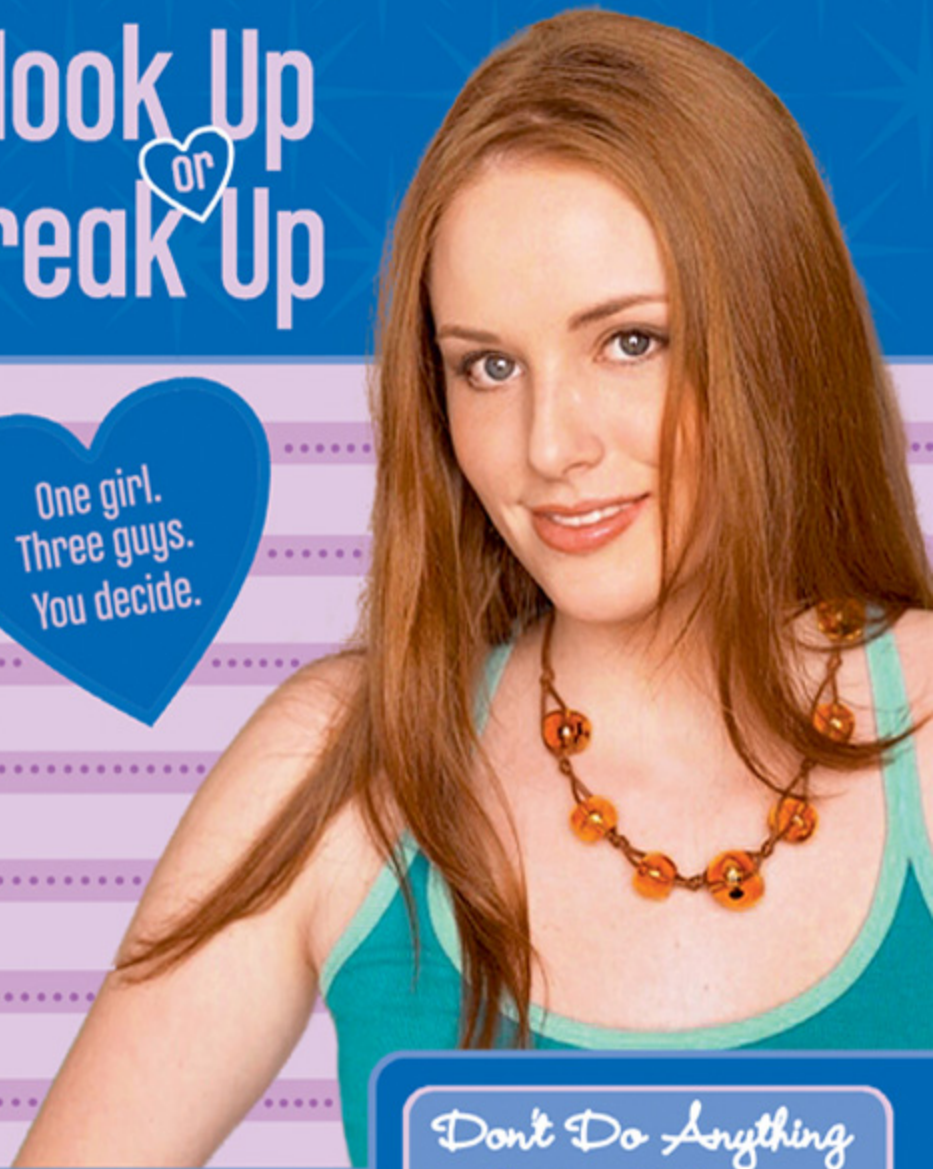


Hook Up or Break Up

One girl.
Three guys.
You decide.



*Don't Do Anything
I Wouldn't Do*



Hook Up or Break Up

*Don't Do
Anything I
Wouldn't Do*
KENDALL ADAMS



HarperCollins e-books

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“How does she *do* it?” my best friend, Laura Jewel, asked as we sat leaned against the wall in Charlotte Larson’s basement.

“How does who do what?” I asked, even though I knew exactly who she was talking about and what that person was doing.

“Becca,” Laura said, thrusting a hand toward the center of the room. “She’s like a superstar. She can talk to anyone. Why can’t *you* do that? I mean, you came from the same egg.”

“Believe me, I’ve been trying to figure that one out for years.” I took a deep breath and forced myself to look across the crowded basement. Sure enough, there was my twin sister, Becca, surrounded by guys under a crappy faux

disco ball, flirting with such perfection, she could have produced an instructional video. Tom Jannsen, Dalton High's most-likely-to-appear-on-*Real World*-and-still-have-a-real-life-afterward, was completely enthralled by her. And why not? Why shouldn't the most untouchable, unfazable guy in school be rendered powerless in the face of my twin? She was gorgeous. She was stylish. She was confident. She was, basically, my exact opposite.

Even though we had the same auburn hair, the same pale skin, the same gray eyes, and the same size-six bodies, no one in our small Pennsylvania town ever had trouble telling us apart. Becca was the hot one. I was the nerd. And no matter how many of these parties I came to, that was never going to change. I, Jenna Appleby, was the ultimate wallflower.

Becca giggled and touched Tom's arm. Her tank top revealed just a touch of cleavage, and as Tom whispered into her ear, she arched her back to reveal a bit more. Instinctively I crossed my arms over my plain black T-shirt. How was she so comfortable showing so much skin? I didn't get it.

"I can't wait to get out of here," I muttered, just as Becca noticed us staring.

"Don't say that," Laura said. "I'm gonna miss you so much."

Becca made her way through the crowd toward us, oblivious to the fact that every guy she passed was checking her out from behind.

"Hey," I said, standing up straight as she approached.

"All right. That's it," Becca announced. She slapped her drink down and grabbed my wrists, trying to pull me away from the wall. "Time to get out there."

"Becca!" I protested through my teeth, pulling back and digging my feet into the ratty carpet.

"Come on, Jenna!" Becca wheedled. "You promised!"

She was right. I *had* promised. But I had also promised before last week's party and a hundred times before that. It was almost a ritual. Whenever we were about to leave the house, Becca would sit me down and make me swear that I would hang out with her and talk to people. And every time I would promise her *and* myself that this was the night—the party at which I was going to premiere a whole new Jenna.

But every time I stepped into the room, I'd freeze. I hated it, but I couldn't seem to change it.

"Becca! People are watching," I said, ducking behind my hair.

Becca finally dropped my arms. "Come on, Jen! This is your last night here! We should be having fun! You know, fun? I've seen you have it!"

In a contained environment, I thought.

"Becca's right," Laura said. "We need to do something crazy."

"We do?" I asked.

"Yeah, we do! I still can't believe you're leaving me!" Becca said. "We've never spent more than one night apart in our entire lives, and now you're just jetting off to California for the entire summer! What am I supposed to

do here without you?"

"Oh, I don't know. Lifeguard, shop, break a couple dozen hearts?" I suggested. *Like every other summer on record.*

Becca didn't argue. "I still don't know why you applied to this stupid program. Who wants to spend all summer studying physics?"

"I do," I told her. "Besides, it's not just about school. I'm going to be in Malibu. That's practically Los Angeles. You know I've always wanted to go there."

"Yeah, but we were supposed to go together," Becca said, combing her fingers down the length of her hair.

"Come on, Becks. This is gonna be good for me. I'll see what it's like to be on my own, maybe even . . . I don't know . . . get a little crazy?"

I said all this as if I was just thinking aloud, but in truth, it *was* the reason I was going away. I mean, physics is great, but what I really wanted to do was see what my life would be like if I wasn't always pegged as Becca's lame sister. I wanted to find out who I could be. It was all I could think about ever since I'd sent in my application to Pepperdine.

"Why do you have to go all the way to California to 'get crazy'?" Becca asked, rolling her eyes and making air quotes with her fingers.

My cheeks burned. How could I explain to her that as long as she—and everyone else I knew—was watching me, I couldn't bring myself to take that leap? I knew that I'd feel like a total moron. Like I was trying to be someone I

wasn't, and everyone would know it. In California, no one would know that it *wasn't* the real me. It would be so much easier.

"Come on. All you've gotta do is break the seal," Becca said, nudging me with one shoulder. Her gray eyes sparkled with sudden inspiration. "Do one completely not-Jenna thing, and you'll see how easy it is. I'm serious. I would *love* to see that! Just *one* crazy thing."

Uh-oh. Becca was getting excited about this. That could mean trouble.

"Ooooh! Like what?" Laura asked.

I shot her a look of death. You don't encourage Becca when she gets a plan going! We both knew that. Laura shrugged apologetically.

"I don't know . . . like . . ." Becca scanned the room. Then her eyes locked on someone, and she smiled mischievously. I felt the blood rush out of my head. All I wanted to do was bolt.

Brandon O'Neal. *The* Brandon O'Neal. Object of my unrequited affection for the past three years. He was a year older than me—just graduated, in fact—but we had been on the track team together, and he'd always been nice to me. Of course, I had never been sure if he actually liked me or if he was just nice.

"I think you should go talk to Brandon O'Neal," Becca said. "No, wait! I think you should go *kiss* Brandon O'Neal!"

She clapped her hands together under her chin, very pleased with herself.

“So not gonna happen,” I said, feeling nauseated.

“What? You claim you want to ‘get crazy,’” Becca said, her eyes wide and innocent as she threw air quotes again. “Here’s your chance!”

My insides squirmed. “Becca . . .”

“No. You can’t ‘Becca’ your way out of this,” she said sternly. “You have been promising me for years that you were going to stop being such a wallflower and show everyone how cool you actually are. Now you tell me that you’re finally going to do it, but all the way across the country, where I don’t even get to *see* it. How is that fair?”

“I don’t think it’s fair,” Laura piped in giddily.

I was seriously considering revoking her best-friend status.

“Or maybe you *can’t* do it,” Becca said, lifting one shoulder dismissively. “Maybe you’re just a big, fat wuss.”

“Oh, very funny. Reverse psychology, Becca? Come on,” I scoffed.

“Whatever,” she said, rolling her eyes. “I’m just trying to help *you* have a little fun. But if you don’t even want to try, well, then, good luck in Malibu.”

I knew she was playing me, but something inside me snapped. She didn’t think I could put my New Jenna plan into action? The plan I had been pinning all my hopes on for the last six months? I’d show her. I had to show *myself*. If I couldn’t do *this*, then I might as well blow off the whole summer.

“Excuse me, ladies,” I said. “I have something I need to do.”

Becca and Laura both froze. “You’re actually going over there?” Laura said in shock.

I narrowed my eyes as my adrenaline really started to pump. “Watch me.”

The second I was away from the safety of my wall, my stomach swooped, but I managed to keep walking. *What’re you doing? What’re you doing? What’re you doing?* my mind repeated over and over.

Brandon was chatting with one of his buddies, but he looked up and smiled as I approached. God, he was hot. Dark hair, blue eyes, square jaw. He could have been the next Superman.

“Hey, Jenna.”

He remembered my name. Good start.

“Hey,” I said.

Then I put one hand on either of his shoulders and moved in for the kiss. He was so stunned, he didn’t even have a chance to move. My lips touched his, and I heard a couple of guys whistle.

I can’t believe I’m doing this, I thought. *I can’t believe I’m actually doing this! Go, me!*

And then, all of a sudden, Brandon’s hands were on my waist. And his lips were moving! He was kissing me back! Brandon O’Neal had not shoved me away and vomited his entire dinner into a potted plant. He was actually kissing me back!

Gradually the hooting and hollering grew, and I was finally too embarrassed to keep going. I pulled away from Brandon. He was flushed and blinking rapidly.

"I just wanted to say . . . good luck at Duke!" I announced giddily.

"Th-thanks," he stammered.

Then I turned around and walked back to Becca and Laura on trembling legs.

"Oh. My. *God!*" Becca said, grabbing my arm. "Shut *up!* You just kissed Brandon O'Neal!"

I gripped her arm as well, trying to keep my knees from buckling. I was hot all over. "I'mgonnadiesgonnadiesgonnadies!"

"Here! Sit!" Becca said, practically shoving Laura out of the way so I could drop down onto a coffee table pushed against the wall. "I'm in, like, total awe right now."

"I'm speechless," Laura said. "If I hadn't actually *seen* you do that, I would have never believed it."

"How *was* it?" Becca asked.

"It was . . ." I shivered as I felt Brandon's lips on mine all over again. "Awesome."

"Do you think he'll call you? Omigod, are you going to date Brandon O'Neal?" Laura asked.

My heart inflated at the thought, but I told myself to pop the balloon. I had to be realistic here. "Laura, I'm leaving tomorrow, remember? I'm just . . . glad I got it out of my system."

"Wow. Maybe there's a little heartbreaker inside you after all," Becca said, her eyes sparkling.

I couldn't have stopped grinning if the perforated ceiling had collapsed on my head. Becca was right. If I could kiss Brandon O'Neal in the middle of a Dalton graduation party,

I could do anything. I had officially busted out of my shell.
This was going to be the best summer ever.

I had just finished fitting my last stack of plain T-shirts into my suitcase the next morning when Becca walked in with a mass of colorful clothes in her arms. She dropped the stack onto my bedspread, yanked the carefully folded tees out of the suitcase, and shoved in her clothes in their place. She looked gorgeous as ever in her red lifeguard bathing suit and black shorts, already perfectly tan after spending every weekend in May and June sunning herself in our backyard so she would be pool-patrol ready. As I looked into the suitcase, I started to wonder if all that sun had already melted her brain.

“Is that your pink DKNY tank?” I asked, stunned.

“I figure if you’re gonna go all California daredevil, you’re going to need the right wardrobe,” Becca said.

Some of her favorite things were in there. Miniskirts, sundresses, halter tops, even her signature PRINCESS T-shirt with the gold lettering.

I felt like I was going to cry.

“Becca. Are you sure?” I asked.

She grinned, her eyes shining. “Sure I’m sure. Just . . . don’t spill spaghetti sauce on them or something, because I won’t be held responsible for my breakdown.”

I grabbed my sister and hugged her, my heart swelling. She hugged me back hard. Maybe this was going to be more difficult than I thought.

“Thanks,” I said.

“You’re welcome.”

We pulled apart, and Becca quickly wiped under one eye as I sniffled.

“Jenna! Say good-bye to your sister! It’s time to hit the road!” my mother shouted up the stairs.

Becca and I looked at each other and my throat tightened. She hugged me again. She couldn’t come to the airport with us because she was starting her first shift at the town pool in less than an hour.

“Be good,” I told her.

“Be bad,” she replied.

We both laughed. I kissed her cheek, and she helped me carry my bags downstairs. Five minutes later I was in the car, waving good-bye . . . and feeling freer than I ever had in my life.

No more Becca-and-Jenna. From this moment on it was Just Jenna.

“My full name is Sundhya, but you can call me Sun. I’ve basically lived in California all my life, but I’ve been all over the world, and every time I go somewhere else, I think, ‘*This* is where I want to live.’ Like the second I stepped through the doors at Harrods in London, I said, ‘*This* is where I want to live.’ But eventually everywhere gets boring. Even India gets boring, even though there are forty *trillion* people there. So eventually I always come back home. San Francisco, to be exact. Where’re you from again?”

I stared at Sundhya Sen, my new, caffeine-addled roommate, as she taped pictures of herself and various

friends and family members all over her side of the room. Pictures taken in front of the Taj Mahal, the Eiffel Tower, some non-specific ancient ruins, a deserted beach. This girl really had been everywhere.

“Jenna?”

“Oh, sorry,” I said. “I’m from Pennsylvania, and I’ve never been anywhere, really. Until now.”

I lifted a framed photo of me and Becca out of my bag. The second I placed it down on my desk, Sun jumped to her feet and snatched it up.

“Omigod! You have a twin! I can’t believe you have a twin! That must be *so* cool!”

“It can be,” I said lightly, picking up a pair of jean shorts.

“Whoa. What was with *that* tone?” Sun asked, wide-eyed. “You hate her, don’t you? You can tell me. I won’t tell anyone, I swear.”

“No. I do not hate her,” I replied with a laugh. I looked out the window at the palm trees lining the quad. Their long fronds rustled in the breeze, and as they bent and swayed, I could see glimpses of the clear blue ocean beyond. “It’s just hard sometimes,” I said with a shrug. “She’s, you know, prettier, more popular, more—”

“Prettier? Excuse me. Are you, or are you not, identical?” Sun asked, holding the photo closer to her face. “I mean, if anything, you have the better nose.”

I laughed and took the picture from her. “I don’t mean ‘prettier’ exactly. She just has style and . . . confidence. Two things I’ve never had.”

“Well, that’s ridiculous,” Sun said. “All you need is a little practice.”

“That’s kind of why I came out here,” I admitted. “I was sort of hoping to bust out of the boring-me mold. Have some actual fun for once.”

“I can *so* help you with that!” Sun cried, slapping her hands together and jumping up and down. “Want to do a makeover? We can start right now!”

She whirled toward her desk, which was already littered with cosmetic products—the first things she had unpacked. Just watching her made me feel exhausted. The energy was shooting off her and bouncing against the walls, ricocheting back at me from every direction. After saying good-bye to my family, taking that long plane ride alone, finding my bags and a cab, and checking in, it was all just a little much.

“Actually, I kind of wanted to walk down to the beach,” I told her. “I saw the ocean for the first time from the cab, and I’m dying to feel the sand between my toes.”

Sun turned to gape at me. “Wait a minute. You’ve never seen the Pacific before?”

I smiled. “Not until today.”

“Okay, that should have been the *first* thing you said,” she told me. She grabbed my hand and started to pull me out of the room. “Let’s go!”

I had barely enough time to grab my wallet and keys before she flung me into the hallway. Too hyped to wait for the elevator, Sun opted for the stairs. We raced together down the three flights to the lobby and out the back door

of our dorm. Outside on the quad, a group of people were gathered around a taller, older guy who was handing out flyers. He looked up when we emerged and smiled. My sandal caught on one of the stones of the pathway and I tripped forward.

Total loser.

“Whoa. Hey. The first step is always the toughest,” the guy said, reaching out an arm as if to steady me. Totally the most gorgeous forearm I have ever seen.

All of this guy was gorgeous. From his carelessly tousled brown hair to his white linen shirt, open at the neck, to his tan skin and teasing blue eyes. He was over six feet tall and had an easy way about him. Like he was perfectly comfortable in his own skin. All the girls around us were practically drooling, and it clearly didn’t faze him one bit.

I cleared my throat and smoothed the front of my T-shirt, then crossed my arms over my chest, uncrossed them, and crossed them again, all the while shifting my weight from one foot to the other and wondering if I’d missed any spots on my legs while shaving.

So much for being comfortable in my own skin.

“Hi. I’m Nicholas,” Gorgeous Boy said.

My mouth opened slightly, but nothing came out.

“I’m Sun, and this is Jenna,” Sundhya said helpfully. “I’m studying creative writing, and she’s in the physics program.”

“Pleasure to meet you, Sun,” he said with a nod. “Jenna.”

Then he eyed me—actually *eyed* me—up and down in a way that made me almost melt. It was the way people looked at Becca all the time. It made me feel . . . beautiful.

And I hadn't even changed my clothes *or* put on makeup!

He handed me a hot-pink flyer. "We're having a party down at the beach tomorrow night. Some of us old guard welcoming the new blood. We're just going to chill, do what we do. You should come."

I stared at the flyer. *What would Becca say? Come on, Jenna. Think. Keep it simple. You can do this!*

A cell phone beeped. Nicholas slipped a BlackBerry from his pocket and checked the caller ID. "I have to take this. But will I see you tomorrow?" he asked me.

Answer the guy before he thinks you're a total freak. It's New Jenna time!

Somehow I took a deep breath, flicked my eyes toward his, and smiled. "We'll be there."



As I walked across campus to my first physics lecture on Monday, the sun was shining, a light breeze tossed a few puffy white clouds across the blue sky, and I could hear the surf crashing in the distance. How anyone went to school here all year long was beyond me. I bet a lot of class-skipping was going on.

I glanced down at my schedule, just to make sure I had the right time and classroom—even though I'd already quadruple-checked it. Mondays and Wednesdays my class met at noon, but we'd be meeting in the mornings on Tuesdays and Thursdays. I had Fridays completely free. Nothing like three-day weekends to make the most of my California summer.

I managed to navigate the maze of pathways and found

the modern building where my class was held. I took a deep breath to calm my first-day jitters and pushed open the glass door. Inside, the air was AC cool. Room 108 mercifully faced *away* from the beach, and when I walked in, the first thing I noticed was that I could no longer hear—and be distracted by—the waves.

The classroom was huge with five long black tables between me and the windows at the back. A tremendous white dry erase board covered the front wall. A few students were already peppered throughout the room and a couple of girls looked up at my arrival, then went right back to chatting.

I was about to take a seat up front as I always did, when I noticed little name cards on the tables, between pairs of chairs, like place settings at a dinner party. BRECKIN, JUDY and YARIN, DANIEL were on the card in front of me.

A girl with long braids at the second table must have noticed my confusion. “Lab partners,” she said, lifting her chin toward the wipe board. On it was a note written in a messy scrawl: *Your lab partner assignments are on the desks. Find your lab partner. Love your lab partner. Lab partners are non-negotiable! Sincerely, Professor Eli Rosenberg.*

“This guy is serious,” I joked.

“Tell me about it,” Braids said.

I smiled and slowly made my way up a side aisle, looking for my name. As I walked, I noticed that an extremely cute African-American guy was watching me intently from his seat at the last table. When I arrived at the back of the

room without having found my name, he turned fully to face me, leaning one arm on the table. He wore a blue striped T-shirt, tan shorts, and muddy sneakers, and he had the calf muscles of a soccer player. For a moment he just stared, as if he was sizing me up. Then he grabbed the place card in front of him and held it up.

“Are you Appleby, Jenna?” he asked.

“Yep.”

I walked over to him and checked out the card. “And you’re Phillips, Sean.”

He nodded, still studying me, looking almost wary of what he saw. “I’m from New York. You?”

“Pennsylvania,” I said, settling in next to him. I placed my backpack on the floor next to his.

“Well, PA, looks like we’re lab partners. You aced junior physics back home?” he asked.

“Yeah. You?” I asked.

He blew a breath through his lips. Like, *please*. “How do you find the kinetic energy of a moving object?” he quizzed me, crossing his arms over his chest.

I stared at him for a moment, waiting for him to say he was kidding. He stared back. His deep brown eyes were dead serious.

“How do you *find* the kinetic *energy* of a moving *object*?” he repeated much more slowly.

I rolled my eyes. The old cocky science-geek routine. I suppose he thought he was impressing me, but I knew ten guys back home with the same smarts and the same ego. Only difference between him and them? He was cute. All

right, so that was a big difference, but still.

"One half mass times velocity squared," I replied impatiently. "Gimme a break."

Sean's eyes narrowed. "Know anything about thermal physics?"

"Please," I said, leaning down to pull out my notebook.

"Nuclear?"

"Duh."

"Fluid?"

"We covered fluid in my first semester last year," I told him. "Are you satisfied yet?"

Sean nodded, considering. "I think I can work with you."

"And *maybe* I can work with you," I replied with a grin.

Sean laughed for the first time. It was a nice laugh. One that showed he might be more chill than he was letting on.

"So, what part of New York are you from?" I asked, opening my pristine new notebook on the table.

"Brooklyn," he replied. "What part of PA are you from?"

"Just outside Philly," I answered.

"I hate the Phillies," he said.

"Mets fan?"

"You know it." He pulled out a pencil and flung it onto the table as if he were throwing down a gauntlet. Was there anything this kid didn't take superseriously?

"I don't really follow baseball," I told him. "But my *dad* is a Phillies fan. In fact, if he knew I was fraternizing with you right now, he might disown me."

Sean smirked. "Well, then. We'd better not tell him."

My heart fluttered as if we were sharing an actual

secret. Interesting. “We’d better not.” Our eyes locked, and even though my pulse was kind of racing, I was *not* going to look away first.

But the door swung open and in walked a balding man with a gray moustache and a huge stack of folders under one arm. He wore a short-sleeved plaid shirt, untucked, and cargo shorts. His scrawny legs were covered with whitish-grayish hair.

“Greetings, everyone! And welcome to Advanced Physics!” he announced. “I am Professor Rosenberg! I trust you have all found your lab partners, and I hope you like each other, because if you don’t, I don’t want to hear it! These are your partners. Get used to them!”

“Hear that? You’re stuck with me, PA,” Sean teased, opening his own notebook. “Think you can handle it?”

I couldn’t help grinning in return. “I think I’ll be just fine.”

It was a perfectly balmy evening. Not too hot, not too cool, with just a slight breeze off the water. When Sun and I arrived at the beach for Nicholas’s party, there was a roaring fire surrounded by several coolers and stadium chairs. At least thirty people milled around, talking and laughing. A golden-haired girl screeched as some guy tried to catch her and throw her into the water. A group of guys carried a keg on their shoulders toward the crowd. Girls wore miniskirts topped by cozy sweaters, while the guys were in board shorts and sweats. It was just the way I imagined a Cali beach party to be.

“Hey. There he is,” Sun said, pointing.

Instantly my already frayed nerves started to sizzle. I reached down to smooth the front of Becca’s favorite black dress—which Sun had chosen for me before I’d even gotten back from class—but all I saw ahead of me was a group of tan, blond girls with perfect complexions. It looked like a Hawaiian Tropic convention.

“Where?”

“Right there,” she said rather loudly.

One of the girls stepped back to adjust her flip-flop, and I saw him. Nicholas *was* right there. In the center of all those girls. All those gorgeous California girls, every last one of whom was vying for his attention. Could I ever compete with that?

“Go on. Go over there,” Sun said, nudging me.

I turned my back to him, hoping he wouldn’t spot me. What was I thinking, coming here and imagining that he’d be hoping to see me? “He’s busy,” I said, feeling pathetic.

“Okay, Jenna, this is where you grow a backbone,” Sun said. “All you have to do is go over there and say hello. You put all those Barbies to shame, especially in *that* outfit. Now, are you going to do this, or are you going to wuss out?”

I tilted my head and squirmed.

“Come on, Jenna. What would your sister do?” Sun demanded.

I stopped squirming. I was here to prove what I could do outside Becca’s shadow. I was about three thousand miles away from that shadow. I needed to start acting like it.

“Fine,” I said. I shook my auburn hair over my shoulders and turned around. Nicholas was nodding as one of the girls chatted his ear off. I ignored the excruciating pounding of blood in my ears, and strode toward the brood. A couple of them shot me dirty looks as I approached, but I just smiled back.

You can do this. You can do this.

“Hi, Nicholas,” I said, stepping into the circle of girls. “Remember me?”

His piercing blue gaze fell onto my face, and for a long, agonizing moment, I was certain that he did *not*, in fact, remember me. I was about to turn and flee and never look back, when he flashed that incredible smile.

“Of course I do, Jenna,” he said. “Want a beer?”

Relief flooded through me. My first instinct was to turn down the beer, but I hesitated. After all, I had gone against my instincts in coming over here. Maybe that was the key to success—doing the opposite of everything my gut told me to do.

“Sure. Why not?” I said, lifting a shoulder.

“My sentiments exactly,” Nicholas said.

He reached into a nearby cooler for a bottle, then popped the top off on the side. When he handed it to me, he gave me a long, slow look up and down my body. A look that left me throbbing. A few of the blondes rolled their eyes and moved away. Huh. Maybe I *did* put them to shame. I glanced over my shoulder at Sun, and she flashed me a thumbs-up.

“So, Nicholas,” I said, clutching my beer. The bottle was

cold and soaking wet from the ice. "You go to school here?"

"Guilty," he said with a nod. "Normally I would go home to Seattle for the summer, but I have an internship in LA this year."

"An internship?" I said.

"I'm a PA for Prospect Pictures," he said, with an expression that made me think this was something really impressive.

"A PA?" I asked.

His brow knit. Suddenly I felt about two feet tall, just from the way he was looking at me. Apparently I was supposed to know what a PA was.

"A production assistant?" he said. "At a movie company."

"Oh, wow. That's so cool! So you work at one of the studios?" I asked.

"Actually we're on a shoot right now. They've given me a lot of responsibility for a first-year PA. I'm pretty much the director's right-hand man. But they think I can handle it," he said. He winked and took a sip of his beer. I swear I almost swooned. He pulled his BlackBerry out of his pocket, hit a few buttons, and slipped it back.

"Sorry. I have to check my messages all the time in case they need me for something," he said.

This guy had a real job with real responsibility. I felt completely out of my league and totally intrigued at the same time.

"What about you? What were you here for again?" he asked.

"Physics," I told him. "They have this amazing

advanced science program here. If you pass, you get college credits so it looks really good on school applications.”

Nicholas nodded absently and started to glance around at the other revelers. I was losing him. And why not? As if a guy like him really wanted to know he was hanging out with a high school science geek.

“Of course I really came out here to party,” I said.

Nicholas’s eyebrows shot up. He slowly smiled. Now that he was looking at me again, I figured I’d take a sip of my beer. It hit my tongue, and I tried not to wince as I swallowed. That stuff is just awful.

“Really?” he said.

“Yeah, you know. Get away from the family, have a little fun, try some new things,” I said. “You don’t get to experience a lot in suburban Pennsylvania.”

I lifted the beer again, and the spaghetti strap on my opposite shoulder slipped down. Before I could even reach for it, Nicholas stepped forward and lifted it back up, his fingers lightly grazing my skin. He was so close to me I could see the lines of his muscles through his T-shirt.

“So you’re an adventurer, then,” he said, looking down into my eyes.

“You could say that,” I replied.

You so could not! a little voice in my brain mocked me.

Nicholas smiled slowly. For a second I was *sure* he was going to kiss me, but then the slamming beat of the latest summer party song split the air. Someone had produced a portable stereo and already a few of the blondes were whooping and dancing.

Nicholas backed up a step and took another sip of his beer. *Please don't walk away*, I thought in a panic. What could I do to hold his attention? How could I keep him thinking I was some cool adventurer girl?

"Do you dance?" I blurted.

"When the right offer comes along."

I knew I was supposed to say something cool in response, but the real Jenna was choking me.

"You offering?" he asked.

"Yeah."

Lame, lame, lame!

"Let's do it," he replied.

He dropped his now empty beer bottle into the sand and took me by the hand, pulling me toward the other dancers. Sun was there, grinding with a couple of guys. I laughed as we joined her. This was the best party of my life, and it had barely gotten started.

"So, do you think you'll miss your family this summer?" Nicholas asked as we strolled up the beach together.

It was past midnight, and though the party was still raging, Nicholas—gentleman that he was—had offered to walk me home. Sun had gone off with some new friends to track down a burrito or something, but I had to get up early to do my lab work for class. If I could drag my butt out of bed. I was exhausted from all the dancing and socializing and the giddiness of not being me. Plus I was still adjusting to California time. Back in PA, it was 3:00 A.M.

"I already do," I said. Then realized how dorky it

sounded. "In some ways," I added quickly. "What about you? Are you going home at all this summer?"

"Probably not," Nicholas said. "The next couple of months are all about solidifying my future."

Could this guy be any more unlike the guys I knew back home? The most they thought about their futures was to decide which fast-food restaurant to hit for lunch.

"I'm so busy with the job and everything, I don't really have much time to think about other stuff," he added.

"Oh." Was that his way of saying he wasn't interested in dating? His cool, older-guy way of blowing me off?

"Well, maybe *some* stuff," he said.

Then, out of nowhere, his warm hand slipped around mine.

Nicholas paused. We were a few yards from my dorm, in the center of the quad, and the security lights cast shadows everywhere. He looked at me and smiled.

"You're pretty cool for a high schooler," he said.

I blushed so hard, I was glad I had those shadows to mask it. "Well, you're pretty cool for an old guy," I joked.

"Ugh!" he said, lifting both hands to his chest and staggering back a bit. "Hit me where it hurts."

We both laughed but soon found ourselves simply staring at each other. I wanted more than anything to kiss him. My whole body was crying out for it. But he was older and sophisticated, and so, so out of my league. What if I tried to kiss him and he pulled away? What if he patted me on the head and told me I was a sweet kid or something? I might just die.

But it wasn't like I hadn't done this before. Remember Brandon O'Neal? He didn't pull away. In fact, he kissed me back. My heart panged at the thought of Brandon. Three years of unrequited love followed by one kiss. What might have happened if I had kissed him two years ago? I might have had a boyfriend, real homecoming dates instead of just-friends dates, Valentine's gifts, and hand-holding in the halls. It was possible, right? But I'd never know. I wasn't going to let an opportunity like that pass me by again.

I could do this. I could.

"So," I said, taking a step closer to Nicholas.

"So," he said. He didn't step back.

I raised myself onto tiptoe and quickly touched my lips to his. Then I lost my balance and started to fall forward.

Oh, great! Very graceful, Jenna! Nice work!

But in that split second Nicholas caught me in his arms, pulled me to him, and kissed me back. He opened my lips with his and slowly, smoothly, touched his tongue to mine. I shivered with pleasure in his arms. This was no sloppy, eager, high school kiss. This was a real, manly, I-know-what-I'm-doing kind of kiss. I just hoped he couldn't tell how unpracticed I was.

He moved his hands up my back and held me so close, he lifted me off my feet. I smiled beneath his lips until, finally, he placed me down again.

"Wow," he said, touching my cheek with his fingers. "I like a girl who goes after what she wants."

My skin tingled with delight. "Well," I said. "That's me."

