done her job for the team, although there was always something that she wished she’d done better. She reminded herself to really go for her handstands on bars tomorrow and pulled the bucket away from the ice machine.

She walked back to the room and pushed the door open. Jamie was already asleep with her feet on her pillows and her medal still around her neck. Shutting the door quietly, Rachel went into the bathroom and filled a clean trash can liner with handfuls of ice. She sat on the sink and iced her old injury in solitude, using the time to visualize her routines for tomorrow. Everything she wanted could culminate tomorrow – everything she wanted that wasn’t next year’s Olympics, at least. Ice tumbled against itself within



the bag as she shifted it. Nothing except an endless loop of four perfect routines claimed any of her attention for the rest of the night, even as she fell asleep.

Nerves almost prevented her from eating breakfast the following morning, until Vlad saw her with nothing but a glass of orange juice and forced her to eat.

“You want to win, you need to eat,” he said. A plate of scrambled eggs and fruit plopped down on the white tablecloth before her. He put a small, French-labelled yogurt cup next to it and squeezed her shoulder. “Now.”

When he walked back to the coaches’ end of the long dining table, she groaned as though in pain and leaned her head on Jamie’s shoulder.

“I feel like I’m gonna puke.”

“You didn’t even eat anything, though,” Jamie said, punctuated by her spoon scraping her own yogurt cup. Jamie turned her chin and it knocked into Rachel’s forehead. “You’re gonna kill it, Rach. You know you will.”

“I just wish it was over already.” She sat up straight again and used the tines of her fork to poke at the pile of eggs. She chanced a glance to the other end of the table and saw Vlad staring at her. Scooping up a forkful with haste, she rushed it into her mouth.

“At least you’re in the all-around,” Jamie said. “I’d rather be competing today than watching you guys from the stands. No offense.”

She stopped chewing and frowned.

“Sorry. I’m being annoying.”

“You’re always annoying,” Jamie said. Rachel continued chewing and Jamie pulled her arm around her shoulders. “I’m kidding. I can’t wait to watch you win – and you better win. Otherwise, I’m gonna hear you whine about not winning gold for the next thousand years, and I really don’t know if I can withstand that.”

“You don’t have a choice. I’m not going anywhere,” Rachel said. She smiled for the first time all morning. The competition began in three hours and they were leaving for the arena in one to begin warm-ups and check-in. She exhaled and a ball of tight tension loosened on her upper back, deep within her muscles. Feeling a little hungry, she continued to eat and tried to visualize perfect routines just like she had the night before. She was ready, well-trained, and in the best shape of her life. The only thing that would keep her from winning was herself.

The arena was no louder and no more crowded than it had been for team finals, and yet it felt bigger and more imposing for the all-around. She was warmed up and waiting with thirty-five other gymnasts from around the world for the competition to start. Having qualified in second, she was in the first rotation group with the best gymnasts on the planet. Li Wan of China, who qualified in the only spot ahead of Rachel, stood in line in front of her. She was moving from side to side at her hips, twisting to warm up similar to the way Rachel sometimes did. The pink scrunchie wrapped around her shiny black ponytail impressed Rachel with its brightness. She wanted to compliment her on it, but whenever they crossed paths, their awkward language barrier just resulted in smiles and handshakes.

Directly behind Rachel was Evgeniya Varlamova, the Russian phenom coached by one of Vlad's old USSR teammates. During podium training earlier that week, Vlad and his old friend, Nikita, smiled and joked around for almost an hour in fast, familiar Russian. Rachel hardly ever saw Vlad smile, let alone cracking jokes, so it served as a surprise. With their unlikely connection, Rachel and Evgeniya had a bit more face-to-face time than Rachel did with Li, but it still wasn't much more than smiles, waves, and Rachel's attempts to use her primitive Russian. Evgeniya stood behind her in line with her eyes closed tight. Glittery blue eyeshadow caked her eyelids, and her icy hair was tied tight in a bun like Rachel's. The double-headed eagle crest on the front of Evgeniya's jacket stared at Rachel like imposing Siamese twins. She turned back in line to face Li's neck. This was it.

A musical little ding indicated the beginning of the competition and their rotation groups marched out into the arena. Rachel kept her arms locked slightly in front of her and marched in step with Li. She could taste her breakfast again until her deep breathing pushed it down. This was what she trained her whole life for, but she wished she could just fast-forward an hour and a half and know her destiny ahead of time.

The event volunteer leading them to the vault stopped at the row of chairs for them on the competition floor. Wasting no time, Rachel pulled off her USA sweats and tossed them onto the first chair she saw. Evgeniya began speaking in high-pitched Russian to Nikita, Li's Mandarin followed not long after, and one of the Romanians was informing her coach of something to Rachel's left. All she could really understand was her own erratic pulse in her neck and ears.

“Big block, tight twist, shoulders up,” Vlad said, grabbing both her shoulders from behind. “You stick it.”

“Stick it,” she repeated, as though it were as simple as a verbalization. “Yeah.”

“You can do this.” He patted the number bib, 408, on her back. “Think about you and your skills and nothing else.”

The vault was the perfect starting place for her adrenaline-fueled nerves – it allowed her to run at full speed, push hard off the table, and travel as far as she could. After saluting to the judges, she stared down the vault runway at the waiting table. She could nail this like she just did in warm-ups and in qualifications earlier this week, or she could hold back and second-guess herself and regret it for the rest of her life. She took a deep breath and began her sprint. Rounding off the springboard, she blocked off the table and twisted into her trusty old Yurchenko one-and-a-half. Someday she hoped to upgrade to a double like Evgeniya and Li, but today was not that day. Coming in for the landing blind, she pulled her shoulders up straight and steadied her arms in front of herself. After reassuring herself that she stuck it, she saluted the judges with a big, involuntary smile and ran down into Vlad’s arms.

“Just what you needed. Absolutely perfect.” He kissed her forehead. “Now get ready for bars.”

She nodded and went to her bag, keeping her head low and retrieving her uneven bar grips. She taped up her wrists and focused all her attention on the ritual of it. During the next rotation, she sat waiting for her turn with her face pressed to her knees. All she needed to focus on were her skills and herself. Keeping tabs on other competitors, score-

watching, and looking up into the crowd guaranteed that she would lose focus, and she needed all of it that she could get.

Her 15.075 on vault was followed by a 16.650 on bars, her highest score ever. Vlad's praise compounded each hit routine and favorable score. By the time she got to beam, she not only believed but knew that she would do her best. She told herself to do it just like she did in practice every day, twice a day, for eight hours a day. The reward came in the form of one of her best sets ever and a 16.250. She went to floor exercise with a cushion of almost three tenths over Evgeniya and four tenths over Li. She told herself to nail it and did. She finished and went into Vlad's arms to catch her breath. The competition ended just as quickly as it began. She almost wished it had gone a little slower, but not for more than a moment or so.

"Excellent," he said. He lifted her into his arms and spun her around. "You couldn't have done any better."

Objectively, this was incorrect, but she felt so cautiously sure of victory that she let herself smile and believe it. The score took its time coming up. She and Li shook hands and smiled at one another. Rachel hoped her own smile could be translated to 'congratulations' and 'good job'. She breathed deeply when she turned back to Vlad and tried to settle her nerves and her facial expression. If she lost, she didn't want to give the TV cameras a sour face.

"Rachel!" she heard in the crowd. Looking up into it for the first time, she saw the U.S. men's and women's teams sitting up high, bundled together in their patriotic regalia.

Jamie waved an American flag in the air and jumped up and down for Rachel's attention. She waved at them all and gave a thumbs up.

To their right, she saw her parents for the first time since yesterday morning. Her dad waved with one hand and held his omnipresent camcorder with the other. Her mom held up her hands in a heart sign. Even from down here, she could see the fluorescent-lit tears on their faces. Rachel bit her lip and felt their emotion transfer right into her chest like a ball of fire.

A steady, rising wave of noise from the crowd rapidly became an electric cheer. She looked up and saw the scores update. A 15.400 on floor put her in first place. With no one else within striking distance of her total score, she secured the gold medal. She hadn't cried in months, maybe a year, but tears slid down the sides of her nose and into her mouth. Vlad lifted her again and spun her into fast, reckless circles.

"You did it," he said. His voice was unfamiliar and strange, filled with the most ultimate emotion she ever heard him express. "You're World Champion, Rachel. You did it."

She did do it, after a lifetime of training to hopefully do it. Over the rest of the week, she collected uneven bars and balance beam gold, too, raising her gold haul to four medals and besting the previous record for an American in a single World Championships. Jamie won silver on vault and was upset about second place, but the next day she won floor exercise gold by a landslide, which seemed to temper her disappointment until it merely ceased to exist. In the same floor final, Rachel had lofty dreams of adding a fifth gold medal to her collection but settled for bronze behind Jamie

and Elena Dinu of Romania. She was happy for Jamie – truly, she was – but for about three minutes before and during the medal ceremony, Rachel could barely look at her.

“Congratulations,” she said to Jamie after the medal ceremony, which was the last one of the entire Championships. The American women swept all but one gold medal. To say they had a good showing the year before the Olympics would be comically understated.

“Thanks, Rach,” Jamie said. They hugged backstage at the arena and their medals clanked together. She didn’t have to look at them, nor did she want to. She did not feel particularly proud of her bronze, and while she was happy that Jamie got gold, she wanted it for herself. She knew her greed was shameful, but it couldn’t be any more shameful than third place, could it?

After Worlds ended and they flew home to Buffalo, Rachel stood in her lavender bedroom to re-arrange her medal shelves. She had three bookshelves bowing beneath the weight of trophies and medals. After contemplating how to best display her newest haul, she moved everything from the very top of the middle bookcase down one shelf and used the cleared space to prop her four World golds in front of their decorative display cases. She put the all-around and uneven bars medals in the center with the balance beam and team medals on the edges. Her bronze on floor was the odd one out, but its color deserved no displaying nor recognition. She tucked it back into its red box and put it on the lowest shelf to be forgotten. Rachel smiled at the four golds again and stepped down from her little stepstool. Perfect. All she needed now was a repeat performance in Beijing.

## CHAPTER 2

### SHE SHOOTS, SHE SCORES

Less than a week later, when Rachel's envy began to subside and going back into the gym at home to resume training humbled her, the realization that she was now World Champion four times over began to sink in. It was a multi-stage process – a few days after she got home, a big sign from a local bank popped up in her front yard reading *Congratulations, Golden Girl Rachel!* A copy of the same sign hung at the entrance of the gym over the big glass doors that she walked through every morning and every night. News crews in town wanted to interview her; she signed autographs at the grocery store when she went shopping with her mom; a local special-needs nonprofit asked her to become an athlete representative. She won gold, and that was her main goal, but everything on the periphery that reinforced her new status wasn't so bad, either.

Perhaps the biggest honor yet was being asked by the local NHL team, the Buffalo Monarchs, to drop a ceremonial puck at a game to honor her win with Jamie. Jamie's stepfather Laz held the title of Director of Events at the arena, which meant Jamie enjoyed entry to all sorts of free shows and concerts and shared the wealth with Rachel and their friends from the gym. This was new, though. Rachel had never been a guest of honor before.

The night of the game, she left practice with Jamie and carpooled downtown in Jamie's white Lexus. Using Laz's pass, they slid off the main route and into the service



parking lot behind the arena. The lot was already jammed with cars ranging from beat-up Chevy SUVs to shiny sports cars. Rachel had only been to a few Monarchs games in her lifetime despite being a lifelong resident of Buffalo. They weren't very good and never had been. A few recent trades and high draft picks were supposed to change their luck, or so she'd heard, but she didn't really care about sports except gymnastics. She barely had enough hours in a day to train and focus as much as she wanted. How could she pay any mind to a sport that didn't even take place on dry land?

"Hey, Jamie," the security guard at the booth said when Jamie rolled up. Jamie turned down the radio that was blasting an R&B track and picked Laz's badge up from her center console.

"Hi, Ian."

"Hey, Rachel."

"Hi," she said, dipping her head lower so she could look out through Jamie's window and at this guy who somehow knew who she was. She could count how many guys she knew on less than one hand, but she pegged him somewhere in his late twenties with thick sideburns and a short haircut. She wouldn't necessarily call him cute, but he was older, and sometimes those were synonymous in her world.

"Never really see you coming in for any Monarchs games." He looked at Laz's badge and handed it back to Jamie. When she tugged on it, he held it in midair with his grip firm, challenging her. He smiled. Rachel stared, somehow both clueless and vaguely angry.

“We’re busy with a real sport,” Jamie said. She tugged on the laminated badge again with force that straddled the line between gentle and defiant.

“A real sport,” he repeated through thick chuckles. “That’s right. I heard you just won a bunch of medals.”

“Yep.” Jamie pulled again to no avail. The gate remained closed a foot from her car’s front end. The engine idled impatiently. “Come on, Ian, just let us through.”

“I wanna see them,” he said. His smile widened, but it made Rachel no less unsettled.

“See what?” Jamie demanded.

“Your medals. Come on, I know you’ve got them on. That’s the whole reason you girls are here, isn’t it? You’re in park, you can take your coat off.”

She felt and fed off Jamie’s radiating tension. She could hear it as if it had words of its own – anger, defiance, a dose of discomfort that threatened to morph into fear. Jamie didn’t do fear. Its presence infuriated Rachel.

“Give it back.” Rachel covered Jamie’s hand with hers and pulled Ian’s hand toward them with a sudden yank. The ID card flipped onto Jamie’s lap. The cropped photo of Laz’s smiling, round face beamed up at them both. Her palms went cold despite the thick heat from Jamie’s vents.

“Tell your friend if she puts her hands on me again, I’ll get her banned from the arena,” Ian said. His smile was gone. He slammed a hidden button that buzzed and pulled the gate open with a fatigued whirl of a motor.

“You’re a dick,” Jamie said. She pressed the automated button to shut her window and turned away. The gate was slow, leaving them in an awkward moment of limbo beside him while they waited for passage. Rachel could taste her pulse in her neck. Jamie looked at her. “You okay?”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to get you in trouble.”

“You didn’t,” Jamie said. With enough clearance to finally move ahead, she slammed her foot to the gas and peeled away from the booth and into the secure lot. “He’s so weird. He tried adding me on MySpace, so I rejected it, but then he did it again.” As she spoke, she craned her neck and eased through the lane to find an open spot.

“Tell Laz,” Rachel said. When Jamie said nothing, she shoved her steering arm. “Tell him. He’ll get him fired.”

“It’s not worth it. It’s fine.”

Rachel frowned but let the silence speak. Jamie pulled in beside a black Porsche and cut the engine. Already, the late October chill leaked into the powerless car. She shivered beneath her white coat and cupped her phone in her pocket. She looked over her shoulder at the security booth, but Ian was already dealing with another car and they were forgotten.

“Let’s go,” Jamie said, nudging Rachel. A careless smile planted upon her best friend’s face as if the previous minute never happened. “I’ll get us some free food.”

To get inside the arena, they had to go through another security guard, but this one was an elderly woman who smiled at them and didn't hold them up at all. Inside, Rachel allowed Jamie and her expertise to lead the way. She'd never been backstage here, although she was familiar with arenas and their architecture from years of competing around the nation and world.

"He said to find Wendy, who's in charge of PR and stuff," Jamie said while reading off her phone. "And then she'll take us where we need to go."

"I have total faith in you," Rachel said. They laughed and walked in step with one another, an unconscious but unbreakable habit. An hour earlier, they were suffering through afternoon practice together. Now they had a rare evening in normal streetwear, no leotards, chalk, or athletic tape in sight.

They approached a wider hallway near what she assumed was the center of the action. The blue Monarchs logo of a faceless king donning a crown was plastered on every white brick wall. The floors turned royal blue once they passed an empty hallway and entered a bubble of noise and bodies, some leaving doorways, some entering rooms, some just hanging out between walls and thresholds. Up ahead at the dead end of a hallway, *THERE CAN BE NO SUCCESS UNTIL EXCELLENCE BECOMES A HABIT, A MINDSET, AND A WAY OF LIFE* was painted in severe blue letters. She felt like she never left the gym.

The sound of something soft repeatedly smacking something hard gradually increased in volume the deeper they got into the bustle. Male voices shouting and laughing accompanied every point of impact. She and Jamie looked at each other with

raised eyebrows and no words. As they did, Jamie's eyes widened and her arm yanked Rachel straight backwards.

"Watch out!" she yelled. Rachel crouched just in time for a soccer ball to come soaring down a perpendicular hallway and attack the wall behind where they had been walking. It landed with a splat and a few accompanying thuds to the sapphire floor. Her heart was in a fit for the second time that night, but this time for near certain death. She looked down the hall and saw ten men in varying versions of the same uniform of blue Monarchs hoodie, sweatpants, high socks, and backwards hats. One was coming right for them in a fast stride.

"Holy shit, I'm so sorry." He pulled his hand out to help Rachel up.

She took it, though warily, and looked at Jamie. Their shared gaze was aghast. The hand she held was warm and twice as big as hers. Her eyes traversed up his baggy sleeve and broad, hidden chest and to his round face and rounder blue eyes. Dark, damp hair hung at his chin and was contained beneath a baseball cap. He was perhaps a foot taller than her, but looked just as young, at least in his face. "I'm sorry. I've never almost hit someone when playing two-touch."

"Yeah, you have!" an older man yelled from the group. They all laughed as one.

"Two-touch," she said, because she didn't know what else to say. She noticed the dimples that cut deep into his cheeks even during his period of visible shock, but quickly found his eyes again instead. Something unfamiliar simmered deep in her stomach and begged for her to acknowledge it, but she didn't know how.

“It’s kind of like soccer, but you get two —You know what, it doesn’t matter. I’m really sorry. Are you okay? Did you hurt anything when you fell?”

Jamie snorted. Rachel remembered that she was there.

“She’s a professional faller,” Jamie said. She linked her elbow in Rachel’s.

Rachel looked away from the very attractive near-assailant and at her best friend. With one long look, she spoke her truth. Jamie blinked and looked at the stranger. “You know, because she’s World Champion and everything.”

“World Champion,” he repeated like it was a new language. His Canadian accent peaked and valleyed around certain syllables. He looked at Rachel again and she wished he wouldn’t because she didn’t know how to look away. “Hockey?”

“No,” Jamie said with an eye roll. “Gymnastics. Both of us.”

“Gymnastics,” he said. She couldn’t understand why they just continued to repeat one another. There had to be more she could say, something interesting and funny and charming and desirable, but she could only stare and gather sweat behind her knees and within the lines on her palms. He chewed on the word that consumed her entire life and smiled again. “Cool. My sister figure skates. Um, not at that level. But yeah.”

“Cool,” Rachel said. She didn’t know what to say to this, but ransacked her entire knowledge base for something, anything to say to keep the conversation going and keep his interest. “I’ve never figure skated before.”

“Yeah, I guess it’s not really the same thing—”

“Barky, if you’re gonna sit there and run game on them, then give us the fucking ball back,” someone with a thick Boston accent yelled. The rest of the game’s assembled players tittered like children at recess.

Her new friend picked the ball up and lobbed it with an unforgiving kick down the hallway. It flew past all the other men, even as two guys tried to jump in the air to catch it. They laughed and booed him. He turned back to Rachel.

“I’m Kellan.”

“Rachel,” she said after a moment spent trying to remember it.

“Jamie,” her best friend interjected without sparing a moment. “And we’re looking for Wendy. Can you help us?”

“Wendy. Yeah. She’s probably in the media room.”

Kellan assumed the role of tour guide and turned his body away from whom she assumed were his teammates, then lead them further down the hall and toward the painted philosophy. He walked to Rachel’s immediate right and was so warm that his body heat became hers. She didn’t know any guys. She didn’t even know how to talk to a guy. Training eight hours a day and being homeschooled didn’t make it a priority. Her legs felt feathery and untrustworthy, like moments before a beam routine when it counted most.

“Are you guys from around here?” he asked. Somewhere beyond, the grinding of what sounded like a table saw whined in a fury and interrupted him. They passed a hall and saw a staff member in all blue sharpening a pair of hockey skates.

“Yeah. Laz Trentini is my stepdad.”

“Oh, no way. Laz is the man. He set up a box for a bunch of us when The Nebulous played here last month.”

“We saw them, too,” Jamie said. She nudged Rachel’s other arm, the one that didn’t feel like it was burning and floating all at once. “They’re Rach’s favorite band.”

“Really?” His dimples grew from the fertile ground of his round cheeks and she had no choice but to smile back, big and all-consuming. Even in the shadow of the high, fluorescent lighting cast upon him, his eyes shined without pause. “I like some of that pop-punk stuff, too.”

“Cool,” Rachel said. She needed to find more interesting things to say. How did Jamie make it look so easy? “Next time they play here, we should all share a box.”

The mental image was perfect as it erupted in her mind – she and Kellan willingly hanging out in proximity, knowingly together, maybe holding hands, possibly kissing, definitely listening to her favorite music – and she wished it into existence. In fact, she wished anything that involved spending any time with him beyond this small, isolated moment into existence.

There was a stutter of silence that made her realize she went too far and suggested too much. Jamie flicked Rachel’s other elbow with a clip of her finger. She looked straight ahead at the word *EXCELLENCE* and considered throwing her neck beneath the skate sharpener.

“I—” she began to issue a correction, but at the same time, he began to speak.



“Definitely, yeah. That’d be great. That’d be awesome.”

With another shared smile, she brushed the face of her palms against the back of her jeans. She didn’t care that she didn’t know what she was doing nor had no idea what to say. She would be happy with no conversation at all if it meant having more time with him.

“She should be in here, maybe,” Kellan said once they arrived at a door marked *MEDIA*. Through the open doorway, she saw a group of about eight people, each sitting before a laptop. No one looked up. Kellan knocked on the door. “Wendy?”

One of the eight, a tall woman in her thirties, dragged her eyes slowly away from her screen and up to Kellan. She looked at Jamie and Rachel next and smiled. She stood so quickly that her folding chair nearly fell over.

“Hey, girls. It’s so great to have you here,” she said. She shook both of their hands and Rachel wished she had taken another moment to dry her palms again prior. Wendy removed her phone from her pocket and began to type with her eyes never leaving them. “So usually what we do is some interviews, take some pictures for the website, we’ll get you girls in your jerseys, and then at seven we’ll do the puck drop with the video package. Then you can head upstairs to watch the game, or you can leave if you can’t stay.” She nodded her smiling chin at Jamie. “I’m sure, Jamie, you know your way around.” Her smile faded in the same blink that it took for her eyes to double in size. “Oh God, did you bring your medals? I can’t remember if I told you guys to or not.”

“Yeah, definitely,” Jamie said. She unzipped her coat and Rachel followed suit. Their sets of hardware clinked together once they were freed from the constraints of

polyester and goose down. Rachel studied hers for the umpteenth time, still in disbelief. The four golds sparkled up at her appreciatively.

“Perfect!” Wendy said with a single clap of her hands. “Well, let’s put you girls to work with some of the reporters.”

She didn’t know there’d be reporters to talk to. She hadn’t known what to expect except dropping a puck and watching hockey. Nodding at Wendy, she felt the retreat of the heat she started to grow accustomed to by her arm. She turned and saw Kellan moving away with small, awkward shuffles.

“You need anything, Kellan?” Wendy asked over Rachel’s head.

“No. Um, no. That’s it. Nice meeting you.” His eyes remained on Rachel’s. She didn’t want him to go. What if they never saw each other again and the last thing she said to him was an incredibly forward suggestion that they go to a concert together? Maybe he thought she was weird and was dying to leave the scene. She couldn’t tell.

“Thank you for showing us to Wendy,” Rachel said with a smile. Wendy piqued an eyebrow and Rachel felt her face flush. “It was nice meeting you, too.”

“Okay. Yeah.” His dimples appeared, disappeared, and reappeared. He backed up right into a line of blue Monarch-emblazoned folding chairs arranged outside the door. His knee bent to obey the obstruction and he tripped with a crash and fell sideways onto a seat. “Shit,” he said. Jumping up like a pogo stick, he nodded once, all business. “Okay. Enjoy the game.”

He jogged in the direction they came from and disappeared, but Rachel could still feel him lingering by her arm.

“He’s something else,” was all the explanation Wendy offered. Rachel didn’t need any convincing.

Further back in the media room, she and Jamie were directed to a logo-embazoned backdrop and opened up to reporters. She was always required to speak to reporters at competitions, but it was usually under the supervision of Donna, the PR czar for USA Gymnastics. Here, she had no one to answer to except maybe Jamie.

Four reporters, two men and two women, came up to ask them questions. Rachel was vaguely familiar with one, a skinny, middle-aged man named Duane who once came to their gym with a camera crew to do a story on them before Nationals. She felt nervous and fearful of saying something wrong and sidled closer to Jamie.

“So, how was Worlds?” he asked while fumbling with a voice recorder.

“Great,” Jamie said with a big, glossy smile. She nudged Rachel. “And awesome for her.”

“All-around champion, is that right?” When Rachel nodded, he had an ah-ha moment of switching on the voice recorder and its red power button winked at her. “You girls have a little dynasty going in that gym. What’s next?”

“Well, we have a national team camp next week, and then just training and upgrading for competitions next spring,” Jamie said.

“And what about the Olympics? Are you going to the Olympics?” one of the women with short red hair asked. “Beijing, you must be thinking about it.”

“Um, definitely thinking about it,” Rachel said. They would never understand how much she thought about it, even if she tried to explain. “There’s a trial process and a bunch of competitions next summer, so we won’t know who goes to the Olympics until then.”

“Do you think you’ll win?” Duane asked. In their ensuing pause, he clarified, “Both of you?”

“I hope so,” Rachel said.

“I want Olympic vault and floor gold,” Jamie said much more definitively. “Team gold, too.”

“What about all-around? Do you guys ever think about competing with one another to win that in Beijing?”

“Rach is a way better all-arounder than me. I suck at beam and I’m worse on bars,” Jamie said. Rachel laughed but more from release of tension than any joy in Jamie’s weaknesses. She was glad Jamie could take the reins in situations like these. “As long as I win vault and floor then I’m happy.”

“And she will,” Rachel interjected. She linked elbows with Jamie. “She’s working on upgrades that no one in the world can compete with. She just needs to show up to Beijing and she’ll win.”

“I wish,” Jamie said.

Everyone laughed. It all went fine. No disasters or blunders. When they were freed from the Media room, they were next shown to a Jersey room – so many rooms for such narrow purposes – and were gifted Monarchs jerseys of their own. The backs of each read MACALUSO 07 and WALLERSTEIN 07. When Rachel put hers on, it almost touched her knees. Jamie’s looked like a dress.

“It’s just nice for the photo-op to have you wear those,” Wendy explained, still typing on her phone without even looking at it. “You can take them off after.”

Their last assignment before puck drop was getting their pictures taken together with their medals. Her face felt numb and the game hadn’t even started. Finally, Wendy gave them about twenty minutes to themselves before they were needed again at seven sharp. She and Jamie sat on the same row of chairs by the Media room that Kellan tripped and fell over. She sat on the chair he landed on and wondered if he already forgot about her.

“I had no idea it was this involved,” Rachel said after looking around to make sure they were reasonably alone.

“Whatever. The real surprise is how much that guy was into you.” She grabbed Rachel’s hand and pulled on it. “He was flirting with you!”

“No, he wasn’t.” She would know flirting when she saw it, like in the melodramatic teen sitcom they liked where rich prep school boys bought rich prep school girls couture and trips to the Hamptons for their birthdays. Kellan was simply a very hot stranger being nice.

“Well, you could barely put a sentence together without sounding completely ridiculous, and he was still all over you. Why didn’t you ask him for his number?”

“I don’t even know if my phone accepts calls from guys.”

“You’re gonna regret it,” Jamie said. “Tomorrow, you’re gonna be like, ‘Jamie, why didn’t I give him my number?’ and I’m just gonna say, ‘I told you so.’ You know that, right?”

Rachel crossed her legs beneath the baggy jersey and re-arranged her medals so that they were slightly but artfully overlapped by one another. She listened to Jamie click on her phone. Rachel looked down the hall in search of Kellan, but there was no sign of him anywhere. She sighed, feeling a little like one of those rich girls who sat around in Manhattan penthouse apartments, waiting for their boyfriends to come back from their parents’ summer homes in the Alps. She patted her damp palms on her knees. Maybe this was why the national team had a no-dating rule. Jamie put her phone away. Rachel could tell from the heavy intake of breath she pulled in that she wasn’t going to like what Jamie was about to say.

“Where’s your floor medal?”

She looked down at the collection of gold atop the Monarchs logo.

“I don’t know.”

“What do you mean, you don’t know? You forgot it?”

“Yeah, I guess I did.” She defied her natural instinct to sit up straight and hunched her left shoulder a little to turn away from Jamie. She did not forget it – it was at home, where she deliberately left it – but it wasn’t Jamie’s business.

“You’re kidding me,” she said. Their eyes met and Jamie’s were increasingly darker the more time passed. “Are you serious? I can’t be World Champion on one event without you getting jealous?”

“I’m not jealous. I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Oh, shut up. You’re ridiculous.” She jabbed her finger at Rachel’s chest. “You have your own. You can be happy for mine.”

“I am happy for yours,” she insisted. She was, but she also wouldn’t mind having it for herself. It was gross and uncalled for, but it was her truth. She hated losing, full stop. The circumstances, rules, people involved, or events didn’t matter.

“Yeah, right. At least now you know how it feels. You think it’s fun watching you win everything and having to explain to the whole world why I’m not as good as you?” The hazel of Jamie’s eyes collected a rare glassy sheen that made Rachel’s stomach seize. “You might be good at gymnastics, but sometimes you suck as a friend.”

Jamie’s legs flicked her up to stand and then she was gone. Rachel stood to follow her, feeling sick and in pain starting from a little pinprick in her gut that grew outward.

“Jamie, come on,” she called past the skate sharpener. “I’m sorry.”

Jamie waved her wrist dismissively, then disappeared through a heavy blue door. Rachel followed her exact path and pushed on the door’s slim silver handle, but it didn’t

budge. This doorway was one of the rare ones left unmarked, so she had no idea where it had taken her. She pulled her phone out and called Jamie, even though cell service was almost nonexistent.

“Where did you go?” Rachel asked Jamie’s cheerful voicemail message. “Please come back. I didn’t mean I wasn’t happy for you. I am happy for you. You deserved gold on floor. You deserved gold on vault, too. I’m sorry. I suck.”

She called two more times, but she knew that she would not be getting an answer. She began to cry in a sudden flush of heat and despair, but it was so ingrained into her to not cry that she tried to stop, and the more she tried to stop, the more she cried. She used the jersey sleeves to dry her face with scratchy swipes and dialed one more time. The message greeted her and she hung up without a word. She and Jamie fought or argued all the time, but never like this, when Rachel knew that she not only really screwed up, but genuinely hurt Jamie’s feelings. She heard footsteps and turned away so her back was facing the hallway. The footsteps stopped and the already-familiar sound of Wendy’s gasping and exhaling of relief greeted her.

“We’re starting in just a minute. Come with me,” Wendy said. Rachel dried her cheeks one more time before turning and forcing a smile on her face. Wendy typed on her phone with both hands and squinted at Rachel. “Where’s Jamie?”

“I—” she said, but didn’t know how to finish. “Bathroom. I don’t know.”

“Okay, well, we don’t have time to find her. Let’s go,” Wendy said, beckoning Rachel. Rachel stared at the door and gave it one more turn of the handle. “You can’t go through there. It leads upstairs.”



“That’s where Jamie went,” Rachel said. She let out a thick exhale that relieved some of the sting in her eyes. “If I can get through here, I’ll find her.”

“No time,” Wendy said. She beckoned again. When Rachel didn’t move, she pulled on her arm herself. “It’s okay. The video package is for both of you, but it’ll be fine. You just need to drop the puck and then you can leave. I don’t know why she came all the way here if she wasn’t going to stick around.”

Because I am human scum, Rachel didn’t say. Wendy led her away from the door and down a maze of hallways. The further they walked, the more she heard the muffle of a crowd through slabs of concrete. She stopped in front of the final hallway, the end of which led out to the ice rink. The ice glowed blue in the dark with two frantic spotlights whirling around from the rafters. Cheering and driving music shot down the throughway from the arena and into her chest. It reminded her of Worlds.

“I can’t go without her,” Rachel said. “I’m sorry, but I can’t.”

“You’re already here,” Wendy said. Irritation began to flavor her voice. Rachel wondered just how many people she could get to hate her in the span of an hour.

She looked around the hall in search of Jamie, but she never appeared. Wendy handed Rachel a puck with a smooth, shiny Monarchs applique on its surface. She heard an announcer talking but didn’t pay any attention until she reached the tunnel that led to the ice with another push from Wendy.

“Please direct your attention to the scoreboard above the ice as we honor tonight’s special guests,” the announcer said over the PA system. Rachel looked around the

crowded arena bowl and the shadowed figures of the Buffalo faithful. To her left was the Monarchs bench, fully attended by the team who were now suited and skated up in their radiant blue. To her right, an away team she knew nothing about wore white with red accents. A small blue carpet created a walkway onto the ice. Everyone focused up at the screen, so she did, too. A montage of herself and Jamie played in sync to a slow pop song. They hugged in matching neon leotards at competitions in dinky convention centers, stood back-to-back with their arms crossed at their first few international competitions as elites, and held peace signs up to waiting cameras in the gym they called a second home.

The montage moved to footage of Worlds, including what must have been the national broadcast commentary feed. She watched herself pull Jamie in for a hug when they won team finals and all that same emotion resurfaced and knit itself into a ball deep in her throat. They weren't just teammates. Rachel had a lot of those. They weren't even just best friends. They were sisters, and she was so jealous of her sister that she may have just lost her forever, not that this crowd knew. The feed showed the American flag going up between the Russian and Chinese flags and the crowd in the ice rink began to cheer in real time, as if that was the sporting event they paid to see that evening. Clips of the all-around and event finals followed until the hometown crowd was electric and doused in blue light. She watched her own routines back with her neck craned, wondering if anyone could pick out her missed handstands and flexed feet and leg separations the way she could.

“Presenting the ceremonial first puck are Buffalo natives and World Gymnastics Champions, Rachel Wallerstein and Jamie Macaluso.”

Sort of. She chose her best smile and pretended that her other half wasn't missing beside her. Some handlers led her to the carpet and she stepped out, immediately feeling the chill of the ice travel up her pant legs and through the sleeves of her jersey. Two hockey players greeted her at the end of the carpet, one in all blue with a white "C" embroidered on his chest and one in white. She shook both their hands and posed for a photo from a waiting photographer. Dropping the puck beneath the surge of noise, she waved up into her hometown crowd, a crowd who knew nothing about her except for some medals and video clips, and wondered if Jamie was still there among them.

She was led back off the ice to the sound of hockey sticks tapping the ice and boards by the benches. She didn't know how she got the nerve, but she looked to the bench and saw Kellan immediately. He was too far away to say hi to, although she doubted she would be able to conjure sound while looking at him anyway. Both in blue, he smiled and she did, too, until she cleared the benches and was back down the tunnel and out of sight. The disappearance of the action and the dulling of the noise brought her back to reality, where Jamie was not only pissed at her but still missing.

Some attendants showed her to an elevator that promised to take her up to the box where she could watch the game. Rachel dialed Jamie one more time while in the elevator, and when it went to voicemail, she wondered if she should have gone out to the car to look for her instead. When the elevator freed her right in front of a luxury box with its door open, she saw the back of Jamie's head immediately. She stood at a table of food and piled pretzels on a blue plate. Rachel ran up to her and grabbed her arm.

"Jesus," Jamie said, dropping some pretzels in the collision.

“Where were you? I called you a hundred times.”

“I was up here,” she said and yanked her arm back.

“I’m sorry. I’m an idiot. I am happy for you, you know that.”

“No, I don’t know that.” Jamie surveyed a serving tray of blue-frosted cupcakes and grabbed a chocolate one. “You looked more than happy to have all the attention down there.”

“I was looking everywhere for you, and Wendy basically shoved me out onto the ice.” She followed Jamie out of the lounge area of the box, which was stuffed with executive types in suits that they dutifully ignored, and out into the two rows of elevated seats that overlooked the ice. The game was already in motion. Five blue bodies and five white jerseys flew around the matte white ice in quick, taut strides.

Jamie didn’t speak, but Rachel sat beside her anyway. Paying attention to the game was impossible with so much anger pulsating in a thick cloud around Jamie. She turned in her seat to face her and the pain she caused directly.

“It’s not that I’m mad at you or I don’t think you deserve it. You do deserve it. You’re the best in the world on floor. You’re way better than me and I know that. It’s just that I get so mad at myself for not being the best. But even if I’m mad at myself, it’s still not as much as I’m happy for you.”

Jamie chewed on a pretzel and watched the game. Rachel watched her jaw as she chewed, waiting for it to open and speak. She could tell by the speed with which Jamie’s

eyes scanned the ice that she was only pretending to be more invested than she really was, but Rachel didn't say anything.

"I'm sorry," Rachel said one more time. "You're right, I suck."

"Not really," Jamie said after a whistle blew down below. She lifted a pretzel, swiped some icing off the cupcake, and crunched into it. "I know it's just your Type A."

"I'm not Type A."

Jamie snorted. It felt so wonderful to hear Jamie laughing that Rachel didn't care that it was at her own expense. Rachel reached for a pretzel, mostly as a test to see if Jamie would let her. She not only allowed her to, but even shifted the plate a little closer to share. She said nothing about forgiveness or making up or understanding. She didn't have to. Rachel took another pretzel and leaned closer into Jamie's side. Anyone looking at them would probably think they were conjoined twins.

"The guy from before is number ten," Jamie said, pointing down to the left side of the ice where all the active players were huddled near the goalie wearing white.

"How do you know?"

"They had his picture up there," Jamie said. She pointed to the scoreboard, which was eye-level with them from up here. "Kellan Barker, number ten."

Rachel scoped the mass of bodies positioning themselves for a faceoff. She found #10 in the middle of the dot, taking the faceoff when the referee dropped the puck. He won it easily and passed the puck to a teammate with a waiting stick. He looked even bigger beneath the mammoth padding covered by his blue uniform, even while he skated

hunched over. When he did skate, it was so fast and fluid that it looked as easy as walking for him. She hadn't ice skated since she was a kid.

“Do you really think I should've asked him for his number?”

“I mean, if you thought he was cute, then why not? The worst he could've said was no,” Jamie said. She unwrapped the cupcake liner with one hand and took a large and criminal bite. Rachel wanted one, too, but it would be hard to stop at just one. Simply regarding sweets as off-limits was a lot easier than over-indulging and having to work them off or puke them up later. Apparently, Jamie didn't agree tonight.

“Oh well. I wouldn't have known what to talk about, anyway.”

They watched the rest of the game with comfortable, seamless conversation, the kind with fifteen years bolstering it. At times they didn't even need words. Points, shrugs, and gestures were a language all their own. When Kellan scored a goal near the end of the third period, Jamie looked at Rachel and wiggled her eyebrows and they both laughed obnoxiously loud, so much so that she couldn't remember what they fought about earlier. The Monarchs won 3-2, the crowd was boisterous beneath them, and she and Jamie linked arms in their matching jerseys to head out together.

“I don't want to go to practice tomorrow,” Jamie said as they took the elevator down, the same sentiment she repeated about three times a week.

“Me neither. We're starting to train my double again,” Rachel said. Just thinking about a tough morning practice spent vaulting made her roll her tense neck around. She wasn't a bad vaulter – her one-and-a-half was usually a sure bet to stick, or at least land

on her feet – but she wasn't powerful like her biggest competition. She needed a Yurchenko double to hang with everyone else at the Olympics next year, and it was a difficult vault that she had never competed before. This year was time, though. For so long the Olympics seemed a lifetime away, and now in less than a year, the Games would begin. If she thought about it too long, she usually kept herself from falling asleep.

“Doubles are easy. You'll get it,” Jamie said.

Easy for her to say. She rolled her eyes and Jamie nudged her in the side. When the elevator landed back in the maze of hallways and blue doors, she felt her phone buzz in her pocket. Checking the time revealed it was 9:47. Rachel clicked to see that her mom texted her.

*Mom: Are you still out? Coming home soon? Everything ok?*

Sometimes Rachel wondered if her mom wanted her to be in dire straits, given that most of their communication insinuated that she must be in danger or trouble.

*Rachel: Yes still out. Yes everything ok. Yes coming home now.*

She tucked it back into her pocket and tried not to lament her answers. They were going home to real life to get sleep before another day of practice tomorrow. Every day

of practice was different and gave her different goals and challenges, but in a larger scheme of her life, she was beginning to feel as though she was in a rut. Gymnastics was all she knew. She liked it that way, but that didn't mean it didn't bore her.

Outside was bitter cold and would be pitch black if not for the tall light posts dotting the service lot. Winter seemed so soon, even in October. Soon, lake effect chill would settle in and freeze her life over for a few months, not that it would change anything about it. Gymnastics didn't pause for anything, let alone weather.

Jamie unlocked her car with a beep from a few yards away. Rachel zipped her coat up to her chin and heard the door they left through open again and meet the concrete wall it was connected to with a bang.

"Hey," she heard.

Both of them turned and saw Kellan. Beneath the lights affixed to the doorway, he looked huge. The closer he got, the more her body felt frozen in time. He wore a gray suit with a blue tie and a white dress shirt beneath. All she could think was how she'd seen him in nearly every type of dress in the last three hours – all except one, anyway. The thought shocked her so much that she stabbed her nails into her calloused palms.

"Hi," she said after far too long. Her voice lost its patience with her and gave up midway through the word.

He stood two feet from them. She could feel Jamie silently freaking out like a crack in the earth. His hair was soaking wet and glistened beneath the nearest lamp post. When he looked at her, she wondered if she still looked as she had inside under brighter



lights and tighter confines. Out here, the entire world surrounded them in the fenced-in parking lot.

“I guess this is weird of me. I don’t know.” His big palms kept sliding in and out of his trouser pockets. “I was wondering if I could get your number. Or just give you mine.”

The crack in the earth became a tectonic shift. The longer she stared, the harder it became to swallow. Maybe Jamie was right. Maybe he was into her. If they left any earlier, they would’ve been gone by now and she never would’ve known. Her mind wandered to some unknown place where she not only knew how to talk to a guy she liked but did so regularly and with him as a willing participant in the conversations. Would this make him her boyfriend? No way, she chastised herself. He was probably just being nice.

“Definitely,” she said. They shared a smile and Rachel laughed into hers, so nervous that she could’ve choked on her own anxiety right there. They swapped phones and she typed her name and number into his contacts list, double-checking her info twice. When they returned their devices to one another, she looked at what he put in. He had christened himself *KELLAN* :). She had given him her full name like a job application. She wanted to ask him if she could fix it, but he already put his phone away.

“Cool,” he said. His eyes hid from the light until he lifted his chin a little, at which point they sucked the glow of every lamp post right to them. “I’ll text you later, maybe? Is that okay?”

“Definitely,” she repeated. “Whenever.”

“Cool.” His hands folded within his pockets again. She wanted to know what they felt like. “It was cool meeting you. I guess we’ll talk later.”

“Nice meeting you too,” she said. “Kellan,” she added.

They stared for a moment longer – she didn’t know how to look away from such big and expressive eyes – and then he unlocked the Porsche beside Jamie’s car. He waved. They waved back. Only when he pulled away did they scramble into the Lexus and bask in the heat it provided with a turn of her key.

“Oh my *God*,” Jamie said no fewer than ten times. “You’re gonna have a boyfriend! You’re so lucky!”

“Not if I make an idiot out of myself,” she said with a pained whine to her voice. “I don’t know what to talk about. What if he doesn’t even text me?”

“Oh, he will,” Jamie said. She squeezed Rachel’s hand and pulled on it mercilessly. “Worlds and a boyfriend. This is your year. Now, if you would just commit to UCLA instead of Snore-nell, you would have the perfect trifecta.”

It was too late for the college gymnastics debate, especially since the two of them exhausted it in a multitude of ways for years prior to now, and Rachel never changed her mind. No, Cornell gymnastics didn’t have the glamorous or successful elite-lite team that UCLA boasted, but it was close to home, had a great biology program, and her parents had gone there, too. There was no reason not to go.

“Don’t start, please. I think we fought enough today,” Rachel said.

“Who fought? I didn’t fight.” Jamie shifted into reverse and winked in the shadow of the parking lot lights. All around them, cars were entered by muscular men in business wear and used to promptly depart the arena in the afterglow of a winning game. Rachel knew that feeling. She craved it constantly. She checked her phone to see if Kellan had reached out in the five minutes since she last saw him and was disappointed that he hadn’t. She looked at his new contact information and the little smiley face he left for her. She couldn’t ignore her gut feeling that its simple colon and parenthetical construction might have been premonitory.

## CHAPTER 3

### DOUBLE TROUBLE

Just like every Tuesday, morning practice began with the boot camp that masqueraded as ballet class with Miss Lena. At the halfway break, Rachel sat on the perimeter of the spring floor and checked her phone while rolling a tennis ball beneath her aching soles. On her screen, the remains of the research she conducted while trying to fall asleep last night teased her. She spent at least an hour Googling Kellan and studying his Wikipedia page like preparation for her final exam to graduate from homeschool. Despite feeling invasive and creepy, she did learn a lot: he was in fact Canadian, from somewhere in Saskatchewan she never heard of. He just turned nineteen in August and was drafted first overall in the most recent NHL draft, making this his rookie season. He played forward and was a center. He had five goals in his first nine games, which an opinion article she read deemed an incredible feat for a rookie. She felt like she knew him already.

Fleetingly, she wondered if he was Googling her and prayed he wasn't. She had no idea what was being said online or what was available about her and had no way of filtering what he might think. Only then did her online sleuthing begin to embarrass her; she exited out of any proof of her stalking and cleared her search history.

When break was over, she and Katie, her junior teammate and the only other elite coached by Vlad, warmed back up by jogging around the floor before it was time for

vault. Vlad stacked pit pillows high on the mat for a drill where they would try to land on their feet, with the intention being harder and more powerful blocks off the table. Given that Rachel's worst event was vault, she dreaded this drill more than any other.

"You need to snap," Vlad called by the table. She was at the end of the runway, getting chalk on her feet. "Block up and out. Legs together."

There was no delaying the inevitable. She jumped up and then sprinted, picking up so much speed down the runway that for a moment she thought she might get this done. She rounded off onto the springboard and blocked as hard as she could off the table. Her eyes were waiting for her feet to hit the pillow, but she landed on her knees instead.

"When I say 'legs together', what do you think that means?" Vlad asked from the floor beneath her.

"That I should keep my legs together."

"I don't understand. You say yes and then you do the wrong thing. Why do you do this?"

Knowing she had no answer that he wanted to hear, she offered no explanation and jumped down from the mats. She helped Vlad adjust the board for Katie and then stood off to the side. Her younger teammate saluted down at the end and then proceeded into her own Yurchenko entry. She landed on her feet but over-rotated a little and stumbled onto her back.

"Awesome," Rachel said. "Those are getting so easy for you."

“Thanks,” Katie said, smiling big while tightening her ponytail.

Vlad adjusted the springboard again and began gesturing wildly to Rachel.

“The second your feet are here,” he said, slapping his palm on the board, “they’re glued together. You push off the table fast. Don’t go like this.” He held his arms out to the side like a scarecrow and then swung them up to either side of his head. “Go like this.” His arms shot straight up in the air from his sides, keeping a direct line with his legs.

She nodded and walked back to the end of the worn runway and its dusty chalk veneer. She needed a double-twisting Yurchenko and the longer it took to get it, the angrier she became with her own inability to do a vault that was basically standard issue at her level of competition.

She did the drill five more times, landing on her feet exactly once. The less Vlad spoke, the more frustrated she became. When they moved onto trying their upgrades, she attempted her first real double of the day. For years, she worked toward this vault in stages – in the pit, on mats, spotted, but never to the hard ground under her own power. She didn’t understand what was keeping her from it. She could tumble on floor with no problem and boasted a triple twist dismount off the balance beam. A double Yurchenko should have been easily obtained, but between the timing of it in the air and her own lack of confidence, she never got it consistent enough to even think about competing it.

“I will land this damn vault,” she said to herself while chalking her feet. “No, I will stick this damn vault.”

“C’mon, Rach, you’ve got this,” Katie called down by the board.

“Legs,” Vlad said.

She stared at the table and took a deep breath. Once every few nights, she was visited by a recurring dream where she not only could do the double but nailed it in Beijing on the day of the all-around final. Vlad would hug and heap praise upon her, she’d smile and wave into the rolling cameras, the crowd would rain cheers down onto the competition floor. Her score would come up somewhere in the 15.500 range – even in her wildest dreams, a perfect score would never happen – and streamline her path right to the top of the podium. Every time she had this dream, she woke up and was reminded that she had yet to ever land one. Exhaling, she jumped into her sprint. She rounded off, hit the board, and forced her legs together. Pushing off the table, she could feel immediately that her timing was all wrong. Her twisting was slow and her rotation wasn’t much better. Underrotated, she hit the ground short and braced herself on her hands. Her feet and legs protested their abuse and she hid the evidence of pain from her face.

“No,” he said.

“That was just a bad block. Next time, I’ve got it,” she said with a push off the mat to stand.

“If you don’t control your skills, if you keep doing crazy things like this, then soon you hurt yourself and then what? I tell you what to do and you don’t do it. You’re done,” Vlad said while fixing the board for Katie.

“What?” The word burned like an open flame in her throat that then manifested in her hands and behind her knees. “No way. Vlad, I need it. Karen Dillard said —”

“I know what Karen Dillard said. I don’t care what Karen Dillard said. She sees you once a month. I see you every day.” He double-checked the measurements and then stood to face her. “Go ice that knee. I’ll see you at three.”

“I can do it,” she said, her despair coming out as sharp anger. “I’ll get it this time.”

“Go home, Rachel.”

“Vlad—”

“*Pozzhe*,” he said in no uncertain manner. Thoroughly silencing her, he turned away and looked at Katie all the way on the opposite end of the runway. “Last one, Katie.”

Rachel stood to the side and slowly removed her flesh-colored wrist guards. Katie charged down the runway and landed a double twist with a big step back. She didn’t have the best form in the air, but she landed it on her feet and that was more than Rachel could say. How was it possible that her thirteen-year-old teammate could do it before Rachel could? And she was supposed to be World Champion? She was pathetic.

“That was your best one yet,” Rachel said to Katie, masquerading her self-disgust as a big smile and a high-five. When both Katie and Vlad looked away from Rachel, she slinked over to the locker room without once looking back.



In the locker room, she unwound the sheaths of tape from her ankles and right knee and dunked them in the trash with a satisfying whoosh of the garbage bag. Her bad knee was killing her, she was starving, and in about half an hour she would have to decide between whether to take a nap or catch up on homework that camp and Worlds had shoved to the wayside. She wondered what Karen Dillard would say when she showed up to camp with her same old one-and-a-half. She only had so many jokes about silver and bronze; eventually she would have to run out and spare Rachel of them.

“Vault looked rough,” Jamie said as she entered the locker room.

“When did you take the judging exam?”

“Why are you mad at me? I didn’t do anything.”

“I’m not mad at you. I’m mad at Vlad.”

“Yeah, but what else is new?” asked Jamie while fiddling with her padlock.

“Why?”

“He doesn’t think I can get a double.”

“I mean, it did look rough,” Jamie said. Rachel stewed in silence that wordlessly picked up in heat and Jamie backtracked. “Rach, seriously, you’re World Champion on two events and the all-around. You don’t need that dumb vault. It’s three tenths. It literally doesn’t matter.”

“It’ll matter when I’m wearing bronze in Beijing,” she said and threw her wrist guards into her bag with a whack. She ripped the zipper shut with a hard tug and kicked her locker door.

“Even if you do just win bronze, at least you’ll have a medal. At least you’ll be on the all-around podium. And honestly, you crying about not having a 5.8 vault when your bars start at 7.8 is so ridiculous. You sound ridiculous.”

She couldn’t name the feeling she got, anger or shame or something brand new, but it made her neck and face hot and her palms streak with sweat. She thought of a million retorts to lob at Jamie ranging from her barely-elite bar routine to how she’d fallen on beam at Nationals three years in a row. None of them made her feel any better to think, let alone say. Last night remained fresh. Two arguments with Jamie in two days had to be a sign of something wrong. Rachel herself figured she was the common denominator. It’s not like she could do anything else right; why would maintaining her most important relationship be an exception? She stood, shoved her locker shut with her elbow, and hauled her bag to the door with a few moody stomps.

“Where are you going?” Jamie asked. “Aren’t we doing homework together?”

“No, I’m gonna go be ridiculous somewhere else.”

“Rach, come on. I didn’t—”

The door swung shut on the remainder of this appeal but she had no desire to turn back. Eventually they would make up, probably within hours. For now, it just felt easier to be mad at everyone and have everyone be mad at her. She walked through the heart of the gym on the perimeter of the floor where some kindergarten-aged girls rolled around in cartwheels. Vlad was out of sight and the pit pillows were stacked neatly away by the wall beneath the endless stream of banners boasting college programs and mascots. All the better to leave without having to say goodbye. It wasn’t like she wouldn’t see him in

two hours, anyway. Ten feet from the doors, her phone buzzed in her bag. Seeing Kellan's name on the screen dulled everything else just enough for her to feel something besides despondent.

*Kellan: hey, idk if u remember me, this is Kellan from last night. We met at the game*

They certainly had. She pushed the glass door open to walk into the frigid afternoon. Up above her, the same sign boasting their status as *Golden Girls!* didn't capture her attention. She spent the whole walk to her car deliberating how to text a boy.

*Rachel: Hi! I remember! How are you?*

Boring, she chastised herself, but it already sent, and she could not reclaim her words from the universe and its cell towers. She tossed her purple gym bag into the backseat of her car with a slumping thud and got up front to start the engine. The sound of passing cars from the business route the gym forked off whooshed through the thick glass of her windshield. It was always a bit of a surprise to leave the gym and see that the rest of the world hadn't stopped while she'd been inside.

*Kellan: if ur not busy do u want to go to a haunted house/maze thing tonight  
around 8*

*Kellan: I mean with other people, not just us*

*Kellan: I mean I'm going with some friends and thought it would be cool if maybe  
u could come and u can also bring friends if u want*

*Kellan: only if u want to I mean*

She was so surprised by the proposal of what she believed to technically be a date that she couldn't answer right away and drove home first. Spending the fifteen-mile drive lost in her own disbelief, she finally looked at her phone again when she parked in front of her house. Neither of her parents were home, not that it was typical for them to come home mid-day. This was meant to be her time to relax, eat, and recharge before afternoon practice, although usually she spent it doing homework and wasting time on the Internet.

