



“Are you trying out for Poms this year?” Alicia asked.

“Yeah.” Erin pushed back on the chair and steadied her feet against the table. “We already had a first practice.”

“WHAT?” Alicia gasped. “You already had a practice?”

“Yeah.”

“What’s the routine like?”

“It’s like . . .” Erin stood up and walked around the room. “It’s like . . . real complicated. We’ve spent two days learning it. Later today we’ll go over the last sequence. The new coach is kind of strict.”

“I didn’t even know they had found a coach!” Alicia blurted out.

Erin fiddled with the silver heart hanging from her necklace. One side read: “I love you.” The other side said the same thing in Greek: “*S’agapo*.” Erin’s mother had given her the pendant to remind her of their heritage.

“Yeah. They did.” Erin sighed. Just last week she’d been told that a coach had finally been found. “Tryouts are tomorrow.”

“Oh my gosh . . .,” said Alicia, her voice trailing off in disbelief. “Hold on. I have another call.” Alicia giggled as she switched to the other call.

With school out for the summer, only a few girls, aside from former Poms, had learned about the tryouts. It had been through word-of-mouth. No wonder Alicia didn’t know. Erin could sort of relate. She hadn’t been able to join a dance class last year because the class was full by the time she’d found out about it. It sucked.

“I’m back,” Erin heard Alicia say. “Sorry, that was a friend from middle school. So . . . you were telling me about tryouts.”

“I think, maybe, I could teach you the routine,” said Erin.

“Would you?” said Alicia. “Thank you! Can I come over now?”

“Yeah,” Erin said, and gave her the address. As she hung up the phone, Erin couldn’t believe she had just agreed to have a complete stranger come over. Especially to teach her a Poms routine. How did that happen?

Erin stared out her bedroom window. Minutes later a pale green car drove up the tree-lined street. It pulled into her driveway. She must live close, Erin thought as Alicia jumped out of the car. She was wearing a cherry-print top and sky blue shorts that read “Puerto Rico” on the butt. Alicia looked as if she was having a great day. Erin went downstairs and opened the door.

“Hi! Thanks for doing this.” Alicia smiled up at Erin. “Thank you so much.”

“Yeah,” Erin answered. She didn’t know if this was going to work. The routine was hard. They had spent, what, more than five hours over the last couple of days on it. But Alicia looked so excited.

“Should I tell my mom to pick me up in an hour?” Alicia asked.

Erin arched her eyebrows. “Sure,” she said, thinking that an hour would be barely enough time to get started on the routine.

Alicia called out to her mother, then followed Erin inside to the basement.

Erin had been in Poms since the beginning of high school last year. She was serious about Poms, and she had recorded the exact songs they were going to dance to for the tryouts routine. Erin practiced a lot. Poms and synchronized swimming were the two activities she loved most.

First Erin showed Alicia some of the movements individually. She glanced at Alicia, to see if she was getting them. Then Erin showed Alicia a set of movements while counting: four marches and a leap with dance hands. Alicia repeated them within the count. Erin nodded, paused, and started again. Alicia was quick to copy her.

Erin turned on the CD player and put the moves to the music: one, two, three, four; one, two, three, four. Alicia joined in. Erin in front, Alicia behind. Alicia moved swiftly, her arms and legs not missing a beat. Erin in front, Alicia behind. For the next sequence Alicia jumped forward beside Erin: five, six, seven, eight. Erin smiled. Alicia was in step. It felt good to dance next to her. It was as if she had been part of the Poms team all along. Erin's smile grew wider. The squad needed a good dancer like Alicia.

When they stopped Erin looked at her watch. They had gone over the whole routine in forty-five minutes. Wow!

"Let's get something to drink," said Erin. On the way upstairs Alicia told Erin about the Poms members she knew from her Jazz Dance class in ninth grade. It was as if Alicia wanted to find out what she and Erin had in common.

"Are you all done?" asked Erin's mother.

"Hi, Mrs. Dunne." Alicia skipped into the kitchen. "No, no. We need to practice more. I really want to make the squad."

"Have you danced before?" Mrs. Dunne asked, while Erin gulped some ice-cold water.

"Jazz in ninth grade and ballet for almost eleven years, but I got tired of ballet," Alicia said matter-of-factly. "The part I liked best in ballet was performing, but we only had two shows a year."

"We perform a lot in Poms." Erin drank some more water. "I think you'll be good at it."

Alicia glanced at the oven clock, then turned around and started back downstairs. "Come on, Erin!" she called behind her. "Let's go over the last part again."

The way Alicia said her name felt special to Erin, as if they had known each other for a long time.

That afternoon, Erin saw that Alicia was the last girl to sign up for tryouts practice—girl number forty-five. The coach frowned at the last-minute addition. But after the audition the next day, the judges chose Alicia as one of the twenty-four squad members. Later, when Alicia told Erin, she said she had jumped up and down clapping and yelling after the coach phoned to tell her that she made the squad.

As soon as Alicia saw Erin the following morning she ran over and hugged her. It was one of those hugs where Alicia wrapped herself around the other person. A monkey hug. Erin felt all tingly. She didn't think it was possible, that a

stranger one day could be a best friend two days later. But it had happened.



Sitting on her bed against the wall and bracing her long legs, Erin looked at the picture frame atop her dresser. Alicia had made the frame for Erin's birthday. It was painted in bright, bold colors. A collage of magazine cutouts surrounded by small, round mirrors on one side faced tiny origami paper flowers on the other. Inside the frame was a picture of both girls smiling on the evening of the homecoming football game in tenth grade. From a silvery chain draped over the frame Alicia had hung Erin's name, handcrafted out of metal and written in beautiful cursive letters. Looking at the picture, Erin felt a rush of feelings. These were new, different feelings that she was still struggling to define. A picture that was the memory of a good day now made Erin feel happy and sad at the same time. Happy to have met Alicia. Sad that she was gone.

Erin looked down at the mementos she had spread out on the blue carpet: newspaper clippings about the crash; school photos; the corsage she wore for the funeral service, dried and preserved in a plastic bag; the condolence card she got from Stephanie; the prayer card from the viewing; and the hot-pink T-shirt she had decorated in Alicia's memory with the rest of her Poms teammates. Erin placed each item back in the shoe box and slid the box underneath her bed. Then she

reached for the silver heart pendant around her neck. That too reminded Erin of Alicia. On Alicia's sixteenth birthday, Erin had surprised her friend with a tiny box. Inside was a heart pendant and chain just like the one Erin's mother had given her.

*I love you. S'agapo.*