And maybe, just maybe, it was.



I was ripped out of a deep sleep the next morning by a loud slam.

“Dammit, Becca,” I muttered, half out of it.

No matter what time of day it was, Becca was always slamming the door to her room, even when everyone else was still trying to snooze. I was about to yell at her when I realized I was definitely *not* in my bedroom. It took a few blinks to figure it out, but then I saw Sun’s world-tour photo collage and remembered.

California. My dorm room. And last night. The party. The dancing. The kiss . . .

I placed my head down again and started to let my eyelids droop, already smiling over the sweet, fresh memories. Maybe I could dream about Nicholas until my alarm went off.

Just as my eyes were about to close, I caught a glimpse of the alarm clock on my desk. 9:35. My head popped up. Already my heart was hammering. That couldn't be right, could it?

I sat up and grabbed the clock, as if holding it would make it change its mind. But all it did was click over to 9:36. I glanced at the window. Sure enough, that California sun was pouring through the panes at full strength.

"No, no, no, no, no!" I wailed, dropping the clock again.

Sun moaned and rolled over in her bed. "Whassa matter?" she said without opening her eyes.

I was already yanking clothing out of my closet. I ripped my pajamas off and grabbed a rubber band to twist my mussed hair back into a ponytail.

"I have class in twenty minutes!" I cried as I yanked on a pair of chino shorts. "My alarm was set for six o'clock! I had lab work to do! What the hell happened?"

Sun squinted at me. "Oh, sorry. My fault." Then she rolled over onto her back and pulled her colorful sheet up to cover her face.

"Your fault? What do you mean, your fault?" I demanded. I yanked the sheet down again, revealing her white tank top with the gold embellishments. She hadn't even changed out of her party clothes.

Sun whimpered and rolled her back to me. "I didn't get in 'til four, so I shut the alarm off. Can I please have my sheet?"

"You *what!*?" I shouted.

"I shut the alarm off. I just could not face the thought

of waking up in two hours to that awful beeping,” she whined.

She was kidding me. She *had* to be kidding me.

“Sun! I had to do my lab work *before* class! Now I’m going to have nothing!” I wailed. “Oh, God. I am in so much trouble.”

“Stop yelling!” Sun cried. She lifted a pillow and brought it down over her exposed ear, shutting me out. “Sheesh. I thought you were here to have fun, anyway.”

There were no words to express the violence of my frustration. My fingers curled into fists, and I let out a groan. Sun just curled farther toward the wall. At this rate I was going to be late as well as unprepared. With one last death-ray glare at Sun’s back, I grabbed my books, shoved my feet into my flip-flops, and stumbled out the door.

“I can’t talk right now,” I told Becca on my cell as I hurried toward the science building. I never should have answered her call, but I didn’t want her to worry. “I’m late for class.”

“Already? It’s only the second day!” Becca said. “Maybe you *are* getting crazy.”

“I’ll tell you all about it later,” I promised, as I shoved my way inside.

“Wait! There’s something to tell? Jenna! Do not leave me hanging!” she cried. “What happened?”

“I *really* have to go, Becca. I’ll call you later. Bye!”

“You’d better! Bye!”

I hung up the phone and turned it off. Outside the

classroom, I hesitated, wanting to be pretty much anywhere else in the world.

I took a deep breath and leaned back against the cinder-block wall. I couldn't believe I had screwed up this badly. I *never* messed up when it came to school. Was this part of the whole new me?

God, I hoped not.

Somehow I gathered my courage and walked into the room. Sean stood on the far side of the tables, talking to a few of our classmates. Might as well get this over with. I stepped up behind him.

"Hey."

Sean turned around with a smile on, but his entire face creased when he saw me. "You look like death."

Uh, thanks. That seemed like the type of comment one should make only after knowing a person a couple of weeks, at least. Still, I let it go. I was about to lay some bad news on the guy.

"I know. That's what happens when I skip my morning coffee." I laughed awkwardly.

Sean smiled at my joke. He lifted the notebook in his hand and yanked the pen from its spiral. "Note: Lab partner needs coffee to retain normal functionality," he muttered, pretending to write.

"You're hilarious," I shot back.

"So they tell me," he said with a shrug, his eyes sparkling with mischief.

Okay, maybe this wouldn't be as bad as I thought. Sean was a cool guy. And it was just one assignment. We could

bounce back from one incomplete assignment, right?

"So, you got your half of the assignment?" He pulled out his own neatly typed pages, and my mouth went dry. "I bought a folder for it. I figure presentation's gotta count for something."

As he talked, he walked back toward our table in the rear of the room. I scurried after him, wondering if that rank smell was coming from my underarms. God, what I wouldn't give to be able to turn back the clock. Some study time and a shower. That was all I needed.

"Yeah, about that," I said. He turned to face me again, pulling a blue folder out of his bag. "I kind of . . . didn't do the assignment."

"Funny," Sean said with a grin. "You are a funny, *funny* girl."

"Sean, I'm serious. I don't have it."

Slowly the grin faded from Sean's face. "What?" he said, dumbfounded.

Oh, God. This was so wrong. I had never not been responsible in my life. Even if I *was* here to party and have fun and meet the new me, I had never intended to slack on my class.

But it wasn't my fault. He had to know that.

"It was my roommate," I said in a rush. "I set my alarm for six this morning so I could get up and do the work, but she turned it off so I overslept."

"Why were you waiting until this morning to do it?" Sean asked. "You had all last night."

I bit my lip. This was not going to be pretty. "I went out

last night. There was this thing on the beach. . . .”

“Unbelievable,” Sean said, shaking his head. He turned and headed for our table at the back of the room.

I felt a rush of hot frustration and hurried after him. “I’m so sorry, Sean. I swear, this is *not* normal behavior for me. I’m usually Miss Responsible. Seriously. My sister even calls me Double-Checking-Jenna because I’m always double-checking that I’ve done everything.”

I laughed, trying to lighten the mood, but Sean refused to be lightened. He turned and lifted his backpack up onto the desk. “You know, I thought you were going to be cool to work with this summer, but if you’d rather be partying . . .”

“I wouldn’t. I mean, it’s not going to happen again,” I said. “And I’ll explain to Professor Rosenberg that it was all my fault.”

“Not necessary,” he said coolly. He ripped open the zipper on his backpack and pulled out another packet of papers. “Lucky for ‘Double-Checking-Jenna,’ you have a lab partner who actually *is* Mr. Responsible,” he said, placing his two packets of typed pages together. “I did the whole thing.”

“You . . . you what?” I asked, stunned.

“Yeah, well, I was in the library late last night working on my half, and I got really into it, so I just kept going,” he said, putting everything together in his little folder. “See, *I’m* here to learn everything I can possibly learn. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to go hand in *our* work.”

He turned and strode toward the front of the room. I couldn’t have moved if somebody had stung me with a hot

poker. Sean really *was* taking this class seriously. Of course he was. This was a prestigious program, and it was an honor to even get in. He had every right to assume that everyone in the class would be as dedicated as he was, but instead he had just found out that his lab partner was an irresponsible party animal. And yesterday we had such a good thing going. We'd even been kind of . . . flirting. I screwed everything up, and in less than twenty-four hours. Must be some kind of record.

"Are you ever going to tell me where we're going?" I asked Sun on Thursday afternoon. I knew we were in Venice Beach, thanks to the old weather-beaten sign on the boardwalk that welcomed us. The question was "Why?"

"You'll see!" she trilled.

After two days of nonstop studying to win back Sean's trust, I had been looking forward to a little chill time when I arrived back at the dorm after class. Instead Sun had grabbed me before my butt hit my mattress and dragged me right back into the sun.

"This had better be good," I grumbled.

Between the cold shoulder I'd been getting from Sean all week, and the fact that Nicholas had never called me even though he'd asked for—and received—both my numbers, I was in kind of a foul mood.

"Oh, it will be. Don't you worry."

I took a deep breath and tried to relax, taking in my surroundings. I was definitely not in Dalton, PA, anymore, Toto. I wasn't even certain that I was on planet Earth.

Everywhere I looked there was oddity. A man with a long gray beard that was braided and beaded sat on the ground in front of a candy store, feeding chocolate to a white mouse that was crawling around on his shoulders. Three girls in string bikinis Rollerbladed by, smooth as ice-skaters, as if they weren't blading over broken, rotting boards. One of them was *covered* in a dragon tattoo. An old lady rapped—yes, *rapped*—for cash by an old, graffitied park bench while a teenage boy played keyboards for her. There were hippies and gangster types, musclemen in tight pants, and veterans selling poppies. Seriously, any walk of life you could think of, it was there.

The boardwalk was lined with random shops, mostly souvenir places but with a few cute boutiques here and there, too. Many of the stores looked so dark and dirty I wouldn't even want to touch the door handles, but others were clean and bright and populated. It was as if this place couldn't figure out what, exactly, it wanted to be.

"So cool, isn't it?" Sun asked, walking backward to check out a skinny dude in a bathing suit who was juggling as he talked on his Bluetooth. "It's like a microcosm of the human condition."

"Wow. That was deep, Sun," I said.

"I can be deep," she replied. Then she gasped. "Oh, look! There they are!"

She grabbed me by the hand and started to run toward a big group of people standing about fifty yards up the boardwalk. A few of the guys were wearing headphones and I could see a woman with short hair holding a boom

with a microphone up over her head, tilting it down toward the center of the crowd. Suddenly a crane rose into the air, taking a camera and cameraman with it.

"Are they filming a movie or something?" I asked, excited.

"Not just any movie," she whispered giddily, stopping a few feet from the crowd. "Nicholas's movie! I found out from some of his friends where he was going to be today, and *voilà!*"

"*What!?*" I whisper-screamed.

"Jenna! I know you've been checking your messages every five seconds all week, waiting for him to call," she said. "Don't think I don't notice these things. So I figured if he wasn't gonna get in touch with you, maybe you should go to him."

"Sun! You should have told me first!" I said, my pulse in full-on panic mode. "I'm gonna look like some insane stalker!"

"No, you're not!" she protested. "You're going to look like a girl who goes after the guy she likes."

I stared at her for a long moment. Nicholas *had* said he liked girls who knew what they wanted and went after it. I guess this little surprise appearance fit into that.

"Come on. I wanted to make the whole alarm clock fiasco up to you," Sun said.

I wasn't totally sure if this was making it up or making it worse, but I didn't have time to decide.

"All right, everyone! Let's take fifteen!" some guy in a baseball cap shouted.

A bell rang, and the crowd busted up. It took about two seconds to spot Nicholas's tall gorgeousness as he made a few notes on a clipboard. He had a headset on and looked very official. When he glanced up, his eyes locked right onto mine.

"Jenna!" He reached down to his belt and adjusted some kind of electronic pack hanging from it. "What are you doing here?"

Sun nudged me forward with one elbow so hard, it hurt. I tripped toward him and forced a smile. "I . . . uh . . . wanted to see you in action," I said, feeling lamer than I had ever thought possible.

But Nicholas smiled. "Your timing's perfect. I have a break right now. Do you want to get something to eat?"

Suddenly I felt tingly all over. "Sure."

I turned around to see if Sun wanted to come with us, but she was already talking to a guy with long blond hair who was totally enthralled by her.

Nicholas reached out and took my hand. "It's good to see you."

Okay, Sun. Alarm clock fiasco forgiven.



“Why don’t we grab a bench?” Nicholas suggested as we walked out of Twisted Ice Cream.

“Okay,” I said.

I was trying to keep my words to a minimum. Somehow I figured I’d look cooler and more aloof that way. Luckily I now had a milk shake straw to suck on. He checked his BlackBerry, then slipped it back into his pocket. I felt a bit giddy to be with someone who might get called away on some important movie-related mission at any moment. So awesome.

“How is it?” Nicholas asked, nodding at my milk shake.

“Delicious,” I replied.

He smiled, amused, and I blushed. Was there something wrong with *delicious*? Because that was what this

shake was. When Nicholas had brought me into Twisted, I had been all ready to order my standard vanilla, but then he'd gotten a coffee-and-chocolate mix, so I took a chance on something a bit wilder—mint chocolate chip. I was not regretting it.

"You like Venice?" Nicholas asked. He tossed a dollar into the rapping old lady's hat as we walked past, and I smiled.

"It's different," I said.

He grinned. "That's one way of putting it."

I took a long sip of my milk shake and sat on the first bench I saw, narrowly avoiding a big wad of gum. Nicholas sat next to me.

"So . . . what's the movie about?" I asked, looking over at him. He had an incredible profile. Like a Greek statue or something.

"It's a teen skateboarder thing," he said. "No Academy Award aspirations around here. But it's going to look great on my résumé."

I was dating a guy who had a résumé. New Jenna was *so* beyond high school.

"I bet it pays well," I said.

He looked at me, amused. Once again I blushed. This was becoming a pattern.

"Actually, it's unpaid," he said. "That's why I have to keep modeling on the side."

"You're a *model*?" I blurted.

I had kissed an actual model! No one at home would ever believe this.

“Yeah, well, it *is* LA. Every person you meet here is a model, an actor, or a screenwriter,” he said. “Whether or not they’re actually making a living at it is another story. Most of my housemates are from my agency. You met some of them the other night.”

“Ah.” I had been wondering how so much hotness could wind up together in one place.

“It’s not like I want to make a career of it,” he said, shrugging a shoulder. “But it’s good money for now.”

“Uh-huh.”

I was getting better at this one-word answer thing.

“So, how’s your class going?” he asked.

I sat up a bit straighter. “Okay.”

“Just okay?” he asked, raising his eyebrows.

Why did he always seem to have that laughing, teasing expression? It made me desperate to impress him. And right now that meant I was going to have to actually answer his question.

“Well, I have this lab partner, Sean,” I explained. “At first I thought he was really cool, but then I missed one assignment, and he’s been all high-and-mighty ever since. I think he’s completely written me off as some kind of idiot and it just makes things really uncomfortable.”

“I see,” Nicholas said. He quickly checked his BlackBerry again.

“All I’ve done this week is try to make it up to him, but he’s being such a jerk.”

I could feel myself getting riled up about it all over again, so I stopped.

Nicholas narrowed his eyes at me. "You know what I think?" he asked.

"What?" I asked, psyched to get advice from a guy. Maybe he could give me some insight into how to remedy the situation.

"I think you take yourself way too seriously," he said.

Everything inside me dropped. Okay. That was blunt. Suddenly what I had just said played back in my mind, and all I heard was childish whining. My face burned so hot, it brought tears to my eyes, so I turned and stared at the ocean.

Why didn't I keep my mouth shut?

"Just take a deep breath, and let it go. Show this Seth dude what you're made of."

"Sean," I corrected.

"Whatever. Look, you got into this program, right? That means you must be smart and a hard worker. So just do your thing. By the end of the summer *you'll* be doing *his* homework," Nicholas said.

Suddenly I found myself smiling. Okay, so maybe he *didn't* think I was a big fat baby. Maybe he thought I was intelligent, self-sufficient, and capable.

He checked his watch. "I gotta get back," he said, standing.

I jumped up and fell into step with him. He tossed his empty cup into a garbage can and handed a homeless guy a few dollars.

"Thanks, man," the guy replied with a grin, gripping the cash.

Nicholas was so generous and smart and worldly. What had I done to deserve such a guy? Not that I actually *had* him . . .

“So, wanna hang out this weekend?” he asked.

I could have floated up off the creaky boards. “Uh . . . sure,” I said.

When? Where? To do what? my brain screamed. But this time I kept it in check.

“Cool,” he said, pausing near the movie equipment that was still set up on the boards. “I’ll call you.”

Just when I was about to start cartwheeling down the boardwalk, he grabbed me around the waist and pulled me in for a kiss. If he hadn’t been holding on to me, I would have fallen over. Hmmm. Maybe I *did* have him.

Nicholas pulled back just as suddenly as he’d pulled in. He grinned down at me. “See ya,” he said.

Then he turned and walked off to talk to the guy in the hat, who I guessed was the director—or at least someone higher up than Nicholas. Before my heartbeat even had a chance to normalize, Sun came barreling over.

“Guess what, guess what, guess what!” she cheered, taking my hand. She twirled me around awkwardly, as I was unprepared for an impromptu dance. “Tomorrow morning Connor and his friends are going to teach us how to surf!”

“Who’s Connor?” I asked.

“That guy I was talking to. He’s a gaffer,” she said. “Whatever that means.”

She looked over her shoulder and waved at the blond guy. He waved back with a smile.

“Uh, Sun?” I said. “I’m not surfing.”

“What!? Why!?” she wailed.

“Because I’m not a very good swimmer. Plus I have *no* balance,” I said. “There’s no way I’m getting on a surfboard.”

Sun grabbed my milk shake and took a long drag on the straw before hooking one arm through mine. Together we turned up the boardwalk.

“You are *so* going,” she said. “By the time dawn cracks, I will have beaten you down.”

I laughed. The very thought of me on a surfboard was so ridiculous, she had no idea. “Yeah,” I said sarcastically. “Good luck with that.”

I stared at the early-morning sun glittering on crashing surf and the five guys in various stages of dress who stood on the sand with their boards. It looked like a postcard. Unfortunately I couldn’t exactly enjoy it, what with the sheer terror pumping through my veins.

“How the hell did you get me here?” I asked Sun.

“I am just that good,” she said, striding down the sand. “And I think your sister had something to do with it, too.”

Becca had called the night before, and I had told her all about Sun’s wacky idea. Unfortunately Becca had thought it was an *awesome* idea and spent forty-five minutes telling me all the reasons I’d be a wuss not to go. She really knew how to push my buttons. I was going to have to smack her upside the head the next time I saw her.

As I trailed after Sun, I could feel every last one of my heartbeats like a mallet against my rib cage. A wave hit the

shore with stunning ferocity, and I almost peed in my blue bathing suit. I couldn't go out there. No way, no how.

Connor broke away from the pack and approached Sun. He was wearing a blue and purple wet suit, but the top hung down around his waist so that his perfect, hair-free torso was exposed. As he and Sun chatted, I hung back. The other guys all whispered and nodded as they checked me out. I blushed and looked away, feeling conspicuously pale.

Then Connor went back to his buddies and conferred. I wondered if they were playing rock-paper-scissors to see who got stuck with the gawky inlander. Then one guy with dark hair looked up at me and did a double take. My heart caught in my throat. Damn, *he* was hot.

"It's all me," I heard him say.

He and Sun stepped away from the group, and when I got a good look at him, my knees went weak. Tan skin, taut muscles, deep brown eyes. He wore a black and white Hawaiian shirt open over a blue bathing suit, and I glimpsed a tattoo of some kind on his chest. He smiled in a welcoming way as he approached.

"Jenna, this is Kyle Cross," Sun said. "Kyle, Jenna Appleby." Then she leaned toward my ear and whispered, "You can thank me later."

I shot her a look of death as she jogged off. Plying me with hot surfer boys. This was so wrong.

"Looks like I'll be your instructor," Kyle said. "Stoked to meet you."

He offered his hand. There was a silver and turquoise

ring on his thumb. When I shook his hand, a sizzle went through me like nothing I'd experienced before. We both stared down at our fingers, and I wondered if he felt it, too.

Was this what love at first sight was like? Or was I just delusional from the abject fear?

"Stoked to meet you, too," I said, trying to suppress my nausea. "You know, I've always felt like there was a surfer inside me just waiting to be set free. But, living in Pennsylvania and all, I don't get a lot of ocean time, you know? But now, just being near the waves . . . I feel so . . . energized."

His brow creased, and I blushed. What was I rambling on about?

"Are you . . . okay?" he asked.

Guess my act wasn't working. Just like that I decided to give it up. There was no way I could concentrate on maintaining my confident act while I was this tortured.

"No, I'm not," I admitted, my shoulders slumping. "I'm petrified, actually."

Kyle laughed. An open, unabashed laugh that made me feel all warm inside. "Well, that's good."

"Really? Cuz it doesn't feel good," I told him. "It actually feels sort of like someone's trying to pull my stomach out of my body."

"Nice visual," Kyle said. "But, yeah, it *is* good."

"Explain, please," I said, narrowing my eyes and crossing my arms over my chest, like I was readying for a class lecture.

"First of all, honesty is always refreshing," Kyle

explained. "And, secondly, it's good to admit you're scared before you try something new. Otherwise you might go too fast too soon and end up, you know, in traction."

"In traction?" I said with a gulp.

"Just kidding." He grinned.

I rolled my eyes. "Try not to kid about stuff like traction."

He crossed his heart with one pinky. "I promise. So, ever surfed before? What's your skill level?" he asked, rubbing his hands together.

"Uh . . . I can swim?" I said, biting my lip. "Sort of."

"Nice. We have a virgin!" he announced at the top of his lungs, throwing his arms up.

Behind him his friends whooped and hollered. "All hail the virgin!"

I blanched. "Wh—what?"

"Oh! Just a term of endearment me and the guys use," he explained quickly. "It's a good thing. It means I don't have to worry about bad surf habits and whatnot," he told me. "If you'd had some shoddy teaching in the past, I'd have to, like, deprogram you, and that could take extra time."

"Oh," I said with a laugh. "Don't have to worry about that with me. I lied before. There has never been a surfer inside me just busting to get out. I'm actually more of a bookworm."

His eyes lit up. "Yeah? Me, too."

"No!" I said, shoving his arm. Wait, did I just *shove* his arm?

"What? Is that so surprising?" he asked.

“Yeah. Well, no. I mean, I just figured you were, like, a live-for-the-waves type, not a school person,” I said.

“Well, you can be both,” Kyle said.

“Yeah?” I asked.

“Yeah.” He flashed me another smile. “I think you and I are going to get along real well, Jenna.”

“Me, too,” I said, staring into those gorgeous eyes. “As long as you swear you’re not gonna get me killed.”

“I’ll do my best,” he joked, reaching out to shake on it.

Our palms touched again, and my breath actually caught. A funny, chill, bookwormy surfer boy who made my heart spasm? I had really hit the jackpot with this one. Kyle seemed like the type of guy who could definitely provide a little California fun for New Jenna.

“Let’s go get you a board,” Kyle said, starting up the beach past me.

Oh, God. I was really doing this. Omigod, omigod, omigod. I turned and hustled to catch up, my pulse whooshing in my ears.

A cell phone rang, and I reached for my bag, half hoping the caller would give me an excuse to bail, before I realized that I didn’t have a Red Hot Chili Peppers song programmed as my ring tone. Kyle fished his own phone out of his vinyl backpack. He glanced at the screen, and his face went hard.

“What’s wrong?” I asked automatically.

Hello, nosy!

“Nothing,” he said. Then he shut the phone off and stuffed it back into his bag. When he looked up again, his

smile seemed forced. “Ready?”

Before I could answer, Kyle turned and started up the sand toward the surf shack again. Interesting. Apparently Happy Surfer Dude had a dark side. I wondered what it could be. But one thing was for sure. His rear view was just as good as the front. Maybe I *would* thank Sun later. If, you know, I wasn’t in traction.



My teeth chattered. I had sand in places I hadn't even known existed. My hair was matted to my face and neck in highly unattractive, knotty dreads. My leg and arm muscles ached, and I had several board burns all over my skin. And yet I was having an awesome time.

"You ready?" Kyle asked.

He was standing in approximately three feet of water next to me and my ten-foot wooden board. Nothing cool and sleek about this thing—it could have doubled as a twin bed. But, oddly, it was still extremely hard to stand on. At the moment, of course, I was lying down on it on my stomach, hoping my bathing suit wouldn't ride up and give me another wedgie right in front of Mr. Surf Sexy.

"Ready," I said.

“Okay, pop up!” he barked.

I did as he said, using every muscle in my arms and legs to spring to my feet. My heart swooped, expecting my feet to slip and go out from under me as they had at least fifteen times before. But instead, miraculously, my toes hit the board and stayed there. Surprised, I stood up, keeping my legs slightly bent, and thrust my arms out for balance.

“I’m up!” I cried.

“You did it!” Kyle cheered. He clapped his hands and whooped. “Go, Jenna! Nice work!”

I took my eyes off the beach for a split second to look down at his grinning face. I had a feeling he was really proud of me. And that made me proud of myself.

“I did it! I did it!” I felt giddy. Kyle’s eyes shone as he gazed up at me. Was it just me, or was he looking at me with a bit more than student-teacher admiration?

Then a teeny, tiny ripple shifted my board, and my whole body went weightless.

“Watch it!” Kyle shouted, lunging for the board.

“Ack!”

The water rushed up at me. My right leg got caught over the side of my board, and I biffed spectacularly, face and side first, with my calf still clinging to the wood surface. Under the water for a couple seconds, I felt that my bathing suit was completely jammed up where it shouldn’t be. I reached back and yanked the rear of the suit down mere seconds before a strong hand closed around my biceps and Kyle pulled me up.

“You okay?” Kyle asked. “That looked gnarly.”

"That's one word for it," I said, pushing my ratty hair off my face. *Mortifying*, *scary*, and *painful* were three more. There was definitely a bruise forming on my inner thigh. "But I'm fine."

"Good. You're sure?"

His hand moved to my shoulder, and he looked into my eyes. My breath came fast and shallow, and not because of the fall. The concern in his expression was obvious.

"I'm sure," I half whispered.

"Okay." He removed his hand, and I shivered. "I gotta say, I'm impressed, Jenna. You really don't give up, do you?"

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"A lot of people don't have the stomach to stick it out once they've fallen a couple dozen times. But you? You're different," he said, studying me.

"Yeah, tell that to my track coach," I replied. "One afternoon of slamming into the hurdles and I was a long-distance girl for sure."

"Well, maybe I'm just a better motivator," Kyle joked.

"Oh, no question," I replied. "But don't tell him I said that."

He crossed his heart with a pinky again. A habit I was starting to find completely adorable. I grinned and looked down at the water lapping around my legs. I couldn't believe how easily the banter came with Kyle. Usually guys like him left me tongue-tied.

"So, should I do it again?" I reached for the board. I really wanted him to look at me the way he had when I stood up for real.

“Actually, I have to go,” Kyle said, checking his waterproof watch.

“You do?” I could not keep the disappointment out of my voice.

“Yeah. Sorry. I’ve gotta be somewhere.”

He easily grabbed up the huge board, and together we made our way out of the shallow surf. He walked over to his vinyl backpack, which was sitting in the sand, and dropped the board next to it. I stood next to him awkwardly. Was he just going to leave? Just like that? Had I imagined all those smiles and looks and stomach-clenching thrills I thought we’d shared all morning?

Okay, think, Jenna. You cannot just let this guy walk away. Not when there’s so much . . . potential. Say something!

“So the lesson’s over?”

That was *so* lame.

Kyle laughed as he grabbed his towel and rubbed his hair with it. “Yeah, but don’t worry. It’s not like it’s *over* over. We *will* be seeing each other again.”

“We will?” He wanted to see me again! Yes, yes, yes!

“Yeah,” Kyle said, looking at me as if I might be slightly dense. Wow! Were his feelings that obvious to him that he thought I was stupid to miss them? Sweet! “Why don’t we meet here again on Sunday? You should get back into the water soon so you don’t forget what you’ve learned, you know?”

Oh! He was so sweet! He was going to give me another lesson just because he wanted to spend time with me.

“Sounds good,” I said.

He crouched and sifted through his bag. When he stood up again he was holding a small black planner and a pencil. Interesting. What kind of scruffy (yet hot) surfer dude carried around a planner?

“Good. Okay, that’ll be your second lesson,” he said, making a note. “Then we’ll have to schedule three more after that.”

Wha-huh? My brow creased as I tried to see what he was writing down. “Three more lessons?” I said dumbly.

“Well, yeah. Sun paid for five, so . . .”

Suddenly I knew what whiplash felt like. The entire beach spun around like a pinwheel and then clicked back into place, but it took me a second to catch up.

“Whoa. You okay?” Kyle asked, grabbing my arm.

“Uh . . . yeah.”

“You sure? You looked like you were about to go horizontal there.”

“I think the sun just got to me,” I improvised. “And I have all this water in my ears . . . I’m sorry, did you say Sun *paid* for these lessons?”

Kyle looked at me, confused. “Well, yeah. It’s not like I can give them away for free. A guy has to make a living, you know?”

I had never felt like a bigger idiot than I did at that moment. I had no idea what surfing lessons cost, but they couldn’t be cheap. I couldn’t believe that Sun had that kind of money to spare and that she was willing to spend it on me. But most of all, I couldn’t believe she hadn’t even *told* me. Here I thought Kyle was flirting with me and that he

wanted to see me again, but he was only doing it all because he was being *paid* to.

I was going to kill Sun.

My lungs burned as I turned on the speed, sprinting for the last minute of my hour-long run. The sun beat down on the back of my neck, and my skin was covered with a thin sheen of sweat that chilled every time the wind blew off the water. For the first time I completely understood why people loved running by the ocean so much. The salt air was invigorating, the wind kept me cool, and the sand kept it challenging. I had always figured I'd stay East for school, but now I was starting to think that a Pacific coast school was the way to go.

My watch beeped, signaling that the hour was up, and I slowed to a walk, gasping for breath. I bent to the water and splashed my face, then walked a little more until my heart rate slowed. Then I dropped down into the sand and sat facing the waves. Yeah. I could get used to this.

I should have thought of going for a run first thing this morning. No matter what was going on in my life, a nice, long jog always made me feel better. I was feeling *so* much more together now. Together enough, even, to check my messages and feel *totally* fine if Nicholas still hadn't called.

I reached for my cell and checked the screen. No messages. On cue, my whole body drooped. Why hadn't Nicholas called? He'd said he wanted to hang out. Why would a person say he wanted to hang out if he didn't actually want to hang out? What was the point?

“Dammit,” I muttered under my breath. So much for feeling fine.

I took a deep breath and straightened my back. Okay. Nicholas was not everything. There were plenty of things I could do today. This was Malibu, for goodness’ sakes. I could just . . . Well, I could . . . And then there was . . .

“Ugh!”

I lay down on my back and stared up at the clear blue sky, wishing I had said yes when Sun asked if I wanted to go shopping with her. But I’d still been miffed about the whole Kyle thing, even though she *had* apologized about a thousand times. I mean, who was I kidding? I *needed* Sun. I wasn’t good at this freewheeling fun thing on my own. If I hadn’t ended up with a nut ball like her for a roommate, I probably wouldn’t have left the library since I arrived here, no matter what my intentions had been. Maybe it was time for me to admit defeat and go back to studying.

“Screw it.”

As I pushed myself up, I saw someone jogging toward me up the beach. Blue Adidas shorts, white T-shirt, dark skin, killer calves, perfect form. I was so entranced by his incredible legs, in fact, that he was practically on top of me before I realized it was Sean.

Wow. This guy should get out of the lab more often. He wasn’t just cute—he was *hot*.

And then he opened his mouth.

“What’re you doing here?” he asked, jogging in place in front of me. “Shouldn’t you be catching up on work?”

I shoved myself up the rest of the way and glared at

him. "Excuse me, but in case you haven't noticed, I've been busting my butt all week. I have *long* since caught up and pretty much surpassed everyone else, so you can take the high-and-mighty act and shove it."

Sean stared at me, stunned. I was a bit stunned myself. But ranting felt kind of good.

"Why do you have to be such a jerk?" I asked. "Do people only get one strike with you or something? I mean—"

"Chill, girl! Chill!" Sean said. He stopped moving his feet and raised his hands in surrender. "I was just making sure your head was back in the game." He looked me up and down and shrugged. "But you're right. You did do a lot this week."

"Thank you," I said.

"And I'm sorry if I was a jerk when you told me you hadn't done the assignment."

"No. That was totally justified," I told him. "It's the silent act since then that's been kind of irritating."

"Yeah, I felt like an idiot for exploding on you in front of everyone, and I didn't know what to say," he replied.

"Oh," I said. Wasn't expecting that.

"But just so you understand, I'm not here to mess around this summer," he said. "I need a lab partner who will work as hard as I do. That's the way it is."

"I get that," I said. "And, trust me, I am a hard worker. In fact, maybe *you* should worry about keeping up with *me*."

He grinned. "I doubt that."

I grinned back. What was it about his smile that always made *me* smile? "Whatever."

"So what *are* you doing down here?" he asked.

"I just finished up a run," I said, lifting a foot behind me to stretch my quads.

Sean laughed. "You run," he said. "With those scrawny thighs?"

My foot dropped. "You happen to be talking to the county cross-country champion. And I've placed in state three years in a row."

"Yeah, right," Sean said. "Prove it."

My heart started pounding the way it always did when I was issued a challenge. "Let's go."

Sean raised his eyebrows, then took off down the beach. I rolled my eyes before racing to catch up with him. His feet slapped along on the wet sand, while I stayed closer to the dry area.

"Head start. Very mature," I told him.

Sean looked down at my pumping legs and frowned. "Okay. You have a nice stride. But you need to put your arms into it more."

Oh, my God. He had to be kidding me. He was critiquing my *running* now? I looked at the water and smiled.

"You mean, like this?" I asked.

Then I shoved him as hard as I could. He slammed right into a swelling wave, and I backed up before it could soak me. Sean flipped over backward, and when he resurfaced, his white T-shirt had stretched up and over his head. He stood up, off balance, and yanked the shirt down, sputtering.

I was laughing so hard, I could barely breathe. "You're . . . you're right!" I stammered. "I sh-should use my . . .

arms more! That was fabulous!"

I doubled over as Sean tramped his way out of the surf and up the sand, his sneakers squishing and spurting. He pulled his shirt away from his body, and wrung out about a gallon of water.

