

JUNIOR
LIFEGUARDS



The Test





A Bright Idea

All I ever wanted was to be an Olympic swimmer. Glory, honor, excellence, patriotism: it all appealed to me. I always pictured myself up there on the top step of the podium in my Ralph Lauren-designed team warm-up suit—red, white and blue, of course—waving at the crowd, bowing my head for the gold medal, receiving my flowers, and wiping away a modest tear as the *Star Spangled Banner* played over the airwaves for all to hear. And the cheering, for me: responsible, reliable, hard-working Jenna Bowers, from

Westham, Massachusetts, as I win the world's highest athletic honor.

More than anything, more even than winning though, I love to swim. The relaxation of the pace and rhythm, the feeling of power as I slice through the water. It's hypnotizing and it takes me outside myself for a while, and then brings me back to earth with a post-workout feeling of calm euphoria. It's what I'm good at, and that skill defines me.

But over the years my joy in swimming has been replaced by times and stats and schedules, endless meets and practices, unglamorous travel and early mornings, jockeying for position on my own team and monitoring my standing in my league. If this is all there is, then my Olympic dreams are wavering.

I swim at the Y here in Westham, on Cape Cod, where I've been on the team for the past five years. I'd like to say I'm the star of the team, 'cause I was for a really long time. But about six months ago some new girls joined up and either

they were better or I got worse, and now I'm number three, or maybe two on a really good day.

At first, this stunk. I hated being seeded third and watching my coach fall all over these two girls the way she'd once fallen all over me. (I think once my coach realized she wasn't going to be an Olympic swimmer herself, she decided the next best thing would be to "discover" and coach an Olympic swimmer.) It had been fun being the star. But then it started to bother me that when I'd lose, which was rare, everyone would want to pick apart why I'd lost: my coach, my teammates, my parents, even my brothers! They'd say my breathing was off or my flip turn was too open or I'd been slow off the block. I wanted to say to them all: *Fine! Then you get in the pool and let's see how you do it!*

And when I started losing more (not badly, by the way—just not winning all the time, like usual), there was more criticism and more hard training, and right then the new girls showed up and . . . well . . . after a while, it was kind of fun

watching someone *else* get ripped to shreds after a bad race, and seeing someone *else* do twenty extra laps for a change. The heat was off and I felt a lot cooler.

Right about then, maybe a month ago, I saw the first flyer.

It said: “Be a hero! Learn to save lives! Westham Junior Lifeguards tryout info coming soon!” and it gave the web address for the town lifeguarding program so you could learn more.

But, most importantly, it was being tacked up on the bulletin board at the Y by a *really* handsome high school guy named Luke Slater (not that I actually knew him; I just knew who he was). Physically, he wasn’t my type (he was kind of short, and I am tall; he was a little too old for me; and he had white blond hair while I like darker guys) but his big green eyes were friendly, as he called out, “Come on out for tryouts! We’re going to post the official date in the next couple of weeks, okay?” And then he grinned at me, so I had to smile back.

“Okay!” I replied, because what else could I say?

I’d heard about kids at school who trained to be Junior Lifeguards; they were always kids I admired but didn’t really have time to hang out with because of swimming. When I was younger, we had a babysitter named Molly who did the training every summer and then became an ocean guard. She was so nice and pretty and cool, and on the rare summer weekends when I didn’t have a swim meet, I’d head to Lookout Beach for an afternoon where I’d see her at work. She’d sit up high on the lifeguard stand in her red Speedo one-piece and tight ponytail, a whistle around her neck and zinc on her nose, and it was like she was the boss of the beach. She’d tell kids what they were and weren’t allowed to do and she’d blow her whistle and everyone would obey her. But she’d always wave at me and ask about swim team and how my brothers were. It was like being friends with a celebrity; I was psyched when people would see her talking to me from way up high on her lifeguard throne.

At the end of her shift, the boy lifeguards would often tease her and throw her in the water, four of them carrying her to the water when her shift was over, everyone laughing and shrieking. It looked like so much fun! Like a movie of what being a teenager should be like. Handsome boys joking around with pretty girls in the sunshine, at the water's edge, and getting paid for it, too! I hadn't seen her much since she'd left for college three years ago, but whenever I thought of lifeguards, I thought of Molly Cruise.

I'd forgotten about Junior Lifeguards though, for a while. Then today, a Monday, everything changed. Today's swim practice at the Y started off like any other: I biked over from school, changed into my suit in the locker room, stashed my stuff, and grabbed my goggles and towel. But on my way out to the pool room, I saw a *new* flyer—a big poster, really. It said, "Junior Lifeguard Tryouts this Saturday 10:00 AM at the Westham YMCA pool. Visit our website for forms and details! www.juniorguards.com. Daily practices

M-F, 1:00-5:00 PM. Weekend tournaments.” I felt a little butterfly in my stomach flutter around, but I pushed it away. I had a swim meet up the Cape this weekend, so there was no way I could attend the tryout. Too bad.

