THE NUMBER ONE BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF THE INHERITANCE GAMES

JENNIFER LYNN BARNES



NO ONE SUSPECTS THE CHEERLEADERS

PENGUIN BOOKS



Copyrighted Material

BY JENNIFER LYNN BARNES

THE INHERITANCE GAMES SAGA

The Inheritance Games

The Inheritance Games
The Hawthorne Legacy
The Final Gambit
The Brothers Hawthorne

The Grandest Game

The Grandest Game
Glorious Rivals
Coming next: *The Gilded Blade*

Games Untold
The Same Backward as Forward

THE FIXER

The Ruling Class
Lessons in Power

THE DEBUTANTES

Little White Lies
Deadly Little Scandals

THE SQUAD

Perfect Cover
Killer Spirit

The Lovely and the Lost

Copyrighted Material

PERFECT COVER

JENNIFER LYNN BARNES



PENGUIN BOOKS

Copyrighted Material

PENGUIN BOOKS

UK | USA | Canada | Ireland | Australia
India | New Zealand | South Africa

Penguin Books is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com.

www.penguin.co.uk www.puffin.co.uk www.ladybird.co.uk



Penguin
Random House
UK

First published in the USA by Laurel-Leaf, an imprint of
Random House Children's Books, New York 2008
This edition published in the USA by Delacorte Press,
an imprint of Random House Children's Books, a division of
Penguin Random House LLC, and in Great Britain by Penguin Books 2026
001

Text copyright © Jennifer Lynn Barnes, 2008
Cover art copyright © Sasha Vinogradova, 2026

The Squad: Killer Spirit excerpt text copyright © Jennifer Lynn Barnes, 2008
Cover art copyright © Sasha Vinogradova, 2026
Published in the USA by Delacorte Press, an imprint of
Random House Children's Books, a division of Penguin Random House LLC,
New York 2008, and in Great Britain by Penguin Books 2026

The moral right of the author and illustrator has been asserted

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner for the purpose of training artificial intelligence technologies or systems. In accordance with Article 4(3) of the DSM Directive 2019/790, Penguin Random House expressly reserves this work from the text and data mining exception.

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978–0–241–80246–5

All correspondence to:
Penguin Books
Penguin Random House Children's
One Embassy Gardens, 8 Viaduct Gardens, London SW11 7BW

Copyrighted Material



Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.

For Michelle, coach, friend, and honorary big sis,
who really did tell me, "If you don't feel stupid,
you're not doing it right."

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

CHAPTER 1

Code Word: Pom-Pom

If you'd told me at the beginning of sophomore year that I was going to end up a government operative, I would have thought you were crazy, but if you'd told me I was destined to become a cheerleader, I would have had you committed, no questions asked. At that point in time, there were three things in life that I knew for certain: (1) I was a girl who'd never met a site she couldn't hack or a code she couldn't break, (2) I had a roundhouse that could put a grown man in the hospital, and (3) I would without question chop off my own hands before I'd come within five feet of a pom-pom.

I liked to fly below the radar. I was the girl slouched in the back of your geometry class, not the one shaking my booty on the field. In fact, in the year and a half since we'd moved to Bayport, I'd spent more time in detention than at pep rallies and considered myself lucky; unless *school spirit* referred to a school-board-sanctioned wine, I had no intention of buying.

Copyrighted Material

And then, one day out of the blue, the note appeared in my locker.

Toby Klein—
You are cordially invited to an information session on the Bayport High Varsity Spirit Squad today at four in room 117.
Go Lions (and Lionesses)!

The year before, a sophomore girl had made the football team, and the uproar it had caused was just one of the many reasons I couldn't fathom the idea of actually supporting the school in any way, shape, or form. That and the fact that I'd had to forcibly remove a football player's hand from my brother's arm three times in the last month. Emphasis on the word *forcibly.* If they touched Noah again, someone was going to lose an arm. Go Lions!

