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THE COUNSELORS

JESSICA GOODMAN

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JESSICA GOODMAN

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Camp Alpine Lake is the only place where Goldie Easton feels at home. As the daughter of the camp nurse and the shop instructor, plus the honorary granddaughter of the camp's owners, she's always had a special connection to Alpine Lake, even before she was old enough to attend. Now she's back as a counselor, desperate for summer to start and her camp friends to arrive. Because with the dark secret she's been keeping, she's more in need of the comfort of home than ever.

But with everything she's been holding back from her best friends, Ava and Imogen, things might not be as simple as she'd hoped—and Goldie's not the only person at camp who has been lying. When a local boy turns up dead in the lake, she knows that his death couldn't have been an accident. She also knows that Ava went down to the lake the night he died. What did Ava see and what does she know? Why hasn't she said anything to Goldie about the death?

But asking questions offers no answers, only danger and betrayals deeper than Goldie ever imagined.

ALSO BY JESSICA GOODMAN

They Wish They Were Us

They'll Never Catch Us

THE COUNSELORS

JESSICA GOODMAN



*To Grandma Belle, Grandpa Herbie,
Pop Siegel, and Supergrandma,
for passing down the love of camp
from generation to generation*



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PROLOGUE

Evil doesn't exist at Camp Alpine Lake. Not inside the wrought-iron gate that separates camp from the town of Roxwood, and not at the waterfront, where far-out buoys keep us isolated from the rest of New England. Everything here is safe. The tennis courts. The arts and crafts shed. The cabins. The Lodge. Camp is a bubble, made for bonfires and sing-alongs and friendships formed under the beam of a flashlight.

Even when I was eight and the group leaders would huddle us together on the man-made beach in neat little rows so we could watch the lifeguards line up in the water to practice safety drills, we knew they were all for show. We were never in danger. Not here.

We'd watch the lifeguards dive in unison, touching the ground beneath the surface, even if it was eleven or twelve feet below. They'd come up with nothing, handfuls of dirt. No harmed child, no limp arm. They'd do this over and over until they reached the end of the boundaries, never screaming in horror. Never fearful that a precious camper was gone.

Even when I became a counselor and was tasked with keeping the children alive, healthy, and well fed, I knew there was never any real danger here. Not on the edges of the forest up by the cliffs where loose rocks threatened to fall silently into the abyss. Not

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along the ropes course where harnesses always stayed buckled. And certainly not in the lake, where I wore my red lifeguard suit like a superhero's costume.

But that was before I knew what kind of dark secrets were hidden in the corners of Camp Alpine Lake, out of sight of campers, counselors, and lifers like me who would give everything we had to keep this place whole.

That was before we learned the truth. About Ava, Imogen, and me—and how far we'd go to protect each other even after we had been exposed.

Before this summer, Camp Alpine Lake was a haven. An escape from what I could not face back home in Roxwood, only a few miles outside the gate.

But now Camp Alpine Lake is another place where I'll never feel safe.

CHAPTER 1

Now

The summer will begin like it always does, with me wandering the grounds of Camp Alpine Lake alone. It's the first day of maintenance week, when all the counselors arrive to get the place ready for campers. But I'm the only one who can come early.

No one else gets to experience how the cabins smell like cedar and lemon when they're empty, not yet filled with other counselors or twelve-year-old boys who don't know about deodorant. How the sun bounces off the lake when there aren't any swimmers bobbing in the lap lanes. Or how you can stand at the edge of Creepy Cliff and scream, loud and long, listening to your voice echo all across New England.

"This place is your home, too, Goldie," Mellie has always said. I've heard the words enough times to believe them, even though my *actual* home is right down the road from Truly's, the dive bar we go to on nights off.

But this summer is different. And Stu and Mellie are the only people at Alpine Lake who know why.

Mom and Dad insist I shouldn't break tradition. "You can't let what happened ruin every single thing you love," Dad says, gripping the steering wheel of our old Subaru as we pull up to the gate. "You deserve to have fun. We'll see you later at orientation."

Mom turns around from the passenger seat and squeezes my bare knee. “You’re going to be okay.”

I nod, unable to find words, but I know she’s right. This place has always calmed me. Always washed away whatever sorrow I held on to at the beginning of the summer. If anything can heal me, it’s a summer at Camp Alpine Lake with Ava and Imogen, who have been my best friends for a decade. I may not have told them about my school year, but eight weeks with them will erase the damage and the pain. Even if we’ve barely spoken in the past few months. They always make everything better.

