

Emily, Em to everyone who knew her, laughed so hard that her long blonde hair fluttered across her ears. She put the finishing touches on a quick roast of her dad with the *Meam* app on her phone. The app—a combo of the words “mean” and “meme”—was the go-to social tool for creating polite and edgy memes from stock photos, gifs, and a user’s own photo library. Kate, Em’s best friend, was seated next to her on a flat beige rug in Em’s bedroom. She looked as if she might be Em’s twin, except Kate was a tad shorter.

Em swiped on a stock meme title from a preset bank and dropped it over a stock photo. She thrust the phone in Kate’s face for approval. Kate flinched at this unexpected intrusion into her personal space. She squinted at the image. It was a rotund pink pig squealing in a muddy pigpen. The title, overlaid above the porker’s head, read: “Dad’s reaction to the Nets missing the playoffs again.”

Kate half-smiled and shrugged. “Eh, it’s ok.” This cool rejection didn’t phase Em. Roasting someone right well was worth trial and error.

She noticed that Kate was checking in on Jaz and Patti’s goings-on via Snapchat. Although Em hadn’t said it out loud, she wanted to get a footing into the crowd led by those two well-styled local high schoolers. They had serious clout. The kind that got them free stuff, like expensive sandwiches and boba drinks at some of the cool eateries in the county. “I thought you said you didn’t care about hanging with them,” Em said.

Kate swiped off their feed and moved on to a post by a younger girl Em didn’t recognize. “I don’t,” Kate said. “Just wanna stay in-the-know.”

Em swiped her own phone past a few more stock photos. She tilted the phone to Kate again after finding another potential roast, revealing an ashamed, droopy-eyed bloodhound who had probably just done something wrong, like topple a trash can. “This one?” she asked.

Kate half smiled. It was apparent she still wasn’t digging it.

Swiping a few more times on various animal pictures, Em landed on one that cracked her up. She held the screen out to Kate enthusiastically. It was a close-up on a funky-faced, gagging adult gorilla who spat out what looked like a rancid banana. Saliva spittle spewed everywhere.

Kate laughed large in her unique rapid triple-inhale bursts that some boys at school had teased was like the frantic gasps of a starved hyena. Whenever she got ribbed about it, her reaction was the same: curled lips and dismissive sigh.

Based on Kate’s trademark response, Em figured she had a winner and inserted the Nets gag title over the distressed gorilla.

It was time to post this beauty to Snapchat, Instagram, and even Facebook—for all of the adult family and friends who were too old to know how to navigate more modern social media sites. She wondered for a moment whether any of her followers might like it enough to bring the post to Patti or Jaz’s attention. Being known for wit was nearly tops in social media clout currency.

She hit Send from *Meam* and chuckled. “Thirsty?” she asked Kate.

“Sure,” Kate said. They got up from the varnished wooden floor of the small bedroom, adorned heavily in midnight blue decor, and left the room heading towards the downstairs kitchen.

An hour later, Kate had left for dinner at her own house. Em was alone on the polyester couch in the back-house TV room watching an episode of *Friends*. The smell of Mom’s signature citrus meatball marinara sauce had been wafting in the air all afternoon. Sometimes the smell would stick around for hours after dinner. Mom had once said it was because of the hardwood floors. There were few carpets downstairs to absorb smells.

As soon as Dad got in from work, they’d eat. He’d been on the road all day—as he usually was—driving for Freeman's Assured Shipping and Transit, FAST for short.

The *Friends* episode went to break at the apex of a Ross-Rachel act-end cliffhanger. Em surfed for a minute and flipped by a bunch of generic advertisements, including one of those Christmas car commercials that showcased new SUV models topped with red and green bows while spinning on gargantuan rotating platforms. She didn’t know any families who could afford the brand featured in the commercial. Click. She landed on NatGeo where a pride of lionesses were on the hunt, stalking an unsuspecting adult antelope.

Glancing at her phone, she saw that there were no new notifications or reactions to her gorilla post. She dropped the phone on the cushion near her leg in time to see a lioness pounce on the antelope. The prey ran furiously as another lioness lunged at its front legs.

The back screen door opened. “What’s up, Em-cat?” her dad Jake, a tall mid-forties man with brown and gray peppered hair, said with a chuckle. He took a few creaky steps on the hard floor and tossed his satchel on a nearby Lazyboy.

For a split second, Em wondered whether Dad’s cat reference was related to what was on TV or the heated discussions they’ve had recently about *the troubles*. Those troubles being an ongoing disagreement over Em’s alleged lack of hunkered-down grit and success in her tenth grade schoolwork as measured by Mom and Dad’s overblown expectations. Dad wanted her to be prepared to take the LSAT or MCAT someday and get into an ivy league grad program. But why worry now? There was plenty of time to put her nose to the grindstone in undergrad and come out fine. Besides, a lot of schools weren’t relying on those tests anymore.

She turned to him, “Have you seen the gorilla meme yet?”

He shifted towards a brown wooden closet at the back of the room and slid the door open just enough to reach a coat hanger. “What’s it about?” he asked. “Wait, let me guess...” He pulled off his coat. “The Nets.”

“It’s a good one though,” Em pleaded.

He hooked the hanger into the coat arm holes and swung it onto the rack. “Hasn’t that Nets thing played out?” He slid the door closed.

Em was bummed. That gorilla pic was hilarious. Her disappointment in his flippant dismissal fueled her annoyance at the Em-cat reference. Now she was sure it was a backhanded remark. She surfed off NatGeo lest it keep reminding her of it. Pressing the recall button on the remote brought back the

Friends channel. Commercials were still running so she surfed down a few clicks and crossed a local access news program.

Dad was almost through the room near the doorway to their modest peach-colored kitchen when Town Mayor Linda Roundhouse spoke on TV. Dressed in a stylish gray Armani suit and standing by a podium at Town Hall, she was in the middle of a speech about an upcoming public park installation. "Today we initiate a project that celebrates the triumph of women who have survived abuse and adversity," she said.

"That opportunist windbag," Dad said, halting and snorting. "What's she know about adversity?"

Em jolted her head to catch his expression. He rarely got this worked up.

"She plays up the victim angle for sympathy at the polls. Get that off," he said. Raising an eyebrow, Em obliged. He took a step closer to the kitchen and stopped again. "Sorry, bad day at work," he said. Em nodded. He walked into the kitchen. Things rarely got under Dad's skin. From what his coworkers said at the company's summer picnics over the years, this was true at work too. He was a man who would give the shirt off his back to anyone.