In the pool room that day, we had our team meeting on the bleachers, then everyone warmed up and jumped in the water. We worked on our weakest stroke first, and I couldn’t stop thinking of the lifeguard tryout as I did the breaststroke up and down the pool. I wondered whether the test would be on certain strokes, or if it would be more about endurance. I’m in really good shape (not to brag), so I knew I could ace an endurance test. If I had to pick a stroke, I’d probably pick butterfly. I bet that would stand out, since most people can’t do it.

“Let’s go, Bowers! Head out of the clouds, please!” Coach Randall called as she strolled past my lane. How could she tell what I was thinking about? I tried harder for a few laps, my head empty of everything but the rhythm: pull, pull, kick, breathe; pull, pull, kick, breathe; pull, pull,

kick, breathe. I usually sing a song in my head to keep my rhythm going, but today I had been distracted, so there was no musical accompaniment. Quickly, I started singing the newest Taylor Swift song in my head and it got me back on track. But then, during a water break, I heard two of the new girls discussing the lifeguard tryouts poster and I got all distracted again.

“It would be hilarious to watch all those kids splashing around in here, wouldn’t it?” said one of them.

The other laughed, not unkindly. “Crazy. I’ve heard a couple have to be saved *themselves* every year!”

“Amateurs!” the first girl laughed.

They were nice girls but smug, and overly secure in their little swim team world. For some reason it rubbed me the wrong way today. I thought of Molly and those handsome boy lifeguards. There was nothing amateur about them. If anything, they seemed like professionals, almost adults, to me. Being a lifeguard took nerve!

If someone was in trouble in the water, you had to go in and save him or her, no matter what! Bad weather, sharks, huge waves . . . anything! It was hard core, like the Marines.

Practice was almost over and it was time for a final time trial, all in, best strokes all around.

“Bweeet!”

Coach Randall blew her whistle and we were off! I dove in with hardly a splash, then cut through the water and porpoised as far as I could before surfacing for a stroke and a breath. As I said, butterfly is my best stroke, and I’ve been working for months to shave a few seconds off my time. Every second counted these days.

My wet hand slapped the concrete end of the pool and Coach Randall was there, as always. She clicked her stopwatch and nodded. “Thirty-two seconds. Not your best, Bowers,” and then she moved down the lanes. I could see that the two other girls in my heat had beaten me, the ones who’d been talking about the Junior Lifeguard tryouts.

I sighed heavily and snapped my goggles off my eyes so I could massage the dents they'd left in my skin. Slowly, I hoisted myself up and out to change. As I walked to the locker room, I passed the tryouts poster again and felt the butterflies, though this time there were more of them.

After I showered, changed, pinned up my shoulder-length hair (which used to be blond but is currently light greenish from chlorine), dropped some eyedrops into my dark brown eyes, put on my hoodie, flip flops and a layer of bubblegum lip gloss, I slammed my locker, grabbed my knapsack and went to claim my bike and ride home. But just as I cut across the lobby of the Y, I heard Coach Randall calling me from her office.

I turned and saw her at her desk, waving me in.

"Hey, Coach," I called. I suddenly felt nervous, but I wasn't sure why.

"Jenna, come on in and take a seat."

Uh-oh, I thought. Coach Randall never calls me by my first name.

"Is something wrong?" I asked, lowering

myself into the side chair next to the desk in her cramped office. My mouth was dry and my heart was thudding. Could she know that I had been fantasizing about Junior Lifeguards?

Coach Randall looked at me kindly. “You seemed a little distracted in there today. Are you okay?” she asked.

Her kindness caught me off guard. We don’t really talk about feelings on swim team.

“Oh . . . I . . .” I could feel a blush blooming on my cheeks.

“I know things have gotten more competitive around here, but you’ve always been my star! I just haven’t seen your usual effort lately. We have a lot of big meets coming up and I just wanted to make sure your heart is in it and that nothing’s bothering you, on swim team or otherwise.” She studied me with her head tipped to the side.

I sighed. It was weird but it was like something inside me just broke open. I felt my eyes welling up with tears. Coach Randall reached out and put her hand on mine.

“Oh, Jenna! I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to make you cry!” With her other hand, she reached for some Kleenex and handed it to me as I snuffled awkwardly.

“Thanks. I just . . . I was thinking . . . it’s not about swim team. I do enjoy swim team. I just, I thought it might be fun to . . . I don’t know. This is going to sound really bad . . .”

“Go ahead. It’s okay,” encouraged Coach Randall.

I took a deep breath and dashed the tears from my eyes. I smiled shakily. “I thought it would be fun to try out for Junior Lifeguards. Crazy. I know! I really don’t have time for that. It was just a thought. I’m over it already.”