She looked at his texts again. If he was asking her out – even in a group setting – then he must be into her, right? Maybe it wasn't just her who felt a slack-jawed moment of attraction last night. Her first instinct was to call Jamie and relay every letter, space, and punctuation mark of his text messages to her, and then she remembered that she was mad at Jamie. She re-read his third message. She could bring friends, plural. Jamie was her best friend, not to mention her only friend her age in the Buffalo metro area, unless Kellan and his friends also wanted her to bring some school-aged Level 7 through 10 gymnasts as companions for the night.

The desire to accept the invitation buzzed in her fingertips. Just the chance of being near him again made her skin boil. But what would they talk about? What if she was awkward or boring? She looked at the sign traipsed across her leaf-doused lawn. Her own super-imposed face looked back at her upon the long strip of vinyl. She was World Champion. She could go on a date.

*Rachel: Sounds fun! Where is it?*

He supplied the address, just a few miles outside of her suburb in a more rural stretch of town, and delivered it with a smiley face. She challenged the emoticon for anything she could glean from it – attraction, desire, interest, connection – but found interrogating it difficult. Maybe she would just have to go in blind and try her best with her limited relationship skillset.

Her afternoon break of two hours mostly disappeared by way of completing AP Biology and Calculus homework with an ice pack on her knee. She focused on finishing assignments that were due that night and a little bit that would be due when she went to national team camp next week. Leaving assignments until the last minute fried her nerves even more than competing under pressure did, but her schedule didn't much care and often made it a necessity. At least soon she would graduate and leave high school behind for college. As a young gymnast, she always told herself she would graduate early to focus on the Olympics like some of the most high-strung girls from the previous quadrennium did, but by the beginning of her junior year, she knew it would never

happen. Now she was simply hanging onto every due date by its thread. Could she have deferred her senior year to focus on Olympic preparations? Of course, but that would be akin to admitting defeat, and Rachel was never any good at doing that in any context.

At twenty to three in the afternoon, she put her laptop away, grabbed a protein bar and a banana from the kitchen, and repeated the same footsteps out to her car that she trailed every single day for fifteen years. She drove back out of her suburb just like she had that morning, passed the same sights, curved her steering wheel along the same bends in the road, and sat at the same timed traffic lights. She began to wonder if she could travel this route with her eyes closed.

Back at the gym, the bustle and noise increased with the afterschool recreational crowd. Two different classes of pre-team girls' and boys' gymnastics practiced handstands on the chalky blue spring floor with assistance from the team coaches. She passed through the frontier of gymnastics equipment and entered the empty confines of the girl's locker room. It was early and she was the first one there, as per usual. She sat down and wrapped her knee while waiting for Jamie to come in. Rachel noticed a black speck on the littlest toe of her right foot and tried to wipe it off, assuming it was dirt or grime. The nerves beneath the surface seared in response. She ripped off another sheet of tape and pulled her knee to her chest to wrap the protesting toe. Jamie came in with a bang of the door and a rustle of her gym bag.

"Did you lose a nail?" Jamie asked. She set her belongings down five feet from Rachel.

"I think my toe's broken."

“Here, use my leukotape.”

A roll of beige tape somersaulted down the length of the bench in a single path. It hit Rachel’s bare thigh and stopped short. She considered both her grave-looking toe and the expensive kino tape now at her disposal. Lifting the roll, she tore a square off and circled it around her toe atop the layer of athletic tape she had already wrapped it in.

Jamie swigged from a bottle of yellow Gatorade. “Are you talking to me yet or are you still mad?”

“I haven’t decided,” Rachel said. She secured the edge of the tape down, inspected her work, and then wrapped her ankles in stretchier light-support tape. On tonight’s agenda was beam practice, tumbling, and an hour of conditioning, and her joints were already protesting their forthcoming abuse. As she wound the white roll around her left ankle, she rolled her shoulders back and applied her best casual tone of voice. “Besides, Kellan asked me out tonight and I thought maybe you could come.”

“What? When? Where? Show me!”

Any would-be rift melted away. She showed her phone and let Jamie read it, watching her friend’s big white smile triple in size.

“Rach, he’s into you. He’s so into you!”

“How do you know?” Rachel asked, leaning over for another look at her own phone. She felt silly for it, but the idea that maybe Kellan did like her was enough to spin her stomach around into light flips.

“‘I thought it would be cool if you could come’?” she recited to Rachel. “He’s in love with you.”

“He’s not in love with me,” Rachel said, and didn’t even let the thought cross her mind. “He barely knows me.”

“Well, that all changes tonight. I’ll definitely go. It’ll be so much fun. You can actually talk to him for more than five minutes. Maybe he’ll ask you out!”

After a few minutes of excited chatter and plans for what to wear and say and how to act, Rachel drafted a text and got Jamie’s approval. Her heart was pounding when she finally hit send.

*Rachel: Okay, I’ll be there with Jamie! Can’t wait! :)*

The locker room filled up with the younger team girls fresh off their carpools. There always seemed to be a competition to see who could be the loudest and most annoying of them all, particularly with the girls who had yet to transcend middle school, and so Rachel and Jamie usually left the locker room first, although with a trail of compatriots who aped their every move. The constant feeling of being watched and imitated, perhaps even admired, wasn’t new but had never been as obvious as it was post-Worlds. She did nothing without an audience, even just in the gym.

Miss Lena coached the first hour of beam practice. Rachel claimed her favorite beam, the one all the way to the left in the row of ten and right in front of the door. It



boasted most of her notable achievements – her first front aerial, first back walkover, first layout step-out, first everything. Jamie’s was the one directly to her right. The entire team warmed up with synchronized sets of split leaps, toe touches, back tucks, and front tucks. All Rachel could hear was the hypnotic pounding of bodies to beams.

“Toes are pointed. Chests are high,” Miss Lena proselytized. “You’re proud to be up there. You’re proud of your skills. You’re not just a gymnast, you’re a ballerina.”

Jamie threw a back pike and whirled her arms around to check her balance. “If she doesn’t shut up, I’m gonna punch-front off this beam onto her—”

“And our mouths are shut!” Miss Lena yelled. “Speak with your hands! Sing with your lines! Your skills are your pens. The beam is your blank sheet of paper. What will you write on it today? How will you communicate with it? What is your message?”

Apparently, Rachel’s message was hitting beam. She felt unstoppable and unmovable, a force of her own, perfecting every skill and every repetition of her routine. For fun, she tried out her dream skill at the end of her flight series, a full-twisting layout to two feet. It was the hardest skill on balance beam in the Code of Points, and while she trained it for years, Vlad never let her compete it before. She had roughly a fifty-percent success rate with it in practice on a good day, but today she didn’t miss one. She tried it for a fourth time and wobbled but held on. She felt bionic.

“What the hell are you on today? And where can I get some?” Jamie asked. She flipped up and back into her full-twisting back tuck and nailed it without a wobble. Jamie could throw hard skills in practice, but it was the pressure of competition that caused her grief on beam. Rachel had almost the opposite problem – she excelled at dance, lines,

leaps, flexibility, and choreography, but if she was going to have an issue, it would likely be on her flight series, her acrobatic skills, or her dismount.

“I don’t know. Maybe it’s just my day.” Rachel moved to the end of the beam, raised her arms overhead to square herself, and went for her dream series again: flic-flac, back handspring, full-twisting layout. She took a step backwards upon landing, but landed it nonetheless. “Imagine if I showed up to camp with a full. Karen Dillard would drop dead.”

“God, please show up to camp with a full.”

They snorted up on their four-foot-high beams but worked hard amid the gathered classes in every corner of the gym. Miss Lena gave them a five-minute warning before they were to move onto tumbling practice with Vlad and Igor. She challenged herself to one more hit series. At the end of the beam once again, she flipped backwards into the three skills, imagining hitting them at camp and Nationals and Trials and the Olympics. She landed her layout without a quiver.

“What are you doing?” Vlad’s voice approached with its own amplification. She looked over and saw him stepping around the low beams to come near her. “Why are you throwing fulls on the high beam?”

“Because they feel good,” she said. “I haven’t missed one.”

“You warm them up on the low beam and then maybe you do them on the high beam,” he lectured her. “Next time you tell me first. How’s your knee?”

“Fine,” she said with a touch of irritated edge. What was he mad about? She just hit six in a row. “Can I try one more?”

He debated this internally for no more than a second. “One more, and then head over to the Tumble Trak.”

She walked back to the edge of the beam and stared at the front doors. The sky was already dark beyond the glass, with late October no less forgiving than the gravity threatening to push them all off their beams with every turn and flip. She had one more repetition at her disposal, although she felt so high with adrenaline and accomplishment and anticipation of later that she knew she could throw one hundred fulls and land them all. No coach on a power trip could take that away from her.

She bent forward and then flipped backwards for momentum. Her eyes focused on the beam prior to her feet touching down for each skill. It absorbed her power, repelled her upward, and beckoned her landings, and yet at every second it threatened to steal her equilibrium and send her to the floor. It was a friend and a foe all at once. She twisted high and tight in the air for her full and came down with both feet nailed to the beam. She raised her arms to steady herself and present. No need to look at Vlad. He wouldn't show any emotion, anyway.

“Good. Really good. Now let's go.”

After two more grueling hours of practicing their tumbling passes and finishing up with the hell of conditioning, Rachel went home, quickly iced her feet and knee, and showered. Her entire body was either fatigued, sore, aching, or in the case of her toe,

broken, but her excitement bubbled up to boil with every passing minute and she felt none of her body's limitations.

Jamie texted her saying she would drive there separately, so on the drive to the haunted maze complex, she relieved some of her nerves by passing familiar sights and screaming along to the radio. It was only when she parked in the gravel lot packed with families, teenagers, and groups that Rachel got nervous again. She looked at her eyes in the rearview mirror and took a deep breath. She just hit seven fulls in a row on the high beam with a broken toe. She could handle one group outing with a cute guy.

Less than a minute later, Jamie arrived and crunched the gravel to the left of Rachel's car. Her shiny hair was wet and pulled back into a ponytail. They crossed their eyes at one another through the panes of glass separating them before exiting their cars.

"Where is he?" Jamie asked, looking over Rachel's head and at the parking lot full of thrill seekers. The maze itself was thickly outlined with tight binds of corn husks attached to a chain link fence so that seeing past the perimeter was impossible. A line of about thirty-five people queued in front of a big arch made out of pumpkins.

"I don't know," Rachel said. And good for her, she thought, because she needed at least ten minutes to prepare how to greet him and what to say. She was about to call Kellan to ask where he was, but it became unnecessary when she saw him first. He emerged from the side of the same black sports car from last night. Three others joined his side; she only recognized two from the soccer game-turned-near-death-experience within the arena hallways. Even beneath a black cap, jeans, and a blue sweatshirt, there was no denying that it was him.

“There he is,” Rachel said with a tug on Jamie’s hand. “What do I say?”

“Hi’ is where I would start,” Jamie said.

The closer they got, the bigger Rachel’s smile stretched. Kellan chatted to his friend on his right, but a few moments later and mid-sentence, his eyes found Rachel. Her stare felt stuck on his. Even if she wanted to look away, she wouldn’t be able to, and she couldn’t remember ever feeling so out-of-control before.

“Rachel,” he said with a growing smile. “Hey.”

“Hi,” she said. A blush peppered her grinning cheeks. The closer she got, the more her pulse raced. By the time they stood toe-to-toe she could feel her palms sweating. They had enough of a height difference that he had to literally look down at her, but if anything it only seemed to intensify their locked eyes. His arm seemed to twitch up but then back down to his side. She stepped in for her own attempt at a hug with courage that couldn’t possibly have come from her. He hugged her back and all she could focus on was the thick muscle beneath her arms and against her chest. She felt completely brain-dead. “Sorry we’re late,” she said while pulling away reluctantly. She pointed at Jamie. “It’s her fault.”

“Sure, my fault. Not your, whose car I was following’s, fault. My fault,” Jamie said.

The introductions were easy, if a little awkward at first, but it was immediately clear to Rachel that it would’ve been a mistake to not bring Jamie with her. She second-

guessed anything she thought about saying to fill silences, but Jamie was never shy or timid enough to keep quiet for long.

“I’ll get your tickets,” Kellan said once their little gathering got in line at the entrance. They stood elbow to elbow and Rachel could smell tiny hints of his cologne. Feelings she’d never really had before warmed her fingers and knees and stomach. It felt like waking up.

“You don’t have to do that,” Rachel said. “I was gonna make Jamie pay for mine.”

“Funny!” she called from ahead of them. She already warmed up to Kellan’s blonde friend, Oskar, who spoke with an accent Rachel never heard before.

She and Kellan exchanged two more smiles that turned into laughter. She was nervous – so nervous – but began to settle into it as it changed shape and form into something exciting and fun. She felt something strange and thrilling but had no name for it. Its closest relative would be the feeling in her stomach she got when she let go of the high bar for a release move, just to hope she would re-grasp it in time before she fell to the mat below.

The maze was dark by the time they got in. The jump-scaring tactics of the actors manned with chainsaws and axes and dressed in their revolting best made both her and Jamie scream time after time. The guys were already comfortable enough to make fun of them for their fear, until an undead little girl jumped through thickets of corn husks in front of them and made each one of the hockey players scream in synchrony. She and

Jamie teased them all in retaliation, but Rachel still took the opportunity to hook onto Kellan's elbow when they rushed past a zombie lumberjack with an axe.

"If they come after us, I'm leaving you here to fend for yourself," she said.

"You only like me because I'd sacrifice myself for all of you," he said.

"Am I that obvious?" she asked, smiling up at him even as another actor revved a chainsaw up ahead. Kellan laughed and pressed a little closer into her side. She wished he'd done it sooner.

When they left the confines of the haunted maze, her throat was hoarse from screaming and her pulse thumped its confusion as her adrenaline dulled minute by minute. Rachel peeked at her phone screen to see that it was just past ten PM. Kellan's friends recapped the highlights of the maze and downplayed their fear loudly three feet ahead, with Jamie piping in with quips and jokes of her own. Just like she always seemed to, Jamie had no problem easing her way into a new crowd in two hours, and the groups seemed to merge seamlessly despite their incongruent compositions. Rachel and Kellan trailed by three feet.

"Do you still have vocal cords after all that screaming?" he asked.

When she looked up at him, he was smiling wide. His smile seemed too perfect for a hockey player to be wholly real. Most of what she knew about hockey involved fights and missing teeth, not cute guys with craters for dimples and shiny eyes.

"Like you weren't jumping ten feet when that headless boy popped out from under that wheelbarrow," Rachel said.

“You can’t prove that happened.”

“I’ll always know.” She grinned up at him as their feet reached the crunch of the parking lot. “For the rest of your life, you’ll have to live with the fact that I know you scream like a little girl. No big deal, though. I can keep your secret.”

He nudged her elbow and little waves of nerves shot up her spine. Did he know how he made her feel? Better yet, did she do the same to him? He had to like her at least a little. He asked her out, after all, but she didn’t know how to shift them into that gear. She didn’t know how to tell him that she wanted him to hold her hand or kiss her or be her boyfriend. She didn’t know anything.

They were getting closer to their cars and time was fleeting. Up ahead, she could see Jamie standing at her car, talking to Oskar. Real life and her impending return to it was waiting. This was the most fun she’d had in weeks, maybe months. Was it too lame to tell him that?

“I could go for a milkshake right about now. If you want, I mean,” he said. It sounded a little breathless to her.

She couldn’t. For one thing, she had no business drinking a milkshake, but more importantly, it was late and she had practice tomorrow. Would she regret saying no? She didn’t want him to think that she wasn’t interested.

“I would, but I have to get home,” she said and checked her phone one more time for good measure. She was usually in bed by now. “It’s just that my curfew is eleven.



Plus, I have to get up early to run before practice and the less sleep I get, the more miserable that misery is.”

“No, I get it,” he said, and she supposed that he of all people would. At that moment, the surprise she felt came on in one sudden burst: neither of their athletic pursuits came up in conversation once all night. She was glad for it. Kellan’s lips curled up again in a show of his perfect teeth. His lips were perfect, too, red and full and missing from hers. She wondered if anything ever bothered him, or if his smile made that impossible. If so, she envied that ability. “I’ll text you.”

“Cool,” she said with far too many nods. Her heart mimed the motion and she could hear it thumping in her neck. “Good,” she added for no reason at all.

“Good,” Kellan repeated. His cheekbones cut right through her. “I’m really glad you came tonight. I hope you had a good time.”

“I really did. Thank you for inviting us,” she said. Without hesitating, she hugged him again, and he hugged her back, and she would be totally content if time just stopped right there. The heft of his hands on her waist could pull her down into the earth’s core and she would never say a word. Her warm cheek pressed against the soft cotton of his sweatshirt, but beneath it, a hidden wall of muscle tempted her. Her knees withstood so much already today, and now they were being tested further. Was there any part of her mind or body that he couldn’t possess just by looking at or touching her? Would she ever know for sure?

“I’ll talk to you soon,” he said, cementing it for posterity. His eyes were fused to hers, heavy like their own element at the very bottom of the periodic table. She really

wanted him to kiss her, but maybe it just wasn't time yet, or maybe he didn't want to. Still, she took a step back and prepared their farewell.

"Don't worry, I'll only tell a couple people that you scream like a girl," she said before turning to walk to her car. She heard him laugh behind her. She couldn't wait to hear it again.

Back at her car, she smiled and said good night to Oskar, who said goodnight to Jamie, who looked both amused and expectant as she watched Kellan's tall, lanky friend meander back toward Kellan. Rachel felt like she just stepped out of one world and onto the flat plane of another. She looked at Jamie, whose eyebrows were up about an inch higher than normal.

"You guys seemed cozy."

"I'm so screwed," Rachel said. She looked over her shoulders and watched the beet red taillights of his midnight-toned car flicker on. Puffs of exhaust fumed out of the rear.

"Rachel's got a boyfriend!" Jamie sang, not unlike the annoying grate of their tween teammates testing the human limits of being as annoying as possible. "Rachel's got a boyfriend!"

"What about you and your new blonde friend?" Rachel deflected.

"He's cute, but he's too tall," Jamie said. She gestured southward in the direction of her short legs. "How am I supposed to talk to a guy who's a foot and a half taller than me?"

I don't know, Rachel thought but didn't say. Kellan's car didn't seem to know, either, as he rolled across gravel and crunched it goodnight. His blinker flicked on, the car stalled at the exit, and then he was gone in a rip of its engine, just like that, like he'd never been there at all. She could smell his cologne still stuck in her nose. She didn't know the answer to Jamie's question, nor the answers to her own, unasked and unspoken. She had absolutely no idea.

## CHAPTER 4

### AGENT PROVOCATEUR

“Hi, my name is Justin Boedecker from Valiant Sports Management. I’m calling to hopefully get a minute or two of Rachel’s time and discuss Valiant’s interest in managing her as an athlete, and some business and endorsement opportunities that may be of interest to her. Please give her this message if you would, and kindly let her know that she can reach my cell at—”

She listened to the strange number and bit into the apple in her hand. As she chewed and the message died, she hit the replay button on the answering machine and listened to the stranger’s voice again. She imagined that her parents would delete it immediately – they were all aboard the college education, NCAA gymnastics, amateur athlete train – but she would give them the power to do so. Finishing her lunch, she stepped out into the milky white sky of winter in Buffalo and drove back to the gym. They had national team camp right after Christmas and sometimes Vlad gave them easy afternoon practices to prepare for the hell that was camp, although she knew better than to expect or hope for leniency. Who knew – maybe he would be in the Christmas spirit.

On her way there, she bypassed the music stations for sports radio instead. This was atypical, but from time to time she could scan stations to hear Kellan’s name. It

wasn't the same as talking to him or seeing him, but with their schedules so mutually packed and mismatched, it wasn't like she had many other options. To her delight, 103.6 Fan Town was wrapping up football chatter and bringing up hockey.

*'And to you shitheads who continue to call our phone lines complaining about this team, just put down the phone. Yeah, the defense is trash. No one's saying it's not. But they got a couple young kids like Romanov and Karlsson and you got Barker scoring fucking goals like he's breathing air, and you got magic. This team can go places. I'll say it right now. You bolster the shitty D, and this is a Cup team,'* the loudest of the regularly-scheduled talking heads said. Her cheeks warmed just from the sound of his name, the recognition of him, and the pride she had in the guy she liked whose sport she knew nothing about except that he was good at it.

At afternoon practice, she worked on her new bar upgrades with Vlad. Her dream routine consisted mostly of re-arranging skills she already had in hopes of capitalizing on connection value. If she put her Ono, Healey, and Ono half pirouettes together, she would get four extra tenths of bonus. The problem was that they were amid some of the most difficult elements on uneven bars, all rated at a juicy value of E and worth five tenths each. He spotted her beneath the high bar while she worked on the new combination. The flexibility in her shoulders was nearly limitless, but even they protested the switch from L-grip to reverse grip and back again.

"Push, push, push," he said from beneath the bar. She pirouetted above the bar into her Healey but was either too slow or too unbalanced and fell over the other side to swing down in failure.

“Dammit.” She bent her knees to slow her swinging.

“You’re not pushing.” He stretched his arms overhead toward the ceiling and squeezed his fists. “If you’re not locked out, you fall every single time.” Bringing his arms down, he pushed his palm against the midsection of her chalky pink practice leotard. “It’s all in the core. Everything is in your core. You have all this strength, why aren’t you using it?”

I’ll let you know when I figure it out, she thought but didn’t dare say. She wouldn’t describe the rest of practice as having gone well, but at least she knew what she had to work on for the Olympic year, which suddenly seemed so near. In the locker room, she tore the tape off her knees, ankle, and baby toe and turned her phone back on. December 21<sup>st</sup>. How on earth was it already December 21<sup>st</sup>? Around her, the sounds of laughter and joy had a certain festive quality to it, or perhaps just an increase in volume. The public-school kids were on school break, but she had no idea what her fellow homeschooled girls’ excuses were. She tossed her tape in the trash and watched some notifications roll in on her phone.

*Mom: Dad’s making ziti for dinner, we can talk about the message on the machine when*

*u get home*

Okay. Whatever. Like her parents would let her sign with an agent after years of telling her that she could not sign with an agent. She ignored the message and tapped onto the next one. When she saw Kellan's name, her teeth found her bottom lip while it curved into a smile.

*Kellan: if ur not busy tomorrow nite, there's a family holiday skate for the team and I*

*guess everyone brings their kids and wives or gfs and it's like a party. I was wondering if*

*u want to go with me? It starts at 4:30. If ur busy it's cool*

*Kellan: not that u have to go as my gf. We can just go as friends*

*Kellan: only if u want to go tho*

Reading it over and over again, she tried to figure out the least desperate way to say that she absolutely wanted to be his girlfriend. Jamie sat down beside her and got to work snipping the heavy tape around her knees and shins off with scissors. Rachel handed her phone to her without a word and dug her sweatshirt out of her bag. She could hear Jamie's thoughts as she read Kellan's messages, with her reactions more like fever pitches of emotion than actual words.

“When are you just gonna tell him you like him?” Jamie demanded. She put the phone down on the bench and squeaked her scissors through her makeshift casts. “It’s so obvious he likes you, and I’m not just saying that.”

“I don’t know.” She picked her phone up and stared at his words. She could hear them in his voice and the Canadian inflection that only seemed strong around certain vowel sounds but that she couldn’t imagine him speaking without. She hadn’t seen him in a few days, but that would change. He wanted her to come to a party for families and loved ones – that had to mean something. She nudged Jamie. “Maybe I will tomorrow.”

“Do it or I’ll steal your phone and do it myself,” Jamie said.

Rachel smiled and typed slowly and methodically, each word taking shape and asserting its message in her head before it ever found the keys. She liked texting him because she could measure her responses and all the possible outcomes. In person, she could barely string a sentence together that she didn’t immediately regret. Before she could finish transcribing her thoughts, another message came through.

*Kellan: u can bring Jamie 2 if u want. Oskar will be there*

In her peripheral vision, she saw the ball of Jamie’s discarded tape fling into the trash can. They were best friends and did almost everything together, but she didn’t want her there. Maybe that made her a bad friend, but she wanted this for herself. No buffers,



no distractions, nothing but herself and whatever she could strike up the nerve to make happen.

*Rachel: Jamie can't make it, but I'd love to go!*

*Rachel: I guess I can be your girlfriend for the night ;)*

She felt like a live fire, a completely unstoppable force of herself. Practice sucked, but at least she had Kellan's party to look forward to. As long as she had the balances, then the checks were manageable. There was less than a year to the Olympics with fifteen already put in behind her. All she had to do was hang on and keep her resolve for one more, and having a hot guy on speed dial made that a lot more bearable.

When she got home and came inside through the garage, the kitchen smelled of hearty marinara and carbs. Pasta wasn't a frequent option on their menu at home, but she would never turn it down. She bent down to peek through the glass of the stove and saw a casserole dish of baked ziti bubbling away. The heat from the broiler smacked her face and spilled a flush across her cheeks. Her hunger catapulted up a level in severity.

"Hey, you," she heard from the doorway to the living room. Her mom stood between both rooms, already in her pajamas with a wine glass in hand. "How was practice?"

"Fine."

“How’s your knee?”

“Fine.” Just then remembering it, the tight pain on the inside of it yelled out for attention. She went to the fridge for a bag of frozen peas and wrapped it in a towel. “How was work?”

“Busy. All the kids off from school are coming in for their check-ups,” she said. Her mom slinked across the white vinyl floor of the kitchen and stopped at the counter where the wine bottle waited for her. She topped three more ounces into her glass and turned to watch Rachel ice down. “Speaking of, you’re due for your cleaning. Why don’t you meet me at the office after practice tomorrow? We can go for lunch after and do some shopping.”

The dulled chill of her makeshift ice pack began to numb her chalky knee. Later, she would shower and watch a movie up in her room. A riveting Friday night, no doubt. Maybe she could text Kellan some more before bed. A few nights a week they got caught up in long text message chains about movies and music and Rachel’s favorite melodramatic teen drama show *Brown Prep*, but more often than not he was in the middle of playing hockey when she was going to bed, so evening wasn’t a reliable time to chat. Regardless, their schedules began to jigsaw together in learned ways – if he texted her any time after five PM, then she could assume there probably wasn’t a game that evening. He knew not to expect any responses from her between nine and twelve, or from three to seven. Midday chatter became most common, but still not as fixed as Rachel would like. She wanted to talk to him all the time.

She realized her mom was expecting an answer.

“Sure. Just maybe not the stuff after,” she said. She straightened her back and squeezed the peas against her knee. “I have plans.”

“What plans?”

“It’s just this party,” she said. It took all of her might to downplay the elation in her voice. “With the Monarchs. It’s like a Christmas thing and I got invited.”

“Is Jamie going?”

“No,” Rachel said, feeling a touch of guilt all over again.

“Is this a Kellan thing?” her mom asked. She took a short sip when Rachel didn’t answer. “Do you really think you need to be dating right now, Rach? Don’t you think this can wait?”

“We’re not dating,” she said. “We’re just friends.”

“Friends who send one hundred texts a day?” her mom said. Rachel squeezed her eyebrows together and summoned a quirk to her mom’s lips. “I pay your phone bill. I see the charges. Do you like him?”

“We’re just friends,” she repeated. The inside of her knee was completely numb. She removed her ice pack and thumbed her cold, red skin. At least the pain was invisible now. A heavy silence joined the smell of dinner. She poked at her joint and waited for the conversation to move along.

“Have you kissed him?”

“Mom,” Rachel said. “Seriously.”

“I just want to know!” Her mom raised her free hand up in amnesty. “It’s not like we have any track record of talking about boys. If you like this guy, I want to know. I don’t like when I don’t know what’s going on with you.”

She didn’t know a fraction of it. Rachel stood to put the vegetables back to the freezer. Thirty seconds remained on the oven timer. She had no idea where her dad was in the house. Her mom’s face was flushed with her usual Friday evening glow. Her mom and dad would kill a bottle of wine over the course of the night, sit on the couch to watch their unfunny late-night shows, and still be awake by the time Rachel went to bed. Last Friday, at some point in the middle of the night, Rachel startled herself awake from a panicked dream where she fell off the beam at Nationals and was fairly sure she heard her parents not only still awake but having sex in their bedroom across the hall. She managed to shove a pillow over her head and reroute her mind back to sleep before she could allow the trauma of it to inflict itself upon her psyche. She loved her parents, but she loved them a lot more when she didn’t think about what she didn’t know about them. Her phone sitting atop the table teased her with its silence.

“No, I haven’t kissed him, but I do really like him.”

“That’s so exciting,” her mom said in a sacred whisper. “He is cute, isn’t he? I’ve seen him on the news before. I want to meet him.”

Rachel shrugged and tried not to flush, or to think of Kellan, which would cause her to flush. The timer sang from the shiny black stove. Her mom put her glass down to take care of it and slid the door open to bring out dinner. Her dad came into the kitchen from the door to the dining room and Rachel smiled at him. He had changed into jeans

and a Bills shirt, not quite the same as her mom's pajamas but as casual as he knew how to be. He greeted her, kissed her forehead, and asked the same questions that her mom had – the ones not involving NHL players, at least. Her mom may have figured out this Kellan thing, but her dad was clueless. She didn't mind.

Rachel set the table and served herself two big scoops of ziti. Practice was hard and she deserved it, she bargained. She had to leave for national team camp on Wednesday, where she would likely eat nothing but dry chicken and wilted lettuce for four days. She stabbed five noodles onto the tines of her fork and ate them without the binds of guilt. Balances with the checks.

"What time's your flight on Wednesday?" her dad asked. He poured four fingers of merlot into a clean glass. The room began to absorb the thick, acidic smells of dinner – hot tomato sauce, melted mozzarella, tannic red wine. She could taste them all with every breath. She unscrewed the cap of her sugar-free Gatorade.

"Nine, I think," Rachel said between sips. "I'll check the email again." If she had any luck, the flight would be cancelled and she would be spared of camp this month. Luck was hardly her strong suit, though. She didn't even get her hopes up.

"Speaking of emails," her mom said. She looked at Rachel and raised her eyebrows. "Or messages, rather. I saw you left the answering machine saved. That Justin guy? Do you know him?"

"I've never heard of him in my life," Rachel said.

"What about the other girls? Is anyone on the national team pro yet?"

“No one that I know of. You could pry UCLA from Jamie’s dead hands and I’m pretty sure Lola is committing there, too. We’re the only ones graduating this year,” Rachel said. All of her other teammates were at least a year or two younger, and none of them had agents. The past national teams always had at least one or two girls that had gone pro to hawk products and brands to the American public. As far as she knew, no one made that much money going pro, and from what she heard, the girls that did usually regretted giving up their NCAA eligibility. She didn’t know or care. She never even thought about it before.

“You don’t need sponsors. You have Cornell locked up already,” her dad said.

“I’m aware,” Rachel said.

“Well, it’s not something we should just ignore,” her mom said. She blew on a forkful of pasta between sentences. “She’s World Champion. That’s a big deal. It might be worth at least hearing what he’s got to say. If she can sign with an agent and make, I don’t know, a million dollars, shouldn’t she at least consider that?”

“Or she can go to school, become a physical therapist like she wants, and have a life for herself after gymnastics.”

“And she can’t do that with cereal box money?” her mom asked. “Cornell will close its doors to people who have too much money? Do you even hear yourself?”

Rachel watched them argue, or disagree, or whatever variation this particular instance fell under. When she was about twelve and Jamie’s parents were getting divorced, all she could remember thinking was that Rachel’s parents were safe from any

threat of dissolving their family. They loved each other, even when they fought. They came to every competition she ever had, supported her career together, and spent time with one another even when everyone around her eventually watched their parents split up. They were immune. She got lucky. When they did fight, it unsettled her more than any tectonic shift possibly could. This was her foundation showing its cracks. She was nothing without them, and them meant a single entity, not two broken parts.

“Okay then. Rach is an adult now, we’ll do what she wants.” Her dad looked at her from her right. His heavy eyebrows answered none of her questions. “Do you want to talk to this agent guy and see what he says, or are you certain you want to go to Cornell and compete there?”

She blinked and situated a few more noodles on her fork. Didn’t her own parents understand that she wasn’t certain of anything, let alone what she wanted? She never even knew what she would be doing in practice before she got there. She just went in and did what she was told every day. The things she wanted were not a sticking point in any facet of her life. They were never even discussed.

“I don’t know,” she said finally. “If it’s just a phone call, then sure. As long as it doesn’t take forever.”

Rachel couldn’t tell how this decision landed between her parents, but her mom said she would set up the call herself and that was that. It was just a phone call. Certainly two cell towers pinging back and forth were not enough to disrupt her parents’ steady footing.

After loading the dishwasher and putting away the leftovers, Rachel left her parents on the couch to go upstairs and shower. The drops of water coating her neck and shoulders cooled in the frigid hallway as she stepped out of the bathroom and over to her room. The laughter of a studio audience tumbled up the staircase landing outside her room. She rolled her eyes and shut her door. Finally alone, she turned on her own TV, lit a candle by her bed, and retrieved some shorts and an old gymnastics camp T-shirt to sleep in. In front of her full-length mirror, she tossed her towel into her hamper and studied her own body like a stranger. She tried to picture herself in Kellan's eyes, but found this exercise disappointing. She was tall for a gymnast but short by normal population standards. She wasn't packed with abundant muscle like Jamie, Cameron, or the other power gymnasts, and she wasn't an angular twig like Talia, but rather she existed somewhere in the middle. She had serviceable breasts, but hardly any waist or hips. Her quad muscles sat upon her narrow knees like shelves. Turning around, she brought her arms forward to hug herself and watched her back muscles ripple and bob in shorelines beneath her skin. If Kellan was into her, would he still be if he ever saw her naked? She didn't look like the girls that guys liked. In gymnastics, people praised her lines and artistry. In real life, that didn't mean much except lean human rectangle of muscle. She knew this didn't matter – she had the body of a four-time World gold medalist, and Kellan did like her, she was certain of that – but it bothered her all night anyway, up until she fell asleep.

Saturday morning practices were the easiest of the week, at only three hours long with no afternoon practice. She left the busy, cramped gym at noon with the elation of impending joy. One dentist appointment sat between her and an evening with Kellan. She



met her mom at her office three miles from the gym and parked in the empty lot. Beyond the door with a white molar logo and MIRIAM J. WALLERSTEIN, DDS sketched upon the glass was a dark waiting room. When she knocked, her mom appeared out of the back hallway with a set of keys to let her inside.

“How was practice?” her mom asked when she pushed the door open, sending her own name out of sight.

Most of the lights were off except for the ones in the hallway leading into her mom’s chosen exam room, which made the familiar backdrop of her practice seem large and creepy. Instead of patients dotting the chairs and divvying up magazines between themselves, the waiting room housed no one. Even the TV was off.

“Fine,” Rachel said. She followed her mom back into the exam room on the right. She knew the standard operating procedure, so while her mom turned on the X-ray machine and shook her computer mouse to wake it up, Rachel got comfortable in the chair and let her mind wander off to later. She told Jamie that she would tell Kellan she liked him. She had no idea how that would come about, or how she would get the words out of her mouth, or what would happen after, but she would not chicken out. She wouldn’t be a failure.

“I called that Justin guy when you went to bed. He said he’s got time at one-thirty this afternoon to talk, so I figured we could do it on the speakerphone in Dad’s office.” Her mom typed slowly and double-clicked on something. “That’s only if you want, though.”

“Sure.”

“What time is your date?”

She didn’t correct her mom, but rather used it to bolster her own understanding of this evening. “Four-thirty, at the arena.”

The mouse clicked as if in acknowledgement. Rachel closed her eyes and rolled her ankles beneath her Sherpa boots. Later she would have to ice the ache away, but that could wait.

“If you did kiss him, would you tell me?”

“Mom,” Rachel said in her most severe warning tone.

“Will you let your mother have this one thing, please? You never had football games or prom or Key Club or anything. You’re going on a date and I’m excited for you. That’s all.”

The swirly feeling in her reclined stomach incensed. Everything in her life was something to dread, patiently wait for, or existed in the realm of the complete unknown. If her mom wanted a little piece of rare excitement, too, then she supposed she could extend a generous hand.

“Okay,” Rachel said. “If anything happens, I’ll tell you.”

Beneath her mom’s face mask, her smile bloomed in the corners of her eyes. Despite her nascent irritation, it made her feel good to make her mom happy. Meanwhile, her mom began her torture disguised as a dental exam. The plastic X-ray molds cut into Rachel’s cheeks. Her mom worked quickly and quietly to take photos and then brought

them up on the computer screen. Rachel lapped her tongue on the new cut in her gums that the firm plastic forged.

“Your wisdom teeth are going to start coming in soon,” she said, circling the pointer of her mouse over the image of Rachel’s molars. “We should get them taken out.”

“Maybe after the Olympics.”

Her mom wordlessly agreed to this course of action and then rolled her seat closer to Rachel. She lowered the exam seat until Rachel nearly touched the ground. Gravity dragged her down and made her head feel like twenty pounds of lead. After opening her mouth, her mom scraped at her gums.

“When I tell you to floss, it’s not a suggestion.”

“Noted,” Rachel mumbled through her open mouth.

She worked in silence. Rachel stared at the ceiling, at the yellow light bulb shining light into her mouth, and at her mom’s focused eyes before just closing her own and letting her mind wander. She didn’t know what to wear later. It was a Christmas party, so a sweater would probably work, unless it was a more formal affair, but Kellan hadn’t said anything. She only owned a few dresses, and most of them were too summery for the season. She should’ve asked earlier.

“Some of your enamel is gone.” Her mom scratched at one of Rachel’s front teeth with the pick of her tool. The sound ricocheted down her throat. “You better not be throwing up your food, Rachel.”

“Of course not.” Not recently, at least. The skepticism shined yellow in her mom’s eyes. “I mean, I’ve thrown up at camp before, but only because the food there is nauseating. You would throw up, too. Everything is gross there. Ask Jamie. Ask Vlad.”

This revelation on the part of her mom didn’t make her nervous or even embarrassed. Somehow, she knew she would get out of it. Mentally, she prepped as many excuses as she could think of on the spot to keep her mom’s worry at bay, but she didn’t need them. Her mom worked in focused silence to clean her teeth, treat her with fluoride, and keep her in the best shape she could from the outside looking in. She even gave her a purple toothbrush and a pack of floss, both of which rattled around in their packages on Rachel’s passenger seat the whole way home.

At home, she made a salad and a turkey sandwich and sat at the desk in her father’s office. He seldom worked from home, but it still held a certain professional atmosphere while they waited for the phone to ring. Her dad typed on his laptop while Rachel ate. The minty taste of her fresh teeth cut through the wheat bread like a serrated knife. She looked at her cellphone on her lap and waited for Kellan to reach out, and wondered if beckoning him with her mind might actually drive him to text her.

“Remember, this is just a conversation,” her mom said while blowing on a mug of Earl Grey. Behind Rachel, tiny snowflakes of no threat twirled down from the gray sky. “He’s gonna say lots of things to get you to sign. We’re not signing anything right now.”

“You can say that again,” her dad said to his laptop screen.

Rachel rolled her eyes in tandem with her mom and surveyed his desk. A photo of them taken on a vacation they took to Jamaica years ago stared back at her. She couldn’t

be any older than twelve in the photo. She stood between her parents with shiny purple braces and far more spindly muscle than any average seventh grader. That spring, she had qualified into the elite level and told everyone she knew that she would go to the Beijing Olympics. Her unlucky birthday made her less than a year too young for the Athens Olympics, but nowadays she knew that she would never have qualified onto that team anyway – she was young and unconfident back then, too afraid of competition and unaware of her own potential. Her rise in gymnastics was more about facing her fears and believing in her training more than anything. Once she stopped worrying about messing up at meets, she stopped falling and making mistakes. From that point on, her rise up the ranks was steady, and then meteoric this last year. She had all the medals to prove it.

The phone rang. Her dad reached over and pressed an expert finger to the answer button.

“Wallerstein residence, this is Adam.”

“Hi, Adam. This is Justin Boedecker with Valiant Management. Miriam said this was a good time to talk. Is that still true?”

“No time like the present,” her dad said. Rachel forked some spinach into her mouth and chewed.

“That’s what I like to hear.” He sounded young and quasi-professional. Rachel wondered what he looked like, and if he wore a suit or sweatpants to the office. She would believe either. “Is Rachel around?”

“Hi,” she said after swallowing.

“Hi, Rachel. How are you doing?”

She glanced at the clock on the phone. Right now, she was fine. In about three hours, she'd be on a date with Kellan and couldn't promise that would still hold true. She kept all of this to herself.

“Fine, thank you.”

“I know you're busy people, so the last thing I want to do is waste your time. I've been spending some time online watching your competitions and meets from the last few years, and of course just this past year. I'm sure I don't have to tell you that you are an elite talent. Generational, some might say. You won the World all-around by, what, three tenths?”

“Three and a half,” she said.

“Right, of course. A year out from the Olympics – these things don't happen to good athletes or even really good athletes. They happen to the very best, and you are that. Of course, you know all this, so I'll keep the praise at bay for now. Have you given any thought to going pro?”

“Well,” she said, then looked at her parents. Her dad stared at the phone, and her mom watched her from over the rim of her mug. Was there a right answer? Did it even matter what she said if she knew they wouldn't let her sign anyway? “Honestly, not really. I'm going to Cornell to compete there, so I can't.”

“Yes, definitely, I did read something about that online. Do you ever think about how long you intend to stay in gymnastics? Obviously you're making a run for Beijing,

and barring a natural disaster that puts China underwater, it's safe to say you're a lock. And Cornell, sure. What about after? Do you ever think about staying at the Olympic level? Have you thought about London at all?"

London. Who the hell was thinking about London? It wasn't even 2008 yet. London was to Beijing what Beijing was to Athens, and not a soul from Athens was in the hunt for Beijing. She had one shot at Olympic glory, and she knew it.

"No, not really."

"Okay, I just wanted to ask and see where your mind is at when it comes to the scope of your career. Because it is that, really. It is a career. It could be a lucrative career, and there is no better time than right now to jump on those opportunities. You're the best in the world going into an Olympic year – there is a lot of money out there with your name on it. You might think sports endorsements are just for the NBA and NFL players out there, but that's not the case. You're a wonderful role model for girls, gymnasts or otherwise. No scandals, focused on your goals, great grades, Ivy League-bound. That's what parents want in a role model for their kids. Advertisers know that and will pay premium for it."

"This is all very interesting, Justin, and I don't mean to sound brash, but Rachel is very well-supported and money is not an issue in our family," her dad said. He shut his laptop lid with a gentle hand. "We would much rather her stay amateur and focus on her gymnastics than have her feel as though she needs to turn it into an income."

"Absolutely. Definitely. And trust me, you're not the only parent who feels that way," Justin said, in no different tone than he had used prior. Rachel watched her dad's

eyes stay steady and Justin's voice filled the office as though he were right there with them. Her mom sipped from her tea and lifted an eyebrow at Rachel. "I just want to make my pitch, give Rachel something to think about, and leave you all alone to make a decision as a family. The sky is truly the limit. Think of anything in the world and you could have your name on it. Your own leotard line? Your own gymnastics equipment? That's not even scratching the surface. Credit cards, cell phones, cereal, protein bars, sports drinks, deodorant, tampons, shampoo, a sneaker line – it's all out there, and it'll only keep coming. I'm not talking pocket change or a couple thousand dollars. I'm talking multiple millions."

His words punctuated the air in heavy clouds like the bergamot from her mom's tea. No one added any more to the mix. Rachel allowed herself to imagine her name on a box of tampons. Would it matter that she hadn't had a period in over a year? She didn't feel the need to mention it, but it amused her nonetheless. The rest sounded too good to be true. No one would pay her a million dollars to endorse cereal. She didn't even eat cereal, nor could she fathom a million dollars.

"Okay, well, that's quite the pitch," her dad said in the tone he used when he was annoyed with her mom. "You've certainly given us a lot to think about."

"That's all I wanted," Justin said cheerfully. "I'll leave you with my email address, and you have my number. I can fly out to Buffalo if you want to meet in person, or we can arrange to meet in L.A. someday. Just give me a call and I'll make it happen."

"Thank you," Rachel said. Her mom repeated the sentiment.



“Have a good day,” her dad said, then clicked to end the call. Justin’s easygoing voice and his promises of riches disappeared. Her dad lifted his laptop into his hands and looked across the desk at Rachel. “Well?”

“I don’t know. It’s not like I have a decision. We just got off the phone with him,” she said.

“Well, let me give you my pitch – the whole reason we let you do gymnastics is because we know how much you love it. We see how happy it makes you, and we want to let you work toward your dreams. I don’t want you to feel like it’s a job or that you have to do it. But it’s your choice.”

She shrugged, then shrugged again when the silence continued. It’s not like she could decide right now. There were other things on her mind. Rachel Wallerstein-branded leotards and protein bars would have to wait at least a day.

“I don’t know,” she said. She lifted her dishes and stood from his comfortable leather computer chair. “I have no decision right now. We’re adjourned.”

Her mom snickered and stood up with her. Her dad smiled on one half of his mouth and then stood up with them to leave his office together. The snow remained sparse at best beyond the window, and she hoped it would remain so when she drove to and from the arena later.

In her bedroom, she stood in her small walk-in closet to piece an outfit together. She had three racks of national team sponsored gear, old competition uniforms, practice leos, and athleisure. One rack remained for her street clothes and formal wear. Upon

choosing a white sweater, jeans, and tan boots, she slipped into her coat and made as seamless of an exit from her house as she could. Yelling goodbye over her shoulder, she went out to her car to warm it back up, tossed her old figure skates in the backseat, and texted Kellan.

*Rachel: Hi, I'm leaving for the arena now!*

*Kellan: cool, already here. I'll wait for u by the entrance*

The snow maintained a steady sprinkle, but nothing that impeded her travel on the roads to downtown Buffalo. Her windshield wipers blew the dusting away with disregarding flicks. When she got to the arena, she worried that Ian would be at the booth and she wished she brought Jamie after all. Her pulse sat in the back of her mouth while she drove up slowly, but it flatlined when she saw a different security guard altogether. This one was middle-aged and indifferent. She told him her name and he let her through the sleepy gate without any hold-up. She parked, gathered her things, and walked to the door in snowy solitude. The white sky threatened a blizzard, but it held off for now.

When she greeted the same elderly security guard from the night of the game and got sent through with a smile, she stepped inside and didn't have to spend any time looking for Kellan. He stood tall in the doorway with white socks, dark jeans, and a green sweater with a glittery 3-D Christmas tree stitched onto it.

“Love it,” Rachel said, flicking one of the tiny cotton ornaments that hung from his chest. “Where’d you get this, Brooks Brothers?”

“Something like that,” he said. His big smile gave her the greeting she really wanted and she hugged him, paying no mind to the Christmas tree between them. He smelled the same as he always did, strong but with a mellow hint of soap, and she sniffed quietly to get the hit she craved. His hands found the middle of her back and she swore she could feel every tiny line and pathway of his fingerprints, even through the fabric of her sweater. She wondered if he thought of her as much as she thought of him in their absence. She could never get the courage to ask, but she would let herself think so.

They caught up while forging through the blue and white arena hallways together. She considered telling him about the agent but decided against it. The closer they got to the locker room, the more clearly she could hear Christmas music. Turning a corner, he stepped in front of the open locker room door and gestured for her to enter.

“Welcome to Santa’s Workshop,” he said. “Or something like that.”

Gone was what she imagined once housed dirty gear and a plethora of hockey equipment. In its wake, a Christmas tree posed in the center of the blue locker room with a small mountain of gifts beneath it. Everywhere she looked, she saw a child – a baby dressed as a reindeer, toddlers having hockey skates mercilessly tied onto their feet, and girls and boys of all ages in Monarchs jerseys of all sizes and numbers. Every few feet, a parent either dressed them, took photos of them, reprimanded them, or held them. There had to be fifty people at minimum inside.

“Wow.”

“It’s been like this since I got here. Actually, it’s only gotten worse,” he said. She looked up at him and saw him smiling at her. “Do you want to meet some of the guys?”

Even if she didn’t want to, she didn’t see much of a choice, given that they were scattered around the room like decorations in a cluttered house. Kellan introduced her to everyone in a semi-circle around the room. She smiled, shook hands, and occasionally hugged those who were of a friendlier disposition and excited to meet her. When they got to Oskar, he greeted her first.

“Hey, haunted house girl,” he said. He smiled and a two-tooth gap revealed itself. “With the friend. Jamie. You didn’t bring her?”

“She couldn’t come,” Kellan said, repeating Rachel’s dishonest text message as if it were gospel truth. “And next time you can ask her out yourself, you lazy fuck.”

“Ouch, what kind of friend are you?” Oskar asked. Neither of their smiles ever died, even as they exchanged blows to arms and chests. She wasn’t sure she could tell them apart from the children around the room.

They moved to the last player in the line. He was huge in every respect, with long legs and wide shoulders and a square face. He looked familiar, and she realized he had come to the haunted maze too, but she hadn’t said more than a few words to him.

“I think you remember Romey,” Kellan said.

“I remember,” Rachel said. She smiled at him. “Hi.”

“Hi,” he said. She knew that accent anywhere. She heard it every day.

“I think once the kids get their skates and stuff on, everyone will go on the ice,” Kellan said. He turned his body slightly toward her and she wished he would come closer. He pointed at her white skates. “And you came prepared, so I’m guessing you’re also some figure skating expert and will throw a few triple axels out there.”

“As if,” Rachel said. She lifted her old skates by their laces. The shiny blades knocked together. “I can barely skate. I need one of those coaster things to hang onto.”

“No, you don’t,” he said, dipping his chin a little. “You have me.”

Words escaped her mind and disappeared amid the cacophony of crying and music. Did he read as much into the weight of their words and stares as she did, or was it just her imagination running wild every time he spoke and looked at her? She smiled and put her hand in her back pocket, where it proceeded to sweat like crazy.

“If you’re offering.”

His eyes glimmered in preparation of a response, but he never had the chance. Behind her, someone yelled his name over the stereo and beyond the Christmas tree dividing the room in two. She turned her head and saw a group of men, all middle-aged, all in blue quarter-zips and not at all dressed for the occasion, all looking at Kellan. One gestured for him to come over.

“I’m sorry. I’ll be right back,” he said into her ear. His hand found her arm and made a microsecond detour to her waist. He nodded at the occupied dressing stall to her left. “Romey, keep her company.”

Rachel watched Kellan weave around toddlers wielding hockey sticks and enter the rectangle of whom she presumed to be coaches or executive types. He looked ridiculous in his stupid sweater, but when he crossed his arms and nodded along to whatever conversation was incomplete without his presence, he transitioned into someone else entirely. She sat down beside Romanov and put her skates on the carpet in front of her boots.

“Ivan, right?” she asked, trying to remember two months ago when she initially met him.

“Yes.”

It sounded reluctant. She knew barely enough Russian to get through a conversation, but she figured practice made perfect, and she may as well practice her second-best language if Kellan was busy.

“Where are you from?” she asked after combing her brain through stray phrases and buried nouns. Ivan whipped his head toward her.

“I didn’t know you spoke Russian,” he said while tying his skates. The floppy beanie on his head made him look younger in his face than he already did, though the gruffness of his voice betrayed his youth. Rachel looked down at her shoes and realized she could not prolong putting the skates on any longer.

“Only a little,” she said in his mother tongue. The majority of her Russian was gymnastics-related, but she had known Vlad, Igor, and Miss Lena for so long now that she picked up more than she even realized.

“I need you to translate for me,” he said. “Follow me where I go.”

It was only after watching him smile that she realized he was joking. She snorted and pulled off her left boot.

“Your English isn’t bad,” she said slowly. She felt self-conscious and afraid of misspeaking. “It’s better than my Russian.”

“I think they’re both bad,” he said. This time she laughed with him and realized that he wasn’t standoffish at all like she had originally thought, but perhaps shy behind a language barrier. He nodded his chin up across the room to Kellan, who was still in a group of men that had increased in size by one since she last looked over. When he had his arms crossed with a serious expression and a commanding posture, that’s when he most looked like Kellan Barker the superstar and not Kellan, her hot friend. It wasn’t easy to reconcile them as one.

“He really likes you,” Ivan said. “He doesn’t stop talking about you.”

She watched Ivan’s giant, hunched over frame tie his skates with the precision of muscle memory and then looked down at her red gingerbread-man-decorated socks. She pressed the knuckles of her toes into the carpet and tried to devise a response. If Ivan said so, then it had to be true. Maybe Kellan had told him himself.

“Why aren’t you together?” Ivan added. She almost implored him to be quieter before realizing that not a single person in the room had any idea what he was saying.

“You guys are busy, and so am I. It’s not that easy.”

“You like him too?” he asked with a wide smile that brought the youth back to his square face. His voice was louder, and perhaps emboldened by their little Russian bubble. A few guys were looking their way and she began to feel flushed.

“I didn’t say that.”

“You didn’t say no,” he said, shrugging like her squirming against the truth was the funniest thing he had ever witnessed. “I won’t tell him.”

“You better not,” she said in English while slipping into her skate. She pointed the blade toward him. “I suck at skating, but I can figure out other ways to use this.”

Ivan laughed at her again, loving every second of their new little bond. She wondered if everyone in the free world knew that she was into Kellan. She bent over to tie her skate and saw Kellan’s socks enter her gaze on the carpet. She looked all the way up at him and saw him smiling.

“I guess you’re ready to out-skate me,” he said.

“I’m going to make an idiot of myself. I haven’t worn these in eight years,” she said. She tugged on the laces and started to tie them. “Watch me hurt myself or something.”

“Nah, I’ll help you,” he said. He sat on the bench to her left and their arms touched. He smelled so good that it made her head spin. Last night she laid in bed and thought about finally kissing him before falling asleep. Her inability to act was pathetic. “Those are figure skates, by the way. We play hockey here.”



“I’m sure you like to tell yourself that,” she said. She smiled and gave his arm a nudge. “If I look stupid or fall, you can’t make fun of me.”

“Oh, I’m absolutely going to make fun of you,” he said. “There’s no alternative.”

“I hate you,” she said. Finally both of her skates were on and tied. She felt like cement blocks were fastened to her feet. “I’ll be the loser this time, but you owe me.”

“Owe you what?”

“I want to see you on a balance beam so I can make fun of you when you fall off it.”

“No way. You’re gonna be way better at skating than I’d be on a beam,” he said. She let him believe that for as long as it took to head out to the rink together. She was surprised when she didn’t fall the moment her blades hit the ice. She was slow and cautious and labored. The ease with which Kellan’s blades sank into the ice was enviable. He looked no different than when they’d been walking on dry land just moments ago.

“See, you’ve got it,” he said, skating backwards and facing her.

“Barely,” she said. She tried to speed up but lost her balance a little and wavered. Kellan reached for her hands and blanketed them in firm warmth. Her stomach was tumbling around like a World floor final.

“You good?” he asked softly. They were approaching center ice.

“Yeah,” she said. Between the intense arena lights from above and the ice reflecting from below, Kellan’s eyes were the same Monarch sapphire hue that she figured he must have patented.