"Nice!" I cheered.

Sean looked up at me with sheer determination in his eyes. "You're next," he said, reaching out to grab my waist.

I shouted and jumped away. For a split second his fingers gripped my tank top, but I spun away and sprinted down the sand.

"You can't run forever!" Sean cried, tearing after me.

"Watch me!" I shouted back.

I knew that sooner or later I was getting dunked, but I could handle that. It would be worth it, because I had a feeling that from now on lab time was going to be a lot more enjoyable.

"Great work today, Jenna," Kyle said on Sunday afternoon, sounding very teacherly. Very "Lesson's over, thanks for the money." How had I not seen this the other day?

He shook his hair out and reached up with a towel to get the excess water. The muscles in his sides and arms flexed, and I blushed. Okay. I hadn't seen it because I hadn't *wanted* to see it. Who wants to look at this guy and think *teacher*?

"Thanks," I replied, forcing myself to look away. My stomach grumbled loudly, and we both froze. I guess I hadn't eaten enough in the cafeteria this morning.

"Hungry?" Kyle asked.

"Apparently," I said with a laugh.

"I could go for some grub," he said. "There's a great burger place up the beach. Wanna go?" Kyle checked his watch. "I have some time before my next lesson."

"Sure," I said, weak at the thought of food, not to mention some time on dry ground with Kyle.

We both shouldered our packs and started up the beach. Kyle returned my board to the surf shack, and then we walked along the dunes until we came upon what looked like a Caribbean hut. It had a thatched roof, open-air windows, and several tables with bright umbrellas along its deck.

"Hey, there's Connor and Sun," Kyle said, waving.

"Hey, you two!" Sun cried, standing. "Come join us!"

"So, whaddup, dudes?" Connor asked, shaking his long hair behind his shoulders. "How're the lessons going?"

"Great," Kyle said, before I could answer. "She's a natural."

He reached out and touched me just below the back of my neck, giving my skin a little rub. It was so unexpected that my heart skipped a beat.

"I don't know about that," I said.

He glanced at his hand, flushed slightly, and pulled it away. I had no idea what to make of that. Was he flirting? Or was it just good-natured, proud-instructor stuff?

We settled in with our friends, and I took a deep breath, feeling well exercised and content from all the fresh air. A waitress took our orders for burgers and fries and dropped

off some ice water, which I drained rather quickly. Kyle checked his watch again. Okay, so maybe he wasn't flirting. If he liked me, he probably wouldn't be so concerned about where he had to be next.

"So, Kyle, how many students do you have?" I asked.

"Too many," Connor offered, practically lying down in his chair. He tipped his face toward the sky and put on his sunglasses, then crossed his legs at the ankles. "We never see the guy."

"A few," Kyle amended pointedly. "I'm trying to make a living *and* earn my entry fee for the Classic."

"The Classic?" I asked.

"It's an amateur surfing competition in San Diego next weekend," Sun offered excitedly. "All the guys are competing. It's, like, a totally huge deal for them. . . ." Sun looked at us and trailed off. "Oh, oops. She was asking you," she said to Kyle, sitting back.

Kyle laughed easily as our burgers were delivered. "No, that's cool. And you're right," he said. "It is a big deal. If I win a spot on the circuit, then I get to surf all the best waves in the world, compete against some of my heroes and—"

"Get sponsors and hot babes," Connor put in.

"Yeah. That, too, I guess," Kyle said, blushing. "But for me it's really all about the surfing—the competition, you know? It's always been my dream to be ranked one of the best in the world."

"Wow. That's amazing. You're actually making your dream come true. Not a lot of people get to do that," I said,

taking a big bite of my burger.

"Only if I make it," Kyle said.

"You will," Connor put in.

"What'll you do if you don't?" I asked.

"Kill myself," Kyle said flatly.

Sun and I stared at each other. Suddenly my burger tasted like dirt.

"Man, you are way too easy!" Kyle said, touching my back again as he laughed. "No! If I don't make it, I'll live. Don't worry. In fact, I'll be going to UCLA in the fall. To study marine biology."

"No way," I said.

Kyle laughed. "Didn't think I was just some surf bum, didja? I told you I was a bookworm! I have layers."

"Yeah, but I figured you just liked to read or something," I said. "I didn't know you were a *science* bookworm."

This was unbelievable. UCLA was a good school. They had one of the best marine biology programs in the country. Apparently Kyle was a science geek, just like me. We actually had some real stuff in common.

"I know someone else who likes science!" Sun sang.

Kyle looked at me. He wiped his hands on a napkin. "You're into science?"

"It's kind of why I'm here," I said. "I'm in the Advanced Physics course at Pepperdine."

"Really?" He seemed shocked.

"Didn't think I was just a surf bum, didja?" I joked.

Kyle reddened, and I grinned giddily. "No! No! Of course not. It's just . . . most girls come out to LA thinking

they're gonna, I don't know, get discovered or hang out with movie stars or something."

"That's why *I'm* here!" Sun trilled.

"I think it's cool," Kyle continued. "It's nice to meet someone . . . different."

We looked into each other's eyes for a long moment. There it was again. That look that hinted maybe he *was* thinking of me as more than a student. Suddenly I had visions of him running out of the surf at his competition, all wet and sandy, racing up to me and grabbing me in a triumphant hug. The supportive girlfriend of a surf star. I could do that.

Connor lifted his head and lowered his sunglasses down his nose to stare at Kyle. "Uh-oh. Science geeks procreate," he said.

"Connor!" Sun scolded.

Kyle cleared his throat and looked away. So did I. Moment officially obliterated.

"Maybe after we digest we should hit the surf again," Kyle suggested. "I think you were really getting it."

I blinked. "But our next lesson isn't until—"

"Off the clock," he interrupted.

Okay, so maybe he *did* feel it.

Suddenly the Red Hot Chili Peppers burst out, and Kyle dropped his burger to pounce on his bag. He whipped out his flip phone, checked the caller ID screen, and opened it.

"Kyle Cross," he said. Then his face lost all color. "Oh. It's you." He glanced at me apologetically, then turned

aside. "What is this, a new number?"

Connor blew out a sigh through his lips, and Sun and I glanced at each other.

"*What's up?*" she mouthed.

I shrugged. Not a clue.

Kyle looked at his watch. "Now? I really don't think that's a good idea. I'm kind of in the middle of—no. No. Fine. *Fine*. Yeah. *Yes*. I'll meet you there. But this is it, okay? Good."

He snapped the phone closed and shoved himself back from the table. "Sorry. I have to go," he said quickly. "My next lesson wants to bump it up, and I really need the money."

Sun raised one eyebrow at me, and I knew what she was thinking. That had sounded a lot more intense than a student-to-teacher call. Was Kyle lying?

"Dude. You all right?" Connor asked, lifting his head.

"I'm fine," Kyle said firmly. "I just have to go."

"But I thought—"

"Good work today, Jenna," he said again, all business now. He fished out a few dollars and tossed them near his half-eaten burger. "I'll see you in a couple of days."

Just like that, he was gone. And I was left wondering if I had completely imagined the intimacy we'd been experiencing moments ago, and whether or not Kyle had something serious to hide. Sun looked at me pityingly, and I squirmed.

Connor heaved another huge sigh. "That's Kyle for you," he said, leaning back again to bask in the sun. "Work

before pleasure every time.”

Well, at least his friend thought it was a work call. *And* he'd been kind enough to categorize me as “pleasure.” Too bad I wasn't quite sure Kyle would do the same.



Physics experiments can be really exciting. The velocity, the speed, the trajectory. Basically, watching things race and fly and soar and drop and calculating when they'll stop or hit bottom or peak is really fun. Especially when my calculations turn out to be right. What's not fun is sitting at a desk memorizing equations. That is definitely a drawback.

On Sunday night, memorizing was the task at hand. I had put it off all weekend, and now I was paying for my procrastination. Meanwhile, Sun sat on her bed, scribbling furiously in her creative-writing notebook, her MP3 player cranked up so loud, my subconscious was singing along with her music.

I arched my back and lifted my arms, stretching a few of my atrophied muscles, and glanced out the window at

the blues and purples and pinks streaking the sky. The sun was going down. The weekend was officially coming to a close, and no sign of Nicholas. I supposed it was time to accept the fact that he wasn't into me. But why fake it? I would never understand guys.

I was about to bend over my notebook again when my cell phone rang. Sun and I looked at each other. Her eyes were wide as she removed her headphones.

"Come on," I said. "It can't be him."

"Get it! Get it!" she urged, swinging her legs over the side of her bed.

I shakily fished my cell phone out of my backpack. A totally unfamiliar California number was on the caller ID. Unless it was a wrong number again, it could pretty much only be him. No one else around here had my digits.

"What do I do?" I asked, my heart thumping.

"Answer it, for starters!" Sun cried. She got up and wrung her hands in her long sweatshirt. "And just . . . be cool!"

Right. What with my pulse racing in my ears, my skin prickling, and my palms going all slimy, that should be no problem. Cool as a freaking cucumber.

I lifted the phone to my ear. "Hello?"

"Hi, Jenna. It's Nicholas," he said smoothly.

His very voice sent shivers right through me. I grinned giddily at Sun. "*It's him!*" I mouthed.

"*Yeah!*" she mouthed back, dancing in a circle.

"Hi," I said.

Sun bounced down onto my bed and pulled me to her

so she could listen. No pressure there. I held the phone between us.

"Listen, I wanted to apologize for not calling," Nicholas said. "There was this last-minute modeling gig over in Century City and it went overtime. Takes these people forever just to set up the lighting. But I really needed the money, so there was no getting out of it."

Okay. Work was a good enough excuse.

"That's okay," I told him. "You gotta do what you gotta do."

Sun flashed me a thumbs-up for that one.

"Well, if you still want to hang, I'm free now," he said. "Why don't you come over?"

"To your place?" I squeaked.

Sun hit me on the arm, hard, and it was all I could do to keep from shouting out.

"I mean, your place is fine. Sure," I added, trying to sound a bit more casual as I shot Sun a death glare. She shrugged, like, *I was trying to help!*

"Great! And since you're coming over, why don't you pick up some Chinese food on the way? I'm starving," Nicholas suggested. "We could have a picnic out on the patio."

Ooooh. A nighttime picnic sounded very romantic. Sun pushed away from me and quietly clapped her hands.

"Okay, sure," I said giddily.

"Cool. My house is twenty-five Orange Blossom Lane, right off Malibu. You can walk it."

"What about the food?" I asked, wishing I had any idea what was around here.

“There’s a good place on your way on Ocean. Get me some General Tso’s chicken and shrimp fried rice, okay? And whatever you want. It’s on me,” Nicholas said.

“Got it. I’ll . . . see you in a little while,” I said.

“Cool,” Nicholas replied. “See ya.”

I hung up the phone, and Sun and I grabbed each other and squealed. “You are so in!” Sun cried, jumping up.

She dove for my closet and started flipping violently through the hangers. My fingers were still trembling, and I didn’t even trust myself to move just yet. Two seconds ago I was knee deep in angles and torque, and now I was going over to Nicholas’s house for a moonlit meal. How had this happened?

“What’re you doing?” I asked Sun as she pulled out one of Becca’s baby tees and miniskirts and held them up to her chest.

“You’re going over to an older guy’s place,” Sun said. “We need to find you something sophisticated. Here. Put this on.”

She tossed the clothes at me, and they fell perfectly into my lap. Sophisticated. Right. Suddenly I was overcome by nervous butterflies. I just hoped that somehow, some way, New Jenna was ready for this.

I screwed up my courage, and made my way along the cracked front walk to Nicholas’s house. It was a low stucco structure with at least ten random beach chairs strewn across the lawn, not to mention a cooler, a bunch of crushed beer cans, a folded-up beach umbrella, and several pairs of muddy sneakers. The porch light flickered, and I

could hear music coming from one of the upstairs windows, which was partially draped by a striped sheet.

I tried the doorbell but heard nothing, so I knocked. Then I knocked again. My face started to heat up. I felt like someone *had* to be watching me and laughing at me. My first inclination was to turn around and flee, but then I remembered this summer was all about going against my own instincts.

I held my breath, lifted a fist, and pounded.

Two seconds later Nicholas opened the door. My breath caught in my chest. I was pretty sure that he was getting better-looking every time I saw him. His tan seemed deeper, and he wore a blue button-down shirt open at the neck, with the sleeves casually rolled. There were those forearms again. Sigh.

“Jenna! Hi!” he said with that easy grin.

I completely relaxed even as my guts totally turned to mush. “Hi.”

“Great! You brought the food. I haven’t eaten since breakfast.” He took the bags from me and stepped aside so I could walk in. Then he kicked the door closed. The living room had a kind of stale smell. All the furniture was mismatched and haphazardly placed. On the wall above an old stone fireplace was a huge Corona mirror with a crack through the center. There were fast-food bags and old six-pack cartons shoved into a pile in a corner. The place was actually kind of . . . gross.

“I’m so sorry about the mess. I swear I don’t normally live like this,” Nicholas said as if reading my mind. “We

have all these summer sublets, and they really let the place go to hell. I'm hardly ever here, so I don't notice it until someone comes over and I see their expression."

I flushed. "Sorry. Was I making a face?"

Nicholas grinned. "It's perfectly natural, considering. That's why I suggested we eat outside."

"Lead the way," I said with a smile.

Together we walked through a dimly lit kitchen and out a sliding door onto a patio. Now this was much better. A small glass-topped table had been set with red plastic plates and cups. Votive candles flickered in the center, and a few more candles were set atop an outdoor bar. I could hear the surf crashing into the shore somewhere behind the hedge that surrounded the yard, and a small stereo on the bar played jazz.

"This is nice," I said.

"Thanks. Have a seat."

Nicholas placed the bags on the table and started pulling out boxes. He shoved the empty bag into a garbage can, handed me some chopsticks, and sat down. As he started heaping food onto his plate, I stared at the chopsticks. There was no other available silverware.

"Uh . . . do you have a fork I could use?" I asked.

Nicholas blinked. "Come on. You can't eat Chinese food with a fork." He broke his chopsticks apart, deftly picked up a piece of Tso's chicken, and popped it into his mouth. "It's easy. Here. Hold 'em like this." He held up his hand to demonstrate.

I already knew this was not going to go well. It wasn't

as if I had never used chopsticks before. The experiments just always ended with my shooting shrimp across the room or dropping sweet and sour sauce right into my lap. Still, I didn't want him to think I was unwilling, so I broke the sticks apart and tried to mimic his grip.

"Good," he said. "Now you just lift."

There was no food on my plate yet, so I tipped the box of beef and broccoli toward my dish and coaxed out a few spears. I tried to lift one of the larger pieces of green, but it slid right off and plopped back onto the plate.

"You're trying too hard," Nicholas said. Already half his food was gone. "Here."

He placed his hand around mine and adjusted the sticks, then held on to my fingers as we went for a piece of beef together. For a split second I gripped the tiny morsel, but then the chopsticks slipped and the beef splattered onto the table.

"Damn," I said under my breath. There was no way I could sit here and humiliate myself like this all night. I was just going to get redder and redder until Nicholas realized what an unworldly, whiny baby I was. How I wished for a fork.

"It's okay. I have a solution," Nicholas said.

A fork?

"I'll just have to feed you." He picked up a piece of broccoli with his chopsticks and slid closer to me.

I looked at him dubiously. "You're serious."

"I never joke about food," he said. "Do you want to eat or not?"

I laughed and opened my mouth, hoping I didn't look like one of those wide-mouthed bass my dad was always tossing into the boat on fishing trips. But Nicholas didn't recoil in horror. Instead he placed the broccoli gently on my tongue, and the flavors filled my senses. Finally. Food. I chewed and swallowed, and he was ready with the next piece.

"I feel kind of silly," I said, opening my mouth again.

"Don't," he replied.

He fed me a piece of the beef, then some rice. With each mouthful he inched a bit closer to me, until his knee was between my legs. Finally I swallowed the last bite and realized I was looking directly into his eyes.

"More?" he asked.

I shook my head slowly. The candles flickered in a soft breeze. "I'm good."

"Good," he said. Then he grabbed my face in his hands and kissed me.

God, I was glad I was sitting. Because if I hadn't been, I would have fainted. I had no idea what to do with my hands, but I found myself holding on to the underside of his sleeves. Finally he pulled away and looked at me, his chest heaving.

"Do you have any idea how beautiful you are?" he asked.

I actually scoffed. It was a knee-jerk reaction. No one had ever said I was beautiful before. People said it to Becca all the time, but no one had ever said it to me. Well, except my parents.

“No, I’m not,” I replied, looking down.

“You are,” he said. “So beautiful.”

He tilted my head up with his hands and looked me in the eye. He wasn’t kidding. He really, *really* thought I was beautiful. Holy crap.

“How would you feel about moving this to the hammock?” he asked, tilting his head.

I turned and for the first time noticed a large green hammock in a far corner of the yard. It hung on its stand beneath the canopy of a huge lemon tree, partially hidden from the house. My heart was in my throat at the very idea of lying down with him, but there was also nothing I wanted to do more.

“Okay,” I heard myself say.

Nicholas got up, took both my hands, then backed me toward the hammock, grinning and toying with my fingers. There was this look in his eye of pure and total attraction. And excitement. A look that, for me, was like an anvil to the head.

Duh, Jenna! He wants to have sex!

Oh, God. It all made sense. Nicholas was much older and, I’m sure, much more experienced than I was. It would stand to reason that he might expect more than a little smooching from the girl he was having over for dinner. My heart pounded with trepidation the closer we got to the hammock. I took a deep breath. I could not let this situation get away from me. I was going to have to talk to him.

“I’m so glad you came over,” he said suddenly, breathless, before covering my mouth with kisses again.

So much for talking.

He backed both of us toward the hammock, and I went along willingly. I couldn't help it. He was being so passionate, touching my face, my arms, my stomach. Searching my mouth with his tongue. Kissing him was so mind-blowing, before I knew it we were lying down, half on the hammock, our legs dangling over the side. Nicholas's kisses slowed and became more tender, which made my body throb even more.

"I couldn't stop thinking about you all day," he whispered into my ear.

Gently, he lifted the hem of my T-shirt and his fingers tickled my skin as they brushed up my stomach toward my bra. My heart caught. No one had ever touched me like this before. I couldn't believe this was actually happening! Jenna Appleby was getting to second base!

But the moment his hand cupped my bra, I sat up. Nicholas sprang back slightly and looked at me, confused. It took me a second to catch my breath.

"What is it?" he asked. "What's wrong?"

"We need to talk," I said.

Nicholas's face fell. "That doesn't sound good."

My sweaty hands gripped at the canvas beneath me. "No, it's just. I've never . . . I haven't . . . I can't . . ."

Damn. Why was this so hard to say? I had never felt so immature before in my life.

Suddenly realization lit Nicholas's face. "You're a virgin!"

"Yeah." I stood up and smoothed my shirt down. "Okay, I'll go now."

“No!”

Nicholas grabbed my hand and stopped me. I turned around and found myself staring down at my sandals. I couldn't look him in the eye to save my life.

“Don't go,” he said, gently holding my wrist. He took both my hands in his and pulled me to him, ducking his chin to try to look up between my two blankets of hair. “It's okay. It's cool.”

“It is?” I said.

“Of course it is. We don't have to have sex,” he said. “I mean, unless you want to. Unless you're ready.”

I shook my head. “I'm not.”

“Okay. That doesn't mean you can't stay,” he said. He stood up and smoothed my hair behind my ears with his hands. “*I want* you to stay.”

I forced myself to look into his eyes. He was smiling, but not in that way that made me feel childish and silly. He was smiling like he thought I was beautiful. I felt the humiliated blush start to drain from my face. Relief flooded through me, and suddenly I felt lighter than air.

“We can do . . . other stuff,” he suggested. “Or not. Whatever you want.”

God, could he be any more perfect? I took a small step closer to him. “We could do other stuff,” I said with what I hoped was a sexy smile.

Nicholas's eyes lit up. “Yeah?”

“Yeah,” I said. I stepped so close to him he had to sit down again. Then I slipped into his lap, the hammock swinging and squeaking, and wrapped one hand around

the back of his neck. "So . . . where were we?"

With a grin Nicholas leaned me back on the hammock, and this time when I felt his fingers on my skin, there wasn't a single part of me that wanted to stop him.

On Monday I strolled to class on the Pepperdine campus feeling as if I owned the place. And why not? Everything was familiar now—the tree with the pretty pink flowers lending shade to the bench that was dedicated to someone named Professor Moony. The pair of middle-aged pros who sat outside the coffee shop together every day, sipping their iced coffees. The blue plastic box with the free newspapers, which I now knew never arrived until almost 5:00 P.M. Even the maintenance lady watering the lawn in front of the psychology building knew me. She waved as I passed, and I waved back with a self-satisfied grin. I was a regular now. And not only that, but I had spent hours hooking up with a seriously hot college senior last night. This was *my* world. Everyone else was just living in it.

As I turned up the pathway to the science building, my cell phone trilled. My heart did a happy dance when I saw that it was Becca. I could not wait to tell her about last night. I would have called her the second I arrived home, but it would have been 3:00 A.M. back in Dalton, and our parents would have had a joint meltdown.

"Hey, Becks!" I said. "Guess—"

"Jenna! You're never going to believe it," Becca said, breathless. "I'm coming out there next weekend!"

I tripped over a crack in the pavement that I had

successfully avoided every single day last week. A guy walking past laughed openly as I took two giant steps forward, trying to right myself. Cheeks burning, I ducked under the shade of a tree and leaned back against the trunk.

“You’re what?” I demanded.

This could not be happening. Not now. Not when I was just getting comfortable.

“Yeah! Mom found this sick deal on the Internet and bought me a ticket. How amazing is this? We are going to have *so much fun!*”

No. We weren’t. Here’s what would really happen: Becca would step off the plane and into my California life, and everyone would fall in love with her. Nicholas, Kyle, Sun. Becca’s light would shine as brightly as ever, and I would be right back in her shadow. There was no way I could compete with her. I would instantly revert to Old Jenna status.

“Jen?”

“But . . . but what about the pool?” I said. “Are you sure Jake can spare you?”

“Of course he can spare me! Are you kidding? He heard I was going to LA and he practically flung my ass out of there,” Becca trilled. “He said something about getting him Tori Spelling’s autograph. Isn’t she so over?”

I wasn’t in the mood to debate Tori Spelling just then. My mind was working overtime trying to figure a way out of this. A way to keep my perfect California dreamworld perfect.

“Actually, I don’t know if that weekend is going to be

good for me,” I said, starting toward class again. “There’s a *lot* going on.”

“Oh, come on. What can you possibly be doing that I can’t do with you?” Becca said, growing irritated. “What’s the matter? Aren’t you psyched?”

I arrived at the door to the science building and one of the professors held it open for me. He gave my cell a disapproving look, granting me the perfect excuse to hang up.

“Yeah, of course. I just have a lot of work to do, but we’ll have to talk about this later, okay? I’m late for class, and I’m not allowed to use the phone in the building,” I improvised.

“Jenna, wait—”

“Sorry.”

I stepped inside and hung up the phone, holding the OFF button down to turn it off completely. Then I froze. What had I just done? Had I really hung up on my sister? That was a first.

Becca probably hated me at that very moment, but how was I supposed to explain this to her? She would never understand my wanting to keep my new life all to myself. In her mind there was nothing better than the two of us together, and part of me felt the same. But right now I was experiencing what it was like to be just me. And I loved it.

Taking a deep breath, I turned toward class. Sean was waiting outside the room, leaning one shoulder into the wall. In his hand was a large iced Starbucks coffee.

“Hey,” I said to him. “Ready for another week?”

“You know I am. You’re the question mark,” he teased.

“Ha-ha.”

“That’s why I got you this,” he said, handing over the coffee. “Wanted to make sure my lab partner was on.”

“Really? You are so my hero right now,” I said, touched. I took a sip of the coffee and noticed that it was, somehow, exactly the way I liked it. Light but not too sweet. Was he psychic?

“Yeah, well, you’re not the first girl to say that to me,” Sean said, walking into class ahead of me.

“Ah, but I’ll probably be the last,” I shot back.

Sean looked over his shoulder at me. “Nice one,” he said.

I beamed as I sipped my coffee. Apparently that Saturday run had really fixed things between us. Thank goodness. I wasn’t sure I could handle any more of the Sean Phillips–patented cold shoulder.



“Thank you so much for meeting me here,” I told Kyle as we walked into Johnny’s Surf Shop on Tuesday afternoon. A tiny wind chime clinked above our heads. Inside, the place smelled like sawdust, rubber, and coconut oil. Sunlight poured in the huge windows, and the wood floor creaked under our feet. “I have zero clue where to start.”

“Not a problem.” Kyle smiled and slapped hands with the multiply-pierced dude behind the counter. “What’s up, Nero?” he said with a nod. Of course Kyle would be a regular around here. “This is Jenna.”

“How are ya?” Nero said.

“Good, thanks,” I replied. I’d never spoken to someone with an eyebrow ring, nose ring, and lip ring before.

“Let me know if you two need any help,” Nero told me,

ripping open the packing tape on a cardboard box with his bare hands.

“We will!”

I led Kyle toward the left side of the store, where all the women’s gear was stocked. Kyle stuck pretty close, which made my heart pound. I could practically feel his warmth behind me, and if I stopped short, that perfect bod would bump right into mine.

“I think it’s cool you want to invest in a wet suit,” Kyle said, putting his hands on my shoulders and kneading my muscles quickly with his thumbs. (Total coronary spasms.) He brought his mouth so close to my ear, he could probably taste my conditioner. (Total full-body shivers.) “I knew I’d turn you into a real surfer.”

I pulled away from him and walked backward, embarrassed by my physical reactions. “I don’t know if I’m a real surfer or just really sick of wedgies,” I joked.

Kyle laughed, and I blushed. Did I just say “*wedgies*”? He was *so* going to mock me for that one.

“Well, that’s a good motivation, too,” he said.

I paused, and my mouth fell open slightly. Really? That was it? No comments about my butt? The extreme depth of my various surf wedgies? Where was all the immaturity I was so used to in guys?

“Okay, when it comes to wet suits, you basically have two options,” Kyle said, pausing between two round racks. “You have your quality, functional suits for your serious surfers,” he said, lifting one hand toward a rack full of black, blue, and purple suits. “Or you have your lesser-quality,

fashionable suits, which are still okay.” He lifted his other hand toward a rack that was all bright colors, flower patterns, and zebra stripes. “They, you know, serve their purpose.”

“Which is?”

“They make chicks look hot,” Nero called over.

“Ah.” I turned toward the functional rack and started flipping. As much as I’d like to look hot, that’s not what this particular shopping trip was about.

“Nice,” Kyle said, leaning both arms on my chosen rack. “You really *are* serious about this.”

“Hey, this is an investment,” I told him. “I want something that’s going to hold up, not something that’s visible from space.”

The second I said it, I wondered if maybe I *should* have chosen something colorful and sexy—something Becca would have picked.

“Cool. I like the way you think,” Kyle said.

I caught a gleam of admiration in his eyes. That was enough to squelch any doubt. Maybe around Kyle, being myself and going *with* my instincts was a good thing.

“You’re not like other girls, are you?” Kyle said, resting his chin on his arms.

I smiled slightly. “And you’re not like other guys.”

Kyle’s grin widened.

“I’ll go try this on,” I told him, grabbing a suit in black with a purple stripe down the side.

“I’ll be here,” he said.

I stepped into the dressing room and yanked the batik-print sheet closed. My hands were shaking as I undressed.

Kyle had just totally complimented me. And not only that, but I'd boldly complimented him right back. This shopping spree was the best idea I'd ever had. For the first time I really felt as if Kyle and I might have a shot at getting past the student-teacher phase.

I stepped into the wet suit and pulled it up. I paused as the stretchy material clung to my skin. Okay. That was going nowhere. I held my breath and pulled harder. The material inched up my thighs. Wow. This was some space-age stuff. By the time I got my arms through and zipped the thing up and adjusted all the parts that were pulling, I was flushed from exertion.

At that very moment my cell phone rang. I fished it out of my bag and saw Becca's name on the caller ID. Instantly my shoulders tensed. I had been avoiding Becca's calls ever since her announcement yesterday. As if not talking to her about her trip would prevent her from taking it. Yeah, right. I just couldn't deal with it quite yet. So, instead, I turned off the phone.

Taking a deep breath, I turned around to check my reflection. There was no mirror in the dressing room. Heathens.

"How's it going in there?" Kyle called.

"Well, I have it on, but I'm not sure how it looks."

All I knew was that it was clinging to me like Saran Wrap. Any flaws I had were certain to show in this thing. Big-time.

"Let me see," Kyle suggested.

Okay, I could either be a modest, self-conscious, wussy girl, tell him to forget it, and change back into my clothes, or I could suck it up.

I swallowed my trepidation and shoved the curtain aside. Kyle stood up straight. For a second I actually thought he was going to throw up.

"What?" I said, backing up a step. "It's the wrong size, right? I knew it."

"No! No . . . no," Kyle said. "That's it. That's perfect fit. I mean, *a* perfect fit." He laughed and ran a hand through his hair.

Nero walked by with a box of flippers and dropped them onto the floor near the flipper display. "Kyle, man. Chill," he said. "He's right, Jenna. That's exactly how you want it to fit."

"Thanks," I said. Then I looked at Kyle. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," he said, shaking his head at himself. "It's just, you . . ."

"What?" I asked, still feeling uncertain.

I could see the blush creeping up his neck and across his face. "Apparently you really don't need the flashy suits. That's all," he said quickly, like he was embarrassed to say it. Nero even rolled his eyes.

Kyle glanced at me tentatively again, and I felt a jolt of pure attraction right through my entire body.

"Sorry. That was lame," he said.

I grinned. The apology made him even more attractive. Because most guys would have tried to pull off that line with a straight face.

"No. No. It's fine." I looked at Nero and smiled. "I'll take it."



Wednesday morning, with another hour or so before lab, I sat on a towel on the sand, enjoying the warmth of the sun as it dried the salty water off my skin. My third surf lesson was officially behind me, and my new wet suit hadn't given me a single wedgie.

Out in the ocean, Kyle shredded a few waves. It was unbelievable, seeing him out there. Until now I had only ever seen surfing like that in movies, and there was always the possibility that it was the product of trick photography or something. But now I knew people could really ride those huge swells, and Kyle was one of them.

His form was perfect. His *body* was perfect. I couldn't wait for him to finish up and come in to shore already. Kyle had been totally professional during our lesson, which was a letdown after the various moments we had shared at the surf shop the day before. But I was hoping that once we were out of lesson mode, we could have a few *more* moments. Give me something else to fantasize about all night long—like I had yesterday.

I was startled out of my trance when Kyle's cell phone rang. A regular ring now—not that Chili Peppers song. The cell was right next to me on his towel. I wondered if I should answer it. The guy *was* trying to run a business here. I glanced at the caller ID. There was one word on the screen: MANETTE.

After the third ring, the phone stopped. Oh, well. I was sure Kyle had voice mail. I looked out at the water again. Kyle was riding a swell in to the shore. I smiled and was about to wave, and then the phone rang again.

Manette.

Weird. Was that a first name? Or maybe the name of a store or something? I didn't feel comfortable answering, so I let the voice mail get it again. Kyle was just lifting his board and starting up the beach.

The phone rang *again*. I was beginning to get tense here. I stood up and waited for Kyle, brushing some sand off the backs of my legs. He flung his dark hair away from his forehead and jogged toward me.

"Hey," I said.

"Hey!" he replied happily, tossing his board into the sand and grabbing a towel. He rubbed his hair and bent over to knock some water out of his ears. "It's a great day, huh?" he said, glancing up at the blue sky. "You want to go grab some food or something?"

"Yeah, sure. Listen, your phone rang a few times while you were out there," I said. "Someone named Manette?"

Kyle stood up straight. His face went white. "You answered it?" he demanded.

"No!" I said, startled by the abrupt shift in mood. "Just saw the name on the caller ID."

He grabbed his phone and scrolled through the calls. "Dammit," he said under his breath. Then it started to ring again. "Oh, come on! Who the hell is giving out my number?"

"Is everything okay?" I asked.

Kyle looked at me as if he'd just remembered I was there, even though we were close enough that the water from his hair was dripping onto my shoulder.

"It's fine. I just . . . I have to go," he said. He quickly gathered up his stuff, then leaned to grab his board, which he shoved under one arm. "I have to deal with this."

"I . . . I thought we were going to go eat," I said, feeling silly as I said it.

"I can't right now," he said flatly. "Maybe another time."

"Kyle, what's going on? You're freaking me out a little," I said, feeling desperate. The wind tossed my hair in front of my face, and I shoved it away.

"I'm sorry. There's something I really need to take care of. It's just—" He tried to look me in the eye but couldn't seem to make it stick. He seemed very frustrated and somehow tired. "I'll call you to set up your next lesson, okay?"

"Yeah. Okay."

He turned around and double-timed it up the beach. I thought about calling after him, but I knew it was pointless. All I could do was stand there, wondering what had just happened. Who the hell was Manette? And why was Kyle so monumentally freaked?

Sweat poured down the back of my neck as if someone was holding a warm-running hose over my head. Out in the center of the field at the Pepperdine soccer stadium there was no shade, and it was pushing noon.