Coach Randall smiled gently and sat back in her seat, folding her arms across her chest. “Is this a sudden thought or something that’s been on your mind for a while?”

I sighed. “Ever since I saw the first poster. I guess a few weeks. It just looked like fun, you know?”

Coach Randall sighed, too. "I know. It is fun. I did it when I was your age."

"Really?" I asked. I was surprised. It was hard to picture Coach Randall on the beach.

She nodded and swiveled her chair, looking up at the ceiling thoughtfully. "You know, I think a lot about how hard we push you kids these days. Things have become so professional, so competitive. You don't have any free time like we used to when I was your age. It's always on to the next meet, or practice, or test."

I nodded. "I'm used to it, though. I can handle it." I sat up straight. *Brilliant, Bowers*, I scolded myself. *Crying in front of your coach about how swim team is no fun! That's a great way to keep a top spot on the team.*

Coach Randall leaned forward again and looked at me carefully. "How about if we make a deal?" she said, squinting.

"What?" I could just imagine where this was heading: extra practices, weight training, more meets . . .

“How would you like to take the summer off and train with the Junior Lifeguards instead of the swim team? I’ll save your spot for you and you can join back up in the fall. What would you think about that?” She folded her arms again and watched me.

I couldn’t help it. A huge smile bloomed on my face. “Wait, *really?* Are you joking?” I looked around the room. “Am I being punked? Is this a trick?”

Coach Randall laughed. “No. It’s not a trick. Think of it as cross training. I think it might renew your interest in swim team if you can get out in the world and see how good your skills are compared to everyone else’s. I had the chance to do it when I was a kid, so why shouldn’t you?”

“But losing three months of training . . . and competition. I’ll fall so far behind . . .”

“Tell you what. You can come to practice whenever you like, but we’ll say at least once a week. That way you can keep a hand in and you won’t fall out of touch with what’s going on. I

just . . . I see your interest level wobbling a bit and I'd hate to lose you from the team. You've got a ton of talent and both of us have put a lot of work into your skill development, not to mention your parents and all their time and energy. It would be a shame for all of us if you quit and it would be a waste for you to stay here when your heart's not in it. If you go on a break starting today, I'll just bet you that you'll come back refreshed and raring to go in September. What do you say?"

I couldn't help myself. I laughed and jumped up and hugged Coach Randall. "Thank you so much!" I cried. "This is awesome! I can't wait to tell my parents!"

She laughed, too, and hugged me back. "I'd maybe pose it as a question to them first, if I were you. See what they say and have them give me a call so we can discuss it. I think . . . I think it's the right thing to do, Jenna. You'll see."

"Thanks, Coach."

"You'll make a great lifeguard, kid!" she said.

“I bet you were great at it, too!” I said, generously.

Coach Randall laughed. “Nah. I was terrible. I only wanted to watch the gorgeous guys!”

“Well, sometimes they need saving, too!” I joked.

I stood in her doorway as I was leaving. “Thanks, Coach. This is just . . . like a gift. I really appreciate it.”

She nodded. “I’m glad we could work something out. Go get ‘em!”

I practically skipped to my bike, I was so happy. I couldn’t believe how things had turned around in such a short amount of time. I’d gone from a normal day of school and swim team, to suddenly heading into a new adventure, with a summer doing just what I wanted to do! How lucky was I?

All I knew was that I needed to talk to my best friend, Piper, as soon as humanly possible. And I knew just what I needed to talk to her about: Junior Lifeguards. The nervous butterflies

flapped wildly around in my stomach as I raced to her farm on my bike. And this time, I didn't push them away. I was getting used to them. They felt kind of good, actually. They'd feel even better if Piper agreed to do Junior Lifeguards with me. But *that* was going to be a challenge.



Unemployed

Piper's family, the Janssens, and my family, the Bowers, go way back in Westham. Like, generations and generations. Westham and the surrounding area used to be populated by just farmers and fishermen in the olden days, and we always had "summer people," but they were low-key. However, in recent years it has become popular with much wealthier summer people than we were used to, which has changed things. Farms have been gobbled up into luxury golf courses, formerly public things (like beach access and

fishing ponds) have become private—with signs and fences to keep out strangers, and things are a lot more crowded.

The crowds are great for local-business owning families like mine (fishing boat captains, farm stand operators, painting contractors) and Piper's (they own a riding stable), but not so great for traffic, house prices, mom & pop stores in town, and stuff like that. It's also not great for kids who don't have rich parents, like us, because things like the movies and bowling are so expensive. Plus, Piper's parents are divorced and they both had to move far away for their jobs, at least for a while. Piper didn't want to move to Ohio or Pennsylvania, so her grandmother, Bett, offered to keep her here, which worked out great for everyone. But Piper doesn't like asking Bett flat-out for pocket money, and her parents aren't able to send her much.