“You flip all over a balance beam. Skating should be nothing for you.”

“I’m better than I thought, but that’s still not saying much.” She wondered if he realized that he was holding her hands in front of all the people he played with and for, and wondered if he cared or not. She looked over her shoulder to gauge the vicinity and saw a bunch of different families and their children grouped together or coming out to the ice. Even Wendy was on a pair of skates, pointing and shooting a digital camera. She wondered how many people, like Ivan, thought that she and Kellan were together or should have been or would be eventually. She wanted their certainty.

“If only you were a world-class figure skater instead. We could skate together all the time,” Kellan said.

“Next Olympiad, okay? Besides, I think they practice just as much as I do. I would still never have any time.”

“You could practice here,” he said and paired it with a barely-there squeeze of her hands.

“Just show up and start skating?” Rachel asked. “I don’t think that’d go over well.”

“I’d make it happen.”

“Oh, duh,” she said. “I guess you are the all-powerful Kellan Barker, number ten. I could probably live in here if you pulled the strings.”

“That’s what you think, huh?” he said with a half-smile that seemed a touch defensive.

“That’s what I know,” she said. She tapped their joined hands against his stomach gently before pulling them back to middle ground.

A subtle silence came over them, but she wasn’t sure why or if she had said the wrong thing. It’s not like she wasn’t right. She glanced back again and watched his teammates pull their kids around on sleds or play hockey with them. She couldn’t believe she was even here with him. It had to mean something.

“You and Romey seemed like buddies in there,” he said while she was still looking over her shoulder.

“I guess that’s one way of putting it.”

“What were you talking about?”

“Nothing really,” she said. She turned back to face him and saw that they were approaching the far end of the boards on the opposite end of the rink. They were about as far away from anyone as they could get. Not conspicuous at all. “Just joking about how my Russian is as bad as his English.”

“How do you know Russian, anyway?”

“My coaches are all Russian,” she said. “I learned way more than I ever wanted to.”

“Oh,” he said. “Cool. That’s awesome.”

Given his direct questioning, she was hesitant to believe this assessment of his, but she shrugged and let it go. Once they were by the boards, she loosened her hands and tried skating backwards slowly. The sensation was strange, especially since she was so used to her bare feet guiding her landings and positioning.

“If you have a little bend in your knees, it’ll be easier,” he said.

She applied this tip and felt a little steadier in her skates. She held onto the boards and then reversed to skate forward again.

“You know how in figure skating, they do the spirals?” she asked from a few feet away. She bent forward slightly and lifted her left leg behind her. The positioning wasn’t the problem, but keeping her balance was. She laughed when she got her leg up about 150 degrees. “That’s probably the only figure skating I could ever do.”

“So I guess I’ll be seeing you in Vancouver is what you’re saying,” Kellan said with his big smile back.

“Oh, absolutely. I’ll just hop over there right after Beijing,” she said. She put her leg back down to the ice while approaching him slowly. “What about you? Are you playing at the Olympics?”

“I don’t know. It’s two years away.”

“Two years is not that long,” she said. Back at his side, she grabbed onto the board’s edge and leaned against it.

“I don’t really think about it. If they want me on the team, then yeah, I’ll definitely go.”

As if Canada wouldn’t want the world’s best player on the team. This philosophy of his was the exact opposite of hers and it bothered her more than she thought it would. It wasn’t his fault that the Olympics were just an afterthought to him. Gymnastics was so different from hockey. The Olympics were everything to her, not just a perk. Plus, he was a shoo-in and she still had another eight months of clawing her way onto the U.S. team. She shook the vague sensation of jealousy away and pressed on a big smile.

“If I can do turns on dry land then I probably could on ice, too,” she said. She pushed off the boards and swung her arms to the left, attempting at least a single spin on ice just like they did in figure skating. The momentum moved her around once and then on her way to a second revolution. Afraid to fall, she tried to reach back out for the boards.

“You’ve got the toe pick on those, so you just kind of dig it where you want to stop,” he said. His arms were out, approaching her in case she fell. “I can pull on your arms to stop you if you want.”

She tried to imagine him touching her and how it might feel and how she would react, even if it were in the context of skating. She thought about what he said and pressed the pick of her left skate into the glassy surface beneath her. Either the force halted too quickly or she just didn’t know what she was doing, and instead of stopping to

a standstill, she lost her balance and fell right to the ice. She was no stranger to falling, but it was so sudden that her right foot got the brunt of it. Her ankle stung on impact. It was no worse than usual but hardly a good feeling, especially without the support of tape. She put her blade flat on the ice and wiggled her toes. Her ankle seared for a moment before slowing its temper.

“Are you okay? Did you roll it?” Kellan asked. He crouched beside her.

“No, it’s fine,” she said. She looked at her hands, then her skates, then the boards, and tried to discern how to stand back up. “I just, you know, maybe didn’t need to land on it like that.”

“I’m sorry. I should’ve just been guiding you.” He stood and his arms came toward her. She thought he was extending his hands to help her up, but instead he lifted her himself. Every nerve ending in her body exploded upon contact. His arm rested beneath her thighs and remained a respectful distance away from her butt. Being so close to him put her brain into shutdown mode. He was so warm that his body heat became hers, the ice beneath them notwithstanding.

“Yeah, maybe you should’ve,” she said, smiling with every word. “It’s all your fault.”

“All my fault,” he said. The depths of his cheeks opened up with the twist of his smile. She could fit dimes into them if she tried. “Okay. I can handle that. What can I do to make it up to you, then?”

More than she could ever bear to say aloud. Thing she would be ashamed to think of even during slumber became feature films in her mind. The more she tried not to think about him naked, the more she thought about him naked. This had to be the result of some larger psychological phenomenon related to homeschool and insular socialization predominantly with fellow females, she thought, but right now it was her problem to deal with. The screams of distant children snapped her out of it.

“You can get on a balance beam,” she said. All that was missing from her tone was a *duh*. She grinned up at him. “Leotard optional.”

Whatever burned beneath the surface of their proximity was both obvious, discussed, and ignored all at once. His eyes spoke for him when words didn’t, and that was at least one language she was fluent in. Instead of stepping into the brand new territory they both tip-toed around, they went back into the foray of the Christmas party. Having to answer for her fall when asked about it by his teammates was an exercise in patience and also humiliation. Still, everyone was nice and welcoming, and she felt like she already knew them all.

When the party wrapped up, he asked if she was hungry and they went for sushi. She thought that it had to be considered a date if they were alone and eating a meal together. She laughed so much over dinner that after a while her ankle didn’t even hurt as much. By meal’s end he not only paid the check but also left the tip. She protested and said she could split it with him, but he demurely said it was no problem and offered no alternative. He held the restaurant’s door open for her to exit and she stepped out into the gray cold. Tiny, insignificant snowflakes were still swirling from the sky. Rachel stopped

on the curb and looked up at them all. Where did they all come from, and how did they show such restraint? The parking lot was quiet except for distant traffic down below the hill it was built upon. She felt him standing behind her.

“Does it remind you of home?” she asked.

“Yeah. A lot.”

She turned halfway. He smiled at her with a flick upward of the corner of his mouth. She smiled back and looked up into the flurry abyss again.

“It kind of looks like dandruff,” she said. He laughed so hard that he almost choked.

He drove her back to the arena to collect her car and part ways for the holidays, talking the whole way about which movie they’d get together to see in the coming days. Making plans was the sort of looking forward that she’d wanted from their relationship from the day they met. She was rational enough to know that he was into this as much as she was, but there were a million reasons not to pursue anything, and she wondered if he was thinking the same.

“Thanks for today. I had so much fun,” she said when he parked right next to her car. The rest of the parking lot was empty except for the rare car here or there, nowhere near as packed as it had been earlier.

“You fell on your ass on my watch.”

“That was the fun part,” she said, smiling when he laughed. She flushed a little and then more when he picked her wrist up and put her hand in his.



“I don’t really know how to say this. I know I’m not great with words or whatever, so if I say the wrong thing, then sorry. I just feel like you should know that I really like you and being with you. I wish we could have days like today all the time.”

“Really?” she said much faster than she expected herself to. “You mean like, as in more than a friend?”

“I guess I do. Yeah.” A pink shade just a hair lighter than his perma-red lips dusted his cheekbones. “I’m just tired of hiding it.”

“I am too,” she said. She leaned closer to him against the center console and pulled his other hand into hers. “I do too. God, I thought we’d be friendzoned forever.”

“Hey, you had just as much ability to say it, too.”

“Yeah, right. You’re you and I’m a moron who fell after two minutes on skates.”

“That’s what I don’t get. It’s like you pretend not to realize how big of a deal you are. Or you really don’t know it. I can’t tell which it is.”

“I’m not a big deal,” she said. “Not like you.”

“I haven’t won anything. You have. They say so all the time on the news. Everyone knows you’re going to the Olympics and you’re going to win gold. Sometimes when I’m with you I completely forget who you really are.”

“This is who I really am,” she said, squeezing his hand. “I like being with you because that stuff doesn’t have to come up. I don’t have to answer questions or talk about it or think about it.”

“I know. Same with you.” He shook his head like he couldn’t believe it, whether that was being with her right then or what she was saying or something else entirely.

“When we hang out, I feel like me. Real me, not hockey me.”

She couldn’t believe the things they were saying, but then again, she could. They’d had something special since the moment they first met. It couldn’t go unsaid for any longer, and it wouldn’t have done any good to let it. Her body flooded with adrenaline like she was about to compete.

“I’m gonna kiss you now,” she said, grinning just an inch from his lips.

“No use trying to stop you,” Kellan said, matching her smile. “I don’t think that’s even possible.”

She leaned against the console and pressed her lips to his. Her palms flushed with sweat. Her ankle pain was gone. He reached across her cheek to push her hair behind her ear and deepened their kiss by leaning into her. She wouldn’t be opposed to making out but had no idea how. Even so, her chaste, closed-lip kiss made her surge with feelings she barely knew what to call. He broke the kiss first and pressed his forehead against hers.

“I think it’s been two months that I’ve wanted to do that,” he said.

“According to my calculations, that’s when we met.”

“Yeah.” He grinned wide. “Mine too.”

She kissed him again, logging the experience for metrics and data as much as she did it out of need and desire. It took eighteen years, but she finally kissed a boy. His lips were big but careful, and soft but sturdy. She put her palm to his round cheek and wished

they hadn't waited so long. Time was constantly escaping her. She was tired of wasting it.

"I got you something," he said between breaths. He pulled his lips from hers but pecked them to her cheek. His broad shoulders leaned back and opened the black center console. She watched in surprise as he unearthed a blue velvet box with a small white bow and put it on her lap. "For Christmas."

"No way. This is—"

"I wanted to. Please open it."

Although her pulse thumped against the pads of her thumbs, she used them to pry the box open. It was lined with gold, pillowy velvet. The name of a local jeweler stamped upon the lid in gold print. She expected to kiss him, not get fine jewelry. She wondered if he knew that she didn't celebrate Christmas. She stared at the white gold chain spread taut across the satin box. Five diamond-studded Olympic rings winked at her one at a time. She shook her head and they each glimmered in response.

"I can't take this. It must have cost a ton."

"I wanted to," he said. She directed the box toward him, but he held his palm up to block its path. His eyes were round and hooked onto hers. "Unless you don't like it? I can get you something else."

"No, I—" She didn't know how to finish the sentence. It was who she was, or rather, who she hoped to be. It began to shake in her grip, and she squeezed harder to steady it. "I love it. Thank you so much. I love it."

She turned in her seat and Kellan draped it over her collarbone to hook around her neck. She could feel his fingers shaking beneath her gathered hair. The tiny flick of the clasp closing felt like a siren in her ear.

“Got it,” he said in a whisper.

She looked down and touched all five of the rings one by one. The diamonds poked into her fingertip. She shook her head.

“I didn’t know we were doing gifts. I didn’t get you anything.”

“Yeah, you did.” His dimples reappeared. She couldn’t see them once she kissed him again.

Saying goodbye was the last thing she wanted to do, but it was dark and late, and she knew she had to go home and back to her real life. Once she stepped out of his car, she waved at him through the window. He waved back and waited for her to get into hers and start it up. The heat from her vents cooked her hot cheeks and only when she looked in the rearview mirror did she see how red her face was. She felt like she spent the afternoon in a broiler. Rachel touched the pendant of her new necklace and turned her head toward him again. He waved again, this time with a smile, and began to back out of his spot. Amid the dark of night, the juvenile flurries transitioned into wet flakes of might. They stuck to her windshield just long enough to melt into miniscule puddles, each leaving their own distinct remnant on the sheet of glass protecting her from them.

## CHAPTER 5

### THE FULL STORY

Rachel's hip knocked Lola and Denise's room door shut and she locked it for good measure. Prisoners had no expectation of privacy, after all, and she had been going to national team camp long enough to know to expect nothing but the worst.

"You all owe me so big," Lola said while entering the center of the dorm room. Rachel, Jamie, and nine other members of the senior national team surrounded her in patient, ritual silence. The pillowcase Lola held bulged like caricatures of Santa Claus' bag of gifts on his Christmas Eve sleigh. Rachel nudged Jamie and received an elbow back.

Lola tipped the pillowcase over. Twinkies, Twix, Sour Patch Kids, Snickers, Lay's, Skittles, Doritos, and more tumbled onto the floor in shrink-wrapped cacophony. Everyone swooped in to secure their lot. Rachel grabbed three bags of Sour Patch Kids and considered a fourth but restrained herself.

"I hope those are the right ones. My dad said stores are just starting to get them in now," Lola said.

Rachel looked at the gummies she procured and saw they were some new tropical variety she never saw before. It hardly mattered. Sugar was a commodity here no matter what the flavor or persuasion.

“Perfect. Thanks,” she said.

Lola nodded and watched the rest of the senior girls divide up chocolates and mass-produced pastries. They didn’t have very long to eat it all before someone’s coach would take it upon themselves to search bags and rooms for contraband, but just the feeling of having it on hand and the sense of security that brought was worth the chance of getting caught. Rachel glanced at the empty pillowcase.

“Doesn’t your dad ever wonder why you bring so much junk to camp?”

“He doesn’t really care. He gets so much stuff from work that there are boxes of this crap in my garage. It’s either you guys eat it, or my brothers eat it and rub it in my face,” Lola said.

Rachel knew Lola in the sense that she knew all of the national team, which was a mix of many years of acquaintance and occasional texts and instant messages, but no time spent together outside the realm of gymnastics. She knew that Lola’s dad was the head honcho of the supply chain for some Texas grocery store and she’d been the de facto snack supplier since they were junior gymnasts. It was also the case that Lola had a string of food allergies – artificial dyes, soy, gluten, and nuts, just to name a few – that meant she couldn’t eat any of it but got the highly sought-after privilege of bringing her own food to camp with no restrictions.

Jamie emerged cradling candy bars and a bag of barbecue chips in her arms.

“Ready?” she asked.

“Yeah, let’s go,” Rachel said. There was no need to hang around and draw too much attention. It wasn’t unusual for the junior girls to get bored and want to know what the senior girls were up to, and that was just asking for someone to get suspicious that they were having fun and come break it up.

Back in their shared room, she shut the door and locked it. Jamie tossed her haul on her bed and Rachel dug into a bag of sours. A stinging pineapple flavor cut through her tongue and she closed her eyes and ate another. One by one, she put them on her tongue, sucked off the citric acid, and chewed until her tongue was numb and her lips felt burnt.

“You know what I’m gonna do after the Olympics?” asked Jamie. She opened a Snickers bar and flopped onto her bed with less grace than seemed possible for someone who just spent six hours practicing gymnastics at its highest level.

“Compete in college, meet hot guys, and become a lawyer like your mom.”

“Okay, before that.”

“Enlighten me,” Rachel said while chewing.

“I’m gonna fly right from Beijing to Italy and spend a week doing nothing but eating whole pizzas by myself.”

“You’re gonna miss your first college classes to eat pizza?”

“All alone with no one to get in my way or tell me what to do,” Jamie said with an airy tone that made Rachel feel like perhaps she had stepped into her best friend’s daydream. “Do you want to come? Only you, though.”

“My parents would never just buy me a ticket to Italy,” Rachel laughed.

“You can get your boyfriend to buy you one.”

“He’s not my boyfriend.”

“Yeah, because I know when I’m just friends with a guy, I make out with him in empty parking lots,” Jamie said in her trademark vocal fry.

“It wasn’t empty. We were just on the far side so no one would see us.”

“The jury will disregard.”

Rachel threw a piece of candy at her and recalled the incident in question, four nights ago with her last bit of freedom before flying to South Dakota for camp. Kellan took her to an indoor mini-golf and driving range that his teammates had talked up to him – why were hockey players so obsessed with golf? – and while they never explicitly referred to it as a date, Rachel was pretty sure it was one. She wasn’t sure if all dates between all couples involved two people threatening to hit one another with golf balls and accusing one another of nefarious playing tactics the whole time, but it felt like one to her. Kellan had a hat on but was asked for pictures and autographs what seemed like once or twice per hole. Rachel was rarely recognized in public except in specific settings, but that night the exception came in the form of an ecstatic group of ten-year-old girls who all agreed that she was their favorite gymnast. One even asked her to sign her wrist cast.

“We watched you at Worlds in our gym! I can’t wait to watch you at the Olympics,” the injured girl, whose name she learned was Hannah, said.



As she always did in these situations, Rachel smiled rather than explaining that she didn't know if she was on the Olympic team yet and wouldn't for months. People liked to say she was a shoo-in or a lock, but those were people who clearly never met Karen Dillard or the national staff before. Instead, she answered their numerous questions, posed for a picture taken by someone's mother, and wished Hannah well for her broken wrist.

When she and Kellan finished their game, the quiet parking lot felt like a reprieve they earned. On the way to his car, she insisted she won the game on a technicality based on a rule she made up where par on the back nine was doubled.

"That's not even – no. *No*. You lost. Just say you lost," Kellan said.

"I didn't lose. Par was sixty and I shot a forty," Rachel said, biting down her smile in the dark of night.

"You are so full of shit! Say it. Say 'I'm full of shit and a sore loser.'"

"Kellan Barker is full of shit and a sore loser."

Kellan opened the passenger door for her, restated that she was indeed a sore loser, and gently shut it. Once he joined her inside, she kissed him without another word said or second wasted. The center console kept them from getting too comfortable, but his hands found refuge in her waves and then on her back and then her waist, leaving invisible scorch marks through her jacket. She was grateful for access to the hilltops and valleys of muscle that emanated heat under his thin hoodie and wondered what his bare skin felt like. She began to crave the way he made her brain shut off. She wanted more,

or at least she did right then in that moment, but it wasn't even worth mentioning. He had to be tired of working within her schedule and abiding by an actual curfew like she was a child, but he never said so aloud. When he dropped her off mere minutes before eleven, they made out again until she knew she had to go inside.

"I'll walk you up," he said above the sound of his seatbelt clicking.

"Don't, it'll just make it worse." She kissed him again, and this time she really tried to savor it. It didn't feel much different. Maybe she wasn't trying hard enough, she thought. Or maybe it was a good thing – maybe it meant that there was more to come. The light from his headlights caught half his face, including his glittering teeth. Her tongue had been in his mouth countless times and she still didn't know if his teeth were real. "Are they fake?" she finally asked with his breath on her lips.

"These two." He swiped his tongue over the front ones up top. "Why? Grosses you out?"

"I've watched skin peel off my hands in layers. Nothing grosses me out."

They embraced one last time and the soapy, woody smell of his skin got caught in her nose. She hoped it would have some lasting power.

"Have fun at camp," he said. "We'll hang out when you're back."

She chose to use this as motivation to make it through the next week. Once she was inside, she stood at the front window and watched his high beams kiss the night goodbye.

“Hang on,” her dad said as she went to the stairs. “Just because you get in before curfew doesn’t mean you get to stay out late every night.”

“I know. Sorry.”

“I don’t care if that kid is Lord Stanley himself. He doesn’t need to eat up all your free time. If he wants to see you so bad, he can park his ass here and watch you do your homework.” On the couch with his laptop, he looked more tired than mad, especially beneath his eyes which were dark with fatigue. On TV, the cooking channel was muted.

“I know. Sorry.” She scaled two steps and looked down at him. “Good night.”

“Night, Rach. See you in the morning.”

On her way into the bathroom, she caught sight of her own reflection in the mirror above the sink. Her lips swelled pink and full. She could still taste his kiss. To her left, her parents’ bedroom door opened and her mom emerged in the dark.

“Where have you been?” she asked.

“I went mini-golfing.”

“It’s eleven o’clock at night.”

“I’m aware. My phone has a clock.” Rachel tried to maintain her composure and not let her racing heart and defunct desire color her affect. “Dad saw me come in. I was on time.”

Her mom looked suspicious and maybe even hurt. Silence flooded the staircase landing.

“Anything you want to tell me?”

Rachel looked at her reflection again. Did it even need to be said? It may as well have been painted upon her forehead.

“No,” she said.

She left her mom’s frown behind, escaped into her bedroom, and spent the next hour in bed wishing for more time, more space, more anything with Kellan. There never seemed to be enough.

Blinking, her eyes settled back on Jamie across their dorm room. Now she missed him, except she wasn’t sure if she should miss him because they were still technically only friends. If she said as much to Jamie, Jamie would again insist that this meant they were dating, and Rachel was tired of this thing with Kellan having no conclusive answer or outcome just like she was tired of everything in her world having no conclusive answer or outcome.

She finished the candy and rolled the empty package up to the size of a nickel, then secured some athletic tape around it to hide its bright green label. Only then did she throw it into the trash.

“Do you think we’re getting weighed tomorrow?” Jamie asked.

“No way she lets us go home without weigh-in.”

“Imagine if she forgot until we were all at the airport and she made the pilots delay our flights,” Jamie said, each word punctuated with a rising, cackling laughter.

“And we just line up at the gate in front of everyone and step on the scale.” This editorialized version was much funnier to think about than what was likely to be their reality. Rachel jumped to her bed on her knees and the shoddy old mattress squeaked beneath her. “Oh my God, and the other passengers get to place bets on what we weigh.”

“God, she’s probably listening in on us and taking notes,” Jamie lamented. “If they charged people for their bets, maybe they could finally afford some new beds here.”

“And Wi-Fi.”

Comfortable silence settled in their tiny room. It was the same one they shared for one week every month for the last six years. It was so small that if they were on their beds and put their arms out toward one another, their hands would touch. Coming to camp had been a given for so long that she had no idea what life would be like once she no longer had to. When she retired from elite after the Olympics and went to college, she’d never have to come here again.

“Are you gonna throw up?” Jamie asked.

She thought about it. It would likely guarantee a satisfactory weigh-in, but she’d been good this time and only had one small bag. For how miserable it would be to get back up, the amount in question rendered any attempt moot.

“Not worth it.”

“Okay, me neither.”

The next day, Rachel led the team through the synchronized warm-up and was assigned to bars for the first rotation. The workout was five full routines and then fifteen

minutes spent on problem areas. After gripping up, she took a relaxed breath and stared at the low bar. Her routine played in her mind frame by frame. If she visualized it enough times, the background would begin to twist and morph from the camp gym or the gym at home to a pristine, colorful arena with Chinese characters all around on every surface. Voices of all origins cheered when her name was announced. Flags from every land mass on the globe dotted the stands. In every iteration of this fantasy, she was the last one in the rotation to compete so her score came up only after breath-holding, palm-sweating anticipation, but her name would always slide up top next to the number one. Sometimes she cried. Sometimes she didn't. She was always smiling so hard that just imagining it stung her cheeks.

*"Davai,"* Vlad said from where he stood in wait.

She grabbed the bar and swung to kip and cast. Once she shot up to the high bar, Vlad stood beside her and was ready to spot. The countless hours they spent drilling and perfecting her connections on the high bar came to pass so naturally and so instinctively that she didn't have to think about what her body had been programmed to do. With each giant she pirouetted on one arm, switching from forward grip to reverse grip to L-grip and back. Right after her Ono half, she swung upward again and hopped into her Chusovitina, landing dead in a handstand.

"Good," Vlad called up to her. He always sounded five miles away from up here. "Feet together."

She locked her arms out as she swung down and picked up momentum. At just the right time she let go to fly, flipped halfway to face the opposite direction, and came down

to grab the bar again. Vlad's arm was stretched out taut in front of her stomach, but he yanked it back when her grips slapped the bar perfectly and rendered him unnecessary.

Everything from that point on was simply the fruit of meticulous technique and endless repetition. Piked Jaeger connected down to a Pak – she'd done that since Level 9. Shooting up to the high bar once again, she wound up into three giants and released into a double layout.

“Easy now,” he said from her right.

Landing with just the right amount of tension in her knees, she nailed the mat with a stick and steadied her arms in front of herself. If only she could copy and paste that exact set into last month's American Invitational. She would've beaten Varlamova and eliminated any doubt about her status as World Champion. Instead, she fell on her Gienger and brought home a silver medal that she hadn't looked at since. She didn't know what it was about silver that disgusted her so much. Even bronze didn't leave the sick feeling in her gut that silver did.

“Again with the feet apart on the Gienger. Stop that.” He patted her shoulder while she sucked in thick gusts of breath. “That was good. Now do it better.”

For reasons that Rachel couldn't fathom, Karen didn't come by once during her bars rotation but was a prime spectator when she moved to the beam. A successful turn on the bars just minutes ago should have emboldened her to nail beam, but she was unable to focus the way she needed to. Vlad gave her to go-ahead to show off her layout full, but right from the start of her flight series she knew she was off-balance. Her flic-flac was fine, but she leaned too far right during her back handspring. In the air for her

full, everything felt wrong – her timing, the angle of her body, even just where her eyes were in relation to the beam itself – and the second her feet came down, her right foot slid off. She leaned left to grab the beam and overcorrect but ended up falling anyway.

“Where were your arms?” Vlad asked. Instead of answering, she bent down and got some of the stray chalk scattered on every inch of the floor to cake to her palms. She took a deep breath in through her nose and returned to stand by the beam. Vlad was still talking. “—straight past your ears. You have any bend in your elbows, this is what happens.”

She knew this but wasn't in any position to say so. She pushed herself back up to the beam and continued along as if she never fell. Her choreography was so imprinted upon her muscle memory that it required no direction or deliberation from her. When she leaped into her switch ring, she threw her head back, stared up at the fluorescent bulbs high above them all, and wondered what all they must have seen and brought to light over the years. She landed and reached back for her left leg to pose in needle scale, imagining that her pointed toes could kick the roof right off the gym and give her air to breathe for once. Her Onodi was wobble-free and connected right to her double turn. After dismounting with her triple twist, she hopped to the left but stood to salute with control. As much as she didn't want to, she looked at Karen.

“One fall like that in a team final and all your teammates can say bye-bye to gold,” she said while writing something upon her ubiquitous clipboard. “And after, they'll tell you it wasn't your fault, but the worst part is you'll spend every day of the rest of your life knowing it was.”



Rachel was very measured with her breaths; two seconds in, two seconds out. The chalk on her palms wore off and she rubbed them against her thighs.

“Take the full out. A regular layout is enough and it’s less of a risk.”

“That’s two tenths less,” Rachel said before she could stop herself.

“And a fall is eight,” Karen said with a smile that never seemed to reach her eyes. “I know throwing the big tricks makes you feel really special and like a really big deal, Rachel, but consistency wins every time.”

“She’s done the full many times. Ten times a day at home,” Vlad said.

Rachel nearly fell again, but this time from surprise and not bad technique.

“And yet she falls on the first one I see,” Karen said. Her eyebrows rose so high on her forehead that they could have done her talking for her and silenced the faux-surprised high pitch that she always seemed to reach. “It’s amazing how that works!”

Rachel’s whole body, every limb and every digit, coursed with fury but she had no choice but to breathe it out and swallow it down. She did four more sets with the regular layout sans twist and landed them all. During the last fifteen minutes, Karen moved over to vault to watch Jamie’s Amanar attempts. Rachel took a chalk break and stepped closer to Vlad.

“If I don’t have a double on vault and the full on beam, then that’s five tenths I’m missing.”

“Then do what I tell you and make it consistent,” he whispered with an urgency that was unusual at best. “Otherwise, she’s right -- it’s a risk you can’t take. You can’t win all-around with a fall. The math doesn’t work.” Even more unusual was him grabbing either side of her head so that his fingers reached the red scrunchie at the base of her bun. “I have no idea what is going on in here, but now would be a good time to figure it out.”

A very practiced, self-imposed numbness was the only way she made it through the rest of training. After cooldown and stretching, the time came for weigh-in. The entire senior team stood in a straight line ordered by height and looked around in shared, silent misery. From her spot at the end, she just stared down at her feet and came to terms with the fact that they would probably never feel the top of another podium.

“Rachel Wallerstein,” Karen echoed from her office off from the gym.

She strode across the floor as Lola was leaving the office. They rolled their eyes at one another in a stolen moment by the door before she entered.

The scale pushed against the wall to the left of the desk was the same one she had been weighed on since she was twelve. It was like catching up with an old friend. She took her warm-ups off and dropped them on a folding chair. She was back in her flag motif leotard and its sparkly rhinestone stars for another performance, the last routine of the day that she had to nail. She stepped up onto the cold metal and stared straight ahead at the wall. Karen brought down the ruler to confirm that she was still 5’2”. At least one thing about her was consistent.

“102.4,” Karen spoke for the scale. “Did you have a big lunch?”

“No bigger than normal,” she said.

“Remember we said we’d get down to 100? What happened to that?”

“I don’t know.”

“That full will be easier if you get rid of the extra weight.”

Her pen scratched across the thin piece of paper clipped to her board. Rachel blinked at the wall, noticing a drip of excess white paint that had probably gone unnoticed for thirty-plus years or however long this place had been standing. It was thirty-plus too many.

“I’ve heard that Canadians eat a lot of poutine. Is that true?”

“What?” Rachel asked, turning her head at last.

“I just thought you might know since you’re so involved with one now,” Karen said. “Maybe you two eat a lot of poutine together.”

“I don’t—” She was utterly speechless. Nothing that came to mind seemed articulate or sufficient. Kellan came to mind, too, of course, but nothing about whatever they had going on was articulate nor sufficient, either. “No.”

Karen finished writing and put her clipboard down upon her desk. She had a sick desire to read what she always seemed to be writing for about two seconds, before she realized that she never wanted to know.

“I’m going to tell you something my coach told me a long, long time ago when dinosaurs roamed the earth.” Karen leaned against the wall, the opposite direction in

which she was standing, and looked into her eyes. “You can only want one thing at a time – really, truly want something bad enough to kill for it. For you girls, you think that one thing is the Olympics. You think you’ve given up everything to make that team. You think you would die to make that team. What you really want is anything but the Olympics. You want a normal life. You want to have sex and get fat at college and go to parties and not train eight hours a day. No one who does those things is a bad person, but they’re not an Olympian. They’re certainly not Olympic gold medalists. The second you stop wanting to be normal is the second your dream becomes a reality. You want a boy right now. You don’t need a boy right now. Learn the difference.”

She pushed off the wall with a finality that seemed wholly impossible given the brand-new flood of confusion she just bestowed upon Rachel. Karen tapped her pen against the desk twice, tap-tap, and opened the door.

“Go get some rest before dinner. I’ll announce the Pacific Challenge team in the dining room. Spoiler alert, you’re going.”

The world seemed silent after that, and she knew that when she got back in line-up for final remarks and their dismissal that people were speaking and sound waves were making contact with her eardrums, but she heard none of it. Back in the dorms, she and Jamie went into their room and she locked their door to blockade them from as much of the outside world as she feasibly could. She had her fill for the day.

“My knees are dead. She made me do seven Amanars and seven Rudis. Even Igor was telling her maybe that was enough, but she just kept making me whip them off,” Jamie said. She flopped onto her back and lifted her heels toward the ceiling.

“I fucking hate her,” Rachel said.

“Yeah, join the club.”

Rachel remembered the spare packs of Sour Patch Kids shoved under her mattress and went right for them. Every tightly wound string of discipline in her brain told her to stop, but she wasn't even sure if she knew what discipline was anymore or if it had ever done her any good. No one else seemed to think so. She tore the seam open and sat on her bed. The first one she pinched out of the bag was blue raspberry and she planted it on her tongue. It stung right on the precipice of where pleasure slid downhill into pain and for a moment, she didn't have to think about anything else except that feeling. The heat rising to her face and the burning desire to cry faded away with every bite. Jamie rubbed Icy Hot on her knees and Rachel inhaled candy. Neither of them spoke. When she finished, she taped up the bags, buried them in the trash, and went to the door.

“Rach.”

“I'll be right back.”

The hallway carpet was the ugliest part of an exceptionally ugly building. Nubby, marled green and brown specks blended into what she doubted was ever intended to look decent. She followed it down to the bathroom, passed the first stall that flushed too weakly, and locked herself in the second. With perfect precision, she tore off pieces of toilet paper and lined the surface of the water with them like strips of wallpaper. She crouched and rested her chin on her knees. Tomorrow she would go home and get to steer clear of camp for a month. An abbreviated group of them would reconvene with Karen at the Pacific Challenge in a week, but at least that would be in Vancouver, a city she'd

never been to before. That might make for a minute or two of fun. Better yet, it was the last meet before the Olympics that both Wan and Varlamova would be at. If she put in extra time at the gym and hit her routines, she knew she could win. Her eyes closed and her mind conjured the way her bare feet would feel on top of the podium and the weight that gold would hold around her neck. She opened her eyes to blink down into the toilet. She stood, kicked the flusher, and left the waiting stall behind.

The dirty carpet led her back to the room. Jamie had taken to taping her airborne legs and looked at her from between her knees. Rachel shook her head and went to her bed, picking her phone up along the way. She hadn't looked at it all day.

*Kellan: in Montreal tonight 4 game tomorrow*

*Kellan: miss u. wish u were here. how is camp*

*Rachel: It's camp. So... blah*

*Rachel: I miss you too*

*Kellan: wanna see a movie when u get back? Mon and Tues, no games, just practices. my nights will be free :)*

She let her fingers hover over the screen with the inescapable smile he always seemed to summon to her face. There were a million reasons to shut this down right now

and never think about him again. For her many faults, Karen had done a great job making her case. Still, this was the first time she hadn't felt miserable all week. If she didn't need him in her trajectory, then why did he make her increasingly uphill path a little more bearable? But if Karen was right – if he was only impeding her quest, if he was somehow a harbinger of failure – then didn't that make him both the problem and the solution? She stared at his words and tried to be honest with herself. She wanted Olympic glory more than she wanted a guy, even if that guy was Kellan. One didn't negate the other, did it? Was both so much to ask for? Why did everything she want require her to sacrifice the other things she wanted just a little bit less?

*Rachel: I have a competition coming up so I'll be busy :/*

*Rachel: You're so busy with hockey and I'm so busy with camp and meets. A little time to focus might be good for both of us?*

Immediately she regretted her choice of sentiment and phrasing, but it was too late to take them back. She typed a message to rescind the previous one, but he came through first.

*Kellan: ok. ur right. i never meant to distract u or w/e. sorry if I did*

*Rachel: No, you didn't. I'm sorry. I didn't mean that at all*

*Kellan: but ur right. u worked ur whole life for Beijing and I should focus on my game too. the team could make a serious Cup run this year. never know when we might get another... shouldn't take it for granted, u know?*

Oh, did she ever know. At least he understood. She turned onto her side with her back to Jamie and let herself make a choice she knew she would regret in real time. It wasn't goodbye, she told herself; it was just see-you-later, and see-you-later didn't have to hurt as much or carry the same weight as a permanent farewell. They could still hang out, but maybe at a lower frequency, one that didn't put her only goal in life in jeopardy.

*Rachel: Definitely. Well, I hope you guys end up winning. You deserve it. I'll be watching  
:) Maybe I'll see you soon?*

*Kellan: I'm sure u will. see u around, golden girl*

She hoped he was right. She wasn't sure there could be any alternative – gold or bust. By the end of the summer, the entire world would have an answer, one she'd been waiting her whole life for. She committed his words to memory and scrolled through the



archive of their communication – debates about movies, plans to hang out, heartfelt confessions, all proof of the closest thing she'd ever felt to love. She took a long, painful breath and clicked delete. Even Jamie didn't hear her cry.

## CHAPTER 6

### LAST TIME FOR EVERYTHING

This is what normal girls her age did, she reminded herself while staring at her phone. The artificial A/C blasting from her car's vents made it hard to pretend that the flush in her cheeks was not due to her nerves. She stared at the bright screen and the last message from Kellan, received a day ago in the stuttered chain of their casual, sporadic conversation. He'd said he was packing, which implied that he was still in town. She released a hot breath into the fierce chill and typed slowly.

*Rachel: Are you still home?*

His response was quick.

*Kellan: yeah playing xbox lol*

*Kellan: why what's up*

She could ask herself the same question. All she knew was that going home felt suffocating, that going to the gym felt suffocating, that answering questions about the Olympics felt suffocating, and she just wanted to breathe for once. Their short spurts of time spent together or in conversation were the only time she didn't feel like something big and impressive and depended upon. With him, she felt kind of normal.

*Rachel: Can I come over?*

She couldn't believe she hit send. She was initiating! Even if he said no, this was one for the record books, or at least the ones outside of gymnastics. She clenched her toes and held her breath when his typing bubble appeared, disappeared, and appeared again.

*Kellan: yeah definitely*

*Kellan: u mean right now?*

It was happening. She was going to do something so unlike herself that no one would believe it even if by chance they found out. Gone were the days of chaste dates and hoping he would kiss her goodnight. His season was over, hers was just beginning, she had no idea when they might see one another again, and she wanted their goodbyes to mean something.

*Rachel: Yeah, now. Okay, awesome :) Be there in 15*

*Kellan: can't wait*

She left this unanswered and shifted her Honda into drive. Leaving the abandoned Dunkin' parking lot behind, she continued back to the main road to veer to the highway. Her body was alight and alert; the taillights of cars seemed redder and brighter as if they'd all been replaced with industrial-strength bulbs. The pop music that played from her connected iPod seemed louder and clearer than it had earlier while driving around and psyching herself up, like the treble had been sharpened on each individual track specifically for this moment.

Once she arrived downtown, she eased her way toward his high-rise building near the water and entered the parking garage. At the box, she typed in his unit number and listened to a dial tone spackle through the speaker. After two rings, his voice greeted her.

"Rach?"

"Yeah, it's me," she said, ignoring the simmering feeling deep in her stomach.

"Cool, come on up." A beep followed and the electronic gate arm rose at an angle. She entered the garage and parked in the first spot she saw. She had no idea where he was parked but it didn't really matter. She checked her reflection in the rearview, grazed her

pointer finger across the Olympic Rings on her neck, and grabbed her things to head inside. She looked around the dim, damp garage on constant alert, preparing for her parents or Vlad or Karen Dillard or God to jump out from behind a car and catch her in the act, but it never happened – she didn't encounter a single soul on the way inside. At the elevator, she entered his code again and took it up to the top floor. It deposited her into a darkly accented hallway not unlike a fancy hotel. On either side of the elevator, big black doors shot out in straight lines like wings in flight. Down at the left end of the hall, perpendicular to the rest of the units, 2015's familiar door beckoned her. She'd been here before, but never with such intent. Her hands began to sweat and she wished she had some chalk.

“Stay cool,” she coached herself on the way to the door. She didn't give herself time to hesitate prior to knocking. She heard no sound from the other side or anywhere else in the hallway. It was the kind of place where noise went to die. After twenty seconds or so, she heard the grand unclicking of a heavy lock and the door opened. There he stood in dark gray sweatpants, a blue shirt with a geometric logo she didn't recognize, and a hat on backwards. She had no idea why she had been so worried about what to wear.

“Hey,” he said. His smile was big and wide and genuine, and that was why it was easy to smile back. He stepped aside and let her in. His wall-sized windows provided a gateway to the exact point where the Niagara River bled into Lake Erie. Across the way, the dark land mass that comprised the edge of Canada crept toward them. She wondered if that was intentional on his part, if he picked this place specifically so that he might always have a view of home. On their side of the glass, his living room was

spacious and generic in its luxury. White wood floors and cream-colored walls confined them into the open floor plan. A huge white sectional couch comprised the centerpiece, as did the flat-screen TV where a shoot-em-up war game was paused. A gray blanket sat hastily folded over the back of the couch. A torn open shipping box full of hockey sticks was pushed into the far corner behind the TV. He must have interpreted her silence as disgust.

“I’ve started packing to go home so I didn’t get to clean up,” he said. “Sorry.”

“No, I’m just admiring the view. All the lights and stuff,” she said. She heard him click the door shut with his fingertips. “It’s so nice at night.”

“Oh, yeah,” he said. He did a bad job of hiding the flick of relief on his face. It made her feel a little better to think that maybe he’d been nervous about her expectations, too.

She stepped in and put her keys on the long counter that lined the entryway. The ominous music playing from the game’s pause screen was a little too on-point. She looked at his broad build like the first time. It’d been a while since she last saw him. Once springtime dawned in Buffalo and playoffs began, he was constantly busy. Their messages thinned. She bounced around from camp to competition to camp again and spent more time away than at home. Did he miss her, too? Had he missed their closeness and proximity, or did he barely even notice her absence?

“Do you want a drink?” Kellan asked. “Or food? I could order something.”

“No, I’m—” she began, but then stopped. She didn’t know what she was. “I’m okay. Thanks.”

He turned the video game off and put a movie on instead, a football film they once quoted back and forth over texts. He pushed a stray hoodie to the floor and cleared the couch of everything but the accent pillows that either came with it or his mom bought for him. She took a seat on the cushion to his left. Kellan brought his arm around her and her upper body relaxed into him. This was it, at least until autumn. If she took this night for granted, she deserved to lose him.

“I keep seeing Olympics commercials,” he said. He was so close that she could feel his body heat in her blood. “That must get you pumped.”

“Yeah,” she said. Sometimes it did. She cherished those moments. Most of the time, it made her want to rip her hair out in big chunks. Lately she’d been waking up in the middle of the night with her teeth sore from clenching them and her heart in cold, stuttered panic from nerves. Her latest recurring dream was a thrilling saga where she fell on every single event during the Olympic all-around final – sitting her vault down, missing the high bar on her Gienger, falling off the beam, stumbling right out of bounds on floor. It did not really get her pumped.

He engaged her in talk about training, but when her answers became sparse, he dropped it altogether. When the mood tensed, she bit her lip in the dark and shifted a little closer to him.

“So, when does hockey start again?” she asked. A high, floaty pitch that was unfamiliar to her entered her voice. She cleared her throat.

“Preseason in September. Season in October. Was hoping for a shorter offseason, but can’t do anything about it now.” He slouched and his hoodie bunched at his hips. “I just wish I could stop thinking about it. You know what I hate most? When they ask, ‘What would you do differently?’ I’d do everything differently if it meant we were still in the fucking playoffs.”

This time, it was her struggling for what to say. She heard the newscasters and the chatter on sports radio while flicking through stations. *‘You get drafted first overall and you can’t score when it counts? Is it too early to call this fucking clown a bust?’* some loudmouth on 103.6 Fan Town blithered through the speakers in her car not that long ago. She turned it off without thinking much about it – everyone had their opinions, even when his team had been doing well, and she knew a thing or two about opinions. Regardless, she abandoned the subject and leaned into him instead.

“When are you going home?” she asked.

“Couple days.”

So she’d be at Nationals when he left for the summer. With the border in sight, his idea of home seemed so much in proximity to hers, but that was only if she didn’t think about how he was from some speck on a map near Saskatoon notable only for being his hometown.

He was warm and solid and provided steady resistance. She tipped her head against his arm and angled her gathered knees so that they tilted onto his thigh. He smelled good and she used it as fuel to keep her resolve.



“You okay? I miss hearing from you,” he asked. His tone surprised her – it was level and normal, not quiet and whispered like she’d expect from a moment like this.

“Started thinking maybe you were done with me.”

“Of course not. I’m okay, just busy.” It seemed close enough to the truth, and really, she was okay. It was just that sometimes, she wasn’t. The more those moments bled into one another and became somewhat indiscernible, the more she just wanted something to fix it. He put his hand on her knee and that was all the reassurance she needed. She began to rub his arm with feathery fingertips and felt fire burning in her chest and stomach and knees. “I know you’re going home. I kept thinking about not seeing you before you left, and I didn’t want – I just wanted to be with you. Really be with you.”

And how seamlessly they moved from there. A long, heavy stare accompanied some shifts of weight and cautious hands. The more they kissed, the surer she was that she wanted this. At first, she expected that Kellan would do all the work, but she discovered that she’d seen enough movies and read enough books to know where to put her hands and how to sit and what to do next. It was almost like she’d done this before. Maybe he thought she had.

The couch had big enough seats that they stayed right where they were. She had her hands up his shirt and traced the pathways of elusive, firm muscle that she finally got to touch. She thought of him throwing her on her back and leading the charge, but then she thought of getting on top and having her way, and she didn’t know what she wanted or which was better. Kellan’s hands were warm and expansive across her back and

beneath her shirt. They spoke little insinuations to one another – *here* or *there* or *yeah* – and nothing else. His lips were soft and his mouth stung of mint.

Her own put-on expertise surprised even her. He unbuttoned her shorts and she kicked them off smoothly. She tugged on his sweatpants. They both worked her shirt off over her head and he pulled his own off. Kellan touched her bare thigh and a wave of electric suspense rippled up her spine. This was better than any movie scene or scandalous book chapter. Her imagination burgeoned and she pictured herself coming here once, twice, even three times a week, sneaking around behind the world's back with regularity. There'd be an element of expectation to it – she wouldn't have to psyche herself up or ask him if she could come over or play any of her stupid mind games with herself. In her fantasy, with aligned schedules and no expectations of Olympic proportions, she could even be his girlfriend. They'd have their fun and then maybe order dinner and maybe she'd stay the night. It would be both normal and exciting.

But that was an imagined future and this was now. Kellan whispered how pretty she was and she kissed him again. He touched the back of her panties and their hips connected. There was a certain enlightened quality to all this – so that's what it's like when a guy is hard, she thought – that would have to wait until later to be made sense of. He kept asking if she was okay with two-word inquisitions and she kept nodding. Her bra was discarded at some point between these minute conversations. Kellan's mouth found her left breast and she made sound at last. She slackened her elbows on the armrest that his head was situated on and ignored the way her thighs were twitching. She yearned for the A/C in her car twenty stories below them. They'd stay in this position, she decided for

them both. He lifted his hips to push his boxers down. Together they peeled her panties off and she dropped them to the floor. She couldn't recall the last time she took a breath.

"I'll be right back," he said prior to pressing a kiss to her swollen mouth.

He got right up and left the living room with the moonlight and sparse city illumination shining across his back. Did he just ditch her? She stared out the window and covered herself with her arms while contemplating leaving. A moment later, he emerged again with his socks giving away his approach. He came back to her with a big smile and pinched a small metallic packet between his fingers.

"Almost forgot," he explained. She dropped her arms and her smile rose.

He asked if she was okay again and she nodded one more time. He put the condom on. It was going to happen, and then it did, bringing with it a gulf of pain. She buried her grimace in the armrest. She lifted off him slightly and then back down, and that helped a little. Her shattered breath bounced off the fabric and splashed back into her face. He rubbed her back and thighs with careful, soft attention as she continued to consume him. Somehow, he continued to make space inside her. Eventually her hips met his and she could go no further. She felt heavy and hurt. His arms swept around her.

"You okay?"

"Yes." She wasn't sure if it was a lie, but it was all she had.

It took a minute, but eventually the discomfort was joined by something else, something new and nameless. She pressed her face into his warm neck. His breath and pulse were a synchronous beat of his own song against her skin. The pierce of barely-

there stubble pinched her face, but she didn't feel much of anything except the sensation of floating and strange, localized pain. She got a handle on the rhythm he was creating and moved her hips with his. His throat rippled in a swallow beneath her cheek. She braced her palms on the support of his chest and sat on her knees like he was her dominion that she reigned over from above. His skin was pale and carved beneath her hands, until she looked at his face, which was pink and heavy-lidded. She learned that the silver chain that only ever peeked out from his shirt collars had a small cross pendant attached to it. She closed her eyes and moved against him, taking every sound he made as permission to keep doing it.

Kellan said some things that she didn't know how to respond to. When his voice got deeper, her stomach clenched more. *She* did this to him. It was *her* having this effect on him. It was enough to feel smug about. His fingers explored the grid of her abs before he situated his thumb where their hips collided. She made her first sound, something between a choke and a sigh. He stared up at her with transfixed focus. His eyes flashed just as black as the river-slash-lake, but without any of its stolen lights. The more his thumb moved, the more she felt like she was about to explode. She chewed on her lip and his name tumbled out in a sigh.

“Fuck, Rach—”

She only realized that she was having an orgasm roughly three seconds into it, by which time she began to taste blood from her punctured lip and the rush was nearly over. Kellan made up for the lack of sound with his cussing beneath her. She stayed on her bent knees and stared out the window while his heavy breaths climbed up her sternum. They

were higher above any building in the visible vicinity. She even sort of felt that height. She wondered if he would mind if she just stood at the window later and stared down at the depths below them and Canada beyond them. She re-discovered his dazed eyes, but his smile lost none of its typical luster. He parked his palms against her thighs, which even to her felt impossibly warm.

“You okay?” he asked for possibly the fiftieth time in less than an hour.

“Yeah,” she said. She dipped her chin and the closer her face moved to his neck, the more the scent of him removed any trace of doubt from her mind. Even if this was the last time they were ever in proximity to one another, she would have no regrets, no fear, no doubt. She harbored no expectation of reuniting, existing in stasis for one another’s return, or promises of exclusivity. If this was the end, then it was the end she wanted. Balances with the checks.

“I’m gonna get my passport revoked for all the cheering I’ll be doing for you this summer,” he said into her ear. She laughed in puffs that fell apart and back together again when his arms belted around her waist. “People might start thinking I’m American. How embarrassing would that be?”

“Canada isn’t any good, anyway. They came in dead last at the Pacific Challenge, and they were the host nation.”

“Can’t say that about hockey. You guys eat our fucking dust every four years.”

“Shut up.” Her laugh betrayed her with every word. Her skin boiled both in anticipation and reception of him. Each of their micro-movements sent her body into territory she clamored for. She enjoyed it while she could in case there was no next time.

The sensation of time passing within curfew-abiding limits built her dread up into a dam. Goodbye had to come. At twenty to eleven, she pushed herself upright and poked her finger into one of the recesses of his cheeks. As if discovering a power button, he smiled up at her and flicked the pendant around her neck.

“Stay over.”

“I can’t,” she said, although when she was home and secured back into the rut of her life, she might entertain the thought of it while she fell asleep.

They dressed quietly with the city lights screaming behind them. She buttoned her shorts and admired the elevated glow for perhaps the last time. Kellan pressed her wallet and phone into her hands. She said nothing, not through his front door or down the hallway or in the elevator, where she let him hold her; nothing at all until they arrived at her car.

“Text me, okay?” she asked, just short of demanding it.

“Phone works both ways,” he said behind his big, shiny teeth. “Yeah, I’ll text you. Don’t go all quiet on me this summer.”

“You, too.” She pulled her arms around him and welcomed the return of the gesture. If only time could stop, but it was a freight train with no brakes. She could have mentioned some vague notion of the future, but why ruin a perfect moment? He opened

her door of her car, shut it when she was situated inside, and waved when she pulled away. Only when she was safely out of sight beneath the glowing darkness of downtown did she allow herself a few stubborn, determined tears.

It was just before eleven when she parked in her driveway. After easing slowly up the incline, she blinked a few times until the red faded from her irises. The living room light was on and she admired the glow from her seat. It wasn't as beautiful as that upon the river and lake, but it held its own luminescent promise. Inside, she shut the garage door behind her and stepped into the kitchen. The lights were off and the entire lower level was silent and still. An empty wine glass sat in the sink. She went around to the stairway and saw her dad on the couch on his laptop.

"Cutting it close," he said while reaching to mute the TV.

"I made it, didn't I?"

"You made it," he said. He turned in his seat to look at her. "What'd you guys end up doing?"

"We went to Barnes and Noble for a while and saw a movie." It was so easy to conjure, this would-be girl's night with Jamie.

"Okay, cool," her dad said after a moment. "Well, I'm glad you guys had fun."

"Thanks. Is Mom asleep?"

"Yep," he said with a little more edge than she preferred. At least she hadn't been home for whatever new argument they whipped up tonight. "She said good night."

“Okay.” Her hand slipped across the edge of the bannister closest to the front door. “Good night.”

“Night, Rach. See you in the morning.”

She went upstairs to shower, taking her time with the lather of shampoo and body wash and the warmth of the water, which not only soothed her aching body but relaxed her mind’s marathon. She brushed her teeth and hair and left the humid bathroom behind her. Movement from the right of the staircase landing caught her eye and she jumped when she noticed her mom standing there.

“God, I hate when you do that silent Grim Reaper thing in the dark.”

“I was listening for you,” her mom said with a yawn. She stepped into the light in her blue pajama shorts and Cornell shirt. “What were you doing out so late?”

“We saw a movie,” Rachel repeated. Maybe detail would make it more palatable. “There was something wrong with the projector and it didn’t start until nine.”

“You should’ve texted me. Eleven is a deadline, not a suggestion.”

“Okay, sorry. I’m going to bed now, anyway.”

She didn’t know what it was about what she said, but it must have set off some higher-order instinct that only the most overbearing of mothers seemed to hone. She came up to Rachel and looked at her head on. She could scarcely think of a secret of hers that her mom hadn’t eventually figured out through the weight in her eyes or the downward curve of a lip or brow. On the other hand, none of her secrets had ever been secrets compared to this.



“Were you crying?”

“Yes. I actually just took a shower entirely with my own tears.” She gripped her gathered clothes a little tighter. “It’s late and Vlad is making us do forty hit routines tomorrow. I’m sorry I didn’t text. Can I go to bed now?”

Her mom assessed her face for another silent, drawn-out moment, but her shoulders relaxed and she even half-smiled. “Fine, Miss Comedy Hour, but I want to hear all about this fashionably late movie tomorrow. Good night.”

Rachel returned the sentiment and shut herself into the lonely oasis of her dark bedroom. The moonlight snuck through her blinds and sprinkled itself across her trophy shelves. From a dusty ribbon celebrating her first cartwheel to all her World medals, every moment of her career sparkled in patient, eternal commemoration. She slipped into bed and tried to fathom how to fall asleep after such a bittersweet evening. Before she could attempt to, her phone buzzed in her hand.

*Kellan: miss u already*

*Kellan: told u I’d text u*

## CHAPTER 7

### NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIPS OF THE UNITED STAKES

Hotel bathrooms the size of linen closets were not the optimal spaces for emptying cans of hairspray into opaque clouds, but for the past fifteen years, they'd been a necessary evil. Their temporary bathroom mirror kissed the edge of the shower to the right and jammed against the opposite wall about three feet later. Perhaps fifteen square feet, maybe less, comprised the workspace afforded to her and her mother.