I turned the note over in my hand. Wow, I thought, the God Squad must really be scratching bottom if they're recruiting *me.* Maybe they just couldn't stand it that there were actually a few sophomore and junior girls who weren't willing to sell their souls for cheerleading immortality. There was a reason the varsity cheerleaders were collectively referred to as the God Squad, and it wasn't because they were religious; it was because at Bayport High, they were gods: the ultimate social power. Most people did everything short of bowing down to worship them on a regular basis.

I was not most people.

Slamming my locker shut, I moved to throw the note away,

Copyrighted Material

but decided to save it for ammunition in case anyone in my carpool got too rowdy. As I moved to jam the invite into my pocket, light caught the letters, and for just a second, a few of them jumped out at me.

"Stupid glitter pens," I muttered, but automatically, my mind began cataloging the letters I'd noticed. I stuffed the note into my jeans, took four steps down the hallway, and then stopped. My brain does tricky things with letters and numbers: scrambles them and unscrambles them, analyzes their combinations, looks for patterns. When I was little, I loved palindromes and anagrams and any secret language more complicated than Pig Latin. Standing there in the hallway, my letter-savvy mind did its thing, and I pulled the invitation back out of my pocket.

After a quick glance around the hall to make sure no one was watching, I held the small white card in the light again and, one by one, picked out the letters that appeared slightly more sparkly than their counterparts.

Toby Klein—
You are cordially invited to an information session on the Bayport High Varsity Spirit Squad today at four in room 117.
Go Lions (and Lionesses)!

There it was in black and white, or, more specifically, in hot pink glitter pen. COME ALONE.

After that, I really did throw the note away, because there was no way it had been written by an actual cheerleader.

Copyrighted Material

Most of them probably couldn't even spell *cordially*, let alone embed secret instructions in an invite to one of their oh-so-special meetings. Someone was definitely playing a trick on me, and I had a pretty good idea who that someone was. I also had a pretty good idea what I was going to do about it.

Proximity—namely the fact that my brother's locker was only three down from mine—was on my side.

"Very funny, Einstein." Since I'd trashed the message and therefore had nothing to throw at him, I settled for flicking my brother on the back of one of his ears.

"Hey!" Noah tried not to lose what little cool he had, but failed miserably. After glaring at me for a second (like that did any good), he changed tactics. "Toby," he said in a low whisper, "I'm working my magic here."

And that was why Noah kept getting attacked by football players with no necks and something to prove. No matter how many times I assured him that hot senior girls weren't under any circumstances interested in scrawny freshman goofballs, he still couldn't help trying out his "charms" on the older women.

It was a miracle he wasn't dead, and given the current circumstances, there was a decent chance that I was going to kill him myself.

"Work's over," I said. I didn't even spare a glance at the current object of his affection before literally dragging him to the side of the hall. "You got anything you want to tell me?" I asked. For a girl my size (five three), I can sound pretty mean when I want to.

Copyrighted Material

"Ummm . . . not that I can think of," Noah said, giving me one of his most "charming" grins.

"Try harder."

"Well . . . I . . . uhhh . . . did tell Chuck that you'd take him home after school."

"Try again," I said darkly. That wasn't what I was shooting for. Still, I had to wonder if Noah had been planning on giving me any forewarning at all that Chuck I'm-in-Love-with-Noah's-Older-Sister Percy was hitching a ride home. That kid made Noah look like Prince Charming.

"I went through your lingerie drawer looking for gift ideas?" Noah tried again.

"You what?" I didn't know what was worse: the fact that my brother had seen my underwear, or the fact that he was probably on the verge of *buying* underwear for a senior girl whose boyfriend I'd inevitably be forced to physically restrain.

"Don't worry," Noah said quickly. "Your stuff didn't give me any ideas."

And now he was insulting my intimates. It was a miracle I'd let him live past childhood.

Noah wrinkled his forehead, completely unaware that I was plotting his death. "What *are* you talking about?"

"The note." I decided then and there that I didn't want to learn any more of the many reasons that I should have been interrogating him. "The card in my locker."

Noah continued with his blank look.

"The invitation from the Bod Squad," I said, using the term he and his friends had adopted for the God Squad.