I get out of the car with shaky legs and heave my duffel over my shoulder. I walk through the gate and inhale deeply, smelling freshly cut grass and woodchips. I’m home.

I make my way to the gazebo and sit down, pushing my sunglasses up on my head. The clock on the dining hall says it’s only nine in the morning. I’ve still got an hour before Ava and Imogen arrive on the buses. They’ll bring with them all the other former campers who are now counselors. The lifers. People I’ve known since I was eight years old. Later today, we’ll meet the foreigners. The ones who fly from Argentina, South Africa, and Australia to experience eight weeks in America. There are always a handful of Brits, mostly teaching tennis or soccer. Men with silly accents who will offer you tallboys and cigarettes at bonfires. Women who order gin and tonics on nights off and sunburn easy. Some come back year after year and some we never see again.

“Goldiel!” someone calls.

I swivel around to find Stu jogging toward me in a polo shirt and long khaki shorts, belted at the waist. An Alpine Lake baseball hat covers his bald head and he’s holding a clipboard like it’s an

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extension of his arm. For a second, my stomach cramps. *Does he regret how they helped me?*

“Hi, Stu,” I say, my voice smaller than usual.

“There’s our golden girl.” I half expect him to ruffle my dark curly hair like he used to do when I was little. But he smiles at me, like nothing happened this year. Like he and his wife Mellie didn’t save my life. “Do you want to know your cabin assignment early? Drop your stuff off before the buses pull in?”

I nod eagerly, pulling one knee up under my chin. There’s no way Imogen, Ava, and I would be staffed in the same cabin since we’re all going to be lifeguards, but hopefully we’ll be in the same group so we have the same schedules. Last year was our first time on the staff side of things and we were all assigned cabins so far away from each other. It sucked. Nothing like the years we spent as campers. I wonder if that’s when the gulf between us began to widen.

“Let’s see,” Stu says, tapping his clipboard with a pen. “Here you are, my dear. You’re with the Ramblers. Nine-year-olds. And you’ll be in Bloodroot. Best view of camp, but you know that already. Your bed was in the back left corner, right?”

That’s the thing about Stu. He always remembers what cabins you were in, what your favorite activities were, and if you preferred chicken patties over wing dings. He knows my dad likes to stock the infirmary with neon-colored Band-Aids so the little ones can wear them like badges of honor, and that Mom blasts Queen in the woodworking shop to soundtrack the buzzsaws. Last year, he got her a vintage shirt from their Live Aid show for her birthday, and I swear it’s her most prized possession.

I smile up at Stu, blocking the sun with my hand. “Any chance you can give me a hint about—”

“Ava and Imogen? I thought you’d never ask,” he says with a wink. “Don’t worry, they’re with the Ramblers, too. Ava’s in Ludlow and Imogen’s in Ascutney. You’re smack dab in the middle.”

My shoulders relax and all I want to do is text them the good news, but I know there’s no use. There’s no service at Camp Alpine Lake. Barely any in the town of Roxwood at all.

“Why don’t you get settled and we’ll see you when everyone else gets here, okay?”

“Thanks, Stu. Holler if you need anything.”

“You got it, golden girl.”

He tips his hat in a playful way and heads toward the office. But as he walks off, his face falls, a furrow forming at his brow. For a second, I wonder if his worry is related to me. If he regrets letting me come back.

But I don’t know what I would do if, after everything, I lost this place, too. The promise of spending the summer at Alpine Lake was the only thing that helped me get through the year. The stares. The whispers that echoed through the halls of Roxwood High. Whenever someone left a nasty note in my locker or shoved me hard in the shoulder, I would close my eyes and think of this place. Of the first day of camp. Of being reunited with Ava and Imogen.

They never treated me different even though I’m not like them. I’m a local—a *townie*. Someone who bypassed camp’s exclusive admissions exam and five-digit price tag because my parents work here. But Ava and Imogen don’t care about that. We’re all the same—the kids who live ten months for two. That’s all that matters.

I hope that’s still true.

The walk from the gazebo to Bloodroot only takes a few minutes, but you can see just about everything. I pass the volleyball

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court, the softball field, the upper picnic tables, and the first set of tennis courts. My cabin is fourth in a row on a big hill and it's right in the center of all the action. Everyone has to pass it on their way down to the waterfront, so it always feels like you're at the center of everything. Plus, like Stu said, killer views. You can see all the way to the lake from the counselor room.