Piper and I know that when summer comes, it's time to make money. Our families in Westham work like crazy from Memorial Day to Labor

Day to make every penny they can, because things really drop off after that. If they don't kill it in the summer, things get pretty lean in Cape Cod by February or March. Piper and I are used to it, and we pitch in and work hard too; I work at my mom's family's farm stand, and Piper, at her grandma Bett's barn. These jobs pay decently (the tips are what really count) so it's worth it, and it would be hard to give up. Unless something really great came along.

I thought about all of this as I stand-up pedaled all the way to the Janssens' barn. I couldn't get there fast enough.

"Piper!" I called, dropping my bike in the dirt outside the main barn door. My legs were shaking but I couldn't tell if it was from my news or all of that hard bike riding. I stumbled across the dirt barnyard.

"In here!" she replied.

I'd held it together the whole ride and now, just hearing Piper's voice, I wanted to burst. I entered the dim barn, my eyes blinking to adjust

and my nose twitching. Four-thirty was muck-out time so it was dusty and fragrant in there. The new hay smelled sweet but the old hay, well . . . yuck.

“Where?” I called again, urgent to see her.

“With Buttercup!” she replied, and poked her head out of a stall halfway down the row. She narrowed her eyes and leaned on her pitchfork, her two long braids the same buttery color as the bales of hay all around. “What’s up?” she asked kindly. “You sound funny.”

“OMG, you are never going to believe this!” I squealed. “Coach Randall has given me a leave of absence from swim team!” And then I sank down on a hay bale as the reality sank in and my legs gave out from the flat-out pedaling to the Janssens’.

Piper crossed the barn in three quick strides and was at my side, plopping down next to me on the hay. “Wait, *what?* Are you sure? Swim team is your life!”

“Of course, I’m sure!” I cried. “And it’s not

my life anymore. It's time for a new life!" I declared. I sat up straight, took a deep breath, and said, "It's time for some adventure!"

"Okay, whoa! Back up, girl. Tell me what happened." Piper sat back against a rough plank wall, her hands on her dirty tan jodhpurs, and her head tilted patiently.

I rolled my eyes a little because I hate it when Piper talks to me like I'm a horse, but I didn't want to get in a fight about it right now when I needed her. I explained about Coach Randall and Junior Lifeguards and Piper listened in amazement.

At the end, she said, "But are you sure you want to quit? I mean, it was kind of a spontaneous decision, right? What are your parents going to say?"

But I shook my head. "I'm not quitting! That's the beauty of it. I can try something new *and* I can go back when I'm done! I'll go to one practice a week anyway. Plus, I think Junior Lifeguards will be awesome, don't you?" I couldn't

ask her point-blank to do it with me because it would scare her off. This was going to have to be handled just right.

Piper is a very strong athlete who does not particularly enjoy swimming, though she is good at it. She's a tall girl, big and strong, but she has a phobia about being in a bathing suit in front of boys. Both of these were things I was going to have to work on in order to convince her to try out with me.

Piper sighed heavily. "So wait. Junior Lifeguards? Seriously? How will you make money? When will you go to swim team practice?"

I nodded. I'd already thought of this. "I'll do the morning shift at the farm stand, weekdays only. On Fridays, I can make the swim team practice because it's late. Then Junior Lifeguards is on afternoons and weekends."

"You won't make as much money working weekday mornings at the farm stand," she pointed out, picking a scrap of hay off her starched white polo shirt. I usually work on weekends when I

can make some big tips carrying out bags to the summer people's cars.

I sighed. "No."

As much as I like making money, Piper lives for it. Ever since her parents left, Piper has worked for her grandma Bett every chance she got, teaching pony camp, currying the horses that the rich kids board there, mucking out stalls, and more. She's already socked away over two thousand dollars.

I pressed my case. "It's not all about the money, Pipe. I want to have fun, too. I want to maybe hang out with boys and have a social life. And I think Junior Lifeguards will look good on my college applications one day, too. Especially, if I'm not the swim team hotshot I used to be."

"Jenna!" scolded Piper. "Don't think like a quitter."

"I'm thinking like a realist," I said. "A realist who one day could be pulling down eighteen bucks an hour as a Westham Ocean Beach Lifeguard!"

“That’s a long way off!” laughed Piper.

“Ya gotta start somewhere!” I said with a shrug. “You’d be good at it, too,” I added quietly.

“Ha!” laughed Piper with a short, dry bark.

Hmm. I could see that I should have spun this differently. Piper is boy crazy. I should have led with the boy angle!

“Come on, Piper,” I said. “There will be so many boys . . .”

Piper rolled her eyes. “You are not talking me into this like you do with everything else. Not this time, sister!”

I backed off.

We both sighed and suddenly the notes of a familiar whistle carried into the barn on the late May breeze.