"Maybe we should do this later," I suggested to Sean. I was still feeling a bit thrown from Kyle's sudden abandonment, and I was having a lot of trouble concentrating. "You know, when we're not close enough to the sun for our blood to boil."

"If we wait for the sun to go down, we won't be able to see well enough," Sean said. He crouched to the ground and lifted the metal-and-rubber slingshot we were using for our experiment. Closing one eye, he pulled back the rubber band and practiced his aim. "Besides, I'm fine."

"How? How are you fine?" I asked, throwing out my arms, which were slippery with perspiration. "This is Mercury hot."

"I'm cold-blooded," Sean said with a grin as he stood. He tossed and caught a tennis ball, then loaded it into the slingshot. "Here we go. Get the stopwatch."

Hang on. Just because my brain was melting did not mean I was going to let Sean do everything himself. A girl had to have *some* pride.

"Wait a minute, wait a minute!" I said, grabbing his arm. He stared at my hand for a second, like he was wondering what it was doing there, and I snatched it back. "Who said we were doing the tennis ball first?"

Sean dropped his arms. "Uh, logic said?"

I smirked. "Wow. You're hilarious. How so?"

He rolled his eyes. "It's the mid-weight object. If we're going to do a control experiment, this is it. Using the data, we can hypothesize about the results of all the other projectiles. Now, are you ready with the tape measure and the stopwatch or not?"

Okay. He had a point. But still.

I turned and grabbed a tube of sunscreen out of my backpack, stalling for time. "So you're not gonna even discuss it?" I said. I squeezed a blob of lotion into one palm, then rubbed my hands together.

Sean narrowed his eyes at me as I started to work the lotion into my arms and shoulders. He placed everything back down on the ground. "Fine. What do you want to use?" he challenged.

I looked at the other objects we were supposed to fling—a walnut, a Nerf ball, a baseball, a golf ball, and a Wiffle ball. I had already decided he was right, but I *so* didn't want to admit it.

"Can you hold this for me for a sec?" I asked, handing him the lotion.

"Uh, sure."

Before he could react, I dipped down, grabbed the slingshot and tennis ball, and took aim.

"Hey! What the hell?"

"I'm fine with the tennis ball. But I want to be the one to fling it," I said. "Got the stopwatch?"

Sean's mouth dropped open. He knew he'd been had. He picked up the stopwatch from the grass and held it up with a glare. "Fine."

I smiled. "Good."

Lifting my arms, I pulled back on the rubber band, and it slipped right out of my lotiony fingers. It snapped against my thumb and stung. Badly.

"Ow!" I cried, dropping everything. "Ow, ow, *ow*!"

I looked down, saw blood, and immediately squeezed my eyes closed. "I'm bleeding!" I cried, stating the obvious.

"Hang on. I got it," Sean said.

He dove into his bag and rummaged around for a second. My whole thumb throbbed, tapping out an insane heart-beat under my nail. Sean procured a Band-Aid and a tissue.

"You carry around bandages?" I asked, still clutching my thumb.

Sean shrugged as he tore the wrapper off. "I like to be prepared." He gently took my hand and pulled it to him. When I removed my fingers from around the cut, I winced. "Eh, it's not too bad," he said, dabbing it with the tissue.

I smiled, comforted, as he cleaned up the cut. "You are such the Boy Scout."

Sean wrapped the Band-Aid around my thumb gently but tightly. My thumb continued to throb in his hand, but it already felt much better.

"Thanks," I said, looking up at him.

For the first time I saw that his brown eyes had hundreds of little gold flecks in them.

"Good as new," he said quietly.

"My hero," I whispered. I didn't intend to whisper. It just came out that way.

"I thought no one was ever going to call me that again," Sean said, smiling slightly. Was it just me, or were those little gold flecks getting closer? Oh, my God. Was Sean going to *kiss* me?

"Well, I . . . I . . ."

Why was I trying to have the last word? He was going to kiss me, and, to my surprise, I wanted him to.

"Shut up," Sean whispered lightly.

Still holding my hand, Sean touched his lips to mine. His kiss was firm and soft and as it went on, I found myself entwining my fingers with his.

"Is this okay?" he asked suddenly, pulling back.

My mind was so groggy, it took me a second to catch

up. I nodded quickly. "Oh, yeah."

Sean grinned and kissed me again, this time wrapping his arms around me. Then, suddenly, an image of Nicholas flashed through my mind. Whoa. What was I doing? Was I really kissing two guys at the same time? Well, not at the *same* time, but you know what I mean. Was I really the type of girl who could kiss two different guys over the course of a few days? Then Sean gripped my T-shirt and pulled me even closer, and my heart flip-flopped. All thoughts of Nicholas went right out of my head. At the moment I didn't care. All I cared about was this unbelievable kiss.

Then, suddenly, someone cleared his throat—someone absurdly close. Sean and I pulled apart, looked at each other, then turned our faces. Professor Rosenberg was standing two feet away. He looked down at his clipboard.

"I don't remember that being part of the experiment," he said, screwing his face into a scowl.

Sean and I jumped away from each other.

"Sorry, Professor. We were just getting started and—" I began.

"We'll get back to work," Sean said firmly.

"See that you do," the professor said. Then he turned and walked off to find some of our other classmates.

I could barely breathe, but then Sean and I looked at each other and cracked up laughing.

"That wasn't embarrassing," I said in between giggles.

"Not at all," Sean said, loading the slingshot again. He lifted it as if to aim but then lowered his arms again. "You wanna do something tonight?" he asked.

I thought of Nicholas again and felt a pang of guilt. But

I really wanted to do something with Sean, and Nicholas and I had never even said we were officially *dating*, let alone that we were exclusive. Suddenly I could hear Becca reasoning with me in my head. This was my summer to bust out of my shell, and, technically, I wasn't tied down, so I could do what I wanted.

"Possibly," I said, smiling slightly. "What were you thinking?"

"I think it should be a surprise," he said. "Now get the stopwatch so we can start already. I'm melting out here."

I lifted the watch and got ready to time our tennis ball's flight.

"Ready?" Sean asked.

I nodded. "Let's do it."



“Where are we going?” I asked Sean for probably the tenth time in as many minutes.

“You’ll see,” he said with a self-satisfied grin. He was loving every minute of this. And why not? He knew something I didn’t know. It was his favorite state of being.

I, however, was flat-out nervous. I figured when Sean asked me out, we’d go to a movie, or, if he was feeling really adventurous, maybe he’d take me to a planetarium or something. He was, after all, a science geek. But instead we were walking along a deserted back street in who-knew-where LA without another soul in sight.

“Okay, but if you’re taking me to some underground chicken fight or something, I’m gonna bail,” I joked, trying to lighten my own mood. “I’m all for poultry rights. It’s a little-known fact about me.”

“You’ve been watching too much TV,” Sean replied. “I promise it’s nothing freaky.”

“Yeah, but define *freaky*,” I said. “Cuz your definition of *freaky* and my definition of *freaky* might not mesh.”

Sean just grinned.

Maybe I should have done a background check on this guy before agreeing to go out with him. And just to make it that much more confusing? Polo-and-T-shirt-loving Sean was sporting a trendy black button-down, distressed jeans, and a knit skullcap. I couldn’t even believe he *owned* those clothes.

“Here it is,” Sean said, upping the pace.

I glanced up and saw a truck-sized man in an all-black suit standing outside a nondescript door. Where the hell had he come from? My first instinct was to shrink away, but Sean stepped right up to the guy.

“I’m with Fritz,” he said.

The guy looked at us through tiny, watery slits of eyes. Oh, Lord. I was going to be the headline on the morning news, wasn’t I?

Finally, Truck Man nodded. He reached for the door and opened it. Loud dance music bounced out, reverberating through the alley.

“After you,” Sean said.

I stepped past him, and another huge man held back a velvet curtain so that I could slide through. On the other side of the curtain was a world of red. The couches were red leather, the bar was red wood, the floor was red tile. It looked like hell. If hell were an extremely cool place packed with fashionable people who were having the time of their lives.

"You like it?" Sean asked, placing a hand on my lower back as he stepped up behind me.

"That depends. Where are we?" I shouted to be heard over the music.

"It's called Rouge," he said. "My cousin owns it."

"Oh, so is your cousin Fritz?" I asked.

Sean's brow creased for a moment, then he laughed. "That was just today's password. It changes every day. You have to be on their e-mail list to get the new one. It's how they keep the riffraff out."

"Exclusive." I tried not to sound too impressed, but I don't think it worked.

"Oh, yeah. It's, like, the hottest underground club in LA right now. There are celebrities here pretty much every night."

Suddenly my eyes were wide, searching the throng of shadowed faces for anyone I recognized. The guy at the corner table surrounded by fawning, miniskirted girls looked vaguely familiar, but he was wearing a hat and sunglasses, which made it harder to place him. One thing was for sure. Half the girls in this place were probably models. They all had a foot and a half on me and were showing twice as much skin. I wished Sean had warned me so I could have gone with one of Becca's skimpier outfits instead of my blue tank top and jeans and with hardly any makeup to speak of.

"Do you come here a lot?" I asked.

"A few nights a week," Sean said with a shrug, as he lifted his chin to acknowledge the bartender, whom he clearly knew. "It's how I unwind."

“Huh. You are just full of surprises, Sean Phillips.”

“You ain’t seen nothin’ yet. So, wanna dance?” he asked, slipping his arms around me from behind. His breath was warm on my neck.

A shiver went down my spine, both from his proximity and a sudden case of stage fright.

“I don’t dance,” I told him, shying away toward the bar.

“Come on! Everybody dances,” Sean said, gently taking both my wrists. He moved his hips back and forth as he held my arms, and, I swear on my life, it was the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen. Still, I resisted. He had no idea of the level of awkwardness he was dealing with here.

“Really, Sean. You don’t want me out there. Trust me,” I said. “A girl has to know her limits, right?”

Sean stopped moving and raised an eyebrow at me. “Are you saying you can’t keep up with me?” he challenged.

I felt myself blush. Already my inner competitor was rising to the challenge. “Don’t. Don’t do that,” I said.

Sean lifted his shoulders. “Fine. If you, Jenna Appleby, think you’re not *good* enough . . .” he said, turning away.

“Sean!” I half whined.

He turned and held out a hand, giving me the most adorable pleading eyes *ever*. I groaned and slapped my hand down into his.

“Fine! But I warned you!”

Sean grinned as he pulled me out onto the red tiled floor. He wove his way right into the center, underneath a huge strobe that was flashing to the beat. He set me up so that I was facing him, and then he just started moving. Moving in ways I’ve only ever seen on the *MTV Video Music Awards*.

A few people around us started watching, awed. I just stood there. How had I gotten myself into this?

"Come on, Jenna!" Sean said, noticing my catatonic state. He put his hands on my hips and started stepping back and forth. Only the way *he* was stepping back and forth—bent knees, turned-out feet—looked like a dance move. "Right, together, left, together," he instructed.

Seeing no way out of this, I did as I was told. I stepped from side to side with the beat, and since Sean's hands were still on my hips, I held my arms bent at the elbow. I felt ridiculous. I even smiled apologetically at a few of the people around me, truly sorry for subjecting them to this.

"There you go!" Sean said. He stepped back, watching me appreciatively. I couldn't believe he was actually looking at me as if I was doing something impressive. I felt totally stiff and awkward.

Then Sean placed his hands on my shoulders and looked me in the eye, still dancing. "Forget everyone else," he said. "It's just you and me."

"Just you and me," I repeated, feeling warm all over.

He nodded, still to the beat, and quickly kissed my lips. When he danced back again, he raised his arms, and I mimicked him, cracking up laughing. He laughed, too, and I closed my eyes for a moment, shutting out the world. When I opened them again, we were dancing—together alone—right in the middle of a huge crowd of people. Just him and me.

As I walked up the beach toward Kyle on Friday morning, nervous butterflies circled in my stomach. After our last

encounter I wasn't entirely sure what to expect. Would he be back to his fun-loving self, or was I about to meet Tense Boy again?

It was amazing to me, how much I cared what Kyle thought—and, specifically, what he was thinking about me. I'd had a few hot-and-heavy encounters with Nicholas and one fabulous date with Sean. How could I possibly want a *third* guy to like me? But I did. I couldn't help it. Kyle was just so . . . perfect.

I clung to the straps on my backpack and tried not to think about anyone else. I could figure it all out later. For now I had this particular guy to deal with. Kyle was crouching on the sand, looking for something in his bag, as I approached. When my shadow finally fell over him, he looked up and grinned.

"Hey!" he said, as if absolutely nothing weird had happened the last time I'd seen him.

"Hey . . ." I replied tentatively.

He turned around and sat down on his towel. "Mind if we sit for a sec before your lesson?"

"Okay." I dropped down next to him on the towel.

He crossed his legs Indian style and looked at me, biting his lower lip. "There's something I wanted to talk to you about," he said.

I held my breath, wondering what was coming next. Was he going to tell me who Manette was and why he had totally lost it?

"About the other day . . . I'm sorry I acted like a nut case with the whole phone thing." He took a deep breath and glanced at me. "Manette is kind of an ex."

"Kind of?" I said.

"No. She's an ex. Definitely an ex," he said.

"Oh." I wasn't sure why he felt the need to explain this to me. I had a million questions, but I didn't ask any of them. I had to see where this was going first.

"The thing is, I wanted to be totally honest with you about it because . . . I like you, Jenna," he said quickly.

My heart completely turned over in my chest, and my whole stomach warmed.

"What?"

Kyle pressed his hands into the sand at his sides, lifted himself up, and turned to face me before dropping down again. Before I could even react to the swift movement, he'd grabbed up my hand.

"I think you're just . . . amazing."

"I am?" It was all I could think of to say.

"Are you kidding? You're smart, you're daring—"

"Daring." Suddenly I couldn't stop staring at our hands. He was *holding* my hand.

"Yeah, daring. You came all the way out here without your family, you take on this whole new sport—which you're really good at, by the way. I really admire you."

"You . . . admire me."

Kyle laughed. "I mean, you're completely unlike any other girl I've ever met. It's like there's not a superficial, game-playing bone in your body, and . . . I really like you."

Suddenly I could not stop grinning. "You do?"

"Yeah, I really do," he said. "I felt it the second we met, but I've been trying to resist it because, you know, you were a client, and I like to be professional."

So he *had* felt that connection that first day. I knew it couldn't have been just me!

"Plus, with the Classic coming up, I didn't want to get distracted," he continued. "But it turns out I can't help myself from being distracted when I'm around you."

"Wow," I said.

"So, do you think that . . . I mean . . . what do you think?" he asked.

My pulse was racing so fast I could feel it in my ears. "I think . . . I like you, too," I said, blushing.

Kyle's smile widened and his grip on my hand tightened, as if this was the most exciting thing he'd ever heard.

"But what about this Manette person?" I asked. "I mean, she can't be *that* ex if she's still calling you."

"She just had a hard time accepting it was over," Kyle said, shrugging it off. "But I've made it clear now. You have nothing to worry about from Manette. I swear. She's everything I don't want."

Implication? *I* was everything he *did* want. Sigh.

"So, I have a question to ask you." He eyed me hopefully. "Would you come down to the Classic? With me?"

"Really?"

"Yeah. I mean, a bunch of us are going, and it's gonna be kind of a scene, but I think you'd like it. And I know I'd like to have you there, you know, cheering me on," he added.

My heart skipped. "I would love to come."

Of course, the Classic was the same weekend that Becca was supposed to be visiting, and I still hadn't returned any of her increasingly incensed phone calls, but

I wasn't going to think about that now. I also wasn't going to think about Manette and *her* phone calls. I could think about those issues when I wasn't smack in the middle of a romantic moment.

Kyle reached up and touched my cheek with his fingertips. "I am so glad you came to California this summer," he said.

My heart flip-flopped. "Me, too."

Then Kyle leaned forward and pressed his salty lips to mine. His kiss was perfect. Sweet and slow and tender. It was so perfect, I felt like I had been waiting for this moment my entire life.



Kyle had to train most of the weekend, so on Saturday night Sean and I took Sun, who hadn't shut up about it all week, to Rouge. This time we had a couple of brushes with fame. Sun spotted two cast members from a now defunct TV drama and three of the *Deal or No Deal* models and proceeded to spend the entire night trying to get close to them, which was great because it gave me time alone with Sean. Then, on Sunday, I spent most of the day on the beach with Nicholas and his friends, playing touch football, napping, swimming, making out, and eating. Monday and Tuesday were all about class and lab, and then on Wednesday morning I got up and went to my last official surf lesson with Kyle, after which we made out in the sand for at least an hour.

Yes, my life was good.

Or bad. Depending on what mood I was in when I looked at it. I mean, what was I doing? I was dating three guys at the same time, and none of them knew about each other. Some might even say I was being mean and kind of . . . well, slutty. Jenna Appleby. Mean and slutty. My friends back home would never believe it. But there were only so many dates and make-out sessions I could justify under the idea that I was supposed to be letting loose. There was being adventurous, and then there was just being selfish.

This whole scenario definitely qualified as “getting a little crazy,” but sooner or later it had to end. I couldn’t really keep juggling three guys at the same time. Even my sister had never done *that* before.

Becca. Crap. I’d spoken to her very quickly on Saturday, but when she wanted to talk about what to pack for her trip, I’d made an excuse to get off the phone. Every time I thought about her coming out here, I prickled all over with heat. This was my new life. Was it wrong that I wanted it all to myself?

Heading back to my dorm to shower on Wednesday, I came around the corner, and slammed right into someone. Stumbling backward, I looked up into the smiling eyes of Nicholas Banks.

“Jenna!” he cried.

He dropped the ladder and tarp he was carrying and lifted me up into a huge bear hug and intense kiss. I glanced at Paul and Red, two of Nicholas’s model friends, who hovered behind him. Both these guys seemed to grow more gorgeous every time I saw them.

"Well, hello to you, too," I said as he set me back down on the ground.

"I've missed you the past couple of days," Nicholas replied.

Wish I could say the same, I thought, *but I've been too busy smooching two other guys*. Still, I couldn't help grinning. First he calls me beautiful, and now he misses me? Nicholas was just full of firsts.

"So, what's up? You guys get a job on *Extreme Home Makeover*?" I asked, gesturing at the ladder.

"We wish," Paul groaned.

"Seriously," Nicholas echoed. "But no, we're borrowing some equipment from campus maintenance. One of our neighbors phoned our landlord after our last big party, and now he's all paranoid that we're trashing the place. He's coming down Monday for an inspection, so we have to give the house a sprucing up."

"Unless we want to lose our security deposit," Red added. His name was actually Lance, but his hair was practically orange—thus, the nickname. He was the freckle-faced, lanky, farm-boy style of hot.

"Which we really don't want to do," Nicholas said, picking up the tarp and ladder again. "So I see a lot of painting in our future this weekend."

"Sounds like fun," I said. "My sister and I paint our bedrooms, like, once a year. We can't stick with a color for more than eleven to twelve months."

"Yeah?" Nicholas said, his eyebrows rising. "Then you should come by. A bunch of people have volunteered to help, and we're gonna get some food and beer and play

music, take some breaks down by the water. We're making it a party so we won't realize we're working."

"Just like everything else we do. Know what I'm sayin'?" Paul said, offering his hand to Red, who slapped it.

"Say you'll come," Nicholas said, taking my hand, which sent tingles all the way up my arm and down the other one. "Otherwise I might not get to see you this weekend," he added under his breath. "And that would just not be right." Suddenly all I could think of was our last marathon hookup. From the look in his eye, he was thinking about it, too—and hoping for a repeat. He really wanted to be with me. And, with the way my body was responding, I wanted nothing more than to be with him.

But there was one smallish problem. I had kind of told Kyle that I would go to San Diego with him for the weekend—which I still hadn't told Sean about, by the way. And, of course, Becca would be here. What was I supposed to do now?

"Can I give you a maybe?" I asked. "I might have a lot going on this weekend."

Nicholas smiled. "Sure. That's cool. Just let me know."

Phew. Okay. At least he didn't ask a million questions. But why would he? He was an older, secure, mature guy.

"Cool," I said.

Nicholas leaned forward and gave me a long, sweet kiss. I smiled, but the second he turned his back to me, my face completely fell. Both Kyle and Nicholas wanted to be with me this weekend, and I was sure that after all the fun we'd had on our dates, Sean was probably expecting to hang as well. I was going to have to make a decision here,

and I was going to have to do it soon.

I hadn't taken two steps toward the dorm when my cell phone rang. I rolled my eyes and sighed when I saw that it was Becca, but I had to answer it. If I didn't talk to her soon, she was going to disown me.

"Hey, Becca," I said lightly.

"Don't 'Hey, Becca' me! Why aren't you returning my calls?" Becca cried. "Know what? Forget it. I don't even care. The ticket is paid for, so I'm coming out there whether you want me to or not."

I trudged to a nearby bench and dropped onto it.

"It's not that I don't want you to," I said. "It's just that there's so much going on."

"Like what? Is there some major physics breakthrough happening that I can't know about?" she demanded.

I laughed. "No, no. Nothing like that." I took a deep breath and closed my eyes. "Brace yourself, Becca."

"Oh, God. What?" she said, her voice filled with dread.

"I'm sort of dating three different guys at the same time," I told her.

"No, you are not," she blurted out. "*Who!?*"

I tried to ignore the total disbelief. "Well, Nicholas."

"Nice," she said.

"Sean . . ."

"Dorky science boy? Why?"

"He's not dorky," I told her. "At all."

"I'll take your word for it. And?"

"And Kyle."

"The hot-and-cold surf instructor guy? Damn, Jenna. What'd you do? Take a slut pill?"

"Becca!" I wailed.

"I'm kidding! I'm kidding," she said. "I'm impressed, actually. When you say you're gonna get crazy, you really mean it."

I smiled, proud of myself—but overwhelmed at the same time. "You have to help me, Becks. What am I supposed to do?"

"Well, I hate to say it, but I think you're gonna have to pick one," Becca told me. "However nutty you want to get this summer, I just don't think you're a three-guys-at-a-time type of girl. *I'm* not even that type of girl."

"I know," I said, wincing. "But, Becca, I like them all. How am I supposed to choose?"

"Well, lucky for you I am going to be there in less than forty-eight hours," Becca said. "I will be able to meet them all and help you make an informed decision."

I sank down on the bench. Little did Becca know that her meeting Nicholas, Sean, and Kyle was basically my biggest fear. What if one of them took one look at Becca and realized they had been kissing the wrong sister? What if they *all* did?

"See? Aren't you psyched I'm coming?" Becca trilled.

"Yeah, definitely," I replied. But my brain was quickly formulating a plan. I was going to have to decide before Becca arrived. That way she would only have to meet *one* guy. I just hoped I'd pick the guy who *wouldn't* go gaga for her.

"Actually, Becks, I think I'm gonna figure this out before you get here," I said.

"Why?" she asked.

"Well, that way we'll know what we're doing for the

weekend, and you can pack accordingly,” I said, appealing to Becca’s need to always be dressed for the occasion. “I think it’ll be easier.”

“Okay. Suit yourself,” Becca said. “All I know is, I can’t *wait* to see you. I feel like you’ve been gone for a year.”

“I know what you mean,” I told her honestly.

Considering how radically I had changed, I might as well have been gone for *three* years. Now all I had to do was figure out how to keep my new life the way I wanted it once my old life arrived in town.

Sean grinned at me as I took my seat beside him the next day in lab. Something about that grin made me squirm. It was the grin of a guy who thought he had a girl. Not the grin of a guy who thought he was sharing a girl with two other guys.

I was pond scum.

“Hey,” I said. “Why so happy?”

“Just good to see you,” Sean said with a shrug.

I couldn’t help smiling. His unabashed ability to say what he was thinking was kind of nice—especially now that it was no longer being used to bash me.

Sean leaned toward me, and for a split second I was sure he was going to kiss me right there in the lab, but then Professor Rosenberg strode into the room, slamming the door behind him, and we both jumped.

“Good news, everyone!” the professor announced, dropping his battered briefcase onto his desk. “We are going on a field trip to Six Flags!”

The room filled with excited murmurs and whispers.

Sean and I exchanged a glance.

“No way,” someone in the front row said.

“Yes way, Mr. Coolidge,” Professor Rosenberg replied. “At least, those of you who want some extra credit will be going. It *is* optional, but I strongly suggest you all attend.” He walked around to the front of his desk and leaned back against it, knocking over a cup filled with pens that scattered everywhere. He didn’t seem to notice. “Now, upon arrival at the park, you will be given a list of physics experiments to be done on several of the rides, along with the supplies you’ll need to complete them. The more experiments you complete correctly, the more extra credit you will receive. Whoever completes the most experiments correctly will win the grand prize.”

He paused and strolled back around his desk, staring at the pens on the floor as if they had magically appeared there. All the students looked around at one another anxiously. Had we missed the announcement of what the grand prize was?

“Aren’t you going to ask me what the grand prize is?” Professor Rosenberg asked, raising one bushy eyebrow as he finally tore his gaze from the fallen pens.

“What’s the grand prize?” we all asked in unison.

“The grand prize is an automatic pass on the midterm!” the professor said, slapping a hand down on his desk. There was a collective, excited intake of breath. “Now wasn’t that worth asking about?”

An automatic pass on the midterm? That would kick ass! All that extra studying that I wouldn’t have to do? Even a science fiend like me saw the benefits of that.

"You are so going down, PA!" Sean teased. "That pass is mine."

"In your dreams, Brooklyn," I shot back.

"When *is* the field trip, Professor?" another student asked.

"Good question!" he replied, flipping open his large leather-bound planner. "The trip will be this Saturday. We'll be leaving from the student center at eight A.M. sharp! Hope you all can make it!"

My spirits took a whirling, screaming nosedive. This Saturday? *This* Saturday? As in the same weekend I was supposed to be going to San Diego with Kyle *and* helping Nicholas paint his house? The same weekend my sister was showing up with her megawatt smile and bootylicious wardrobe to wow the entire state of California? *That* weekend?

"What's the matter? Afraid I'm going to kick your butt?" Sean teased as all the others started to tackle the day's experiment.

"No. It's not that," I said numbly.

"So cheer up! It'll be fun. You, me, a little good-natured competition," Sean said, getting up to gather the items we needed for the lab. He paused and gave me a quick squeeze from behind. "Maybe some Tunnel of Love action?" he added in my ear. "If you're lucky."

I smiled, but when he turned around and strode toward the front of the room, the gut-clenching guilt took hold. A trip to the amusement park and some Tunnel of Love action *did* sound like fun. And a pass on the midterm would be great. Unfortunately all it meant to me at that moment

was one more roller-coaster-sized variable in my decision-making process.

I had a *lot* of thinking to do.

Okay, this was not good. I've never been much of a procrastinator, at least not when it came to important stuff like homework, chores, and life-altering decisions, but apparently procrastination was part of New Jenna. In fact, New Jenna was a pro.

It was Thursday night. My sister was on her way to Pepperdine from the airport. And I *still* hadn't figured out what I was going to do. I paced back and forth from my bed to Sun's, to my bed, to Sun's. It only took about three steps to get from one bed to the other, so I was kind of making myself dizzy, which was not helping. I had to make a decision, and I had to do it yesterday.

That was when the phone rang.

My heart spazzed, and I fumbled for my cell. It was Kyle. Yesterday I had bought myself an out by telling him that my sister was unexpectedly coming in and I wasn't sure she would want to go on a road trip. But I had promised him I would let him know by tonight, which, of course, I hadn't. I had already let two of his calls go to voice mail. If I didn't talk to him soon, he was going to give up on me. I picked up the call and squeezed my eyes closed.

"Hey, Kyle," I said, resting my head in my free hand pathetically.

"Hey, Jenna!" He sounded excited. "I just wanted to check to see if you and Becca had made a decision about San Diego yet. There's some other people who need a ride,

so I'm gonna need to save your spaces in the van if you're coming."

"Oh, uh—"

My call waiting beeped. Someone had perfect timing.

"Can you hold on a sec?" I asked Kyle.

"Sure. I just—"

I clicked over to the other call, cutting him off. "Hello?"

"Hey, Jenna. It's Nicholas."

Smooth as a tall glass of cool milk.

"Oh, hi, Nicholas."

"So listen, I'm down to picking out a new color for my bedroom," he said. There was a lot of noise in the background and I wondered if they had already gotten started working. "It would be great to have your opinion."

He wanted my opinion on a color for his room? This *was* serious!

"Feel like coming over?" he asked.

"Oh, I . . ."

Then our landline rang. I jumped up and checked the caller ID. It was Sean.

Dear God, they were everywhere.

"Jenna?" Nicholas said.

The phone rang again.

"Are you there?" Nicholas prompted again.

My cell phone beeped, reminding me that Kyle was still on the other line.

Okay, Jenna. Think. Nicholas was so sexy and confident and cool. Plus he was older, and he thought I was beautiful, which made me weak. But Sean . . . Sean was so smart and funny and fun to be with. Whenever I was

around him, he challenged me, and he was also *so* cute. Maybe a bit of a perfectionist, but I could live with that. And speaking of perfection . . . there was Kyle. His kiss had felt like coming home. Like I was always meant to be kissing him. Yeah, he was beyond hot and athletic, and he also felt like he could be a good friend as well as a boyfriend. Was that something I could really throw away?

“Jenna? Hello?” Nicholas said in my ear.

Beep! Beep!

Ring!

I was on the verge of a serious panic attack when a knock on the door caused something inside me to snap. I shut off the cell phone, ripped the landline out of the wall, and stood in the center of my room, panting.

Silence. That was much better.

Another knock. “Jenna? Are you in there?”

“Becca!”

I flung the door open and practically threw myself into my sister’s arms.

“Hey! Good to see you, too!” she said, half choking me.

I stepped back and took her in. She was wearing a pink flowered dress with matching heeled sandals, and all twenty of her nails had been French mani-pedied. In a word, *gorgeous*.

“So!” she said with a grin. “Have you decided yet? What are we doing this weekend?”

The Choice

How did everything get so out of control so quickly? I know I wanted to have fun this summer, but this is no longer fun. But who I choose to hang with this weekend will end up affecting the rest of the summer. I have to make the right choice, and I need your help. Choose wisely, because New Jenna's new life depends on it.

.....

→ 1. *Nicholas*

Pros: He's unlike any other guy I've ever met. He's so mature and together and confident and sexy. Back home I could never get a guy like him in a million years. He thinks I'm beautiful, which means that

when I'm around him, I *feel* beautiful. Also, I've gone further with him in the hookup department than I ever have before, and it's *amazing*.

Cons: Yes, sometimes he makes me feel beautiful, but sometimes he also makes me feel childish. Just one amused look can totally flatten me. Also, he was totally cool about not having sex, but what if that changes the longer we're together?

Heartbreak risk level: *Moderate*



2. Kyle

Pros: He's gorgeous, athletic, grounded, smart, and is into science, like me. It's incredible to find a guy my age who has dreams and goals and actually goes after them. I can totally be myself around him. He has a lot in common with the real me, which makes being with him very easy but still exciting. Kissing him felt very, *very* right.

Cons: Because he's so goal-oriented, he can be all-business. He's a responsible planner, and I was supposed to let loose this summer and try new things. And there's always the issue of the mysterious Manette. Is he really over her? Because it seems like she's not over him.

Heartbreak risk level: *High*

3. Sean

Pros: He is *so* cute, *so* smart, *so* funny, and *such* a good dancer. We spend almost all day, every day together, and I've yet to get bored around him. He's just full of surprises. The running thing, the gentle thing, the dancing thing. Who knows what side he'll reveal next?

Cons: He's kind of impatient and *way* obsessed with doing well in class. Not that I'm not—it's just that he takes it to the extreme. I'm not sure dating my lab partner fits into the "new me" goal of the summer.

Heartbreak risk level: *Moderate*

Have you made your decision? I hope so, because it's down to the wire. Just remember, this is my California Summer of Dreams, so choose well!

If you choose *Nicholas*, keep reading.

If you choose *Kyle*, turn to [page 157](#).

If you choose *Sean*, turn to [page 209](#).

You Chose Nicholas



“Come in! Come in!” I said to Becca, grabbing the handle of her suitcase. “Welcome to our teeny, tiny room!”

“Wow. It *is* teeny tiny,” Becca said. She turned in a small circle in the center of the three-by-three throw rug, taking it all in. “I can’t believe two of you live in here.”

“Yeah, and with Sun it’s more like three people,” I said.

Becca’s eyes widened slightly. “Why? Is she fat?” She said the word *fat* under her breath.

“Becca! First of all, who cares if she is? Secondly, I’ve told you about her. She’s just kind of . . .”

“Nuts?” Becca supplied.

“Exactly!”

We both laughed, and I felt the familiarity settle over me like a warm blanket. My anxiety about Becca’s visit

started to melt away. I hadn't realized how much I'd missed her until now.

"It's so good to see you," I said.

"You, too." Becca looked me up and down and a little line appeared between her two perfect eyebrows. Definitely freshly waxed. "You look . . . different."

"Well, I *am* wearing your clothes," I said.

"That's not it, though," she said, perching on Sun's messy bed where she'd be sleeping while Sun was in San Diego. "You're tan. And toned. And more chill somehow." She paused, studying me, and then her eyes widened again. "Jenna, you look *hot*!"

I beamed. "Really?" I said, stepping in front of the mirror.

I could see what she meant. My hair, which I usually wore in a ponytail back home, was down around my shoulders, and my skin shone with a healthy glow. Even without much makeup I looked more Becca-ish than Jenna-ish. Suddenly I felt a lot more confident about my decision to stay here and stick with Nicholas. Maybe there wasn't such a huge disparity between me and my sister.