"There's nowhere to put the clips. Hold these, please," her mom said before tucking the package of purple barrettes into Rachel's hand. She obeyed. The corner of the package slid beneath one of the week-old rips on the outer edge of her palm. It was the constant wear and literal tear of her hands that made her most self-conscious, although she supposed she should've been used to the confused stares that lingered on her hands at store checkouts and doctor visits by now. There was always something torn open or healing somewhere on her body.

In the mirror that only emphasized the constraints of the bathroom, she watched her mom tighten her dark hair to her scalp with some unforgiving tugs of a hairbrush. Somehow, it hurt less to watch her work and inflict the pain than it did to look away and simply coexist with the feeling. The light in the bathroom glowed bright white to be as flattering as possible. It was the youngest her mom had looked in a long time.

“Remember when I used to do the little braids in your bun for meets? You loved those.” While twisting a black hair tie around Rachel’s gathered hair with very little mercy, a smile found the left corner of her mom’s mouth. “And glitter spray. Do you want glitter spray?”

“I’m gonna pass,” Rachel said.

“You girls always have the best leos and the best buns,” her mom said. With expert precision, she twisted her hair into a long, tight tail. It reminded her of the swirly ice pops she used to have every summer in her youth, the kind with bright artificial dyes and even stronger artificial flavors. Her mom began to circle it around the base of the ponytail so that it consumed itself into a pristine bun. She secured loose hairs with the purple clips that matched Rachel’s leotard and finished it all off with a purple metallic scrunchie.

Rachel stared at her coiffed reflection. As President of the booster club, her mom had final say over their team uniforms every season and she spared no expense for the Olympic year. The warm-ups were lavender with silver rhinestones spelling out her name and “NCG” on either shoulder. The back of her zip-up jacket shimmered with a shiny silver applique of the gym’s logo, a silhouetted gymnast on a balance beam performing a double stag leap. Beneath her warm-up suit, she bore a custom lilac leotard with a shiny foil bodice and violet sleeves studded with rhinestones. The entire ensemble cost a thousand dollars. She couldn’t remember a season where uniforms cost more than six hundred or so. She wondered if her parents had argued about it for long or if it was

simply a silent purchase made, just another tick in the score card they kept for one another of perceived slights and lost arguments.

“Your last Nationals,” her mom said and rubbed her shoulders. Her chin found Rachel’s shoulder. In the mirror they looked like conjoined twins, if conjoined twins could differ in age and hairstyle maintenance level. “Are you nervous?”

“Yeah, a little.” There was no need to lie.

“You’re gonna do so great. You’ll win another National title and go to the Olympics and get your all-around gold. It’s finally 2008.” She kissed the powdery finish of Rachel’s made-up cheek and rubbed her arms with fervent rhythm.

She thanked her mom for her hairstyling and they left the cramped room together. Rachel tossed the pack of hair clips into her open suitcase and placed her gym bag on her bed. The comforters on either bed were an inoffensive sandy beige tone that matched the tub in the bathroom. The maroon carpet with green squares was plush enough that she felt like she melted into it with every step and shift of weight. Once or twice since check-in, she imagined it swallowing her up and depositing her in Beijing two months later.

“The bathroom is the size of a phonebooth,” her mom said.

“Well, next time we come to Phoenix, I’ll make sure our entire travel arrangement revolves around which hotel has the biggest bathroom,” her dad said. He sat at the table by the window with his laptop. Most days, she could count on finding him situated much in the same way – leaning slightly forward in an exhibition of bad posture, black frame glasses low on his nose, typing and clicking with an expertise atypical for someone in

their mid-forties – but his actual task at hand was usually a toss-up. For a few hours a week, he amused himself by keeping tabs on her official website, of which he was the webmaster. Today, she wasn't too surprised to instead see him working; on screen was the network software that he not only updated and maintained for the regional hospital system in Buffalo, but that he had engineered himself. He even won an award for it a few years prior. The small plaque that came in the mail and now hung in his office at work was how she learned what he christened it – Champion Systems.

The anticipation of another argument settled across her skin like an open flame. She was tired of them pretending not to fight while they fought. She looked at the clock – still twenty minutes before she had to be at the arena for warm-up.

“Could you at least act like you need to get ready to watch your daughter win Nationals today?” her mom asked.

“I am ready. I’ve been ready.” He gestured at his laptop with a frantic flick of his wrist, and then at his light purple polo and jeans. He even had his shoes on. “What do you want me to do, Mimi? Stare out the window until it’s time to go?”

Rachel took out her grip bag and made sure it was still properly packed. Grips, check. Her nastiest but luckiest purple wrist bands and their numerous chalk stains, check. Two rolls of white athletic tape and a handful of rubber bands, check. Her parents went silent, which in some cases was worse than fighting, so she continued through her backpack. She took careful accounting of her wrist guards, hair ties, Icy Hot, turn shoes, scissors, Rip-B-Gone hand salve, and bandages. Everything was there, just like when she

meticulously packed it prior to leaving for Phoenix. She tried to think of how else to busy herself. She picked up her phone but didn't see any texts.

*Rachel: When are you guys leaving? Adam and Miriam are already at it*

*Jamie: Like 10 minutes. Krista's been on the phone with her firm all morning and Laz is making me watch some show about deep sea fishing. Plz end my life*

She returned a timely 'lol' to Jamie and put her phone down. Across the room, her dad typed and her mom stood at the window as far away from him as she could while still having a view of the business route the hotel sat beside. At least they were miserable in a new location to spice things up for once. She couldn't be certain if the worst of the arguing began suddenly or if it had been a slow but steady ascension over time into its current state. Maybe she just hadn't ever paid attention. Her gymnastics had long been the axis of their lives, especially so for her. Was there a difference between being focused and being self-absorbed? If so, when did one become the other, and had it been a conscious shift on her part?

When they took the rental car to the arena, Vlad, Igor, and Jamie were already waiting at the entrance designated for competitors. Rachel waved to them all and exhaled her nerves and frustration from earlier this morning. She faced her parents in the arena's atrium one last time.

“Break a leg, Rach. Just not your leg,” her dad said. He kissed her forehead and pulled her in for a hug. “I’m so proud of you.”

“Thanks,” she said. When she moved to her mom on the assembly line of last-minute platitudes, she pulled her into an even tighter embrace.

“Don’t be nervous, honey. You get too tight when you get nervous. And don’t forget to smile when you’re on floor.” Her mom kissed both of her cheeks. “Do you have your turn shoes?”

“Yeah, they’re in my bag,” Rachel said.

“You’re sure? You’ve forgotten them before.”

“I know I have them.”

Her mom relented. With her nerves at a fever pitch, she split from her parents and met her coaches and Jamie. Their quad trekked through a marked doorway that led to the lower level of the arena. Vlad and Igor were a few feet ahead. They compared papers detailing the competition’s rotation groups. Their seamless Russian coated her ears and calmed her. To her immediate right, Jamie zipped her matching jacket up to her chin.

“Your mom is like Laz if Laz knew anything about gymnastics,” Jamie said.

“No, my mom is like a parole officer if a parole officer knew anything about gymnastics,” Rachel said.

“Today, Trials, the Olympics, and finally, finally, finally college,” Jamie said, with a touch of mystique blanketing the idea of eventual freedom. “We made it this far.”

“Barely.” She put a hand against her stomach as the nerves festered like acid.

Downstairs, she and Jamie joined most of the other girls to warm up together on the competition floor. The stands didn’t begin filling until about twenty minutes later. Backstage, she found a quiet corner away from the provided mats to tape her knee, stretch her arms, and visualize her routines. She had no idea if this practice really contributed to executing good performances, but it kept her mind occupied enough that it couldn’t wander away from her and to visions of falls and errors and meltdowns, and so it was a ritual.

“You’re starting on vault,” she heard Vlad say. With her eyes still closed, she pictured him about twenty feet away, far enough that he had to yell as if in a wind tunnel. When she opened her eyes, he stood less than two feet from her. “Second one up.”

“That’s lucky,” she said. Her arms swung in circles at her shoulder joints. She liked to get them so loose that it began to hurt.

“Luck is for losers,” he said with the ease of a local giving directions. He approached her to knead her biceps and get her further warmed up, no different than the prior years of competitions and meets that seemed to all culminate to this moment. He didn’t give her very much time to reminisce. “Remember to pop off and get a good block. You need height if you want to stick.”

“Okay.” She’d like to see him stick a blind landing vault in front of twenty thousand people and nationally televised cameras.



“Okay?” he responded. She didn’t know if he was referring to her arms being warmed up or if she was ready to go. Neither was all that important. Time would not wait for her.

“Yeah, I’m ready.”

Never one to miss an opportunity to instill a little more pressure into their lives, Karen Dillard entered the makeshift green room and honed everyone’s attention right to her without a word. Rachel remembered Jamie’s assertion that it was finally the Olympic year and they’d survived to this point. It hadn’t been for lack of trying on Karen’s part.

“Ladies, before we get started today, I just want to leave you with a few things to think about,” Karen spoke. Her voice rippled in echoes over the concrete floor exposed around and between mats on the floor. She cradled her clipboard in her crossed arms. “As I’m sure we all know, the Olympic team only consists of six people and two alternates. While not everyone will be able to call themselves an Olympian after this summer, what everyone can do is their very best today. Only the top twelve ranked girls after today will make it to Trials. For eight of you, that means the end of the road. For twelve, it means just the beginning.”

Karen’s eyes settled upon Rachel’s like they’d been waiting to do so. Usually she looked at her with disapproval or impatience, and only occasionally some minute level of satisfaction. Rachel achieved almost everything she could in the sport up to this point – National titles, World titles, however many international meet victories – and she still wasn’t convinced that Karen liked her all that much.

“This is the most talented senior group the U.S. has ever had, and this will be without question the most difficult Olympic team selection I’ve ever overseen.”

The minor shock of what sounded almost like a compliment occupied Rachel’s mind right up until the start of the competition. All twenty of them marched in with their rotation groups to a warm, steady cheer. She couldn’t remember a Nationals that ever took place at an arena this big. She marched behind Jamie to vault with Lola right behind her. They lined up in front of the judges and faced one-fourth of the crowd. Some parents were there, but not everyone who bought a ticket had a familial obligation. Most were simply spectators who paid to see the country’s best gymnasts either hit their routines or melt down in highly publicized fashion. She smiled at the vault judges when they confirmed the line-up and checked her off as present. To her right, Jamie tapped elbows with her and lowered her voice beneath the roar of the crowd.

“My leo has been lodged up my ass for an hour. Why are they so high-cut?”

“My mom probably thought we’d score higher,” Rachel said.

They cackled together as quietly as possible. Even just standing and waiting for introductions made her feel nostalgic, if a little tired. In less than two months, the Olympics would begin. Was there anything that would happen beyond that? Would time continue to exist after the Olympics? She spent a decade and a half training for this summer and had given negligible thought to what could come after.

“Phoenix, welcome to the 2008 U.S. Gymnastics Championships. Starting on vault, from Nickel City Gymnastics, Jamie Macaluso!” the faceless male announcer proclaimed from overhead. Jamie stepped forward to wave. Cheers were cacophonous.

An air horn soared over the topmost layer of noise. She had no idea how Jamie's stepdad had smuggled one into every Nationals for the last three years without getting it confiscated.

"From Nickel City Gymnastics, Rachel Wallerstein!"

The cheers maintained abundant fervor. She stood forward to wave to the crowd before stepping back into line. The air horn burped taut and feverish, distant but somehow right in her ear. She began to sweat.

When the eighteen others were announced across all four apparatus, the warm-up chime sounded. Her vault group raced down the runway to get as much practice time as possible. Rachel pulled her purple suit off and tossed it down to a chair on the floor. Jamie's matching set landed on hers. The five of them converged upon the chalk bowl like sweating vultures.

"Here goes mostly nothing," Jamie said.

"I haven't landed one double since I got to Phoenix," Lola said. Aerated bits of white powder floated around their heads and rose in a slow reversal of gravity. "Janet almost made me scratch. If I fall, have fun in Beijing without me."

"If one more person says 'Beijing', I'm hanging myself from the high bar," Rachel said.

"Me first," Jamie said.

Lola groaned as though in pain. It was exactly how Rachel felt. She rolled her neck and focused only on what was immediately around her. If she looked up into the

crowd or at the other rotations or at the dozen cameras broadcasting their every twitch and breath to television, that's when she would lose her focus and control. She moved to the end of the vault runway and watched Jamie start her first timer. She rounded off and blocked off the vault table. She landed on her feet, rolled to her back, and jumped up to stand with ease. Vlad and Igor tag-teamed the board measurements and then Vlad gave Rachel a distant thumbs up. She took a deep breath and sprinted down the runway. At the board, she rounded off and blocked nice and firm. It was just practice, so she let a simple layout with no twist shape her body. When her heels hit the mat, she rolled to her back.

"That exact block next time," Vlad said when she stood to get out of the way for Lola. He gestured toward the table. "Big, big bounce like you got there. You do a nice, fast twist and wait for the ground."

She nodded and went back to the line. A sanitized Top 40 hip-hop track thumped overhead. Ahead of her, Jamie threw her Amanar and landed with a step forward. The crowd voiced their approval.

"Ready," Vlad yelled to Rachel through the wall of sound.

She ran down for her second and last practice run and did the exact same vault entry, except this time she went for her one and a half twist. In midair she always felt a little lost until the balls of her feet and the mat made acquaintance. She opened her arms out and dug her toes into the mat. She must've been a little underrotated because she squatted low and sat it down. She pushed herself up with slippery palms and entered the crook of Vlad's arm for a lecture.

“Too slow. Why are you holding back? There is no time for holding back. Do it fast and do it right. Stick it next time.”

He slapped the number bib pinned to her back and she took the stairs down to the floor. She moved through and around cameramen, stepping over cords and gym bags scattered everywhere. She didn't want to hold back. She wanted to stick it. It always seemed so much easier to envision than to enact, though. She took a seat after knocking their clothes off the chair with a swipe of her arm. The chime sang overhead and ended warm-up. Jamie stood at the end of the vault, chalking her hands. Her lips moved occasionally but her eyes stayed low. When her name was announced, the long pierce of the air horn welcomed her to the vault runway.

“Let's go, Jamie!” Laz yelled from some crevice of the arena. Rachel imagined him hidden in a corner like a spider in the dark with the innate ability to only appear when all risk of capture was averted.

“Crank it,” Rachel called to her. She wasn't even sure if Jamie could hear her. She knew that she wouldn't have if their places were switched.

Taking a large step back, Jamie activated every muscle in either leg and charged down the runway with speed that Rachel knew better than to ever hope to match. She watched Jamie do her Amanar a thousand times at least, but there were no cameras or ticket stubs in the gym at home. Jamie blocked and reached a full five feet, maybe even a little higher, above the table. She wrenched two and a half twists around in her single layout with ease that suggested that she was not attempting one of the hardest vaults in

the world. She landed with her back to Rachel, took a sizeable but single step forward, and then saluted with a bounce of joy.

Rachel jumped out of her seat and cheered with the rest of the crowd. Igor said a few quick words to Jamie and then she walked back down the runway. Rachel leaned against the podium to wait for her.

“That was one giant leap for mankind,” Jamie said when she drove her hands back into the chalk bowl.

“The step wasn’t that big. No way you get less than 16.200,” Rachel promised.

“Tell that to the judges,” Jamie said. She was poised to say something else, but her eyes met the lens of a camera next to Rachel for a millisecond and then zipped back to hers. They shared a grin – there’d be time later to recap without risk of it airing on television.

Her score came up as 16.100, which Rachel found to be too low. Some of the crowd did as well and a small but dedicated wave of booing emerged from a section suspiciously close to the source of Laz’s air horn. The head judge raised the green flag for Jamie’s second vault and Rachel clapped again, muffled only by her wrist guards.

“You’ve got this.”

Jamie saluted. A gasp spread across the arena when someone missed a release over on bars and belly-flopped to the ground. Rachel wouldn’t have noticed had it not been for the audible reaction. Jamie took a step back and repeated her same run. This time, she bounced off the vault table in a front handspring entry. She didn’t have quite the

same height that she did with her Amanar minutes ago, but it was still a block that Rachel could never hope to replicate. Jamie twisted around one and a half times and stuck her Rudi cold. This time she faced the vault table and Rachel could see the relief coat her best friend's light-basked face.

"Yeah!" Rachel shouted in the heat of the adoring crowd. She should've felt nervous since she was next, but all she felt was relief and pride. Laz's horn voiced its immense approval. Once Jamie was back on the floor, she pulled her into a hug. "That was so good!" Rachel said in a squeal. It was her turn, but that could wait.

"I don't even care if I fall on beam now. I don't think I've ever hit them both that well before." Jamie hugged Rachel back. "Don't think about anything, okay? Just do it like at practice. You know you've got it."

She inhaled this advice. If Jamie said Rachel could do her vault, then she knew she could do her vault. She pushed herself up to the podium and got some fresh chalk on her soles. All she needed to do was land it on her feet like she did two, three, even five times a day. She could still be Olympic all-around champion even with her easy vault. That was a calculated, mathematical certainty. Everything was accounted for as long as she did what she was supposed to do.

"The score for Jamie Macaluso's second vault, 15.95," the voice far above them all said. An approval from the crowd followed for about five seconds until the voice cut in one more time. "On vault for Nickel City Gymnastics, Rachel Wallerstein!"

She raised both of her arms overhead. She couldn't hear anything except the soles of her feet scratching the blue velour of the runway. Vlad adjusted the board, nodded at

her, and hopped down to the floor. The fluorescent arena lights danced across a few beads of sweat on his temples.

Her final nervous exhale collapsed her shoulders and then she took off. She rounded off and propelled her palms to the table as fast as she could, even faster than she had in warm-up when it brought about praise from Vlad. Twisting in the air, the crowd melted into a kaleidoscope blob of color and camera flashes and sound, none of which were distinct. She kept her eyes on the blue mat awaiting her impact until she was coming in blind and no longer could. She found the ground while her upper body was completely upright, a rarity in any of her thousands of efforts. Her toes curled into the mat and willed, begged, and forced both of her legs to stay still. Once her shoulders shifted slightly forward and her center of gravity obeyed her demands, she raised her hands in the air. Sound came back and the air horn led the charge.

“Just like that. Just like that,” Vlad said. He met her at the stairs and pulled her into the tight web of his arms and even spun her around once. “Perfect, Rachel, absolutely perfect.”

“I can’t believe I stuck it,” she said. The words came out wrapped in a gasp.

“Perfect,” he repeated.

The other girls in her rotation congratulated her, and shrieks and laughter comprised their own wall of sound within their gathered area on the floor. She got to Jamie last and they jumped around in a hug.

“Now you just need to do bars and beam for me, and we’ll be set,” Jamie said.



“And all I need is one of your vaults.” She felt high.

“The score for Rachel Wallerstein on vault, 15.100,” the announcement informed them.

She glanced up at the scoreboard. She had a start value of 5.5, which was no surprise, and her execution score averaged out to 9.6. It wasn’t a bad score, but rather one of her highest ever. The immense satisfaction of sticking it cold was still fresh, so she thought her score would be a little higher and got swept up into a touch of disappointment.

“One down,” Jamie said. Rachel tore her eyes from the scoreboard involuntarily and managed something like a smile.

“Three to go.”

Over the next and most stressful hour of her life, she had a small mistake on bars when she got off-balance on her Chusovitina and had to take an extra swing before her Gienger, thereby losing the connection bonus, but she recovered well and still managed to score a 16.75. On beam, she had a small balance check on her two-foot layout and a hop on her triple twist dismount. She frowned up at the scoreboard when it was announced that she scored 16.200. Vlad crouched behind her and kneaded her calves.

“Start thinking about floor. You go last.”

“They only gave me a start value of 7.0,” she said. It was supposed to be a 7.1 if she hit all her connections and planned skills. Her neck began to hurt from craning it straight back for so long. “What did they take away?”

“Make sure you’re pulling back on the double Arabian.” He made no attempt to conceal that he was ignoring her. “Every time you lean forward, you go out of bounds.”

He was still talking about floor exercise, which was not yet on her radar. Her self-directed irritation grew with every moment spent replaying the motions of her beam routine in her mind. She stared up at the bright LED standings.

1. WALLERSTEIN Rachel – Nickel City – 47.850
2. FUENTES Lola – Lone Starz – 47.350
3. SIMPSON Denise – Caliber Elite – 46.775
4. MACALUSO Jamie – Nickel City – 46.625

“Was I too slow between the Onodi and the double turn?”

“*Basta*,” he snapped and pinched her calf. “What does it matter now? You have one more event and you’re going to prepare by thinking about what’s already happened? You think that’s what champions do?” He sandwiched her right thigh between his palms and rolled it back and forth as if attempting to light a fire with her leg as the fuse. “You get a big bounce on your front double and get enough power into the front full.”

So he wouldn’t humor her running self-critique. She expected no less. She didn’t really care that she was in first place, or at least not when it was the result of subpar performances on her part. She was still commiserating about her previous mistakes when floor warm-up began, so much so that when she practiced her double layout, she let her mind slip away, balked in midair, and slammed to the blue spring floor flat on her back. She stared up at the scaffolding constructing the ceiling. Banners from sports teams decorated it like a horizontal Christmas tree. A few mentioned obscure NHL accolades.

She thought of Kellan, but only briefly. Maybe they made achievement banners for NHL players being the recipients of Olympic hopefuls' impulses.

Vlad slid into her line of sight from the left. The mood of the arena felt different, and she realized that many eyes were watching her but not in the way she was used to. He hung his head five feet above her.

"Are you hurt?" he asked quietly.

"No."

"Good. Are you done doing crazy things now, please?"

He held his hand out and she let him pull her to her feet. Pretending she hadn't just choked, she resumed switching off passes with the other girls and warmed up the rest of her skills without further incident. When she stepped off the mat and returned to her bag, she took a sip of water and watched Jamie warm up her full-twisting double layout. She landed with her right foot out of bounds. Rachel looked down at the black carpet where her chalky feet stood and squashed any stray thought that challenged the fortress of her mind.

"You okay?" Jamie asked when she popped up a few moments later beside her own bag.

"Yeah, just flubbed it," Rachel said. "I'm good."

"Good." She grabbed Rachel's hand and squeezed it hard. "Crank it. Don't hold back."

“You too,” she said. They were almost there.

She didn’t mean to, but when it was her turn and she was waiting for the green flag to go, she looked up into the stands. Small, insignificant faces greeted her from every angle. The movement of two waving arms caught her attention, and she zeroed in on her purple-clad parents. Her dad held his camcorder and her mom sat next to a man she couldn’t recognize from so far away. She rubbed some chalk to her palms and stuck her thumb up beside her thigh, her little signal for them and no one else.

“On floor exercise for Nickel City Gymnastics, Rachel Wallerstein!”

She released the deepest breath she’d ever conjured and stepped in bounds to pose in the corner. A digital beep pinged overhead and her new music pierced through the PA system. Bright, explosive classical piano sailed and soared around the strands of a violin. In her first pass, she shot through the air with the fuel of adrenaline and landed her double layout to her feet instead of her back. Her second pass followed immediately after, a front handspring into a front double twist connected to an immediate front full twist. This was her trickiest pass, the one she messed up the most in practice. She hit the spring floor and bounced forward but managed to stay in bounds. She thought of how many times she fell on it the previous day in podium training and a smile stretched outward to the crowd.

The music activated her muscle memory and she twirled to the center of the floor. Miss Lena’s dance demands played on a loop in her mind – *chest up, toes pointed, pretty hands, chin high* – and she felt almost like the prima ballerina that she wanted her to be. Her switch ring leap connected to her switch split leap with a full turn were by far her easiest elements and posed no issue. She pressed her weight into her left turn shoe and

spun in a double attitude turn. She knew where the judges would deduct from her efforts like they always did – a leg separation here, a stray step there – but even by her own standards, she was nearly flawless so far.

She took a moment in the corner to catch her breath and tumbled into two back handsprings to a double Arabian. Her right foot kissed the white boundary, and she panicked and stumbled over it. The line judge raised her flag and Rachel clenched her fists mid-dance. Her mind rerouted to Miss Lena who would smack her wrist and demand pretty hands if she were there with her on the floor, and so she shelved her anger and fluttered her fingers. The crowd was clapping along to the crescendo of her music. She ran one last time for her last pass, a triple twist. Landing with control, she posed with her left leg held up beside her cheek, collapsed in a stylized heap to the ground, and raised her left arm to the ceiling. The last note of music was punctuated by a flourish of her hand. Cheers accompanied the frantic pulse in her ears. She stood to salute the judges and, when the cheers persisted, waved to the crowd for two seconds. She jogged off the floor to where Vlad waited.

“What did I just tell you?” he asked once she was within earshot. Still, his arms circled around her and he patted the top of her crunchy hair. “Great job. Great meet. Great start.”

She responded only with drained, wanting breath and a single nod. Cameras descended upon her, but she squeezed past them to put on her warm-ups. Jamie came up and hugged her.

“Next stop, Beijing.”

“God, don’t remind me,” Rachel said.

They laughed together in the sweet release of tension and performance anxiety. Finally the day was over, or at least her active participation in it was. She drank from her water and stood with Vlad, Igor, and Jamie while waiting for her floor score to come up. At last, her digitalized name swept up to the top of the standings and pushed everyone down one spot. The judges awarded her with a start value of 6.3, an execution score of 9.25, and detracted an out-of-bounds penalty of one tenth. She finished Nationals with an all-around total of 63.500. She came to Phoenix with a secret personal goal of 64.000, and she couldn’t not think about her erroneous extra swing on bars, her subpar beam set, or her out-of-bounds on floor. Vlad hugged her again and she accepted a kiss to the cheek from Igor. Once her eyes tired of studying her underwhelming total, she checked the rest of the standings. Her shock materialized in the form of a gasp and a clamor for Jamie’s arm.

“Oh my God! Jamie! Jamie, you’re in third!”

“Holy shit, I know!”

They tore away from their coaches and back into each other’s arms to jump around like the human pogo sticks they trained their whole lives to be. Rachel stepped on the foot of a cameraman but couldn’t find the breath to apologize. Jamie had never finished on the all-around podium at a senior Nationals; the closest she’d ever come was fourth. Their coaches hugged them both, creating their own little nesting doll. Amid the cheering of twenty thousand people came a long, steady note from the can of the air horn.

The next hour evaporated by way of podium ceremonies and press interviews. It was nearly four in the afternoon when she reunited with her parents in the atrium. Her dad presented her with a bouquet of roses two shades lighter than the hue of her leo. When she ducked her chin to smell them, the strength of their scent made her eyes water. Her mom gently arranged Rachel's four medals in her hands.

"National Senior Elite Floor Bronze Medalist, and All-Around, Balance Beam, and Uneven Bars Champion," she recited from their inscriptions. The late afternoon sun from the windowed walls of the atrium glowed upon them all and highlighted the multitude of sunspots across her mom's face. Their eyes, carbon copies of the same dark brown hue, met for the first time in hours. Her mom's were turning red around the rims. "Just like we knew you would."

"Wouldn't it be nice to get those in Olympic size?" her dad asked her, nudging her upper back with a tap of his knuckles. She laughed and felt her recent frustration from her errors and her much earlier anger with both of them melt away like sweat to chalk. For once, they were civil. Better than that – they were happy.

Young gymnasts crowding the exit saw her leaving with her parents and asked her for autographs. She signed whatever they offered – T-shirts issued by the venue, leotards sold by the concession stands, casts, scrunchies – and spent about five minutes posing for photos. She felt as though she must have said 'thank you' to the entire universe by the time she finished and waved goodbye to the gathering. Back with her parents, she entered the hot desert sunshine with them and let it warm her face and soothe the soreness in her jaw from clenching it all week.

“So after you get washed up, we’re doing dinner with Jamie, Krista, Laz, and your coaches at this Italian place I found on Google,” her mom said. She cloaked her arm around Rachel’s shoulders and pulled her into her side. Her dad took her gym bag and carried it in his arms.

“Great.” Thoughts of tiramisu breached her post-competition mind. She didn’t repel them.

“And then after, I thought we could go for frozen yogurt with Justin Boedecker from that Valiant Management. Remember him? He sat right next to us the whole time.” Her mom rubbed her shoulder blade with warm, dense strokes. “He said he’s never heard of a gymnast with so many business inquiries. You! Can you believe it?”

“Wait, what?” Rachel blinked away from the low sun and at her mom, then her dad, while they moved together like a single unit of three parts. The pavement beneath her feet was scalding hot despite the barrier that the soles of her sandals provided. “I thought you guys said I couldn’t go pro.”

“Well, this is just a meeting. We’re not signing anything,” her mom said. “He just said he had some proposals, and it can’t hurt to hear them, right? He flew all the way here from Los Angeles.”

Rachel considered this and then looked at her dad with a swivel of her head.

“No comment,” he said.



“Adam, honestly,” her mom said. Rachel could hear the swivel of her eyes in her irritated tone. Her mom rubbed her shoulder, this time a little gentler. “If you’re not up to it, that’s okay. Maybe we could do a conference call once we’re settled back at home.”

She looked straight ahead at the parking lot and admired the way the Phoenix sun kissed the top of every car without discrimination to make, model, age, or color. Already the backs of her knees started to sweat, and out here there was no chalk to soak it up.

“We’re already here, right? We may as well,” she said, waiting for a smile to touch down on her mom’s face. When it did, she turned to her dad and poked his arm. “As long as you don’t break the scale at the register with your sundae this time.”

“No promises,” he said. His dark eyebrows glistened down at her. It was as though they wanted to tell her something, but she knew she was simply imagining it in the dying daylight. He lowered his head to kiss her forehead like every other time she reigned victorious, plus the times she didn’t. Her medals clanged against her chest in harmony with the bouquet’s rustling cellophane.

Penne alla vodka served as the perfect reward for her second consecutive National title, as did several consecutive hours of her parents getting along. While seated along a rectangular table at an Italian hole-in-the-wall near their hotel, she stole frequent glances of them talking to Jamie’s parents or the coaches or even each other with jovial equilibrium. Once, she even saw them smile at one another without prompting. Maybe they reached a turning point. Maybe she fixed them for good.

“Are you getting dessert?” Jamie asked from her left. They both finished about half of their respective pasta dishes, but Rachel was already full and pushed her plate away.

“Want to split tiramisu?” she asked, although she knew the answer.

“I hate that nasty, bitter coffee taste.” Jamie put her fork down on the perimeter of her half-eaten manicotti and nudged her plate back an inch in defeat. “I can’t believe we have to fly back home just to fly back out to freaking camp.”

Rachel grunted her agreement, or her disapproval, or both. She flicked her nail against the dessert menu stuck in the wire napkin holder.

“Hey, Rach, not a bad idea,” Laz boomed across from her. “Who wants dessert? Everyone get what you want. Dinner’s on me.”

“Okay, screw it. I want cheesecake,” Jamie said.

Right as Rachel decided to go for it, her mom spoke up.

“We’re going out for dessert after this, so count us out. Rachel’s meeting with that agent again.”

“You didn’t tell me that,” Jamie said with a sharp pivot of her head. Her eyes, no longer caked with the purple eyeshadow and heavy mascara of competition, sunk deep into shock or maybe betrayal. “What about college gym?”

“That’s still happening. My mom just agreed to hear his spiel again,” Rachel said, more rushed than she wanted. For years, one of their many shared dreams was to go to

college and compete and have normal lives for the first time. When college coaches courted both of them a few seasons back, Jamie committed to UCLA, which was not just a great school, but also something of an unspoken halfway house for former elite gymnasts who needed to transition into normal life and brick-and-mortar education after a lifetime of being homeschooled professional athletes but didn't know how. Unlike Jamie, Rachel was hesitant to move further than two hours from home. She'd never lived away from her parents. When she got accepted to Cornell as a legacy kid, committing to their gymnastics team seemed obligatory. She knew she became too defensive every time Jamie guilted her about the ocean and celebrities and a championship-contending team, but Cornell was a good school, too, and she couldn't stand doubting the choice she made to enroll there.

Their parents and coaches meshed a conversation about dessert into a conversation about endorsements and college gymnastics with the seamlessness afforded by years of existing within the exact same bubble of life. She pulled her finger back from the edge of the dessert menu right as her phone buzzed in her pocket. She held it beneath the drape of the red tablecloth.

*Kellan: so how's the view from the top of the world?*

"Is that him?" Jamie whispered, her indignation fading away. She grabbed Rachel's wrist and angled the phone so they could share a vantage point. "What are you gonna say?"

“Nothing,” she said. She caught her mom’s eye and attempted to smile the suspicion off her face. It was the only failproof tool at her disposal these days.

“Right, I forgot you can’t text him without two business days of deliberation,” Jamie said. “Have you talked much since you guys did it?”

“Can you shut up?” Rachel hissed. She paired it with a well-placed elbow to Jamie’s waist. Jamie smacked Rachel’s arm away with the strength of someone ranked first in the country on vault and first in the world on floor. Rachel sucked in a shallow breath when her bicep seared in pain and dropped her phone to the wood-paneled floor, where it clattered and bounced under the table.

“What is going on over there?” her mom asked.

“Nothing,” Rachel said with another smile. She ducked beneath the table before it could be scrutinized. Plucking her phone off the ground, she stared at his digital name. She was good at compartmentalizing her thoughts and always had been, but when it came to him, they never seemed to want to obey their exile, even when it mattered most.

From dinner she and her parents went straight to a frozen yogurt parlor. It was still seasonably warm out, so the idea of a sundae didn’t sound too bad, especially after her mom had vetoed her first choice. When they got out of the rental, her mom hurried up beside her and tucked some loose hair behind Rachel’s ears.

“Make sure you smile a few times, okay? You get so serious sometimes.”

“I’ll smile once I get some dessert,” Rachel said. When her mom gave her a scolding look, Rachel concocted her best grin, the one she reserved for photo ops and judge salutes. It made her mom laugh.

“You’re too much. We’re gonna miss you so much when you’re at school, you know. I don’t know what I’ll do when you’re gone.”

“My guess is you’ll continue bullying people about their flossing habits. The only difference is that your real patients actually pay you for it.”

“That’s right, Miss Freeloader.” She swept her arm around Rachel’s waist and together they walked up to the sidewalk of the strip mall plaza that the shop called home. Its pink and green neon sign was sandwiched between a tanning salon and a mattress store. In the window of the tanning salon, two girls a touch older than Rachel stood behind a cash register and bent over the leftmost girl’s phone. She figured it had to be about a guy. It seemed like the whole world knew how to deal with guys except for her. She imagined going inside the tanning salon, bestowing her phone upon them, and asking them to manage her Kellan conversation for her while she went next door and discussed her marketability with her parents over ice cream.

Her dad held the door for them. Inside the shop, the bright white vinyl floors and tile walls would look no different from a hospital if it weren’t for the accents of bubblegum pink and neon green on every available surface. There were only five tables and three of them were occupied by distinct groups of school kids. The fourth was held down by the guy she’d seen in the crowd earlier. He wore a powder blue dress shirt and

jeans, and his sandy hair was styled in such a deliberate swoop that she couldn't tell how old he was, whether that was twenty or forty.

"There's the National champ," he said while standing. "Is your neck sore from all your new jewelry?"

His phone disappeared into his back pocket and he held out his hand to shake hers. Rachel shook it back. Her mom pinched her hip and she smiled.

"Luckily, no," Rachel said.

The medals themselves were safely tucked in a soft knit bag in her suitcase. Maybe she was supposed to have brought them. The refrigeration systems of the wall-mounted yogurt dispensers began to hum loudly in sync. The four of them stood around the table as if preparing for a sacred ritual. She hadn't been to temple since her cousin Daniel got married over a year ago, but she was reminded of that feeling of being simultaneously lost and included that she got every time they went to service.

"That's two in a row now, isn't it?" Justin asked her.

"Two-time senior all-around champion, plus her third bars gold and her second beam gold," her mom said. She rubbed Rachel's back with enough fervor that it began to create friction and leave a hot trail.

"I'd say that calls for celebratory fro-yo," Justin said. He had the whitest teeth she'd ever seen and a broad nose that encroached upon both of his cheeks in a battle for territory. Still, he was kind of cute in an off-limits way, no different than when the men's and women's national teams had rare moments in proximity at international competitions

that served as unexpected reminders that the opposite sex existed. She pushed her phone further into her the depths of her back pocket.

They designed their own desserts on Justin's dime and squeezed around the plastic white table. She realized soon after that this had not been a chance meeting and he came prepared. He sifted through his brown leather laptop bag and then coated the table in plastic folders and printed spreadsheets.

"Before I get on my soapbox here, I just want to say that I know you're committed to Cornell, and that's great. College is important."

Justin slid a spreadsheet closer to her. Rachel moved her pink cup to make room.

"But we go to college to get a degree so we can start a career and make money, don't we? I did. I know that's your parents did." He paused to acknowledge both of them on either side of her. "But that's because me and your parents – we're not like you, Rachel. We're not generational talents like you. Almost no one is. That makes you valuable. That makes you *marketable*. You're ahead of everyone else – you already have a career. How much is a Cornell degree? It's probably going to cost you and your parents one-fifty, one-eighty. And that's after you spend all four years competing every weekend for their gymnastics team. When do you plan to get your homework done? During your beam routines? While you're waiting for your turn to go on floor?"

"Cornell is one of the best schools in the world and it's close to home," her dad said. While speaking, he lifted the printed spreadsheet and squinted at its thick black ink.

“Both of those things are true, definitely. But it’s also true that fiscally, it’s a bad choice. Actually, it’s a terrible choice. My friends in the industry – they don’t understand it. Frankly, I don’t understand it.” Justin pointed at the spreadsheet. “I did some rough calculations of all the prize money you’ve declined since you entered the senior level. At the bottom there, I added in my estimate of what that college gymnastics experience will cost you.”

She leaned closer to her dad and looked at the math. Most of it was correct, including the fifty thousand dollars she turned down for her gold haul at Worlds to keep her NCAA eligibility in good standing. She looked at the summation at the bottom of the landscape-oriented spreadsheet. Including her future tuition, it was just north of three hundred thousand dollars.

“The bottom line, excuse my pun, is that for the most elite of athletes like you, college athletics are a waste of your time and money. Brands and companies and products, they want you to represent them. The time to cash in is right now. There’s a lot of money out there with your name on it, literally. When you win gold in Beijing, you’re going to be an American hero. That sells. Four years from now, that might not be the case.”

“*If* she wins gold in Beijing,” her dad said. He put the spreadsheet back down with a splat of his palm and slid it back to Justin. “All you see right now are dollar signs. What if she doesn’t win gold? Can you tell me to my face that you’ll mean any of what you just said if she comes home from China without a single medal? We’ll still see value



in her. Her college team will still see value in her. Her friends and family will still see value in her. Will you?”

“Of course she’ll win gold,” her mom cut in. “For God’s sake, she’s the National and World champion. Have a little faith in her.”

Rachel looked down at her cup and watched her tiramisu-flavored yogurt melt in shiny puddles on either side of the dollop. The Sour Patch Kids she decorated it with at the topping station left artificial dye stains all over as they toppled to the bottom of the cup. She placed it on the edge of the table and felt her stomach curdle. Her dad set his cup beside hers and reached for her hand. The rough face of her palm brushed against his.

“I have no doubt that you’ll win. To me, you have no competition. But I’m not going to sit here again and listen to him convince you to gamble on that. We already had this discussion and you both know what I think.” Her dad stood, took twenty dollars out of his wallet, and put it on top of the spreadsheet. “Thank you for fitting us into your schedule, Justin. I’ll be in the car.”

His purple polo weaved past two tables of middle schoolers and left with only the chime above the door serving as a farewell. Once he hit the sidewalk, he went left toward the mattress store and then disappeared from the glass front all together. When she was little, she used to hang from his various limbs on his way out the door to work – clutching to his legs or upside-down from around his neck – until she got too big and too old and too busy to pay any mind to him leaving, especially since he never failed to come back. She sat still with the urge to follow him until it became a tangible lump in the back of her throat.

“I’m so sorry. He’s just jet-lagged,” her mom said in a tone about half as loud as before.

“I understand. If I could make every parent see the light, my job would be a lot easier,” Justin said. When she forced herself to look back at him, he was smiling like nothing had happened. He slid the plastic folder to her, as well as the spreadsheet and the twenty-dollar bill. “I won’t keep you ladies any longer, but the gist of it is in that folder – just some proposals and companies I’ve inquired about. The money is out there and it’s waiting for you. I really think now is the time to strike, but that’s ultimately your decision, Rachel.” He reached back into the laptop bag and gave her his business card. A logo of a shiny gold battle shield and sword shimmered beside his name and contact info. “I think your mom has my card already but take one anyway. And congrats again on your second National title.”

The three of them shook hands and exchanged some loose promises of talking soon and getting in touch. Rachel collected his paperwork. Her mom, after insisting Justin keep the money, tucked the bill into her purse when he declined. He held the door for them on their way out. She stood on the sidewalk and watched him go to a plain black rental car in front of the tanning salon. The desert night snuck into the sky while they’d been inside, a red and pink mix not unlike melted yogurt. She realized she hadn’t breathed in a while and felt her shoulders relax when she finally did. Ten feet away, the windshield of their rental car revealed that it was empty.

“Where’s Dad?” she asked.

“Probably on his high horse,” her mom said.

She ignored this and stepped around her mom to look for him. Every moment that passed with him unaccounted for caused her breath to wither. This had to be it. He left them for good. She was used to her mom and dad's tolerance for one another wearing thin, but never did she imagine she would have the same effect on him.

"Dad?" she called beneath the setting sun.

An elderly couple leaving the mattress store stared at her on the way to their car. Go ahead, she wanted to tell them, there's no better day to stare than Rachel-the-Spectacle Day. She'd even do a backflip if they wanted a show. What kind? Back tuck? Back pike? Back with a full? They could pick. There weren't even any lines here to risk going out-of-bounds.

"Dad?" she called, louder this time.

"Hey, yeah, be right there."

She followed his voice with quickening feet and turned the corner of the mattress store. The strip mall, she learned, was more like a mall-opolis. A Chinese restaurant, a laundromat, two insurance companies, a pool supply store, a Radio Shack, and more stretched back and further out to the right in a semi-circle path. She saw him too late and ran right into his chest.

"Where's the fire?" he joked. "You okay? Where's Mom?"

"Over there," she said. "I couldn't find you."

"You can't get rid of me that easy." He grinned and walked in step with her back to the front of the plaza. "Things go okay in there with Jerry Maguire?"

“He left,” she said. She didn’t know what else to say. The paperwork felt like an encyclopedia. She was suddenly ashamed to be holding it and tucked it beneath her arm and out of his sight.

“I’m sorry, Rach, but I knew I was gonna say something I shouldn’t, and I didn’t want to embarrass you like that.”

“No, it’s fine,” she said. She took her first full breath in far too long and felt her head lighten. The sky seemed brighter, even as it darkened around them. She wished she could go back in time just a few hours to when she won and her parents were ecstatic not just with her but also with each other. She linked their elbows. “Everything’s fine.”

When they turned the corner and reunited with her mom, she paid careful attention to their facial expressions and body language, looking for any and every sign that she should start bracing herself for what she’d feared for so long. However, they said little and gave her nothing to analyze. Her dad opened the passenger door for her mom and the back door for her, which she grasped onto as a good sign. In the car, the GPS guided them back to the hotel and did all the talking for them. Rachel stared down at the paperwork in her lap. Like everything else, it boiled down to a bunch of numbers. She flipped them over so she could no longer see the print and dug out her phone. An hour-old notification from Jamie greeted her.

*Jamie: I’ve prepared a list of reasons why you should not only NOT sign with an agent, but also transfer to UCLA*

*Jamie: 1. WE WOULD BE 2500 MILES AWAY FROM OUR INSANE  
FAMILIES... how does this not seal the deal???*

*Jamie: 2. Full ride!*

*Jamie: 3. We could go to the beach all the time!*

*Jamie: 4. The team is so awesome, and you know a bunch of them already! We  
could get a triple room with Lola and it'll be like camp but with 100% less Karen  
and 100% more hot guys*

*Jamie: 5. Because you're my best friend and I don't want to live across the  
country from you*

Either Rachel had reached the depths of exhaustion that reduced her brain to vapors, or she truly couldn't think of anything to respond with. Her fingers hovered over the keyboard and clamored for the right thing to say but nothing came to her. She clicked away before the stinging in her eyes materialized. The screen loaded Kellan's text from

earlier, the one asking her how her view from the top of the world was. He must've looked up the results from Nationals or maybe he watched it live on TV. She didn't know which was preferable, but at least she had an honest answer for him.

*Rachel: No different than on the way up*

## CHAPTER 8

### TWIST OF FATE

The Olympic Games were a month and a half away. If she wanted to forget that fact for a minute or a day, she was not given the opportunity. Reporters called the house daily asking for interviews. Her e-mail inbox was a graveyard of interview requests and messages from distant friends and relatives, sending their luck or asking her if she had time to hang out. The answer was a resounding no. She had no time to see anyone, let alone speak to anyone. She barely had enough hours in a day to train as much as she felt she needed to.

There were exceptions – the national broadcast crews came to film vignettes of her training and sit her down for interviews, but the only reason Vlad allowed this to occur was because USA Gymnastics made him. Other than that, their gym was off-limits to the news, spectators, and anyone except dues-paying families. As always, she could enter the gym and have no access to the outside world for a few hours. It was her, her skills, and her worries. She liked it that way.

Between Nationals and Trials, the training increased – she felt as though that could be said about every week, but this time it was true. Numbers and routines doubled, her conditioning ramped up in frequency and duration, and her upgrades suddenly became her routines. Gone were the days of trying skills for fun. Practice was now work.

“I’m sick of seeing those feet come apart,” Vlad snapped at her from beneath the high bar. She just caught her Gienger, but unless she was focused on keeping her toes pointed and ankles together, then sometimes she broke form and focused more on grabbing the bar than how she looked doing so.

“Sorry.” She kipped and casted up to a handstand and did a half-turn to switch to reverse grip. Soaring down, she flipped into her piked Jaeger with Vlad spotting her, then rebounded forward into her Pak transition to the low bar. She stopped and braced herself against the bar to await more criticism.

“Do you want to win in Beijing?”

“Yes.”

“Because I’m not so sure. Everything looks flat. Where’s the flight? Where’s the beauty? It’s artistic gymnastics, not some school playground. Do it again.”

She swallowed any hope of words and went back to the high bar to jump up and run through her routine one more time. Her shoulders protested this, but she didn’t know how to tell them that she had no choice in the matter. She did her routine one more time, thinking about her feet and her flight and everything else she had to make space in her brain for. Once, she had considered gymnastics to be fun. She had no idea what she’d been thinking.

“Better.” He watched her float down to the low bar and she stopped there, bending her knees so her momentum died. “I want to see that every time. Enough with



the lazy. This is who you are. This is what you do. Show some pride in that or don't do it at all. Okay?"

Her nod was the only acceptable answer she had at her disposal. He patted her back and sent her home for the afternoon, although she would come back at three when they trained vault. When she got to her car, she sat in the driver's seat in the wind of her air conditioning for at least five minutes. Her eyes shut and not a single thought crossed her mind. It was bliss to not think or move.

She spent her afternoon break sleeping, and then dragged herself back to the gym at three. It took everything in her to demand her legs to make haste toward the doors. She never voiced these thoughts, so she didn't think she could be called ungrateful or whiny. As long as she never complained, then her thoughts could be as miserable as she wanted with no blowback. Her mind became her sanctuary.

After warming back up with Katie, Jamie, and Annika, they split off and Rachel joined Katie at the vault. She prepared herself for a bad day. The Yurchenko double wasn't consistent, but if everything was right and she got just enough height off the horse, then she landed it upright about forty percent of the time. She couldn't believe that Vlad hadn't called off her training it yet so that they could instead focus on perfecting her one-and-a-half, but here they were, still trying to squeeze blood from a vault-table-shaped stone. She needed it for the Olympics, though, and even if he tried to call her off from it, she wasn't sure she knew how to admit failure to herself. She knew she would get it eventually.

“Think about the drills we do,” he said from the far end of the runway. She dabbed her feet in a puddle of chalk by the stained runway and listened to him. “Everything we do is about isolated power. Just enough to get up and out. It doesn’t need to be spectacular. You don’t need to reach the ceiling. You just need enough.”

Sure. Whatever. She coated her palms with a thin layer of powder and situated her feet at the end of the runway. He stood by the table. The plan was to compete the double for the first time at Trials so that she didn’t have to take a brand-new vault to the Olympics without any experience. Trials were in a month. She thought nothing of it, and of nothing at all, and sprinted down the runway. At the hand mat, she rounded off and jammed her feet into the board, locking them together as soon as she remembered to. She blocked off the table fast and twisted around two unfamiliar times. Vlad grabbed her waist as she came down. Her legs were staggered with her left in front of her right, and her chest was low, but she landed it.

“Not so fast with the pike down,” he said. He bent over at his hips to show her the error of her ways. “You had height that time. You see the ground coming in – you don’t need to prepare too early. Just open up in time and be ready. You can do this.”

She nodded and stepped aside to watch Katie, who had spent the early part of the year perfecting her own double. She landed completely upright but with a big bounce backward. Rachel high-fived her and went down to try it herself a second time. She breathed in her view of the vault table and breathed out her previous ugly attempt. Anything she ever competed, any of her skills or combinations or routines, had always been the result of repetition and belief in herself. If she gave a skill every piece of her

effort and told herself she could do it, then she had never failed to do so, even if it was just in practice. Why was this so different? Why was she keeping herself from accomplishment? Was she afraid of it?

Her feet pounded down the length of the runway. This time, her mind peppered itself with wills to success – big block, tight twist, chest high – that played on loop. She pounded her wrist guards onto the surface of the table. She was twisting off the table a nanosecond faster than she normally would, which accounted for a lifetime in gymnastics. Her body fought gravity with this strange little hiccup in its learned mechanics. When her feet came into the ground, she was still twisting with most of her weight on her right leg. A thump sounded beneath her skin. She fell onto her back and stared at the ceiling. Time paused. She felt nothing and then tremendous pain flooding her knee. For a moment, she assumed she had passed out or died.

“Oh. Oh.” Vlad repeated the only word available to him as he kneeled beside her. “Oh. Rachel, where? Point to it.”

She sat up on her elbows. She was afraid to look at her leg, but when she did, it looked structurally no different than it had before. Her skin was soiled with chalk and her knee was dressed in tape, but that was typical. She looked at her kneecap and focused on the sensation of sharp pain radiating around it. She pointed at the left inner part of her knee and then down the center of her kneecap. He swore in barely-there Russian and lifted her into his arms. She knew she was in pain but felt deaf to it.

“Go work out with them,” Vlad said to Katie, nodding his head to where Annika and Jamie were struggling through their bar workout with Igor. Katie stared at Rachel

with fear stricken in her wide eyes. “*Idi*,” he barked at her. Turning on the ball of her foot, she dashed away in bouncing strides across the gym. Rachel could pay no mind nor attention to his caustic attitude or her teammate’s shock, not when she was fairly sure she just destroyed her knee.

He brought her into his office and placed her in one of the folding chairs across from his hapless desk covered in binders, forms, and paperwork. He located a pair of scissors and kneeled before her to trim away at the tape. Even if she could speak, she wouldn’t know what to say. Her face felt numb and she realized she was clenching her jaw and breathing only through a small hole in her throat. She inhaled through her nose between squeaks of scissors.

Swearing again, he peeled the sticky tape away and threw it on the floor. Her knee was already swelling in a round, subtle curve across the top and inner side. She was close to crying but swallowed it down until her face stung with repressed pressure. He pushed the pad of his thumb into the swells and asked if it hurt. She nodded. He asked if she could try moving it. She flexed her knee a little bit but pain prevented her from much else. He stood, seeming two feet shorter than he ever had.

“I’ll call your mom.”

When her shock began to subside, it occurred to her that she would not be going to the Olympics. There was emotion assigned to this realization, but she didn’t know what exactly to do with it or how to show it. Vlad gave her a set of crutches that were propped behind his office door. She used crutches before for similar injuries, but never

this close to the apex of her whole life. Crutching out of his office, a lime green blur of Jamie sprinted across the gym and over to her.

“Oh my God, what happened?” Her panic was twofold, and Rachel wondered if she was making up for Rachel’s slack. “What’d you do? Is it bad? Are you okay?”

“It’s sprained,” Vlad said. He put his hands on Rachel’s shoulders. She wished he would put them on her knee and restore it to thirty minutes ago before she destroyed her future. “She’s going to the doctor. Go finish practice.”

“I’ll come with you,” Jamie said.

“Don’t. I’m sure it’s nothing,” she said, which was so stupid and untrue, but she had no other words at her disposal. How could she know until she knew? She lived each second as it passed and hung onto it desperately. She didn’t want time to pass. She didn’t want to know.

“I can drive you to her office,” he said. He stepped ahead toward the exit. She stared down at her knee and saw it swelling against her wishes. All the taping and icing and babying she’d done to it, and for what? It couldn’t withstand a few more weeks? “Rachel.”

She looked up into his face. Normally flat, a significant and unsettling horror laid beneath the surface of his sharp, pale features. She could see him attempting to rein it in. He was mostly successful except for stubborn hints that continued to rest upon his brows and deep in his eyes. It read of guilt. She couldn’t draw attention to it even if she wanted to, even if she needed to.

Outside in the blistering sun, it seemed impossible that her dream could die on such a luminous and perfect day. As long as she focused on the weather and not on the events, then she could continue to fool herself. Vlad opened the passenger door of his rusty truck and she pulled herself in with one leg. She hugged the crutches to her chest and he shut the door. The faded black leather stuck to her legs. She'd only been in his truck a few times, and never since she got her license and car on her sixteenth birthday. He joined her from the driver's side and turned the key to a miserable whine. Cool air breathed upon her and he nudged the setting up to max. Country music dawdled from the speakers; he muted it.

"I don't think it's torn," he said. She had no idea if he was speaking to her or to himself. "Sprain, we can deal with. Partial tear, okay. But I don't think it's torn."

She looked down at her swollen joint and was immediately aware of the sharp detour her life was about to take. It didn't matter if it was torn, broken, or amputated. It was all the same in terms of outcome. She looked out the window as they left the gym behind. The parking lot was near empty. Soon, it would be full of SUVs and minivans bringing the rec kids and the team girls to another evening of summer practice. Her car sat beside Jamie's in the sunlight, perhaps wondering where its owner was going.

"You must make a fortune owning this place and you drive a tin can," she said while still facing her window.

Tangible surprise flooded the cab, but not for long. He shifted gears as easily as he could with a transmission that resisted his attempts.

“I drive it until it can’t anymore. When it’s done, it tells me. Until then, I keep going.”