Em swallowed a forkful of spinach and arugula. She was more than happy tonight's dinner was progressing as Beyer household dinners typically did without any heavy discussions concerning her *troubles*. On a bad day, Dad would notice when Mom's mood wasn't up to the normal cheer and ask what was wrong. Sometimes that wrong was tied to Em. Although Mom wasn't letting on yet, today was one of those days.

The six 'o clock news piped in from the wall-mounted kitchen TV while Em and Dad sat at the dining room table. Behind the table was a nut brown China cabinet where Mom stored nicer dinnerware for special occasions. Kelly, Em's mom, glided into the room as Dad and Em were already eating. She looked ten years younger than her age. Maneuvering a steaming bowl of spaghetti onto a hot plate in the center of the table, she took the seat closest to the kitchen.

A story was airing on the TV about a community that chipped in on gifts for underprivileged kids in the neighborhood. Em saw an opportunity. Redirect any pointed conversation regarding *troubles* at school towards chat about Christmas cheer before they could ignite.

She forked a heap of spinach. "Dad, what's the biggest Christmas present you've delivered so far this week?" she asked, then bit the greens off the silverware.

Dad cleared his throat, possibly the result of a stuck cucumber slice from the salad. "There's no way to tell really," he said. "Not like twenty years ago, with Amazon and all now."

Em nodded. "Ah, that makes sense. Isn't there some kind of sleuthing you can do by looking at the shipping labels?" she asked.

"Hmm..." Dad said, looking off in thought for a moment. "There might be one way to sort of tell."

Em tried to keep her enthusiasm down enough to avoid detection of the facade. She nodded, responding with borderline over-enthusiastic interest, "Yeah?" Any time she or Mom took interest in the details of his work, he got pumped to share thoughts on whatever hot topic was abuzz at the office.

Once Em got him rolling, no way *troubles* would come up before she could finish eating and dart to her room.

There was a problem. Mom looked at Em and held it just a second too long. She was "hip to Em's jibe" as Mom would say. Em had to ease back on the tactics or Mom might break the dike and release the *troubles*.

Dad continued, unaware of the dynamics at play just beyond the edge of his plate. "It's kind of out of style these days, but once in a while family and friends will address packages for a 'Master' or 'Miss.' Do you know what that signifies?"

Em shook her head and pushed her empty salad plate aside, then slid her spaghetti dish to the fore.

Dad chuckled. "I'm getting old." He turned to Mom. "Do you know?" he asked. She smiled and shook her head. Em recognized this smile as one of knowing the answer but saying nothing so she wouldn't steal Dad's thunder.

"'Master' is the old school term when sending a package to a young man. Same for 'miss'—young woman, that is."

Em bit into one of the meatballs. They didn't taste as tangy and flavorful as they should. After a few more chews, she could tell they were made of turkey and not beef.

"So usually when someone uses those terms," Dad said, "the package is a gift. Now whether it's for Hanukkah or Christmas or other reason, there's still no telling for certain."

Em responded with more interest in things shipping than ever. "What's your best guess? What's your gut say about the numbers this week?" She knew she was on the verge of tipping even her dad off to her ploy, but luckily he still didn't catch on. Em did notice another Mom glance but ignored it.

Dad shrugged, "Ah, maybe fifty. Remember, I do mostly industrial deliveries right now or the numbers would be way higher."

Em twisted a forkful of pasta on her spoon. The disappointment in the meat sauce hit a tipping point. She couldn't resist commenting any longer. "These aren't so great," she said to Mom. "Did you skimp on the meat?"

Mom jerked back in her seat. "Just so you know, turkey isn't cheaper than the beef I normally use. I'm trying something healthier. Please feel free to cook tomorrow night."

Em leaned away from her. "Sorry. I was just saying."

Mom nodded and then spun a few strands of pasta on her own fork. She turned to Jake. "Speaking of deliveries, one arrived today—although the deliverer wasn't keen on handing over the parcel."

Em realized the sauce comment had sealed her doom. Why couldn't she keep her mouth closed when dinner had been going so well?

Dad's face dropped. "I thought the grade for the report would come on Friday. Did it come early?"

"It was scheduled for Monday, actually," Mom said. "And arrive it did."

He took a swig from his glass of iced tea. "Are the grades bad?" he asked Em.

Em smiled while shaking her head. "The report's pretty decent."

Dad stared her in the eye. "How decent?"

Mom looked at her too. Em smiled a little wider. "Good."

Mom pursed her lips. "Uh huh. 'C' good."

Dad pointed at his right eye and then towards Em and asked, "You mean 'See, good' or the letter 'C'?"

Mom chuckled. "She got a bunch of cold hard 'Cs.'"

Dad exhaled and frowned. "Here we are again."

Em sat straight up and enthused with hand gestures. "Just read Ms. Crane's notes. They're really affirming."

Dad was stone faced. "Like what?"

Em spoke in a high tone. "Like, 'Emily has shown real excellence.'"

Mom shook her head rapidly. "Ms. Crane's full quote from the end of the report is: 'There are true glimmers of excellence here, but she continues to cut corners.'"

Dad leaned back, his expression sagged. "So the questions about my route were a rouse?"

Em envisioned forthcoming restrictions and lockdowns during Christmas break. "Of course not," she said cheerfully. "I care about your work. I want to go out on a route with you over vacation break, actually."

Dad nodded slowly, but not convincingly. "Alright. Finish up." He looked at Mom. "We're going to have a family chat after we eat."

Em grimaced as she stuffed a meatball in her mouth.

Kate and Em chatted in back-room seats near the windowed side of the classroom. A few minutes remained before first period class began. Em talked fast to cram in her update about the *troubles*. Kate laughed quietly. "Burned," she said while half-eyeing her Snapchat feed. "Did they use the word 'probation'?"

"No," Em said.

A dapper guy, Dae, laughed loud from across the room at something on his phone.

Kate smiled at the intruding laugh. She swiped further down her feed. “Mine threaten probation all the time,” she said. “You’re free over break then?” she asked.

Em nodded. “As long as nothing else comes up, which should be fine ‘cause no more big tests until January.”

Another guy the girls didn’t know well named Bret, a short blonde, laughed while looking at something Dae pointed to on his phone. Em focused on them to see if there was any way to figure out what was so funny. Bradley hurried into the room. He was wiry, a boy so bland his style and demeanor could be cut and pasted into any school setting over the past thirty years and nobody would notice. “Gotta shift. B-boy is on the move,” Em said as she slid up out of the desk seat.