Copyrighted Material

At the phrase *Bod Squad*, Noah's eyes lit up. Before he could get any unsavory ideas, I plowed on. "You know, the whole 'come to our secret lair in room 117' thing."

Noah opened his mouth and then closed it again. "You're joking about the secret lair thing, right?" he asked a few seconds later. "Because if they did have a secret lair, that would be really hot."

"You didn't send it?" I asked. Noah was many things, but he wasn't a liar, or at least he wasn't a good one.

"Pretend to be a bunch of cheerleaders?" Noah asked.

Why did I feel like I was giving him ideas? I looked down at my watch. "Go to class," I said finally, not wanting him to be late for fifth period. "And stay away from my underwear."

A second later, Noah was jackrabbiting toward his next class and I was walking slowly in the general direction of my own. Personally, I wasn't in any hurry. It had gotten to the point where Mr. Corkin and I had an understanding: I hated his class, and he hated me. It was a give-and-take relationship, and because of that, I took my time walking down the hallway and stopped at my locker again, just for the heck of it. Who cared if it had been less than a minute since I'd visited my locker last? Who cared if the bell had just rung? Delaying the inevitable was an art, and I was an artist.

31-27-15.

My combination was an anagram of a six-digit prime number. The fact that I knew that should tell you a little bit about me.

I opened the locker, briefly wondered if there were any orange Tic-Tacs left inside, and then immediately stopped

Copyrighted Material

thinking about freshening my breath. There, on top of a history book I hadn't bothered to read, was another note.

Toby Klein—
You have been selected to attend a preliminary meeting with the Bayport High Cheerleading Squad! Congratulations. How does it feel?
Go Big Gold!

How in the world had they gotten another note into my locker so quickly *and* without my noticing? Talk about strange.

This time, the invitation was written in purple gel pen, but when I held it up to the light, some letters were a shade darker than the others, like the note's author had traced them over twice. I quickly scanned the letters, but this time, they didn't spell anything.

"Miss Klein? Need I even ask if you have a hall pass?"

Our vice-principal didn't hate me nearly as much as he probably should have given my complete and utter lack of school spirit and my slight tendency toward jock-directed violence, but he was still the vice-principal.

"'Fraid not," I said, holding up my hall-passless hands to illustrate.

"What's this?" Mr. Jacobson's eyes widened at the sight of the little white notecard. "You got an invitation to the Spirit Squad's information meeting?" he asked. "That's quite an honor."

Copyrighted Material

And you wonder why I think this school's messed up.

"Yeah." I took in Mr. J's encouraging smile. "Whatever."

"Toby," Mr. J said, and I could feel a lecture coming on. "It's an honor to be selected. You should go."

I hated to break it to him, but there was no way in Hades.

"Can't," I said, trying to soften the blow. "I'm late for Corkin's class, and that means detention. Darn."

While Mr. J launched into a lecture on personal responsibility and trying to make things work, I played around with the letters in my head. YOERICUTUS?

YO RICE UTUS?

Nope.

STORY ICE UU?

Damn *U*s.

"Toby, are you listening to me?"

"Sort of."

Mr. J smiled despite himself. "I think it would be good for you to get involved with some extracurriculars," he said finally. "You should go to that meeting this afternoon. Mr. Corkin can spare you for one afternoon detention."

Wait a second, I thought, had I just been given detention immunity? Maybe I would go to this "meeting" after all. If it meant being able to thwart Corkin's diabolical plan of sticking me with yet another afternoon of torturous doldrums, it was totally worth it.

"Toby, go to class." Mr. J's words interrupted my train of thought. Obediently, I turned in the direction of the history room, and suddenly, the correct anagram of the scrambled letters fell into place.

Copyrighted Material

CURIOUS YET?

I hated to admit it, but by the time I broke the news of my vice-principalian pardon to my faculty nemesis, I definitely was.

Since when did cheerleaders write in code?

Copyrighted Material

CHAPTER 2

Code Word: Boobalicious

They were the most popular, had the perkiest smiles, and wore the shortest skirts. They were the best, the brightest (yeah, right), and the most boobalicious. They threw the most exclusive parties, hooked up with A-plus-list jocks, and ate lesser females for lunch. They were the varsity cheerleaders, and I was at one of their meetings.