When he pulled into her mom’s practice, she was already waiting by her car with her phone to her ear. Regardless of how far they were from her, Rachel felt her eyes right on her. Vlad backed his truck in to the right of her mom’s Infiniti so there would be little in the way of distance to get to the passenger side of her car.

“Thanks,” she said automatically. She wasn’t aware that she was speaking until she already spoke.

Her mom came around to pull the door open while Vlad departed from his side. She reached her hands in to help and propped her cellphone between her ear and neck.

“They just got here, I’ll call you back when we’re at the doctor’s,” she said into the phone. Her eyes found Rachel’s knee and inhaled her bottom lip. “Yeah, we’re going there now. I will.”

She hung up and helped Rachel out. While Rachel stood on her crutches, her mom bent down and gingerly pressed her fingers into the swollen skin that Rachel had already begun to consider as not her own. This was someone else’s knee, someone else’s leg, someone else’s problem. Not hers. She didn’t have time for problems.

“What the hell happened?” her mom demanded. She stood up and spun her head toward Vlad. “What the hell did you do?”

“It was my fault,” Rachel said. “I underrotated a vault and landed bad.”

“We pay you to coach her so this shit doesn’t happen!” her mom shouted. “Where the hell were you? Don’t you pay any goddamn attention when they’re doing these ridiculous skills?”

“It was my fault,” Rachel repeated.

“No. It wasn’t.” Despite the midday sun, he looked paler than ever. “I’m sorry. I was right there. This is on me. It’s my fault.”

“It was my fault.”

“God, we don’t have time for this. Her kneecap is the size of a basketball and the doctor is waiting. Let’s go.” Her mom opened the passenger door and helped Rachel get in. This time, the crutches had to be relegated to the backseat. She felt asleep and yet wholly conscious. If she pinched herself, she might snap into reality. She didn’t try. Her mom departed the parking lot with all the horsepower her car could offer. Vlad stood in stasis at the foot of his truck, watching them go. She wanted to go back to the gym.

Doctor’s offices were all the same to her, regardless of their nature. They left her mom’s practice just to arrive at Dr. Harris’s, the orthopedic doctor she went to as often as she did eye exams and physicals. Her mom spoke, but Rachel didn’t hear her. She stared at her knee and watched it swell. Eventually it had to stop, she figured, lest it pop and blow her up from the inside.

In his office, she relayed the story and explained the way she landed, the sound she heard, and the manner in which it hurt. An MRI revealed her truth: partially torn ACL, sprained MCL.



“It’s not a complete tear,” white-haired Dr. Harris said. He showed them the MRI of her knee on his computer screen and tapped the worn eraser of a pencil atop her troublesome ligaments. “Just about forty percent. That’s doable. We’ll take that.”

Sure, Rachel thought, we will. You can have it. Take it, please. I’ll find another.

“Prognosis?” her mom asked. Her purse was clutched to her chest, and her eyes never left the rendered photo of Rachel’s knee.

“The MCL will heal first. Two to four weeks. The ACL, I can’t say. There’s always risk of a full tear. With stringent physical therapy and careful discipline, it could be back to normal in three months. I don’t foresee needing surgery as long as it’s allowed to heal.”

Three months would be damn near October.

“I can’t wait that long,” Rachel said.

“Rach,” her mom said. Her warm hand found her bare arm. “We’ll figure it out.”

“I need to train. The Olympics start in six weeks,” she said. She demanded her way and implored Dr. Harris with her most severe glare. How could he try to take her life away from her? Who did he think he was? “Can I still do landings? Can I train?”

“Of course not. It’s completely unstable.” He pointed at her ACL again. “If this doesn’t heal, you will tear it. I can’t tell you when or where that’ll happen, but it will happen. It’s like when your rubber band gets a little bit of a snip in it, but you keep using it anyway. What happens? One day, it snaps.” He looked up beneath his thick white

eyebrows and at her mom. “No weight-bearing or impact for at least two weeks. We’ll have a follow-up then.”

She tried to forget every word he said in hopes that it would reverse her knee injury and make it go away, but this was futile and only made her feel worse when the truth began to seep in. At the front desk, her mom paid the co-pay and scheduled another appointment. She held the door open for her, helped her out to the car, and assisted her entry. Only then did Rachel begin to cry.

“Baby, it’s okay,” her mom said. Her weight shifted across the center console, and her long arms pulled right around her, making Rachel into a little bundle. “Just breathe, honey. You have to breathe.”

When she tried, she choked on the air and the truth and her fate. What had she done to deserve this? This was a death sentence. There was no way she would be ready for Trials. If she wasn’t ready for Trials, she wasn’t making the team. Even if by some miracle she was cleared the day of Trials, she wouldn’t have the preparation and the training time going in. This was worse than losing time. This was watching time spit all over her dream.

“I have to train,” she gasped. “I have to train. I have to—”

“Rach, you need to breathe,” her mom implored her. She was crying, too, but Rachel didn’t care. She couldn’t care about anything else right now. Her entire world was imploding. There was nothing else.

“I have to go to the Olympics. I have to go to Trials. I can still practice. I’ll be fine.”

“Shh,” her mom whispered. She cradled her head to her chest and brushed Rachel’s stray hairs back toward her messy, chalky bun. Her mom’s suppressed sobs reverberated through her ribcage and into Rachel’s ear like they were hooked to an amplifier. “It’ll be okay. It’ll be okay.”

It would not be okay, and she was not okay with that. Her dream was over. Her mom may as well have just said it in plain terms. The more she didn’t, the worse she felt. The end was near. Worse – it was here.

## CHAPTER 9

### ALL ABOUT ATTITUDE

She sat in bed, right leg propped high upon its own kingdom of three pillows, with her latest MRI in hand. She studied her arranged ligaments and the ghostly, transparent lines of her femur and tibia. Everything beneath the surface of her skin had done such a good job of putting up with her demands and withstanding her training up to this point. Was one more summer of compliance that much to ask for?

From her closed door, she heard a knock. It opened before she acknowledged it.

“Hey,” her mom said, leaning against the threshold. “How are you feeling?”

“Fine.” She put the thick X-ray sheet on her nightstand and instead picked up a book she had stashed there.

“It’s just a few weeks, Rach. At least it’s not a full tear.”

“Yep,” she said.

She clenched her jaw which was still sore from clenching it overnight and flipped to the bookmark. She couldn’t remember where she left off and what happened last. She didn’t care. She’d trade places with any of the characters without any deliberation. Even if any of them were at a crossroads in their life or up against the most daunting of foes, at

least it wouldn't be her life and her work that had culminated to absolutely nothing. She could put on someone's life like an outfit and at least it wouldn't be her clothes that got dirty.

Her mom leaned her cheek against the white frame. The overhead light on the ceiling only grabbed half her face, and the shadowed side looked particularly fatigued. The sunspots seemed darker than normal even away from the summer sky.

"Maybe I'll move some appointments around tomorrow, and you and I can go do some dorm room shopping. You don't have a single thing for school yet. At this rate, you're gonna show up to Cornell with your toothbrush and a sleeping bag."

"I have practice tomorrow."

"What do you think you'll be doing with one leg? There's no need to do both the morning and the afternoon workout."

Vlad would have no problem keeping her busy on three limbs. That was not and never would be an issue. It was the way her mom spoke, like it was ridiculous to even think of it as necessary or to even want to, that bothered her more than the throbbing of her knee. She looked down at the open book in her hands and glared at the page to the left of the spine. The first sentence she saw froze itself in her vision. *There wasn't enough space between both doors*. She would commit it to memory until her mom left her alone. *There wasn't enough space—*

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said it like that."

“I’m about five seconds away from getting really mean,” Rachel said. She kept her eyes on the print, wondering absently what had led it to this point and how she had forgotten the story already. “Please shut the door when you leave.”

Despite her best effort, a shopping trip did precede her departure to national team camp. Not only did she and her mom descend upon Macy’s to pick out a lavender bedding set for her dorm room and a strange bedside contraption in the same shade that combined a lamp, a table, and a cupholder, but for about ten seconds she even felt excited about the prospect of taking a giant leap to college. It was only ever discussed in vague, abstract terms around their house, but the deposit was paid for and classes were enrolled in. She was going to college. Then again, she’d thought she was going to the Olympics, too, but that would be hard to do with one good knee.

At the first practice of national team camp, she brought her MRI and detailed notes from Dr. Harris at home to give to Dr. Christine at camp, who examined her knee with some curious bends and flexes while scratching her chin a lot. Karen Dillard did a worse and worse job of hiding her impatience the longer it went on. She clipped her red nails against her clipboard and looked at Rachel, who looked away and back at her investigated knee.

“Can she train or not?” Karen asked. Rachel knew the tone well. It was usually accompanied by her falling off beam or making a sizeable mistake, and almost always followed by an ominous speech about her dedication to the sport and her level of focus.

“I wouldn’t be comfortable with her doing more than bars,” Dr. Chris said. She put Rachel’s foot down on the floor and picked up her own clipboard to scribble upon.

“No tumbling. No vault.”

“Beam?” Karen said at double speed.

“Maybe dance elements or her lower-impact acrobatic skills. Dismounts, no, I can’t co-sign her doing any dismounts. No impact. No running. No hard landings. Mats only.”

Her knee looked fine in contrast to the amount of inconvenience it was causing. It kind of hurt, but she didn’t really know what pain felt like anymore, at least not in any typical scale. She only felt it if she made a conscious effort to feel it, and there was never a good reason to do that.

She left the trainer’s room with her MRI, doctor’s notes, and Karen’s hand on her shoulder.

“You can do a modified warm-up with the others. After that, Vlad and you can start on bars. We’ll see from there.”

She nodded and went back into the gym. The group was running around the floor. They were already onto the lap of split leaps, which she assumed fell under the umbrella of banned running. When the running ended and everyone took a seat on the spring floor to begin the synchronized stretches, she unzipped her jacket and slipped out of her pants, waiting for the right moment to jump in. There never seemed to be a right moment, so she took a seat among them and hoped for the best.

With Vlad and on bars, she felt normal and capable, until each set ended without a dismount. She despised how wrong it felt to simply jump off the bar after a routine instead of swinging into her familiar double layout. It felt like she only did half the work. When she hopped off after set number four, she stretched her arms at the shoulders and got some more chalk. Looking around the busy, noisy gym was a clinic in what she couldn't do. The narrow echo of Lola nailing her back tuck--back pike connection on beam bounced off the walls. Jamie's floor music, at this point simply white noise that her brain could filter out like the fan of a ubiquitous air conditioner, played overhead as she landed her double-double. Rachel looked down at the white cloud hovering above the chalk bowl and frowned.

"Feels good still?" Vlad asked beside her.

"It's fine," she said. She shook her leg out slightly while mentioning it. "I think I could at least try a dismount."

"No."

"Well, what am I supposed to do when we switch off?" she asked. She rubbed her grips together and felt the friction of chalky leather drag on either palm. This was the one thing that had never felt wrong, off, or unfamiliar. The bars were always home. Now they were her cage.

"You'll condition. Handstands, sit-ups, skin-the-cats. You'll work just as hard."

"But my routines—"



“Rachel,” he said. It took on barely-there silence that she’d come to fear. Usually it meant bad news or disappointment, which was so different from his usual anger or frustration. He dipped his head a little lower, three or so inches from her waiting ear. “You have very little time before the Olympics begin. You either let the knee heal and you go to Beijing a little behind on training, or you hurt it even worse and don’t go at all. You choose what you want to do, but I will only help you with the first one.”

As a little girl in her earliest years and levels of gymnastics, the Olympics always seemed like an obvious destination. Of course she would go to the Olympics and win gold. Why wouldn’t she? It was what she told everyone who asked about her career goals. It was what she wrote about in her entrance essay for Cornell. It was her only defining characteristic. Rachel, the Olympic hopeful. That was all she was because it was all she knew how to be. Or maybe it was all she let herself be.

She let out a heavy, cathartic breath and it blew around some puffs of chalk. It was what crying may have felt like if she was in a position to do so.

“Okay?” he asked in that same quiet tone.

“Yeah,” she said. She brushed the rough leather dowels against her palms one more time. Clouds flew off sideways and vertically up toward her face. It even got on her tongue and a little bit entered her nose. She was used to it, though. She had trained through it before. “Okay.”

Such a limited range of motion didn’t mean she couldn’t work out, as Vlad made quite clear. While the rest of the senior team rotated through all their events and did full routines for hours, Rachel spent the same amount of time conditioning her upper-body

and core, as well as stretching. Her turning leg was healthy, so she practiced her double attitude turn on floor what felt like a couple million times as well as her Onodi-double turn combination on the laser beam.

At dinner that evening, Rachel picked at a thirsty chicken breast and let the exhausted threads of nearby conversation swirl around her as she thought about the Olympics. If she didn't heal in time, would she still make the team? The official rules stated that nobody with a debilitating injury would make the team, but could possibly be an alternate, depending on the situation. She never once dreamed about being an Olympic alternate. She never even considered it in the realm of possibility. Flying all the way there just to sit in the stands and watch – she couldn't think of any worse of an end to the last fifteen years of her life.

She escaped out the back of the dining hall and went for a walk toward the woods that formed a straight line a quarter of a mile from the dorm building and the gym. Years ago, she and what had consisted of the junior team back then used to take walks and run around on the grounds of camp, but as the years progressed and the training became more difficult, any free time was instead used to sleep or eat. She hadn't been out here in a few months, maybe a year. The South Dakota sky was a maroon gradient. The night was early enough to still be hot and humid but late enough that it was beginning to wink into darkness. She ducked into the cover of the forest and took her phone out of her jacket pocket to call her mom.

“Hello?” her mom answered right away. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” Rachel said. “It's just me.”

“I know, but every time I get a call, all I think is that you must be hurt.”

“Too late for that.” She found a flat rock to sit on and put her legs out in front of her to rest them. The wrap on her right knee seemed heavier with each passing moment of the day.

“Honey,” her mom said, the verbal equivalent of a hug. “How’s it going? What did you do today?”

“I did my bar routine about nine thousand times, and then conditioning, and then practiced my turns another ten thousand times. It was so stupid. Everyone was around me nailing their upgrades, and I can’t even do roundoff.”

“What’d Vlad say? What’s Karen Dillard saying?”

“Just the same stuff about being patient and doing what I can,” she explained. She used the foot of her bad leg to kick a palm-sized rock against a nearby tree. It ricocheted off and scattered into the darker depth of the forest beyond her. “But she told us that she won’t take someone who’s injured to Beijing except as an alternate. She said that even before I got hurt.”

“Rach, I know you’re worried and I know you’re scared, but you have got to be patient and you need to listen to the doctors. They said you still have a chance to recover. If you try to rush it and do something you shouldn’t, that chance could be gone.”

“That’s what Vlad said,” she said. “But I just – I can’t be an *alternate*. I didn’t get all the way here to be an *alternate*. I want to win the all-around.”

The more she spoke, the more she unlocked everything that had been suppressed the second she stepped onto the plane to get here. Emotions didn't exist here. Crying was taboo; whining was a crime worthy of punishment. She sniffed and felt the sting hit the inner corners of her eyes.

"There's nothing wrong with being an alternate, Rach. We'll still be so proud of you. You'll still have so much to be proud of."

Rachel said nothing but continued to cry, her only contribution to the topic. What did it matter if her parents were proud of her? They'd be proud of her even if she never made the National Team in the first place, let alone won at Worlds, let alone was a favorite to be Olympic champion. They'd be proud of her even if she'd never done a single cartwheel in the sport of gymnastics.

"I don't think this is what you want to hear, but honey, there are girls out there – some of whom are your friends and teammates – who work just as hard as you and for just as long as you because their dream is to be an Olympic alternate. For some people, that's a goal. There's nothing wrong with adjusting your goals."

She didn't understand why no one would just say what they really meant. So many 'if's, 'maybe's, and 'we'll see's had been quilted together this week as an illusion of possibility.

"So you think I should just aim to be named an alternate?" she asked.

"I think you should aim for whatever you want, with the caveat that maybe what you want and what can happen aren't the same thing," her mom said. Now she even

sounded emotional, eerily similar to the crackling of a broken-up call due to bad service. “If anyone can do it, it’s you, but maybe no one can do it.”

And that was all she needed. When she resisted that hammered-in urge of hers to hold back tears, they finally flowed. She sobbed in tandem with her mom from thirteen hundred miles away and yet it was the closest she felt to relief since before her knee injury, and maybe even long before that. This summer had been a given for months, and now it was ripped away from her within moments of the last possible second.

Their crying continued only long enough for Rachel to feel numb as opposed to miserable. When she said good night, her mom insisted she stay on the line and talk a little bit longer, but she just wanted to be alone. She turned her phone off and trekked back to the border of the forest where the woods were thin and sparse, but nightfall made it seem richer and draped in mystery like the fantastical stories she read during her youth. Forests always seemed to be magical escapes in those kid’s books and fantasy movies, but she supposed her reality had always been off the mark from everyone else’s. Once she got close enough to clear the forest, she saw a flat rock on the edge of the timber that stopped her retreat. The gray face of it glowed lighter than the rest of the surrounding area. The night was blue around her face and black at her feet, but the flat boulder didn’t seem to know that. She secured her phone in her jacket pocket and stepped up onto the rock. The surface was slick but not slippery, weathered down by numerous decades of rain or passing animals. It felt like her favorite type of balance beam, not the ones that were brand-new and too sandpapery on the surface, nor too old and worn down to have any traction, but just enough of both.

She kicked her left sneaker off and flexed her toes in the turn shoe that she still had on from practice. The ball of her foot ached from the hours of work it put in today, but she pressed her weight into it and lifted her stiff right leg behind her. With her arms propelling her, she spun counterclockwise: one and then two attitude turns. She spun into another, spinning one and then two times around. She couldn't remember if she'd ever practiced her skills in the dark before. It was a strange sensation with no reference points or blurs of color passing her by with every spin, but she liked the way she didn't need to stop herself at some predetermined point, like she could just keep spinning for as long as momentum would let her. After stilling herself gently with her right foot on the ground, she took a deep breath and swung around in attitude again. One, two – the urge to stop there imprinted upon every fiber of every muscle – but she eeked around a third spin.

At first, she didn't know how to react. There was no one around to celebrate a new skill with or to tell her if her form was subpar. She smiled momentarily in the dark and attempted it again. Relaxing her shoulders with another measured breath, she braced her arms and again turned with her right leg behind her at her hip. One, two, and then three. She presented to invisible judges with her arms high in the air. No one had ever done a triple attitude, at least not that she knew of. Vlad would know for sure and so would Karen Dillard, but it also didn't matter. She was too injured to think about doing floor, and she could never get it consistent enough to attempt it on beam. She tried it one more time and got a little off-balance but managed to squeak it around. Rachel jumped off the rock with her good foot and put her shoe back on. Even if it never saw daylight or the bright fluorescent lights of a competition floor, it was hers, and she wanted at least that much. She crunched through dry grass on her way back to the dorm building. Along

the way, she wondered what it would be like to see her last name beside a triple attitude turn in the Code of Points and be immortalized in the sport forever, but she knew better than to allow her hopes to rise that high.

## CHAPTER 10

### TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS (PART ONE)

“Well, it’s looking a lot better,” Dr. Harris said in front of her latest MRI. The computer screen mounted to the wall gave his circular bald spot a bright glow not unlike the inside of a refrigerator. He studied the photo of her knee joint and tapped the rendering of her ACL and MCL with his pencil. “Inflammation is down considerably. And how’s the pain?”

“It’s not that bad,” Rachel said. Pain was rarely unbearable. She’d hobble around in agony if it meant she could get back to training at full strength and competing. Every day without full clearance was a day wasted. “Honestly, I don’t feel it.”

“Uh huh,” her doctor said. “Physical therapy is going good?”

“Great,” she said. Her thrice-weekly appointments involved all sorts of interesting medical contraptions involving balancing on a bosu ball, sliding on a strange ramp shaped like a rainbow, and jumping up and down a mini staircase. Did it work? She couldn’t tell, but she liked the way the treatments gave her an active role in recovery rather than sitting around and waiting for it.

He read the notes from Dr. Chris that she brought for him to read. They seemed to share the same outlook as far as recovery went, and hearing the same thing twice was



getting old. She watched with narrow focus as he flipped the first page of the report over, read it quickly, and looked back at her illuminated MRI. She crossed her hidden fingers behind her back on the examination table.

“Let’s get you back to running for ten minutes a day and see how it feels,” he said. He slid back in his chair and retrieved his brown clipboard off the standing desk behind him. The clip was stuffed with her notes from over the years, topping out to about half an inch worth of twists, sprains, and setbacks. Her parents’ health insurance probably owned a majority stake in his practice by now. “If running feels good, you can try some of your lower-impact skills with soft landings. Just make sure you’re on mats. Nothing landed on the floor.”

She sat forward with expectant eyes while he wrote quickly with a pen pinched between his thumb and pointer finger. She leaned even closer, imploring the shine of his head while his eyes were downcast. Finally, he looked back up at her with a half-amused quirk to his lips.

“Running is a good base point,” he said. “If you can’t withstand running, you can’t withstand soft landings, and if you can’t withstand soft landings, you can’t be thinking about hard landings yet. You don’t want to jump right back into your hard stuff.” He smiled wider. “No pun intended.”

“What if running and the mats feel fine?” she asked. There was little disposable time left for these experiments and she felt every last second of it dwindling. “What about one real dismount, just to see how it goes?”

“Running,” he repeated. He had even written it on his little pad with his letterhead imprinted on it in blue ink. Her destiny in his scratchy little print: *RUNNING 10 MINS DAILY. SOFT IMPACT ONLY (MAX 5) – NO HARD LANDINGS*. “The healing is going great. You’re young and you’re healthy. You’re in better shape than 99% of the planet. You will get there. It’s just not today.” He stood from his rolling chair and swung the standing desk around to type into her chart. “You’ll be back here next Tuesday. We’ll see then.”

“That’s a day before I leave for Olympic Trials. Could I be ready for landings then?”

“Probably in small amounts, but it’s more important that you take it slow and let it go at its own pace. It’ll tell you if it’s ready and you’ll know if it’s not.” He typed a couple words on the loud black keyboard while she frowned down at the sheet of prescribed punishment. A couple mouse clicks followed, and then he looked at her and sighed. “I would be a terrible doctor if I gave you medical advice that could end your whole career.”

“I *know*,” she said, more miserably and much more comfortably than she should have. “It’s just, you know, I thought maybe I’d be ready for Trials. All the way ready, not just running a few laps.”

“There’s still time. The human body is incredible. A week might feel like a lifetime, but as long as you give them the opportunity to, the MCL and ACL will be mending themselves nonstop over that time. You just have to be patient enough to let them do that.” He typed some more while he spoke.

She looked down at her right knee. An entire lifetime of work hinged upon two stupid strands of tissue. She couldn't say that she came to terms with her likely destiny as an Olympic alternate, but she began to accept it as a possibility and it was all thanks to one bad vault landing. If she had just gotten a better block off the table, had twisted a little faster, had opened up a little sooner – but there was little that could be done about it now.

“Okay,” Rachel said. She stood from the examination table which groaned softly beneath her and folded his little handwritten slip in half. “Running and soft landings.”

“Running in small doses, and just a few soft landings” he corrected. “Let's cap it at five per day for now. You feel anything off or wrong or painful, you stop.” He went to the exam room door and opened its slim metal handle, freeing her into the hallway of the office. “See you Tuesday, except then you'll be better than ever.”

He could not be more wrong. She would be going into Olympic Trials with no hard landings. She'd gone from favorite to win the all-around to alternate afterthought in the span of a month. In no way did she feel better than ever.

“I really hope you're right,” was all she said. She thanked him and began to hope that he'd be the bearer of better news when they met again next week.

She left the orthopedic practice and felt the hot July sun sizzle against the hair on her arms. The sun licked at the part of her hair. She dreamed of the AC in the gym as she often did during this time of year, although it had never been such an earned privilege before. She could remember early in her gymnastics career when she would feel annoyed

every June as the summer schedule came out at the gym and ate up all her time not spent doing her homeschool work. Now she longed for more time in the gym.

In her car, she felt her thighs become one with her leather seats. Unsticking herself, she turned on the radio and tapped the button to scan stations. While backing out of her spot with a cautious foot on the brake, a pop song bled into a talking head on the sports station.

*“You bring in a guy like this, he’s supposed to be the face of the franchise, their whole future,”* the host yelled against the heaving gusts of her AC vents. *“When his ELC runs out, what’re they gonna sign Barker for? Nine mil? Ten mil? He scored two goals in two rounds of the playoffs. How do you sign that for ten mil?”*

*“It’s more than that, Hoggy. This dude is the future captain and he can’t get the job done,”* a more nasal voice added. *“Cut the cord on him and get a big, big haul in return. Two first-round picks and a couple prospects for Kellan Barker, that sounds fair to me.”*

That was enough of that. She went back to the pop station and turned it down so that it was nearly inaudible with the auto-tuned voice only pitching through the AC every few notes or so. It seemed like any time she opened the blinds around her world and checked out what was going on outside of gymnastics, everyone was talking about Kellan and his team. The last time she saw him – she nudged the temperature knob down a little cooler as she recalled it – he didn’t seem very open to discussing hockey. He was back home by now. She wondered if she’d ever even see him again after this summer.

When she got to the gym, she parked in her usual spot to the right of the door. The afternoon sun boasted its daily apex and cast a long, welcome shadow of the gym right over her car. The darkness it offered emboldened her, and she plucked her phone out of her pocket.

*Rachel: You went home right as it got nice here. It's 95 degrees  
lol. Hope you're having fun at home in maple syrup land, you  
deserve it*

She gave him the two minutes she had before she had to go inside to respond, but he didn't in time. She put her phone in her gym bag and let it go. Inside, she went into the locker room and greeted the rest of the team. The Level 7s, 8s, 9s, 10s were talking each other in circles about practicing their new floor upgrades. Their season was already over, and now was the fun lull spent practicing new skills before preseason began. She wished she could say the same.

"How's the knee?" Jamie asked. She sat on the bench across from her and taped both of her ankles in easy, quick laps. Rachel pulled a fresh roll of tape out of her bag, ripped the packaging open with her teeth, and tore the seam off to begin winding around the joint in question.

"A little better. The doctor said maybe I can start taking a few landings when we get to Trials."

“Was he sure? What if you can’t?” Jamie asked after a long but loud pause.

Two of the 9s, Krissy and Michelle, argued over a potentially misplaced iPod. She tuned them out. Rachel tore the edge off the tape off once she secured the wrapping. It was tight and uncomfortable and made it almost impossible to move, but there was no other choice.

“Then I guess I don’t make the team,” she said. She ended the sentence with the light thump of the roll landing back in her bag.

“That’s impossible. There’s no way, Rach. There’s no way she leaves you off.”

“There’s absolutely way. Even if by some miracle she felt bad for me and wanted to take me, it’s not an option.” It was so easy to say with zero affect or stake in the gravity of what faced – she almost believed her own blasé delivery.

Rachel stood from the bench and plucked her doctor’s note from her bag. Vlad would never say that this new clearance of hers was a futile, meaningless advancement in her recovery, but at this point it was. A few laps around the floor couldn’t replace the numbers she’d lost and how far behind she was. The more matter-of-fact she was about that, the better. No one needed platitudes, especially her. There was no place for them in this sport.

She left Jamie’s pitying eyes behind and left to find Vlad. The tape stifled her range of motion just so, making her feel like she was hobbling with a peg-leg like a pirate in a film. She saw him across the gym by the rod floor, directly diagonal from the locker

room door. He brought red mats down from the wall and they landed in sparse clouds of chalky residue. Once she got to him, she handed him the note.

“The doctor said I can run.”

He took it without a hello and read the slim orders. His eyes went to her bandage and then her face.

“So what are you waiting for?”

At least he was still willing to bypass any and all small talk, even when no one else seemed to be.

Even though the doctor awarded her just ten minutes of activity, she felt strong and capable after the warm-up run, maybe even more than she should have. It was a tiny step, and a meaningless step, but she would take any sized step with just a single week of wiggle room. The other girls started on the rod floor to practice their tumbling or their new upgrades. Rachel was relegated to the spring floor to do dance-throughs. Her floor music played overhead on loop, so much so that it pierced her eardrums and became her only mechanism for thought until she could only think in piano C-scales and the whines of violin.

Three repetitions in and she felt more winded than she was used to. If she let herself think about it, it upset her, so she didn't. She spun into her new triple attitude turn, gritting her teeth when it became clear by the first revolution that she wasn't balanced. She fell out of it at two and a half and ignored the pierce of her nails digging into her palms with a caustic sting. Finishing her choreography, she paused the music with the

sound system's remote and took a water break. Even while standing alone, she tried to hide how exhausted she was. Across the room, the sound of Jamie tumbling traveled through the floor and right into her ribcage in forceful reverberations. She flipped high and tight into a double-twisting double tuck and landed on the chalky mats with a step back. Igor quickly criticized her best friend's technique, but it looked great to Rachel, and even better now that she knew she'd never get to do the same.

She did one more dance through by herself. Without any tumbling, she focused on her leaps and dance and extension and expression, all the things that were easy to forget when she had four tumbling passes to worry about in between. When it was time for her turn again, she exhaled every nagging thought through her nose and squared herself with her arms. Lifting her bandaged leg behind herself, she spun on her turn shoe again. This time each revolution was quick and easy. She put her foot down after three and smiled. Thirty seconds later, the music stopped and she stood up from her final pose.

"How's it going over here?" Vlad asked her, approaching the white boundary on the blue floor between her and the others. She grabbed her water and nodded.

"Okay," she said.

"Knee's good?"

"It feels fine." She raised it by two inches and shook the offending leg slightly, exaggerating its presence. "I swear I could take a few landings and be fine."



“And then you make it worse, and you’re done for good,” he said. He kneeled down to her right and kneaded her right quad in familiar, firm rolls. “I think after practice we need to give Karen a call. Tell her what we’re dealing with before we get to Trials.”

“I think she knows,” she said. She set her gaze at the wall covered with banners from meets of past, equipment sponsors, and colleges that granted scholarships to past gymnasts. With loud, squeaky drives into the rod floor, Annika tumbled beneath the banners and into her full-in. She stumbled backwards but landed it to her feet.

“She knows you’re hurt. She doesn’t know you’re on the brink of being cleared for bars and beam, and that in a few weeks you might be fully recovered.” He lowered his hands, bypassed her tape job, and rubbed her calves. “No matter what team she puts together without you on it, there’s a big hole on beam and a massive hole on bars. They need you. We try and petition you on as a specialist, and by the time you’re in Beijing, you’ll be fully cleared.”

“‘No one with a debilitating injury can be selected to the team.’ It’s written in the selection procedures. If I only do two events at Trials, it’s obvious to everyone that I’m hurt.”

He rubbed in fervent passes of his palms. Katie tumbled down the rod floor into her front double twist and fell to her hands and knees when she over-rotated. Despite the fall, she jumped up with a grin. Michelle stumbled around and mimicked Katie with an impressive splat into the nearby foam pit. Giddy, girlish laughter rose in a chorus of fifteen summery voices.

“What do you want, Rachel?” Vlad asked. He was so quiet that she barely heard him. His windbreaker pants dragged across the floor when he switched sides to rub her left quad, pushing and swirling her blood around to dissolve her lactic acid.

“I want to be named an alternate and cheer my friends on as they win team gold.”

His ensuing silence didn't bother her because there was nothing else to be said. That was best-case scenario at this point and they both knew it. She was getting more comfortable with appearing to be at peace with it. No one had to know that she bawled in the shower last night and threw every one of her soap bottles against the tile wall over and over again until the sounds of impact they made were loud enough to replicate the way she felt. No one had to know that she didn't fall asleep until one last night because she spent the previous three hours crying beneath her pillows until the heat of her own breath nearly suffocated her, all the while wondering if it was better to just scratch from Trials and withdraw from contention altogether. No one had to know.

“It's still worth it. We'll get you ready on bars and beam and you'll prove that you belong there. Do it for yourself.”

She nodded, accepting her fate once again, a constant process that never seemed to stop repeating itself. How many times could she come to terms with the exact same thing? And why did it only get more difficult each time?

When he finished with her legs, he stood and gave her shoulder a pat with a simple, easy finality that was enough to make her cry. She refused.

“I saw you working on your turn. Triple?”

“I’ve just been practicing it. It’s not really consistent yet.”

“Let me see,” he said. He stepped back by six inches and crossed his arms, preparing for judgement.

She swiped the sole of her turn shoe against the floor a few times and felt the scratch of friction travel up her leg in fuzzy sparks. Bracing her arms, Rachel swung into the turn, keeping her back leg high and steady. She could feel the pull of it in her core and the demand it placed upon every muscle group to be so precise and balanced. She spun three times, using Vlad as her reference point. Stopping without a wobble, she finished and presented with her arms held high.

“I like that. Keep working on it.” He patted her shoulder again. “Knee feels good?”

“It feels fine,” she insisted.

He nodded, considering this. He rubbed his shadowed chin and nodded toward the balance beams that were arranged like battle front lines.

“We’re moving to beam in a few minutes. Do a full set on the laser beam and we’ll see where we’re at.”

Spending the next two hours of practice within the same ten-foot radius as the rest of her teammates was a welcome change of pace, but since she was the only one not on a high beam, she still felt as though she were part of some strange B-team that barely qualified her as a gymnast. Rachel dragged the long, soft padding of the laser beam to the ground about four feet to Jamie’s left. In tandem, she, Jamie, and their younger

compatriots warmed up with a series of complexes – walking the length of their beams on their toes, forward and back; high kicks, forward and back; split leaps, down and back. Rachel gave these little exercises her best effort as she knew she wouldn't be doing much else today.

“It's good news that you can do beam, right?” Jamie asked from four feet above her.

“If you count this as beam,” she said. “I can't even do a dismount.”

“Well, it's still better than nothing,” Jamie insisted. She wobbled on a mistimed split leap but recovered with some whirls of her arms. She leapt for her last one of the set and stopped at the edge to watch Rachel. “I bet you'll be ready by Trials. You've been super careful, and it's been three weeks already.”

She didn't respond.

“You have to come,” Jamie said. Desperation implored the soft tone for only her to hear. “I wouldn't even be in contention for the team if it weren't for you.”

“You have two of the hardest vaults in the world and they may as well hand you the gold medal on floor. You were never not going to Beijing.”

“But not if it weren't for you being here with me,” Jamie said. She practiced her full turn and did it perfectly, then gave a sidelong glance to Rachel. “I would never have gotten this far if it were just me by myself in the gym every day, or at all the meets, or at camp. Half the fun is that you and I get to do everything together.” She practiced another full turn and wobbled slightly, sticking her leg out to the side to check her balance, but

saved it. “Lola and Denise and all them – when you’re the only elite at your gym, I don’t know how they do it. I mean, with Denise, her parents make her so I guess she doesn’t have a choice, but I know I could never do this by myself. And after all this, if you’re not at the Olympics right next to me... It won’t be the same. It won’t even feel right.”

Tiny titters of whispers and hushed conversations slowly rose from the far right beyond Jamie’s beam. As always, if she and Jamie talked, then everyone else took it as permission to do the same. There were plenty of bad habits they’d imprinted upon their teammates over the years, not the least of which was constantly talking when they weren’t supposed to, but how could they not when there was always so much to say? There wasn’t a single move that Rachel had ever made in the world of gymnastics that Jamie hadn’t been right next to her for. They were a team in every sense of the word, from the Nickel City team to the national team to simply being two halves of a whole.

Rachel felt pressure in her forehead and sinuses and chin and cheeks. The more she tried to stifle it, the more the pressure expanded and pressed against her skin like helium to a balloon. She dug her toes into the soft cushion of the laser beam and spun into her double turn. She was a little off and wobbled into a balance check.

“You too,” she whispered.

“What?” Jamie said.

The high-pitched roar of neglectful whispers traveled under, over, and between the thunks and slams of back tucks and punch fronts onto hard, wooden balance beams. She sank her teeth into her bottom lip and spun another two times around. She completed

it with no errors, not even a wobble. She squeezed her eyes shut, let the sting dissipate, and snapped them back open.

“I said you too. There’s absolutely no way I could’ve done any of this without you.”

“What part of ‘work your upgrades’ do you think means ‘talk?’” Vlad demanded while facing all of them head-on from the ends of their beams. “Enough with the mouths.”

Silence followed just as he intended, but it was punctuated by the sounds of hard work that made her feel at home. Jamie landed hard on the beam following a beautiful standing Arabian. Rachel could feel the force of it radiating in her toes and fingers. It was a good thing, her best friend being a lock for the Olympic team. It was a great thing. She did believe that, but no more than she wished that she could say the same thing about herself.

Once practice was over and they were dismissed, the raucous continued in the locker room and created a ringing in her ears. All she wanted to do was go home and sit in front of the TV with an ice pack until she was tired enough to go to bed. The universe owed her that much. She unwound the constricting tape and extended her leg out fully just because she could. Her knee took its own breath of relief.

“Let’s do something fun tonight,” Jamie said beside her, followed by the rip of tape pulling off her ankles. “We should go to Barnes and Noble. I have to get one of those Spanish brush-up books for the UCLA placement exam.”

Rachel shrugged and slipped into her pink flip-flops. Her skin on her toes matched the hue from the abuse they took today. It was more unusual to not see them looking angry and inflamed.

“I’ll buy us those cookies that are the size of a tire. Please?”

“I should ice my knee, and I think my dad’s making dinner.”

A few locker doors slammed in tandem. A pop song straight off the set of a Disney show screamed from someone’s iPod. Its thin electric beat sounded like a tin can falling down concrete stairs. When she stood to leave, the sound of it followed her out even as she distanced herself further and further away.

Despite being seven at night, the heat withstood their time spent inside and she felt herself sweating the second they stepped outside. Jamie was quiet and so was Rachel. A group of booster club moms stood in a circle on the blacktop, arms folded and designer purses slung high on their shoulders while they took turns talking over one another. Occasionally she was recruited by them to take home flyers or notes or chains of gossip to her mother, but today no one acknowledged her. She got all the way to her car before Jamie broke the silence.

“I know you’re mad at me,” Jamie said. “It completely sucks. If you don’t make the team, it’ll be so wrong. Everyone knows you’re the best in the world. If they make an exception for anyone, it should be for you, and if I were you right now, I’d be pissed at everyone too. But it just kind of feels like you’re mad at me, and I don’t want you to be. If I did something, I’m sorry.”

“You didn’t do anything. No one did anything.” She unlocked her car with a friendly beep.

“But we just said that’s not true. There is no me without you, or you without me, don’t you get that? The Golden Girls and all that – yeah, it’s stupid, but it’s true. It was always supposed to be us going and sweeping the event finals, and now maybe it’s not, and I hate that, but I hate that maybe you’re mad at me for it more,” Jamie said. “If our places were switched, I’d still be happy for you.”

“Of course I’m happy for you!” Rachel insisted. Why could no one just leave it at the level of basic fact – the Olympic team would not include her. Full-stop. The emotion surrounding that turn of events didn’t matter, and yet she was the only one who seemed to realize that. “Why does everyone keep bringing it up? I get it. I don’t need to keep being reminded. I’m not mad at anyone. I’m just accepting it and maybe everyone else should try to do the same.”

At that exact moment, something either offensive or scandalous caused the huddled clique behind them to burst into nervous laughter. It brought about an even warmer and more uncomfortable feeling, like being on the perimeter of a joke, even if it didn’t involve her in any way. Jamie stared at her for the duration of the outburst and beyond. Her eyes always seemed to know exactly where to look upon Rachel’s face for the truth, be it a sightline set too low or a flare of her nose. Sometimes Rachel was convinced they knew one another better than they knew themselves.



“I’m sorry, Rach,” she said. She put her bag down to the hot pavement and pulled Rachel into big, unabashed hug. “I’m so, so sorry. This sucks so fucking bad. I’m so sorry.”

And so went the last of her resolve to put on a complacent face. She was not complacent and she was not at peace with her fate, and so what was the point of hiding that from the only person who knew her better than herself? She pressed her eyes into Jamie’s shoulder and hugged her back just as tightly.

“I can’t believe it.” She strung the words together through thick gasps. “Why now?”

“I’m so sorry.” Jamie continued to repeat it over again, the refrain of a song all their own. It didn’t make her feel any better. “You belong on the team and everyone knows it. The all-around is yours and everyone knows it. No stupid knee sprain will ever change that.”

Jamie’s shoulder became so damp beneath the weight of the bridge of her nose that it simply transferred moisture back to Rachel’s skin. It was such a familiar feeling, constantly feeling suffocated either by her own hand or by the nonstop whiplash of her world at large. She sniffed and forced her eyes to shut tightly.

“I promise I really am happy for you,” Rachel said. “I know you’re gonna kill it.”

“I know you are,” Jamie said. “It should be both of us, though.”

It wasn't up to them to make that call anymore than it was up to them to put the team together and prevent the failures of their bodies to withstand their demands. It was nice to imagine it, though.

She didn't commit to going shopping later, but said she'd let Jamie know. Alone in her car, she turned on the engine and checked her phone. The only notification she had was from Kellan, received almost three hours ago. She clicked on his name and the screen gave life to a picture he sent of himself on the shore of a lake. In the background behind his self-portrait, a Golden Retriever played by the shallow edge of the water. A pink inner tube was further back on the water, no bigger than a speck on her screen. Kellan's face took up more than half of the frame with his big smile and two fake front teeth. His eyes caught hers, and she stared for too long before reading his accompanying message.

*Kellan: maple syrup land = sweet. day at the lake with my sister. not as hot here but I'm cool with that :)*

*Kellan: been wondering how u are. I thought u were mad at me honestly. plus u must be so busy. didn't want to bug u*

She pressed her thumb into the arch of her right eyebrow and swallowed a sigh. He probably didn't even know about her injury, not that he could do anything to change

her fortune. The thermometer on the dashboard ticked down from 94 to 93. She rolled her neck around in a circle and typed.

*Rachel: I was never mad at you, or at anyone but myself*

*Rachel: I thought I was losing focus. The crazy thing is I don't think I was ever unfocused. I think I was TOO focused*

*Rachel: It's too much to say over text, but I've had a lot of time to think about everything, and I just wanted to say sorry and maybe we can start fresh in the fall if you want. If not, no problem, and have a good rest of the summer!*

She read her messages back to herself once and then two times, memorizing her own words. Maybe it was too little too late, but it felt good to try and clear the air. Even if they never spoke or saw each other again, she would know that she tried to make peace. He didn't answer right away, but instead of waiting to see if he would, she put her phone aside and started the drive home.

Backing out of her usual spot, the shadow that coated the whole parking lot welcomed her as she left for the day. The white Nickel City Gymnastics sign and its shaded gymnast logo guided her exit, just like it had welcomed her and bid her farewell for fifteen straight years. She had never given thought to the fact that one day she'd leave practice for the last time, but it began to seem inevitable and sooner than she was ready to admit.

## CHAPTER 11

### TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS (PART TWO)

Fireworks. That's what she was reminded of when faced with the popping lights of camera flashes. Whether they were a foot from her face or high above stands in a packed arena, they always resembled a monochrome light show reminiscent of the Fourth of July, at least until they reached the apex of their power and fizzled back into the nothing they were born from.

"Taking questions is Rachel Wallerstein of Nickel City Gymnastics in Buffalo, New York. Rachel is the 2007 World all-around, balance beam, and uneven bars champion, and the 2007 and 2008 National champion. Let's start with you there in the front." Donna, the lone soul at the helm of Public Relations for USA Gymnastics, pointed at a skinny man in the front row wearing a gray sweater vest. He stood from his folding chair and held a voice recorder in midair facing Rachel.

"Ken Ballast from the Minneapolis Times. Rachel, could you describe exactly where you are in terms of recovery with your injury? And could you explain how ready you expect to be in time for Beijing?"

She pushed her loose hair behind her ears. Her national team windbreaker rustled with every degree of movement. A few camera flashes went off again like her own personal fireworks show, or at least thinking of them as such made pre-competition press summits seem a little less like indentured servitude

“I sprained my MCL and partially tore my ACL about a month ago. It’s not the first time, so now my knee is a little unstable. I’ve been doing physical therapy and talking to the doctors and whatnot. They think I’ll be ready to resume full training in about two weeks.”

The flashes pierced at the conclusion of her answer. She clenched her toes inside her shiny white sneakers and tried to find somewhere to look. The rolling TV cameras in the back of the room? The red-haired reporter in the third row filing her nails? The antsy guy in the first row scribbling her every word on a notepad?

“But you intend to compete at Olympic Trials tomorrow, is that still the case?”

“Yeah, I’ve been cleared to do bars and beam.”

“Given the fact that there’s a rule in place preventing injured athletes from making the team, do you see any reason to compete tomorrow? And do you think that rule is fair?”

She pinched the hem of her jacket beneath her thumb and forefinger. It was loud and obnoxious, but warm and comfortable; they were required to wear it whenever they represented the national team. She looked at one of the several microphones gathered on the table in front of her and wished it would speak for her.

“Yes, I see a reason to compete tomorrow. I’m showing I’m getting close to one-hundred percent and that my bar and beam routines are ready.”

“Do you expect to be named to the team at the conclusion of Trials?” he repeated. The voice recorder inched a little closer to her. He was ten feet from her but could have been within three inches and it would feel no different.

“No, I don’t.”

“So then can you explain why—”

“Because I want to,” she said, suppressing none of her bottled-up evisceration. “Is that okay with you?”

He opened his mouth, closed it, switched off the voice recorder, and sat back down. The rest of the press picked up his slack and asked her more questions. Her patience was a drought by the time her media availability ended and she was free for the day. She left the conference room through the side door for personnel and walked right into Karen Dillard, who lacked her clipboard for once.

“Press is a good thing,” she said. Her eyebrows flattened and yet she looked amused, or at least more amused than her tone of voice implied. “A little spotlight on gymnastics every four years doesn’t hurt. Sponsors keep us afloat. You’re the face of this program, Rachel, you should know that by now.”

“I was the face,” Rachel said. She brushed past Karen with their jackets wisping off one another. “Excuse me.”

Pressure seized her bicep and yanked her back. Karen held her grip just long enough to pull her close and keep her attention.

“*Are*,” she re-emphasized, as thin as a knife. “You’re on the front page of every newspaper in the country. Soon it’ll be every one in the world. Now, no one is blaming you for getting injured, especially not me, but you might consider conducting yourself with some dignity this weekend. Yeah, it hurts. Yeah, it sucks, but this is how it is. Either accept it and be supportive of your teammates or go home.”

“My teammates are the only reason I’m here.” She shook her arm, pulling herself away and free of Karen’s hand. Unimpeded, she made a second attempt to exit. She only got about five feet away before Karen’s voice followed her.

“I wouldn’t have told you this otherwise, but I guess it doesn’t really matter now – I don’t think you could’ve beaten Wan or Varlamova in Beijing. Between your downgrades and your inconsistency this year, I don’t think you could’ve pulled it off. Maybe it’s better that you’ll never have to know.”

Her feet continued to move, but this time in the opposite direction back where she came from. All her movements were automatic, as if carved into muscle memory with the repetition of routine. She cocked her arm back and then forward and hit Karen’s nose hard enough that it crunched beneath her middle knuckle. The blood that dribbled from her nose was the same hue as their matching gradient jackets.

“Good luck explaining that to the sponsors,” Rachel said. She flexed her fingers, conscious but not sentient of the pain brewing beneath her flesh. Her hands buzzed as they tremored. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Later, she began to worry that she would be disqualified from Trials or maybe even arrested, but when no cops showed up to her hotel room door that evening, she

decided she was in the clear. The following morning, she woke up feeling the most well-rested she could remember in recent memory. She rubbed her eyes and looked across the room. Barely-there clicks of her dad's laptop keyboard became audible only when she watched him type. The curtains blockaded the window from any proof of sunlight.

"Where's Mom?" She pushed herself up to sit as she spoke. Her knee protested with the agonizing pinch of tight pain that greeted her every morning. Once she got up and stretched, it would improve. Like everything else, it needed a little coaxing along to play nice with her.

Her dad looked her way and finally smiled as if remembering to.

"She's getting coffee. How'd you sleep?"

"Great. Almost too good."

"Yeah?" he said. "Knee's okay?"

"Knee's fine."

That was all that could be said about it, so she didn't try to fluff up or drag out the subject. It needed to be healed by today; it didn't manage to do that. The more she pretended to be at peace with that, the easier it became.

Her mom returned to the room with coffees and Rachel rehashed the same status report about her knee. After taking a shower, she and her mom stood in the bathroom in front of the mirror and prepared her hair. This bathroom was bigger than the one they were forced to work with during Nationals, but her mom didn't mention it at all. Rachel stared at her reflection in the mirror and studied the way her hair created smooth



roadways to the back of her head with every tug of her mom's brush. While she worked, the shiny glass of her eyes created a veneer that the light danced across. A fat teardrop spilled to her mom's left cheek and she brushed it away with her thumb.

"I'm sorry," she said behind Rachel's head. Shame buried itself in a dry knot in her voice. She wound the length of Rachel's hair around the high point on the back of her head, making a perfect bun shape.

"It's fine." Rachel held the pack of hairpins up for her mom to grab at will.

"You've been so strong throughout this whole mess." She fumbled for a bobby pin and then shoved it into the mass of her hair. "You have so much to be proud of. You'll never regret coming here and showing everyone how hard you've worked and cheering on your friends. You're doing the right thing."

"I know."

Her mom's tears upped their frequency while she stabbed pins in a circular pattern around Rachel's final competition bun. She doused it in hairspray, secured a few white clips atop baby hairs, and wrapped the bun in a white metallic scrunchie. Once Rachel's hair was styled and glued down with the power of clips and product, she turned her head slightly to the left and right to examine it. It looked just as perfect as it always did.

"I know the answer already, but I brought some glitter spray," her mom said. She rubbed Rachel's shoulders after sneaking another tear away with a quick brush of her thumb.

She couldn't remember the last time she had imbibed in hair sparkles. It fell out of fashion years ago, going the way of velour leotards and braided buns into the realm of gymnastics faux pas. Trends aside, Karen always banned their use of it at international meets, claiming glitter looked immature and tacky. Rachel pressed her finger into a white hairclip at the base of her neck that didn't budge.

"Why not?" she asked, smiling at her mom in the mirror. "I could use a little sparkle."

Her mom barely repressed her excitement before going to retrieve the spray bottle from her luggage. Rachel used the moment alone to practice her smile, which she predicted she would use a lot today. She put on a fake one and tried to make it meet her eyes, but she looked possessed and frightening. She loosened her lips a little and relaxed her eyes, which was more believable. If only she spent more time training it with her beam and bar routines this past week.

Her mom shielded Rachel's forehead with the palm of her hand to give her a few quick spritzes. Sparkles floated down from the nozzle to her perfect bun, with escapees either falling to her shoulders or meeting their demise on the floor. She felt twelve again.

"Do you hate it?" her mom asked, putting the cap on the bottle. "If you want to wash it off, I can re-do your hair."

She turned her neck to and fro once more, mesmerized by the silver specks that lit up beneath the big light above them. They'd shine even brighter under the arena lights later.

“I love it,” she said. “You always did the best buns.”

Her mom kissed her sparkly cheek and pulled her into her arms. A tight ball of tension lodged in Rachel’s upper back loosened itself, but stubbornly remained. It didn’t feel like nerves or stress. She wasn’t sure what to call it, but it had woken up with her this morning and seemed like her new companion for the day.

“Did you pick out what you’re gonna wear?”

“Not yet. I only brought two options.”

“Let’s go choose.”

Together they left the bathroom and Rachel went to her suitcase. She looked up at her dad, who smiled at her without hesitation this time. Part of her lied in wait for her parents to either start or continue a fight, which was as ritual as their morning coffees. Instead, her mom picked up the two national team-issued leotards that Rachel brought and held them up in the air by their hangers. One was a red bodice with silver, white, and blue piping comprising strange, swirled designs. The other was all white with a subtle sheen that provided a backdrop to clusters of red rhinestone firework showers.

“I like this one,” her mom said, giving the white one a shake of approval and dropping the red one back to her bag. “What do you think?”

“I was gonna pick that one,” Rachel said. They shared smiles. Being unsure of when the next genuine ones would come by, she wanted to put them in her pocket and keep them on hand just in case she needed them later, but she’d have to do without. She

would fumble her way through the worst day of her life without knowing beforehand that everything would end up okay. She'd done it before.

When she got to the arena and detoured from her parents, she could not remember warming up for a competition and feeling so few nerves and shadows of doubt before. The tension radiating off her eleven teammates was thick enough to choke on, but she felt fine. Empirically speaking, her bars were ready and consistent. She spent the last few weeks doing ten or fifteen uneven bar sets each day, and knee injury or not, her routine was now better than ever before. She only started doing full beam routines three days ago, but she was mostly successful in getting it back and the only question mark was her dismount. Putting all her focus and preparation into two events made her confident that she would nail them today, even if it didn't really matter. Two perfect routines or two meltdowns, the result would be the same.

Backstage before march-out, she dug through her bag for her water bottle and saw her phone screen light up with Kellan's name and an attached photo. When it loaded, she blinked a few times before realizing she was staring at her own face. A picture of a massive Olympic Trials poster sporting her, Jamie, Lola, Denise, Cameron, and Talia all mid-pose accompanied his message. Given how the sign was secured to a huge concrete wall, it looked as though he took it right outside the arena.

*Kellan: did u know Minneapolis is only a 5 hr flight from Saskatoon?*

*Kellan: why didn't u say anything about ur knee?*

*Kellan: we're inside and it sounds like it's starting, but we (we = my mom and sister) are in section 106 and we came to see a world champion, so don't let us down*

*Kellan: last one – u are the best and everyone knows it. doesn't matter what happens today or in Beijing*

The little knot between her shoulders unfurled a little more, making her arms each feel a foot longer. She glanced around the busy, tense green room and typed quickly.

*Rachel: You know this is the American Olympic Trials, right? Canada has their own*

*Rachel: I can't believe you came all the way here*

*Rachel: There's a stairwell to the lower level by the west entrance. Meet me there after?*

“All gymnasts, their coaches, and official personnel, Olympic Trials will begin in one minute. Please line up with your rotation groups and your athletes at this time,” a young guy in a headset announced from the front of the green room.

Her hands shook while watching the screen of her phone. Some of her friends got in line and most of them fidgeted with palpable nervous energy. Others got last minute lectures and pep-talks from their coaches, punctuated by emphatic finger wags or grasps

for shoulders. She noticed Vlad waiting for her by the throughway to the arena floor. Instead of his typical visible exasperation, he lowered his chin in a patient nod. Her phone buzzed in her hands.