"So, I've decided I'm going to stay with Nicholas," I said, turning to face Becca again.

"The hot, hot, hottie? Good choice!" Becca said with a grin.

"Yeah, well, it just makes sense for my 'get crazy' summer, I think. He's older and so cool and so gorgeous," I said.

"That's great, Jen. I can't wait to meet him." She got up to fluff her hair in the mirror.

"Well, you will. First thing tomorrow. He's having a bunch of people over all weekend to help paint his house, so I figured we'd pitch in," I said.

Becca's face fell. She stared at me through the mirror. "Are you kidding me? I flew five hours to play *Trading Spaces*?"

Instantly my shoulder muscles tensed. Was she really going to make this difficult? Coming to this decision had already been hard enough. "You love to paint!"

"Yeah, *my* room," she said, dropping down onto my bed this time and pushing herself back into the pillows. "Because then I get to live in it. Besides, I didn't bring any painting clothes. Why didn't you warn me?"

She had a point there. I blamed the oversight on all the insanity of the past couple of days. Frumpy, comfy clothes were not something Becca would ever waste precious suitcase space on.

"You can wear something of mine," I told her, earning the most sarcastic, dubious look of all time. "Come on, Becca. It'll be fun. They're getting food and beer. It'll be like one big party." I sat down near her feet. "Besides, Nicholas has some really cute friends!" I sang.

Becca rolled her eyes but smiled, reaching for the *Elle* magazine on my desk. "Okay, fine. As long as we get to spend *some* time on the beach."

"We will. I promise."

I grabbed my cell phone and turned it back on, then dialed Nicholas's number. He picked up on the fifth ring.

"Jenna? What happened?" he asked.

Oh, right. I'd hung up on him. "Oh, uh, dropped call," I

said. It was pretty noisy in the background. Noisy enough that I felt the need to raise my voice. "Anyway, Becca and I are definitely sticking around this weekend, and we'd love to help!"

"Excellent!" he said. There was a crash in the background, but he didn't seem fazed. "Did you want to come over now? Cuz we could use some more beer . . ."

"Actually, she just got here, so I think we're going to lay low tonight," I said. I decided not to point out that I wasn't even old enough to *buy* beer. "But we'll see you in the morning, okay?"

"Sounds good," Nicholas said. "Can't wait to meet her."

I ignored the twisting in my gut over that statement. "Great! Bye!"

The moment I hung up, the door was flung open, and Sun rushed in, her arms full of shopping bags from Roxy and Swimsuits, Etc., among other places.

"You would not *believe* the bargains I found today!" she announced. "There was a two-for-one swimsuit sale, and I got these crazy wet sox things in, like, five different colors and did you know that you can get sunblock with glitter in it? I—"

"Sun? This is my sister, Becca," I interrupted.

Becca lowered the magazine and sat up. "Hi," she said.

Sun's eyes went wide and all her bags fell to the floor. "Omgod! You're here!" she cried, hugging my sister. "Damn! You two *do* look exactly alike. Nature is so freaky, isn't it?"

"Uh . . . sure?" Becca said with a laugh.

"This is great! We are going to have so much fun this

weekend!" Sun announced. "You guys *are* coming to San Diego, right? Kyle and Connor are so stoked for the competition, and I hear there are going to be some totally insane parties on the—"

"Actually, we're going to stay here," I said.

Sun's face dropped. "What? Why?"

"Nicholas," I replied giddily. "I think he's getting serious about me."

"So we're going to paint his house," Becca deadpanned.

"Well, that could be fun, too," Sun said. "Wait until you see this guy, Becca. He is *fi-ine!*" She touched Becca's arm like they were old friends. "And his entourage? Forget it. You will totally be hooking up by the end of the weekend."

"*Real-ly?*" Becca said, finally perking up.

I smiled as the two of them started chatting. This was going to be a fun weekend. Especially if Becca *did* hook up with someone. As much as I hated to admit it, I knew that Becca's liking a guy other than Nicholas would make me feel a lot more secure.

The three of us decided to hit Sun's favorite Indian restaurant for dinner, but first I had a couple of phone calls to make. I was kind of hoping they would notice my anxiety and go out to the student lounge, but Sun had already dumped out her jewelry box and was telling Becca which part of the world each item was from. Unfortunately my cell didn't work in the hall or lounge, so it was either stay here, go outside—something Becca definitely would tease me about—or ask them to leave. New Jenna might have done that, but just having my sister there was making me

feel very Old Jenna. Yep, it was happening already, and in the face of calling Kyle and Sean, I didn't have the strength to cope with it. So instead I curled up in a corner near my headboard and called Kyle, hoping Sun's jewelry show was fascinating enough to distract them both.

"Hey, Jenna! Where'd you go?" Kyle answered the phone. He sounded so chipper, it made me want to hang up again.

"Sorry about that. I was getting all these calls at once . . ."

"That's okay," he said. "So, what's the final decision? Are you in, or are you out?"

I took a deep breath. My free hand was curled up so tightly my nails were digging into my palm. "Out, actually."

"Oh." I never knew a vowel could sound so disappointed.

Sun and Becca both looked up at me to see what would happen next. I turned slightly farther away from them, my knees now pressing into the wall.

"I kind of told this friend that I'd help him paint his house this weekend," I explained. "His landlord's coming, and the place is a mess. . . ."

"Oh. I see," Kyle said. "So this is a guy friend."

I bit my lip. "Kind of."

"Are you two . . . ?"

"Kind of," I repeated.

"Oh." He cleared his throat. "Okay. I get it. That's cool." There was a sharp intake of breath and a pause. "I guess it just . . . wasn't meant to be."

I felt nauseated. He sounded really thrown and upset. Who knew I could make a person sound like that?

"Well . . . good luck in the competition," I said awkwardly.
"I really hope you make it."

He laughed lightly. "Thanks. I'll . . . well, bye, I guess."

"Yeah. Bye, Kyle."

The line went dead before I had a chance to hang up. I was glad he hadn't flipped out or anything, but he had sounded so surprised that it almost made me want to change my mind. It was a new experience for me, breaking a guy's heart.

"You okay?" Becca asked.

I forced a weak smile. "Yeah. Fine. Just give me one more minute, and we'll go eat."

Not that I had any appetite. I pushed myself off the bed and quickly dialed Sean, wanting more than ever to get this over with.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Sean. It's Jenna," I said.

"Oh, hey! What's up?" he asked.

"Not much. Listen, I'm not going to make the field trip after all," I said.

There was a long silence. "Why not?"

"Actually, I'm kind of . . ."

Just say it! Get it out!

"I'm kind of seeing someone," I said. "And this weekend I promised I'd help him and his friends paint their house, so—"

"Wait, you're *what*?"

"Helping him paint his house," I said.

"No, no. The first part. You're *seeing* someone!?" Sean blurted.

Suddenly I was sweating.

"I'm sorry, it just . . . happened," I said.

"It *just* happened. Before or after we went out?" he asked.

Lie! Lie, lie, lie! But wait a minute, *was* there a good answer to that question?

"Before . . ." I squeezed my eyes closed.

"I don't believe this," he said. "Were you playing me this entire time?"

"No. I swear it wasn't like that. Sean, I'm sorry. I really like you. I just . . . I really liked this other guy, too," I said, grasping for words. I took a deep breath. "I messed up."

Sean blew out a sigh. I could practically hear his jaw clenching. "Yeah. I guess you did."

"I really am sorry."

"I know. You said that already," he told me, sounding resigned. "Listen, I think I should go."

"Okay," I said, swallowing hard. "See you on Monday, I guess."

Another sigh. I knew what he was thinking. Lab was gonna be tons of fun now.

"Yeah. I'll see ya," he said. Then he hung up.

Slowly I lowered the phone, my hand shaking. "*That* went well."

Becca reached out and rubbed my back. "Welcome to the life of a heartbreaker. Better get used to it," she said.

I smiled wanly. "Can't wait."

"I can't believe people actually get to live here," Becca said the next morning as we walked to Nicholas's house. She

tipped her face to the sun, and I could see the blue sky and puffy white clouds reflected in her movie-star-huge sunglasses. "I am totally coming to school out here."

"Watch where you're going. You're gonna drop the coffee," I warned her.

She looked down at the loaded tray in her hands as if she'd forgotten about it. "Thanks, Mom."

My eyes narrowed. She knew I hated it when she said that. Almost as much as she hated it when I reminded her that she was my little sister. By four minutes, anyway.

"Are you sure that's really what you want to wear?" I asked her, clutching the bag full of donuts in my sweaty hand.

I had put on a pair of old denim shorts and a well-worn T-shirt for our day of work. Practical but cute. It wasn't as if I wanted to ruin any of my good stuff with paint splatter. But in Becca's world, "work clothes" meant a tight white tank top and yellow minishorts.

"This was all I had," Becca said with a shrug.

Of course, she had turned down my many offers to lend her anything in my closet. We both knew what she was doing—dressing up to meet the boys.

Just because Becca looks adorable does not mean that Nicholas is going to like her better, I pep-talked myself. *Get a grip, Jenna. Have some confidence.*

"This is it," I said as we arrived at Nicholas's front walk. Already the front yard had been cleaned up and mowed, and two of Nicholas's friends stood on the roof of the front porch, rehangng a shutter. Nicholas himself was doing a little touch-up work on the pillars below, and I could see a

couple more guys moving around inside. Rock music blared from a stereo set up in one of the windows.

"Is that him?" Becca asked under her breath, recognizing Nicholas from the candid picture I'd snapped one night with my phone—at her request. "Oh, my God. He's even hotter in person."

My grip on the wax bag tightened until the folds were cutting into my palm.

He thinks you're beautiful, I told myself. *He thinks you're beautiful.*

"Let's go," I said, stepping in front of her. "Hey, Nicholas!"

Nicholas looked up and did an undeniable double take. He lowered the paintbrush he was holding and stared. There was an adorable streak of white paint on one cheekbone.

"Twins! You've got to be kidding me," he said.

Becca giggled, and I felt a chill go down my arms.

"Did I not mention that?" I asked.

Already Paul and his friend Todd had walked out of the house. Meanwhile, the two guys up above, including Red, were hanging precariously over the edge of the roof for a better look. What the hell was it with guys and twins? Paul had such a lascivious look in his eye that I didn't even have to guess what he was thinking.

"No, you did not," Nicholas said. He wiped his right hand quickly on the butt of his jeans, then held it out to Becca. "I'm Nicholas."

"Becca," she said, tossing her hair back. Her patented flirt opener.

Oh, no, you don't. No, no, no!

"Pleasure to meet you," Nicholas said.

He hadn't even said hello to me yet. Not technically.

"You, too," Becca replied. She adjusted the tray of coffees she was holding so she could shake hands with him, then rebalanced. "Well, if you guys can stop gaping long enough, I've got coffee!" she trilled.

The guys laughed, and a few, at least, had the decency to blush. Then they all followed Becca inside—including Nicholas. Her hips swished back and forth like a Victoria's Secret model, and all male eyes were trained on them. Overhead I heard the two rooftop boys scrambling to see who could get through the window first. Already I felt myself start to shrink away.

Retreat, a little voice in my mind told me. *You are way out of your league here.*

But the very thought sparked my indignation. This was *my* territory. *My* potential boyfriend, whom *I* had hooked up with and whispered sweet nothings to. I just had to remember that. And maybe remind him, too.

All of this took about two seconds to register in my mind, so it didn't seem *too* much of a nonsequitur when I strode into the living room, lifted the bag of donuts, and sang, "And *I've* got donuts!"

I executed my own hair toss, and within moments, Nicholas, Paul, and the second rooftop boy defected to me. Nicholas finally gave me a kiss on the cheek and thanked me for bringing breakfast. I flushed with pleasure. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Becca gape at me in surprise.

That's right, I thought. *New Jenna has a spotlight of her very own.*



"I think Classic Khaki was a good choice," I said as I shook a paint roller over the plastic tray.

"I don't know. It's so unoriginal," Nicholas said, stepping back to study his work.

"But at least your landlord will like it."

Nicholas glanced over his shoulder at me and grinned teasingly. "I like *you* in it."

I blushed—guess the streak of paint I'd managed to swipe across my chin was actually a good thing. Working alone with Nicholas in his room was also a good thing. I felt like we were in our own little world on the third floor, secluded from everything else. Just me and him. The way I liked it.

The floor of Nicholas's bedroom was covered with tarps and old sheets—including a *Star Wars* set from who knows

where—and all his furniture had been moved to the center of the room. He was working on the biggest wall, while I took the one by the door. I was just about to reach the trim when we both heard a shriek and a giggle from downstairs.

“Stop! Todd! Aah!”

It was my sister. Clearly having a fabulous time “working.” Nicholas and I looked at each other.

“Your sister seems like a cool girl,” he said.

My good mood fell away, and I became very absorbed with applying paint. Now that I knew how it felt to be Becca—having the spotlight on me for once—sharing it didn’t feel all that wonderful. I had spent so much time in Becca’s shadow, and I wasn’t ready to go back yet.

“Yeah?” I said, sounding dubious.

“Yeah. Why? You don’t think she’s cool?” he said.

Suddenly an idea occurred to me. And even as I realized how lame it was, I heard myself saying it.

“No. I mean. Yeah, *I* think she’s cool,” I said, my body temperature rising with each false word out of my mouth. “But back home she’s kind of shy.”

I’m horrible.

“Really?”

Nicholas, unshockingly, seemed surprised.

I scoffed, as if it was so obvious, but wondered how I’d get away with this. “Totally.” I placed my roller down in its tray and swiped my hands on my shorts, then picked my way across the *Star Wars* sheets toward him. “It’s like she was born without the fun gene. She has no idea how to have a good time.” I looked Nicholas in the eye and reveled in the fact that he was completely riveted. “Not like me.”

Then I stood on tiptoe and gave him a firm, very sexy kiss. I felt a thrill at my brazen behavior. I thought having Becca here would turn me back into a wallflower, but instead I was becoming the exact opposite. I broke off and smiled at Nicholas.

Slowly he smiled back. “*Very* unlike you,” he said.

Then he grabbed me around the waist, and I screeched with glee as he tackled me onto his tarp-covered bed. As he touched my face and ran his index finger along my chin-streak, every inch of my body responded. Then he kissed me, and my sister’s laughter faded into the background. Nicholas had forgotten she existed. All thanks to the new me.

Becca stretched her arms above her head in her pajamas, briefly exposing her flat, tan tummy, then dropped onto Sun’s bed. She yawned hugely and fluffed the pillows.

“Long day,” she said.

“Are you sure you don’t want to go out somewhere?” I asked, hoping she would turn me down again. I was totally exhausted from a day of painting, hammering, and making out.

“No. It’s cool. I think I’m a little jet-lagged,” Becca said, yawning again. “I had fun today, though. You were right. Those guys are pretty cool.”

“Yeah,” I said happily. “They are.”

“But tomorrow we find some time to hit the beach.”

I smiled and reached for my desk lamp. “You got it.”

I turned off the light and settled down into my covers. My body completely relaxed, loving the release. It had been

a good day. We had gotten a lot done, had a few laughs, and Becca seemed totally smitten with Todd. Everything was working out perfectly.

"Nicholas is amazing, Jenna," Becca said in the darkness. My eyes popped open.

"It's so weird to think of you with a boyfriend," she added.

"Gee, thanks," I replied.

"No! Not like that. You were with this guy and I didn't even know him until today. It's weird."

I knew what she meant. If she'd been dating some guy back home that I didn't know, I'd feel weird and detached, too. We always shared everything.

"Jenna has a boyfriend," she said wondrously.

"Well, he's not technically my boyfriend," I said.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Just that, you know, we haven't said *boyfriend* and *girlfriend*, that's all," I told her. "So you didn't completely miss my first boyfriend thing, because he's not technically my boyfriend," I added, wanting to make her feel better.

"Oh. Huh. For some reason I thought you guys were."

Something about the way she said that put my senses on alert, but I brushed it aside.

"Well, whatever he is, you're beyond lucky. He is *so* hot, Jenna. I mean, seriously, he could be a movie star," she said, sounding awed.

My hands gripped the ends of my sheets as if they were the only thing keeping me from falling off a cliff. If Becca wanted a guy, she got him. It was a proven fact. Please tell me she did not want *my* guy. Please, please, *please*. Couldn't I have just *one* guy?

"You think?" I heard myself squeak.

"I could definitely see him walking the red carpet, chatting with Nancy O'Dell or whoever," Becca said.

She was daydreaming about him. I could hear the sigh in her voice.

"Has he ever modeled or anything?" she asked. "Cuz he totally could."

"Nicholas?" I said. "He's not all that, Becca. I mean, *everyone* out here is hot."

What was with me today?

"In L.A. guys like Nicholas are a dime a dozen."

I was such a huge liar.

"I mean, take Todd for instance," I said, turning onto my side. I could just see my sister's outline in the dim light coming in from the courtyard below. "Now, *he* could model."

Of course, he was the only guy in the house who never had, but Becca didn't need to know that. And Todd was still *really* cute.

"I guess," Becca said dubiously. "He *is* pretty cool. And he's pre-law. He says he wants to be an entertainment lawyer. Do you realize how many celebrities he's going to meet?"

Just like that Becca was distracted, and I was able to relax again. I leaned back on my pillow and looked up at the ceiling, feeling as if I'd just dodged an oncoming train.

When we took a break for lunch the next day, the sun was high in the sky, and a cool breeze was coming in off the ocean. We all gathered on the patio, splattered with paint and dust, and grabbed whatever chairs we could find. Todd

came back from his food run and dumped two buckets of chicken and three bags of sides in the center of the table. The guys converged on the food like rabid wolves.

"Guys! Guys! Hold on!" Nicholas said, hands up. They all stopped, and he looked at me and Becca. "Ladies first."

He was such the gentleman. I grinned and was about to thank him, but Becca beat me to it.

"Thanks, Nicholas," Becca said, lifting her hair over her shoulders as she stood up. "You're such a gentleman."

Sometimes we thought so alike it was scary. Becca and Nicholas exchanged a smile that made my fingers curl. I grabbed a plate and took a chicken leg and some fries, then sat down at the table next to her. Becca placed a piece of chicken on her own plate, then licked the tips of her fingers slowly. I swear, every last one of those guys drooled. I slumped in my seat.

No, Jenna. Come on! Fight fire with fire!

Taking a deep breath, I sat up straight and cleared my throat to get Nicholas's attention, all ready to say something flirty. But I couldn't think of a thing.

"So, how long are you here, Becca?" Nicholas asked as he heaped his plate with food.

"She goes home first thing Monday morning," I blurted.

"Want to get rid of me already?" Becca joked.

"Not at all!" I replied with the sweetest smile I could conjure.

"It's too bad," Nicholas said as he dropped into his chair. "You two should really think about staying out here and getting an agent. Everyone *loves* twins."

The guys, their mouths full, enthusiastically muttered their agreement.

"I could hook you up with my agent, if you want," Nicholas said, causing my stomach to drop to my toes. "She only reps guys, but I'm sure she could set up a meeting for you with someone else at my agency."

Becca's eyes met mine. She wore a knowing smirk that made me want to slowly slink off. I hated getting caught in a lie.

"Oh, so you *do* model," Becca said with great interest.

Please don't tell him I told you he was a dime a dozen, I begged silently. Take pity on your sister!

"Yeah, here and there," Nicholas said, wiping his fingers on a napkin.

"We all do," Paul said, grabbing a napkin. "Except Todd over here. He just reaps the benefits of our work."

"Benefits?" Becca asked.

"You know. Parties, freebies, ladies . . ." Red teased, and they all laughed.

My face burned as if I'd been in the sun all day with no sunblock. For some reason that comment made me uncomfortable. Becca, however, didn't seem to notice.

"Have you ever done anything I might have seen?" she asked Nicholas. Only Nicholas, I noticed.

"Nah. Nothing too big. But even for small jobs the pay is pretty amazing," he said, trying to sell her on getting into the biz. "You get an hourly rate, and the best part is, half the time you're just sitting around waiting for them to fix the lighting or deal with someone's makeup."

"Really? So you get paid just to hang out?" Becca

leaned an elbow on the table and set her chin in her hand, scooting closer to Nicholas. I saw him glance toward her cleavage and wanted to die. How could he miss it? Thanks to her second tight tank top in two days, it was right there. She was practically shoving it into his face.

Nicholas apparently realized what he was doing and turned his attention to his meal. "Plus they sometimes give you free clothes or products, and you meet some interesting people," he said, popping a French fry into his mouth.

Becca had stars in her eyes. She looked as if she had already met the only interesting person she cared to meet. I stared at my chicken, feeling as if I would never eat again.

"Plus I've gotten to do some traveling. Last year I did a shoot in Cabo, which was unbelievable," Nicholas continued. "Best two days of my life."

He did a shoot in Cabo? He'd never told *me* about that.

"Sounds amazing," Becca told him. "But Jenna would never go for it. She *hates* being in the spotlight."

Nicholas glanced at me, surprised. Okay. So much for the good posture. Now I was definitely sinking in my seat.

"Really? That's exactly what she said about *you* yesterday," he told Becca. "For twins you don't seem to know each other that well."

Becca stared at me.

Can you blame me? I asked her with my eyes.

Then her eyes narrowed. "You said that?" she asked.

Suddenly I felt an intense wave of anger. How dare she come in here and judge me for trying to hold on to *my* man? We both knew what our lives were like back home. She was the one who was always trying to convince me to

be different, to be more outgoing, to date more. And I had! So I had told a couple of little white lies to protect my new image and my new man. She *so* would have done the same thing. But now she was looking at me as if I had done something wrong. Meanwhile she was the one flirting with *my* guy! This was so unfair.

“You know, I’m not really hungry,” I said, scraping my chair back on the patio. “I think I’m going to go finish that trim in the living room.”

I stalked off, fuming, expecting either Becca or Nicholas to follow me. Either one would have been fine by me. I was more than ready to have it out with Becca. And if Nicholas came after me, that would mean that he cared.

I paused at the back door and glanced over my shoulder just to see what kind of effect my sudden exit had caused. My heart sank. Everyone was chowing down as Becca and Nicholas continued to chat, practically on top of each other. It was as if they hadn’t even noticed I was gone.

twelve

Here's what I learned that afternoon: Painting trim when angry is not a good idea. I was messing up everywhere. But you know what? I didn't give a crap whether or not Nicholas's landlord flipped out. Why should I? Clearly he didn't care about me, since, oh, about an hour had passed after I stormed inside, and he hadn't come looking for me yet. In fact, I was pretty sure that he and Becca hadn't even gotten back to work. They were still out back talking about her new career in modeling. Unbelievable. Maybe his landlord would toss him out and he and Becca could get a place together! Yeah! Then they could have the same modeling agency and the same address, and they could live happily ever after!

"Ugh!"

I jumped down from the stepladder and dropped the

brush onto the tarp at my feet. I hated this. I hated feeling like everything was out of my control. Why couldn't I just go back out there and say something?

Suddenly I heard the back door slide open, and Becca's voice filled the house. I grabbed my brush and jumped back onto the ladder, trying to look nonchalant. Unfortunately I was quaking with nerves and anger.

"Hey, Jen!" Becca said, waltzing into the living room with Nicholas in tow. She was all smiles and bright eyes, and Nicholas was grinning from ear to ear. They looked every bit the happy couple. "We're going to go hit the beach and cool off before we start working again."

Of course you are, I thought, my shoulders and neck tightening. *Why don't you just get married while you're at it?*

"Wanna come?" Becca asked as if nothing had happened between us. As if we hadn't had a telepathic standoff and we both didn't know she was crushing on my sort-of boyfriend. *Thanks for the pity invite, sis.*

"No thanks," I said stiffly.

Becca's smile faded. "Come on, Jenna. You promised we'd go to the beach today."

"I know," I said, continuing to paint. "That's why you should go. I want to finish this."

I could feel Becca staring at me, but I refused to look at her. *You are not affecting me. You're not*, I told her silently.

"Fine," she snapped. "If you really want to spend this gorgeous day working—"

I took a deep breath and exhaled audibly.

"Then let's go," she said to Nicholas.

"We'll be back soon," he said.

No “*You don’t have to do this. It’s my place.*” No “*Come on, Jenna. I want you to come.*” Nothing.

I didn’t say a word as they turned and traipsed out the door, heading for the break in the hedge and the sand path down to the beach. My jaw clenched, and I kept right on working. I was just getting toward the corner when, suddenly, it hit me.

I was a complete idiot.

First of all, I had utterly forgotten my promise to myself to go against my instincts with Nicholas. Being angry and righteously indignant was *not* New Jenna behavior. Secondly, I had just let my gorgeous, popular sister go off alone to the beach with *my* guy to flirt and splash and be wet together. Was I out of my mind? And most insane of all, I was toiling away inside, painting *Nicholas’s* house, while he was down at the beach having fun.

What the hell was I doing here?

I dropped the brush, grabbed my beach bag from near the front door, and headed for the back. I was just about to slide open the patio door when I overheard Todd and Paul in the hallway.

“Nicholas is so the man,” Todd said. “I cannot believe he is going to bag *twins!*”

“I know,” Paul said reverently. “He’s had sisters before, but never twins. He’s my god.”

I froze, so completely skeeved out I couldn’t breathe. Is that what this was? Some kind of challenge? Had Nicholas been planning to “bag” Becca ever since he saw her? And—ew—he’d *had* sisters before? If these guys were right—if this was what Nicholas was really about—then he’d been

totally playing me for weeks.

I shoved my way outside, then ran for the beach path. This was *so* not going to happen. Not if I had anything to say about it.

The pathway down to the beach was steep, and the sand was kind of loose. As I clomped my way down, trying to keep my balance, I could see Nicholas and Becca out in the shallow waves, laughing and talking. Becca dunked under and came back up, smoothing her hair away from her face and looking every bit the sexy mermaid. Nicholas couldn't take his eyes off her.

Come on, look up, I willed them. *See me and have the decency to spring apart*.

But the beach was wide, and the sand slowed me down. As I tried to speed-walk toward the edge of the water, Nicholas reached out and pulled Becca to him. She didn't shrink away. And then my worst nightmare came true right there in front of my eyes.

He leaned in and kissed her. With tongue and groping hands and everything. I knew exactly what that kiss felt like, and I wanted to hurl.

I stopped in the middle of the beach, my chest heaving, watching my sister press herself into my boyfriend's chest. The guy who had been so sweet and understanding when I'd told him I didn't want to have sex. The first person I had ever let touch me under my clothes. The guy I thought cared about me *so* much. It had all been a big lie. He was a total slime.

"What the hell are you doing?" I screamed at the top of

my lungs, storming toward the water's edge.

The two of them finally sprang apart, although Becca looked a lot more chagrined than Nicholas did.

"That's my sister, you asshole!" I shouted.

"Jenna—" Becca gasped.

"I'm not talking to you!" I replied. My anger, for the moment, was focused on Nicholas.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa. Calm down," he said, walking toward me in the water. "What's the big trauma?"

"The big trauma? The big trauma is that I just came down here and found your tongue in my sister's throat—that's the big trauma!"

"Hey, I thought you came out here to have fun this summer. We never said we were exclusive," Nicholas said smoothly.

Suddenly that sleek confidence of his was very irritating.

"Who cares what was said or what wasn't?" I fumed. "There's a little thing called common decency. I mean, God, Nicholas! I stayed here this weekend to help *you* out, and while I'm up there working, you're down here making out with my sister!"

Nicholas's nostrils flared. He reached past me and grabbed a towel out of the sand. "This is unbelievable," he said, irritated. "You know, my friends told me not to get involved with you, but did I listen? No-o-o! Unfortunately, it turns out they were right. You *are* too immature for me."

"What?" Becca and I said in unison.

She was standing next to me now. I wasn't really keen on having her on my side, considering I was as angry at her as I was at him.

"How could you say that to me?" I said. "I thought you *liked* me."

"Oh, you were good for some things," Nicholas said, violently drying off his legs and torso. "Like going on food runs. And the fooling around was, well, *sweet*," he added. "But to be honest, I wasn't going to be able to take the goody-goody thing much longer anyway. A guy does have his needs."

"Oh, my God," I said under my breath. My hand was over my stomach. I was going to vomit. I really was.

"So, what? You were just using my sister all this time?" Becca snapped.

"And what were you doing with me?" he asked her. Becca had no response for that. "You know what? I've had enough of playtime, kiddies. I've got better things to do," he said to me. "Don't call me."

He grabbed his shirt off the ground and stormed away. As if he had any right to be angry here.

"Oh, yeah? Well, don't call me either!" I shot back lamely.

Like he even cared.

For a long moment neither Becca nor I said a word. I didn't want to be anywhere near her. I didn't even want to talk to her long enough to tell her to back off. I wished she would just go away on her own, but she refused to take my body-language hint.

"Jenna—"

"Don't," I said, turning my betrayed eyes on her. "I don't want to hear it."

She stared back at me for a long moment, clearly trying

to think of anything she could possibly say. Coming up with nothing, she looked down at the sand. I took the opportunity to turn around and walk up the shoreline. This time I really didn't want her to follow me. And this time, she got it right.

I was so, so stupid. The more I thought about my "relationship" with Nicholas, the more I recognized all the signs I had missed. I sat on my bed, hugging one of my pillows, wanting to whack myself in the head with each new epiphany.

All Nicholas ever wanted to talk about was himself. Whenever I tried to talk about myself, his attention would lapse. Plus he never called me unless he needed me to bring him something or help him with something, or come over to fool around. In fact, we never did anything other than hang out at his house and hook up. How could I have been so naïve?

But when I saw Nicholas in my mind's eye, I understood. Of course I had overlooked all his flaws. He was the first guy who had ever really showed an interest in me, and on top of that, he was a dream. At least that was how he came off. He'd made me believe he was respectful and understanding, when all along he'd just been waiting for me to give it up.

I took a deep breath. Well, I had learned my lesson. I wouldn't get sucked in by a guy like him again. Unfortunately the thought didn't help stop my nausea.

There was a jingle of keys at the lock, and the door swung open. Sun had given my sister her set for the weekend.

It had seemed like a good idea at the time, but now I wished she hadn't. There Becca stood, looking sheepish, holding a pizza box and a grocery bag. I could see through the white plastic that she had a six-pack of Mug root beer and a huge bag of M&Ms.

Our signature Breakup Buffet. This was what we ate whenever Becca broke up with a guy. Until today the feast had never been procured on my behalf. This was *not* a first I was relishing.

"Can I come in?" Becca asked.

The problem with the standard dorm room is that there is absolutely nowhere to escape to.

"Whatever," I said coolly.

Becca walked in, letting the door slam behind her, and put all the food onto Sun's desk. She dropped down onto my bed, sitting on my bare feet until I yanked them out from under her.

"Jenna, I am so sorry," she said, putting a hand on my knee. "I have no idea why I let him kiss me. I'm such a bitch. I wish I could take it all back."

I stared at her, wishing she could take it all back, too.

"I swear, I just thought we were talking, you know? Innocent flirting. I really didn't want him to kiss me. I—"

"Oh, please!" I blurted, dropping my legs down so that she lost her balance for a second. "Innocent flirting? I *saw* that kiss. There was nothing *innocent* about it. He was my boyfriend! You can't flirt innocently with your sister's boyfriend! There's no such thing."

"Hey! You said he wasn't your boyfriend!" Becca said.

A shocked laugh escaped my throat. "That's your

defense? A technicality? You *knew* I liked him. Who cares whether it's official or not? You're my sister!"

Becca was dumbfounded. "Jenna—"

"No, Becca. Don't even try it. You wanted him from the second you saw him, and you just went right ahead being Becca about it," I said. "You couldn't stand the fact that a guy actually wanted *me* for once."

Becca's mouth opened slightly, but I could tell I had her. I sat back and waited for her to freak. After all, that was her usual response when cornered. But instead she simply closed her mouth and sighed, looking across the room.

"Maybe you're right," she said.

"What?"

Becca pulled her knees up under her chin and kicked off her sandals. She buried her chin between her knees and hugged herself.

"Maybe you're right," she said again, lifting her curled shoulders. "Maybe I'm not used to your being the center of attention. And about the 'boyfriend' thing, I guess I just used that as an excuse to, you know, make it okay."

Yeah. I could identify with her rationalization. Like telling myself it was okay to date three guys at once because I wanted to have a summer of fun.

"Wow," I said.

"You don't have to be so smug about it," Becca said, her eyes flashing.

"I'm not," I replied. "I'm just surprised."

"Yeah, well, so am I," she said. "When you told me you were going to 'get crazy,' I guess I didn't really expect you

to do it. And then when I walked in here, you looked so different, it was like . . .”

“What?” I asked, swallowing against a dry throat.

“You weren’t even Jenna anymore,” she said quietly. Suddenly she looked like a vulnerable, five-year-old version of herself. “I guess I just wanted to see what was so great about this guy, you know? How he made you change so much.”

I wanted to laugh and cry all at once. “Becca, first of all, Nicholas didn’t change me. If I’m different, it’s because *I* changed me,” I said. “I’m still Jenna. I’m just . . . making a few changes.”

“Big changes,” Becca said with a wan smile.

“I guess. Some of them are,” I said. “But you’re gonna have to get used to them, cuz I kind of like them. Well, not the one where I’m totally dense about guys.”