Bradley zipped up the row towards Em and Kate. “My seat,” he said, dropping a folder and textbook on the desk where Em had just been sitting.

Em spoke with bonus dramatics, “All yours, my liege,” and stepped beside Kate’s desk. “Talk soon,” she said.

Dae interrupted. “Emma! You have to see this!” Mrs. Tyler, their late fifties trigonometry teacher, walked into the classroom at the same moment. Dae lowered his voice while waving Em over. “Quick,” he said. The teacher unpacked her burgundy utility tote on the large front desk.

Em wasn’t sure what to do. Go find out why this guy was so worked up? She didn’t know Dae well enough for him to have such an enthusiastic need to share a joke. Kate had no advice and shrugged. Em took steps in Dae’s direction because it was on the way to her seat in the middle row anyway. She arrived at her desk where a Trig textbook lay open for the day’s lesson. The wall clock revealed one minute before period bell. She almost sat down, but curiosity was the itch the cat couldn’t scratch. She hurried to Dae.

Leaning over his shoulder to get a better view of his phone, Em saw a Facebook post. She looked closer. It was a gif posted on her page by her dad. Dae played it.

Her eyes locked onto the title Dad had written above it, her brain fixated on the words. Although the title was written grammatically as a sentence, it read in her mind as bold with all caps: “**HOW EM REACTS AFTER FAILING A TEST SHE DIDN’T STUDY FOR!**” She gasped.

The gif setting was a jungle scene where a small marmoset was high in a tropical tree grabbing for some sort of reddish tree fruit just out of grasp on a neighboring tree. He reached...reached...just about grabbed it. Slip! Gravity overpowered his miscalculated grip on the host tree and SWOOSH, he tumbled down through a paltry patch of skimpy branches. His tiny body fluttered as it bounced off a thin limb. His scrappy hands grasped for any branch that would hold him, but no luck. Pop! His head knocked against another branch as he dropped. Bam! His mini monkey frame bumped off another branch. He was in a dreadful free fall and veering towards the ground. Surely he was going to thud hard at the bottom. Out of pure desperation, he lurched out for a sturdier branch just below his plummeting self. Clasp! He swiftly gripped both arms around a branch that might offer purchase. Whip! He swung a hundred and eighty degrees around with serious inertial force and planted his feet on the top of the solid branch, stabilizing himself.

The primate sneezed twice. A few seconds later, he scratched his rump. His expression was clueless, as if nothing had happened. He walked to the inner edge of the branch and scampered down the tree.

“Time to take a seat,” Mrs. Tyler said to Em.

“That’s hilarious,” Dae commented. Bret cupped his mouth and laughed raucously.

Em looked at Mrs. Tyler then back at Dae. She was shellshocked and almost couldn’t speak. The only words she could get out were, “Why are you...on Facebook?”

Dae smirked. “My mom texted this to me with craffing and winking emojis.” Em stood, dazed. “I think she wanted me to learn something from it,” Dae said.

A terrible swirl of dread and dark emotions took hold. Who had seen this? Why had Dad done this? He violated the rules—

“Please get to your seat, Emma,” Mrs. Tyler said firmly.

Em trudged to her seat. In high school, the butt of a joke gets the worst kind of negative clout. How could she do damage control? She slumped into her seat as Mrs. Tyler wrote the day’s topic on the board, “Monomials.” Em lifted her phone and brought up Facebook. She clicked her profile and launched her Facebook page to tally the number of comments, all sure to be terrible. She had to hide the post immediately. “Put the phone away, Emily,” Mrs. Tyler said. Em needed a few seconds to hide the post. “*Now* Ms. Beyer,” the teacher said. Em huffed and tossed the phone on her backpack under the seat.

The algebra classroom door burst open as Em stormed into the hallway along with other kids who departed their classes. She grabbed her phone and started typing a text to her dad while hurrying through the hallway towards the back wing where her locker was.

Kate came from behind and caught up. “What’s going on?” she asked, her voice pitched higher than normal.

Em snorted. “Dad burned me on Facebook,” she said while typing with haste.

“What?” Kate asked.

“An embarrassing gif. He compared me to a monkey.”

Kate stifled a giggle. “Really?”

Em shot her the stink eye. “It’s no joke. Everyone probably knows or will.”

“Seriously, most people around here won’t even see it.”

Em shook her head. “Parents like Dae’s Mom are texting it to their kids.” Kate’s eyes bulged. “I’m screwed,” Em said.

“Delete it.”

Em snapped, “That’s what I’m doing.”

“Calm down. It’s not my fault.”

“Sorry.” Em typed the last sentence of the text message to Dad, which read: “Why’d you shame me publicly?!!” She shook her head and grit her teeth. “I’m going to roast him so hard he’ll look like one of those old time cartoon characters after a bomb explodes in their face.”

Kate chuckled.

“With smoke coming out their ears and only a single hair left on their head,” Em said, wiggling a pointer finger over her head to illustrate the point. Kate’s trademark hyena guffaw made the appearance Em was hoping for—a little comic relief. It faded fast. Feelings of worry and vengeance rushed back in.

At her bedroom desk, Em spun through online photos that slid across her laptop screen in a hunt for the best scorch. She was coming up far short of a proper picture that could be tailored to the retribution Dad deserved. Yes, he had already texted he was sorry about the mistaken post and that he’d explain it later, etc., etc. That wasn’t going to save him from an embarrassing public rebuttal.

Mom had told her to stay calm, they’d talk about it before dinner. Yet nothing could explain away what he did. She didn’t want to discuss it until he got a taste of shame. Afterwards, he’d understand and they could really talk on-the-level. There was one small snag—a twang in her conscience. The family had a rule about meming. First, no mean spirited posts. Second, never use an actual picture of a family member in a meme. Keep them to animals and pop culture grabs.

It was too late to worry about those rules after the monkey post. Dad knew she was working on her grades, so why’d he turn the screws on her publicly? Then it dawned on her. There was a great awkward picture of him that she’d taken a few years ago. During that incident, he had been on the toilet with the door half open despite the many times Mom commanded him to keep it shut for olfactory propriety. Em had stuck her phone in and hollered then snapped a bunch of startled-reaction photos. That very incident was the reason rule number two—no family pictures in memes—existed.

She got up from her desk, opened the sliding white wooden door of her closet, and pulled out a hard drive from a high shelf above the rack where she kept hats and a few board games. She sat back down and plugged the drive into the USB port. Navigating to a folder on the drive called “Summer 2017,” she scanned down the file list until she found one labeled “Best Dad toilet.” This would do. Yeah, this was going to throw the right amount of shade on him publicly for everyone to see.