“Bett,” said Piper.

Piper’s grandmother, Bett Janssens, is a dynamo. When Piper’s grandfather died twenty years ago, Bett took over the family stables and turned it into the number one riding establishment in our area, which is saying a lot. People of

all ages, male and female of all abilities, flocked to the barn to learn to ride and to have their horses cared for in a “concierge” fashion. Bett’s barn was all about service and catering to its wealthy clientele. It helps that it is physically picture perfect, like a Cape Cod postcard: beautifully weathered grey shingled buildings with white trim and shutters; neat gates and fences covered in pale pink rambling roses; and all surrounded by rings and jumps set in endless white-fenced fields that tapered down to the dunes for amazing access to trail riding in the waves. The land alone is worth more than you could ever imagine. Not that Bett would ever sell.

Bett is in great shape and always on the move; the air feels electric when she’s around and people treat her very reverently, like she’s famous. But as inspiring and impressive as the Bett show can be, it can also be tiring. Bett can make lesser mortals feel like losers very easily. Piper and I took a deep breath and steeled ourselves for the arrival of the whirlwind.

“Girls! Why so serious? It’s almost summer!” said Bett cheerfully as three mutts trotted along behind her into the barn. “Lots of peace and quiet and free time to look forward to.” She cackled at her own joke and smoothed back her chin-length white hair with one hand as she lifted a brown velvet riding helmet on with the other.

“Are you going to tell?” Piper asked me quietly.

I shrugged. “I guess. I haven’t even told my parents yet.”

Bett’s smile disappeared as she tugged her helmet on tightly and clipped the clasp under her chin. “What’s up, girls?” she asked, smoothly squatting down to hay bale level to meet our eyes. Besides all the riding, Bett is a regular at 6:00 AM beach yoga every day.

“I’m taking a sabbatical from swim team,” I said, a big smile growing on my face.

“Oh, honey, no kidding! Why?” Bett’s blue eyes were full of concern. Despite my smile, she knows very well how much time I spend in the pool at the Y since she’s always dropping me there

or picking me up on the way to and from my activities with Piper. She reached out and gave me a rough rub on the leg, like I was a newborn colt she needed to warm up.

“I . . .” I was about to tell her about Junior Lifeguards but Piper silenced me with a look.

“It’s a long story,” said Piper.

Bett bit her lip thoughtfully for a minute. “What are you going to do with yourself this summer?” she asked. Idleness would not occur to Bett.

I took a deep breath and made my first formal announcement on the subject. “Actually, I’m going to try out for Junior Lifeguards,” I said, and I smiled. *Take that, Piper!*

Bett raised her eyebrows and smiled back. She looked relieved that I had a plan. “Well, *that’s* a wonderful idea!” She said, standing up and giving me a strong clap on the back. “You’ll be terrific at that!”

“Thanks.” Her confidence strengthened my resolve.

“Maybe Piper should do it with you!” said Bett lightly, but her eyes were serious. She began pulling tackle down from the wall to harness up her giant Arabian workhorse, Layla.

“Ha!” laughed Piper, her blue eyes dancing. “A landlubber like me! Can you imagine?”

“You’d be great at it,” said Bett, dead seriously. She slung the tackle over her arm.

Piper’s smile faded. “Come on! Hello? It’s me, Piper Janssens, you’re talking about! Why would *I* do such a thing?”

But I wasn’t going to let this opportunity slip by. I turned to grin encouragingly at Piper. “A change of pace? Social prestige? Get out and see the world a little? Make more money down the road? And we’d have so much fun, Piper! Do it with me!”

Piper rolled her eyes. “Yeah, right. And what would they do without me here?”

Hmmm. That was another challenge for me. Piper liked working at the barn. She wasn’t obsessed with caring for horses or riding, though

she was good at both. She liked the money, and also, I think, the security of staying home all the time.

“Actually, honey,” Bett interrupted, untangling a stubborn lead. She glanced over at me as if deciding whether or not to say what she wanted to say.

Piper turned to look at her. “What?”

“I don’t know if this is the right time . . .”

Piper looked at me then back at her grandmother. “You can say anything you want in front of Jenna. It’s okay.” She shrugged. I shrugged, too.

“Well . . .” Bett took a deep breath. “I’m just going to put this out there.” She transferred the tackle from one arm to the other and leaned against the side of the barn doorway. “Piper, your parents and I think you need a break from the barn this summer. You need to be out doing other things with your friends, kids your own age. Having fun, broadening your horizons, learning new skills.”

“What are you talking about?” Piper was confused.

Suddenly, I wished I was anywhere else on earth.

Bett drew a deep breath. “You have the whole rest of your life to work here, not that you have to. We’d just like to see you do something else for a change. I was going to let you know this weekend, but now . . . well, maybe you should do Junior Lifeguards with Jenna instead this summer. Since you won’t be at the barn, I mean.”