*Kellan: I've scored 2 goals in this building, I think I can find a stairwell*

*Kellan: see u then, CHAMP*

She let out a thick, rejuvenating breath and tossed her phone in her gym bag. She didn't wonder if seeing him would be awkward, or what they'd talk about, or how weird it would be to compete in front of him. All she thought about was how today was Point A for everything she always thought she would be. Even though the destination she spent years working toward was no longer within reach, the starting line was still the same. She got in line for the Floor rotation group behind Jamie and poked her on her back.

"Try not to tumble into the stratosphere today," Rachel said, referring to Jamie's extra-bouncy tumbling passes from yesterday's podium training session. Pressure and nerves seemed to be manifesting in everyone in some way, whether it was falls off the beam, slip-ups on floor, messy vaults, and missed bar releases. She just hoped it wouldn't carry over when there was a crowd, a television audience, and an Olympic dream on the line.

“Easier said than done,” Jamie hushed over her left shoulder. “Hey, did you see Dillhole’s nose job? Igor heard she walked into a door as it was being pushed open. I think I believe in karma now.”

Her pulse froze and she turned her head to search the green room. How did she nearly forget that she attacked the National Team Coordinator not even a full day ago? When she finally spotted her, Karen was showing the contents of her clipboard to another member of the selection committee, pointing at some piece of data and talking about it with sharp twists of her mouth. A dark shadow housed itself beneath her right eye and her nose was bandaged. She expected to feel anxious about potentially being called out for her assault, or proud of herself for finally standing up to Karen, but all she felt was indifference. Karen pointed to the board again with two hard taps and looked up in a survey of the room. When she saw Rachel, she knew she should’ve looked away, but she couldn’t. Even with the entire women’s gymnastics program shoved in one crowded room, this felt no different than their little conferences around the scale in her office at camp. The only acknowledgement Karen gave her was a small arch in her eyebrow that disappeared almost as soon as it arrived.

“Minneapolis, please welcome your 2008 U.S. women’s gymnastics Olympic hopefuls!” the announcer boomed overhead. Twenty-thousand people responded in elation. Rachel turned back in line and breathed Karen out in a heavy exhale.

“Don’t hold anything back,” she said to Jamie with another poke between her shoulders. “Crank it.”

“Consider it cranked,” Jamie said. She reached for Rachel’s hand to squeeze. The tense knot at the back of her neck finally melted all at once.

The PA gestured for them to enter the arena and the two rotation groups, Floor and Vault, marched out onto the floor in tandem. Every surface was red, white, or blue with neat centerpieces of flowers on each corner of the elevated podium floor. The crowd was a four-sided wall. Normally she didn’t look up into the surroundings at meets, but today it was all she looked at. Fans clapped, held up signs, or waved American flag regalia. She had pictured this day thousands of times. She never imagined herself feeling so relaxed when it finally came, nor so numb to her fate.

She stayed in her warm-up suit when they got to floor and lined up for the judges. With her hands clasped behind her back, she could hear and feel every sporadic pulse and shallow breath of the five girls beside her. She knew she would feel no different than them if her situation was brighter and she were doing the all-around today.

“You okay?” Jamie asked her while stretching her arms over and behind her shoulders.

“Yeah,” Rachel said with a single nod. “Yeah, I’m okay.”

“You never know. If you’re ready by the time we’re in China and someone gets hurt, you could be added to the team,” Jamie said. “It’s not some insane impossibility.”

“But only before qualifications. After that, it doesn’t matter. Besides, I don’t want any of you guys to get hurt. One of us getting screwed by an injury is more than enough.”

“I know,” Jamie said. “I guess I just still can’t believe it was you.”



She shrugged and listened to the announcements overhead transition from riling up the crowd with fanfare to introducing the girls that were starting on vault. Rachel clapped with each name. Jamie tuck-jumped in place, a futile technique to thin out her last-minute nerves.

“Starting on floor exercise, Jamie Macaluso!”

Rachel whistled and joined the tens of thousands of people applauding her best friend. An air horn joined the surge of noise and she smiled without realizing it.

“Rachel Wallerstein!”

She stepped forward and waved to the crowd. The cheers were so loud that they reverberated in her ear drums even when she stepped back into line. She was off for the first two rotations, but the atmosphere made it impossible not to feel pumped up and ready to go.

“Denise Simpson!”

“Talia Zolotov!”

“Lola Fuentes!”

“And Cameron Marks!”

The warm-up sound chimed, and her five teammates activated their collective fast-twitch muscles to run to the corners of the floor and warm up their passes. She almost followed them out of habit. She stood on the edge of the podium as they traded off. Cameron did a two and half twist into a front layout but underrotated and sat it down.

Immediately after, Jamie threw her full-twisting double layout and landed with both feet halfway out-of-bounds. Warm-ups were always a shaky affair at any meet, but usually she was a part of the mix, too. She felt helpless as she watched, a feeling she was getting tired of.

She hopped down to the floor and tried not to show any misery on her face. Vlad pointed at the floor with a jab and she stepped into a handstand. She stared at her splayed fingers and tried to tune out the audience and the music playing overhead and the sounds of her friends bouncing and landing on the spring floor. Being the lame duck was worse than being nervous to compete. She was just glad that none of the TV broadcasters had engaged her in a live pity interview on the floor thus far.

“Okay,” Vlad said after a few minutes, tapping her calf. She stepped out of the handstand and rolled her shoulders. “Keep your shoulders warm. When we go to vault, practice your beam on the floor.”

She nodded and waited for more instruction, but that was the last of it. There wasn’t much to say when her workload was reduced by half and her expectations were cut by one hundred percent. There seemed to be no good place to put herself – sitting would cool her off, she didn’t want to warm up too much and wear herself out before bars, and she’d just get in everyone’s way up on the floor. She zipped her windbreaker up to her chin and wondered how Vlad stood by and spectated every time they were in this setting. It was unbearable.

“Knee’s okay?” he asked, his arms crossed over his red sport polo.

“It feels fine,” she said. She lifted her foot off the ground and the heavy tape covering her knee stretched taut. Earlier this morning, she felt the typical soreness from a night of inactivity, but once she got moving and warm, it felt fine. Nonetheless, she knew the risks of unhealed sprains on an already unstable joint, and she knew she would be sorry if she damaged it further by not taking the precautions she decided to take. It didn’t make it any easier of a choice, though.

“When you’re coming down off the double layout, you need to have bend in your knees,” he said. He squatted gently, putting tension in both knees and mimicking a safe landing. “Prepare for that landing. Ready knees.”

“Ready knees.” She nodded without realizing it. This was what she was used to – the constant coaching, the nonstop reminders of how to achieve success. She didn’t want them to stop, but she didn’t know how to say that. Maybe he had figured it out himself.

Jamie was up first on floor. Rachel cheered the loudest out of anyone there, far outpacing the reach of Laz’s airhorn. The beep sounded and her music began, a fast and driving violin rendition of a ‘90s rock song. No more than ten seconds of the track passed before the crowd was clapping along. Rachel cupped her face when Jamie tumbled into her first pass, the full-twisting double layout. She landed it in bounds and Rachel screamed in her direction. Her double-double, double layout, two and a half twist into a front layout, and double pike were all nearly perfect, with the amplitude and power that Jamie was renowned for. She had trouble with her double turn and fell out of it, but her leap series achieved her trademark height and bounce. Ninety seconds later, Jamie posed in the center of the floor with her arms stretched outward, beckoning the crowd right to

her. The applause drowned out the announcer's voice completely. When Jamie came off the floor, Rachel pulled her into a hug.

"That was your best ever," Rachel said, rocking her back and forth. "Every pass was perfect."

"It felt perfect," Jamie gushed, wavering side-to-side with Rachel. "Except my stupid turn. God, I hate dance skills."

"Doesn't matter. Just let it go," Rachel said. She tightened her arms for one last big squeeze and then pulled back to put her hands on her shoulders. "Your best event is done and you rocked it. You're the World silver medalist on your next event. Don't think about anything except crushing your vaults."

She expected a quick, sarcastic quip and probably deserved one for her motivational speech, but Jamie just nodded in silent agreement. While the judges were scoring Jamie's routine, Rachel went up to the podium to scratch. She stood on the white out-of-bounds border of the spring floor while the judges talked, calculated, and wrote on their scoresheets. It was nothing new, but it was no less interesting every time she was reminded of how the sport she loved so much boiled down to squiggly lines, hieroglyphic symbols, and fractional math. They finalized the score and it popped up overhead. The announcer made it official.

"The score for Jamie Macaluso on floor exercise, 15.800," he said. "Next up on floor exercise, Rachel Wallerstein!"

The cheers erupted again, but there was no reason to applaud. The head judge raised the green flag. Rachel saluted, touched her right foot to the spring floor, and saluted again. She erased her smile and walked down the steps and into Vlad's arms.

"Great job," he said. "Beautiful technique."

"Yeah, my coach is a stickler for good form."

He laughed. It was one of the only times in recent memory that he appeared to be of any disposition more positive than simply content. He pulled at her shoulders and began to knead them firmly.

"I want perfect handstands on every pirouette and feet together on the Gienger. No messy toes. Everything perfect."

She closed her eyes and let the words sink in. They were not new instructions nor anything he hadn't told her a million times prior. Still, it was the first time all day that she felt like she had a job to do.

"The score for Rachel Wallerstein on floor exercise, zero." The crowd booed, but the unfazed voice continued. "Next up on floor exercise, Denise Simpson!"

She watched the scores update one routine at a time across floor and vault. Jamie was in first, with Cameron in second and Daisy from vault in third. Rachel was all the way at the bottom, where she would remain throughout the entire meet.

She was last in the vault order on their next rotation. She spent the warm-up period helping the coaches adjust the springboard and the mats for her teammates. For Jamie, she triple-checked the board measurements after Igor double-checked them, then

stepped aside to let her do what she did best. Jamie ran down the runway, smashed her palms into the vault table, and stuck her practice Rudi. Rachel lifted her hand for a high-five when Jamie walked off the mat. The loud pop song entertaining the crowd in the interim made her restless and unsettled. While retreating to the end of the runway, Jamie turned to face Rachel and pointed at her wrist. She mimed the lyrics to the song, *look at your watch now*, and Rachel snorted, not realizing until then how much she needed a little levity.

She watched all her teammates vault in succession and cheered them on through sticks and stumbles. Jamie, the penultimate vaulter in the rotation, scored a record 16.15 on her Amanar and a 15.900 on her Rudi. Rachel met her at the stairs with a warm hug.

“You killed it.”

“Thanks, Rach.” Jamie pressed their cheeks together and swayed into their hug. “Now it’s your turn. Show us how bars is done.”

She intended to, but not before scratching vault. Up by the vaulting table, she stepped onto the springboard and clasped her hands to wait for the judges. When they announced her name overhead, Rachel saluted, touched the vault table, saluted again, and stepped down to the floor. Jamie hugged her, but this time words weren’t necessary nor were they desired. She was awarded another zero, but it would be her last today. That much she knew.

She was first up on bars. While Vlad prepped them for her, she put her attention toward fiddling with her buckle grips. The leather was old and worn, just the way she liked it. She stood in front of the low bar and waited for the judges to give her the cue to

start. Vlad dangled from the high bar and squeezed frantic palmfuls of chalk to it. She evened her breath and adjusted the stained purple sweatbands on her wrists to hide the fact that she was a little nervous. At last, she would get her chance to prove how good she was, how good she knew she was, and how much she belonged on this team, despite any bureaucratic and physiological circumstances preventing that. She rubbed her leather dowels against one another and watched white dust coat the calloused abrasions on her palms. This was her time now.

“On uneven bars, Rachel Wallerstein!”

The audience cheered with vehement support, but she blocked them out until they quieted. After jumping back to his feet, Vlad pressed a little more chalk onto the low bar and brushed his palms together. Clouds floated down to the blue mat her bare feet stood upon. They looked at each other. He nodded. So did she. She saluted the judges and stepped up to face the low bar. Seventy, eighty, maybe even ninety routines that she practiced in the last two weeks stared back at her. She knew every movement, muscle strain, inch of airtime, and angle of this routine. Now she just needed to do it perfectly when it mattered less than it ever had.

She swung to glide, kip, and cast no differently than she first did as a six-year-old Level 3 gymnast. Toe-shoot up to the high bar, and then her pirouette series from there. Her transition into L-grip was uncomfortable but perfectly natural. Sometimes she even liked the burning strain it put on her shoulders. After her Ono, Healey, and Ono half pirouettes, she swung up into her Chusovitina hop, landed it pencil-straight with her arms locked out, and then came down to swing and release into her Gienger. She re-grasped

after soaring three feet above the high bar. She heard none of the cheers that she willed away. Casting up again, she half-turned to reverse grip and came down to flip into her piked Jaeger, then connected it down to the low bar with her Pak salto. She was the closest to flying that any mere human would ever be. A half-turn at the top of the low bar prepared her to toe-shoot back up to high again. Her rotator cuffs and biceps were in unconscionable agony. No matter how many times she practiced, it never felt easier; she just became numb to the pain. She swung into three giants and released the bar when her toes kissed the glow of the arena lights bearing down on her. With her entire body stretched and extended, she pulled her double layout around and came down to land. Knees bent, arms steadied, feet willed to stasis.

She stuck it.

Her frame of mind remained beneath the fortress of competition focus, so when she saluted and stepped off the podium, she didn't feel or hear any external stimuli until Vlad pulled his arm around her shoulders. It came back segment by segment then – the roar of a crowd, the slams and thunks of the balance beam in use across the floor, her teammates congratulating her. She smiled into Vlad's chest.

"Best ever," he said into her ear. "Get ready for beam."

She nodded and stepped aside, only to be assailed by Jamie's powerful embrace. Together they squealed in a strange solution of stress, excitement, grief, and pride. There was no name for it, but it was all she could taste.

"That was incredible," Jamie said. "You're such a badass."



She accepted hugs from the rest of their friends and tried to keep the energy level up. With every new encounter, she assured them that they could finish strong and hit their beam routines.

“You’ve got this, Lo,” Rachel said and brought her arms around Lola. Lola’s diamond stud earring cut into her cheek, but she barely even noticed. “Be aggressive. No chickening out.”

“Aggressive,” Lola repeated. She nodded and the earring fought with her cheek again, but Rachel didn’t move. She held it there and hugged her longtime friend, feeling proud that she would soon have the same dream come true that Rachel already said goodbye to.

She moved aside to hug Denise with a big smile. A glance up at the scoreboard showed her in third place. Remembering Worlds and the fall Denise suffered there, she felt extra pressure to psyche her young teammate up and give her confidence a deliberate nudge.

“You’re gonna be an Olympian. All you have to do is what you do in practice every single day. Be confident on the Arabian. Show everyone here what you can do,” she said.

“What I hope I can do,” Denise corrected. She looked young and scared with big eyes like an illustrated character in a children’s book.

“What you can do,” Rachel repeated, sharper than she intended. “We’ve seen you hit it hundreds of times. Just show them once.”

The younger gymnast doubled down on the hug and Rachel hugged back. A year ago, she would have never thought she'd be in this cheerleader position, but she couldn't deny the sudden turns and wills of reality.

She pulled away from Denise and stepped back to Vlad. He rubbed her shoulders with firm palms and melted her lactic acid away. She took a shaky breath and her threatening tears disappeared. The scoreboard blanked and then updated. This time, the fiery outburst of the audience was one sudden boom without a rising crescendo. She stared up at her name and the highest number she'd ever seen in any gymnastics context.

*Rachel Wallerstein: 17.125.*

“Holy shit.”

“And you get mad when I tell you, ‘do fifteen sets today,’” Vlad said. “Injured and breaking records. That’s not what good gymnasts do. That’s what champions do.”

She didn't linger on this little victory for long, not when she still had beam coming up. When he finished treating her arms, she stretched on the floor and practiced her leaps and beam choreography down by the uninhabited vault area. The tiny patch of solitude not only offered her space to move around but also to breathe. She closed her eyes and measured her breaths – three in, long and deep; three out, full and cleansing. Her newfound nerves dissipated with the breaths she released into the atmosphere.

The group rotated to beam and took turns warming up. Rachel was last in line to compete, so she waited off to the side and practiced her flight series on the floor. Checking to make sure no one was behind her, she flipped backwards into her flic-flac, her back handspring, and her layout to two feet. Her landing was steady, but it was just

the floor, so she didn't take it as any sort of victory. She coated her palms with some chalk from the corner of the mats and turned to face Vlad.

"How's your leg?" he asked.

"Good." She looked down at the source of her truncated program and dashed Olympic dream for the first time since the competition began. It was heavily taped, but so far it felt fine, which was as much as she could ask from it.

He nodded, surmising its bandaged appearance. His thumb stroked his chin while he looked down at the floor, into the crowd, and then back at her. Something in his eyes was playful, like preparing the punch line of a joke.

"Do the full if you want."

"Really?"

"Why not?" he said. He turned her away from the American flag strung high behind the beam and toward the crowd instead. "For some of these people, you're all they know about gymnastics. They came to see you. If you feel good and strong today, do it."

"But Karen said—" she said, thinking immediately of the crunching feeling her knuckles endured while shattering her nose yesterday.

"Karen is a salaried hall monitor. I'm your coach, and I'm telling you to do the full if you want to do the full."

She swallowed this and surveyed the capacity crowd. A sliver of the lower bowl to the left was marked as section 106, and although she took a minute to scan the rows

there, she couldn't pick out Kellan or his family. Her parents always sat on the side of the spring floor between the two sets of judges, so she looked there with low hopes, but she spotted them right away – her mom in red, her dad in white. She waved to them and swallowed her lip when they waved back. Her mom held up her heart-shaped hands and Rachel returned the gesture. Seated beside them were Jamie's mom and stepdad. Laz gave off three fat bursts of his airhorn, which she realized he hid beneath his seat. She looked away with a lingering smile, turning back to 106.

This time she saw him with one quick glance. Kellan stood and waved both of his arms to hone her attention. She held her hand up high in the air, reaching for the lights and banners above. He gave a thumbs up. His mom and sister were on either side of him and waving to her, a girl they never even met before, when she had no chance of making the team. She waved one last time and turned back to Vlad. It was her final hour.

“I'm doing it.”

Back on the floor, she was the loudest one cheering for Denise and Lola, who competed fourth and fifth on the beam. When Denise landed her standing Arabian, she stuck one leg out to the side in a massive balance check but held onto the skill. Rachel whistled her support through her fingers and cheered when she landed her double pike dismount.

“Awesome fight,” Rachel said, high-fiving her when she came down from the podium. “A fight is better than a fall.”

“I thought I had it that time,” Denise said, something between irritation and worry clear across her face. “They probably took five tenths from that.”

“That’s still better than eight. You went for it and you held on. That’s what matters.”

Denise didn’t look as convinced as Rachel tried to make her feel. Next to go was Lola, who started with a visibly shaky front walkover—flic flac—layout step-out flight series, but settled into her routine with every subsequent skill until she looked confident and focused. After her two-and-a-half twist dismount with just a small hop forward, Rachel met her at the podium stairs.

“You killed it today.”

“I did, didn’t I?” They shared a laugh and Lola hugged her first this time. “Okay, beam queen Wallerstein, now it’s your turn.”

And so it was. Rachel rubbed her sweaty palms on her thighs and took the steps up to the podium that Lola had just departed. While waiting, she got some fresh chalk and rubbed her feet in a pile of it. The beam and the flag faced her in wait. This was her domain, or at least one of two. Bars may have been her best event, but beam was her favorite. Precision, balance, skill, and grace – what other sporting event boasted all four? No athletic pursuit matched what gymnastics required of the human body and mind. Of that she was certain.

“The score for Lola Fuentes, 15.875,” the announcer said, raising a loud approval from the crowd. “Next on balance beam, Rachel Wallerstein!”

She blocked out auditory sensation and held her thumb up beside her thigh facing her parents. This was it, almost certainly her swan song as far as elite gymnastics went.

The head judge raised her green flag in front of the much bigger American flag. She took another deep breath, this one of the calming, cleansing variety, and exhaled before saluting with a smile. She'd only been doing full beam sets for a few days and had practiced fewer than five dismounts on the hard ground, but it was go time and that was all that mattered. She mounted the beam on her chest and rolled her legs behind her back and over her head, pointing her feet on the beam in front of her face. She unraveled herself and stood up tall on her toes to migrate to the end of the beam with her fluid choreography. Raising her hands overhead to square herself, she didn't hope she would hit a perfect flight series or worry about making a mistake on the full. She just went for it.

She flipped backwards just like a moment ago on the floor – flic-flac, back handspring – but when rebounding for her layout, she twisted high and tight and landed both feet to the beam. She extended her arms out from her sides to steady her body and mentally evaluated her knee – no more pain than usual. The rest of her routine flowed without mental faculty or deliberation. She was one with the beam, her favorite feeling. Her side aerial to layout-stepout was perfect, as was her often-precarious Onodi-double turn combination, her switch ring, and her front walkover to immediate sheep jump connection. All that remained was the dismount.

At the end of the beam, she faced the opposite mat and thought of the four or five dismount attempts she practiced since her sprains. All she needed was one. She rounded off the beam and spun into a triple twist as quickly as she could. The landing was a little short of the full rotation and she hopped forward, but to no ill or injurious effect. She saluted the judges with a big grin and ran to the stairs and into Vlad's waiting arms.

“Excellent.” His accented voice weighed itself down and she felt damp tears on her neck. “I’m so proud of you. I’ve never been prouder of you.”

“Thank you.” She swallowed her emotion once, and then once more, but the attempts failed and she cried with him. “Thank you for everything.”

She walked into a group hug of her teammates, all of whom were either screaming, squealing, or crying. She joined in the cacophony, releasing everything she spent her entire career bottling up, shoving aside, or wishing for. She and Jamie hugged. Both cried. The crowd remained at a steady level of deafening output that held up for the remainder of the announcements and her score, which eventually flashed onto the board as a 16.500. The noise increased in both severity and duration. Rachel wiped her cheeks. It felt criminal to cry at a competition, but how could she not, when it was the last one? There was no way to lay her career to rest without a little bit of sorrow.

When Trials ended, the announcements informed everyone that the team selection would proceed momentarily. Karen and the rest of the selection committee gathered their personal items and paperwork, then disappeared backstage to deliberate in private. Jock jams played overhead. Rachel exchanged teary smiles to anyone who congratulated her or hugged her on the floor. She never imagined feeling so sad could be so festive, too.

The girls were ushered backstage to wait and she used the time to gather herself, find some tissues, and reconvene with Vlad. The other girls waited with their coaches, most of whom reassured them with calming words, but some of whom were already lecturing or rehashing mistakes and errors. She sat beside Jamie on a folding table’s edge

and reached for her hand. Talking about the inevitable in plain terms seemed both stupid and beneath them, so she didn't.

"Laz is gonna break his airhorn when you get named," Rachel said.

"Good. It'll be a public service."

She laughed and sniffed into a tissue. Jamie linked their fingers together. They persevered every hardship and heartbreak as a unit, but never anything like today. At least there weren't many more of this magnitude to come. She couldn't stand the morose tension and switched the subject.

"Kellan's here. He flew in to watch."

"Seriously?" The mood changed to a different excitement, a less weighty version of it.

"Yeah. I'm meeting him upstairs right after this is over." She threw the spent tissue away in the trash can by the table. "I'm nervous. I haven't seen him since – you know, last time."

"Don't be nervous. You just killed Trials. He should be nervous to see you." Jamie turned to face her. "He came all the way to Minneapolis just to watch you. He definitely still likes you."

"I know," Rachel said, although it sounded agonized to her ears.

"That, or you were mind-blowingly awesome for your first time."



“Shut up.” She smacked Jamie’s windbreaker sleeve with a noisy crinkle. “What should I say? It’s not like I’ll see him for months after this. I’ll be at Cornell and he’ll be busy with hockey.”

“Or you could be at UCLA with me and Lola,” Jamie said. When Rachel rolled her eyes, Jamie pulled on her hand. “I’m kidding – but not really. I don’t know, Rach. You guys never had a problem finding stuff to talk about before. Just tell him how you feel, but be honest. Don’t pretend you don’t like him if you do, and don’t pretend you like him if you don’t.”

It was obvious and she was right, but she committed this wisdom to memory anyway. They shared a big hug in their matching jackets that were as warm, comfortable, and obnoxious as ever.

“I love you,” she said with her chin atop Jamie’s shoulder.

“I love you, too.”

“Where was my invite?” Lola said and squeezed in to make it a triangle hug. Laughter tittered between the three of them and Rachel finally began to feel her nerves and tension from the day melt away little by little. It never reached the fever pitch she was used to in these settings, but she was grateful for what she got. She would’ve missed that itchy, anxious feeling if it had been wholly absent.

“Attention, National Team members and their coaches.”

The sharp voice drew everyone’s eyes right to its source and attuned each ear with perfect control. Karen stood at the front of the green room with the entrance to the arena

floor open to her right. The crowd beyond did the wave while patriotic beach balls bounced around from row to row. Rachel held Lola's and Jamie's hands.

"I will be announcing the team through the arena's PA system in alphabetical order. If you hear your name, immediately go out onto the floor to kiss and cry for the crowd. Alternates will be named after the competitive team is named and can go out then. If you do not hear your name, do not attempt to go out onto the floor."

She felt the sweat from both of her friends' palms mingle with her own, but they had no chalk here, even though it was so omnipresent everywhere else in their respective and communal lives. Karen and her nose cast left through the tunnel to enter the competition floor again. The green room quieted when the music shut off, and the crowd slowly simmered and then stilled.

"Minneapolis, it is my great honor to present to you the 2008 U.S. women's Olympic gymnastics team," Karen's amplified voice echoed over the seats and through the concrete walls. "Your six Olympic team members are: Daisy Alvarez-Jones, Lola Fuentes, Jamie Macaluso, Cameron Marks, Denise Simpson, and Talia Zolotov."

Rachel counted along in her head from one all the way down to six. She knew the team before it was announced, but it made the eventual revelation of her name's absence no easier to stomach. She clapped mightily with each name, hugging Lola when her tears flowed and doing the same for Jamie when she was called. She would be the supportive friend, and anything else could wait until she was alone.

In the interim moment between team reveals where she was left by herself, Vlad came beside her and put his arm around her.

“You should be out there,” he said. “You would be out there if not for what happened.”

“I know.”

“Your full was perfect. I wish you could’ve seen the look on Karen’s face, although the nose bandage ruined some of the fun.”

She wiped her damp hands on her blue track pants.

“That was extremely reckless. You could’ve lost everything. You could’ve been arrested.”

She knew better than to ask how he knew or figured it out. There was so little about what she was capable of that he didn’t already know.

“I know.”

“But you weren’t.” He pulled her closer into his side. “And now I don’t want to ever hear another word about how much you hate doing arm and strength conditioning.”

She snorted and then laughed, laughed, and laughed. It wasn’t even funny, but it was exactly what she needed right then, after everything else that she always thought she needed was yanked away from her.

“Your alternate athletes are Hailey Pierce and Rachel Wallerstein,” Karen’s amplified voice seared throughout the arena.

“Congratulations,” Vlad said.

She turned to hug him and took another deep breath. No tears, she told herself. Nothing but joy for the success of her friends. She stood from the table and met Hailey by the door. Her mom's voice from weeks ago reminding her that some people worked just as hard as her to be named an alternate returned to mind. She smiled at Hailey's teary face and hugged her, too.

"Congratulations," they said in tandem.

They entered the floor and went up the stairs to the podium, Rachel trailing Hailey. It was so loud with human voices and music that she couldn't hear herself think or breathe. Red, white, and blue confetti already soiled the spring floor, but a stray piece here and there straggled behind and floated down to join the others. She moved down the line to congratulate the competition team one more time. All of them were in tears, and she began to cry, too, even after promising herself she wouldn't. She got in line at the very end and looked up at the audience. A row of people she didn't know at the top of the stands held her name up in golden letters. She pushed a breath through her lips and looked away.

"Your 2008 U.S. women's Olympic gymnastics team!" Karen called again. The building packed in more sound and more energy. This was it, she thought while clapping. She survived her new reality and shapeshifted destiny. Next stop, Beijing.

At the end of the celebration, Rachel grabbed her bag backstage and maneuvered her way out of everyone's sight and mind. Her phone buzzed in her hand while she jogged down an arena hallway to find the staircase she descended two hours prior.

*Mom: U did an amazing job. I am so proud of the strong woman you've become.*

*Waiting 4 u outside the West entrance. Dinner wherever u want!*

*Rachel: I love you guys, be there in 10*

She found an exit marked *STAIRS* on a green placard and pushed her weight into the door. The quiet concrete façade of the stairwell served as the perfect antithesis to the bright and shiny fanfare she just survived. She slowly became miserable but didn't know what to do with that or how to deal with it yet. She climbed the stairs two at a time with her national team bag jostling at her back. At the landing, she gathered herself, took one last lonesome breath, and opened the door.

The atrium was packed with posters, balloons, vendors, college recruiting tables, cut-outs of her and her teammates, and people. Spectators crowded the exit and made their slow migration out of the building. Through the glass front of the arena, she immediately saw her parents waiting in the overcast afternoon. Her dad's camcorder hung from the strap on his wrist and dangled by his leg. His other arm wrapped around her mom, who burrowed against his chest. The invisible wind jostled his short curly hair while he smoothed his hand over her mom's. Both sets of their shoulders shook in perfect, rhythmic time.

"Rach."

It'd been so long, but her body reacted in no unfamiliar way to its most confusing stimulus. When she saw Kellan, he stood in a small, deserted offshoot of the atrium that housed broken vending machines. He wore a hat with a red maple leaf on it and a blue flannel shirt. His eyes waited for hers. She walked to him with the help of his inexplicable magnetic force and hugged him without speaking. He put his arms beneath her backpack to embrace her more fully.

"I didn't know. This little girl sitting next to us and her mom told us the deal with the rules. That's so fucked up, Rach. That's so fucked up."

"It's over now."

"I know some of the hockey guys at NBC Sports, maybe I can get them to say something—"

"Don't."

One of his shirt buttons flicked at her lip and she closed her eyes. The soapy scent of him reminded her not just of the night they slept together but also their little dates leading up to that and even the night they met, when she was coming off the high of four World golds and believed her own hype. How was that only nine months ago? How could less than a year feel like all of eternity?

She only realized she was crying when she felt him rubbing her back. She gripped fistfuls of the soft plaid he wore and buried her face into it. Kellan guided her behind the door of an unlocked Coke machine to hide from departing eyes. Still holding onto him,

she wailed with his shirt buttons poking her face, pinching at her skin, and demanding her pain. Her nails stabbed and yanked at the fabric she clung to.

“I’m so sorry,” he whispered, emotion tightening his accent so thick around every word that he sounded as foreign as she felt. His cheek pressed against her glittery hair. “Just let it out. Hit me if you want to hit something.”

“I can’t believe this.” Gasps separated each awful word. “I really thought I’d win the all-around. Now I’ll be in the fucking stands.”

“You already won, babe. Everyone is saying you were robbed. Everyone knows how good you are. The whole world knows.”

“But I want to know,” she said. She looked up at him, but he was a shadowed blur in their little enclave and her emboldened tears. “I want to win and know for sure, for myself. Now I won’t even qualify. I won’t even compete. I’m only there if someone gets hurt, and there’s no guarantee that’ll happen.” She slammed her forehead against his sternum. “I can’t believe I gave up everything for this. My entire life was this, and now it’s not even happening.”

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

She coughed hard and loud. He made a song against the back of her jacket. She forced in loud, thirsty breaths and began to calm down. She rolled her hot cheek against the soaked front of his shirt. A few loud, girlish shrieks echoed across the far end of the atrium. She would never forget this day and all its varied sounds no matter how much she tried.

“You didn’t have to come, but I’m glad you did.”

“You should’ve told me. I would’ve understood. I would’ve been there for you.”

“I didn’t want to talk about it. Besides, I think you had enough going on. People at home were so awful to you guys after the playoffs.”

“I don’t care about them,” he said.

She half-coughed, half-laughed in disbelief.

“I mean, yeah, I did care – too much – but then I went home and golfed and played with my dog and realized that nothing anyone says matters. I work hard and I play my game and that’s all I can do. The background noise doesn’t make me any better or worse. It’s just there.” He lifted his thumb to her itchy cheek and brushed a flattened teardrop away.

She wiped a drop off her jaw and wondered what it might be like to exist in such a way that nothing anyone said bothered her. His eyes, now rimmed with red, smiled at her. His round face accommodated his slight smile. The night she met him, encountering the face of a boy on the body of a man had confused her to unfamiliar depths of emotion. Now she couldn’t picture him any other way.

“I’m sorry for shutting you out. I thought I had to. I thought there was no way I could focus and have whatever we had at the same time. Pretty stupid of me, I guess. All I did was make us weird and wreck my knee,” she said.

“It’s okay. I was mad, but not at you. More at myself, I guess. I thought, ‘Well, if you’re gone for good, then I better get a Cup out of it’, but then I got so in my head that I



just played like shit, and the more I played like shit, the more in my head I got. So, I guess we both bombed it. Couple of winners between us, eh?”

He smiled and she did too, though slow at first. He kissed her cheek and she leaned against his damp chest. A still, quiet moment passed. The gut of the arena was magnitudes quieter than before, and echoes traveled further within the open space. Her phone buzzed once in her pocket. One of the plugged-in vending machines began to hum across the hall from them. So much of her last year had been spent worrying, and now all her worrying resolved itself in the course of two hours. Her nerves fizzled on and off beneath her skin like they didn’t know what to do anymore.

“You okay?” His words shifted his chin and transmitted through her stiff hair.

“Not really, but I will be.”

“I have a couple dollars change, can I buy you a drink and take you out for dinner?” he asked. She snorted and tipped her chin on top of a shirt button to meet his eyes once more.

“I’ve seen your place. You can buy me something nicer than a can of Coke.”

“There’s probably a Pepsi machine around here somewhere.”

She elbowed him at half-speed. His laugh made her stomach feel tight and wavy not like it did in mid-air after letting go of the high bar, but rather when it was right there waiting for her and securely grabbed again.

“Anyway, you’re too late. I have a dinner date with my parents, who are probably just now realizing how much time and money they wasted trying to get me to the Olympics.”

“Wasted,” he repeated like a swear word. “You were going to the Olympics. You were going to win the Olympics. I know you know that.”

“It doesn’t matter anymore,” she said. It was both true and false, but for different reasons. Sometimes it felt like something she could really believe, and sometimes it felt like a complete lie. She pulled her arms around his neck and got on her toes. “However, I guess you can come to dinner with us.”

“You guess,” he said, flashing all twenty-six genuine and two fake teeth at her.

“Okay, you can.”

“Got room for two more?”

“Yeah, of course.” She completely forgot about the people they were keeping waiting, but he made everything easy to forget. “Your mom and sister are still here?”

“Yeah, I told them I’d only be a few minutes.” He smiled wider. “I’ll just say it was your fault we’ve been keeping them waiting.”

“I’m sure you wish that was true.” She eyed his lips, fuller than she thought any guy’s could feasibly be and more expressive than she ever knew possible. He was revelatory in all sorts of ways. “This is such a weird time to meet your family. ‘Hi, I just lost my only dream in life, nice to meet you.’ They’re gonna think I’m a loser.”

“We just watched you score over a 17 on the uneven bars. You’re not a loser. Besides, there’s only room for one disappointing loser in my family, and right now that’s me, so get in line.”

She refused to give him the satisfaction of laughing, although it demanded everything in her not to. He lowered his arms to belt around her waist and the seismic pressure of his proximity simmered through every vein and drop of blood in her body. She pressed her stomach into his and got on her toes, then tilted her neck back. He met her halfway and their lips reunited, like nothing had changed even though every facet of her universe had undergone transformation since they were last in this position. It didn’t change her circumstances or make her forget the death of her dream – maybe nothing could do that – but he did what he always had, which was to help her let go of what she couldn’t control and try to enjoy the things she could.

Exiting their enclave side-by-side, the first glimpse of what the day became surprised her. The sky blanketed a musty gray tone with thick, cottony clouds. Her parents huddled together by the glass, still embracing one another so that at first glance they looked to be one. Approaching them seemed impossible. What was there to say? How could words begin to summarize or sate today?

“There they are,” Kellan said.

She thought he meant her parents, but upon seeing two women who had his exact face shape and dimple positioning, she realized otherwise. His mom looked younger than she always imagined, as well as taller; she cleared Rachel’s bun by several inches. His sister was beside her, almost Rachel’s height but much younger at just twelve.

“I was wondering where you went,” his mom said. Her cheeks were full and her bright eyes met Rachel’s.

“It’s all her fault,” Kellan said, smiling at Rachel, who rolled her eyes at him. “Mom, this is Rachel. Rachel, Mom.”

“Hi, Rachel. I’m Mom,” she said. Rachel laughed and was only momentarily surprised when a handshake was bypassed for a hug. “You were so wonderful out there.”

“Thank you, Ms. Barker. It’s so nice to finally meet you.”

“I’m way too young to be anyone’s Ms. Barker. You can call me Kim, honey.”

Her hug was warm and full and reminded her of her mother, who was less than twenty feet away through a pane of glass. She’d never missed her own mom so much before, at least not while so nearby.

“And this is Kathy,” Kellan said once Rachel and his mom pulled apart. He put his knuckles on Kathy’s head and tapped her there three times.

“It’s so nice to meet you.” Rachel hugged her, too, since this seemed like the moment and his family seemed like hugging people. “I saw a picture of you hanging out on a pink inner tube. You looked like you were living the life.”

“Until he flipped me over,” Kathy said, shoving Kellan’s hand away.

“You love having me home,” Kellan teased her. He tousled her hair with his knuckles, narrowly escaping a smack from his little sister.

“Can you take him back, please?” Kathy asked. Rachel laughed and saw Kellan smiling at her. For what purpose, she didn’t know, although maybe it was just a catch-all for now, the only reaction or outward expression that seemed to make any sense when nothing else did.

She invited them to dinner and they agreed to come. She felt she should be nervous about her parents meeting his family and going out to dinner with him and what they’d all talk about, but she was out of fresh nerves and all she felt was generalized numbness. On their way out of the arena, Kellan rubbed her back as they moved closer to her parents. She rolled her neck around in a circle and pushed through the heavy door.

The afternoon air teased heat and ominous weight. The sky was no brighter than while she was inside, and she knew they had to get moving soon. Her mom spotted her first. She lifted her head off her dad’s chest and looked at Rachel for a long, studious moment. For once, she didn’t think about what height her eyebrows sat at or what her lips were doing. She pushed herself into her mom’s arms.

“I’m so sorry, honey,” her mom whispered. Her voice was increasingly unstable until it broke altogether, falling into pieces like an upset Jenga tower. Rachel circled her arms tighter around her slight mother and felt her dad hug them both simultaneously.

“It’s okay,” she said. “It’s over.”

“Oh, baby.” Each word was a sob all its own. “I shouldn’t be crying – I’m sorry. I’m so proud of you. You worked so hard and you were so spectacular today. I’ve never been more proud of you.”

“You can cry. It’s okay,” she said. Her own tears began to smear against her mom’s cheek. She didn’t try to quell them. There was no longer any need.

“Everything’s gonna be okay,” her dad promised either her or her mom or all three of them. He sounded sure of it despite the barrier of emotion his throat attempted to construct. He kissed her forehead and she could feel his shaky breath. “We’re all going to be okay.”

She had no more brain space to consider the validity of this nor its probability. As much as she would have liked to, she couldn’t care about anything that had once seemed guaranteed. She smiled for them and put on a brave face, her fakest yet. As long as they were okay, then she could pretend to be, too.

She mentioned dinner and saw their faces display their confusion when they noticed Kellan here in this strange setting so far from home. She didn’t explain nor feel the need to. His mom and her parents mingled awkwardly at first, but it warmed up with each passing moment, even as the sky opened up and threatened to rain them out. The indoor sanctuary that dinner promised would have to bypass small talk and pleasantries and anything but quick community.

On the way to the parking lot, Kellan held her hand. The sky jerked its curtains wide open and drops the size of test tubes splattered upon her face and jacket and hair. Her dad pulled his jacket off and scrambled to cover her mom, Kim, and Kathy from the blaze of the storm. Kellan began to unbutton his plaid, but she squeezed his hand to stop him. The rain didn’t bother her any more than the rest of the day’s realities did. If she got a little wet and cold, so be it. It was better than feeling nothing at all.

## CHAPTER 12

### OLYMPIC DREAMS

The Olympic Village existed in all her lifelong dreams as a prize all itself. People just like her from around the world converged there with one goal in mind – to win, just like their entire lives had been geared to do. It would be where she ate and slept every night of every day of the Olympics. She would wake up every morning, win a gold medal or two, and come back to rest and do the same the next day. She pictured huge windows and bright walls and world-class food, all eaten or occupied by elite athletes just like she knew she would always become. From the way past Olympians on the national team talked about it, entry into the Olympic Village was its own Olympic victory.

As an alternate, she didn't get to stay in the Olympic Village. She didn't even get to enter the Olympic Village. She and Hailey were sequestered in a nearby hotel in Beijing to eat, train, and exist separate from the team. Everyone kept telling her she was an Olympian, but she didn't feel like one when she couldn't even sleep like one.

"It's not that great," Jamie said between the competitive team's training session and Rachel and Hailey's training session. In the training room, Jamie got her shins massaged by Dr. Chris while Rachel taped her ankles up by herself. The roar of an ice machine by the door rudely interrupted her. When it paused, Jamie continued. "You thought Karen was bad abroad, you haven't seen anything. She came in to do bed checks

four times last night. How are you supposed to sleep like that? And this morning at breakfast, she wouldn't let us eat until she checked everything we chose. I got half of a bagel and she threw it out."

Rachel expected no less from Karen, who pounded the idea of team gold into their scrunchied heads from the time they were juniors. Now that the Olympics were actually here, she was surprised Karen hadn't killed herself of a self-imposed cardiac event yet.

"I know it's not all bad," Rachel said. She wound the tape tight around her ankles and smoothed the torn seam down to stick to itself. "You don't have to lie. Have you met anyone cool yet?"

Jamie watched her shins get a futile rubdown while hesitating to answer. Rachel wasn't with the team, sure, but that didn't mean she couldn't hear about the fun things they got to see and do in their extremely limited free time.

"We met the basketball teams," Jamie said. She picked her USA backpack up and dug out her digital camera. Clicking through it, she handed it to Rachel. The display screen showed Jamie and the rest of the team, none of whom were over five feet tall, posing with a selection of the USA men's and women's basketball teams. They looked like they could be their socks. Rachel laughed and handed the camera back.

"That's so cool."

"I just wish you were with us," Jamie said. "Lola and I keep saying how weird it is without you there."



Rachel put the tape roll back on the rolling cart beside her where she found it. She was supposed to get her knee examined by Dr. Chris, but she hoped she took her time with Jamie so that they could finally have more than a few minutes to talk to one another. They all had pre-paid Chinese cell phones, but minutes were limited and she didn't want to talk to her friends over the phone when most of the time they were within five hundred feet of each other. Getting to talk face-to-face after two days of talking to no one but Hailey and Vlad made her want to take advantage of it and run the opportunity dry.

"How have the practices been?" Rachel asked to change the subject.

"Awful. She's got me doing my vaults and my passes like, ten times a day. Now she's saying she might put me on beam in quals."

"What?" Rachel said. She almost laughed. "When have you ever done beam for the team?"

"Exactly." Jamie looked at the closed door, and then their shared space, which save for Dr. Chris was empty. She looked at Rachel and lowered her voice. "But Denise keeps choking on beam and Talia pulled some muscle in her back today so now it's a big mess. I heard Karen talking to Igor. She told him to get me ready to do beam, just in case."

"Wow." She gathered her legs to her chest and eyed the closed door one more time. With the current line-up, Lola was the best beam worker and second best on bars. Talia was the best bar worker and second best on beam. If Denise couldn't get her beam together in time for qualifications, then they needed at least two other people – maybe Cameron, who was at least known for her consistency on beam, and then either Daisy or

Jamie. She couldn't see Karen pulling Denise from the beam line-up, though. She was an all-around gymnast and they needed her for the three-up, three-count format of team finals. Why wreck her confidence by benching her on beam in prelims? "Who's doing bars?"

"Definitely not me," Jamie said, and Rachel snorted. Even Dr. Chris stifled a laugh disguised as a cough. "In prelims, probably Daisy, Cam, Lo, and Talia. Maybe swap Denise for Daisy. I don't know. Karen seems like she has no idea who's doing what. All I know is I'm anchoring vault and floor. Everything else is her problem."

Her problem, indeed. Rachel played with the edge of her tape jobs and pictured watching qualifications from the stands. It's not that the team without her was incapable, but gold required her scores. Her bars were better than ever before and she was pretty sure her beam would be all the way back in time. Even just those two routines would push the team over the edge, but it didn't matter. It was her friends' opportunity now.

"What about you?" Jamie asked. "What are your practices like?"

"Pretty basic," Rachel said. Karen didn't even watch her and Hailey train the last two days. It was just Vlad and Hailey's coaches, Becky and Jack, in the gym with them. Today she and Vlad planned on doing five bar routines, just as many beam routines, and maybe trying her floor passes if Dr. Chris cleared her to do so. There was no pressure in the gym, so they created their own with Vlad telling her to try and do all her routines with zero mistakes. It was an impossible exercise, but at least it gave her something to work for.

Dr. Chris finished with Jamie, who stood from the exam table slowly with a hobbling, stiff unsteadiness. Her muscular calves were wrapped tight in tape from knee to ankle. Ignoring Dr. Chris' new availability, Rachel reached for Jamie's hand and pulled on it.

"You need to watch your numbers," Rachel said. "Don't let her push you."

"Easy for you to say. You know how she gets." Jamie squeezed her fingers, transferring heat to Rachel and taking some of Rachel's heat for herself. "It's okay. Igor's been telling her where to shove it every so often. So far, it's been the best part of the Olympics. Makes me wonder if maybe he was the one that rearranged her face and he's just not telling me."

Rachel said nothing verbal but gave another squeeze. Eventually she would tell Jamie the truth, but right now, she didn't need to interrupt her focus or pit her even further against the woman she needed to impress most.

"Just be careful," Rachel insisted. "You don't want to end up like me."

She looked at Dr. Chris, who smiled too late. She patted the exam table Jamie had just exited and Rachel transferred her weight to it. Dr. Chris took Rachel's right calf in her hands and flexed her leg out, then bended it and pressed her thumbs against the inside and outside of the joint.

"Any pain?" she asked.

"None." She woke up with tremendously less pain than normal today, which had to be a good sign. "All of my landings have been fine so far, like nothing ever happened."

“Good.”

Dr. Chris bent her knee at an angle again and then extended it out once more time. She felt Jamie’s stare and hoped that she was silently praying for her. Did it matter? Most likely not, but full clearance was full clearance. Her anticipation spiked with every mini physical test.

“There’s still a little swelling that I’m not really comfortable with,” Dr. Chris said, pushing her seat back. The wheels scratched the vinyl floor. “But it’s definitely more stable.”

“And?” Rachel asked.

“You can try your passes, but I’d like them to be done on mats and I’d want you to be spotted,” she said. “Try one of each today, and then we’ll see how your knee responds tomorrow.”

“Rach, that’s awesome!” Jamie said, jumping despite her mummified shins. She grabbed Rachel’s shoulders and hugged her. “Tumbling, that’s a huge step.”

“Wow,” Rachel said. She couldn’t really believe it. Did she even remember how to tumble anymore? It’d been weeks. It was probationary and Vlad would be spotting her, but she didn’t know how many more baby steps stood between this and full clearance. She smiled at Dr. Chris and leaned in to hug her with Jamie’s hug still attached to her. “Thank you. Thank you!”

“Don’t thank me. You’ve been patient and careful, and because of that, you’re almost back to health. Now, that first tumbling pass is going to feel great. You’re going

to feel invincible and one hundred percent. You're not, though. You need to limit yourself or we're back to square one. Got it?"

She knew herself, and maybe she knew her now too, and she knew Dr. Chris was right. The second she tried a double layout or her front double-front full, and even better, landed one, she would want to keep going until she did them better than before the injury. She couldn't let herself. She nodded and promised to be careful. When Dr. Chris wrote her prognosis on a paper for her to take to Vlad, she and Jamie left the trainer's room together.

"I just wish you got this news last week," Jamie said quietly. The teal blue hall held no one except them beyond its long, smooth walls. The practice arena looked brand new inside and out.

"Me too," she said.

She looked at Dr. Chris's writing – *four passes 1x each, spotted, on mats*. She yanked her burner phone out of her pocket and checked the time. Her practice session with Hailey started in three minutes. One text from Vlad awaited her attention.

*Vlad: Practice*

"We should meet up and go for a walk or something later," Jamie said. "If the dragon lady lets me out, that is."

“Sure,” Rachel said with a quick, excited nod. Anything to get out of her B-team hotel for a while. “Just call me.”

They hugged and allowed the day to separate them one more time. In the practice arena, Vlad was either working on his poker face when she gave him Dr. Chris’ prognosis or just didn’t care about the new clearance she earned. He read it a few times and then tucked it into the pocket of his track pants.

“We’ll see,” he said. “If you feel up to it.”

“I feel up to it now,” she said. The words bounced to the ceiling. It was nearly the same thing as having a full program back. Why wouldn’t she feel up to it? “Can we start with floor today? I really want to try my passes.”

“No, we’ll finish there,” he said. “Get your workout in and then we’ll worry about tumbling.”

She didn’t care for this plan of action, but she never had a say in any of her workouts, so arguing proved pointless. She and Hailey chatted while they warmed up in the empty practice gym. They ran around the floor’s perimeter in the same order and progression of exercises that they did every day for several years. With the whole gym now their domain, they got to do whatever they wanted, so Vlad started her on bars. She warmed up with sets of kips and casts, some clear hip circles, some handstand drills, and a few pirouettes. With her shoulders warm and fluid, her new goal of five perfect routines began. On her first set, nerves permeated deep in her stomach, a weird but welcome change. She mounted the low bar and swung through her entire routine, pushing for each handstand and mindful of her pointed toes. He stepped in to spot her Gienger and then

again for her piked Jaeger. In the air for her Pak, she forced her feet to remain side-by-side as conjoined twins that dare not pull apart and break form.

“Better,” he said.

She turned halfway atop the low bar and flew back up to the high bar with her Ray. Swinging into three fast giants, she released for her double layout and stared the ground down in a battle for dominance as she whipped down for the landing. She braced her arms, landed with her knees bent, and commanded her stick.

“Good,” he said. “But not perfect. Too close on the Gienger that time.”

She groaned and he laughed. He didn’t have to say a word to goad her to trying again; she was already chalking up to mount for set number two. This was her Olympics now and she was not going to settle for just okay or satisfactory, even in practice.

Four good bars sets and five great beam sets later, her mind demanded rest but her legs fluttered with anticipation of her new tumbling allowance. Vlad put a soft blue mat on the corner of the spring floor diagonal from where she stood.

“What do you want to try first?” he asked.

It wasn’t often that she had a choice. Her first pass in her floor routine was her double layout. It had been a long time since she last flipped her body around two times around in the air.

“The front double—front full,” she said. She waited for him to call her a chickenshit.

“Okay,” he said after a moment. “Warm up a handspring—front layout first. I’ll be right here.”

She released a breath and wiggled her fingers at her sides. She just did five sets each of the hardest bar and beam routines on the planet. Why did warming up a layout she’d done since she was nine years old scare her? She should be excited to get back into tumbling, not nervous.

Her feet propelled her forward into her run. She kicked off the ground, bent forward for a front handspring, and rebounded for a front layout. Vlad held her on either side of her waist as she came down to land on the mat. She stood and presented with her arms. Her heartbeat was tangible in each of her fingertips.

“Good?”

“Yeah,” she said.

“If you’re not ready, it’s okay,” he said. “We can try tomorrow.”

“No, I want to try it now,” she said. She jogged across the floor where she came from, pumping herself up in her head as she went. Champions weren’t afraid. She had a World bronze medal on this event. She wasn’t going to chicken out. She looked at where she left him by the mat and rubbed her hands on her blue practice leo. “I’m going for it this time.”

“Okay. I’m here.”

She did the pass in her head. Forward skills weren’t the easiest, especially ones with blind landings, but she always liked the challenge of them and the way they made



her feel like she was walking on air, eschewing the ground for a moment to try out the atmosphere instead. She ran across the floor and leaned into a front handspring, rebounded into a front double twist, and rebounded again into a front full twist. She landed off to the side and stumbled into Vlad, who kept her from falling.

“Easy, easy,” he said.

She gathered herself and raised her arms in the air. The plain walls of the practice gym served as her audience, and her discarded gym bag by the floor acted as her judge.

“Messy. Need a little more bounce off the double into the full,” he said.

She wished his words would perfect the pass for her. They never had before, though. It had always been her putting in the work, repeating the skills, and doing them wrong until eventually she got them right. Why should now be different?

She finished practice after six hours with one of each of her passes done for the day. Most of them were sloppy and all of them were spotted, but at least it was a step of progress. She wanted to do more, but Vlad denied the request before she could even voice it.

“Dinner, and then ice, and then bed,” he said while catching them a cab back to the hotel.

“I was gonna hang out with Jamie later,” she said while they scooted into the back of the taxi. Hailey and her coaches caught their own, since five people proved to be too big a squeeze for one Beijing taxi.

“And do what?”

“Walk around. Hang out. I don’t know. Anything except sit in my room,” she said. She checked her prepaid phone for the time. It was already five in the evening.

“You can do that with Hailey.” Vlad said something in a surprising lick of Mandarin to the driver, who pulled away from the curb and out into traffic without a word returned.

“Hailey can come with us.”

“Rachel,” he said while watching the standstill traffic while the taxi barely accelerated, “you girls are here to focus and compete. You’ll have all the time in the world to socialize once the Games are over.”

She looked down at the white residue coating the bottom of her national team backpack. It no longer looked brand new the way it did when she got it right after Nationals. The gear sponsor designed even newer ones after that, but only the competitive squad received the new uniform collection. So far, the only proof that she was at the Olympics was driving past the National Indoor Stadium every day.

“You mean they’re here to focus and compete. I’m here to rehab and watch from the stands.”

Distant honking infiltrated the glass of the cab. There were lines of cars like the grid of a quilt all over both sides of the road and diverging side roads. Towering buildings hovered above them at various heights, all insanely tall. It looked nothing like home, not even downtown Buffalo, and that made her both happy and homesick. If she went home, she would wish she were here, and here, she wished she were home.

“It’s not over yet, Rachel. Anything could happen before qualifying.”

She knew this, but who would give up their spot unless it was a life or death situation? She took precautions for her bad knee, and now she regretted it. She had no proof that continuing to compete and train on the sprain would have exacerbated the injury or lead to a tear. All she had proof of was that playing it safe gave her a guaranteed ticket to the sidelines. If she hadn’t been so cautious, she’d be on the team. At least of that she was certain.