She clicked on the photo. Up popped a seriously unflattering picture of Dad in the bland white walled downstairs bathroom. His face was hilariously contorted as if purposefully exaggerating the strain to relieve his bowels. Em knew what the title for the meme would be already. She emailed the photo to herself and opened it on her phone with the Meam app. This was going to be a rebuttal for the ages.

Em was too miffed to wait in the back TV room for Dad's arrival. She wanted to hide in her room and wait, but Mom had asked her to stay downstairs and be ready for the dad-chat. Em's compromise was to stay in the front glass paneled sitting room on the soft blue two-seater couch. At least the amber rays of sunset gave the setting a little cheer. Plus, it was as far from Dad's typical entry point as she could get.

She surfed around Snapchat, Instagram and a few other apps to gauge how many kids might have seen her father's now-deleted post. It seemed all was clear. No mentions of monkey Em anywhere. No posts on any of Dae or Bret's accounts from what she could tell. None from Jaz or Patti either.

Thirsty, she got off the couch and headed to the kitchen for a drink. Walking through the dining room, she feared being too close to the back door should Dad step in unexpectedly. She hastily opened the fridge. Right on the cue of bad luck, Dad opened the back door. Em slammed the fridge without grabbing a thing and sprinted back to the front room.

"Em?" Dad called loud from the TV room. "You around?" For a moment, she thought about continuing past the couch, through the front door, and out for a walk in the neighborhood rather than dealing with him.

Footsteps rustled from the ceiling above, followed by more footsteps on the stairs leading down to the dining room. Mom was descending. Em halted. Stay or go? She decided to sit on the couch. Dad would have to come find her.

Moving through the kitchen, Dad called, "Kelly?"

Mom tread off the last step onto the dining room landing. "Yeah, honey," she said.

Dad stepped into the dining room. "Where's Em?" Em didn't hear a response. She figured Mom was quietly directing him towards the front couch. Sure enough, he walked in, slowly pacing towards Em. He glanced at the floor and scratched his right cheek. His voice cracked. "I'm so sorry, honey. I guess I totally screwed up."

Em couldn't look him in the face yet. She stared at the plastic pastel floral arrangement on the walnut coffee table in front of the couch. She hadn't expected the feelings stirred by this confrontation to be this intense. The sadness of the betrayal hit her hard. Dad stepped closer to the table. "I thought I posted the gag only to you."

She looked at him squarely. "You can't be that clueless!"

"Whoa, bring it down," Dad said.

"Did you set the privacy settings on the post?"

"Of course I did..." he hesitated. "But I might have re-clicked the wrong option by mistake just before posting."

"You can't screw up like that!" She couldn't hold back. "The stakes are too high! You shouldn't have posted that gif in the first place."

He nodded. "I know. You're right. Mom called me out on that. I'm sorry." Em's face was reddening. A few drops of perspiration formed on her brow. Dad appeared pensive and spoke softly. "Em, why are the stakes so high?"

She looked off towards the entrance to the dining room to see if Mom was standing in the wings, but she wasn't visible. "Things aren't like they were for you and Mom," Em said. "It's way different now."

Dad nodded. "I know. I realize that. We talked though about all this social media stuff not consuming you. It can eat you alive—"

"I get it," she interrupted, on the verge of crying. "But a crap bomb like 'monkey Em' blows stuff up that I shouldn't have to deal with."

He came near and put a hand on her shoulder. She flinched. He motioned towards the couch for permission to sit. She shrugged.

After sitting next to her, he looked into her eyes. His expression was filled with remorse. "You're right. I'm so sorry."

Em turned from him as a tear rolled down her cheek. The hurt was palpable. She couldn't hold back tears any longer. Tears rolled down her cheeks. "I can't trust you anymore."

Dad breathed in hard and tried to hug Em. She pulled back. His voice crackled again, "I love you Em. I don't ever want to do anything like this again."

Em cried a little more. With hesitation, she rallied enough strength to look at him. His eyes were weary.

"I'll post a really bad meme about what a dunce I am," he said.

Em shook her head and slid further away. "That won't matter. You're an adult. No one will care if you roast yourself." She sighed. "When you roast me, I can't fix it." Another tear streaked to her chin. He reached out and rested his hand on her shoulder. It took Em a few moments before she could look at him squarely again. His eyes were filled with tears.

She allowed him to bring her head against his chest. He caressed her hair. "I'm sorry for being so clueless and hurtful," he said. She grabbed his forearm and sat quietly for a moment as he continued stroking her hair.

During dinner, Em's strained feelings eased but guilt over the toilet meme brewed. She thought about getting up midway through the meal and hustling to her room to delete the Dad roast she had posted forty-five minutes ago. How would she explain the need to go upstairs though? Bathroom break? The main bathroom was on the ground level. She decided the meme could wait. Yet remorse grew with each bite of salmon and every sip of iced tea.

After a quiet dinner, Em went up to her room and flipped open her laptop. Her Facebook feed was already loaded. She hovered the pointer over the link to her dad's Facebook page. Her nerves shot up

sky high. *Please. No one have commented.* She held above the trackpad for another second then clicked.

Dad's profile page banner displayed an idyllic photo of herself, Mom, and Dad smiling sweetly in close shot at the beach. The dad meme appeared below the banner as the most recent post. Underneath the meme picture of her dad on the toilet was the title: "This is what my dad thinks of the #Me Too movement." The picture had been flopped so that the toilet was positioned directly over the words "#Me Too."

She scanned fast below the post for comments, Likes and Dislikes. Only one comment appeared. It had been posted by Aunt Rachel, Mom's older single sister who lived in Michigan. The comment simply said: "Too funny." No Likes or Dislikes—a good sign no one else had seen it. Em quickly deleted the post and hoped beyond hope that this would be the end of it. If Aunt Rachel ever mentioned it, which was doubtful because Mom rarely talked to her, Em would brush it off as a really silly and forgettable post. She quit the browser and slapped the laptop lid closed.

The girls locker room during fourth period gym class was abuzz with chat of weekend hangs and hot guys. Em slipped her second arm through the school issued white phys-ed tee emblazoned with three letters: VHS, that stood for Van Buren High School. Her North Jersey school was neither great nor all bad. Kate was tying her pink trimmed gray sneakers on the bench beside her. "Is your uncle Todd coming for Christmas?" Em asked, raising her tone in a flighty manner to accentuate 'Todd.' Uncle Todd was known as an opinionated relative who often barged into town during the holidays. Em always enjoyed the tales of him scrapping it up with Kate's other family members during visits.