It was official: I'd sold my soul to get out of detention.

"As you know, very few sophomores make the varsity squad." Brooke Camden, squad captain (or, as I liked to think of her, head bitch), raked her eyes over the occupants of room 117. The other varsity cheerleaders smiled sick little grins, and Brooke continued. "Most of you tried out for the JV squad. Some of you made it, some of you didn't, but making JV is no guarantee. We only take the best. The rest of you will be cheering for freshmen until you graduate."

Ho-hum.

Copyrighted Material

"We don't have tryouts, we don't care if your mom was a cheerleader at *her* high school, and we don't explain our decisions."

All hail Brooke, Queen of Cheerleaders!

I glanced around at the varsity hopefuls in the room. Half of them were on the verge of tears, one of them looked a single haughty smile away from a nervous breakdown, and a few of them, already JV cheerleaders themselves, seemed to be putting every ounce of energy they had into appearing popular, perky, and worthy of pom-poms.

Gag me. Was this really better than detention? I was starting to have my doubts.

As Brooke lectured on about the massive responsibility of representing all that was good and beautiful at Bayport High, I turned my attention to the other God Squad members in the room. As impossible as it seemed, I had to admit that, given the fact that the invitation had proved to be legit, there was at least a decent chance that one of them had encoded the secret messages into my notes.

I glanced at each of them and ran through their names in my head. Brooke, Tara, Tiffany, Brittany, Lucy, Bubbles, Chloe, and Zee. Brittany and Tiffany were twins, and Lucy might as well have been their triplet. They were blond, bubbly, and gorgeous, and had a combined IQ of 37. I immediately scratched them off my list of suspects. Chloe Larson, Brooke's second-in-command, was smarter than she let on, but also wouldn't have touched my locker with an eighty-foot pole. That left Tara, Bubbles, and Zee.

I couldn't bring myself to believe that a person named Bubbles could have encoded anything.

Copyrighted Material

"Any questions?" Brooke asked, leaning back against the blackboard.

"I have a question." Hayley Hoffman raised one manicured hand into the air. She was exactly the kind of girl the God Squad was looking for: JV cheerleader two years running, blond hair that she bleached blonder, and social claws that consistently demolished anyone and everyone who stood in her way and half of the people who didn't. When Brooke inclined her head toward Hayley's raised hand, Hayley stared directly at me. "Was this meeting by invite only?" she asked. "Or could just anyone come?"

I didn't know whether to be angry that she was implying I wasn't good enough to attend the meeting, or deeply offended that she thought I wanted to be there in the first place.

"This meeting," Brooke said, her voice every bit as bright and deadly as Hayley's, "was your first audition." Her eyes flitted to the rest of us, making it perfectly clear that this message wasn't just for Hayley. "You came, we watched." She smiled, no teeth. "We weren't impressed. Any other questions?"

This time, there were no takers.

"In that case," Brooke said, "we'll be in touch."

And just like that, the meeting was over.

That's it? I thought. This was what I was supposed to be "curious" about? Forget curious. I was completely baffled.

The only thing I knew for sure was that Hayley was right—I didn't belong here. Of all the girls who'd received a summons to this invite-only meeting, I was the one who even a dumb four-year-old would have circled in one of those "which one does not belong?" tests. Besides Hayley, there were a slew of other JV cheerleaders, some of them sophomores and some

Copyrighted Material

of them juniors who hadn't been chosen for the God Squad the year before. Then there were the noncheerleading populars: the too-cute editor of the yearbook, the part-time model, and the girl whose hot older brother was newly single. Given the fact that Bayport was one of the richest school districts in the country, everyone in this room could just as easily have been auditioning for a television show called *Lifestyles of the Rich and Bitchy.*

Everyone except me.

Chloe Larson rammed her body into my chair and then proceeded to give me the evil eye. "Watch where you're going."