## CHAPTER 13

### OLYMPIC TEAMS

Her B-team hotel was no more welcoming or comfortable than when she first moved in. It looked like every hotel in America, except smaller with a twin bed. At least she had that over Jamie and the others – they were all sleeping two to a room in the Olympic Village. She iced her knee, watched the English-language version of the news, and used the hotel Wi-Fi to check her email. Her international phone plan wouldn't kick in until tomorrow, the first of August, so she and her parents were on an email spree instead. Her mom's messages mixed mundane life updates with soul-bearing diatribes about how strong Rachel was and how proud they were of her. Her dad's messages were heavy on the life updates and slim on emotion, and always ended with "Love, Dad". She didn't know which was worse.

And then there were Kellan's, which were so unlike anything her parents sent her. He didn't talk about the Olympics at all. Over the last three days he sent her three e-mails full of pictures, ranging from his dog Duke catching a tennis ball on a plush green field of grass that must be native only to the innards of Canada, to photos of him on a local golf course with his high school friends. She opened her inbox with her ice bag on her knee, saw over one hundred new messages ranging from family and acquaintances all over the globe, and clicked on Kellan first

*From: barky88@macmail.ca*

*Got on the ice today at USask with some NHL guys who live around Sasky. Probably be back in Buffalo early September for training camp. When do classes start at Cornell? The league released the schedule, I can start planning visits to interrupt your studying... (jk) ((not really)) I already miss you now, can't imagine it when you're at school. Anyway, here's a pic of Duke swimming from this morning... gold medal in the doggy paddle, yes or no?*

She clicked away and answered her parents first, assuring them that she was not only alive but also well, and editorialized the recaps of her training to make them sound more interesting and promising than she knew they were, while also balancing the level of hope with which to leave them with. The mental gymnastics were more exhausting than her physical gymnastics. She clicked back to Kellan, smiled at the photo of Duke's wagging tongue, and typed back:

*From: rachel\_jayne89@aol.com*

*Absolutely a gold medal in the doggy paddle. No competition! And of course you can come visit me at school. I wish you could visit me right now. You would be surprised how much free time an Olympic alternate has, plus I have my own room :)*

She erased the last line with a stab of the Backspace key. Her cheeks seared despite the whooshing of her room's air conditioning unit. Pausing, she clicked undo and watched her words reincarnate. She was tired of being a chicken. She left them there for his consumption.

*Training today was okay. I got to start tumbling again. Doesn't really matter though. I'm happy to be here but also not really. I think I'm gonna go home after qualifications if they don't need me. (Whoever competes in qualifying is the final team – you can't add or remove people after that). I said I'd stay to watch all the finals but being here and not competing really sucks. Plus, I don't want my parents to fly all the way here just to sit in the stands with me. Jamie will be so mad at me, but I think she'll forgive me eventually. I think I'd forgive her if the roles were reversed.*

*Wish you were here. Tell your mom and Kathy I said hi!*

She hit send on her most honest thoughts since arriving in Beijing and closed her computer. Her dinner arrived at her door via room service, chicken with vegetables and rice. She ate alone and waited for Jamie to reach out, but it was already seven with no sign of life. The team had a nine PM curfew, so time was dwindling away. The news ran the same headlines; the sky outside her third-story window began dimming but the sound rising from the streets was no less loud. She picked up her phone and her wallet, left her tray outside in the hall, and approached Hailey's door beside hers. Hailey answered a few

seconds after Rachel knocked. She was already out of her training clothes and in shorts and a T-shirt.

“Do you want to go on a walk?” Rachel asked.

Hailey looked confused, but gradually it turned into hesitation, and then flipped right into a beam of joy.

“Definitely,” she said, her southern accent no less strong there in China. “Let me just text my coach.”

She had no idea where they would go, and Rachel was two years older than Hailey and thus felt responsible for her well-being, but they left the hotel and just walked. They were within walking distance of Olympic Village and it was the only destination she wouldn’t get lost going to, so there they went.

“It’s so cool here,” Rachel said while staring up at the behemoth buildings above them. She’d competed in New York City before and thought the cityscape there was impressive, but it didn’t compare to Beijing. From where they stood on the sidewalks, she couldn’t even see one percent of the city. Every time she saw a map or a panoramic photo, she realized that she was nothing but a speck among the landscape, especially now that it was hosting the world for the Games. Her whole life had been spent imagining Beijing as the inside of an arena and the location for the heat of competition. She never thought about what the city itself might look like.

“It reminds me of Atlanta, kind of,” Hailey said. “I mean, Beijing is a lot bigger, obviously.”

“Do you live there?”

“Well, I’m from Marietta, which isn’t really Atlanta, but it’s close enough,” Hailey said. She smiled and her braces winked at Rachel. “And Marietta is definitely smaller than Beijing.”

Rachel smiled back and moved in tandem with her fellow alternate. She tried to think of what she actually knew about Hailey, which didn’t amount to much except for her gym’s name and her coaches’ names and maybe the existence of a few siblings. Her best events were beam and floor. She thought she heard something about her committing to the University of Georgia recently.

“Are you committed to Georgia?”

“Yeah,” Hailey affirmed. “But I won’t start until 2010.”

“That’s awesome. They have a great team.”

“I’m excited. Plus, it’s close to home. I have friends from school who will be there, too. It’s like, perfect.”

“You go to school?” Rachel asked, turning her head aside to look at her.

“Oh, yeah,” Hailey said, laughing in no unfamiliar manner. “I know. Everyone always acts so shocked. I go to public school. I always have.”

“Wow.” It wasn’t unheard of, of course, but at this level it was treated as more of a character flaw than anything. Even if Rachel had wanted to go to public school, her training schedule wouldn’t allow for it. Some gyms were better at accommodating the



school day hours, but they normally didn't hone any elite gymnasts. She couldn't even picture herself at public school. She could barely picture herself at college, and she would be starting classes in a month. "Do you like it?"

"I mean, it's school," Hailey said, like no real answer could be assigned to such a question. "I like being with my friends, mostly, and going to the games – football, I mean. Basketball games are a big thing, too. Everyone goes. We just had spring formal in May. I got my boyfriend to wear a pink tie to match my dress." She slapped her pockets, but quickly realized that she too had left her obsolete American phone in her room. "I can show you the pictures later."

"You have a boyfriend?"

"Hunter," she said. Her braces blinked in the daylight once more. "He's Class President. I was going to run for Treasurer, but I don't really have the time for that, so I'm on Student Council instead. Sometimes I get to tell him what to do, which is fun."

None of these words were anything but dictionary definitions to Rachel. There were younger girls at Nickel City who went to public or private school, but doing so was never anything more than an obligatory afterthought.

"That sounds awesome," she said, and it did, in all senses of the word. "When do you train?"

"Monday through Friday from four to eight, and Saturday mornings."

Her training schedule was quite literally half of Rachel's. She couldn't imagine it. In an alternate universe, what would she do with half of her day free? She trained eight

hours a day and sometimes she left the gym at night wishing she had even more time to train. Even so, it didn't seem to be of detriment to Hailey. She made it to Beijing, too.

Their small talk peaked and valleyed as the Olympic Village approached. She already felt a little less miserable with some conversation.

"This might sound weird, but I just can't get over how cool it is to train with you and talk to you and stuff," Hailey said. They were at a congested crosswalk. Olympic rings decorated more and more surface area the closer they got to the epicenter of the Games.

"Cool?" she asked while eyeing the crosswalk light.

"Yeah. I mean, you're you. When I made the national team, I couldn't believe I'd get to train with you. My coaches are always saying, 'train like Rachel', you know – it sounds kind of weird, maybe, but at the camps, they're always watching you and your coach and taking notes and stuff. I actually started doing your bar warm-up routine and I really like it. It helped with my handstands."

Incessant honking disrupted almost every word. Rachel was confused but mostly silent, as happened often when confronted with her own status.

"Thanks," she said, because she didn't know what else to say. "I'm glad it helped."

Silence fell between them, but she didn't get the sense that it was awkward, so she tried not to feel that way. They crossed the street in a big crowd and faced the entrance to

the Village. The greenway welcomed public access; it was the facilities that they couldn't enter.

"Do you want to go in?" Rachel asked, staring at the big archway that separated them from the Olympians.

"Yeah, definitely."

They crossed beyond the arch and she felt the air shift and vary in its weight. On a patch of fertilizer-green grass to the left of the brick path, a group of guys in a mixture of German and Belgian gear kicked around a soccer ball. A tall blonde in a Ukrainian tracksuit sat on a bench, talking on a cell phone. They all could be anything – soccer players, swimmers, track stars – and yet here, they were simply grouped together as the world's elite. Her face took on weight from the downturn of her lips.

"We should find the others," Hailey said as they passed one of forty-two apartment buildings. "Do you know where they're staying?"

"I think Jamie said they're in building twenty-seven," Rachel said. She looked at her phone again, but no sign of Jamie was there. Whatever. She'd call herself. "Let me see where they are."

Her phone informed her that she only had two dollars' worth of minutes left at her disposal, but she decided it was worth seeing their friends. She dialed Jamie and waited. She and Hailey stood off the side of the path, watching a small white golf cart ease by them as it delivered two men in Kenyan T-shirts to their next destination.

"Rach?" Jamie answered.

“Hey. Hailey and I are outside on the grass,” she said, looking up into the elevated windows of one of the apartment buildings. “Can you come outside and hang out with us?”

“Dillhole is all over us,” she said. “I’m sitting in here with Lola and I’ve heard her come into our suite like, three times already.”

“It’s just outside,” Rachel said. Her frustration built with every word. Karen was lucky she didn’t find it worthwhile to pay Rachel any mind, or otherwise she’d rearrange her face back into place.

Jamie agreed to round up the others and proceed with the nefarious plan of exiting the building and standing in front of it. She and Hailey continued walking to meet them there. By the time they arrived at their beige building pushed back about thirty feet from the path, the competition team was already outside. The despair melted from her face and she smiled when Jamie ran up to hug her.

“I feel like I haven’t seen you in years, and it’s only been a few hours,” she said. “I hate that you guys aren’t staying with us. It’s such bullshit.”

“I’d rather be staying with you guys,” Lola added. “I feel like I’m being watched when I sleep.”

“Maybe you are,” Jamie said, waving her fingers in Lola’s face while emitting some paranormal noises from her throat. All eight of them laughed louder than necessary, but no less genuinely. It felt like quenching a thirst.

Gathered on the grass, Rachel listened as they discussed not just the ins and outs of their training sessions, but much more interesting stuff like the cute Australian swimmers that lived in their building and how much better the food tasted here than at camp.

“When we’re allowed to eat it,” Cam said with her knees gathered to her chest. Her nails were painted red, white, and blue in an alternating pattern.

“Yeah, she’s really on another level,” Jamie said. She plucked at some blades of grass and then let them flutter to the ground by Rachel’s foot. “Don’t get me wrong, she’s always a bitch, but she’s been Satanic in practice.”

“Like when she told me that maybe my vault would be higher if I didn’t eat so much cereal at breakfast,” Lola said with a snort. “They have unlimited gluten-free cereal. I’m going to eat a whole box of it if I want, and you can get the hell over it.”

“And the numbers she’s making us do are ridiculous,” Cam said. “Ten floor routines in a day. Does she want us to fall apart?”

“No, she wants us to hit,” Jamie said. She looked at Rachel, who had since rested her chin on her knees and listened to this extended recap with rapt attention. “We saw the Chinese finishing their training before. They have three girls whose start values on bars are almost the same as yours. *Three*. We don’t even have one.”

“They’re not as strong on floor, though,” Rachel said. “And you guys are just as good on beam.”

“I mean, the math is the math,” Jamie said.

She didn't say much else, and with the look they shared, doing so was unnecessary anyway. She got the hint – this team, as it stood, was not going to win gold. They would be lucky to win silver as long as the Russians held on. And it's not that it was anyone's fault, but numbers were numbers. She knew that far too well.

Silence simmered. The sky was darkening, yet more competitors were filtering out from the buildings and onto the quads interspersed in front of and between the linked buildings. Every language passed them by at some point, the shapes and sounds of words new and old gracing her presence and then disappearing forever. She didn't understand what she heard most of the time, but the polyglot beauty didn't escape her. It sounded like music.

"Oh, and her cast is off now," Jamie spoke in the silence. With the night beginning to fall, she glowed nearly blue, like she had suctioned some of the last daylight off for herself to emanate. "Sucks. I wanted her to have to wear it on TV."

"Maybe she'll run into another door," Denise said.

Everyone laughed, nervously at first and then warm and loud as it grew comfortable and well-deserved. Rachel debated revealing her truth, decided against it, and then considered it again. It might distract them or build even more bad blood between the girls and Karen, but it also didn't really matter anymore. It couldn't hurt her more than it already had.

"She didn't run into a door. I punched her."

A lick of loud Russian shot to their group from across the quad. It was a feminine voice; otherwise she would be afraid it was Vlad. The words spoken were clear to her primitive but storied experience with his native tongue – “*Where are you?*” the voice across the way asked an invisible recipient.

“No, you didn’t,” Jamie said.

“Yeah, I did. I punched her the day before Trials, right after the press conference.”

The appalled looks on all of their shadowed faces slowly morphed into disbelief or skeptical glances to one another. Jamie’s eyes remained on hers.

“Did you really?” Jamie whispered.

“I swear on my life. You can ask Vlad, he knows.”

Jamie knew her better than the other six girls put together, and when she gasped, everyone else seemed to realize that Rachel was telling the truth. Jamie yanked on Rachel’s hand and pulled on it for answers.

“What? Why? When? How did it feel? What did she say?”

“After my press conference, this one guy was hounding me about how I wouldn’t make the team and I just told him off. After, Karen got on me about how I’m the face of the program and need to represent them well and support you guys. I told her that I am supporting you guys, and then when I was leaving, she told me that she was glad that I wouldn’t be on the team because she didn’t think I could win all-around gold anyway, so I punched her.”

It was only when retold in plain terms like this that she realized how little it meant in the grand scheme of things. Karen's cast was already off and qualifying was in two days. It was a little bit of revenge that didn't change a single aspect of Rachel's life, and maybe that's what she regretted about it most of all.

"I can't believe you punched her," Lola said quietly, as though in church.

"You're my hero." Jamie pulled her arm around Rachel and hugged her tight.

"You rearranged Karen Dillhole's face and didn't even brag about it. A true American hero."

Sure. An American hero, one who wouldn't even be competing. She wasn't particularly convinced of that, but at least the truth served as a bit of respite and distraction for her friends who needed it. She would remain their cheerleader and their moral support for as long as they deemed her necessary.

The outdoor lights affixed to the sides of each apartment building and the lamp posts growing tall like trees alongside the pathway gave a glow of daylight to the nightfall, which was how she saw Karen leave building twenty-seven's front door. She noticed her nose first. The subtle bruising beneath her eye had faded. The evidence of Rachel's handiwork was no more. Too bad.

"Curfew," Karen said to their gathered settlement.

"We're right outside the building," Jamie said.

"Curfew means inside and accounted for," Karen said. She eyed Rachel, who stared back at her with a fatigue that she couldn't attribute to nightfall. Try me, she



thought. Say what you really want to say. The days of quiet, cutting conversations about her focus or her dedication or her weight or her ability were over. Karen got exactly what she wanted, which was nothing to do with Rachel.

Cameron, Talia, and Denise were already standing. They slunk slowly toward Karen in defeated retreat. Jamie, Lola, and Daisy remained seated for long enough that Rachel thought they would directly defy her, until Daisy sighed and stood up. Jamie looked at Rachel, rolled her eyes, and stood to pull Lola up by the hands.

“If you get to the practice arena early tomorrow, maybe we can talk in the trainer’s room again,” Jamie said.

“Definitely.”

She hugged her best friend and then hugged Lola, who whispered in her ear.

“You should be with us.”

“Don’t worry about me. You guys need to focus on prelims.”

“Inside, now,” Karen snapped.

She stood back with Hailey and watched the other girls go inside one by one. When Lola, last in line, retreated inside, Karen shut the door behind them and came up to Rachel.

“You two have a curfew, too.”

“We don’t even live here.”

“Trust me, I know.” Her blonde ponytail glistened beneath the nearest streetlamp. When she crossed her arms, the laminated credentials hanging from her neck tickled the front of her jacket with scratches. “What’s wrong, Rachel? Can’t let other people have the spotlight for once? You need to try and get everyone in trouble and bring them down to your level?”

“We were sitting out and talking,” she said. “Last time I checked, that’s not a crime in any country, although I guess you do rule your own dictatorship.”

“Clever. They’ll love that at Cornell.” Karen smiled and she looked younger than she ever had. She patted her shoulder. “It’s okay. You’ll always have your World medals. Who knows, maybe you’ll hang on until 2012.” With another smile, she looked at Hailey, nodded, and then challenged Rachel with another stare. “Don’t let me see you get in the other girls’ ways again. Good night, ladies.”

She only realized she had her fists clenched when Karen disappeared back into the apartment building, by which time Rachel’s hands were cramping with her fingers in tight little spirals. She released an exhale like an exhaust fume.

“No wonder you punched her,” was all Hailey said.

The next morning, she woke up expecting a lecture from Vlad about going to the Village to see her friends, but he said no such thing or even indicated that he knew she went there. They got to the practice gym early enough that the competitive squad was still training. Adjusting her last-season backpack on her shoulders, she stood in the doorway and watched Jamie on beam. She went for her standing full and slammed her weight into

the four unforgiving inches that awaited her. A little off-center with her left shoulder too low, her right leg popped out to the side.

“Where’s your fight?” Karen asked from the floor. Her clipboard pushed into her hip as if trying to insert itself into her body. “You’ve done that ten times this week with no problem. Get your shit together, Jamie.”

Jamie said nothing in response, and her back faced Rachel so she couldn’t read her face. She continued the rest of her routine with tiny balance checks here and there and topped it off with her full-in dismount. An immediate hop back besmirched the landing.

“No,” Karen said. “Do it again.”

A few taps to her back shocked her into a tiny jump. She turned to see Vlad looking at his watch.

“You should get in and see Chris now,” he said.

“Right.” She looked into the gym and saw Jamie mounting the beam to begin whatever number repetition this would become. She wanted to stick around and watch but knew it would only cause more problems. Besides, Jamie could handle herself.

She walked with Vlad away from the gymnasium and down to the trainer’s room. With him in the room, her forthcoming prognosis seemed even more suspenseful than usual. After exchanging pleasantries with a waiting Dr. Chris, she got into her usual spot on the edge of the exam table and let her work her magic. She poked and prodded, asked her questions, and bent her knee forward and back. She tried to zero in on any sensation of pain but felt none.

“How’d the tumbling go yesterday?” she asked with her knee extended fully out beneath her arm.

“It looked terrible, but it felt fine,” she said. She looked at Vlad, who nodded his agreement. “No pain or anything. Everything on the floor felt good.”

“No weakness? It doesn’t feel like it’s buckling under you when you land?”

“No,” she said, and it was the truth. For all the dramatics her knee expressed over the years, it felt as fine as it ever did at its best. Pain, sure, but unsteady or tenuous, no.

“Well, I think it’s about as healthy as it’s going to get here. Swelling is down, it’s stable, no pain – as long as you’re careful and taking safe landings, you shouldn’t be in any more danger of further injury than you would be normally.”

She looked at her knee while she spoke, almost wishing it would say the words for her and admit to the heartache it caused her.

“So she can train full-strength,” Vlad clarified.

“Yeah. I’m gonna clear you, Rachel. I just wish it could’ve been a little earlier.”

She shook her hand and thanked her for all her help over the last few painful weeks. When Vlad held the door open for her to leave, she focused on nothing except the sensation of her weight-bearing knee keeping her upright. If she tried tumbling two weeks ago, she could have blown her ACL out. She wanted to think she did the right thing. For a few days, she convinced herself of that. Here in China, though, with everything Olympic closing in on her and shutting her out all at once, she didn’t know how she ever fooled herself into thinking she didn’t make a mistake by playing it safe.

“Well,” Vlad said. She waited for more, but it died in his throat.

“I don’t know what to say,” she said.

“You did the right thing,” he said.

She looked at him for what could’ve been the first time ever. His eyes absorbed some of the fresh aquatic paint on the hallway walls and the reflected hue made his green eyes mossy and alive. Years ago, she watched videos of him in the early nineties cleaning house handily any time the pommel horse and high bar were contended. On grainy footage immortalizing his early twenties, he was even kind of cute. Now he always looked tired.

“Come on.” He swept his arm around her shoulder, rustling her second-rate team jacket with a slide of his elbow as he did. “Let’s go see if they’re almost done in there. You have some tumbling to clean up.”

They were not done, but she got to sit inside by the door and watch them finish up. Most of them looked nervous, except for Jamie and Lola, who looked annoyed. Talia was in the middle of practicing her Deltchev on bars and missed the high bar completely on the re-grasp. Her coach, who doubled as her father, caught her in midair before she could fall to her fate on the mats. Lola and Jamie traded off passes on the floor. Both of them looked confident, if a little bouncy. Up on the beam, Denise nailed her leap series and L-turn, and then immediately fell on her Arabian. Her coach’s stony silence died swiftly when Karen interrupted it to say something too quiet for Rachel to hear. She pointed in Denise’s face and her mouth twisted and sharpened around a selection of

words that Rachel was sure she herself had heard at least a hundred times before – lazy, unfocused, undedicated, out of shape – and perhaps all of the above.

Standing beside her, Vlad's phone rang and he answered in casual Russian. Rachel removed her own phone, this one her personal phone, which now had international access. August 1<sup>st</sup> blinked at her from the home screen. Opening ceremonies were tomorrow, and qualifying was the day after. She shook off the solemn feeling a simple date gave her and opened up her messages to text her mom. It was eleven at night back in Buffalo, but it wasn't a time-sensitive message to convey.

*Rachel: My knee is cleared. I can do full practices again*

She tucked her phone away – her mom was not a fast texter – and watched the girls continue to practice. Denise was back on the beam. The look on her face screamed everything her silence couldn't. She knew that feeling and that position well enough that the thought of anyone else ever feeling that way hurt her even more.

The end of the competitive team's practice was highly anticipated, judging by the looks on their faces when they gathered their belongings up and ambled toward the door in silence. Rachel stood and waited for Jamie, who walked with a fast-talking Igor and nodded occasionally. When she saw Rachel, she rolled her eyes and came over to the wall she was propped against.

"Now imagine us having all that fun on the floor in team finals," Jamie said.

“How are you guys supposed to focus with her screaming at you?” Rachel whispered. “How is that supposed to encourage anyone?”

“You’re asking me?” Jamie looked over her shoulder into the gym. Karen had gathered most of the coaches and stood in a huddle with them, directing conversation and fates with lots of definitive hand gestures. “Whatever. Same shit. What about you? Anything new?”

Only the biggest news possible, she thought. She listened to Vlad talking in the hallway and watched in her peripheral vision as the other girls waited by the door for their coaches to finish receiving their scathing progress reports that they would then hear secondhand later. She looked at her untaped knee and shrugged into the lie.

“Nothing.”

“Sucks,” Jamie said. She reached in and hugged her.

Rachel hugged her back and sunk into it. They’d never existed this long without constant proximity or at least the option of it. She felt like a prisoner.

“You guys should come hang out with us again later,” Jamie said. “The earlier, the better.”

“Sure.” She let it sustain and energize her for now.

The gym cleared little by little, with coaches guiding their athletes out of the practice arena and into fresh monologues about their failings as athletes and as people. Rachel unzipped her tracksuit to begin warming up on the floor with Hailey. They jogged around the perimeter in perfect time. Every time a lap allowed her to face the doorway,

she got to spy on Karen, Vlad, Becky, and Jack debrief in a huddle. Karen did most of the talking, but just seeing her around for their practice surprised her. Hailey sidled up beside Rachel as they passed the door and rounded a corner.

“What do you think they’re talking about?”

“She’s probably just bitching about the other girls,” Rachel said.

“Do you think she’s watching us today?”

“I don’t know,” Rachel said, although she doubted Karen would waste her time with them.

“I hope not. I always screw up when she’s watching me.”

“She wants you to be afraid and she wants you to mess up because she thinks yelling at you until you feel like trash is how you’ll do your best. Pretend she’s not there, ignore everything she says, and you won’t make any mistakes.”

Hailey didn’t respond, but she wasn’t bothered by the silence. It had taken her years to finally just stop caring about Karen’s input or vendetta. She didn’t expect anyone to do the same overnight.

When they were warmed up, Rachel fiddled with the tape on her knee while Vlad and Karen continued to talk. She was beginning to worry about the subject matter that was taking so much of her coach’s time, but right when she psyched herself up to go up to them and join the conversation, Vlad broke away and walked over to Rachel.

“What was that about?”



“I told her you’ve been cleared,” he said. “She had many questions. She also wanted to let me know that you were distracting the team last night before their curfew.”

“We were sitting outside ten feet from their front door,” Rachel said. She fingered the strip of tape and smoothed its edge down. “We live together for a week at camp every month. No one cares when we talk then.”

“Trust me, she’s not interested in hearing logic right now,” Vlad said. He held his arm out and pulled Rachel to her feet. The tape hugged her knee lovingly and promised to keep it stable now that she was able to use it again.

“What did she say about my knee?”

“She’s either a great actress or not that impressed. She said with how far behind you are, even if something did happen in these next two days, she would give Hailey her official endorsement to be slotted in. The good news is that it’s not up to her to make that decision – the personal coaches take a vote.”

None of this particularly surprised her, and she didn’t expect the news of her recovery to change any disposition Karen had toward her. She was very far behind. Hailey was a healthy all-around gymnast and practicing well.

“Is there bad news?” Rachel asked, since there always seemed to be bad news.

“The bad news is that even if you did get voted in, you haven’t done a full floor routine or a vault in a month. Plus, right now it doesn’t sound like anyone is injured enough to be pulled from the line-up.”

“So you’re saying I’m doing floor and vault today,” she said.

He smirked, although it was slow to appear. He smiled so infrequently that sometimes she figured he must not always remember how to do so.

“That’s probably the first time you’ve ever asked to vault.”

“Yeah, well, I have to keep you on your toes. You’ve gotten too comfortable with me slacking.”

Despite her bravado, just looking at the vault table against the wall planted seeds of nauseous fear deep in her gut. Her last vault had been the reason for this mess in the first place. She knew she would try again, but she needed to ease into it first, and did so on floor. She warmed up some basic tumbling passes – back tucks, front tucks, back layouts, front layouts – and got her feel for the floor back with each bounce of her feet off the blue carpet.

With her confidence boosted a little, she again went for one of each of her tumbling passes with Vlad spotting each one. Preparing for her double layout, she told herself that she needed as much bounce as possible to get it around and have a safe landing, so when she tumbled into it, she slammed her feet into the spring floor after her back handspring and whipped into the air as high as she could, gravity be damned. She over-rotated it and nearly sat it down. Vlad braced his arms beneath hers and kept her from falling.

“Too much is just as bad as not enough,” he said. “You never went that hard before you got hurt, so why now? Why don’t you trust yourself?”

“I just want to have enough power going into it.”

“The power is there. It’s the landing you need to think about. If all you think in the air is, ‘I hope I land it’, then you’ll miss the landing. Know you’ll land it going into it and just worry about making it perfect.”

He was right, of course, and while his criticism annoyed her, it also was the most normal she felt in weeks. He wanted her to be better – he believed she could be better. He wouldn’t push her to improve if he didn’t. That had to mean something.

She practiced each of her passes one by one, taking small breaks in between to catch her breath and mimic the pacing of a floor routine without music or dance. She was exhausted, but he spotted her when she needed it and pushed her when she didn’t. She hit her last triple twist and took a big step back with the momentum of it. Her air sense was the same as it ever was, and she always seemed to know where to land. It was just up to her endurance to get her there.

“Okay, that’s enough,” he said.

Rachel bent over in the corner and sucked in as much of the gym’s atmosphere as she could. She hadn’t been thoroughly exhausted like this since the injury, to the point that she felt like she could keel over and die. She’d missed it. He tossed her the water bottle from beside her gym bag and she took two long sips until half the bottle emptied.

“Ten minutes, then we do beam.”

“Can’t I do a floor routine?” she asked.

“You can barely stand,” he said. “You just got clearance. You need to pace yourself.”

“What about vault?”

“Am I speaking in Russian? Work on your beam and we’ll see how you are after.”

Fine, she thought. She took her drained physical energy but newfound mental energy to beam, where she hit set after set after set, although he kept her from doing any dismounts. Every time she remembered her conquered floor passes, she nailed a skill on the beam. She may have had the world’s most inconvenient injury, she thought while coming down into a perfectly square side aerial, but she would top it with the world’s best rebound to peak form.

After five hit beam sets, including two where she threw the full-twisting layout instead of the regular layout, he let her try two dismounts. He was saving her knee, but perhaps there was something else beneath his steady dosing of her hardest skills. At the end of the beam, she blew a stray hair out of her face and popped off into her round-off back handspring dismount series, then pulled her triple full through the air until she came down to meet the mat with ease. She saluted to the blue-toned wall and imagined it instead as a wall of thousands of faces, all applauding her.

“Feel okay?”

“I feel amazing.” She was exhausted and her legs were jelly, but her statement lacked no truth. She felt her best since touching down in Beijing. She looked past the bars where Hailey was training and at the vacant vault table. It called her name in every language. She could feel Vlad’s eyes on her. “Can I please try a vault?”

It wasn't an immediate no, which kept her hope alive in the pursuant silence. The smack of Hailey landing her full-twisting double tuck dismount on the mats bounced off the walls.

"Rachel," he said, dragging it out the way he did when he knew he was about to disappoint her.

"You can spot me," she bargained.

"You did plenty today. Too much. You don't need to throw a vault on top of it."

"A timer. Let me at least touch the table."

How could he argue with that? She could do a timer in her sleep. He relented, although made it clear by his tone and slow approach to the table that he wasn't happy about it. Rachel ran to the end of the runway and bounced on the tired balls of her feet while he measured the runway and the springboard. He measured twice, then made a small mark with chalk to indicate her preferred distance of runway length.

"It doesn't have to be pretty," he said. "Just do it right."

"I will," she said.

She brushed her big toe against the mark he created for her and looked down the blue runway to the red vault table. Weeks ago, she had been preparing to vault just like this, never suspecting that it would be the catalyst to all her recent misery. She took a deep breath and let it go, all of it, Karen and her knee and her alternate status and her friends' misery and feeling alone and her constant desire to cry, and sprinted down the runway.

It felt unfamiliar, but with each step the routine of it came back to her. As a little girl, her earliest handspring vaults had been landed while seated onto mats; her first Yurchenko full, achieved when she was eleven; her first one-and-a-half, when she was thirteen; her would-be double that landed her in this position. She rounded off, pushed her feet into the springboard, soared backwards until her palms slammed into the table, and stretched her body straight in the air. She watched herself command the ground to come closer, prepared for it, and slid from her impacted heels down to her back with an easy roll. Her heart was throbbing in her ears. Her palms were soaked.

“Okay?” he asked above her, his head hanging in her line of sight.

“Okay,” she said. With every breath, her pulse calmed. She was okay. She wasn’t hurt. She survived a timer. He pulled her to her feet, and she considered another try. He put his arms around her shoulder. “Don’t even think about it. You’re done.”

“That was good though, right?” she asked, looking at him for guidance and assurance. “It felt good.”

“It was good,” he said. He planted a rare kiss to her temple and patted her shoulder when he released her both from his side and from a day of accomplishment. “You did good.”

Good, she repeated to herself. She went to her bag and picked it up in her arms, turning back to eye the vault table and then the entirety of the practice gym one more time. Good today, great tomorrow. It was a challenge she’d always taken and always succeeded at. Why should now be any different?

## CHAPTER 14

### OLYMPIC SCHEMES

On August 2<sup>nd</sup>, opening ceremonies began. Strange, because Rachel felt as though the Olympics had been in action for at least a week by then. She and Vlad made plans to go and get as close as they could to the ceremonies in town that evening and see what festivities they could access. Her parents were arriving at the airport that evening and would miss them altogether, but she would have plenty of time to see them in the week to follow. All she had was time, after all.

She was in practice that afternoon when she could sense that something in the universe was about to shift drastically. Never having lived through an earthquake or a hurricane, she couldn't say for sure if it was the same sensation that prophesizing survivors often spoke about after surviving natural wreckage they felt coming ahead of time. It felt big, but not destructive. She let it eat at her all through training without a word, and performed five bar sets, five beam sets, and one full floor routine before she began to see the pieces move into place.

It came first as a phone call to Vlad. She didn't necessarily draw a connection from this to the dreadful feeling permeating her entire body through every turn of practice, but when she saw the look on his face, she realized something had been up all along. She wasn't sick or crazy or jet-lagged. She knew it before he said a word, and yet the truth erupted anyway.

“Denise just tore her Achilles in podium training,” he said very quietly and very evenly. There was no emotion subscribed to his shaded features – he hadn’t shaved in a while, and she wondered if he forgot to bring a razor to China – and so she didn’t allow any to profess their feelings across her face, either.

“Is she okay?” Rachel asked. “Where is she now?”

“She was just with Dr. Chris. She and her parents are with her at the hospital.”

“Can I go see her?” She pictured her younger teammate, the numbers she and all the others were putting up with – God, no one needed to be doing fifty floor routines in a week, she thought while daydreaming about punching Karen again – and started walking toward her bag. “Is it nearby?”

“You’re not going anywhere.” He flipped his new phone shut before dropping it into his pocket. “The coaches are coming here to take their vote.”

She must have made some noise of acknowledgement about this turn of events, but she didn’t recall doing so. All she did was continue back to the floor to practice her passes like no interruption ever occurred. She knew in some distant space of her mind that if she let herself think or imagine for one second what could possibly happen in the span of about an hour, she would never regain her focus, so she simply didn’t.

She clicked play on her floor music and channeled every wisp of thought into her music and her skills, no different than any other time she ever performed despite extenuating circumstances. For ninety seconds, this was all she could allow herself to worry about – landing her skills and performing her routine. After her double Arabian,



she spun into her triple attitude turn, just barely eeking it around to three full revolutions. Her combination pass was bouncy but fine. She finished her triple twist while utterly exhausted but held on until her feet nailed the ground. Her final pose allowed her the chance to rest. When the music ended, she laid on her back and let her breath catch loudly. She could not remember being this out of shape before, but struggling through workouts was better than no workouts.

Her first vault was an ugly affair. Vlad told her to do a Yurchenko layout, a vault she'd been doing for almost ten years. On her first attempt, she was too high on the table and stumbled out of the under-rotated landing. When he told her to do it again, she focused on the speed of her hands and the force of their contact. Slowly, layout after layout, she began to get the timing back. She was never going to be a world-class vaulter, but getting back into the groove of her least-favorite event was a victory in itself.

“You want to try a twist?” he asked once she landed three layouts without major incident.

He meant a full, which only started out of a 5.0, five tenths less than her usual vault and eight tenths less than the vault she hurt herself on, but baby steps had worked for her up to this point. She trusted the process and she trusted him.

She stared at the table, pictured her landing, and then sprinted into it. Rounding off, she snapped her hands to the table as quickly as she could and twisted around one full time. She could feel her knees bending in the air, her fear preventing her from locking her legs out into perfect form, but she braced for the landing and came down. It was hideous, but it was completed and she was safe.

“Not so bad for a month off, huh?” he asked, high-fiving her when she felt herself smiling. “Bad knees, but we can clean that up.”

Distant chatter from the hallway slowly neared until she could hear what Jamie intended to say before she said it, which was one of her more useless yet permeating life skills. She rested her sore hands on her hips and watched the door. The five remaining team members and their personal coaches filed into the practice gym in varying lanes of two or three abreast, packing the vast gym and making it feel more constricted. Jamie saw her and jogged over. Before long they were joined by Lola, and the others filtered over in time – Cameron, then Talia, then Hailey, then finally Daisy. The coaches gathered by the door, but Karen was the only one speaking.

“Were you vaulting?” Jamie asked.

“Yeah.”

“You got cleared?”

“Yeah.”

“And you didn’t even tell me?” Jamie said, smacking her bicep. Rachel gasped and hit her back.

“I don’t want you guys worrying about me. You’ve got enough to deal with.”

“Yeah, no kidding,” Lola said. Her right ankle was heavily taped and both of her shins were doused in chalk. “You should’ve heard it. It was disgusting, hearing an Achilles just pop like that.”

“Have you guys talked to her?” Rachel asked.

“Not since she left the arena crying,” Jamie said. “It was bad.”

Each of them settled into a short silence, and Rachel could just about hear all of them thinking the same thing – it could’ve been any one of them. Injury came with the territory, everyone knew that. What really mattered was the timing.

“They’re supposed to vote now,” Jamie said. Her eyes found Rachel’s easily. “I don’t know how long it’ll take.”

“It’s not like I’ve got anywhere to be,” Rachel said. She stretched her legs out and eyed the tape job on her knee, suddenly thankful that what lied beneath hadn’t blown out on her despite all the demand she placed on it. It had ample opportunity to give out on her once and for all, and yet it chose not to despite a few hiccups along the way. Thank you, she thought while looking at the bandage surrounding it.

Hailey was quiet to Rachel’s left. It was either her or Rachel taking Denise’s spot. She could find fault in both options – Rachel was more experienced, could score higher, and was a medal threat for the all-around, beam, and bars. On the other hand, Hailey was perfectly healthy and in shape, while Rachel was at best a wild card. Rachel wanted to be named, but she knew why she wouldn’t be.

“We should go see Denise after this,” Rachel said. “I’m gonna go see her before my parents land.”

The girls nodded into this plan of action one at a time. She looked at Hailey and smiled, then reached for her hand.

“You okay?”

“Yeah,” she said. She nodded a second too late. “I didn’t think – I mean, I never thought I might actually compete.”

“You’re an alternate because they wanted you in case something like this happened,” Rachel said. “That’s how good you are.”

The mood seemed more fraught with every passing second. The coaches, save for Vlad, Becky, and Jack, left the room to convene elsewhere. She looked at Vlad, who bore no expression that she could read. Rachel and her six teammates sat in strange silence, five girls whose destinies were locked in and two whose were in battle with one another. She didn’t want it to feel antagonistic or feudal, but she knew this sport and she knew there was always only one winner and then everyone else.

The coaches weren’t gone very long, maybe three minutes. She watched as they came back in, each of them in their official team gear and Karen with her clipboard crossed between her arms.

“Denise is flying home tomorrow morning to get surgery on her Achilles. I don’t suppose I need to spell out that she will not be competing,” Karen said.

Her voice was dry of emotion and starting to leak of its life. Rachel wondered if she slept for a single hour since they all got to Beijing. She felt Jamie’s knee tap hers. She didn’t tap back. She didn’t even move. She wasn’t sure if she was even breathing.

“As per the official protocol for these situations, the five remaining personal coaches vote in the replacement athlete to fill the void. The coaches were made aware

that Denise was most likely going to compete on bars and beam for the team. With that disclosure, the vote was 4-1 in favor of Rachel.”

She could feel the air suck out of gym and from her lungs in one seamless swoop. It wasn’t just her own breath that failed her but the sensation of knowing that multiple other people were not breathing, too. When she felt Jamie’s breath on her ear and her arms around her body, it was shocking mostly because she herself could not do the same.

“You’re on the team, Rach,” Jamie said, pulling her into no unfamiliar hug. “Oh my God, you’re on the team.”

Why couldn’t she respond? Why couldn’t she do anything except stare in frozen, stunned silence as everything she wanted fell right into her lap? The outburst that followed seemed rehearsed, or at least it felt like it because it did not surprise her.

“She’s a specialist,” Hailey’s coach, Becky, said. It wasn’t a shout or a yell, but it was nonetheless acidic. Her face told no lies. “Hailey’s an all-arounder and she’s in competition shape. Rachel just started vaulting twenty minutes ago.”

“They don’t need Rachel to vault. Team final vaults are Lola, Cameron, and Jamie. That’s been the lineup for over a year. Daisy can vault in qualifying,” Igor said. He stood beside Vlad in their matching blue sport polos with a little USA emblem on their shoulders.

“If Rachel can get a vault by qualifying, then she needs to vault. She’s World Champion, it’s only right that she qualifies all-around,” Vlad said.

He said it directly to Karen, who watched this little multi-pronged explosion occur in her midst with slim, pleased eyes. Rachel felt her spine seize in awful, anxious tension. It felt like when her parents fought, but at least with her parents, she could fool herself into thinking she wasn't the catalyst of all the dissention, just some of it. She had no such luck here.

"This is bullshit," Jack, Hailey's other coach, said. He pointed right at Rachel, who from twenty feet away could feel it stab her right in her pounding heart, bypassing her ribcage altogether. "If Hailey were the one with the status, she'd get the vote unanimously. This isn't a popularity contest, it's an Olympic team."

"Our girls didn't come here for team silver or bronze. With Rachel's bar and beam scores, they have a shot at gold," Janet, Lola's often soft-spoken coach, said.

"It's not right," Talia's dad said with a shake of his head. "The rules are supposed to prevent this from happening. All that noise about how putting girls with injuries on the team isn't fair to the other athletes, just for one to end up on the team anyway. This isn't right and it isn't fair."

Well, Rachel thought while digging her nails into her gathered shins, she'd never have to wonder who cast the lone dissenting vote. And yet the more they spoke, the more sense it made. How could she disagree with them? She just did a vault that would make a Level 8 judge cringe. She could barely get through a floor routine. Her bars and beam could bring in the highest scores of the competition, but that only mattered if no one else on the team went down with an injury and everyone hit their routines to their best ability. There was no guarantee of either happening.

Little sidebar conversations between the coaches rose and fell in musical rhythm. Rachel and her teammates said nothing. She couldn't even look at Hailey, not without spending ample time deliberating what she should say first. A few clicks of Karen's nails on her clipboard persisted until she finally spoke.

"Enough. We're done discussing this in front of the girls. Rachel is officially on the team and Hailey will remain the alternate in case anyone else goes down. If you have further thoughts on the subject, write them in your diary."

She looked right at Rachel, who in turn sat up straighter, her spine unfurling quickly like the insidious removal of weight on an industrial mouse trap.

"Anyone who needs treatment, go see Dr. Chris. Otherwise, everyone except for Rachel and Vlad, get out of the gym now."

Her orders marinated for a moment before any movement occurred. Jamie hugged Rachel again, and was joined by Lola, then by Cameron, Talia, and Daisy. She responded with weak arms and deaf nods. She turned to reach out for Hailey, but she already left the floor to approach her waiting coaches.

"Hailey."

Her plead failed. The gym emptied in a rush of exiting bodies. Jamie was last, hugging Rachel when they stood together under the eyes of Vlad and Karen.

"Meet me in the trainer's when you're done? I want to go to the hospital with you," Jamie said.

“Yeah.” She blinked her heavy eyelids and pulled on Jamie’s hand, trying to transmit her lasting image of a retreating Hailey. “Tell her I’m sorry.”

Jamie shrugged. “She’ll understand, Rach, just like you did at Trials.”

Perhaps it was true, or would be in the future, but it did little to mend the guilt she felt. She watched Jamie go, slow at first, then with a jog out the door when Karen sharpened the impatient look upon her face. Vlad nodded at Jamie as she exited. Karen shut the door behind her, locking the three of them into the gym and its bright aqua walls.

“First, let me just make clear that I don’t endorse or refute anything said by any personal coaches. I’m a staff member for USA Gym. I don’t work for any individual gymnast, nor for her coaches.”

“We’re well aware, Karen,” Vlad said with no affect. He extended his hand out to pull Rachel closer. She felt dazed and as though the last few minutes were the season finale of a weekly drama and not her real life. He put his arm around her shoulder.

“Good, then allow me to clarify something else: the philosophy of this organization is always and has always been team before individual. I’m sure I don’t have to explain to you that those two things very rarely coexist in harmony. Rachel is World Champion, no one is refuting that. That was before an injury made her half the gymnast she was when she won that title. Rachel will do bars and beam in qualifications and team finals. She is not qualifying all-around.”



“She’s earned all-around and you know it. The amount of medals, eyes, and money she’s brought to this program in the last year probably padded your retirement account ten times over.”

“She’s out of shape and she’s not ready,” Karen said like the lash of a whip.

“How would you know? You haven’t watched her practice once. You have no idea what she’s been doing in here.” Vlad squeezed her shoulder cap with furious tension. She could feel his anger thump against the pads of his fingers. “If you keep her out of the all-around, you will spit in the face of every gymnast who grows up thinking one day they can make the American Olympic team. You tell them to work hard and make their dreams come true, and then when they do, you shut them out and waste their time. You think parents want to read about that in the papers? If you let this become a story, good luck assembling a team four, eight, twelve years from now. Good luck paying the rent on that sad excuse for a camp. Good luck finding a job when those dried-up membership fees and annual dues delete your salary right off the budget.”

“Don’t threaten me ever again. Coaches have been blacklisted from this program for a lot less,” Karen said. She pushed the short edge of the clipboard against his stomach and leaned forward, pressing some menacing weight into it. “Maybe the better question to ask is if you’re directing your anger in the right place. After all, she didn’t get injured at my camp. If I’m not mistaken, she blew her knee out at your gym on your watch. Isn’t that right, Comrade?”

The clipboard slapped the wall with a slam after a whack of Vlad’s wrist. Rachel stepped between the two of them and shoved her palms out in either direction.

“God, both of you, shut up!” She could taste the rasp of her throat. She could taste her anger and her anxiety and her stress and even a sliver of elation beneath the surface like a meal coming back up. Her eyelids slapped shut and she pushed her palms out again, hitting both of their chests. “If it means everyone will stop arguing, then I don’t have to qualify all-around. Daisy is a better vaulter and Karen’s right, I’m not ready. I shouldn’t have even been voted on. I won’t win the all-around in this shape.”

“That’s not true. All you need to do is qualify in. You could do a Yurchenko full and still qualify in. Then we have two days of practice to get you ready for finals. Experience matters more than numbers. You’ve done this already, Rachel. You just need four solid routines when they matter most. That’s it.” He put his hand atop hers and pushed her palm against his chest. “Don’t ever count yourself out again. Otherwise, you may as well just go home.”

She felt his heart thump against her palm, just like the transmitted signal from his fingers earlier on her shoulder. Her eyes remained closed and everything flashed into her mind all at once – her parents crying outside of Trials, her countless fake smiles over the last month, Denise sitting in a hospital bed waiting to go home and get surgery, winning her prized golds at Worlds, Kellan receiving the burden of her pain in Minneapolis – and yet they all made her feel exactly the same, as if they were one. She let out a shaky breath and knew she was about to cry in front of the two people who hated crying more than anyone. When she pictured them drying up into the atmosphere never to be seen again, they disappeared from the inner corners of her eyes.

Rachel lowered her arms and stepped forward near the door. Her chalky bag slumped against the wall. Her parents were on a plane. Kellan was fourteen hours away. Denise was in a hospital bed. Qualifications were tomorrow.

“I’m going to visit Denise with the others,” she said while lifting her heavy gym bag up back into her grasp. Everything she once thought she needed waited beneath its patriotic fabric, and yet none of it could fix any of her real problems. “I’ll be back for dinner and the opening ceremony.”

She pushed the doors open, rounded the corner of the threshold, and swam down the sea-blue hallway to the trainer’s room. Jamie, Lola, Cameron, Daisy, and Talia were gathered among the two examination tables and the few stray chairs. There was conversation, but the mood was solemn and unsettled, with furtive glances and quick, short responses. She blocked the doorway and they all looked at her.

“Does anyone know how to say ‘hospital’ in Mandarin?” she asked.

Despite their small statures, shoving six young women into one cab proved difficult. The cab driver didn’t say a word, not even when Cameron opened her English to Mandarin dictionary and said the word, *yi-yuan*, that would hopefully take them to Denise. Rachel sat behind the driver and saw his eyebrows do all his talking for him. Nevertheless, they departed the practice gym and slipped into traffic.

“What did Karen say?” Jamie asked. She sat in the middle and Talia was seated upon their clustered legs. Lola sat by the other window with Daisy seated upon her and Jamie. Cameron, their newly appointed tour guide and translator, sat up front in comfort.

“That I’m out of shape and not doing the all-around.”

“Tell me you punched her again,” Lola’s hidden head begged.

“Unfortunately not, but Vlad almost did.”

She stared up into the summer sun hiding behind mammoth buildings and wished it would stick around longer and give her more time to practice and get in shape and make things right with Hailey. Time dragged on forever when she arrived here in Beijing, and now it seemed so limited.

“I’m sorry about my dad,” Talia said when they sat in gridlocked traffic in front of a teasing green light.

“It’s fine. He wasn’t wrong.”

“Yes, he was,” Jamie said. “You deserve to be on the team, Rach. You should’ve been on it from the beginning. You could win gold on bars and beam, not to mention we need you if we want to even sniff team gold. It’s the right call.”

Jamie was right, but that didn’t eradicate Rachel’s creeping guilt. One teammate was down to one leg and another just had her Olympic hopes crushed for the second time. All this collateral damage and yet there still wasn’t any hope for her dream of all-around gold.

They arrived at a sleek hospital and the driver tapped the meter, which demanded twenty-one yuan. Rachel dug through her bag for her wallet while everyone scrounged pockets. Together they pooled the fare together and began the process of emptying themselves out of the cab one by one. Rachel waited for Talia to depart and then she

stepped into the sun herself, feeling it warm her cold fingers and hot cheeks. Once they all stood together, the cab pulled away to freedom, having survived its plight of carrying six American gymnasts.

“Her mom said she’s in room 612. Let’s go,” Jamie said with her prepaid phone in hand.

They used numbers to find their way around, eventually finding an elevator and tapping the button for 6. They moved quickly and officially to avoid detours or curious looks. At 612, they all gathered in the doorway. A curtain shaded the lone bed in the room. Denise’s mom and dad stood by the room’s window. The sun jumped upon them head-on and she could see from their swollen eyes that they had both recently finished crying. She and the others stood in silence, waiting for their next move. Rachel knocked on the door herself; she was tired of waiting for things to happen.

“Oh, hi, girls. Come in,” Denise’s mom said, standing up straight. “Honey, the girls are here.”

They entered the tiny room and passed the curtain. Denise was laid up in bed in a dark blue practice leo and her team jacket, but with her right leg bearing a cast from the middle of her foot up to her knee.

“You have to fly home in that thing?” Lola asked.

“Yeah, and with these,” Denise said, poking the crutches propped at her bedside. “What are you guys doing here?”

“Seeing how you are,” Rachel said. “Did they say how long?”

“Surgery when I get home, obviously, and then probably nine months,” she said. She looked stoic, but not teary. Her dark eyes mingled with Rachel’s. “So I’ll be ready for Worlds next year.”

“That sucks, Denise. I’m sorry,” Jamie said.

“Well, there’s always London,” Denise’s mom said. She came beside her daughter and held her hand. Denise softened her hand against her mom’s, but only after a brief pause.

“Where’s Hailey?” Denise asked the group.

Rachel rolled her neck awkwardly and debated how to phrase the last hour of events.

“The coaches voted for Rachel,” Cameron said. “Well, except for Talia’s dad.”

“I said sorry,” Talia said.

“So you’re competing?” Denise asked Rachel. When she nodded, her eyes settled onto hers softer than before. “Well, good. You’ll be awesome. You’ll all be awesome.”

Later, after Rachel received her official credentials and ate dinner and went to watch the bombastic fireworks show of the opening ceremony from its crowded outskirts with Vlad, Jamie, Lola, and their coaches, she felt her prepaid phone buzz in her back pocket. The distant thumping of performance music from within the Olympic Ring staccatoed against her every blood vessel, as though her blood itself was the noise. She looked away from a bright red firework bursting into the smoggy sky and down at her phone.

*Denise: I couldn't say anything in front of my parents, but thinking about the crowds and team finals was keeping me awake at night so I started thinking of how to get out of it. I was going to fake a muscle sprain in my back but this happened instead.*

*Denise: I wish I could be as confident as you guys but it just doesn't work like that for me. Anyway, I'm glad you will get your Olympics. I'll never forget how nice you were to me at Worlds and Trials.*

She read it multiple times over, with the glow of red firework showers brushing over the screen again and again with every burst of celebration. She looked up above the Bird's Nest and watched the sparks fire up to the sky, linger in spite of gravity, and fizzle down to the bottom of the atmosphere. She clicked reply and didn't deliberate for any longer than it took to type.

*Rachel: You are so much more than this sport*

*Rachel: Have a safe flight and surgery*

The next batch of sparks shot up to kiss the sky and sparkled yellow. Lola and Janet ooh'd and ahh'd beside her, snapping photos on their digital cameras to remember the moment that the Olympics began for posterity. Rachel pulled her real phone from her pocket to use its camera to take her own commemorative photos, but not before the prepaid buzzed again.

*Denise: So are you, but you may as well win some gold while you're there :)*

*Good luck*



## CHAPTER 15

### FOUR UP, THREE COUNT: QUALIFICATIONS

The day of qualifying, Rachel entered the National Indoor Stadium for the first time since arriving in Beijing. Many times she had envisioned it and yet none of the images she ever conjured came close to its stature in person. The floors were teal blue, similar to the practice gym, yet brighter and soaring in luminescence like its own dry body of water. Yellow, green, red, and pink swirled designs with the logo of the Games plastered available surface area that wasn't the floor. The stands were empty – for now, at least – but could hold twenty thousand people without a problem.

It was morning practice before qualifications when she attempted her second vault since the injury. She was waiting for her turn until the end of their vault rotation in training so that Cameron, Lola, and Jamie got all the practice time they needed. Their vaults looked steady even in this staggering setting. Their futures hinged upon the start of the competition that afternoon at four and then team finals tomorrow morning. Jamie looked better than ever; cleaner, higher, crisper. Rachel said as much when she watched Jamie stick her Rudi.

“I’m like a wine, Rach. I just keep getting better.” She grinned and stepped off the mat by the table. “What are you going to do?”

“Whatever he lets me do, I guess,” she said, looking down on the floor where the coaches gathered around Karen’s clipboard. “I did a really bad full yesterday. I want to at least get the one-and-a-half back.”

“It’s all in the block,” Jamie said. She stretched her arms up above her head and mimicked impact with flat palms against the air. “If you know you’ve got the air, then everything else just comes down to muscle memory.”

She supposed the second-best vaulter in the world would know what she was talking about. Vlad joined her up on the podium so she could practice her vaults. She did two timers to get a feel for the table again. After that, she attempted another Yurchenko full. She blocked hard and fast and focused on straightening out her knees. She landed with a tiny hop back.

“Better,” he said. “Don’t pike your hips down so much. Try it again.”

On her way back down the vault runway, she could feel Karen watching her. An ugly full wouldn’t impress her. The team didn’t need a good fourth vault as long as the other three girls did what they were capable of, and so far they looked great in training. She wanted that fourth spot and she wasn’t going to let it escape her chalky grip.