“Wait, *what?*” Now Piper was furious, and I think mortified, too. She didn’t know which way to look or what to say. She spluttered, “Are you saying I’m *fired?*”

“No, dear, I wouldn’t fire you,” said Bett calmly, though there was pain in her eyes as she spoke. “I’m just . . . putting you on a much-needed leave of absence.”

Now Piper was becoming teary. “But who will help out here? And what about the money? I need a job! Why is it your decision and not mine?”

Bett drew herself up straight and planted her feet in their boots in a wide stance. (*Uh-oh*, I thought.) “It’s for your own good, Piper. Trust me. And we can work out an allowance, that’s not a problem. You just need a change of scenery. Something age-appropriate.”

Piper was furious. “No way. No *way* am I leaving the barn! It’s not up to you! It’s *my* life!” And then she stormed out, leaving Bett and me staring at each other.

“I think she’s a little upset,” I said tentatively.

“A little?” Bett managed a small wry smile.

“I’ll go after her,” I offered.

“Thanks, honey. Better you than me right now, I think.” And Bett turned on her heel and strode down the alley to Layla’s stall.

“Let’s go, butterflies,” I muttered to myself as I followed Piper down the path to the farmhouse.



All In

Piper flopped miserably on her bed as I opened up the Westham Junior Lifeguards homepage on Piper's computer and read her everything that the lifeguard training program would feature. Every day there would be fitness activities (not a plus for her, but good for me since I'll need to stay in good condition if I'm not doing swim team regularly) and then a new skill or technique would be introduced. Over the summer we'd learn CPR, the Heimlich maneuver, mouth- to- mouth resuscitation, and other basic first aid skills from

the local EMT squad. We'd have experts from Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute come tell us about wave patterns, hurricanes, riptides, coastal erosion, lightning, and more. Seasoned local lifeguards would teach us lifesaving techniques like saves and holds, scanning techniques to spot trouble before it's too late, and how to use gear such as life preservers, rescue kayaks and surfboards, and maybe even Jet Skis. There would also be training for lifeguarding competitions, mostly up and down the Cape. (One year, the squad had gone to Nationals and won!) And then there was a section on Mental Preparation, taught by Bud Slater, who must be Luke's dad. He would focus us to train our attention, practice mindfulness and even meditate (kind of wacky but interesting).

I read it all out to Piper and she sighed and scoffed and made lots of discouraging noises, but I didn't let it get to me. The only question she asked was, "What do they make you do to try out?" but the website didn't address the specif-

ics, other than that there would be pool and ocean tests this weekend. For the first portion—the pool swim test at the Y on Saturday—we needed to register in advance at the town lifeguarding headquarters at Lookout Beach. We'd have to create an account online for each of us in order to print out an application, then we needed to fill it in, have a waiver signed by our guardians, and pay a \$50 tryout fee. If we passed the pool test, we'd be invited to the ocean test on Sunday at Lookout Beach. If we made it, the program was free.

I busied myself printing out two copies of the program overview, the waiver, and application, while Piper moaned about how she hates swimming, hates wearing a bathing suit in public, doesn't want to waste her time away from the barn, needs to make money, already knows CPR, and so on.

I separated the forms into two stacks and shook them neatly into two small, even piles. "Pipe, here's the pile for you and Bett to fill out. I'll take mine home with me. Let's plan to go after

school tomorrow and hand them in at the beach office, okay?"

"I'm not doing it," said Piper, staring up at the ceiling.

I sighed. "Well, at least try out. Then, if you don't pass, you can tell Bett you tried and maybe she'll let you have your job back. Okay?"

"Humph," said Piper.

I stood up. It was five-thirty and my parents would be home soon and wondering where I was. "Listen, Piper Janssens. We need to have a fun and exciting summer. We're only thirteen once. And Junior Lifeguards is the way to go. It's something new and different for both of us, and it will be interesting. We'll be outside, we'll learn a ton, and down the road, we can be lifeguards together and make good money and it will help us get into good colleges. If you can think of a better plan for our summer, and for future summers, just let me know!" I was about to leave when I knew it was time to play my ace. "And by the way, it says on the website that certified pool guards make \$15

an hour and ocean guards can make up to \$30 an hour around here.”

Piper was silent at first as I flounced out of the room.

Then, “Whatever, traitor!” she called after me.

I grinned. If she was name-calling, it meant I was getting to her.



After dinner that night, I broke the news to my parents and asked them to fill out the Junior Life-guard forms for me. Neither of them had the reaction I was hoping for: my dad was annoyed, and my mom was surprised. It was true what Coach Randall had warned me about—we’d all put time into this swimming career of mine, and it wasn’t easy for my parents to back away from it. The paperwork sat on the kitchen table, untouched.