But I love Bloodroot for different reasons. Ava, Imogen, and I lived here the first summer we were assigned the same cabin. The previous year, when we were eight, we begged the counselors to let us switch, but they never did. And then finally, a few weeks before we were due to be Ramblers, Ava's mom called and worked some fancy-person magic so we were not only assigned to the same cabin, but also beds right next to each other in the far corner of the room, right by the big window that faces the waterfront. Like Stu remembered.

I push open the door, and as the metal springs squeak, tears prick my eyes. *This* is my home. I dump my duffel on a top bunk in the counselor room and walk slowly through the main cabin, running my fingertips along the wooden bed frames, the rafters overhead, and the cubbies that will soon be crowded with little girls' linens.

I stop at the entrance and look up at the plaques. There's one commemorating each year that camp's been open, with the names of those who lived here painted in dramatic fashion. I recognize so many names. Girls who fell in love with each other, who formed friendships you can only make at a place like this. I search the plaques until I find ours.

There we are, along the bottom. Three lines of the same phrase, repeated over and over with our names signed below. *Sisters by choice*. Our handwriting still looks the same. Mine, neat and tiny,

like I'm trying to fit as many letters as possible. Imogen's loopy and bubbly, and Ava's a quick scrawl.

I close my eyes and hold my breath, keeping this feeling in my lungs. It's the first time since before the accident that I feel free. That I feel like *me*. But I can't think about that too much because I'll break into tears, and if I do, Ava and Imogen will know as soon as they see me. They always know. And then I'd have to tell them the truth.

They don't need to know yet. Maybe ever. It won't do me any good. I'll still be Goldie Easton, the most hated girl in Roxwood. I'll still have to repeat a semester of high school. And Dylan Adler will still never walk again.

I was lucky I didn't go to jail. That's what people said around town.

It's because she's associated with that camp.

Those directors saved her ass.

Stu and Mellie pulled some strings for her.

She should rot in hell.

What if Ava and Imogen think I'm a monster, like everyone else? We've shared everything with each other. Complaints about the bumps on our bikini lines, the jelly donuts Ava special orders around Hanukkah, the secret things that make our bodies hum alone in the dark. But not this. I don't want them to know about this.

It was easy to dodge their calls and the three-way FaceTimes right after the accident, and as the semester stretched on, they both became busier and busier, and their texts became less frequent. Now, six months later, I don't know how I would begin to explain that my whole life had changed without them even knowing.

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Plus, Ava's got enough to worry about with her shitty investment banker dad who's happy to write her checks for her Upper East Side prep school but refuses to visit from Palm Beach. And Imogen's busy with auditions after landing a cell phone commercial that plays before basically every YouTube video.

They never found out about the accident thanks to the fact that they never asked me about life up here. Well, and that Stu and Mellie made sure the news didn't hit the local paper. Whenever Ava and Imogen brought up our futures, I'd just say I couldn't wait to get out of this hellhole. No one expects anything else when you live someplace like Roxwood.

For now, I want to enjoy the summer. Eight magical weeks at Camp Alpine Lake. Nothing exists outside this place. Not even the past.

CHAPTER 2

Then

It was hard not to notice Heller McConnell at the haunted house orientation. There were nine of us, all seniors from Roxwood High, who had been cast to work the season at the old abandoned psych ward off Route 16, and Heller was the only athlete.

I was picking through a box of fangs when Heller walked over to inspect a roll of mummy wrapping. His curly dark hair swooped over one eye and a soft smile tugged at the corner of his red mouth.

“Didn’t peg you as a vampire lover,” Heller said, holding up a plastic knife.

His voice was low and smooth, the same way he sounded over the loudspeaker at school while making the morning announcements.

“I could get into it,” I said. “A gender-swapped Dracula situation.”

Heller laughed like he was impressed. “Goldie, right?”

My brows shot up in surprise and Heller snapped his mouth shut.

“Sorry, that’s weird. It’s . . .”

“We’ve been in the same class since kindergarten,” I said. “It’d be weird if you *didn’t* know my name.”

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A smile blossomed on his face, and I licked my lips, trying to ignore the warmth spreading through my chest.