"I don't know. He might have a girlfriend in Ohio," Kate said as she finished a knot.

"Oooh! It would be great to have the two of 'em come," Em said.

Kate deadpanned, "I'll be sure to encourage my mom to make it happen."

"Hey, Beyer!" a piercing voice said, cutting through the room like a drill. Em looked to see who it was. A tall brunette named Tami de la Cruz took a few fast strides and quickly arrived in Em's personal space. Em stepped back towards her locker. Tami wasn't in this gym class, so her appearance was unexpected and confusing. Em had no time to process what was happening as Tami, a half-foot higher than Em, leaned in closer towards her face. There was little room for Em to move. "You're a real smart alec," Tami said. The room when silent.

"What are you talking about?" Em said firmly. Kate stood up.

"Me Too is a joke to you?" Tami said.

Em's heart dropped to her throat. She had no online social connections to Tami. Had someone reposted a screen grab of the Dad meme but laid low like a viper on a vine, ready to strike? Why hadn't anyone at school mentioned the post this morning? Maybe someone reposted midday so the hounds of high school could tear her up when there was no escape. If that's what happened, the person who reposted was an evil genius.

"What are you talking about?" Em repeated, deciding denial was the best option.

Tami snickered. "I hear the idiot in the picture is your dad." Her face tensed as she moved closer. "You know what I'm talking about."

"Step back," Em said loudly. A bunch of girls shuffled around locker rows to get a front row view. A few came over to the fray while scanning their phones.

One short girl, Dana, laughed and showed her phone to some adjacent onlookers. "Oh that's deep shade on the movement, girl," she said to Em. A few others hived around Dana to get a glimpse of the post. The dread Em felt deepened. She couldn't fathom how she would recover from this massive blunder.

Another girl Em knew, a redhead named Cindy, nodded. "That's her dad. I've seen him with her at games," she said.

"That post is about my dad. It has nothing to do with me!" Em blurted.

Tami inched closer to Em again. "Using your dad as a disguise to hide your true attitude?"

"No!"

By now, a few girls had begun recording the fight. It didn't escape Tami's notice. She turned and yelled in Cindy's direction. "If anyone records this or posts about it, you'll be next on my hit list!" The gawkers's faces went slack. They lowered their phones immediately.

Tami returned her attention to Em. "You a monkey, tappin' the keyboard..." Tami air tapped imaginary keys "...and has no idea what she's doing?!"

Em scowled at the obvious reference to the marmoset meme. "No!"

Tami heated up. "You posted it!"

Em quickly sidestepped to gain space and banged the back of her head on a locker while shifting. The pain jolted up her frustration two notches. She lashed out at the rude intruder. "Back off!"

Tami cussed and thrust closer. Em raised her hands to push back, not quite making contact.

"You gonna hit me now?!" Tami said. Em tried to sidestep again, but Tami grabbed her shoulder to subdue further movement. That was it. Em's anger peaked. She shoved Tami. In a flash so fast no one could see it coming, Tami whipped her hand across Em's face with hard force. Tami's eyes were distilled rage.

The world went silent. The shock stung more than the prickling of Em's left cheek. Life flashed before her eyes. She was now a pariah. Word of this beating would spread like an infestation within minutes. Her life was ruined forever.

Em clenched her eyes so tight she saw stars and cried.

“Yeah, cry, monkey!” Tami said, stepping back. “We’re not finished.” The class bell rang. She moved beyond the row of lockers and ran out of the room before the teacher could get wise to what was happening. Many of the onlookers gawked for a few moments before dispersing back to their own lockers. The phys-ed teacher remained nowhere to be seen. Kate put her hand on Em’s shoulder and squeezed softly. Em was wrapped in despair so thick she couldn’t see any way out.

During lunch period, the situation was way too distressing to eat, so Em skipped the cafeteria and went to the upstairs library to hide out. After entering the library, she drifted to an empty four-seater table in the far back corner of the moderately lit gray-walled room behind the Geology and Physics bookshelves and sat. She could feel the cool paleness of her face.

Numerous kids snatched looks at her. Some of them were popular and academically-minded, while others were among the saddest of cases who hid from any chance of social interaction down in the lunch hall. Many feigned phony wall clock glances and other subtle trickery to excuse looking her way. The lowly kids probably felt good that someone else was now firmly installed at the bottom of the school’s social order for the next year, minimum. The popular kids surely enjoyed gloating.

Where was Kate? She was supposed to finish in the cafeteria fast and join Em to alleviate some of the emotional burden. Em fought back tears as she scanned all the social media accounts she could think of to determine how wide this disaster had spread. The answer: far. Everywhere she looked, kids had reposted the toilet meme. Her heart raced as she looked up Jaz and Patti’s Instagram page. Their repost had over six hundred dislikes. That number meant kids at neighboring schools in the county knew about it too.

This was an unrecoverable tragedy. What would happen if other kids’ parents found out? Could she keep this from Mom and Dad? Would local media get involved and blast her family all over the news like they often do when people screw up regarding big social issues? Fear became overwhelming. She cried, muffling her nose and mouth in her sleeve. A lanky, dark haired boy at a nearby table turned his gaze away in embarrassment.

The wait for Kate seemed like forever.

Em’s phone dinged. Was it Kate on the way up? The message read: “Call me ASAP. Come home immediately after school.” It was Mom. Em’s heart rate doubled. She half wanted to text her back to confirm the reason but was too afraid to respond. Mom must know about the toilet post.

She spotted Kate entering the library so she stared directly at Kate until eye contact was made. Kate hurried over.

“Where were you?” Em asked as Kate sat.

Kate’s voice was loud. “Getting more info.” The dark haired boy stared in their direction. Em rapidly gestured for her to quiet down. Kate lowered her voice. “Tommy Schneider found it first last night and reposted it. Things kinda spread from there.”

Em barely knew the guy. He better not ever post anything controversial because he was her enemy forever now. “What’s everyone saying?” Em asked.

Something happened that rarely ever did. Kate avoided eye contact and didn't say a word. Em decided not to press. She fought hard against a second wave of tears. Kate noticed and looked at her with great empathy. "It'll all blow over soon."

Not true and Em knew it.