“Yeah, but that’s not new,” Becca joked.

I whacked her arm, but we both laughed. “Whatever,” I said. “That part I’m *not* keeping around.”

Becca let her legs drop and looked at me. “I’ll never do anything like this again, Jenna. I swear. It was temporary insanity.”

“I know.”

“So, are we gonna be okay?”

“When are we ever not okay?” I said, feeling a rush of warmth. “I mean, if we survived the dreaded doll massacre of third grade, we can survive this.”

Back when we were kids, I had always used and abused all my dolls, while Becca kept all of hers up on shelves and wouldn’t let me touch them. One day while she was out on

a playdate, I got fed up and went to work on her collection with a pair of scissors and permanent markers. I don't think Becca had ever fully forgiven me for that.

"You're right. I guess we're finally even," she said now, scrunching her nose. She leaned over and hugged me, and I hugged her right back, squeezing my eyes closed.

"I really am sorry about Nicholas," she said over my shoulder.

"Screw the guy. Bring on the pizza!" I said.

Becca clapped her hands together and stood up. "Now you're talking," she said, grabbing a bottle of root beer and handing it to me. "Let's eat!"

I laughed and let her serve up my very first breakup buffet as she chatted away about nothing at all, trying to distract me. And it was definitely working. Who cared about guys? This was all that mattered.

The End

The Choice Redux

Well, that turned out kind of . . . sucky. Think you can help me do better with another guy? Go back to [page 117](#) and try again!

You Chose Kyle



“Come in! Come in!” I cried, hugging Becca again. She tripped forward, dragging her rolling suitcase with her, and we both almost went down. Then my hip jammed against Sun’s footboard, and we were saved from hitting the deck.

“Ow.” I released Becca to rub my new bruise.

“Geez. You must have really missed me,” Becca said as she walked into the center of the room. She turned around in a small circle, as if trying to figure out where the rest of the place was.

“I really did!” I said. Just seeing her made my trepidation melt away. In all my concern about her visit I had forgotten how weird it was to be away from her.

“Way to sound surprised,” Becca joked, placing her stuff down. She reached out for another hug. “I missed you, too,” she said into my hair. When she pulled back

again, she was all excited smiles. "So? You haven't answered the question. What are we doing this weekend?"

"We're going to San Diego!" I announced.

"Yes! Hot surfer boys and lots of beach time!" Becca cheered. "I knew you'd make the right decision."

I laughed. "Thanks." Then I realized I was still clutching my cell phone. "But now I have to make a couple of not-so-fun phone calls."

Becca grimaced. "Yeah. Those are never happy. Do you need some pointers?"

Thanks for reminding me that I have zero experience with this, I thought. But I tried to let it slide. I knew she didn't *mean* to imply that I was lame.

"No. I think I got it," I told her.

"Okay." She grabbed her purse, and I could hear the dozens of makeup products clicking around inside. "I'll go to the bathroom and fix my face so you can have some privacy."

"Thanks," I said. "It's down the hall on the right."

"Good luck!" Becca gave me a quick hug for support before traipsing out. I smiled after her, feeling slightly more confident. Maybe having Becca around would be a good thing.

I dialed Nicholas first. He picked up on the fourth ring, and there was so much noise in the background now, I could hardly hear him.

"Hello? Jenna?" he said.

There was a huge crash.

"Everything okay over there?" I asked.

"Yeah. Just letting off a little steam before all the work

starts," he said. "So when are you coming over?"

I bit my lip and held my breath. Better to just get this over with. "I'm not."

"What!?" he shouted over the noise.

I rolled my eyes and sighed. Could this be any more uncomfortable? "I said I'm not! I'm gonna go to San Diego for the weekend!"

"Oh! Really?"

"Yeah. Actually, there's this guy . . ."

"Oh. Okay. That's cool. Well, have fun! I'd better go before someone destroys something we can't fix."

My heart dropped. Clearly he hadn't understood what I was trying to say, and I didn't want him to get off the phone before he did.

"Wait! Nicholas?"

"Yeah?"

"I just . . . I just wanted to make sure," I fumbled. Wow. Maybe I should have taken Becca up on those pointers. "I mean, I don't think we should see each other anymore," I said, squeezing my eyes closed.

"Yeah. I got it. There's this guy," he said impatiently. "Really, Jenna, I have to go. Have a good summer."

And then the line went dead. I fell back onto my bed. So, that was it. I guess I hadn't meant as much to Nicholas as I thought I did. Uncontrollable humiliation came over me. Did this mean that everything he'd said to me was untrue? All that stuff about my being *so* beautiful and about his wanting to be around me?

It doesn't matter. You picked Kyle, a little voice inside me said. I took a deep breath and shoved aside the negativity.

I hated feeling stupid, but I didn't have to, right? In fact, I was *smart*. I had ditched the guy who clearly couldn't have cared less about me. Good move, Jenna.

I took a deep breath and dialed Sean.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Sean. It's Jenna," I said.

"Whoa. Are you okay?" he asked.

I suppose that Nicholas's reaction had left me sounding morose. "No, actually. There's something I have to tell you."

"Uh-oh."

I swallowed a lump in my throat. "Yeah, I'm kind of going away for the weekend," I said. "With Kyle."

There was a moment of silence. "Kyle?"

"Yeah. My surf instructor?" I said.

"Oh. Are you *seeing* this guy?" he asked.

"Kind of," I said, rubbing my forehead.

"So what the hell were you doing with me?" The anger and disappointment rang clear.

"We never said we weren't seeing other people," I pointed out.

"Well, thanks for the update, PA," he said. "I feel so much better now."

"I'm sorry, Sean. Really. I just . . ." Every explanation I thought of sounded lame, so I gave up. "I'm really sorry."

"So let me get this straight: You're skipping out on the trip and the midterm pass to—what?—shack up with some surf bum?"

"He's not a bum," I shot back, standing. "Why do you always have to act like you know everything?"

"Because I do," Sean said defensively. "And one thing I

know for sure is that you're definitely not serious about this class. I think I'll talk to Professor Rosenberg about suspending his no-lab-partner-switching rule."

My jaw dropped. He had to be kidding me. "Sean—"

"Later, PA," he said. Then he, too, hung up.

I turned the phone off and dropped it onto my bed. Unbelievable. Two minutes ago I had really liked both those guys, and now I had serious doubts about them. Not that I expected anyone to take a breakup well, but, sheesh. One didn't even care, and the other tore my head off.

Thank goodness Kyle was normal.

Suddenly the door to my room was flung open, and Sun barreled in, clutching shopping bags in one hand and Becca's fingers in the other. "San Diego better watch out!" she announced, flinging the arm with the bags into the air.

"You're going?" I asked.

"You bet your twin butt I am," Sun said. "And now that I've met your other half, I'm even more psyched than I was before."

"This girl is hilarious!" Becca announced, bouncing down onto Sun's messy bed. "She practically tackled me in the bathroom."

"Yeah, she does that," I said.

"So, how did the calls go?" Becca asked.

"Oh, fantastic," I said with a shrug. Then I looked at Sun. "What the heck is all that?" I asked, gesturing at her bags.

She dropped them onto the floor and rummaged through the first one, pulling out a gorgeous sarong-style dress. She held it up to her body and struck a pose.

"I figure if I'm going to be hanging out with the surf

crowd all weekend, I'd better dress the part!" she announced. "Connor is going to keel over when he sees this. It's red! He said red was his favorite color, right? Were you there for that conversation, or were you there for the conversation about fake sugar? I can't remember."

As Sun continued to ramble, Becca caught my gaze and widened her eyes like, "*Whoa.*" I looked back at her and shrugged slightly like, "*Told ya.*"

That's the thing about being a twin. We've always been able to communicate without speaking. We both laughed and Sun stopped talking.

"What? What did I say? What!?"

Becca and I just laughed harder, and I could feel those horrible phone calls shaking off me. This was going to be one incredible weekend.

As Becca, Sun, and I approached the big blue van on Friday morning, Kyle was crouched on the ground, checking one of the tires. All the other guys milled around, chatting or scarfing breakfast burritos. I watched Becca's face as she took in all the incredible hotness. She looked, in a word, grateful.

"You are so my girl," she whispered, smoothing her hair back. "Now, which one's yours?"

But I didn't have to answer. Because just then Kyle spotted us. He stood up with a huge, heart-stopping grin, and jogged over to lift me up in his arms.

"I am so glad you came," he said, letting me slide down until my feet hit the ground. Then he planted a long, slow, incredibly sexy kiss on me. So long that all the guys and

even Sun and Becca started to whoop in appreciation.

“Whoa,” I heard myself say.

Kyle touched his nose to mine. “I’ve been looking forward to that for two days.”

Good decision, Jenna. So good.

Somehow I made myself turn around. “Kyle, this is my sister, Becca.”

“Hi there,” she said.

Kyle blinked, clearly surprised by the twin thing, but he recovered quickly. “Nice to meet you,” he said. “You ready for a long ride with a bunch of scruffy morons?”

Becca turned to look at the gaggle of guys, who all jokingly preened for her attention. One of them even lifted his arms to flex his biceps—which were not bad at all.

“I think I can handle it,” Becca said with a laugh.

Biceps Boy stepped forward and offered his hand. He had short, spiky brown hair and dimples to die for. “Hey, I’m Brody,” he said. Becca placed her hand in his, and he quickly lifted it and kissed it. “Might I offer my services as your personal surf instructor for the weekend?”

“Well, I—”

“No way, dude! I was gonna offer!” one of the other guys protested.

“Hey! It was my freakin’ idea!”

Suddenly Becca was surrounded by half-dressed hotness. Kyle slipped an arm over my shoulders, and I stepped into his warmth. He smelled of suntan lotion and mint toothpaste.

“Your sister’s popular,” he said, sounding awed.

“Yeah. She is,” I replied, resting my head against his

chest. He didn't seem at all interested in her. Not one bit. Sigh.

"I'd better finish loading the van," Kyle said, glancing at his watch. "We have to hit the road soon."

"I'll help." I was so giddy over his nonreaction to Becca, I felt as if I could lift the van itself.

Kyle grabbed up my bag, then Becca's. He groaned as he hoisted hers up to his shoulder. "What does she have in here? Bowling balls?"

I laughed. "We're girls," I reminded him. "She needs bathing suits, pj's, party clothes. And ten pairs of shoes to go with each outfit."

Kyle smiled as he led me around to the rear of the van, where we found Sun and Connor smooching, their legs dangling over the bumper. They both started at our arrival.

"Sorry. We're in your way," Sun said.

"Couldn't help myself, man," Connor said apologetically.

Sun beamed. "He can't help himself. I like that."

"That's cool," Kyle said with a shrug. "But maybe you should check the oil before we go?"

"On it," Connor said, turning on the heel of his Chuck Taylor. Sun giggled and followed him to the front.

"What are you, like, in charge around here?" I asked.

"Nothing would ever get done otherwise," Kyle said, placing our bags into the back of the van. "I love these guys, but they need a dad sometimes."

"Mr. Dependable," I joked lightly.

He looked over at me as if he wanted to say something but wasn't sure he should.

“What?” I asked, feeling suddenly uncertain.

“It’s just, you mentioned party clothes,” he said, his muscles flexing as he moved the bags around to make more room. “I’m actually not going to be able to party too much this weekend.”

“Oh.” I felt a pang of disappointment. Didn’t he want to spend time with me? Wasn’t that why he had asked me along?

“It’s just, this competition is really important,” he explained, standing up straight and shoving his hands into his back pockets. “I’m going to need to be rested. And focused.”

I felt as if I was being scolded, somehow. As if I hadn’t realized how critical this competition was. But I *had* realized it. I knew that this weekend could make all his dreams come true. That was one of the reasons I wanted to be there. If he won, then I’d get to share the greatest moment in his life. If he lost, well, it would suck. But at least I’d be there to comfort him. Either way, it was him and me. That was what I cared about. But did he?

“Got it,” I said.

Kyle smiled. “Sorry. Didn’t mean to get all serious on ya,” he said, leaning forward to kiss my cheek.

“No problem.”

He smoothed my hair down with one hand and then cupped the back of my head, looking me in the eye in a way that made my skin tingle. “I really am glad you’re here.”

Suddenly I felt warm all over. Okay, so he *did* care. “Me, too.”

Then Kyle turned and clapped his hands together. “All

right, you guys! Let's get this show on the road!" he shouted. "Everybody into the van!"

There were a few groans of protest, and I laughed. It really did seem as if Kyle was a father figure. But then they all started whooping and fighting over who got the front seat and pulling out CDs for the stereo, and Kyle jumped in on the debate.

"Road trip!" Brody shouted, picking Becca up off her feet. She screeched as he deposited her into the van.

Kyle laughed and shook his head. "You are a wild man!" he cheered, slapping Brody on the back. Then he turned and held a hand out to me. "You ready for this?"

My heart skipped a beat as I placed my fingers in his. *I hope so*, I thought.

The hotel was so jam-packed, it really looked as if people were hanging from the rafters. It was a three-story structure right on the beach, with doors facing the water and long trellised terraces connecting the rooms. As the van putt-putted to a stop in the parking lot, we stared up at hundreds of kids our age, all of whom seemed to be drinking, laughing, shouting, dancing, and running from room to room. A guy came out of one room with his surfboard and nearly knocked a bikini-sporting chica off the third-floor terrace. At least five different types of music blasted from various rooms, each competing for supremacy. It was total mayhem.

"Jonas, what the hell did you do?" Kyle demanded, shoving the van's sliding door open.

He stepped out and was nearly run over by a guy on a

skateboard. He placed his hands behind his head as he took in the scene.

"Sorry, dude," Jonas said, unfolding his long legs and stretching. "This was the cheapest place to stay within a thirty-mile radius. It's not like we're rolling in green."

"There's no way we're gonna get any sleep here," Kyle said, throwing up a hand. "You really wanna compete on zero z's?"

"Give me a few Red Bulls, and I'm good to go," Jonas said.

"Aw, yeah!" Brody cheered, laying out a hand to be slapped, which it was. By everyone except Kyle.

"Maybe we could find another hotel," I suggested, swinging to the ground.

"No way. Everything's booked solid," Jonas said matter-of-factly. "Our rooms are on the third floor, so at least you won't have people jumping up and down on your head all night."

Kyle took a deep breath. I could practically see him processing, trying to let it go. Finally he executed a neck roll and exhaled loudly.

"Okay. You're right. I'll be fine," he said.

All the guys converged to grab their bags as Becca and I exchanged a relieved look. Crisis averted.

"This is nuts, huh?" I said, glancing at the hotel. It looked like a *Girls Gone Wild* convention had met up with a frat reunion.

"Totally. Like right out of a movie," Becca agreed.

"This is gonna be so much fun!" Sun announced, joining us. "Party central, ladies!"

We laughed as the guys started to filter over with their stuff. Brody had Becca's bag as well as his own. Kyle lifted his duffel and my bag, then slammed the door.

"Let's go check it out," he said with grim determination.

We all headed toward the hotel as a group. The closer we got, the more engulfed we were by the noise and revelry. A few girls in wet suits strode by with their boards, headed for the water. A few guys sat around, drinking beer and debating environmental issues. Oddly, the more people Kyle saw, the more his expression relaxed.

"Okay, this is pretty cool," he said as we reached the door marked OFFICE. "At least it's all surfers. Doesn't seem to be a poseur kind of place."

"God forbid," Becca joked under her breath, and I smiled.

"So let's do this." Kyle was just turning toward the door when he stopped so short, he almost tripped himself. His face went ashen. I followed his gaze and saw two drop-dead-gorgeous surfer chicks approaching. One was super-tall and blond with a tattoo of a sun right around her exposed belly button. The other was more compact and muscular with cocoa skin and a short, messy 'do. They both smiled as they wove their way toward Kyle.

"Uh, Jonas. Who did you say told you about this place again?" Kyle asked weakly.

Jonas cleared his throat and looked away.

"What's going on?" Becca asked.

I had a feeling I knew, but before I could answer, the blond surfer chick walked right up to Kyle and lifted her

arms to wrap them around his neck.

"Hey, Kyle!" she exclaimed.

Kyle stepped backward to avoid her, and she paused but recovered quickly. Smiling at all of us, she flicked her gaze over me, Becca, and Sun, then turned her attention to the guys.

"Hey, guys. What's up?" she said.

They all grumbled hellos, looking sheepish and uncomfortable.

"What are you doing here?" Kyle demanded.

"Come on. Like I was going to miss your big weekend?" she said.

Becca and Sun were staring at me so intently, I had a feeling they could see each other *through* me.

"Uh, Kyle?" I said. I had to say something. I was starting to feel conspicuously invisible.

"Oh! Jenna!" he said, reaching for my hand. "Manette, there's someone I'd like you to meet."

So I was right. This was Manette. The girl who couldn't stop calling. The girl who was supposedly Kyle's ex.

"This is Jenna. My *girlfriend*," he said pointedly.

Manette blinked, and smiled broadly. "Nice to meet you," she said. "Welcome to California."

I had no idea what to say. Everyone was watching me. I thought Kyle had told her, in no uncertain terms, that it was over. Why was she here? And how the heck did she know that I wasn't from California?

"Well, why don't you all get checked in?" Manette said, like a good hostess. "My aunt owns the place, so I had her put us in rooms right next to each other. This way we can

hang out *all* weekend. I just can't wait to catch up."

No one said a word.

"See you up there?" Manette said to Kyle.

Then she and her friend sauntered off as if they hadn't just been at the center of the most uncomfortable encounter in history.

"That was Manette?" I asked Kyle, watching her perfect little butt as she walked off.

Kyle sighed. "Yeah. That was Manette."



“Alone! Finally!” Kyle said, taking my hand as we wandered along the beach that evening. Becca and Brody were a few feet ahead of us, continuing their day-long flirtfest on our way to some barbecue place Brody had decided on for dinner. I heard Becca laugh and wished I could feel that carefree. Unfortunately, now that Kyle and I *were* alone, I had about four thousand things I needed to say.

“Kyle . . .” I began tentatively.

“I know. I know,” he said with a nod. He glanced at me, sheepishly. “You want to know what the deal is with Manette.”

“Got it in one,” I said.

Kyle let out a groan and tipped his head back to look up at the stars. I knew instinctively he wasn’t groaning at me. He was groaning at Manette. All day he had avoided

her whenever she'd come around—which had been often—and yet she kept coming. And she never even looked daunted or uncertain. It was as if she was unshakably positive that, sooner or later, Kyle was going to snap out of it and remember he wanted to be with her.

"How long ago did you two break up?" I asked.

"A few weeks ago," he replied. "We only went out for about six months, but I knew early on she wasn't for me. She's too superficial. All she cares about is going to parties and being seen and buying clothes. She's, like, your polar opposite."

I blushed at the compliment but made myself stay on the subject. "Okay, so you broke up with her . . ." I prompted.

"Yeah, but she can't seem to let it go. She keeps calling me and she wants to see me, and she won't take no for an answer. I even changed my number, but she got the new one from one of the guys. And once I find out who, I plan to kill that person."

"So you have a stalker," I said, half joking.

"No. I mean, she's not crazy or anything," he said, glancing at me. "Just stuck. I guess she thinks she really likes me."

My eyebrows shot up. "She *thinks* she really likes you?"

"Yeah. That's the thing," Kyle said, warming to his subject. "She never really liked *me* me. She wanted me to be some live-for-the-waves person. Like a moment-to-moment, I'll-leave-for-Mexico-at-the-drop-of-a-hat kind of guy, and that's just not who I am. That's what finally pushed me over the edge and made me break up with her. I realized she was trying to change me."

"What made you realize it?" I asked.

He pressed his lips together and stopped walking, letting Becca and Brody put more distance between us. "I got drunk one night at Connor's twenty-first and when I woke up the next morning, I was in Tijuana."

"What?" I screeched.

Becca paused halfway up the beach. "Are you okay?" she shouted back.

"Fine, fine." I waved her off, still looking at Kyle. "She *kidnapped* you?"

"No! Not exactly. According to all my friends I agreed to it, but I was very drunk. Trust me. I haven't had a sip of alcohol since. Don't want to go there again, you know?"

"Yeah. That's understandable," I said. This girl was seriously out of control.

"Anyway, the point is, I told her it was over. And told her and told her, but clearly it's not sinking in."

He shook his head and started walking again.

"Well, maybe you were too nice about it," I offered.

"Maybe," he replied. He sighed. "Listen, Jenna, I don't want to talk about Manette anymore. She's out of my life. It doesn't matter where she shows up or what she thinks she's going to accomplish." He stopped again and took both my hands in his. "*You're* my girl."

I looked into his brown eyes and felt a warm, tickling rush from the top of my head all the way through my body and down into my toes. The boy really knew how to get to a girl.

"You get me, Jenna. And even though I haven't known you that long, I know you'd never try to change me," he

said, squeezing my fingers. "You're the only one I want to be with."

My heart was so full, it was crowding out my lungs. Barely a breath came out as I said, "Wow."

Then Kyle slipped his hands around my face and tilted my head up. He searched my eyes for a split second and smiled, before leaning in for the most mind-blowing kiss I've ever experienced. My knees buckled, and I fell forward into him. I was about to pull away, embarrassed, but he wrapped one arm around me and held on to me like he never wanted to let go.

When he finally pulled back, his eyes were serious. I barely noticed, though, because I was floating somewhere over Southern California.

"There is something I have to tell you, though," he said.

"What?" I asked dreamily.

"If I do make the cut at the Classic, if I make the circuit, I'm leaving for Hawaii on Monday."

Smash! That was the sound of me crashing back to earth. I blinked and backed up a step.

"You're . . . you're *what!*?"

Kyle brought his hands up to cover his face, then pulled them down and made a sort of tepee over his nose and mouth, looking at me pleadingly.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you," he said. "I just—I thought that if you knew, you might not come."

Well, obviously! I thought. How could he do this to me? How could he get me all wrapped up in him and then just drop a bomb like that?

"I don't understand," I said. "So what is this? Are you

just using me? Get the stupid high school girl to go away for the weekend to have one last hurrah?"

Kyle looked stricken. "No! It's so not like that. You know it's not like that."

"How do I know?" I asked.

"Because of what I *just* said to you!" Kyle told me, thrusting his hands out. "Remember the other day when I told you I had been trying to resist you since the day we met? This is part of the reason—because I knew I might be leaving."

A huge knot was forming under my rib cage, and I sucked in a deep breath.

"Jenna, do you have any idea how much it kills me that I didn't meet you until now?" Kyle continued. "I wish you had come here last summer. Or that the competition was at the end of August. But you didn't, and it's not, and there's nothing I can do about that. But I hoped we could spend my last couple days here together. That was why I wanted you to come."

Whoa. It took a minute for all of that to sink in. I stared at him for what felt like a long time, and he just looked right back, his eyes open and honest and hoping. He didn't want me to walk away. It was written all over his face.

"This sucks," I said finally.

"Tell me about it," he replied. His brow creased in an adorable way. "You're not gonna leave, are you?"

I had to laugh, even though part of me wanted to cry. "No. I'm not gonna leave."

Kyle's sigh of relief was so big, his entire chest went up and down with the force of it. Then he stepped forward and

wrapped his arms around me. I clung to his soft T-shirt and squeezed my eyes closed.

I tried to readjust my summer-boyfriend expectations. If Kyle's dreams came true over the next two days, all I got was a one-weekend boyfriend. One measly little weekend. It didn't feel remotely like enough.

"This is unbelievable," Becca said, standing on tiptoe to scan the crowded beach. "I think everyone in California is here."

"Definitely looks that way," I replied.

Aside from a bunch of surfing officials and celebrities seated in the canopied grandstand, all the other spectators were in a free-for-all on the beach. It looked more like Ozzfest than a sporting event. I couldn't imagine how anyone could see anything from down there, which was why I was so grateful to Brody for finding us a dune to stand on near the back of the crowd. Brody was the only one of the guys not competing—no big surfing-star aspirations there—so he was off giving a pep talk to the guys before they got into the water.

"Oooh! Is that Kelly Slater?" Sun shouted, pointing into the throng. There was a three-person camera crew cutting through the crowd, following an older blond guy with a serious tan who kept turning to talk to the camera. "I'm gonna go find out!"

She ran off, sand spraying up behind her.

"Who's Kelly Slater?" Becca asked me as the wind tossed her hair back.

"No clue."

Already at least twenty competitors had taken to the waves, including Connor and Jonas. Connor had done okay, but Jonas had completely biffed and broken his board.

At that moment Manette strode toward our dune in a white bikini, her posse trailing behind her. She shot me a smile as if we were old friends. The crowd parted to let her through, and I saw more than one male jaw drop.

"Hey, Jenna. You're still here?" she said, stopping just below us. "Thought you might have gone home." *Because you're intimidated by me*, her tone implied.

"No. Still here," I said.

"I didn't see you guys out last night," she said. "Have a pretty early bedtime?"

"Kill her," Becca said under her breath.

"No. Kyle and I stayed in," I told her. "He doesn't want to party this weekend. Has to rest up for the competition. He's very serious about this, you know." *I know him better than you do*, my tone implied right back.

Manette's brow knit. "Huh. That's weird. He always managed to go out and party when he was with me, no matter what he was doing the next day," she said. "But I guess I just bring out his fun side."

Her friends laughed, but Manette smiled innocently, as if we were chatting about the weather.

"Ladies and gentlemen! Next into the water, Kyle Cross!" the announcer called out. My heart leaped, and Becca grabbed my hand.

"This is it!" I cried, forgetting Manette for the moment.

"Well, see you later, Jenna," Manette said. "I want to be

the first one there to congratulate our boy when he gets out of the water.”

My whole body tensed up. I imagined myself launching off the dune and taking her down WWE-body-slam style. Maybe I should just do it. It would be *very* un-Old Jenna.

“Ignore her. She’s nothing,” Becca told me.

Manette strolled off, and I managed to focus on Kyle as he paddled out into the waves. Kyle was all that mattered. Not his big blond mistake.

Kyle grabbed the sides of his board and dove under a huge wave. He looked incredible out there. Calm and sure and determined.

“So, are we hoping he makes it, or are we hoping he doesn’t make it?” Becca asked, biting her lip.

I swallowed hard. This was Kyle’s dream. He wanted to get onto the circuit more than anything. I couldn’t send him bad vibes just because I wanted to spend an extra few weeks with him.

“We’re hoping he makes it,” I said with a nod.

Becca squeezed my hand. “Good girl.”

Out in the water, Kyle stood up on his board and rode a huge wave, slicing down into its belly. He zoomed toward the beach, crouching as the wave crested over him. The water was so clear I could see a murky outline of his wet suit as he rode beneath the wall of water.

Stay up, I urged him. *Don’t fall like Jonas. Come on . . .*

Finally, after what seemed an eternity, Kyle shot out the other side of the wave. The whole crowd went nuts. He thrust his hands into the air and grinned as he rode toward the shore.

“Yes! That was incredible!” I shouted.

Becca hugged me. “He’s amazing, Jenna.”

I grinned as I watched Kyle grab his board and work his way out of the shallow water. Then I saw her. Manette rushed forward in her barely-there bikini, beaming with pride and joy. Everything inside me felt sour as I watched the scene unfold. But Kyle looked up, and walked right past her open arms, putting his board between the two of them for good measure.

“Ha! Did you see that?” Becca cried.

Suddenly I was smiling again. From where we stood, I could see Kyle cutting right through the crowd, homing in on the spot where Brody had told him we’d be as if nothing in the world could distract him. Well-wishers slapped his back, but he never stopped walking. I took a few steps down the dune. He dropped his board into the sand, lifted me up, and twirled me around, planting a kiss right on my lips.

As I kissed Kyle, everyone around us applauded. It was my daydream come true.

“You look totally hot,” Becca told me that afternoon as we finished up our makeup in our room at the hotel. “You are so the girlfriend of a champion surfer!”

“Yeah?” I asked, checking myself out from every angle. I was wearing a pink miniskirt I had bought at one of the surf shops, and a little white tank top Becca lent me. “It’s not trying too hard?”

“Definitely not,” Becca said. She leaned toward the mirror to apply her lip gloss. “When you walk into that

party with Kyle tonight, every girl in the place is going to be jealous of you."

I grinned. As far as I knew, no one had ever been jealous of me in my life. There was a quick knock on the door, and Becca and I yelled "Come in!" in unison.

Kyle stepped inside and whistled. "Wow. You two look amazing," he said.

"Thank you," we replied. Again in unison.

"You guys going to that party with Jonas?" he asked, dropping down onto the bed.

Becca and I exchanged a look. "Yeah. You're going, too. Right?" I said.

Kyle crossed his arms over his chest. "No. I told you, remember? No partying this weekend."

"But don't you want to celebrate?" I asked. "You're in the top ten!"

"Yeah, but I need to make the top *five*," Kyle said lightly. "Which means getting up early tomorrow morning and being ready to compete."

A lump of dread formed in my chest, and Becca shot me a concerned look. She knew how disappointed I was. I knew that she, like me, was remembering what Manette had said on the beach. How Kyle had always managed to go out and party when *they* were together.

"I'm all done," Becca said, dropping a few cosmetics into her bag. "I'll just go hang out with the guys 'til you're ready."

I leaned back against the dresser and waited until she was gone. "You're really not going?" I asked Kyle.

"I can't, Jenna. Tomorrow is the biggest competition of my life," he said, turning toward me and looking up at me

from the bed. "But it's cool if you go. You shouldn't have to stay here and watch TV just because I am."

"Well, great. Thanks a lot for your permission," I said flatly. I hadn't meant to say anything that sarcastic, but it just came out.

"Whoa. What was that?" he asked.

"I'm sorry, okay? It's just . . . you sprang it on me that these may be our last two nights together, and now you're not even going out with us."

"So, the sun hasn't even gone down yet. Go out for an hour and then come back and hang," he said. "It's not like you have to stay out all night."

"But don't you want to celebrate your win?" I asked hopefully. "Everyone's gonna want to congratulate you."

"I don't care about that," Kyle said, reaching for my hand. "And I haven't *won* yet. That's kind of the point. Tomorrow is all that matters."

I kind of thought I mattered, too, I thought. But I didn't say it. It sounded too childish.

Kyle stood up and slipped his arms around my waist. "Listen, go out. Have a good time. I'll still be here when you get back, okay?"

When he put it that way, the idea of his waiting back here for me *was* kind of nice. "Okay."

"It's too bad Kyle couldn't come out!" Becca shouted to be heard over the dance music and conversation. We were leaning against a wall near the kitchen of the tiny bungalow that was hosting the rager of the century.

"I know! This sucks!"

I checked my watch. We had only been here for half an hour, but already I was regretting my decision. Hanging out with Kyle should have been more important than a San Diego surf party. What was wrong with me?

“Should we dance?” Becca suggested.

“How?” I asked her, as a passerby slammed into my shoulder.

The place was jammed with people. Whoever lived in this house might not have a home in the morning. All the furniture had been pushed up against the walls, and a lucky few had claimed spots on the couches and chairs, away from the toe-crushing revelers. Strung along the white ceiling were hundreds of red and green lights shaped like hot peppers. There were kegs everywhere—in the kitchen, the bathtub, a corner of the living room—and everyone I saw seemed to be clutching a plastic cup full of beer. In the far corner Sun and Connor were half-hidden behind a potted plant, making out as if there was no one else in the room.

“Good point! With a party like this, I totally understand the benefits of wallflowering,” she said, wrinkling her nose. “Is it just me, or do you smell nothing but sweat?”

“It’s not just you. Maybe we should get out of here,” I suggested.

Becca glanced at me. “Aw! You just wanna get home to your man!”

I blushed and ducked my head. “That’s not it.”

“Yes, it is! You’re so grossly in love it’s . . . gross,” she teased, shoving my shoulder with hers.

“No, I am not!” I protested.

“Uh-huh,” she said facetiously, causing my grin to widen even farther. “You know, it’s really not good to lie to yourself. Let alone your twin sister.”

I glanced down at my hands. *Was I lying to myself?* No. A person could not be in love this fast. It was just not possible.

“Oh, my God. Look who it is,” Becca said.

My heart dropped even before I glanced up. Manette had just come through the door in a minidress that really should have been categorized as a tank top. She wore a self-satisfied grin as she pulled someone into the room with her left hand. A second later the floor dropped out from under me.

Kyle had just tripped through the door, right into Manette’s side.

“Holy crap,” Becca said.

My mouth went completely dry. Apparently Manette really *did* bring out Kyle’s fun side. Manette laughed and turned around to hug Kyle, whose arms circled her tiny waist as he hugged her back.

There wasn’t even enough time to think about going against my instincts with this one. I turned around, shoved through the crowd, and fled out the back door.



“Do you want to go?” Becca asked me, putting a hand on my shoulder. Gripping the railing of the back deck, I stared at the sun, which was just starting to dip into the horizon. I couldn’t believe he had come here with *her*. He couldn’t do it for me, but for her?

“He said she didn’t mean anything to him,” I croaked.

“Look, they’re not necessarily back together. They just came here together,” Becca said.

She had a point. But his coming here with her was almost as bad as his getting back together with her.

“Same difference,” I muttered.

“I’m sorry, sweetie,” Becca said, smoothing my hair. “He’s just an idiot. They all are.”

“Big idiot,” I said with a snuffle.

“I’m gonna go find Brody and see if he can drive us

back,” Becca said. “You gonna be okay?”

There was a huge sob choking my throat, so I nodded.

“I’ll be right back,” Becca said.