In that moment, I wasn't Goldie Easton, the quiet girl who was always head down in her phone or an old mystery novel, never present. I was something new and sparkly, full of possibilities. I cleared my throat and hunted for something to say.

"Why are you here?" It was the wrong question. I knew it as soon as I saw Heller's face fall.

"College fund," he said. "Pays more than leading hayrides at the nursery."

"Dartmouth?" I'd heard their hockey coaches had been courting him since sophomore year. It was pretty much a miracle, a Roxwood kid going Ivy. I expected Heller to puff out his chest and be all aggro about it. But instead, he averted his eyes like he was embarrassed. It made me like him more.

"It's not a sure thing," he said, shrugging. "I still have to get in." Then he leaned forward into the bin of costumes and dug out a black pointy witch's hat, setting it on my head at an odd angle.

"Everyone said there was a reason no one took jobs here." Heller smiled right at me and took a step closer so the space between us almost disappeared, so I could smell him, all mint and flannel and firewood. "But I think I'm going to like it."

CHAPTER 3

Now

I hear the buses before I see them. Everything echoes up here in Roxwood, where the trees and the mountains create a canyon for sound to bounce through. It's especially loud at Camp Alpine Lake, where you have to climb up a huge hill to see the entrance. That drive is always the best. It makes your stomach buzz like you're on a roller coaster, and only when you reach the top of the hill do you see the massive banner welcoming you home, here.

I push open Bloodroot's front door and stand on the porch, squinting up toward the gazebo. A flash of yellow metal appears through the trees and my heart flutters. I make a break for it, rushing toward the buses, my friends.

I get there in time to see Mellie and Stu walk out from the office, wearing their matching striped senior staff shirts, the ones with the Alpine Lake logo stitched onto the chest. Mellie rubs her hands together and her dark ponytail bobs up and down. For the first time I notice a few gray streaks winding through her hair.

"This is the best part," she says, her shoulders rising to meet her ears. "It doesn't feel quite real until everyone is here. Right, sweetheart? You're all what makes this place so special."

She squeezes my hand and I resist the urge to rest my head on her shoulder. I shift my weight from foot to foot, trying to settle my

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nerves, to ignore the fact that I almost don't want this summer to start because then, of course, it will have to end. And I'll have to go back to Roxwood High.

The buses roar from right below the apex of the hill, and then all of a sudden, I see them peeking out, barreling toward us, the tops hitting the trees that canopy above.

"Here we go," Stu whispers. But he's not looking at the road. Instead, he's focused on some piece of paper stuck to his clipboard. "Damn Roxwood . . ." he mumbles.

But before he can say anything else, Mellie throws an elbow into his side. "Stu," she says with a singsong voice, as if he's a child. "My nervous husband. He's always worried on the first day, you know." Stu drops his arm and hides his clipboard behind his back.

"Sorry," he mumbles. "Forgot to eat breakfast."

Mellie gives him a sharp look. "Did you check—"

Stu pats his insulin pump, attached to his hip, and points down to his fanny pack, where everyone at Alpine Lake knows he keeps a little diabetes kit. Stuff like an extra insulin pen and glucose tabs just in case he or any of the diabetic kids have emergencies. Stu's always been super open about his pump, which is probably why parents who have diabetic kids like to send them here. In-a-pinch supplies are never far away, and Stu has a dedicated mini-fridge in the office for kids who need to store their insulin someplace safe. Plus, he actually knows how to help them out if their blood sugar gets low on a hike or at the lake.

Mellie huffs and shakes her head. It's obvious something is wrong. There's a tension in the air, something I know I'm not supposed to ask about. Not just because I'm only a second-year counselor, but because I'm not one of them. I didn't travel here

from a cushy suburb, or talk about how when I'm older I'll donate a hundred grand to refurbish the stables. I'm the girl Stu and Mellie took pity on. The girl they look out for.

I straighten my spine and toss my hair behind my shoulders, willing confidence to come. Butterflies hum in my stomach as the first bus pulls around the traffic circle in front of the dining hall and comes to a stop. The doors make a hissing sound as they open and dozens of people pour out onto the front lawn. Smiling faces carrying backpacks and water bottles, wearing high-waisted denim shorts and tie-dyed shirts, fresh sneakers and bandanas knotted on top of their heads. Everyone's screaming and shouting and filling the air with their energy, their electricity. I bounce on my toes with anticipation and scan the faces for Ava and Imogen, anxious for their hugs, their love, their reassurance. It dawns on me for the first time in ten years that I'm nervous to see them. But they're not on the first bus.