It was all I could do to keep myself from rolling my eyes. I was sitting down, and she had run into me. Cheerleaders: they thought they owned the air the student body breathed.

"I guess some people are just perpetually in the way, you know?" Hayley's words broke into my thoughts. I debated giving her a reason to get another nose job, but decided against it. I was a third-degree black belt; she was a junior-varsity cheerleader. Where was the fun in that?

Instead, I stood up, ready to go back to my normal life of beating up football players and hacking into the school's database to change my grades and Mr. Corkin's middle name. And that's when I saw another note. It must have been in my lap, because it fell to the ground when I stood. Hayley's eyes lit up, and she dove for it, but another manicured hand beat her there.

"I believe this is yours." Tara Leery was a British exchange student and, as far as I'd been able to tell, the cheerleader most likely to have a functional cerebrum.

Tara handed the note to me, brushing her fingertips

Copyrighted Material

against the back of mine. She held my hand for a moment and then turned, and without another word, she followed Chloe "Out-of-My-Way" Larson out of the room.

I watched them leave and then looked back down at the note.

"Maybe someone's finally sending you the memo on combat boots," Hayley said, and then, in a confidential whisper, she added, "For the record: so over."

"Oh," I said thoughtfully. "I got that memo. I filed it away with your boyfriend's petition for a brain and the lost-and-found ad for your virginity."

I admit it. I'm not the nicest person. I have been known, on occasion, to use my sharp wit and clever puns for evil, rather than good. I don't smile at people just because they smiled at me first, and if I have something to say to someone, I say it to their face. I am, in other words, the anti-cheerleader.

Hayley recovered from my below-the-belt comment about her none-too-secret loss of virginity to a delusional football player who had also slept with her best friend and somehow thought that neither girl would figure it out. Hayley made her best attempt at glaring me into oblivion, flipped her hair over her shoulder, and flounced off, four JV cheerleaders following in her wake.

"Was it something I said?"

As soon as she was out of sight, I decided to make one last concession to my curiosity, after which I would never even think the word *cheerleader* again.

I opened the note in my hand, half expecting another encoded message. No such luck. The paper was blank.

Copyrighted Material

CHAPTER 3

Code Word: Perky

"What was it like? What were they wearing? Did they happen to mention—"

"How a dweeby little freshman could win their undying affection?" I finished Noah's sentence for him. "No."

My brother wasn't the least bit deterred. "Did you talk to Brooke at all?"

I groaned inwardly. He had to have a thing for Brooke Camden. Why couldn't he crush on someone his own age? Or better yet, someone from his home world, Planet Goofball.

"Well?" Noah prompted.

I scratched the back of my hand absentmindedly. "I went," I told him. "I watched. I wasn't impressed."

Noah wouldn't let the issue go. "Did you at least get a couple of phone numbers?"

"Noah, for the last time, if you're not careful, you're going to get yourself killed, and one of these days, I'm not going to be there to save you."

Copyrighted Material

Most younger brothers would have been offended at the very thought of being "saved" by their five-foot-three-inch sister. Noah was not most brothers.

"Where else are you gonna be?" he asked. "Cheerleading practice?"

"In your dreams, Noah." I scratched the back of my hand a little harder and wondered if I was having an allergic reaction to something (probably Hayley Hoffman).

"You do realize that it looks like you have some kind of bizarre scratching tic, right?"

I ignored Noah's comment and turned my attention to my hand. What in the world was wrong with it?

"Maybe it's a psychosomatic response to your guilt for not getting me phone numbers."

I gave Noah a look and then used the aforementioned itchy hand to thwap him under the chin.

"Oh, come on, Toby. You know you love me." Noah grinned, and even though I didn't find him the least bit charming, I smiled back before flicking him again and heading for the sink. I stuck my hand under the faucet and turned the water on, and the instant the water touched my skin, my entire hand changed color.

"Teal?" Noah, who'd followed me into the kitchen, asked. "Doesn't really seem like your style, Tobe."

"Noah," I said calmly.

"Yeah?"

"Run."