“You’re going to fall behind, Jen. If you want to get a college scholarship for swimming some day, you can’t afford to take a season off.” My dad’s mouth was set in a grim line.

Having grown up in Westham, my parents are big advocates of “Getting Out”. Even though they both moved back here after college to work in family businesses, they say they have bigger dreams for my three younger brothers and me. Part of that dream is a good education and exposure to the bigger world. Swimming was always going to be my ticket off the Cape.

“I’d hate to see you lose everything you’ve worked toward,” said my mom.

My twelve-year-old brother, Nate was eavesdropping as he pulled some computer paper from my mom’s desk drawer and inserted it into the tray of our family printer. “I think the coach just wants to get rid of you,” Nate said snarkily.

I stuck my tongue out at him and waited for my parents to chastise him but they didn’t. They just looked at me.

“Wait, do you think that, too?” I asked in shock.

“I just need to talk to Amy Randall in the morning,” said my mom wearily. “I’m not sure what I think.” She rubbed her eyes.

“Look, I’m all for having a fun summer, but can’t you work that in around swim team?” asked my dad.

“No,” I said. “And anyway, Coach Randall is letting me work swim team in around the ‘fun,’ which by the way, will also be hard work. Plus, I’ll be working for Mima at the farm stand,” I added. “It’s not like I’ll be slacking!”

My dad smiled. “You aren’t capable of slacking, kid. And I love that about you. I just hate to see you toss away all your hard work in the pool. That’s all.”

“I don’t see it that way,” I said, and I folded my arms across my chest. “I see it as an investment in my future and . . . a kind of cross-training for swimming! I thought you guys would be all for this. I can’t really believe you’re giving me such a hard time. I’m so psyched to do Junior Lifeguards, plus it’s really educational!”

My mom had picked up the papers and was reading the program overview. “You *would* be good at it,” she said thoughtfully.

“I could be just like Molly Cruise!” I said, playing my ace card. My parents had always loved Molly.

But then they exchanged a funny glance.

“What?” I asked.

“Nothing, honey,” said my mom. “Look, leave the forms here. I’ll talk to Amy Randall before I go to work tomorrow and if it sounds all right, then I’ll sign them and leave them here for you? Right, Dad?”

My father sighed heavily. “I guess so.” He shook his head but I pretended not to see. Their reluctance made me nervous but I couldn’t let it shake me.

“Fine,” I said, ready to agree to anything that sounded like a yes.

I took a deep breath and went to study for exams, wondering vaguely what the weirdness was about Molly.



The next day was gorgeous, so my friends and I sat outside on the grass for lunch at school.

Exams wouldn't start until next week so we had a few glorious days of pretending they weren't coming. June is unpredictable on the Cape: one day it can be warm and sunny, the next day, cold and stormy. We had to take advantage of the good weather when we could.

I had spread out my hoodie and was lounging on it. Piper was next to me on her stomach, kicking her legs in the air as we chatted. Our friend, Selena Diaz was there and we were waiting for our other friend Ziggy Bloom to come back from getting her lunch out of her locker and join us. I was so happy to be with my peeps, on this gorgeous day, with so much to look forward to, telling Selena all about my plans.

Selena was cross-legged, next to me, making a daisy chain from flowers she'd pulled from a nearby bush. "Junior Lifeguards, huh?" she said. "That sounds kinda cool."

I sat bolt upright. "Do it with us!"

"Us?" moaned Piper.

I glared at her. "Shush!" I said. "Yes. Come

on, Selena, it'll be so fun! On the beach, cute boys . . .”

“Like who?” demanded Selena, setting the daisy chain on top of her head like a crown.

Okay, by the way, Selena is gorgeous. Like, people stop and turn around to look at her on the street, she's so pretty. She's not very tall but she has a great petite figure and long, long reddish brown hair, and huge dark eyes and bright white perfect teeth and dimples. People tell her all the time that she looks like Tori Vega from the show *Victorious* on television. She always acts like she doesn't care when people say it but I know she enjoys the compliment—really because her big thing is she wants to be a famous actress one day and good looks are just another tool in her drama kit. The only bummer about Selena's looks is that boys really go for her, to the exclusion of everyone else. And she and I generally have the same taste in guys. This means that usually, when we crush on a guy, he ends up liking Selena instead.

Selena had stumped me on the boy question,

since obviously I had no idea who'd be trying out. "Well, we'll have to see which boys come, but if you think about who the lifeguards are now from the older grades, then *imagine* the kinds of guys from our year who will be trying out . . . not just from here, but from the other towns around. You know . . . it could be epic!"

Selena grinned knowingly at me. "You have no idea, chica!" she said, wagging a finger at me. "This is false advertising!"

Hmm. Busted.

"Well, I'm sure there will be handsome guys there. It's practically a prerequisite . . .!"