The second one pulls in and I move toward it, waving to people as they call my name, screaming their hellos. I'm a given. Part of the scenery. Goldie Easton. Another fixture of Camp Alpine Lake. As present as the rock climbing wall or the chocolate fountain at Sunday brunch.

Finally, I spot them and my stomach lurches. There's Ava, the tall, striking white girl with chestnut roots and long platinum hair, piled high into a messy bun. Her limbs are like ropes that extend to forever. Imogen stands next to her, shielding her eyes from the sun. She's half Japanese, half white, with dark hair twisted into two French braids, dyed neon pink at the ends. Shorter than Ava, but with poise that makes her seem grand. They're searching the crowd and my heart skips knowing they're looking for me, too.

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Imogen sees me first and her mouth forms a wide smile. “Goldiel!” she shrieks. Ava turns and they both rush toward me. Within seconds, they tackle me to the ground and we tumble to the soft dirt.

Ava squeals and plants wet, sloppy kisses on my forehead and my cheeks while Imogen squeezes me to her chest. I hold them tight, feeling their bodies mold around mine, remembering how much we’ve grown since we first met. My stomach settles. Nothing has changed.

They release me in a fit of giggles and Ava cups my chin with both her hands. “I’ve never been happier to see you, my golden girl,” she says. Her blue eyes are bright and her cheekbones are high. Her mom wanted her to model, but Ava always said she’d rather die than spend her free time hanging out with a bunch of handsy old guys looking at her every fold. When we finally disentangle ourselves, I notice a crowd is standing around us, watching.

“Never could break these three up!” a woman says in a British accent. I look up to find Meg, who taught archery last summer, rolling her eyes. She has pale, ruddy skin and a tiny gap between her front teeth, which you can only see when she’s laughing for real, like she’s doing right now. Meg’s a few years older than us and was our counselor in our final year as campers. She quickly became my favorite since she shared the Welsh cakes her grandmother sent over from the UK and never told on us when we snuck out for a midnight raid to the boys’ cabins.

Last summer, she was on-again, off-again with Ray Levin, the guy who runs the waterfront, and at the end of camp, she moved to New York to be with him and work at a startup. But last I heard, they broke up and she had to head back home to a shitty

bartending job in the UK where London financiers grabbed her ass without permission.

“Easton, I’m in Bloodroot with you!” Meg says, throwing her bag over her shoulder. “Got promoted to group leader this year, so that makes me your boss.” She sticks out her tongue and wiggles it in my direction.

Imogen grabs my hand. “Wait, you’re in Bloodroot? Jealous!”

“Got any intel about us?” Ava asks.

“Ramblers,” I say, almost breathless. “We’re all next to each other.”

“I knew they’d make it work.” Ava pushes herself to stand. She reaches out her hands and we both take them, pulling ourselves up. “I mean, they had to, after I put in a phone call last month.”

“You did not.” Imogen laughs. I follow them to the bag drop and pick up Ava’s sleek black trunk and Imogen’s bright yellow leather backpack. Together we walk toward the cabins as the rest of the counselors stream by, frenetic energy pumping through the air.

“Ava, what did you do?” I ask, almost not wanting to know.

She shrugs. “I mean, there’s only so much they can deny a girl whose parents were enmeshed in a truly tragic, high-stakes divorce that dominated the New York gossip blogs for almost a decade, right?” Ava turns her head to the sun. She looks amused, with a smirk and a casual hair toss, but her voice is hollow, and Imogen gives me a look that says *don’t say anything*. So I don’t. “It’s not my fault that they desperately wanted Mark Cantor to send his precious *new* babies to Camp Alpine Lake this summer. He was always going to, obviously. But it doesn’t hurt to remind them that there are other options.”

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“You did *not*,” I say, blushing at her nerve.

“It’s not like he was ever going to ship those little monsters off to some random camp in Maine where they don’t even have electricity. They’d be laughed out of that stuck-up Palm Beach country club.” She lowers her voice and leans in toward us. “Get this, Mom told me the twins almost didn’t pass the entrance exam.”

Imogen’s eyes go wide in shock.

“I know,” Ava says. “But I guess that didn’t matter. Privilege’s a bitch.”