As Em stood outside by the back door of the house, she hesitated to reach for the knob. Time to face Mom, but she wasn't ready. It would take some mental prep first. She breathed and imagined a bunch of possible positive outcomes of the conversation tonight. From a short "talking to" to a few-day grounding. These didn't feel believable. Rather than dwell on worst case scenarios, she opened the door as quietly as possible and stepped inside. Mom was nowhere to be heard. Em closed the door quietly and took a few feather-light steps on the hardwood floor, hoping she would make it up to her room surreptitiously.

Em navigated to the kitchen with few more creaky steps and passed through the dining room. She put a foot on the stairs.

"You home, Em?" Mom called from upstairs.

Em sighed. The start of the confrontation was now. She decided she'd rather have a heated discussion downstairs than up—just in case she had to storm out mid-argument for air. "Yeah," she said warily.

"I'll be down in a minute," Mom said. Em dropped her school backpack on a table chair and went to the kitchen. Her stomach was grumbling because she still hadn't eaten a bite since breakfast. Being home calmed her nerves enough for a snack. She opened a red wooden cabinet above the microwave and pulled down a box of Cheese-Its.

As she palmed a handful, Mom descended the stairs. Em took a big mouthful of crackers and crunched loud, thereby delaying the conversation for at least thirty seconds. When Mom did arrive, her disappointment was palpable. Em raised a finger for her to wait as she chewed and chewed.

Mom grabbed a glass from the cabinet over the dish rack and filled it halfway from the tap. She took a short sip. "Things are very serious," she said. Mom was instantly concerned as she noticed Em's cheek. She reached out to touch it. "What happened to you?"

Em had a great realization: bring up the incident in the locker room now. She could parlay some sympathy from the slap to reduce the force of Mom's corrections. Maybe Dad's too. Em spoke, barely allowing time to swallow crackers. "A girl in phys-ed hit me," she said.

"Oh my gosh," Mom said. "Are you okay?"

Em frowned. "I'm shook up." These words, although intended to manipulate, were also true.

"I'll get some cream," Mom said and hurried upstairs. This was definitely the way to navigate around hard consequences Mom and Dad might lay on her. Focus them on the punishment she'd already experienced and which was yet to come at school for a long, long time. The thought of this reality knocked her out of this defensive strategy. It brought dread and worry back.

Mom returned to the kitchen, spinning the lid off a cream jar as she approached. Dabbing a little and rubbing it into Em's cheek, she asked, "Was it related to the toilet picture?"

"Yes," Em said. "The girl thought it was my opinion." Em felt ease as cool viscosity was massaged into her skin.

"Give me her name. I'm going to chat with the vice principal."

Em shuddered. She'd be glad to have Tami suspended. But right now, it wouldn't help. She needed time to think about how to get revenge without looking like a pathetic tattletale. "No ratting her out. Not yet."

Mom stopped massaging Em's cheek. "I want you safe. Bullies have to be confronted by adults."

Em thought for a moment. "Let me see what Dad thinks first."

Mom nodded once and resumed rubbing cream into Em's cheek. "Was the post your own opinion?"

Em looked Mom in the eyes. "Of course not!"

"Why'd you write it then?"

"I was mad after Dad's monkey meme, but I deleted it after we talked last night. It was up for maybe an hour at most." Em looked away.

"I get it. It was reckless though."

"I know. But he's always talking about Roundhouse. I'm sorry," Em said.

"When Dad gets in, we're going to have a big chat. For now, I'll tell you that the boss heard about it and called Dad in to see him."

Em was worried. She noticed for the first time that Mom's expression was stiff. Definitely stressed. "Is that bad?" Em asked.

"Yes," Mom said. "The boss never calls anyone in..." her voice trailed off. "Go settle yourself upstairs. I'll call you when we're ready to eat." Em went to her room.

An hour later, Em heard Dad come in the back door downstairs. Her nerves had settled a bit in the waiting. Now they shot back up. Dad's voice wasn't emotive as it usually was when he greeted Mom. Their hushed voices barely rose through the thick floor below Em's feet. She couldn't make out specifics of the conversation. It sounded like Dad said something about "suspicion." They moved into the dining room. Mom's footsteps echoed up the stairway.

"Em?" Mom called up. Em tried not to think about the paralyzing dread of what awaited downstairs. She walked to the stairs and descended, then stepped into the dining room beside Mom. Dad was visibly deflated. She assumed it was his disappointment in her.

Dad shook his head ever so slightly. Em was ready to apologize but Dad spoke first. "What got into your mind?"

Em's voice cracked. "I'm sorry. I erased the post after we talked last night. It was only up for—" Dad raised his hand to stop her, quiet thought on his face.

Mom grabbed Em's hand. "Dad was called into the office by the boss, as I said."

"Mr. Freeman, the 'F' in FAST," Dad said. "He only calls drivers in when there's a big problem."

Em's throat went dry. Mom squeezed her hand firmly. Em's voice trembled, "How did he find out?"

"One of his wife's friends has a kid at your school," he said. Word travels fast these days."

"Did he suspect you posted it?" Em asked.

"No, but he did suspended me."

Em realized the "S" word she misheard earlier was that one. Overwhelmed with guilt and remorse, she shook. It must've been obvious because Mom rubbed her back. Dad must've noticed too. He walked over and gave them both a big hug, then leaned down and kissed Em's forehead.

"I take the blame," he said. A tear flowed from Em's eye into his shirt. She was barely able to keep from breaking down.

Dad reacted as if startled for a moment but his words didn't betray the particular thought. "Your mom and I talked this over," he said. "It's my fault. I shouldn't have mouthed off about Roundhouse in front of you," he said.

"Or at all," Mom reminded him.

He gestured in agreement. "I don't know her struggles," he said.

Em was emphatic. "Why'd they suspend you?"

"Because I'm a face of the company in the field," he said. "They're afraid word of this has or will spread. They can't have toilet man—who ridicules women—interacting with tons of clients during the holiday season."

"Can't you work in the office?" Em asked.

"They already have staff for that," Mom said.

"Besides..." Dad trailed off.

"What?" Em asked.

Mom kept soothing Em's back. "He doesn't have to go into it," she said.

"I'll tell you this much," Dad said. "The reason I mouth off about Roundhouse is that her family owns a lot of businesses we contract with. They're fastidious to a fault."

"What's fastidious?" Em asked.

"Super-picky," he said. Em nodded. "And I do a lot of service work for them."

Em was angry on his behalf. "But I didn't mention her name in the post."

"Doesn't matter. She takes part in the family's business. Her park project and toilet man don't mix."

Em's stomach tightened into a rock.

"Don't worry," Mom said. "The company will pay your dad until things cool down."