"What is?" asked Ziggy Bloom, collapsing into the grass next to us. Her patchwork denim skirt pooled all around her and her black, springy curls blew around wildly in a gust of spring breeze. She pushed them away impatiently, her tiny, fair-skinned hands gathering them into a fat twist that she clipped up at the back of her head. "Cool daisy crown, Leeny," she added, patting Selena on the back.

“Hey, Zigs,” said Piper.

“Shalom,” said Ziggy. After a family service trip to Israel last summer, this had become her go-to greeting. She unwrapped a room-temperature tofu burger and began eating it hungrily. I winced. I am a meat and potatoes person and Ziggy’s vegetarianism will always be a mystery to me. “What’s a prerequisite?” she asked again.

I explained about Junior Lifeguards, and boy cuteness, and then we all reviewed where we stood on our summer plans. I explained about my plans for swim team, the farm stand, and Junior Lifeguards. Piper explained about Bett and the barn ultimatum.

“What about you, Selena?” asked Ziggy.

Selena took the crown off her head. “I’m dying to go to this awesome acting camp I read about that’s in Michigan this summer, but it’s just too expensive. On the other end of the spectrum, my dad wants me to go to *summer school* this summer!” Selena made fake gagging noises as she told us this. (She’s super popular and is in-

volved in almost everything at school extra-curricularly, but she doesn't get very good grades. It drives her parents crazy since they are very ambitious). "Oh, and I'm also going to volunteer at the church to help them put on their summer camp musical, as usual. But that's only two evenings a week, and it doesn't start until August." We all digested this and then Ziggy filled us in, ticking her activities off on her fingers.

"I am going to be tracking piping plover nests for the Nature Conservancy, volunteering at the food pantry, doing a weekly beach clean-up, and meeting with my knitting group twice a week to finish up some blankets we're making for kids in homeless shelters in Boston."

"Wow!" I said. "That's . . . really generous of you."

"And impressive," added Selena.

"My parents are pretty psyched about my plans," said Ziggy modestly, taking the last bite of her tofu burger.

"The only bummer is you'll be hanging

either solo or with adults all summer,” Piper pointed out.

“And it is a lot of work,” added Selena.

“Work is fun!” said Ziggy.

“Only if you get paid, you hippie!” said Piper, grabbing Ziggy’s knee and squeezing it in a monkey bite tickle.

“Speak for yourself, capitalist!” laughed Ziggy as she whacked Piper’s hand away. Ziggy’s family lived very simply and close to the land on a tiny organic farm, and other than growing a small amount of crops and raising chickens and a few goats, her parents didn’t really have jobs. No one could figure out how they supported themselves. Ziggy had mentioned in passing that they did a lot of bartering, but it was hard to tell. They drove a Prius, grew most of their own food, used solar energy and volunteered a lot around town, and both of them were artists. We couldn’t exactly ask where they got the money for say, taxes, which was the number one expense my parents liked to complain about.

“I take that as a compliment!” said Piper, all fake-serious now.

Selena and I laughed. This was an old fight between Piper and Ziggy, and they could be pretty funny about it.

“Why don’t you do Junior Lifeguards, Zigs?” I asked. “It’s community service! It’s basically free. It’s educational and it’s all about giving back.”

Ziggy raised her eyebrows. “Maybe I will. What do I have to do and when would I have to do it?”

I explained the details and emailed the website to her from my phone. Ziggy doesn’t have a phone so she can’t text, but she goes to the library to check her e-mail every day.

“I’ll look into it,” she said. “My schedule is pretty flexible, but I don’t know how much time I could commit to it.”

“There’ll be good-looking boys!” I added. This was my new sales pitch.

Selena snorted. “As far as you know!”

I whacked her playfully with my lunch bag. “Listen, if the four of us did it together, it would be awesome. That much I *do* know.”

Deep down inside, I prayed that I would find those forms signed and waiting for me on the kitchen table when I got home later. Who knew how the conversation had gone with my mom and Coach Randall earlier? It would just be so embarrassing if I convinced all my friends to do it and then I wasn’t allowed to do it myself!

“Well, so far, it’s just the one of us. But we might come cheer you on at tryouts, Jenna. Right, girls?” said Piper.

The bell rang to signal the start of the next period. We all stood up and began to pack up our stuff and gather our trash. Selena and Ziggy moved off toward the garbage area, with its compost and recycling bins.

“Baby steps, Pipester! Baby steps!” I teased.

Suddenly, Piper pulled me aside and whispered, “Jenna, even if I did want to do it, you have to face the fact that I would probably fail the

test. Don't you see that? Why would I bother humiliating myself? Think about it."

She took off for her next class and I stood there, open-mouthed, digesting this information. Piper was a great athlete. But would she pass? I wasn't sure. Did I still think she should go for it? Selfishly, yes. But for her own sake? A good friend would say no. So what did that make me?