My skin prickles and I try to readjust the weight in my arms. Ava’s always been blunt. She calls it *New York realness*. But her flippancy irks me. Doesn’t she know that not everyone at Alpine Lake gets special treatment like that? That not all of us can pull the rich donor daddy card to get what we want?

Ava dips her designer sunglasses so they’re low on the bridge of her nose. “At least my shithole pops came in handy.” She bumps her butt in both of our directions and Imogen offers a sympathetic look.

“Worked in our favor this time,” Imogen says, and Ava gives her a grateful smile, one that’s intimate and knowing. It throws me off for a sec.

Ava and Imogen have always seemed to speak their own language, one forged out of living an hour away from one another—Ava in Manhattan and Imogen in New Jersey. When we were little, they would call me from one of their houses, saying they were having an impromptu sleepover and they wished I could have come, too, even though Roxwood is a six-hour drive from the tristate area. As we got older, it became obvious they’d merged their friend groups. Ava would share photos from suburban house

parties, posing with the cast of whatever play Imogen was starring in, and Imogen would text me updates from Central Park picnics with Ava's prep school classmates. I started visiting as often as I could, a few times a year. But that didn't compare to the way they blended their summer worlds with their real ones. I was left up here, wondering what my life would be like if I was one of them.

If I had grown up in Manhattan, would I still have disappeared into the background of class photos, my head peeking out above pretty girls with shiny hair? Or would I be placed in the front, smiling next to Ava? If I had gone to school with Imogen, who lived in the best public district in the northeast, would I still have felt unmotivated? Or would I have been inspired to excel, earn honors, and gobble up extracurriculars like all of those ambitious, fresh-faced kids who think Big Ten universities are safety schools?

I'd never know, of course, because I had grown up in Roxwood, where the library hasn't been renovated since the sixties and the cafeteria smells like mildew because there's never a budget to fix the leaks. Where getting average grades means you're heading to community college, and the teachers spend more time figuring out how to get the district to pay for their printing costs than finding ways to inspire us. In Roxwood, you're either Heller McConnell, golden boy, or everyone else, lost cause. There is no in between.

"God, it feels good to be here," Ava says, stretching her arms up above her head. "Like I can finally breathe."

"Seriously." Imogen pulls at one of her braids. "Mom and Dad have been up my *ass* about moving to LA. All I said was one year. That's all I need to see if I can make this whole *actress thing* work. And if it fails, I said I'd go to college. I already got into USC and

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deferred for a year. It was all they talked about while I was packing this week.” She rolls her eyes and pouts. “Wait, Goldie, did you decide where you’re going yet?”

I ignore the question, hoping they don’t notice. “I didn’t know you deferred,” I say.

“I decided last week,” she says like it’s no big deal. “But you knew I was thinking about it forever.”

Ava wiggles her fingers like jazz hands. “Our Imo! Trying to be a star. A queen! A viral sensation!”

“You’re already a success, Im,” I say, grateful they don’t push the question of what I’ll be up to come September.

Imogen nuzzles into my side. “God, I’ve missed you, Goldie. Your unbridled optimism.”

Is that how they view me? Optimistic? For a second, I wonder if they know me at all—or if I’ve changed so much that I barely remember myself.

“Here we are.” Ava drops her bag on the lawn in front of our three cabins. Other counselors are bustling in and out, and the screen doors slam with excitement. “Ah, maintenance week.” She spins around. “No campers, no responsibilities, a full week of ridiculous fun.”

“Ooh, I can’t wait for the bonfires,” Imogen says.

“And the nights off at Truly’s,” Ava says.

“Skinny-dipping in the lake!” Imogen shrieks.

Ava giggles and holds us tight to her. “It’s gonna be a perfect summer.”

Imogen nods. “Never needed it more.”

Same, I want to say. But instead, I smile and grip their hands as tight as I can.

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Ava pushes open the double doors to the cafeteria, which is buzzing with laughter and singing and clanking metal forks. She loops her arms in mine and Imogen's and saunters toward the tables, already filling up with counselors ready to kick off the first night of debauchery. During this one week before the kids arrive, anything goes.

But then Ava stops and squeals. "Willa!" she yells, throwing her arms around my mom as Imogen goes in for a bear hug from my dad. They swap and I stand off to the side, fitting my mouth into a smile.