He was smart enough to vacate the kitchen, leaving me staring at my own bright blue hand. I soaped up and scrubbed

Copyrighted Material

it, but the color stayed. Ready to seriously pummel something, I grabbed a handful of paper towels and tried to rub off the color. Nothing came off on the towels, but when I looked back at my hand, the color was gone.

"Wha . . . ?"

After a half second of deliberation, I turned the faucet back on and let a few droplets of water drip onto my knuckles, and as they wet the skin, the color reappeared. Carefully, I continued letting water drizzle onto my hand until the vast majority of it was again a bright, perky teal.

Wait a second, I thought. Perky . . .

I shook my head to clear it of ridiculous thoughts. The cheerleaders had *not* dyed my hand teal.

Or had they?

I ran the day's events over in my mind until I came to the part where Tara handed me the note, her fingers gripping mine for the smallest fraction of a second.

"I suppose she could have done this," I said under my breath, "but why?"

Of all of the God Squad, Tara seemed the least likely to torture an antiestablishment social reject such as myself. Then again, maybe I just had to accept the fact that this whole day had been one giant plot to get me to that meeting, dye my hand teal, and . . .

And what? Why go to all the trouble? We were talking about the prettiest, most popular, ditziest girls in school. I wasn't even sure they were capable of encoding notes, let alone using invisible dye to . . .

Notes.

Copyrighted Material

The realization hit me, and slowly, I reached into my pocket and pulled out the blank sheet of paper from before. Someone had folded it like a note and somehow gotten it into my lap. When I'd dropped it, Tara had given it back to me before Hayley could open it. Tara, who had also possibly turned my hand an invisible teal.

I unfolded the paper and spread it out on the counter. It was still blank, but looking at my hand, I had to wonder. Was it really blank?

I folded a paper towel in half and wet a corner. Feeling a little bit ridiculous, I gingerly rubbed the cloth over the note, leaving a dampened streak in its wake. The moment water touched the paper, bright teal letters leapt to life. Again and again, I wet the paper towel and dragged it gently across the note, until the entire message was revealed in ink the color of my wet hand.

Practice gym, 5:30, tomorrow morning. Be there.

What, no "Go Lions!" or sis-boom-bah crap? Apparently, cheery cheerleader-speak was only for visible ink. Seriously, though, what was up with the cheerleading squad writing me coded notes and dyeing my hands with invisible ink? Was it the whole squad? I had always thought of them as being one massively popular person split into many bouncy parts, but Tara was the only one who'd actually been involved in this whole debacle, so . . .

Something else occurred to me then, and I backtracked. Tara had picked the note up and handed it to me, had coated

Copyrighted Material

my hands with whatever it was they were using for ink, but she hadn't handed me the note. She'd been on the other side of the room when it had appeared out of nowhere. The only one near me was Chloe. Chloe, who had crashed into my chair instead of giving it a berth the size of Montana, a more typical course of action.

"This is ridiculous." I tried to snap myself out of it, but couldn't deny the teal hand or the invisible message or the encoded notes in my locker. Something strange was going on here, and all evidence suggested that it had something to do with the cheerleaders.

I could only think of one surefire way to find out what was going on: be at the practice gym at five-thirty the next morning. Sure, it was obscenely early, but really, what was the worst that could happen?

Copyrighted Material

CHAPTER 4

Code Word: Tumbling

"Cheerleading practice? You guys woke me up at this ungodly hour for cheerleading practice?"

I am not a morning person, especially when I'm expecting a revelation of some kind and instead get eight cheerleaders telling me to stretch out so we can tumble.

What the hell *was* tumbling anyway?

"We always practice before school," Bubbles said solemnly.

Why was I even talking to a person named Bubbles? Why? From the moment I'd gotten here, they'd all acted like my presence was nothing out of the norm. No one had said a word about why I was there. They'd just told me to stretch and gone back to stretching themselves, like I was supposed to read their warped little ponytailed minds.

"Can anyone here explain to me why I'm at cheerleading practice right now?" I asked, my voice dangerously pleasant. All seven of the other cheerleaders turned to their captain, and I awaited with bated breath the wisdom she was sure to impart.