Dad scratched his nose. "Let's pray things diffuse quickly," he said.

It was clear, Mom and Dad had no idea if or when things would ever cool down. Em frowned. "What if this gets picked up by TV?" Her questions came more rapidly as overwhelming possibilities dawned on her. "The paper? A bunch more websites and social media outlets? TikTok?"

Mom patted her shoulder again. "Don't worry yet," she said. "I'm working on it. I've been talking with parents and have a meeting with the vice principal tomorrow."

Em's eyes widened. "Am I in trouble?"

"I don't think so," Mom said. "I spoke with VP Rainer for a few minutes today. I'll let you know after we chat tomorrow."

Dad squinted at Em. "Did something happen to your face?" he asked.

Em touched her cheek. Maybe this is what had startled him earlier. "A girl—"

Mom cut her off. "Someone at school slapped her over the meme."

Dad leaned in closer to Em. He angled her face gently by the chin and examined the tender skin. "Who?"

"You don't know her or her parents," Em said.

"Where were the teachers?" Dad asked.

"They can't be around every second. This girl ran into the locker room, slapped me, and took off."

Dad was annoyed at the indignity. "Did you report her?"

Em did a double take. "Rat her out? If I was a boy, you'd never say that."

Dad sighed. "This is different."

Mom stepped towards him. "I'm going to handle it tomorrow."

"Please don't tattle!" Em said. She stared at Mom, her mouth agape.

"I won't push to find out who hit you, but I am going to tell the office that this happened," Mom said.

Nodding, Dad seemed distracted. "Em, I have an idea." He rubbed his chin. "Join me in the garage after dinner."

Mom's eyebrows rose. "Hon, I'm not sure about that."

"It'll be okay," he said, looking at Em.

Going to the garage meant something. Although Em hadn't been up for it before, she was now.

Em swore she heard a whoosh as her black-gloved fist landed on a classic style red Everlast punching bag in the two-car side garage. Her heart was pumping. This was Dad's workout room. Sparse, unlike many garages in the neighborhood. A large waist-high toolbox sat in the back corner near a car vacuum and a few full cardboard storage boxes. In the center of the floor was a lifting bench. A line of ascending dumbbells ran along the left wall. In the middle of the right wall was a cabinet that housed Dad's sound system and amp connected to a 40 inch TV mounted above one of the electric garage doors. Just off the wall hung the punching bag that swung from the ceiling by a chain. Em gave the bag another jab.

"Not too hard yet," Dad said as he tinkered with the CD player attached to the stereo. Em knew what was coming: one of Dad's favorite workout tracks from long before she was born. She could hear the intro in her head before he hit play: Chiga-chiga-chiga-chiga bamp! Bamp-bamp-bamp! Bamp-Bamp-Baaaaaam. Dad pressed a button and *Eye of the Tiger* blared on.

Dad joined Em by the bag as she hammered it with another dead-on jab. "Ow!" she cried. Her wrist was tweaked.

"Hold on, Em," Dad said, grabbing the bag to stabilize it. "I'll show you a few things." He motioned for Em to hand him the gloves, so she stepped out of the way and took them off. "Normally I'd start you on strength training and technique before getting into any sort of moves, but we don't have time for that in one night." She handed him the gloves, which he threw behind him on the ground. "We'll use those in a bit. I have one question." Dad moved closer to Em. "How did it feel when you got hit?"

Em thought. Her heart pounded a few times as the sting, the chagrin, of earlier that day flooded back. "Scared...upset."

"I'm sorry, honey. I'm gonna give you some tools to prevent this from happening again. But, what I meant by the question is, how did it feel physically when that girl hit your cheek?"

"After the shock, it stung."

"How bad?"

She tried to separate the shock and fear and dread from the actual pain. "I guess, not terrible."

"Did the pain go away pretty fast?"

"Yeah. The physical pain did, actually."

"Good."

"What's that mean?"

"That Tina isn't strong."

"It's Tami."

"Right. I want you to think about Tami's slap. Remind yourself that the pain wasn't very bad. *Know* it."

"Ok."

"Did she use both hands when she hit you?"

"Like how?"

He demonstrated. "Have one hand raised in front of her face like this," he raised his left hand in front of his face, "when she hit you with the other?"

Em recalled that Tami hadn't given any warning that she was going to slap until swinging her hand. "Ah, no. No hand raised except the one that hit me."

Dad nodded. "When you execute some of the moves I'm going to show you, be confident. If she comes at you again, remember, she can't dish out pain that will really hurt. You'll be the one to fear."

He pantomimed a move incorporating a side step and fake-out left/right slap. Em tried it a few times. She whipped her left hand outwards, pretending she was going to hit an imagined version of Tami, then brought her right hand around to deliver the actual blow. It was the right-left sidesteps—mirror opposites of the hand movements—that revealed her serious lack of coordination. After a ninth failed attempt to execute the moves, Dad put his hand on her shoulder. "Don't worry, you don't have to get it down tonight," he said and smiled. "We'll continue the training as long as you'd like." It was written on his face. He was excited by the possibility of sharing some of his passion for garage workouts with her from now on.

Em got back to the Everlast. On the tenth attempt, she was starting to land the fake-out/jab solidly on the bag. "I'm feeling like I might have some control over things."

Dad smiled emphatically. "I know exactly what you mean." He showed her a second move, both hands raised. His left hand was close to his face, his right a little further forward in front of his torso. Em soaked it in.

The next morning, Em was nervously prepared for the morning updates from Kate, who had been doing recon work on Em's behalf since last night. Kate reached out to kids all over town in a way that Em couldn't because they wouldn't have been honest with her.

Em made her way into the school building, loading and unloading her locker on the way to homeroom. She definitely could see that most kids took extra notice of her doings. Nobody said a word though.

"Some parents are mad too," Kate revealed when they finally met in a homeroom huddle.

The nerves Em had subdued, at least partially since last night, were rearing their ugly head again. "My mom said she's working on it," Em said.

"How?" Kate asked.

"She's seeing the VP in an hour."

Kate nodded curtly. "We'll see." Em didn't like Kate's tone but wasn't going to call out her only ally for cynicism.

Em stepped into the gym locker room with her heart practically in her throat. She maneuvered to her locker past a group of snickering gawkers dressing for class—a bunch of buzzards waiting to pick the bones of their Em-prey clean off. Her reflexes were on edge. When would it come? Tami part two? After all, Tami had said yesterday that their beef wasn't over. Em looked around but couldn't see Mrs. Burns, their phys-ed teacher, anywhere either.