"It is *so* good to see you girls," Mom says, clasping her hands together in front of her chest. She means it, too. Mom's been running the woodworking program here since before I was born and always likes to say that she never saw girls as close as us.

Dad runs a hand through his thick dark hair and smiles wide, showing all his teeth, even the crooked one on the bottom row. Imogen blushes and I remember the one time she told me he was a DILF, forcing me to fake vomit into the lake. Even though he *is* known as Hot Head Nurse, that doesn't mean I have to like it.

"Ready to have another incredible summer?" he asks.

"Eight perfect weeks before heading into the real world," Ava says.

Mom glances in my direction, a flash of realization crossing her face. She knows I haven't told them that college is still so far away for me. That I have one more semester in hell.

"Amen, Ava," Mom says, the smile reappearing on her face.

"Ooh, look. There's Tommy and Dale—let's grab seats with

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them.” Imogen points to one of the long tables in the middle of the room.

“We’ll catch up with you girls later,” Dad says. He squeezes my shoulder and I avoid his worried eyes as they head back over to the camp elders’ table and dole out hugs to Ray Levin, the water-front guy.

Ava cocks her head in Imogen’s direction. “Just because Tommy Eisenstat went down on you at his after-prom doesn’t mean you’re going to ditch us for him all summer, right?”

“He *what*?” I didn’t even know Imogen went to Tommy’s prom. “How could you not tell me?”

“Well, I kinda tried,” Imogen says, a little sheepish. “But you never called me back last month.”

I rack my brain for a bunch of missed calls from Imogen. I think they came in right around what should have been my graduation. So that checks out.

“Sorry,” I mumble. “You know how bad the service is up here.”

Imogen loops her arm in mine, dispersing any tension. “So, he mooned us every single swim session when we were Scouts, but . . . I mean . . . he’s hot these days, right?”

I look hard at Tommy as he offers us a cocky nod, his red hair lying flat over his oily forehead. A smattering of shiny pimples blankets his nose. He tosses a tater tot at Dale Franklin, sitting across the table.

“Sure,” I say, laughing.

Imogen covers her face with her hand. “Oh no. Please don’t judge me. He lives one town over. We have all the same friends back home.”

Ava throws her head back and laughs. “Come on,” she says,

pulling us toward Tommy. We climb over the benches and slide into our seats. Tommy nods at Imogen and she reddens before reaching for the bread basket in the center of the table.

“Hey, Goldie,” Tommy says, flashing me a smile. I guess if I met him now, I might not remember that when we were ten years old, he always smelled of tuna fish. Or that he tried to pants Ava when we were twelve and she didn’t speak to him for the whole summer. I guess if I met him now, I’d think he was kind of cute. *Kind of* being the key phrase.

I scan the rest of the table quickly to find it full of a bunch of other guys our year. Boys who had the honor of being witness to our first kisses, our first slow dances, our first games of spin the bottle. I know these boys in a way you only can from sharing something so special, so intimate, and in a way that makes you not really know them at all. I know who’s a strong enough swimmer to pass their deep-water test, and who’s better at tennis versus basketball. I know who can play acoustic guitar and who wore braces for six years or more. I know who cries every year at the end of camp.

But I don’t *know* them, really. I don’t know if they faked ADHD to get extra time on tests, or if they’re assholes to their parents. I don’t know if they call the smart girls *bossy* at school, or how they text.

I don’t know them like the boys in Roxwood, the boys who drive trucks and shoot guns and think hockey is life. The boys who comforted Heller McConnell after the accident and told him things like “It’s not your fault you were in the car. You did nothing wrong.” The boys who taunted me and tortured me for the rest of the year. The boys whose disgust I can hear pulsing in my ears when I try to fall asleep.

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Here, where the outside world doesn't exist, I can be whoever I want to. The boys at Alpine Lake know that.

I cram a forkful of pasta salad into my mouth as Stu and Mellie play their sleigh bells over the microphone. The entire room erupts in the announcement song without hesitation.

"Announcement, announcement, annoooouuunce-ment! Stu and Mellie have an annouuuuouncement!"

Stu chuckles into the microphone. "That never gets old," he says, shaking his head. Mellie beams next to him.

"We all wanted to wish you a hearty welcome—" He pauses.

"Or welcome back!" the room sings in unison.

"To Alpine Lake for another amazing summer."

The counselors cheer.