With those same heavy eyes set right on her, she ran down the runway to do another full. She recited Jamie’s advice and smashed her palms into the tabletop. Soaring through the air, she twisted one time and floated down to the mat. She stepped back with her bad knee, but she was completely upright. Vlad clapped his palms together once.

“Better. Much better. Could you do that exact vault again later?”

With lights, cameras, a crowd, and a television audience of about three billion, it would certainly be a challenge, but one she was not going to abandon. She did it at Worlds last year, and she almost didn't have the chance to do it here.

"Definitely," she said with a firm nod.

Practice was efficient, productive, and successful with no major mistakes by anyone. Even Rachel was happy with her workout, given that her last few were only focused on two events. On floor, she finished out of breath, but standing upright. It was only when she saw Karen watching her at the conclusion of her floor music that she realized she hadn't watched her on floor since before her injury.

"Was that a triple attitude turn?" she asked. The tip of her pen stood propped in complete stasis against her spreadsheet of fates and failures.

"Yeah," was all Rachel said while she looked around for her water bottle.

"Since when?"

"Right after my injury," she said. She finally located her bottle and chugged half of its contents in one go. Seeing the expectant look on Karen's face, she put the cap back on. "It's not like I was able to do much else."

"Do it again," she said.

Rachel looked to Vlad, who nodded behind Karen. She tossed her water bottle on top of her backpack, stepped onto the spring floor, and dug the ball of her left foot into the blue mat. Bracing herself, she spun three times around on the slick but controlled

surface of her turn shoe. Finishing with a little flourish of her back leg for style, she stepped out of the turn and awaited criticism.

“Do you have the paperwork submitted for that?” Karen asked Vlad.

“What paperwork? You’re the one insisting she’s only good for two events.”

“That was before I saw practice today,” Karen said. Her eyes were wholly unforgiving on Rachel’s, but perhaps not wholly evil. “You want to do the all-around?”

What a stupid question. She looked at Vlad again, but only for half a second.

“I’ll do whatever’s best for the team,” Rachel said. “If that’s all-around, then yes, definitely.”

“You think you can withstand a full meet? You haven’t competed four events since Nationals.”

“I know I can,” Rachel said. She could feel her heartrate accelerate right beneath the USA patch on her red practice leo and its various chalk clouds.

The entire world hung in the air in the moment that followed. She could feel Jamie’s eyes on her. Rachel blinked at Karen, commanding some sort of answer. Prelims were in a few hours. There was no more time left. She looked at her clipboard and then up at the silent, still gym.

“Everyone, listen up, I’m not repeating myself. We’re in subdivision four with Romania, China, and Canada, and we’re starting on bars. The lineup is as follows: Daisy, Lola, Talia, and Rachel on bars. On beam: Cameron, Talia, Lola, and Rachel. On floor:

Rachel, Lola, Cameron, and Jamie. On vault: Rachel, Lola, Cameron, and Jamie. The line-up is final barring a life-threatening injury or death in the next three hours.”

She counted her name four times and repeated it back again to herself another four times just to make sure. Vlad put his arm around her before it occurred to her what was happening.

“See?” he asked her. He pressed her head into his shirtfront. “You never give up. You don’t ever give up.”

“Holy shit,” she said. She couldn’t recall if she ever swore in front of him before, but it was out before she even wrapped her mind around her thoughts and planned speech. “Holy shit, I’m doing the all-around.”

“Get a snack and ice that knee,” he said with a firm pat to her shoulder blades. “You earned this, Rachel. This is yours.”

The girls spent the next three hours in delirious joy, repeated similar sentiments about how they couldn’t believe the Olympics were finally beginning, snacked on the protein bars Lola stuffed the bottom of her backpack with, and psyched each other up for the biggest meet of their collective lives. She even found the time to text her mom.

*Rachel: I’m doing AA. I love you*

By evening, it was time for prelims. They warmed up backstage in a giant hall with clusters of national teams in each corner. The Romanians talked nonstop to one another in their matching white, yellow, red, and blue tracksuits. The Chinese team bore stunning red and yellow warm-ups with a white flower motif, but they appeared nervous and above all quiet. She couldn't imagine her Olympics being in front of an American crowd. The pressure would probably kill her. Directly across the room from the Americans, the Canadians stretched on mats and smiled at one another through easy conversation. She eyed the rhinestone maple leaves on their red leotards and rolled her neck in a circle.

And then it was time. A volunteer holding a sign with the uneven bars symbol led them out onto the floor in a single-file line. Rachel stared at the crowd above, in awe at how much it matched her various daydreams about this moment and yet made her imagination seem primitive. At least one hundred Chinese flags rippled across various points in the stands. The crowd was so loud when the Chinese team marched to beam that she could hear each individual spectator's voice pound through the smooth floor. She looked up into the stands by the uneven bars and saw a whole row of American flags. A few former gymnasts with national pedigree waved from beneath the rippling fabric. Rachel waved back and wondered where her parents were.

When they arrived at the bars, Rachel and the team discarded bags, shoes, and warm-ups in a flurry of red, white, and blue. Karen was talking, but she couldn't hear anything in this atmosphere. Rachel flexed her fingers and looked at her prepped grips. Never had they been donned for a moment this big.

“I want those feet together on the Gienger,” Vlad said, grabbing her shoulder with a squeeze. “And spot the ground on your landing. Ready knees, remember that.”

“Ready knees,” she repeated. Four different television cameras were so close that she could breathe on them. She looked up at the bars and paid them her respects. They would be her victims by the end of the week.

They lined up for the judges, survived announcements and introductions, and then began the one-touch warm-up. Rachel stood by the chalk bowl and watched as the lineup warmed up in order. Daisy was steady; Lola seemed tight and shell-shocked but eased into her routine by the midpoint and even stuck her full-twisting double tuck dismount; Talia was a disaster and fell on her Deltchev. Her dad caught her in the same breath that it took to cuss at her in Russian. Talia remounted and finished her routine with a small hop on her double front. Rachel approached for her turn and reached for Talia’s hand. Their grips met.

“Let it go, Tal. Just pretend we’re at camp and you’re doing it for the fifth time in a row.”

“*Davai*,” Vlad said, snapping her back to the constraints of her limited warm-up period.

Talia nodded unconvincingly. Her dad said nothing and lead her down to the floor. Whatever. Rachel stood at the lower bar and swung to mount. She moved through every skill with ease, and when her arms burned and it stopped being easy, at least it was familiar. She landed her dismount and stepped with her bad leg, but for warm-up in qualifying, she’d take that one hundred times over.

Vlad rubbed her shoulders and they went to the floor to begin. Every team on every rotation performed in sync for this one moment that they all shared. The Americans started strong with a 15.362 from Daisy. Lola stuck her dismount again for a 15.612. Rachel could barely watch Talia, but she held her breath and crossed her fingers. When she hit her Deltchev with ease, she and the others screamed their pride from the floor. She landed her double front for a 16.445.

“Great job,” Rachel said, hugging her by the stairs before it was her turn to go.

Vlad prepped the high bar and Igor prepped the low bar for her with floating, heavy slaps of chalk. She ignored all else and waited for the green light.

“C’mon, Rach!” Jamie called from the floor.

This was by far the most important moment of her entire life, at least as of yet, with plenty more to come later this hour and week. This routine would get her into the uneven bar finals and let her contend for gold. It would boost the team into contention for the team gold. It was the proof of her dedication and refusal to quit this sport even when it most wanted her to. For about a minute, it would be who she was.

“On uneven bars, representing the United States of America, Rachel Wallerstein!” the announcer said. The same sentiment followed in Mandarin.

She looked at Vlad, who crouched in wait by the low bar. If he was nervous, he had been working on his acting skills. He nodded and so did she. She saluted the judges and didn’t think one single thought for the next minute. She swung; she flipped; she pirouetted; she flew. Her toes were pointed and glued together; her arms were locked out



and perfectly straight. She was nothing but her body. Releasing for her double layout, she zeroed in on the ground, bent her knees, and held on to stick before saluting.

“Perfect,” Vlad said, kissing her hair. “Get ready for beam.”

She walked into the arms of her team and together they jumped and screamed. They survived the first rotation without a single error. All they had to do was hang on for three more, and then do it all over again tomorrow.

“The score for Rachel Wallerstein of the United States of America on uneven bars, 17.112.” The faceless voice sounded like praise of its own. She looked at Vlad, whose smile was contained but just barely. It was still too early to do any celebrating, but she all but guaranteed her entry into the uneven bar finals.

Beam was mostly steady with no major falls. Rachel herself scored a 16.225 with her watered-down routine of a basic two-foot layout instead of the full. Slowly with each rotation the nerves dissipated, but she could only say as much until floor. She hoped she would be in good enough shape to get through the routine with lots of adrenaline and no self-doubt. Even if she wanted to, she couldn’t back out now; the line-up was set, and the request to name the triple attitude turn the Wallerstein was already submitted. The world and the sport were waiting for her.

She settled into her performance from the moment the beep pierced the stadium. Her music drove her to each of her tumbling passes. She was exhausted by her second pass, but the atmosphere and the clapping crescendo gave her the juice to keep it going. She got her three revolutions all the way around on her turn and couldn’t help but stick a little fist pump into her choreography. Two tumbling passes later, she almost stepped out

of bounds on her triple twist but held on until the very last note. She saluted to the judges with a big smile and jumped down into the arms of the team.

“You are such a badass,” Jamie said. She needed to get ready for her own routine, but still stopped to congratulate Rachel.

“Floor now, recap later,” she said, giving Jamie a slight push to the stairs. “Crank it.”

“Consider it cranked,” Jamie yelled behind her while jumping up the stairs to the podium.

She held her breath for the duration of Jamie’s floor routine, from the brief pause of silence before her music began all the way to the very last pose. All of her passes were higher than any mortal should ever be able to catapult. She stayed in bounds right up until the very end, when her left heel just barely stepped over the white line. Still, the smile on her face at the conclusion of her fiery music was all the proof anyone needed – the best in the world was back and she still had it. In fact, it never went anywhere.

“Awesome,” Rachel said, gathering her best friend’s exhausted self in a hug. “All you’ve got left is your vaults.”

“Thanks, Igor,” Jamie said, cracking a big smile as she did. “What are you doing, the full?”

“Yeah,” she said. They gathered their things up by the chairs, ignoring the plethora of cameras trailing their every breath and fidget. Karen came by and patted everyone on the shoulders.

“Great job, girls. Everyone stay focused and present. Just one more rotation to go.”

These little moments where she actually seemed to imbibe in some pride toward them were the rarest, so Rachel ate it up as much as she could. She put on her team jacket and slid into her sandals while letting the high of floor and the depletion of her lungs reset. She glanced up at the scoreboard – they had a lead over China by eight tenths, with Romania and Canada trailing. In the larger landscape from earlier in the day, Russia had the overall lead. It would remain to be seen where they all landed once they were done with the final rotation. She stared up at the scores a little longer, biting her lip as she did.

“Hey,” Vlad said, tapping the fabric of her jacket at her back. “Focus on your vault. Big block, tight twist, ready knees. Right?”

“Yeah,” she said with a nod. She knew all this; it was just up to her body to obey the directions. She looked into a nearby camera, then at Vlad’s ear, which she leaned into. “China’s still got bars left, right? They’re gonna crush us.”

“That’s not your concern right now,” he said, staring at her with severity. “You have a vault to worry about.”

Fine. She tried to breathe it out and let it go, swinging her neck around in a circle. Her heavy bun didn’t shuffle a millimeter. They marched to vault at the conclusion of the third rotation and began warming up. Rachel was first in the lineup and first to warm up. She watched Vlad fix the springboard for her and tried to calm her nerves. She would almost certainly get into the all-around final even with a mistake, but she didn’t want to

just get in. She wanted to nail a full and use it for confidence to upgrade for the all-around final.

He gave her a thumbs up and she ran down the runway. Rounding off, she stared up at the ceiling lights as she smashed the vault table with her wrist guards. For probably the first time ever, she over-rotated and sat it down. Jumping up, she swallowed her lip and clenched her fists.

“Control your power,” he said, holding onto her arm. “Save the power for next time. Right now, you just need a hit.”

The adrenaline of the moment made knowing what constituted too much power or too little power difficult, if not impossible. She staggered down the stairs and stared at the table as her teammates warmed up. Their soaring bodies didn’t register to her at all. She closed her eyes and pictured her vault; high, powerful, clean, tight, stuck. If she couldn’t do a Yurchenko full, then she didn’t belong at the Olympics.

The announcements melted together and then it was her time to go. She was leading off again and needed to set the tone. Her teammates couldn’t see her nervous or faltering. She needed to be the foundation. The green light came on the scoreboard and she saluted. Despite the eyes upon her, she saw none of them. She pictured her ideal vault again and ran down the runway. She contacted the table just as hard but honed her power, controlling the speed with which she flipped and twisted. Spotting the ground, she came down upright and steadied herself with wide arms. She stuck it.

Congratulations on the floor turned into last minute reassurances for Lola. She squeezed Lola's hand while her friend scaled the stairs to go to the runway. Vlad cupped Rachel's cheeks and tapped them with his thumbs.

"Knee's good?"

"Perfect," she said, shaking it out. It really was for once. She felt nothing except spastic nerves and itchy lungs.

"Good."

"The score for Rachel Wallerstein on vault for the United States of America, 14.325!"

Low – hideously low, in fact, but it was part of the game plan. She looked at Vlad and nodded. She would be going to the all-around. For some reason she didn't cry. Instead, she faced the vault and cheered on her three teammates one at a time as they hit their vaults. Lola and Cameron had Yurchenko doubles, and Jamie was anchoring with her two vaults to qualify to vault finals. Lola scored a 15.150 and Cameron used that as a stepping stone to pull in a 15.250. Finally, it was simply down to Jamie. The entire arena seemed to pause in anticipation of her. For her first run, she ran down the runway and rounded off for her Amanar. The sound of her palms crushing the table echoed into Rachel's eardrums. She soared higher than ever before, five and a half feet at minimum, above the table. She twisted effortlessly and came down with a big step forward. It was awe-inspiring.

“Yeah!” Rachel screamed in tandem with her teammates. She jumped around and clamored for each other’s hands in tight squeezes and hooked fingers. This was it. One more vault, the last piece of gymnastics, and they were going to team finals.

She returned down the runway while Igor set up her board and the judges calculated. Rachel stood with Lola and squeezed her hands.

“It better be a 16.200,” Lola said. “The step and that’s it.”

“Screw the step. They better give her a 16.500,” Rachel said.

They gave her neither, but came close at 16.175. It would still secure her ticket to the vault final as long as her Rudi went well. When Jamie saluted, Rachel chewed on her lip and squeezed Lola’s hands again. Never one to waste time, Jamie charged down the runway and jumped onto the board, slamming the table in a front handspring entry. She soared through the air, twisted one and a half times, and came down to face the table with a stick. She steadied her arms in front of herself as though she didn’t quite trust her own stability. When it was clear she could, she saluted and jumped down the steps.

“You’re going to the final,” Rachel said, swinging her arms around Jamie like a web. The others joined until they were a human sandwich. “My best friend is going to be vault and floor champ.”

“We’re all going to the final. Team finals, that is,” Jamie said. A smile was plastered upon her face. “We did it.”

They did, or at least the first step of it. With the conclusion of qualifying, the full spectrum of scores across the entire field tabulated. When they marched backstage, they

got to look at a big computer screen with every datapoint available, from lowest score awarded on any individual apparatus to who qualified to which finals. Karen clicked to the team qualification scores. China led by five tenths. The Americans were in second, with Russia behind them by three tenths. Tight was an understatement.

“That doesn’t mean we’re out of it yet,” Karen said. “Tomorrow is three-up-three-count. The lower scores will drop away and the best ones will be the only ones that matter. Three high scores are a lot more impressive without a fourth low score added to the tally.”

None of that was news, but it didn’t make it any easier to believe as possible. China dominated them on bars by almost a point and a half. Even if they dropped their lowest scores, it still was no contest. She looked to the box that displayed the all-around qualifiers. Li Wan qualified in first, Evgeniya Varlamova was in second, Sofia Cotoră of Romania was in third, and Rachel was all the way down in sixth. Lola was in eighth. She clicked to bars. Rachel qualified in first place by two tenths over Li. On beam, she qualified in first by a tenth over Evgeniya. She was still in this thing. Team and all-around would be a fight, but she wasn’t a washed up, injured hack. She still had some prestige to dust off here.

There was more good news. Jamie qualified first on vault over her longtime rival, Elena Dinu of Romania. She qualified as the leader into floor finals, too. Rachel could barely believe it, but she herself qualified into the eighth and last spot into floor finals. A week ago, she couldn’t even tumble. To finish off the American effort, Talia qualified fourth into bar finals and Lola snuck into the eighth spot in beam finals.

“Okay, beam queen, look at you,” Rachel said, giving her friend a big hug.

“What kind of friend would I be if I let you have all the spotlight?” Lola asked. She hugged her tight around her waist. “You were awesome today.”

“So were you.” She looked at all of them one by one, the six parts of this one team, and smiled with ease for the first time in a long time. “So were all of you.”

Now all they had to do was exactly what they did today, except better. They already did it once. Certainly, they could do it twice.



## CHAPTER 16

### THREE UP, THREE COUNT: TEAM FINALS

If she thought the crowd was loud during prelims, either her hearing strengthened overnight or science had discovered a newer, higher sonic boom that this crowd was attempting to surpass. Fervor was intense and she could taste the Chinese crowd's hunger for gold. If everything went like it did yesterday, they would be going home fed.

The Americans started on vault with China in their rotation. Russia, Romania, Brazil, Great Britain, Australia, and Japan filled out the rest of the six teams who qualified into the medal round. She didn't care about a single one of them. Her only concern was herself and her team.

"Ignore the crowd. Ignore the other teams. Ignore the scoreboard. Ignore me, if that helps. All you need to do is focus on yourself. Every single routine, skill, turn, and hour of practice in our lives has led us right here," Rachel said. She huddled her five younger teammates around and each of them linked their arms over one another's shoulders, a single unit of six parts. She didn't know how she had so easily slid into the role of cheerleader, but it seemed to be working and she wouldn't mess with success. "Think about it. Fifteen, sixteen, seventeen years, and it all came to right now. In an hour, we could be the Olympic champions. Don't think about how crazy that sounds. Think about how you've already done everything you need to do today a million times before."

“Nothing matters except for what’s in this huddle right now,” Jamie added. She could feel her squeezing her shoulder. Each of them sparkled in their matching white leotards with blue and red rhinestone swirls. They could be seen from the surface of the sun.

“Are we ready?” Rachel asked. Her eyes flicked over each face beside hers one at a time – Lola’s smile, Talia’s nervous grimace, Daisy’s flat, focused affect, Jamie’s smirk, Cameron’s nod. She smiled into the cluster. “Good. Let’s do this thing.”

“Crank it!” Jamie yelled right up to the ceiling. Noise was a feeling, a body process. She was lost to it and yet deaf to it. She had never felt so ready.

Starting on vault turned out to be the best possible position, because it was one of their best events as a team. Lola hit a clean double, Cameron followed up with an even better one, and Jamie rounded out the rotation with her best Amanar yet. The moment she stuck it, the sound that left Rachel’s throat seemed anything but human, and she began to think that maybe they could do this.

On the floor, they lumped together in a huddle and either watched China or deliberately did not watch China. Rachel stared at Li Wan amidst her team and coaches while they warmed up. Today, she and Li were units of much larger parts; in two days, they would battle to see who was the best individual. Rachel watched every turn of the Chinese vault rotation. Li threw a nice double, Tan Xia followed up with an even better one, and then it came down to their anchor, Zeng Xiaoqing. The entire arena stilled in preparation for her Amanar. Rachel studied every movement she made down the runway when she rounded off onto the board, hit the table, and whipped around in the air. Her

heart stopped the moment Zeng's feet were coming into the mat too early. Under-rotated, she sat it down. The crowd gasped as one.

"Everyone start thinking about bars," Rachel said, turning to the team. She, Talia, and Lola were already gripped up, although it took Lola a minute to do so after having just vaulted. "Or beam, if you're up on beam later."

"Or floor, if you suck at both," Jamie said, giving some much-needed levity to a precarious situation. She smiled at her and they nudged elbows. Maybe they'd be okay. Maybe there was a chance.

Bars went almost as well as it did yesterday, although Rachel had trouble with her Chusovitina—Gienger combination in warm-up and then repeated the same error when it was her time to compete. She held on and only lost the connection bonus, but it was a tenth that they needed. She stuck her landing and came down the stairs to the high-fives and hugs.

"I'm sorry. I haven't screwed that up since Nationals," she said to her compatriots, half of whom were practicing beam choreography on the floor by their chairs.

"You're fine, Rach," Jamie said and wrapped her arm around her shoulders. "No one fell or died. We're still in this thing."

She looked up the scoreboard but knew she shouldn't have. China competed bars first in their rotation, so the scores were current. With Rachel's score of 16.975, China led by eight tenths. In third place was Russia behind the Americans by a threatening two

and a half tenths. She couldn't bear to do the math, regardless of the outcome. If Zeng of China hadn't fallen, the Americans would be in their dust by a point and a half. If any of the Americans fell or had a major mistake, it would be nearly impossible to catch back up unless they did the floor routines of their lives, and that wasn't even taking Russia's efforts into consideration.

They started on beam in the third rotation. While waiting for the warm-up signal to be granted, she gathered herself, Talia, and Lola into a huddle by the stairs up to the podium.

"We've done these routines six million times before," she said to them. "Just do it one more time. It doesn't need to be amazing. It just needs to be normal, what you do every day."

"We've got this," Lola promised. "And you too, Rach – you've got this. Show everyone how the World Champion does it."

And that was all she needed. She breathed out her doubt and breathed in Lola's belief in her. They were beyond capable. It was just about putting the pieces together. She felt another hand enter their midst and looked up at Karen, who held onto her shoulder. If she looked dubious about their ability or convinced of their impending doom, she didn't show it.

"Play it safe and do the regular layout," she told Rachel.

"I can do the full," she said, standing up straight.

“No.” She allowed no deliberation. “There’s no margin for error. Do a clean routine for the team. Save the theatrics for event finals if you want to show off.”

She looked over to Vlad, who was already watching her. He nodded. She wanted to help the team, and the extra two tenths from her full could do that, but it was the hardest skill on the balance beam for a reason. She couldn’t live with herself if she fell and cost the team the gold or even the silver.

“Okay,” she said to Karen, whose eyes were level on hers. “Got it.”

Beam started shaky with Talia having a balance check on her L-turn, but from then on, they were nearly flawless. Lola hit the best beam routine of her life. Rachel squeezed her hand without a word on the way up the stairs as she descended and Rachel got ready to go. Vlad came up with her for a last-minute pep talk.

“Nice and square. Don’t rush anything,” he said.

“Got it.”

“You can do the full in the all-around. Save it for then.”

“Fine,” she said. He patted the #408 bib on her back and departed the podium in quick strides.

Her routine was as easy as breathing out her nerves and blocking out the crowd. She could feel every repetition from the past few weeks in her bones, moving each individual fiber of her body. She didn’t wobble once, not even on her layout. She stretched, pointed, extended, and flew. On her triple twist, she landed square to the beam but took a tiny step to the side with her bad leg. It wasn’t flashy, but it got the job done.

All they had left was floor. The original line-up was supposed to be Lola, Cameron, and Jamie, but with Rachel qualifying eighth into event finals with her performance yesterday, she wondered if there might be a change. She didn't want to pull any of her friends from the line-up, but she also wanted to help the team get the highest scores possible. She could see the dilemma on Karen's face while China was up on beam. So far, they were hitting their routines, and the crowd was fully invested in every second of it. She watched Li Wan flip and twist down low on the beam into her Rulfova and the hometown audience exploded with praise. Rachel used the opportunity to sidle up to Karen and sweep her words into her ear.

"I can do floor," she said.

"You've been tumbling for a week. You're not doing floor with gold on the line."

She looked up at the scoreboard one more time, swallowing her despair in one large chunk. With one beam routine still left, China would have a bit of a margin over USA going into floor exercise.

"I'll hit," Rachel said.

"Forget it." She brought her lips to Rachel's ear, defying any and every rolling camera and boom mic in the vicinity. "You will have your chance in the spotlight. Your teammates earned this just as much as you did and they're in better shape than you, so put your ego away for a day."

Her nails left tiny little dashes in the surface of her calloused, chalky palms. She froze her vision upon Karen, wishing for her to either spontaneously combust or change

her mind, but neither occurred. She would have to sit and watch floor, powerless to change the way any of the cards fell from this point on. Vlad swooped in and guided her away to an unoccupied patch of chairs.

“You can’t be worrying about her,” he said in quiet Russian. He turned his head to avoid a camera. “She didn’t let you do the all-around because she likes you. She’s doing what she thinks will bring in the most medals.”

She didn’t know enough Russian to answer back, so she chose frantic English.

“She’s making a mistake.”

“Then let her. You’re here to be an athlete. She’s here to coordinate. That’s it. You did your job, Rachel. It’s done. Cheer your friends on and whatever happens will happen.”

In her own slow-motion freeze-frame, she watched it all unfold. China hit all their floor routines in succession, their home crowd willing them to stunning performances. One after another, Lola and then Cameron performed. Their nerves were tangible, although she couldn’t tell if the weight of the scores needed was obvious to them in that moment. She was right there by the stairs wishing them luck as they went up and congratulating them as they came down. Cameron had a big error on her double L-turn, falling out of it before the second full revolution was completed. When she came down the stairs, she had tears in her eyes.

“It’s okay,” Rachel said, pulling her arms around her tight and cradling her head. “It’s okay, Cam. You did an awesome job today.”

“No, I didn’t,” she said. She pressed her tears into Rachel’s glittery chest. She looked at Vlad and pointed at her jacket. He handed it to her, and she cloaked it over Cameron’s head while the vulture-like cameras came in for what she assumed would be on the front page of every paper tomorrow.

“Yes, you did.” Rachel stuck her head beneath the jacket where it was just them, even amid the bubble of human chaos and impossible bodily feats. “You’re an Olympian, Cam. We’re gonna medal. We did that together.”

“But not gold,” she said right to Rachel’s sternum.

“We worked too hard to get here just to act like we aren’t good. We came here as World Champions and we’re still going to be on the podium. We didn’t lose gold. We won silver.”

Gradually, Cameron gathered herself and was able to relax. Rachel hugged her beneath the coat and left it atop her shoulders for her to use at will. She stepped away to go up to Jamie, who was climbing the stairs. Rachel looked at the scoreboard. Jamie would need a 16.101 to put them in gold position. It was a physically impossible score and the crowd knew it. She pulled on Jamie’s arm.

“Don’t hold back,” Rachel said.

Jamie squeezed her hand, nodded with her eyes, and ascended to the podium.

“On floor exercise for the United States of America, Jamie Macaluso!”

She took in a breath every time she saw Jamie do the same. They were all one in this moment. She held Lola’s and Cameron’s hands and felt Talia and Daisy behind her



as they watched their anchor, the very best in the world on floor exercise, perform with gusto. Every tumbling pass with perfectly landed, if not teasing the boundary lines. Her double turn was crisp, as were her leaps. Her music seemed too poignant for the moment, as if she had predicted its need long ago while selecting a track to perform here. When she drilled her double pike into the floor with a definitive stick, she posed in the center of the floor with her arms stretched out. Tears pooled in her eyes beneath the arena lights. They flowed when she met them on the floor, and they all gathered in one big huddle. The mass accumulated bodies of coaches and cameras. Everyone was crying, but Rachel refused.

“We did it,” she said, because they did; it was abstract. It could change to the moment and mold to what they were capable of. She swung her arms around all five shoulders around her and pulled them close to fuse to her. “You guys did an amazing job.”

Jamie looked at Rachel as the announcement came in. Like so many times in history, it was just them and then everyone else.

“The score for Jamie Macaluso on floor exercise for the United States of America, 15.850!”

It was only later after lots of tears, the medal ceremony, the weight of silver around her neck, and seeing her parents for the first time in two days that she began to relax and feel relief. Her shoulders loosened with every minute put between herself and the result of team finals. Silver once disgusted her to the point of hiding her second-place medals out of her own sight in her bedroom. Now, it was a feat all its own. This was their

victory. And it was a victory – at least in itself. Maybe no one else in the larger world would see it that way, but she did. She knew what went into this result – weeks of miserable national team camps, laundry lists of international meets, pressure-packed domestic competitions – and this was the result. That was not on any of them individually. It was much, much bigger than that. Vlad was right; they did their job. Second place had no bearing on that any more than gold would have.

## CHAPTER 17

### ONE UP, ONE COUNT: ALL-AROUND FINAL

The morning of the all-around final was one of the most idyllic she could ever remember, competition day or not. She awoke in her twin bed to the straining sun leaking through her thin hotel curtains. Instead of feeling nervous or sweaty or sick, she felt well-rested and calm. The first thing she did was check her phone. Over one hundred messages greeted her from sources ranging from relatives to gym friends to journalists. She ignored them all and clicked upon Kellan, who was near the top.

*Kellan: got the whole crew coming over tomorrow to watch u kill it!*

She smiled and typed back her thanks. She spent the morning in a dream state, getting breakfast with her parents in the hotel dining room, letting her mom do her hair, and picking out a blue rhinestone-studded national team leo to wear. She didn't even feel awake.

"Are you nervous?" her mom asked while poking her thick bun with sharp bobby pins.

“No.” And she meant it. What was there to be nervous about? The team won silver. They were at the Olympics. They already survived what was supposed to be disaster, and yet everyone was alive and well, the world was standing, and she felt capable. Silver didn’t inflict pain and suffering the way she always imagined. She even started to feel sort of proud.

“I just can’t believe after all that happened, you’re still going to get your chance,” her mom said. She kissed Rachel’s cheek before smoothing down baby hairs with thick blasts of hairspray. “You’re so strong, honey. Now the whole world will know that, too.”

She let out a breath and stood up straight. Her mom wrapped her hair in a blue scrunchie. Two days earlier was about the team. Today was all about her – no jockeying for position, no strategizing who could fit in which spot in the line-up. She was left to her own devices to put up four routines and see where they landed among the rest of the world. Did she want gold? Of course. Was she going to spend all day worrying about it instead of just doing what she trained to do when the time came? Absolutely not.

She, Vlad, and her parents took a cab to the arena. They comprised a strange party, but one most fitting on a day like today. She was quiet but calm while watching the buildings weave above them with every turn of the taxi. Beijing began to feel familiar in its enormity, even if it only encompassed about one square mile to her so far.

“You’re so quiet, Rach,” her mom whispered to her immediate right in the back of the cab. She rubbed the blue polyester of her track pants, creating heat on her knee. “You feel okay?”

“Yeah.” She smiled at her mom, seeing her own eyes look back at her. Of the three other lives in the cab, all of them were directly to thank for this day. This wasn’t really her day as much as it was theirs. Maybe team finals were over, but this was just as much of a team final in its own way.

In the warm-up arena connected to the National Indoor Stadium, she and Lola practiced together. Lola looked more nervous than Rachel felt, but she knew she would shake it off like she always did. They practiced their vaults together and Lola’s double looked good on both of her tries. Rachel high-fived her, hoping to impart some more confidence to her friend.

She and Vlad were calm and focused while she practiced. Her first practice vault was the full, which had become easy for her in the two days since team finals and the three days since prelims. He told her to do a one-and-a-half, her first since the injury. Ignoring the commotion of twenty-three other competitors and their coaches around her, she exhaled the last week in one thick gust. She was scared, but not enough to give up. She ran down the runway, rounded off, pounded the surface of the table the moment she could, and twisted around. Landing blind, she hopped two feet forward, but she was upright.

“Got to be a little faster bringing your shoulders up,” he said, mimicking a lift of his own. She nodded. He was calm; it relaxed her further.

She tried again and took a step to the side this time. It would have to do. The double was no more, but she could do a decent one-and-a-half. At least she could say she tried.

“You ready?” he asked her while rubbing her arms and warming them up.

“Very.”

She gave Lola one more hug before they split up into their different rotation groups. Rachel was starting on vault and Lola on bars. She would have preferred to switch places with her, but that wasn’t an option. Marching out in Group 1, she ignored the crowd and the lights and the cameras fully. They were nothing new. She was halfway through her Olympic experience and all she had to do was mock her previous performances, like cutting them out from a magazine and pasting them into today’s competition.

Her warm-up vault out on the competition floor was steady but still with a step to the side. He tried to correct her with a last-minute technique reminder about hitting the table completely straight on, but she didn’t really think there was much to do at this point – a step was better than falling, and she was happy with it.

When it was time to go, she saluted the judges and listened to the crowd cheer for her, but only for a second. When she sprinted down, she ignored everything except her and the table. She blocked hard and twisted, the whole time waiting for the ground. When her feet impacted the soft blue mat, she bent her knees a little and took the tiniest step forward. She saluted with a weightless ease and walked right down into Vlad’s arms.

“That’s all you needed, Rach,” he said with a kiss to her forehead. “Start gripping up.”

It was all so similar – the remarks, the sounds, the lights, the scoreboards, the stiff tape around her wrists as she got her grips on, the thumping in her heart – and she felt as though, despite the Olympic setting, she'd been here a thousand times before. She almost wanted to be nervous just so she could feel like she wasn't forgetting something or dreaming. She sat on a chair with her grip bag on her lap while Vlad rubbed her shoulders.

“Knee's good?”

“Great,” she said in a single breath.

“You need more tape? You want a protein bar?”

“No, I'm good,” she said. She looked up at him. Beyond his short sandy hair, the lights of the arena glowed behind him. She shook her head and smiled. “I don't know why, but I'm really good.”

“Because you're ready,” he said with some unforgiving pushes and pulls of her biceps. “Everything you ever did was to get ready for today.”

His sentiment resonated with her through the next rotation when she scored a 17.125 on bars, and then again when she scored a 16.412 on beam after drilling her layout full into the beam. Every time she remembered she was at the Olympics, she reminded herself that she was prepared for today. Knee injury or not, she had spent so much time worrying about and practicing for this day that now that it was here, the preparation had been more nerve-wracking than the meet itself. If she just did everything

she did leading up to now, then she would have a chance. That had been the game plan all along.

While warming up for floor, she felt her pulse begin to pick up and calibrate the setting it was in with the level of anxiety she was supposed to feel, but she still felt in control. Even with her weak vault, she was behind Li by three quarters of a tenth, and Varlamova was behind Rachel by one and a half tenths. She had to hit floor, and then the rest was up to fractional math and subjective opinion. Her anxiety seeped through her palms. She gathered a handful of chalk from the bin by the spring floor and coated her hands, then looked up into the crowd. Almost every inch was covered by Chinese flags, with patches of American flags breaking up the pattern every few rows. Russian and Romanian flags waved in isolated groups. She saw arms waving up top and noticed her team, the men's team, and her own parents waving. She waved up to them and heard Jamie whistle. She held up her hands in a heart to mirror her mom's. They seemed so much closer than they really were, as if they were right there beside her.

She was first to go on floor in the last rotation. Ignoring the announcement of her name, she saluted the judges and stepped in bounds to pose in the corner. She hadn't competed floor since prelims, so her self-doubt began to manifest, but only until her music began. Each pass was done as perfectly as she could manage, minding her landings and trying to save every last tenth that she could. She grit her teeth during her triple attitude – or rather, the Wallerstein – and somehow got it around even though she felt off-balance from the beginning. She took a breath of composure and continued to perform. Every note was an extension of her pulse, the rhythm of realized and immortalized dreams. She sucked in a massive breath before her triple twist and ran across the floor



into it. Round-off, back handspring, three twists around in the air. She landed a little short but pulled her shoulders up straight to pose and conclude. The crowd roared around her from all sides and above. The flags above shook like little sound waves.

That was it. Fifteen years since she first enrolled in gymnastics class all spent hoping for today, and now it was over.

She waved to the crowd and jogged off the floor to wait for the numbers that would seal her destiny. She looped into Vlad's arms and he spun her around in the air.

"Just like a champion," he said. He lifted her into his arms and seated her up on his shoulder, leaning slightly sideways so that she was balanced. The crowd continued to boil over in bubbles of screams. For once, she let herself hear them. She waved to the cluster of her friends and family up top. Even through the cacophony, she could hear Jamie whistling while shaking a huge flag with Cameron. Tears stabbed the inner corners of her eyes.

When Vlad brought her back down to her feet, she hugged him tight.

"Thank you so much."

"You have nothing to thank me for."

He was so wrong, but she didn't expect him to concede, especially not in such a setting. She smiled into a rolling camera and waved after brushing some tiny tears off her cheeks. Looking up, she watched her score come in as a 15.312. The judges took a little bit from her short triple twist, but it was a solid score and it was too early to see how it

panned out against the field yet. She nodded at Vlad and slipped into her tracksuit. Now they had to wait.

She watched Li's routine with relaxed eyes, simply happy to spectate in real time regardless of results or mistakes. The crowd was clapping in one continuous beat to the tune of her stunning orchestral piece. Everything was almost perfect for her up until the end, until she went for her double pike. Rachel watched with knowing eyes as she pulled way too hard and landed with her right foot out of bounds. She cringed and could feel the crowd's gasp in her stomach. It was one thing to step out of bounds, but to land partially out of bounds was a three-tenth deduction – too much to give away with a lead of less than a tenth.

She clapped anyway and moved to the stairs to shake her hand once her coaches finished talking to her. She and Li exchanged smiles and kisses on cheeks. Even with her mistake, the crowd was in full hero-worship mode and adoring their star. Rachel went back to Vlad by the chairs. Along the way, she put weight on her right leg and felt a sting in her knee that she didn't notice before.

"What?" he asked, reading her face as he could often do. She shook her head.

"Nothing."

"The knee?"

"It's just a twinge. I must have bothered it on the triple."

“Sit,” he said, leading her to a chair. As she sat, she pulled her jacket on over her shiny sleeves and watched him poke at the thick tape around her knee. “Where do you feel it?”

“Here.” She pointed to the middle of her knee, although she didn’t really feel it as much as she was conscious that something was wrong with it. She didn’t trust her own judgement, especially with her adrenaline pumping like blood. “It’s okay. I can walk on it.”

“I’ll get some ice.”

He went to the barrier that led to backstage and exchanged words with Karen, whose eyes Rachel could feel on her, but she was busy watching Varlamova get ready for floor. Li’s score came in at 15.200. Rachel still held first place and Li was officially locked in behind her. Holy shit. She was guaranteed at least a silver medal. She didn’t know what to think, and there was nothing to say with no one around. Cameras circled her but she stared at Evgeniya up on the podium, acutely aware that both of their destinies were not only linked in multiple ways but would be decided in about two minutes.

Vlad returned with a bag of ice and crouched to hold it to her knee. He asked if she was okay but she just nodded and waited for Evgeniya’s cue to go. When she finally got the go-ahead, she saluted with a one-armed flourish and stepped in bounds. A solemn classical remix guided her from pass to pass, gradually picking up in tempo and tone until it was a screaming wave. Her leaps, passes, and double L-turn were nearly faultless. Her penultimate pass, the same triple twist that Rachel just hurt herself on, came around short

but Evgeniya squeaked it around to cheat it and potentially get the benefit of the doubt from the judges. She ended with a double pike and a big slide back, but her piercing eyes hooked into the crowd. They ate it up.

“That was really good,” Rachel said, clapping along with the twenty-thousand-plus in the building. Vlad said nothing and readjusted the weight of the ice bag on her ACL. She watched the folds in his forehead as he looked up at the scoreboard. His various expressions were something of a language she learned over the time he’d been coaching her. The little hills of flesh above his brows said *beatable*.

Evgeniya came down the steps with a big smile. There was no question that she thought she won, and so did her coaches, given the way her truncated Russian delegation peppered her with hugs and kisses. She shook hands with Li and Sofia and everyone in their rotation. Rachel stood and smiled, waiting for her to approach with Vlad crouched and treating her knee. Evgeniya came over with the same big smile and sparkly blue eyeshadow to hug her.

“*Otlichno*,” Rachel said.

“You also,” Evgeniya said atop her thick accent. She hugged Vlad and Rachel hugged Evgeniya’s coach Nikita, and it was all a strange mix of rivalrous sportsmanship that she had come to identify with the sport. Evgeniya fluttered away back to her female coach, Sveta, and the whole arena held its breath for the result.

It came in at last. Rachel swallowed her breath and sat completely still, feeling nothing but the numb freeze of her aggravated knee. The judges gave Evgeniya a 15.300.

Rachel remained in first place, and no one else could challenge.

Vlad's tears pressed against her temple as he pulled her into his arms. The audience's cheers rising higher and higher were the only proof that time hadn't stopped completely. She looked away from the scoreboard and into his red-stained eyes.

"I won?"

"You won, Rachel. You won."

There were so many people in her midst – cameras, Vlad, Karen, Lola, fellow competitors – that she didn't even know who was who. She hugged Lola in frozen shock and stared up at the scoreboard one more time just to make sure.

#### 1. RACHEL WALLERSTEIN – USA – 63.849

Every time she dreamed about winning this exact competition on this exact day, she was able to take account of every sound, color, face, and feeling. In reality, it was nothing but a kaleidoscope where sound had shade and faces were noise. She supposed she was in shock, even as her body began to realize what happened. She won. She was the Olympic all-around champion.

During the medal ceremony, she cried through the entire National Anthem. Everything escaped in fat tears. The pain in her knee, the pain her knee had caused her, the pressure she survived the last year to get to this moment; all of it collected on her cheeks before she brushed it away like nothing at all. At the conclusion of the anthem, with every American flag in the building dancing high above her, she held her bouquet of flowers up to the ceiling and looked down at the gold medal dangling from her neck. Its

weight and shine were immense. Everything about the moment was just that – immense, all-consuming, and maybe even worth it. She held its thick weight in her palm and smiled at the ring of white jade inset on the front. Engraved upon it was the immortalization of this day – *2008 Beijing Olympics, Women's artistic gymnastics individual all-around*. The color told the story. The words were just a reminder.

## CHAPTER 18

### THE SWAP: EVENT FINALS

Not that anyone needed to know, but she wore her medal to bed and when she woke up, she smiled at it on her pillow for no fewer than ten minutes. Even with her knee in agony, she found it hard to feel any pain with her lifelong dream in her hands. Very little about the Olympics had felt real, and now it felt even more like an alternate dimension she'd entered for the summer. She was the Olympic champion. A year ago, she was just Rachel.

Olympic champion or not, her knee was in a familiar state of unrest. She and her parents went to see Dr. Chris at the practice gym the morning after the all-around to see what the damage was. She resumed her examination and physical test of Rachel's bothersome knee as if the rehab had never ended and she'd never been cleared.

"Without an MRI, I'm going to say the ACL has a sprain again," she said, pushing her thumb into the tender spot. "But it doesn't seem like the MCL does."

"Can I compete on it?"

"That's mostly a question of if you think you can withstand the pain," Dr. Chris said. She looked at Rachel and then at her parents, sharing long glances with each of them. "I can't in good conscience clear you myself, no, but I understand that you can't exactly reschedule event finals."

Rachel looked at her parents and shared mini conversations with them with their shared glances. She was eighteen, and this was ultimately her choice, but she'd never made such a choice since being legally able to. They had their hands in everything she did, from what doctor she saw to what time she had to be home every night.

"I think you should do whatever feels right to you," her dad said. He put a hand on her shoulder and squeezed.

"Mom?"

"I agree," her mom said. Her parents reached for one another's hands. Rachel didn't know why this seemed so strange to her. She almost didn't believe her eyes. Her mom smiled beneath threatening tears and used her free hand to pull on Rachel's.

"You're so strong, honey. I don't want to see you hurt, but you need to decide what you think is best for you."

If only it was that easy to decide. She had practice in the warm-up gym before the vault and beam finals later that day. Floor and bar finals were tomorrow, and then her Olympics were effectively over. They could end right now and she'd be satisfied, injury aside, but there was still more to prove for herself and she had to cheer on her teammates. To think that she almost went home because the thought of just spectating had upset her so much.

"I'll talk to Vlad and decide then," she said to her parents. She tried to read their faces to gauge their real opinions on the matter, but either they did a good job of lying, or they were telling the truth about their openness to her choice. She couldn't tell.



At her last practice before beam finals, she met Vlad and repeated what Dr. Chris said. Around them, Lola practiced her beam routine and Jamie was training her vaults. Talia was making use of some time on the bars even though finals weren't until tomorrow. Vlad eyed the thick wrapping on her knee and crossed his arms.

“What are you going to do?” he asked.

It really was her call, then. She could go ahead in search of more glory with two possible outcomes – compete in pain but with no further injury or compete in pain and potentially tear her ACL. There was no emotional weight to the possibilities. She pictured the next two days in perfect technicolor. The decision was instant.

“I can do bars and beam,” she said. “I’ll give Cameron my spot on floor.”

“Are you sure?” he asked after a lengthy silence. The sound of Lola drilling her two and a half twist into the mat stabbed the thin walls around them.

“Yeah. She’ll do a better job than I would.”

It was the right call, and a surprisingly easy one to make. Rachel didn't need to be tumbling on one leg. At least with bars and beam she could isolate the impact to two hard landings. Floor required four, not including the training that she would have to do prior. Only qualifiers to the event finals were allowed in the practice gym, so she didn't quite know where Cameron was, but figured she was with her parents. She deserved that much.

She dialed Cameron on her prepaid phone in a quiet corner while watching Talia go through her bar routine again. She looked down at her knee and felt it pinch in pain upon acknowledgement.

“Rach?” Cam’s voice came through. She could hear honking nearby, like Beijing traffic had directed its various noises right into her microphone.

“Hey. Where are you?”

“I just left the Summer Palace with my parents. We’re going for lunch. Is everything okay?”

“Yeah,” she said, because it was. Knee injury aside, she’d never been better or more relaxed. She smiled across the room at Jamie, who was taking a break from her vault training. “Actually, you know how I hurt my knee again?”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t really want to do floor tomorrow in the finals. Will you take my spot instead?”

A long, drawn-out honk followed. Jamie shrugged in Rachel’s direction with a crinkle between her eyebrows. Rachel shrugged back with half a smile.

“I’m—Are you serious?”

“I’m dead serious. If you don’t want to, I can ask Daisy.”

“I’ll do it. Of course I’ll do it. Oh my God.” The scratch of her phone jostling followed, and she could hear her telling her parents ‘*I’m doing the floor final!*’ Rachel smiled and felt that lightness between her shoulders broaden more and more. “Thank you so much, Rachel. You’re the best.”

“*We’re* the best,” she corrected her. “I’ll see you in the practice gym. Have fun at lunch.”

She tossed her tiny phone in her bag and looked at Vlad.

“It took some convincing, but I think she’ll do it,” Rachel said. He snorted.

Each of them spent the afternoon practicing their qualified events in quiet tandem. She knew the feeling of isolated focus well from cumulative months spent at camps, but this felt different – they were still individual parts, but it continued to feel like they were all working together. She did four practice beam routines without any dismounts, then did her triple twist on the fifth. She landed with a sting in her knee that didn’t necessarily feel worse than the previous pain, just unwelcome.

“That’s enough,” Vlad said. She had no objections.

When Cameron arrived with her coach, she came to Rachel for a hug and Rachel held her tight, remembering team finals and the overwhelming emotion of that whole day. It seemed like forever ago.

“Thank you,” Cameron said again. “I can’t believe you’d do this for me.”

“You have a better chance to medal than I do,” Rachel said. “Just go out there and don’t hold back.”

By the time Karen was asked to make the change in line-up official, Rachel no longer cared about the sour looks she was on the receiving end of. She iced her knee and sat with Jamie by the vault runway when Karen finally approached her.

“You qualified into floor finals. That’s your spot.”

“I have one leg,” Rachel said, gesturing to her ice pack. “I’m not tumbling on it.”

“This is the Olympics, not some club intra-squad meet. If you hit, you have a better shot at the bronze than Cameron does.”

“You didn’t think so when during team finals when my leg was healthy.” She felt the urge to flick her away like a little fly. Intimidation was no more and neither was patience.

Karen glared at her and she was reminded of all those days at camp, waiting for a number on a scale or a hit routine in practice to decide her worth for the day. She knew deep down that she would never be back there again. It was almost as good of a feeling as her all-around gold gave her. She stared up at Karen’s tight blonde head, her eyes steady and unwavering. Try me, she thought. Karen bent down at her hips and brought her face mere inches from Rachel’s, like Jamie wasn’t even there.

“You are an ungrateful, smartass little bitch who couldn’t get through Trials without a sympathy parade,” Karen said. The corners of her mouth turned up with every word. “Your attitude and your laziness are your coach’s fault for coddling you all these years, but you’re just as much to blame for costing the team the gold.”

“What the hell is your problem?” Jamie shouted. Rachel tapped her elbow with her own to calm her down and leaned forward.

“My laziness kept me from doing the full and kept me off the floor line-up. Is that what you’re going to tell the national staff when they want answers?” Rachel blinked

once, but her sightline remained the same. She could feel Jamie's anger. Rachel's only emotion was level contentedness. "Lazy people don't win Olympic silver medals. We did that despite you, so if you don't mind, please swap Cameron into my spot and get out of my face, or your job security will be the least of your problems."

She could feel the world stop on its axis right there in the middle of Beijing, China. Jamie was beside her with her own challenging eyes on Karen. Somewhere, she felt Vlad watching, although whether he was horrorstruck or amused remained a mystery. Karen stood up a long moment later. The tension around her mouth settled. She wasn't retreating. She was simply relenting.

"Guess there's no shame in quitting when you're already ahead," she said. The credentials around her neck swung like a metronome. She slivered a smile upon her lips and stepped back. "Consider it done."

She and Jamie watched in twin silence as Karen moved away in steady, unbothered strides to check on Talia and her father. Rachel sat up straight and crossed her legs, putting the right one atop the healthy one.

"I feel like I don't even know you anymore," Jamie said. She slung her arm around her shoulders and pulled her into her side. "Can I still be your best friend or are you too awesome for me now?"

"You are stuck with me forever," Rachel said, hugging her. Her team was happy with individual glory still in their sights. Nothing had ever felt better, not even gold.

Their Olympics ended the way some had predicted, but that Rachel had only ever dared to wish for. She collected her gold on uneven bars with a record-breaking 17.212 and gold on balance beam with a nailed full and a 16.375, thereby solidifying all her lifelong dreams in less than seventy-two hours. Evgeniya won the beam silver and Lola won the bronze in a surprising but nevertheless incredible result. On bars, Talia managed a bronze behind Li Wan in a beautiful, nerveless routine. Jamie vaulted better than she ever had to finally claim her vault gold, then followed it up the next day with a decisive gold-medal showing on floor. In one of the biggest surprises of all, Cameron snuck onto the floor podium to win bronze by just over a tenth. It was the best American showing in Olympic gymnastics history, and it all transpired in little more than a week. On August 11<sup>th</sup>, artistic gymnastics in the twenty-ninth Olympiad was officially over.

Everyone's plans diverged from there. Daisy's parents, who had originally met in the Phillipines, wanted to take a detour there to vacation; Talia and her father planned to visit her grandparents in St. Petersburg; Hailey went home to the States to start the schoolyear; Cameron and her family wanted to stay in Beijing and watch some of the remaining events; Jamie had a ticket to Rome and was dead-set on going, even if it meant missing the rest of the events and the closing ceremonies. She, Lola, and Rachel were in flux. They had some time before college classes began at UCLA and Cornell, but not enough to do much travelling.

"Just come with me," Jamie begged after a team photo-op at the Summer Palace gardens the morning after event finals ended. A professional photographer snapped photos of them posing with their medals, posing with each other, posing with their parents and their coaches, and in combinations of all the above. Rachel smiled for a photo

with her parents and Vlad in front of glittery Kunming Lake. Her four medals weighed her neck down, yet she stood tall. These, after all, were weights she was more than happy to bear.

“I can’t just go to Italy. I don’t have a single thing packed for college. I have a bedspread and a backpack,” Rachel said.

Their group finished the photo-op with the early symptoms of sunburn and lunchtime hunger, but happier than they’d ever been as a group. Occasionally, people they passed recognized them and ask for photos. The medals they all donned probably helped with identification. While posing for a group photo with a French family of four, Rachel felt her phone buzz in her back pocket. The digital camera Laz wielded for the family clicked in commemoration. The family thanked them, congratulated them all, and then continued their path through the park, as though their encounter with Olympic gymnasts was only the second-best part of a beautiful summer day.

“Cornell’s two hours away. You can drive home to get whatever you forget,” Jamie said. She tugged on Rachel’s arm while they continued walking in step. “Repeat after me: ‘I enjoy pizza very much, and I would love to come to Rome with you.’”

“Did someone say pizza?” Laz said, bringing up the rear. His massive hands held onto Jamie’s shoulders. “Can you get that here?”

“I’m trying to get Rach and Lola to come to Italy with me,” Jamie said. She turned around to walk backwards and flashed her best smile at Rachel’s parents. “Adam, Miriam, I know you can see the cultural value in paying her way to Italy. Think of how much of a leg up it’ll give her in college to have that worldly experience.”

“I would love for you to explain how eating pizza will help me in my biology labs,” Rachel said. Jamie’s smile was infectious, and Rachel’s grew so big that it began to hurt.

Her parents smiled at one another beneath the hot, unforgiving sun. They walked close together with her dad’s arm slung around her mom’s waist. She didn’t know if she should have, but with everything else going right, she decided to take it as a good sign.

“I think a flight can be arranged,” her mom said, smiling as she did. “As long as you’re back in time for orientation.”

“Done and done,” Jamie said. She grabbed Rachel’s hands, still facing backwards, and skipped so that her three medals banged together in harmonious song. “Come on! You know you want to.”

And she did. Everything she wanted was right here – almost everything, at least. The most important things were within arm’s reach, but she didn’t want to forget what it was like to want. She felt her phone beg for her attention once more and could restrain herself no longer. She held it at her hip and scrolled to the top of three hundred and eighty unread text messages.

*Kellan: not bad for an American*

*Kellan: see u in the fall, golden girl :)*



She couldn't swallow her smile but felt no need to. To have accomplished all her goals before her nineteenth birthday seemed daunting in theory, but for now, basking in achievement and doing whatever she damn well wanted was her only concern. Kellan, college, and the impending unknown would have to wait a little bit longer, just like she had waited so patiently for so long for this feeling.

"Deal," Rachel said with a squeeze of Jamie's hands. "But only if Lola comes with us, and you're paying for my food."

"I'm a simple girl. I heard 'gluten-free pizza' and I bought a ticket," Lola said. She draped her arm around Rachel's warm, pink shoulders. "So I guess that makes three."

Jamie cheered in loud yelps that echoed across the lush park and then disappeared forever up to the blue sky, the same blue sky that brought them here and the same blue sky that would guide them to Rome and then home. Although the echoes were quick and fleeting, they traveled in loud and thunderous waves like a packed arena waiting for a moment of greatness. No more waiting. She looked down at her collection of medals, each hanging by their own red silk band. Greatness was here.