Copyrighted Material

"If you can't cut the hours," Brooke said, "don't join the squad."

"I'm *not* joining the squad," I said. "Why would I join the squad? I don't even like . . ."

I searched for something to go in the blank. People? This school? Any of you? More like (d) all of the above.

"I don't like . . . cheers," I finished, trying to be diplomatic. After all, they outnumbered me eight to one.

"Oh, really?" Brittany-or-Tiffany (it was impossible to tell the twins apart) asked, like I was trying to put one over on them. "If you don't like cheers, then why are you here?"

Because you told me to be here, I said silently, but I wouldn't admit that out loud. They'd ordered me here, and I'd dragged myself out of bed to come, under the delusion that I might actually figure out why they were messing with me in the first place.

"Don't be such a grumpy bear, grumpy bear," Lucy said in a voice so bright that the sound of it made my teeth ache. "It's not that early, girly!"

My left eye twitched at the rhyme, and when she flashed me a big, toothy smile, I lost it.

"No," I told her in a firm tone I usually reserved for household pets that were chewing on my boots. "I don't do perky before nine."

The entire squad frowned at me in one synchronized motion.

"So are you in or aren't you?" Chloe's tone was more command than question.

In for what?

"I'll teach you to do a herkie!" Lucy, completely unaffected

Copyrighted Material

by my "no" voice, bounced into the air and did some kind of funky cheerleading jump. "Now you try."

"In for what?" I asked Chloe, ignoring Lucy and trying to strike the memory of this moment from my mind forever. "In for what?"

I was getting really sick of asking.

Bubbles was the one who answered, her voice a reverent whisper. "The Squad."

This was just too much. Don't ask me what I'd expected, but it wasn't this. Invisible ink, encoded messages, and the night before, I could have sworn I'd seen someone in a cheerleading skirt standing on my front lawn, surveying the house, and now . . .

"You want me to be a cheerleader?"

"Give the girl a cookie," Brooke drawled. "She finally figured it out."

I opened my mouth to speak, but Brooke cut me off. "Most sophomores would die for this chance," she said. "Are you in or are you out?"

"Out." This had to be some kind of sick prank. Me on the God Squad? No way. This was just part of a time-honored tradition of high school cruelties: confuse the asocial bottom-dweller, convince her she's on the squad, and then dump her. Only this time, they'd picked the wrong bottom-dweller. I wasn't jumping for joy at their invitation; I was dangerously close to losing my infamous temper.

"Stop sending me letters," I said in a low voice. "Stop messing with my hands, and stop coming by my house late at night."

Copyrighted Material

Eight pairs of eyes stared back at me, duly shocked.

"Toby," Brittany-or-Tiffany (the other one this time) said. "Why would we do a thing like that?"

I looked at each of them in turn, one suntanned teen queen after another. The twins appeared identically bewildered at the very suggestion of harassment. Bubbles's bottom lip was sticking out in an exaggerated pout (who does that?), and bouncy Lucy was still very conscientiously instructing me on the finer points of the herkie. Brooke, every inch the head cheerleader, and Chloe, every inch her clone, stared me down. Meanwhile, Zee, who I knew only as the school's resident Asian party girl, inspected her nails, and quiet Tara offered me a weak half smile.

There wasn't enough brainpower in this room to dye Easter eggs, let alone my hand.

"You're right," I said, hands in my pockets. "You're cheerleaders, and I'm nuts."

Brooke nodded. "That's right," she said proudly. "We date football players and cheer for games and win all the spots on the homecoming court. We are the pride of the Lions. . . ."

"Lionesses," someone else murmured.

"The pride of the Lions/Lionesses," Brooke said. "We *couldn't* do the kinds of things you're talking about." As she spoke, the others circled around me in a way that was decidedly creepy, until all nine of us were standing at the very center of the gym, directly over the Bayport emblem on the floor. "After all, we're just cheerleaders."

With those seemingly innocuous words and a flick of her wrist, Brooke produced a cell phone and proceeded to dial

Copyrighted Material