But when she turned around, she froze. Her hand suddenly gripped my elbow, and I turned around as well. Manette was standing right in front of us.

“Jenna! Becca! So good to see you,” she said with a welcoming grin—as if she owned the place. “Great party, huh?”

“Back off, Manette,” Becca said.

I wanted her to go away. I couldn’t look at this girl for one more second. How the hell had she gotten Kyle to come out with her? Had she hypnotized him or something?

“Jenna, listen. I know you saw me with Kyle, and I’m sorry,” Manette said. “But isn’t it better that you know now? Kyle isn’t over me, and I’m definitely not over him. You just have to accept it.”

“You’re wrong,” I snapped, my face overheating. “I don’t know how you got *my* boyfriend here, but it doesn’t change the fact that he’s *my* boyfriend.”

Manette, somehow, stepped even closer to me. So close, I almost choked on her musky perfume.

“Well, if he makes the circuit, which we both know he will, then he won’t be around to be *your* boyfriend, will he?” she said, almost whispering into my ear. Guess she’d finally decided to drop the sweet-little-me act. “Unless you plan on going to Hawaii—like I am.”

My jaw completely dropped. Manette leaned back to admire the fruits of her labor and was not disappointed. She had gotten what she wanted—total shock.

"You're going?" I asked.

"Of course I am," she said, lifting a shoulder. "I go wherever the surfers go. It's my life. And what will you be doing while we're traveling all over the world together, Jenna? Taking PE?"

I couldn't believe this. There was no way I could compete. Not only was she gorgeous and self-assured, but she was utterly determined to get Kyle back. She was actually going to *be* there. With him.

"Ever heard of 'out-of-sight, out-of-mind'?" she added, slamming a dagger right through my heart.

"All right, that's enough, Barbie," Becca said.

Manette ignored her. "I'm doing you a favor here, Jenna," she said calmly. "If it's not me, it's gonna be somebody else. What do you expect him to do, stay faithful to you for months on the road? He's gonna be a celebrity, Jenna. He'll be able to have any girl he wants. There's nothing you can do about it."

I blinked. I hadn't really thought about it. But now that she'd made me, I had to wonder. *Did* I expect him to be my long-distance boyfriend? It seemed completely unrealistic. And the very idea of Kyle with anyone else made me sick.

"You're a nice girl, Jenna," Manette said finally. "I'm just trying to help you face the facts."

She patted me once on the shoulder, smiled almost apologetically, then turned and moved off through the crowd.

I shoved clothing, jewelry, beach towels, and makeup into my bag at random, barely able to see through the tears in

my eyes. In the corner Becca spoke to our parents on her cell phone, whispering fervently.

"Okay. Yeah, she'll be fine. Love you, too," she said. Her cell phone snapped closed, and I looked up. "She says that a cab ride back to Malibu qualifies as an emergency, so we can, in fact, use the emergency credit card."

"Thank you, Mom," I said through my teeth.

"Are you sure about this?" Becca asked, holding her phone in both hands in front of her. "You don't want to talk to him first? It's still early. We can go back and find him."

The very idea of even looking at Kyle right then made my heart seize up. I yanked the zipper closed on my bag and picked it up. "No. I just want to get out of here."

"Okay then," she said, shouldering her own bag. "Let's go."

We were turning toward the door when someone knocked. Neither of us moved.

"Jenna? Are you in there?"

It was Kyle. In the background I could hear a few other voices as people returned from the party.

"Should I get it?" Becca whispered.

"No!" I whispered back, my heart panicking. I actually looked at the window as a potential mode of escape, but then I remembered we were on the third floor.

"We're gonna have to leave at some point!" Becca whispered.

"Uh . . . the walls are pretty thin," Kyle said.

My shoulders drooped. Becca rolled her eyes and opened the door. "Hey, Kyle! What's up?" she said, all bubbly.

"I was looking all over the party for you guys! Where were you—" Kyle stopped short when he saw our packed bags. His whole face creased with confusion. "Are you leaving?"

Becca looked from me to Kyle and back again. "I'll just be outside," she said. Then she shrugged at me and left, closing the door behind her.

"Jenna?" Kyle said, stepping closer to me. "What's going on?"

I had been hoping to avoid this conversation, but now I knew there was no way out. It didn't matter how cute he was or how much he seemed to care about me. This was about self-preservation. Old Jenna would have been so psyched just to have a boyfriend, she would have endured anything to keep him. But New Jenna had to look out for herself.

"I don't think I can do this, Kyle," I said in a rush. "I think we should break up."

"What!?" he blurted.

"I mean, I know we've only been together for, like, three days, but—"

"Jenna, what is going on?" he asked, looking panicked.

"I know I said I'd stay this weekend, but you didn't really want to leave for Hawaii all tied down, right?" I said.

He said nothing. Just stared. "Where is all of this coming from?" he finally asked.

"Nowhere," I said quickly. "I was just thinking and—"

"I felt so bad after you left that I went to the party to apologize. Then I spent over an hour there looking for you, only to find out that you were here all along, and now

you're breaking up with me?"

"You went to the party with Manette," I said. "I *saw* you guys. I saw her holding your hand, and I saw you hug her."

Kyle looked at me as if I was insane. "When?"

"When you first came in!" I told him. "I'm not crazy, Kyle. I know what I saw."

Kyle shoved his hands into his hair and paced to my bed, his eyes searching the floor. "Okay, Manette *drove* me to the party because I asked her to because everyone else was already gone. And, yeah, she grabbed my hand on the way through the door, but that's just Manette. But I didn't *hug* her. I—"

He stopped talking and snapped his fingers. "Wait a minute! I *tripped* into her, and she hugged me before I got my balance." His brow knit, and he looked past me. "Damn, that girl is good."

"So you're saying you're really not getting back together with her?" I said. "Even though she's going to Hawaii with you? Even though—"

"Who told you that?" Kyle said, laying his hands out flat. "Did she?" His face was hard as stone. In that second I knew he understood everything. Maybe I *could* read him. A little.

"Freakin' Manette," he said under his breath.

Then he turned and ripped the door open.

"Kyle!"

He ignored me and stormed down the hallway toward a group of people standing near the stairs. A couple of them parted at his approach, and I saw Manette turn around.

"Kyle!" she trilled happily, oblivious.

He stopped right in front of her. His anger was so

obvious, her friends backed up a bit.

“Stay away from Jenna,” he said through his teeth.

She shot me a look over his shoulder. An impressed look—like maybe she’d underestimated me.

“Kyle, whatever she said—”

“She didn’t say anything,” Kyle shot back, seething. “From this second on I want you to stay away from her *and* from me. Do you understand me?”

For the first time since I’d laid eyes on her, Manette looked thrown. She glanced around quickly before smiling again.

“Kyle,” she said in her wheedling tone. She reached up to touch his chest, and he lifted an arm to block her hand. Manette withdrew. She even took a full step back.

“I mean it, Manette. I’ll get a restraining order. I’ll skip the damn tour. I don’t care what I have to do as long as I don’t have to deal with you.”

One of Manette’s friends gasped, and another giggled. Honestly, I almost felt bad for the girl. I guess Kyle had officially decided not be so nice about this. And he was doing it for me. To protect *me*. Manette looked over at me, then stared at Kyle for a long, silent moment.

“Are we clear?” he demanded.

Manette narrowed her eyes. “We’re clear,” she said. “If that’s what you really want to settle for. I’m too good for you anyway.”

“If that’s what you want to believe, feel free.” Kyle walked over to me, cupped my face in his hands, and kissed me. It was firm and gentle and deep and tender and mind-melting all at once. In that moment I knew: I really *was* his girl.



I leaned back against the hotel wall with my head on Kyle's shoulder, staring out at the waves and the stars. From where we sat, the terrace trellis broke up the view a bit but not enough to spoil the moment. The hotel was pretty quiet. Most of the people who had come back early had regrouped before heading out to other, later parties. Even Becca and Brody had gone out to meet the crew at some beachfront club. Manette and her friends had disappeared as well. From down below a reggae tune played at a respectable level, but other than that and the occasional door slam, it was actually quite peaceful.

"I can't believe Manette is going on the tour," Kyle said with a sigh. "That girl really needs to get a life."

"Surf groupie, huh?" I said.

"Not a sustainable career," he replied with a small smile.

I lifted Kyle's arm and placed it over my shoulder, cuddling in closer. "I *really* don't want to talk about Manette anymore."

Kyle reached up and brushed his fingers through my hair. "I know, but she did bring up a good point. What are we going to do if I make it?"

I tilted my head to look up at him. "First of all, you *will* make it. And secondly, I think we just . . . stay in touch. Keep each other informed. See what happens."

"You're very Zen about this," Kyle said. "I was thinking, if you date anyone else, I'll kill the bastard."

We both laughed.

"Well, whatever. I think you should just focus on

tomorrow. We can figure it all out later.”

“I really like you, Jenna,” he said, looking at me with this intense admiration that turned my insides to goo.

“I really like you, too, Kyle,” I replied.

We leaned in for a kiss, but at that moment we heard a whoop and a holler from down below. The outdoor stair rail shook, and voices carried up on the breeze.

“They’re ba-ack!” Kyle sang.

“Oh. Goody,” I replied flatly.

We scrambled to our feet just as Jonas, Becca, Brody, and a bunch of other people arrived on the third floor. They came over and slapped our hands in greeting.

“Party over already?” Kyle asked.

“It got broken up,” Brody said. “Whatever. Sucked anyway. Bunch of people went trolling for another one, but we figured we’d come back and crash.”

Becca slid past the guys and took my arm, all giggly. I could tell she had some kind of plan up her sleeve. If she’d been wearing sleeves.

“Would you mind if I stayed in Brody’s room?” Becca whispered.

“What? You’re gonna *sleep* with him!?” I said under my breath.

“No!” She slapped my arm so hard, it stung. “It’s just we kind of want to stay up and talk and cuddle and stuff. Then maybe we’ll actually *sleep*. That’s all.”

“Okay. But if you need me, get me,” I told her.

“I will,” Becca promised, crossing her heart. “Jenna, you’re never going to believe this, but Brody’s going to Penn State in the fall! He’s gonna only be a couple hours

away! I really think we might have something here.”

I glanced up at the guys. I couldn’t believe the depth of the unfairness here. I finally meet an amazing guy, and he’s potentially leaving in less than two days. Meanwhile Becca meets her twentieth amazing guy, and he’s a potential long-term boyfriend. Ridiculous.

“I’m really happy for you, Becca,” I said, trying to sound as sincere as humanly possible.

“Thanks. I am, too,” she said, gazing at Brody.

As if on cue, Brody broke away from Kyle and Jonas and grabbed Becca’s hand. “Shall we?”

He used his key and opened the door to the room he was supposed to be sharing with Kyle. They walked in together, leaving the door wide open for the moment.

“So,” Kyle said, moving in close to me. “Looks like I’ve been kicked out of my room.”

Just then a pillow came flying out and smacked him directly in the face. He caught it with both hands before it could fall to the ground.

“Looks like,” I said.

“Mind if I crash with you?” he said. “If those two are gonna be up all night anyway, I’d rather not be in there.”

My pulse started to race, and I warmed with anticipation. “Sure.”

Kyle smiled, and I led him over to the room I was sharing with Becca and Sun. Inside, Kyle placed his pillow on one of the two double beds and started fiddling with the alarm clock. My hand shaking, I quickly wrote Sun a note telling her to crash in another room so that she wouldn’t wake Kyle coming in all drunk at 4:00 A.M. I used one of the

safety pins from her makeup case to attach the note to the warped metal frame around the room number outside.

I closed the door and took a deep breath. When I turned around again, Kyle was right behind me.

“Hey,” he said.

“Hey,” I replied, breathless.

Then he grabbed me and pulled me into an intense kiss. His arms circled my waist, pulling me to him, backing toward the bed.

Mayday! Too fast! Say something!

I pulled myself back and stopped. “Uh, Kyle? I can’t . . . you know . . . have sex with you. Right now. Yet. You know?”

Kyle blushed. “I know. That’s fine. I was actually just thinking a little more of *this* would be good.”

He kissed me again, and I melted into him. A little more of this would be *really* good.

“I thought you had to get to sleep,” I said, tearing myself away again.

Slowly he smiled. With his fingertips he brushed my hair back from my face and tucked it behind my ears.

“I think I can stay up for a little while,” he said quietly. So quietly it made my toes curl.

“Nice,” I said.

Then I kissed him again, and we fell back onto the bed.



I woke up to the bright Cali sunlight streaming in through the hotel windows. After blinking a few times I was able to focus on Kyle's sleeping face. I smiled and cuddled into the pillow. There was a boy in my bed. He was right there. And he was sooo cute when he was sleeping. He took a deep breath and sort of snorted, and I slapped a hand over my mouth to keep from laughing. This was the coolest thing ever.

Moving carefully so as not to wake him up, I rolled over and glanced at the clock. Instantly I shot up. It was 8:30. 8:30! The competition started at nine!

"Kyle!" I blurted, whirling around. "Kyle! Wake up!"

He started and sat up on his elbows. His hair was all matted in the back, and one of his eyes was stuck shut.

"Wha . . . ?"

"It's eight thirty!" I cried, picking up the clock.

"What!?! He was perfectly awake now and already on his feet, grabbing his T-shirt off the floor. His shorts were all twisted, and he straightened them, looking around in a panic, as if he had no idea where he was. "What did you do!?" he demanded.

"Me? What do you mean, *me*?" I blurted.

"Did you turn the alarm off?" he said, looking for his sandals. "You let me sleep in, didn't you? How could you do this, Jenna?"

I stood there, dumbstruck, as he threw the sheets aside to check under the bed. Was he really accusing me of turning off the alarm so that he would miss the competition? He had to be kidding me.

"I didn't do anything!" I cried. "I have no idea how this happened!"

Behind me there was a long, low groan. Slowly I turned around. There was a big, messy lump in the next bed.

"Oh, no. No, no, no!"

I grabbed the cheesy comforter and whipped it off. Sure enough, there was Sun, all curled up in a ball, still wearing her clothes from last night.

"Gimme!" she whined, reaching for her blanket.

"Dammit, Sun!" I shouted, throwing the blanket back over her.

"I didn't even hear her come in," Kyle said, stunned.

"Me neither. But I will bet you money she shut off that alarm," I told him. "Wouldn't be the first time."

"This is insane, Jenna. What am I gonna do?" Kyle asked, bringing his hands to his face. "Do you have any

idea what the traffic is gonna be like over there at this hour? I bet the beach is already packed.”

“Calm down,” I told him, shoving my hair back into a ponytail and grabbing my purse. “We are going to take care of this.”

“How?” he wailed. “I’m supposed to be on my board, in the water, in less than half an hour. It’s too late!”

“It’s never too late,” I said. “Let’s go.”

I gripped the skinny steering wheel of the van and pressed down on the accelerator, testing just how fast she would go before shaking to bits. Slamming the blinker on, I zoomed into the fast lane and passed a slow-moving Taurus.

“Dude, if Mom and Dad saw you right now, they would take away your license,” Becca said. Her hands were braced on the ceiling and the window, and she looked as if she was trying hard not to vomit.

“I have to get him there in time,” I told her. “Speed limits are nothing to me right now.”

Up ahead was the entrance to the competition. All I saw were red brake lights. “Dammit,” I muttered.

“What?” Kyle asked. He was in the back of the van on the front bench, stretching out his legs as best he could. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing I can’t handle,” I told him.

Without even thinking I turned the wheel, sliding the van onto the shoulder. I raced past car after idling car, as beach bums and surfer dudes screamed obscenities out their windows and gave me the finger. Honking horns abounded.

"Jenna!" Becca shouted.

"Don't talk to me right now!" I said, my shoulders up by my ears.

There was a stop sign at a small cross street right before the entrance to the parking lot. Traffic was coming in from both directions, and there was a bottleneck at the entrance—three lanes of traffic trying to converge into one.

Kyle placed his hands on the back of my seat and leaned forward. "We're never gonna make it," he said.

"We're not done yet," I told him. I slammed the ancient gearshift into park. "Brody! Get behind the wheel!" I ordered, shoving open my door.

"What are you doing?" Kyle asked.

"Getting you to the beach," I told him.

I slipped out of the van and walked right into the traffic. Adrenaline had completely taken over.

Up ahead, a car inched into the lot. Everyone nudged forward. I stepped in front of the car coming in from the left and held up my hands.

"Hey! What the hell do you think you're doing?" the guy behind the wheel shouted out the window.

"Stopping you!" I shouted. I waved manically at Brody to come forward. "I have a competitor in that van! He has to get to the beach!"

Brody edged forward, coming superclose to the guy's bumper.

"Bull-crap! You do not!" He lurched his car forward, and I backed up a step.

"Hey! What're you, trying to kill me?" I cried, glancing down at my shins, which he'd come very close to shatter-

ing. "Brody! Go!" I yelled.

Brody finally took the initiative and hit the gas. He lurched through the intersection and joined the bottleneck at the entrance to the parking lot.

"Thanks for your patience!" I shouted happily at the driver.

"Screw you!" he groaned, and flipped me off.

As if I cared. I turned on my heel and raced after the van. Next I stepped up in front of the two cars competing with Brody to be first through the gate. I had to keep stepping back and forth between them as they tried to inch around me, and I was sweating by the time Brody finally broke through the logjam, but somehow I made it happen. Kyle shoved open the sliding door and I jumped inside.

"That was amazing!" Kyle cheered, kissing my cheek as the van really started to move. "I'm so sorry for blaming you back at the hotel, Jenna. I never should have thought you'd do something like that."

"I wouldn't," I told him, pouting ever so slightly. A move I learned from my sister, thank-you-very-much.

"I know that," he said. "I think you just proved beyond any doubt that you really want me to win this thing."

He put his arms around me and squeezed, and I smiled. "After that," I said, my heart still pounding, "you'd *better* win."

"What's taking so long?" Kyle asked, shifting nervously from foot to foot in the sand. "It's just a few numbers. Add 'em up!"

"I think they're getting somewhere," Becca said, standing

on tiptoe. "The guy with the beard just handed something to the chick with the scar on her face."

"Yeah?" Kyle said. He reached out to hold my hand.

"Yeah, dude," Brody said as he shaded his eyes with his fingers. "Something's up."

We weren't the only ones who had noticed the activity up on the grandstand. Behind us, the whole crowd started to hush. The final ten contestants were all nearby, hanging with their individual posses. I kept looking around at each of them, trying to remember their performances to judge for myself who might come in before or after Kyle. Kind of impossible, when I knew next to nothing about the sport and even less about the scoring process.

Across the circle I saw a familiar figure shove her way to the front. Manette. Had she really not gotten the message last night?

But then I saw her sidle up to one of the other surfers and whisper something into his ear. He circled an arm around her waist and brought her in to his side as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

"Manette has officially moved on," I said to Kyle.

He noticed her and smirked. "Good luck, dude."

Then the tall tanning master who had announced yesterday's results stepped up to the microphone.

Kyle's grip on my hand tightened. "Here we go."

I held my breath. "Good luck. Not that you need it."

He smiled and quickly kissed my nose. Honestly, I was touched that he was even able to think to do that just then. This announcement was basically going to decide the course of his life.

"Thank you, everyone, for your patience," the man in charge said. "First of all, I want to thank all ten finalists for the incredible show they put on for us this morning. There was some truly sick shredding out there today, and we loved every minute of it."

The crowd cheered, and Kyle released me long enough for us to both clap a few times before he grabbed my hand again.

"And now, I figure I'd better announce our top five before you start throwing things," the man said. He lifted a card and read from it. "In fifth place, Kiai Jones!"

A guy with dark skin and blond dreadlocks whooped and hugged a person I was pretty sure was his mother. Everyone applauded.

"In fourth . . . Jeremy Hefferon!"

Another happy surfer. Another huge cheer. There were only three spots left. Could Kyle have finished in the top three? My stomach knots didn't seem to think so. I couldn't take this much longer.

"Coming in in third place . . . Kyle Cross!"

I screamed. I really did. Kyle hugged me so hard, I thought I heard a rib crack. Becca slapped him on the back as Brody tried to jump on top of us. All of Kyle's other friends came over for hugs, and I stepped back to let them at him. Meanwhile, the man at the microphone announced the second and first place winners, but I didn't even hear him. I was too busy beaming with pride.

"We did it!" Kyle said, returning to me for another hug. "Thank you, Jenna. Thank you *so* much!"

"What did *I* do?" I asked him, laughing.

"I wouldn't have even made it here today if not for you," he said, leaning back to look me in the eye. His hands were on my hips. "This is my dream come true, and I have you to thank for it."

I smiled. "Eh. It was nothing."

Talk about a sucky day. Monday it rained for the first time since my arrival in Southern California. Becca and I got up, trudged through puddles to a cab, and left for the airport. After hugging her good-bye and squeezing out a few tears, I headed back to campus, met up with Kyle at his apartment, and helped him pack—which only took about half an hour, considering his Spartan existence. That at least left some good-quality smooching and cuddling time. But before I knew it, six hours had passed, it was still raining, and I was back at the airport. I was sick of the place. At this point, I was thinking about taking a bus home at the end of the summer just to avoid coming here again.

"Last call for flight five-two-two to Maui. Last call."

"I guess I really have to go this time," Kyle said, standing up from the uncomfortable plastic chair. He adjusted the strap of his backpack on his shoulder. I stood up as well. I couldn't look him in the eye. If I did, I was going to burst into tears and that was just not okay.

Kyle ducked his head. "Are you gonna look at me?"

I shook my head. "Wasn't planning on it."

"Come on."

He stepped closer and lifted my chin with one finger.

"I promise I am going to call you every day. Or IM you or e-mail you or text you. Whatever I can get my hands on,"

he said. "You are gonna be sick of me inside a week."

"Not possible," I managed to say.

Kyle smiled slightly. "And the second I get back on the mainland, I am coming to see you. I don't even care if you do have a boyfriend by then. That weekend you two are on a break."

I laughed, and a couple tears squeezed out by mistake.

"Deal?" he said.

"Deal," I replied.

"Okay." He glanced over his shoulder. The line at the door to the jetway was dwindling. "I gotta go."

"I know."

He leaned down and touched his lips to mine. They lingered there for a long moment, and then they were gone.

"I love you, Jenna."

My heart stopped. I opened my eyes, which I hadn't realized were closed.

"You do?"

"Crazy," he said. "But true."

"I love you, too," I said, without even realizing I was going to say it.

Kyle laughed. "Cool."

"Yeah. Cool."

Then he squeezed my hand, gave me one last kiss, and strode off.

The End

The Choice Redux

Well, that was basically a little California dream come true, wasn't it? But if you don't think so, well, it's your call. You can always go back to [page 117](#) and try again.

You Chose Sean



"It's so good to see you!" I cried, hugging my sister and pulling her into the room. Just having her there made me feel much more secure. Here was a person who would always love me, no matter *what* decision I made.

"Good to see you, too, but you're strangling me," Becca replied. She removed my arms from around her neck and looked at me quizzically. "You okay?"

"Yeah! Yes. I'm fine," I told her. "In fact, I think I've finally made a decision." I sat down on my bed and crossed my legs, the picture of poise. "I am going to stick with Sean."

I grinned as I said his name, feeling a little flutter in my chest. Becca sighed and righted her rolling luggage, shoving the handle down. Her face was the picture of doubt.

"Really? The science geek?" she said.

That didn't do much for my confidence.

"What? He challenges me," I said. "And he's really funny and smart and—"

"I thought you were going to 'get crazy' out here," Becca said, raising her palms. "How does dating a guy who's just like you work into that?"

"He's not *exactly* like me," I told her.

"Well, what happened to Nicholas and Kyle? They both sounded so—what's the word I'm looking for?—hot! And Sean sounds so . . . nerdy."

She was already distracted, looking around the room at Sun's pictures and the tons of crap on her messy desk and bed. I felt my face start to burn at her insinuations. One, that I was a science geek and two, that Sean wasn't hot enough. How did she know? She hadn't even *met* him.

"Well, that's not *all* he is," I said. "I told you he's an incredible dancer."

I still hadn't told her *where* we'd gone dancing though. If Becca knew about Rouge, she'd spend the entire week-end begging me to go there until all the veins in my head popped, whether or not I'd chosen Sean.

"Okay. So he has one point in his favor then," she said, picking up a jeweled box from Sun's desk, inspecting it, then placing it back down.

"Besides, if I stay here with Sean, we get to go to Six Flags on Saturday. You *love* rides."

"I guess," Becca said blithely, lifting one shoulder.

"Whatever. Sean is just as hot as Kyle and Nicholas," I assured her. "Just wait 'til you meet him."

Becca finally smiled. "Hey, whatever floats your boat,"

she said. "I'm just psyched to be here." She hugged me again, and this time I felt slightly less relieved. "But I also have to pee. Where's the bathroom?"

"It's down the hall on the right," I told her.

"Cool. Be right back."

As soon as the door closed behind her I felt a few cold fingers of doubt slide up my shoulders. Was Becca right? Was dating Sean going against the whole point of this summer?

No. Sean might be smart and driven, but he was also funny, and we laughed together. A lot. When it came down to it, Sean was the best of both worlds. We had stuff in common, but there was so much about him that was new. I liked the way he made me feel. I had to go with my gut.

Of course now that I'd decided, I had to make a couple of phone calls that I *really* didn't want to make. I glanced at the closed door. Getting this over with before Becca returned seemed like a good idea. I grabbed my cell and quickly dialed Kyle.

"Jenna! Hey! What happened to you?" he asked, sounding very upbeat.

I swallowed hard. "I don't know what happened. I just lost you," I lied. "Sorry about that."

"No problem. So, did you talk to your sister? Are you guys gonna make the trip?" he asked.

I was sweating. I sat down at my desk and took a deep breath. This totally sucked. "Actually, no."

There was a long pause. "Oh."

"I'm really sorry, Kyle," I said. "It's just—"

"No, that's cool," he said quickly. "I understand."

There was a long, drawn-out silence during which I almost changed my mind fourteen hundred times.

"So . . ." he said finally.

"So call me and let me know how it goes," I said.

"Yeah? Okay, yeah. I'll do that," he said.

"I really am sorry," I told him, wishing there was some way to end this on a good note.

"Hey, not a problem. Don't worry about it," he said. Someone shouted his name, and I heard a few muffled words. "I'd better go. Have a good weekend."

"Yeah, you, too," I said.

As I hung up the phone, my heart was so heavy, I wondered if I'd just made the biggest mistake of my life. But I had to press on. I dialed Nicholas, wanting more than ever to just get this over with.

"Hi there," he said smoothly.

In the background was the most insane din I'd ever heard. Music, shouting voices, female screeching, a loud crash. I swear I even heard mooing.

"Having a party?" I said.

"We figured we'd go a little nuts before we got to work," he replied, nonchalantly.

"Ah, well, listen, Nicholas, I don't think I'm going to make it over there this weekend."

He said nothing. All I heard were party noises. Wow. Was he that mad?

"Hang on a sec," he said. "Yo! Todd! Might not want to hang from there! I'm not taking you to the hospital!" Then he was back. "I'm sorry, what did you say?"

Oh, God. He hadn't even heard me. I had to do this

again? "I said I'm not going to be able to come over this weekend."

"Oh. That's cool. We have enough people to help," he said.

I blinked. Okay. Clearly he wasn't picking up on my tone. Maybe it was the constant smashing noise that sounded like it was happening right next to the phone.

"Actually, I'm not really sure we should see each other anymore," I said. Then, when there was no reaction, I added, "At all."

"Right, well, if that's how you feel," he said. "Listen, I have to go. They need me to make the margaritas."

I felt as if someone had just torpedoed my heart. "Nicholas, do you even hear what I'm saying?"

"Jenna, did you think I was going to cry? You're a great girl, but come on," he said, making me feel like I was twelve. "I really have to go. Good luck with everything."

And then he hung up. My hand dropped into my lap. Well. Guess I made the right decision there. I couldn't believe he was so blasé about the whole thing! Had I really meant so little to him?

"Screw it," I said through my teeth. I stood up and dialed Sean's number. He picked up on the first ring.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Sean, it's Jenna," I said.

"Hey! Where you been? Is your sister there yet?"

"Yeah, she just got here, and she's really psyched to meet you," I fibbed, pacing my room again. "Want to go to the beach tomorrow?"

"Definitely," Sean replied. "How's ten? Before it gets

really hot? We can meet by that old, broken-down lifeguard chair.”

“Perfect,” I said.

Becca was not a morning person, but I knew I’d be able to get her to the Malibu beach anyway. She’d just gotten here, so her internal clock was three hours ahead. If I could get Becca and Sean together, I knew she would see what I saw in him. Plus if we were on the beach, his hot body would be exposed, which I knew would knock him up a few pegs in Becca’s estimation. Yeah, it was shallow, but you had to know your audience. If he made a good first impression, she would take the time to get to know him.

“See you guys then,” Sean said.

“Bye.”

The moment I hung up the phone, the door to my room was flung open, and in burst Becca and Sun. They were giggling, doubled over, and holding hands. Sun had half a dozen shopping bags hooked on her arm.

“Oh, my God, Jenna!” Sun announced. “I just met your sister in the bathroom, and already I’m, like, in *love* with her.”

“She is hilarious!” Becca added. “I don’t know how you get any work done with her around.”

Me neither.

“I was totally going to go to the surf competition this weekend, but Becca convinced me to stay here and keep you girls company,” Sun said, tossing her shopping bags onto her bed. “We are going to have the best time!”

“We so are!” Becca agreed.

I laughed and rolled my eyes as they dropped down

onto my bed, chatting away. That was Becca for ya. Everyone loved her.

"This is the life," Becca said, stretching as she rolled over onto her stomach in the sun. The top of her black bikini rode up a bit and she readjusted it. "I was meant to live in California."

"I know. Why did Mom and Dad have to pick Pennsylvania?" I said.

"We should get their heads examined," Becca added.

I laughed and checked my Nike watch, then closed my eyes and lay back again. Sean should have been here by now, unless one of us had gotten the meeting point wrong.

"When does Sun get out of class again?" Becca asked.

"Around twelve," I said.

"Cool. I cannot wait to hit the shops."

"I know. You only talked about it all night long," I teased.

Last night Sun and Becca had decided that it was about time I do some LA shopping—which was, of course, one of the top three things Becca wanted to do while she was here, together with tanning, and celeb-spotting. Sun was all psyched to take us to the best boutiques on the Strip. At this point I couldn't wait either. Once we'd done it, Becca could finally stop talking about it and Sun could stop bugging me to go with her.

"Do you think we'll see anyone famous?" Becca asked.

I smiled. "Around here, you never know."

I still hadn't told Becca about Rouge and the random celebrity sightings, but now that I had picked Sean, I thought I should mention it. Maybe we could go there with

him tonight. Becca would *love* that.

I turned onto my side and propped myself up on one elbow. "Hey, you know what I forgot to tell you? I—"

Suddenly something smacked against my back, and I was completely doused with water. I gasped in a breath and was so shocked that for a good second I didn't move. Becca screeched and sat up and was instantly hit in the stomach with a water balloon.

"What the—?"

I whipped around and saw Sean standing a few feet away on the sand, wielding two more balloons. He wore a blue T-shirt over his bathing suit and had a plastic garbage bag full of more balloons.

"Sean!"

"Huh. I didn't think the splash would be that diffuse, considering the force and trajectory," he said with mock contemplation. "I should recheck my calculations."

"You are so dead!" I shouted, jumping up.

He reeled back as I grabbed for the bag of water balloons, and he pelted me with another, shattering it against my back. I screamed and laughed. The water actually felt good after I'd roasted in the sun for the past hour.

"Arghh! Stop! You guys!" Becca screamed.

I ignored her. All I saw was revenge. I picked up a balloon and flung it at Sean's feet. It shattered and splashed up his legs and onto his bathing suit.

"Nice shot!" he said, coming at me with another.

I grabbed two more and ran toward Becca to get away from him.

"No! No! No!" Becca cried, waving her hands. She

grabbed her towel and stood up, shielding herself with it.

Sean threw another, and I dodged it. It bounced by me on the sand, so I snagged it, and overhanded it right at him, hitting him in the neck and soaking his whole body.

"Oh, no way!" he said, as water dripped from his nose.

"If you can dish it, you can take it!" I shouted.

The next two minutes were a blur of balloons, screeches and splashes. I was fresh out of ammo, crouching on the ground, when Sean pulled back to fling one last balloon.

"Stop! Stop! STOP!" Becca screeched.

Sean's face fell, and so did his arm. My heart was pounding in my chest. Seriously, I think the scream could have been categorized as *bloodcurdling*.

"Becca! What's wrong?" I asked.

Slowly Becca lowered her towel, peeking out as if afraid of a sneak attack. Hair was matted to her neck and face, having fallen out of her perfect bun, and she had mascara running down her cheeks in scary streaks.

"Whoa," Sean said.

"Nice. Is that how you always greet your friends?" Becca snapped. She balled up a corner of the towel and used it to wipe under her eyes. All that did was spread the mascara stain.

"Sorry, I—"

"God! Now I'm going to have to fix this," she said, looking at the black blotch on her pink towel.

"What's the big deal?" Sean said defensively. "I was just trying to have a little fun."

Becca's face went nuclear. If there was one thing she

hated even more than looking disheveled, it was being talked down to.

"Well, you have a lame-ass idea of fun!" she retorted.

"Becca, calm down," I said, my cheeks burning. "We were going to go swimming anyway."