As Em changed into her gym outfit, WHACK! Someone smashed a locker closed so hard behind her that she practically jumped out of her skin. The culprits, two brunettes named Jamie and Amini, were horsing around. Em took a breath and put her foot into one of her aqua blue sneakers, then sat on the bench next to Kate. She tied them. Kate secured her shoes too while keeping one eye on the room. No sign of Tami.

The class softball session went off with practically no incidents except for Dana's off-hand quip about Em's swing being as weak as her support for #MeToo. Em and Kate were at their lockers changing back into regular clothes.

Em reached onto the top gym locker shelf and grabbed her phone. A text notification from Mom was waiting. She had tried to forget about the Mom/VP meeting taking place during class and was uneasy about the message. The need to know was stronger than nerves, so she read it.

Kate noticed while sliding her arm into a yellow blouse sleeve. "Is it your mom?"

"Yeah." Em continued reading. Her mood picked up. "She said the VP is writing a letter to parents. He'll clear things up."

Kate nodded and closed her locker.

Em swung her backpack over her shoulder and closed her locker too. Something in the text bugged her. Mom had written that VP Rainer would send an email to all parents explaining the mistake while protecting Dad and Em's reputation. Rainer would say that Dad blew steam off about something at work and Em misunderstood what he had said. Em wasn't crazy about this explanation. It wasn't really accurate because it made her look naive. She'd have to talk to Mom about it later even though she knew there probably wasn't anything she could do about it.

The afternoon air was crisp and cool. Em's thin gray parka barely kept her body warm enough. She and Kate were chipper despite the chill as they walked the school grounds towards their bus. For the first time in two days, Em felt hopeful. She could and would enjoy the Christmas holiday. After all, in a world where many famous people's social media screw-ups got buried in a week or two, she'd surely be in the clear after the new year. It would usher in a reset, which she wouldn't squander. She'd be able to salvage the back half of the school year with volunteer school service projects and contrition. She'd rise from the ashes.

Shove! Trip!

Em fell face first into the ground. The dreaded voice, attached to a more dreaded body, hovered overhead. Tami was hyper-kinetic. She cussed. "C'mon, monkey girl!" Before Em could do anything, Tami kicked her in the right thigh. It hurt. A lot. The kind of pain that's made worse by the cold. As much as Em had been training her mind to be tough, it wasn't anywhere near as easily done in the thick of battle. Tami lunged at her again, ready to deliver another serious thigh blow. Em rolled out of the way just as Tami kicked, causing Tami to stumble. There it was. Maybe Tami wasn't unstoppable. The stun didn't evaporate as fast as Dad said because of the more intense thigh kick, but it did start to ease off. Em mentally recited his strategy. *Get out of the weak position. Get to a better defensive stance.*

Tami came around to kick again. Em rolled another half spin on her chest and pushed herself up onto her feet. Her thigh was a stiff, but manageable. She swung both hands up in front of her, the left out front and the right closer to her face.

"You're a street fighter now?" Tami laughed. She stopped a few feet in front of Em. This all happened in what seemed seconds. Drove of kids, some exiting the buses they'd already boarded, descended on the scene. They were ants drawn to the sweetish stench of a dumpster. No outside monitors or teachers seemed to have had time to react yet.

Red-faced and wild with rage, Tami breathed steam through her mouth. Em wondered where Tami's anger came from. Tami lunged. Em tried to sidestep and deflect Tami's right hand but her coordination was off. A few of Tami's prickly cold fingers whipped across Em's face. Em took two steps back. The pain was minimal. Adrenaline was kicking in. She reminded herself that Dad was right. This girl wasn't tough. She relied on cowardly blindside attacks.

Tami circled back, eyes redder for being foiled. Em stood her ground with arms raised, concentrating on Dad's instructions: Left deflect, right counter. Tami charged again. When she swung her right hand to slap Em's cheek, Em shoved the hand away with her left hand and hammered Tami on the cheek with her own right hand. Tami was disarrayed from the punch. Em took advantage and hooked Tami's front foot, then shoved her. Tami stumbled to the ground and fell flat on her chest.

Kids roared in approval. This emboldened Em. As Tami tried to get up, Em pounced on top and rolled her over on her back. Em gave Tami another intense slap in the face with her right hand. One boy caterwauled. Another screamed, "Yeah!" Tami started to cry. She was the one to take a whipping now.

Em felt something from deep inside. A feeling of power. Triumph. A feeling like she was a lioness in control of her prey. But the feeling wasn't singular. Something else, something dark was in the shadow of her soul. She wondered whether Tami would come back at her again tomorrow or next week or after the new year. This had to be the end of it. Em had to make sure.

Kids were cheering and booing at the same time. A few kids were arguing among themselves. Tami seemed to stifle tears as much as she could to appear tough. Em clenched her fist. Her facial muscles constricted. She let her own rage flow. One more good blow or two might do the trick. She swung her arm back to get good momentum for a strike in the face.

"Stop!" A short brunette named Darla screamed. Darla jumped down on the ground in front of Em and grabbed her fist. Em recalled she had seen Darla hang with Tami in the past. "Don't touch her!" Darla said with ferocity as she shoved Em's fist aside. "Let her up!" Em noticed that Darla's eyes were wet. There was something about the pain in Darla's face and Tami's defiance in the midst of it all. The dark shadow inside Em revealed itself only for a second. She was afraid to acknowledge what it was: maybe the toilet joke was personal for Tami. Maybe she already knew violence from the other side of a fist. Em's gut burned with dread.

An adult woman, one of the outside moderators no doubt, yelled from a distance. "Stop what you're doing!" Em moved off of Tami. The spectators went silent. A bunch of kids dispersed fast, many ran back to their buses. Kate helped Em stand as Darla helped Tami up.

"Are you okay?" Kate said quietly.

The moderator cleared the remaining kids out and said to the two brawlers, "To the principal's office."

Em was silent. She watched Tami walk back towards the main entrance with Darla.

"You're the one who's in the right." Kate said. "You're allowed to defend yourself."

Em felt as if she were free-falling in a bottomless pit. "Once I got her on the ground, I wanted to destroy her," she said. Kate walked with Em back towards the entrance. "Have you ever felt that way before?"

Kate shook her head. Em didn't feel like saying more. She didn't quite know how to put into words what she had just experienced. From a deep primal place, she had wanted to use her power in the moment to elevate herself in the eyes of her peers, to demolish an opponent who was powerless. Why couldn't she stop?

She hoped Dad had some answers. She hoped he was up for talking about it.