"I wasn't," she said.

I had no response to that. How could you sit out in ninety-five degree sun and *not* go into the water?

"I'm so sorry, Becca," I said. Even though I thought she was overreacting a little bit, I hated seeing her so upset.

I glanced at Sean, begging him with my eyes to apologize. I knew that backing down was not his style, but I was hoping he would get the message. Otherwise this weekend could be over before it ever began.

Sean sighed and looked at Becca. "Listen, I'm really sorry, too. I didn't mean to upset you," he said. "I didn't realize."

Thank you, thank you, thank you!

Becca glared at him for a long moment, then turned to look at me. "I'm going back to the dorm. Can I have your key?"

I swallowed uncomfortably. Becca had no idea how tough that was for Sean just to say those words. And now he looked very unhappy. They both did. This was so not the way I wanted this meeting to go. "Becca . . ."

"Jenna," she said in her no-nonsense voice, holding out a hand.

I rolled my eyes. "Fine." When my sister got angry, there was no talking to her until she'd had time to cool off.

It took me a second to find my keys in the bottom of

the bag, and the silence among the three of us was so sour, it could have been squeezed to make grapefruit juice.

"Here," I said, handing them over.

"Thank you," she told me. Then she turned on her heel and stalked up the beach. I looked over my shoulder at Sean with an apology on my lips.

"Wow. Nice sister," he said sarcastically.

My whole body slumped. So much for that.

"We've only been here an hour, and I've already spent half my money," Becca announced happily as she and Sun emerged from yet another denim-and-halter-top boutique and into the sun. "We *need* to slow down."

"Maybe we should stop and get something to eat," Sean suggested, hands in his pockets.

Becca looked at him as if he was speaking pig Latin. "Do you know nothing? You don't stop to eat until *all* your money's gone."

"The girl speaks the truth," Sun piped in, placing her sunglasses over her eyes.

Becca smiled triumphantly and hooked her arm through Sun's, and together they traipsed toward the next store, which looked a lot like the last one.

I glanced at Sean apologetically. "I don't know what's wrong with her," I told him. "I swear she's not usually like this."

"Apparently she *really* doesn't like water balloons." We both laughed halfheartedly, and then Sean sighed. "Maybe I should go."

"No," I said, touching his arm. "Please don't. I was so

glad you made the effort to come. I'm sure she'll defrost soon. She's just . . ."

Sean looked at me expectantly, but I had no idea *why* Becca had suddenly turned megarude.

"Overtired?" I suggested finally.

For a moment Sean just stared at me, but then he shook his head and smiled. "Come on. We'd better catch up before we lose them," he said, taking my hand—which made me feel a million times better. "But you should know I am only doing this for you. And you are going to owe me."

"Fair enough," I said, giddy.

"Forget this place. It's all guys' stuff," Becca was saying as we joined them. She started off, but Sun hesitated.

"Wait. Maybe Sean wants to check it out," Sun said.

I could have kissed her for including him. Becca had been practically ignoring his existence all afternoon.

"That's okay," Sean said.

Becca stepped up next to Sun again and pulled her sunglasses to the tip of her nose, the better to look Sean up and down. "I don't know. Maybe you *should* go in there. Your wardrobe could use a makeover."

My jaw dropped open. I was going to throttle her. Seriously. Who was this bitchy chick, and what had she done with my sister?

"Becca!" I hissed through my teeth.

Sean forced a fake smile. "That's okay, Becca. I'm not really into superficial appearances," he said pointedly.

Becca's face fell briefly, but then she snorted a laugh. "Well, *obviously*," she said, gesturing at his outfit.

"Becca! What is *wrong* with you?"

For a split second there was a smidge of guilt in her eyes, but she blinked it away quickly, and went back to looking all innocent. Clearly this had been the worst idea of my life.

"You know what? I think I'm going to get something to eat now," Sean said casually. Then, without another word, he turned and headed back toward a small food court we'd passed a few minutes earlier.

I leveled Becca with my best look of death.

"What?" she said, her eyes wide.

"Could you *be* any ruder?" I asked.

Sun took a step back and slowly moved away, pretending to be enthralled by the window of an electronics store.

"*Me?* He's a total buzz-kill," Becca replied, glancing into the store window to mess with her bangs.

"At least he's trying!" I said.

"How? By saying I'm superficial?" Becca shot back.

"Well, he's *here*, isn't he? This isn't exactly what he wanted to do this afternoon, but he came here for me."

"Yeah, about that. I don't even know why you invited him," Becca said. "I thought we were supposed to be having some girl time."

"I brought him because I wanted you to get to know him," I said, realizing how ridiculous it sounded now. This trip was accomplishing anything but that.

"I'm sorry, Jenna. I just think you could do so much better," Becca said coolly.

That stung. "You've barely talked to him!"

"I've seen enough to know that he's immature and ego-tistical."

Uh, you could have just described the way you've been acting, I thought. But I didn't say it. I didn't want this argument to get any worse. Becca was only here for a few days, and I did *not* want to spend time fighting.

"Look, maybe we should split up, and Sun and I will meet you back at the room later," Becca suggested. "You know, so we can avoid World War Three."

I blew out a sigh. "Fine," I said, lifting my palms in surrender. "Whatever."

She hesitated for a split second, and I got the distinct feeling she'd been expecting me to say something else. I opened my mouth, but it was too late. She was already turning on her heel.

"I'll see you later," she said.

Then she looped her arm through Sun's, dragging her off. Sun glanced at me over one shoulder, confused, and I simply shrugged. As soon as they'd disappeared around a corner, I dropped onto a wooden bench behind me. I couldn't believe this was happening. Becca wasn't even going to try to like Sean. I had been worried about my guys falling in love with Becca and ruining the weekend. But I'd gotten the total opposite. Becca and Sean *hated* each other, and my weekend was still ruined.

Could this suck any more?

Suddenly I was staring at Sean's feet. I looked up at him, squinting against the sun.

"Hey," he said.

He was holding a bag from the pretzel place and juggling two sodas and two bottles of water.

"Hey."

"Where did they go?" He sat down next to me and handed me one of the sodas.

I held it on my lap and sighed. "They decided to go on ahead," I said. I took a long sip of the cool, sugary soda. "And we're not going to catch up."

"We're not?" he asked, ripping off a piece of pretzel.

"Nope."

"Well, that's good, I guess," he said.

"It is?"

"Well, if we're being honest here, I'm kind of relieved," he told me, chewing. "I mean, Becca is . . . I can't even believe you guys are related, let alone twins. You're so much cooler than her."

I felt a rush of warmth so fast, it almost choked me. Me, cooler than Becca? There's one I never thought I'd hear.

"Also, that means more pretzels for us," he said, holding out the bag. I glanced inside and pulled one out. There were two more nestled in the wax paper.

"You got them food?" I asked, touched.

"And water," he said. "They seem like water girls."

I laughed. Becca was *totally* a water girl. No unneeded calories for her.

See? Look how thoughtful he is! I wanted to tell her. *This is one of the things I love about him!*

Unfortunately she wasn't there to tell.



I yawned and stretched as Becca and I approached the long gray bus idling in the main parking lot on Saturday morning. A few kids from my physics class hung out near the curb, chatting, yawning, or bopping their heads to the music on their iPods. Becca looked around lazily, her eyes hidden by a huge pair of sunglasses she had bought on her spree. I wondered what the crowd looked like to her. Did every last one of them fall into the “science geek” category?

“Do they have to leave at the crack of dawn?” Becca asked grumpily. She yanked out a lip gloss and quickly applied some.

“You’re the one who wanted to stay up all night gossiping with Sun,” I reminded her.

Of course, our late-night gab and snack fest had so far been the most fun we’d had since she arrived—the three of

us had avoided any and all mention of Sean—which was why I’d stopped myself from pointing out how late it was getting.

“Whatever, Mom,” she said, rolling her eyes.

She knew I hated it when she called me that. I bit my tongue to keep from telling her off. *Not a morning person, remember?* Inside the bus, the air was cool and the seats looked plush and comfortable. I was already aching for a nap.

“Jenna, hey!” Sean lifted a hand and stood up slightly from a seat in the back. He was about to slide out so that I could sit with him, but then Becca climbed up the stairs behind me and his entire face fell.

Oops. Had I neglected to tell him that she would be coming along on our fun field trip? I gamely made my way to the back of the bus.

“Hey, Becca,” Sean said flatly.

“Hey,” she replied. Then she dropped into a seat across the aisle from his. “You can sit with him.” She lifted an arm in a dismissive way. “I’m just gonna go to sleep anyway.”

“You’re sure?” I asked.

But Becca was already curling toward the window, using her purse as a pillow. I shrugged, and Sean scooted in so that I could have the aisle. He stashed his backpack under the seat and hunkered down a bit.

“I thought we were going to hang out today,” he whispered. “You know, so that you could witness how much I was kicking your ass.”

“You are too funny for words,” I whispered back.

Sean said nothing. I slid down in my seat, too, and my

bare arm pressed into his. "What was I supposed to do, leave her in the dorm? I know you guys don't like each other, but she's my sister," I said. "*And* my best friend."

Sean sighed and shook his head as he stared forward.

"Give her another chance," I said. "She was tired yesterday." So not true, but it sounded good. "She's napping now, so when she wakes up, she'll be a whole new person."

I hoped.

Sean looked me in the eye, and I looked right back. I could tell he was doubtful, but then, finally, he took a deep breath. "Fine," he said. "I'll try. For you."

I beamed and hooked my pinky around his between us. "Thank you."

"But I'm still gonna kick your ass," he said.

"Noted."

He grinned and kissed me, and suddenly I felt like everything was going to be fine.

"I can't believe you dropped the ball on the free-fall experiment!" Sean said with a laugh as we inched forward on the log flume line. "Literally! You *literally* dropped the ball!"

My face burned. "We get the irony, Brooklyn," I grumbled.

I had been moody ever since my last experiment went awry. We were supposed to let a rubber ball go in front of us at the exact moment the ride plummeted toward earth, but I had dropped my ball on the way up and it had bounced into some trees. I had totally screwed up my chances of winning.

"Sorry," Sean said, trying to wipe the smile off his face.

"But you gotta admit, it's kind of funny."

"Bet it wouldn't be funny if *you'd* dropped your ball," Becca muttered.

I shot her a grateful look. "Yeah. You'd be freaking out," I told Sean. "Besides, I'm going to double back later and finish it."

"How ya gonna do that without a ball?" Sean asked.

"I'll just get somebody to lend me one," I said with a shrug. Then I smiled flirtatiously. "A lab partner, maybe?"

"Oh, no way!" Sean said, lifting his hands. "You're not getting any help from me. This is a competition, remember?"

I knew the guy was competitive, but not even helping out your girlfriend when she's down? That was serious. He moved forward in line, and I held back for a moment so I could talk to Becca.

"What's with Mr. Competitive?" Becca whispered into my ear.

"I have no idea," I said. "I knew he was serious about the class, but I did *not* know he was such a sore winner."

"He's worse than Dad on a Trivial Pursuit high," she said.

"Honestly? I would so *love* to knock him down a few pegs right now," I said. "Wipe the smile right off his face."

"Sounds good to me," Becca agreed.

We both smirked, and it felt really good to be back on the ins with Becca. For the first time since she arrived, I felt as if I had actually stopped missing her. As if we were finally connected again. Now if only I could be on good terms with both her and Sean at the same time, that would be perfect.

"You ladies coming?" Sean asked over his shoulder.

Our "log" creaked toward us on the belt. This ride had large cars, with three rows of seats and enough room for four in each row.

"How many?" the ride worker asked.

"Three," Sean told him.

"Right here," the worker said, pointing at the front row of the fake log.

"Hang on," Sean said. He whipped a towel out of his backpack and quickly wiped the seats dry. "Don't want you girls sitting down in a puddle."

"Thanks." There he went, showing his thoughtful side again. Maybe he didn't *completely* lose his mind in competitive mode.

Becca was about to get in first, but I stopped her with a hand to her arm. "Wait. You have to sit in the middle so that we can set up our accelerometers."

"Your accel-what-now?" she asked.

"It's the experiment. We'll each need the wall next to us. Sorry. You'll have to sit in the middle."

Becca looked at me for a long moment, as if she was trying to read my mind. Then she smiled knowingly. "Oh. Okay."

I studied her face. I had no clue what she was thinking. And that didn't happen with us very often.

"Are you kids getting in, or what?" the ride monitor asked.

"Sorry." Becca stepped aside to let me in, then sat down next to me. Sean settled in next to her. As the ride started forward, Sean and I quickly set up our accelerometers.

Basically, the accelerometer was a weight tied to a protractor with a string, which would help us find the acceleration of the log on its final plummet. I set mine up at an exact ninety-degree angle, then double-checked it as the car slowly moved toward the first incline.

"You all set, PA?" Sean asked, leaning forward to see past Becca.

"You know I am, Brooklyn," I replied.

"Because, you know, if you set that baby up wrong, you're gonna have to wait on that long, long line again and *still* go back to the free-fall," Sean teased. The car hit the first hill and creaked toward the crest. "I think you might just fall behind for good."

I shot him a defiant look but double-checked my accelerometer. Had I fastened it securely? Had he noticed something I hadn't? I couldn't really check the angle now that we were going up, because the weight was hanging backward at forty-five degrees.

"Made you look!" Sean laughed.

I blushed beet red. It was just the normal teasing Sean and I usually did with each other, but for some reason it was getting to me more now. Maybe because I was actually losing this time—no ifs, ands, or buts.

Becca scoffed. "You are *so* mature," she said to him.

"Just having a little fun," he replied.

"Oh. And your idea of fun is constantly picking on my sister?" Becca said.

For once Sean had no response. In fact, he looked pretty chagrined. Score one for Becca.

Our log inched toward the top of the hill. Becca glanced

at me, then got that look in her eyes that meant trouble.

"Wanna know what I think is fun?" Becca asked Sean. "Here."

Suddenly, in a rush, I realized what she was about to do. My heart dropped long before the ride dipped. "Becca! Don't!"

But I was too late. She reached out and yanked Sean's accelerometer, which fell to the floor in pieces. And then we zoomed down the flume.

"What the hell is your problem? Did you just come out here to ruin my life?" Sean spat at Becca.

"God! Be a little melodramatic, why don't you?" Becca shot back. "It was just *one* experiment. Now you and Jenna are even."

We were back on solid ground, outside one of the park's burger stands, and we were drawing quite a few well-deserved stares. Sean and Becca kept getting louder and louder, and I had a feeling that at any second now, park security was going to arrive to escort us off the premises.

"You guys! Calm down," I said, trying to step between them. "Sean, I'm really sorry—"

"Did you put her up to this?" Sean demanded, turning on me.

I lost my breath for a moment. "What?"

"I'm serious! She said she did it so we'd be even. Was it your idea?" he asked, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Come on," I said. "You know me better than that."

"Do I? Cuz you don't seem to be too angry at her," he said, casting a venomous glance in Becca's direction.

"Meanwhile, she's been in my face ever since she got here!"

"Well, it's not like you've made it so very easy for her," I shot back, feeling defensive. "I mean, the first thing you did when you met her was soak her with a water balloon!"

"Yeah!" Becca put in.

Sean's jaw dropped. "I thought you were on *my* side with that!"

"What?" Becca asked.

I took a deep breath. "I saw *both* your sides, okay? Can't we just calm down and figure this out? What can I do?"

Sean's eyes narrowed. "You can give me your accelerometer so I can go back and do the experiment, for starters. Mine's totally trashed."

"Fine," I said, starting to dig in my bag.

"Uh, hello?" Becca said, grabbing my arm. "I don't think so."

"Excuse me?" Sean said.

"She's not giving you her accelerometer unless you give her your ball."

I stopped digging. The two of them stared each other down like a couple of kids playing dodgeball. Why did I feel as if one of us wasn't coming out of this alive?

"Jenna? Can I talk to you for a second?" Sean said finally. "Alone?"

Yeah."

We moved off toward a sparkling fountain at the center of the park.

"Don't you dare give him that thing!" Becca shouted after me.

I waved her off over my shoulder.

"Look. I really can't take any more of this," Sean said. "Let's bail."

I felt like a whiplash victim. "What? You want me to abandon my sister in the middle of an amusement park?"

"We were supposed to spend this day together, Jenna. And she's screwing it all up," Sean said. "I've been really patient with her up 'til now, but messing with my work? That's strike three."

"Sean, I understand why you're upset. I really do. But I am not going to stand here and choose between you and my sister," I told him.

"That's not your sister. That's Satan," Sean said. "It's like she's *trying* to break us up. How can you not see that?"

I laughed. "You *really* have to wake up and smell the reality here. It's one experiment. And it's a pass on a midterm that you're gonna ace anyway. She shouldn't have done it, I know. But can't you just let it go?"

Sean stared at me. "Fine. I can let it go."

"Good," I said with a sigh. "Now let's move on to the next thing on the list." I fished through my bag for the printout from class and my park map. "Now if we—"

"But I'm not spending another minute with her," he interrupted.

"What?" I said, letting my arms drop. "Sean, I said I was sorry—"

"I know you did. And I know you are. But *she* isn't," he said. "I don't like games, Jenna, and your sister is clearly all about games."

I swallowed hard. I had no idea what to say to him. No idea how to make this whole thing better.

“I gotta get back to work,” he said grimly, adjusting his backpack on his shoulder. “Call me when the weekend’s over. Or not. Whatever.”

Then he turned around and disappeared into the crowd.



I was sitting on my bed, toying with a corner of my pillowcase, when Becca and Sun came traipsing in with takeout. From the smell of it, they had tracked down my favorite—broccoli and bacon pizza. Someone had dared me to try it once, and it turned out to be the greatest thing I had ever tasted, as gross as it sounds. Still, my stomach turned at the smell.

“We got your favorite! You ready to *mangia*?” Becca sang happily, dropping down in the middle of the floor. She set the pizza box on our throw rug and looked up at me hopefully. Sun, meanwhile, dug a few plastic cups out of the closet and started pouring soda.

“I’m not hungry,” I told them.

Becca’s face went slack. “You must *really* like this guy.”

I scooted forward a bit on my bed. “Yeah. I really do,”

I said morosely. "I just don't understand how things got so screwed up."

"Sounds to me like it was all Becca's fault," Sun said bluntly. She plopped down next to Becca and handed her a cup full of root beer. "Drink?"

"My fault?" Becca said incredulously.

"I speak only the truth," Sun said. "Those two were totally fine until you got here. Then, all of the sudden, I'm driving out to Six Flags to pick you two up because she can't ride on the same bus as him? You do the math."

Becca looked at me, and I grimaced. "She does have a point," I said.

"I'm sorry, okay?" She slapped her hands on her thighs, then raised them in surrender. "I just . . . I thought you could—"

"Do better. I know," I finished. "But that's the thing. I don't want to do better. Or worse. Or anything. I just want to be with him. I mean, when he's not trash-talking, at least," I added with a weak laugh. "I know he wasn't great today. He *is* competitive, and it's not like I didn't know that. But I'm competitive, too. I mean, I would have picked on him if he'd dropped his ball at the free-fall. It's just what we do. Normally we . . . have fun together."

"Oh. Oh, God, Jenna. I'm *so* sorry," Becca said, biting her lip. "I really *was* rude to him, huh?"

"Kind of," I said.

"It's totally normal," Sun said with a shrug. "You were jealous."

"Of Jenna and Sean? Uh, no," Becca said.

"No, of Sean's *relationship* with Jenna," Sun pointed

out, rolling her eyes as if it was *so* obvious. "You're not used to anyone's being as close to Jenna as you are. And then he's *also* not your ideal for her. Of course you'd try to sabotage their relationship."

"I did *not* try to sabotage their relationship!" Becca cried.

"You yell at him the first time you meet him. Insult him while we're out shopping. Mess with his experiment," Sun said, taking a bite of pizza. "Come on, Becca. It's textbook." She paused and looked up. "Maybe I should be a shrink."

Becca and I stared at each other. Then, finally, Becca covered her face with her hands. "Omigod! I'm a psycho!" she said. She looked up at me over her fingertips. "Jenna, I am so, *so* sorry! She's right! My subconscious is a bitch!"

"Weird," I said.

"Well, what's the big deal? Just call him and explain," Sun said, taking another bite of pizza.

"He doesn't want to talk to me," I said, hiding my face in the pillow. "He might even have broken up with me."

Becca shoved herself up and sat down next to me. "What did he say? I mean, *exactly*," she asked.

"He said, 'Call me when the weekend's over. Or not. Whatever.'" Repeating the words made me feel sick.

Becca and Sun looked at each other knowingly. "Sounds to me like the boy doesn't know what a good thing he's got," Sun said.

"And you know what that means," Becca put in, getting that little twinkle in her eye.

"What?" I said "What does it mean?"

"You have to make him jealous," Sun announced.

"Make him see what he's missing!" Becca added excitedly.

"I don't know, you guys," I said squirming. Making a guy jealous on purpose didn't sound like me. And it didn't sound very honest, either.

"Yes, you do know," Becca said, patting me on the leg. "Trust us. We know what we're taking about."

I had to give her that one. Becca and Sun both knew a hell of a lot more about guys than I did. Maybe I *should* listen to them.

"Come on, Jen. I'm the one who screwed this up for you. Let me help you fix it. All we have to do is find him, and we can make him yours again by the end of the night," Becca assured me.

Sun's whole face lit up. She stood and hit a few buttons on her laptop. Her e-mail screen popped open. "And, luckily, I know just where our victim is going to be . . ."

Rouge was slamming. It seemed everyone and her brother had gotten today's password e-mail—just as Sun had. We had been in the club for less than two minutes, and already I'd been elbowed, butt-bumped, and shoved aside more times than I could possibly count.

"This place is killer!" Becca shouted into my ear. "How did you not tell me about this before?"

"Long story!" I shouted back. "How are we supposed to find Sean in this mess?"

"You're not supposed to find him!" Sun yelled. "He's supposed to find you!"

"How!?" I cried.

A girl with straight blond hair and straws for legs slammed into me, spilling half her drink onto my shoes. Then she shot me a look like *I'd* just soaked *her* feet.

"You two. Out on the dance floor," Sun said, grabbing both Becca and me by the shoulder and turning us around. "There won't be a guy in this place who won't notice a couple of sexy twins."

"Huh?"

Sun rolled her eyes like I was just *so* innocent and brain-dead. "Sean will come to see what the commotion is about. By then you'll be dancing with some cute guy. Now go! I'll take a spin around the place and see if I spot him."

With that, Sun disappeared. Somehow, with the music pounding in my ears and the hundreds of body parts making contact with mine, I was starting to feel panicky. Which made me feel less than confident about this plan.

"Becca? Are you sure about this?" I asked.

She responded by grabbing me by the wrist and yanking me onto the dance floor. Two seconds later, I found myself dancing with Becca in a miraculously open space near the center of the throng. A couple of guys backed up to give us a little more room to move, at the same time checking us out in a totally blatant way. Soon more guys started to stare. Then a few more. My face burned like the sun. Luckily, the red lights masked it.

"Everyone's looking at us!" I shouted into Becca's ear.

She slung an arm over my shoulders and kept dancing. "That's kind of the point!" With a smile, she wagged her hips, bending at the knee nearly all the way to the floor. That earned her a few cheers. Meanwhile, my stage fright

was becoming paralyzing.

"Come on, Jen! Just pretend we're putting on a show back in my room at home like when we were little!" she shouted. "Loosen up!"

I remembered how Sean had gotten me to do that on this very dance floor, and I closed my eyes. In my mind I saw Sean and me that night, dancing together as if no one was watching. Soon I was moving just the way I had then.

"Ooh! We have our first brave soul!" Becca said.

My eyes opened as I felt someone move in behind me. I glanced over my shoulder to find a totally gorgeous blond guy with a light layer of stubble on his cheeks, dancing behind me. He smiled and raised his eyebrows as if to say, *"Is this okay?"*

I looked at Becca, and she nodded, urging me on. This was, after all, the whole reason we were here. According to Sun and Becca, Sean had to see me with someone else to realize what he was missing. A guy this hot would definitely slam that message home.

"Hi!" I shouted, turning around. "I'm Jenna!"

"Christian!" he responded, shaking my hand. "I had to come say hello. You look awesome out here!"

I laughed, shocked that anyone would ever think that. "Thanks."

Christian put his arms around my waist but kept his incredible bod a respectful distance away from mine. Still, I felt sickeningly uncomfortable.

"Relax!" Becca said into my ear.

She was already dancing with her own beautiful boy. And of course she looked so comfortable, she could have

been sacked out on our living room couch. When I didn't move, she turned around, lifted my arms, and placed them around Christian's neck. We all laughed, and before I knew it, Christian and I were dancing. And half the guys in the room were still watching, as if waiting for their turn.

What was it with guys and twins? Seriously.

Christian was a great dancer. So great, in fact, that I was actually starting to have fun. We moved a bit closer together and I laughed as he twirled me around. Maybe I should dance with strangers more often. Then, out of nowhere, Becca's hands touched my shoulders and her hair grazed my skin.

"Incoming!" she sang.

Before I could even register what that meant, a hand came down on Christian's forearm.

"What the hell are you doing?" Sean demanded.

Right. The jealousy plan. My heart started to pound in my chest at the very sight of Sean. Apparently Becca and Sun were right. This had worked like a charm.

"Sean! I didn't know you were here!" I said, acting all blasé as Becca and Sun had coached me. It was hard, considering how totally hot he looked in his trendy white T-shirt and sandblasted jeans. "This is Christian! Christian, Sean."

"Hey, man. Nice to meet you," Sean said, lifting his chin quickly. "Now I'd appreciate it if you'd get your hands off my girlfriend."

I grinned. I couldn't help it. He'd called me his girlfriend!

Christian looked baffled. "Sorry, man. I had no idea."

"Yeah, well now you do," Sean said flatly.

Chivalry was not dead. Christian raised his hands in surrender and moved off.

Sean turned to me, his eyes smoldering. "Who the hell was that guy?" he shouted, as everyone continued to dance all around us.

"Just a guy I met!" I said, lifting one shoulder. "You didn't want to see me again this weekend, so I figured . . ."

Sean stared at me. He just stood there and stared. Where was the apology? The profession of devotion? All the things Becca and Sun had promised me?

"What are you doing here, Jenna?" he asked, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Sean, what—"

"Because it looks like you're trying to play me," he said.

My shoulders drooped. There was nothing to do but deny, deny, deny. "I'm not trying to play you. I—"

"Oh, really? You knew I would be here. You come in looking all hot and grab some guy and pretend he's your date or something," Sean said. "You really gonna say I'm wrong?"

I opened my mouth, but nothing came out. Nothing anyone could hear over the music anyway. I think there was a bit of a confused moan, but the bass ate it up.

"I don't believe this! I told you today that I don't like games, and the first thing you do is try to mess with me!" Sean said, clearly offended.

"Sean, I thought . . . I thought you didn't want to see me again, and I didn't know what to do," I said, dropping all pretense. "I just—"

Sean's expression softened slightly. "You thought I didn't want to see you again? Didn't you get my message?"

"What message?"

"Listen to your voice mail, PA," he said. "And call me later."

Then, without another word, he was gone.

Becca and Sun followed me out into the fresh air of the alley. At least a hundred people were lined up there, hoping to get into the club we'd bailed from after fifteen minutes. I yanked my cell phone out of my bag. It was dead.

"Dammit!" I said under my breath.

"I'm always telling you to charge it!" Becca sang, handing me hers. "Here. Call your voice mail."

"Thank you!" I grabbed her phone greedily and dialed my own number, then the code to get into my voice mail. The digitized voice told me I had one new message.

"Did you see what he was wearing?" Becca said to Sun. "Maybe he *does* know how to dress."

"Shh!" I said, waving a hand at her. I held my breath as I listened to the message.

"Jenna, it's me," Sean said. "I'm really sorry for freaking out before. I was just mad about the experiment. You know how I get with class and everything, but never mind. Never mind. That's not an excuse," he stammered. "It wasn't your fault. It wasn't even Becca's fault. She was just trying to defend you, and then you were trying to defend her. I get it. I have a brother, too. I wasn't thinking about that, you know? But now I am, and I . . . I'm sorry, I'm rambling. But I don't want you to think that I don't care if you

call me. I really want you to call me. Badly. So that I can at least apologize because . . . I was a jerk. Becca was right. I was picking on you all day, and I'm sorry. I get too competitive. I know. Anyway. So call me. Please. Unless you hate me. All right. Bye."

I hung up the phone and looked at Becca and Sun. My heart felt completely full, and at the same time I felt extremely stupid. Sean really *didn't* like games. If nothing else, the total honesty of that message reminded me of that. He was straightforward, up-front, and, for better or for worse, he was always Sean. He never tried to be anyone else. And I had done *exactly* that. Putting on a front was not the way to win him back. I handed the cell to Becca.

"Well? What did he say?" she asked.

"Yeah, Jenna. We need to know everything if we're gonna help you come up with Plan B," Sun added.

"You know what, guys?" I said. "I think from here on out, I should do things my way."

It took forever for Becca and Sun to talk themselves to sleep, so it was almost two in the morning when I finally finished my work. I saved it onto a disc, shoved my feet into my sneakers, and left the two of them snoozing in our room. I tiptoed out and closed the door as quietly as possible, then hurried downstairs and across the quad to the guys' dorm. The campus was peaceful aside from a few different songs dripping out of open windows, and my flip-flops slapped against the bricks on the quad, sounding absurdly loud. When I got to the brightly lit entryway of Sean's dorm, I dialed his room number into the security system.

"Hello?" Sean's voice crackled over the speaker a moment later.

"Hey. It's me. Jenna," I said. My heart pounded nervously.

"It's two in the morning," he said sleepily.

"I know. And I'm kind of alone out here," I said, glancing around at the shadows.

"I'll be right down."

A few minutes later Sean padded toward the glass door in soccer shorts and a white T-shirt. He squinted in a confused way as he let me into the lobby.

"What's up?" he asked, eyeing the disc in my hand.

"I wanted to give this to you," I said, holding it out. "My results from the log flume experiment."

Sean took a step back, as if I was holding out a weapon. "You don't have to do that."

"Yes, I do," I said. "It's only fair. Becca sabotaged you. If she hadn't, you would have completed the experiment. You have to take it." I shoved the disc toward him, feeling a flare of desperation.

His brow creased. "Are you drunk?"

"No! I'm not drunk!" I protested, dropping my hands. A couple of guys who had just walked in with a pizza eyed me and laughed. "This is the only way I can think of to make up for today. For this whole, stupid, ridiculous misunderstanding of a day."

Sean placed his hands on my tense shoulders and kneaded the muscles in my back with his fingertips. He looked directly into my eyes. "Jenna, did you get my message or not?"

"Yeah," I said. "I finally listened to it."

"So then you know you don't have to make anything up to me," he said. "I'm the one who should be apologizing for being such an ass. You must have wanted to strangle me."

I exhaled a weak laugh. He'd hit the nail on the head. "Kind of. But then I responded by going to that stupid club and trying to make you jealous," I said.

"Okay. Not your finest moment," he admitted.

I blushed and looked up at him. "I just didn't want to lose you. And I guess I . . . kind of freaked," I said. "I mean, even though there's sort of an expiration date on this . . ." Then I waved the disc back and forth between the two of us. "I just—"

"Wait a minute. There is?" he said, holding up a hand.

"Well, in August we go home, right? I mean . . ."

He stared at me blankly, causing me to overheat.

"Anyway, that's not the point right now," I said, standing up straight. "The point is, I want to be with you. And I didn't want you to spend the night not knowing that."

The comment hung in the air for a long moment until I basically wanted to die. I was trying to be up-front the way Sean always was. I figured he'd respect that. So why had he suddenly gone mute?

Finally Sean smiled that heart-stopping smile of his.

"See? Now that was all you had to say."

He reached for my shorts and pulled me toward him by the belt loops. My breath caught in my throat a second before he laid an incredible, long, searching, pulse-pounding kiss right on my lips.

"Now I don't know what this whole expiration date thing is about, cuz I looked things up," Sean said suddenly,

pulling away so fast, my mind was still fuzzy from his kiss. "We only live about two hours away from each other back home, and I don't see that as an insurmountable distance."

"You looked that up?" I said, grinning. "That's so cute!"

"Do not call me cute," Sean joked, lifting a finger. "Cool, yes. Handsome, maybe. Never cute."

"Got it," I said, wrapping my arms around his neck. "Cutie."

"Now see? I can't work with this," Sean said, throwing his hands up and trying to back away.

I wouldn't let him, though. I held on to him so hard, I almost tripped him. "Oh, just shut up and kiss me again," I said. I was really getting used to this straightforward thing.

Sean looked at me, momentarily stunned, and shrugged. "All right then."

And he did. Somehow we stumbled back to one of the couches and fell onto it, sitting with our legs entwined. Still, our lips never parted. I have no idea how long we sat there, kissing and giggling. I don't even know if anyone walked through and saw us. I just know it was bliss.

"So, no more game playing?" Sean said finally, resting his forehead against mine.

"No more game playing," I said.

"Good. But I'm *so* gonna kick your butt on that midterm," he teased.

I grinned and touched my lips to his. "Bring it on."

The End

The Choice Redux

Think you can do better than that? Ha! Good luck!
Turn back to [page 117](#) and try again.

About the Author

Kendall Adams

has been the breaker of many hearts, and she closely guards her own. She lives in New York City.

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