"By now you should all have settled into your cabins and met your group leader," Stu says. "The next few days will be a rollicking mess of getting this place ready for campers. You'll be broken into groups to focus on cleaning, decorating, and fieldwork. Lifeguards, the lake is now yours."

Ava, Imogen, and I nudge each other with our shoulders. Pride blooms in my chest. Everyone knows a lifeguarding gig is the most coveted job. I bet Tommy and Dale are stuck on baseball or soccer.

Mellie clears her throat and launches into a speech explaining some of the new changes around the grounds. Thanks to a few million-dollar donations from parents and alumni, they've renovated the Lodge where the summer musical takes place, added a new dance studio up by the arts and crafts shed, and hacked a new hiking path up by Creepy Cliff. They also purchased a fresh fleet of golf carts, a water trampoline, and will now have smoked

salmon at Sunday brunch to go along with the bagels shipped up from New York.

“Guess they made that Cantor money go far,” Ava mumbles under her breath.

“But now it’s time for the not-so-fun part. The rules,” Mellie continues. Everyone groans, another customary response, but she smiles even wider. “Remember, this is your *one* week without campers, so enjoy it!” The room cheers. We all know that maintenance week is *the* week to throw down. There will be dance party bonfires, water bottles filled with alcohol, and the beginnings of summer flings. We’ll get one night off camp, where everyone will be deposited into the heart of Roxwood. At that thought, my stomach sinks.

Mellie starts mentioning all the major no-nos—drinking and smoking and hooking up when you’re on duty—even though they often look the other way for those ones, especially if you’re a lifer. She reminds us of the one rule that will actually get you fired—sneaking into their winter cabin without permission.

“When you leave camp to go into town, please know you are representing Alpine Lake,” Mellie continues with her high-pitched voice. “That means no getting in trouble with the law, no drinking in public places, and no bringing non-Alpine Lakers back to camp. If you do . . .” She trails off and drags her finger across her throat in a slicing motion.

“Classic Dawn having to ruin it for everyone,” Imogen mutters under her breath. “Did she really have to bring that loser back last year to screw near the stables?”

Ava covers her mouth to suppress a giggle, but my cheeks flush. Sure, Dawn Waterson was fired last year, but the guy she brought

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back was a few years older than me at Roxwood High. Stu and Mellie made his life hell after they found him here. They called the cops and forced them to give him a trespassing citation that came with a \$3,000 fine and a court summons. He had been studying to get into nursing school but had to take on double shifts at the diner to pay it all off, just because Stu and Mellie didn't like that he was on their property.

But everyone here laughed it off, joking that Dawn would spend the rest of the summer tanning by her parents' pool before heading off to join a sorority at Indiana University in the fall. I bet she never thought of Roxwood again.

"Enough of the boring stuff," Mellie says, waving her hand in front of her face. "We're in for the best summer ever!"

The counselors bang their fists and holler into the rafters. At our table, we pound so hard, our silverware and plates fly up into the air, clamoring back down with satisfying thwacks.

"Best summer ever!" the room chants. "Best summer ever!"

I have to believe it.

CHAPTER 4

Then

“Come with me,” Heller said. His mummy costume was drooping off his shoulders and there was a smear of fake blood drawn across his cheek.

I handed him a makeup remover wipe. “Where?”

“Dylan Adler’s,” he said. “Annual Halloween party. You can’t miss it.”

I turned back to my cubby and hunted for my bag. “I missed it the past three years and seems like I survived.”

“That was before you knew me,” Heller said, holding out his hand.

I don’t know if it was because we had downed a few nips of vodka in between guests or if it was because he was looking at me with those deep brown eyes, the ones that stayed focused on my smile, my mouth. But for whatever reason, I said yes.

“You made it, asswipe!” Dylan Adler slapped Heller on the back as he led me by the hand over to the bar, past a keg, a dart board, and a few beaten-up couches. Dylan wore his hockey uniform and a mullet wig that distracted from his pockmarked skin. I’d always been scared of him, thanks to his towering frame and his usual surly

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expression. But that night he clocked my hand wrapped in Heller's and nodded, friendly. "Sup, Goldie."

I nodded, too, even though it was the first interaction we'd had since he cheated off my second-grade math test. "Sup."

"You still working with those Alpine Lake snobs?" he asked.

Heller must have sensed my nerves because he held my palm tighter, rubbing his thumb against the back of my hand.

"Heading back this summer," I said.

"I guess it's good we have one of our own there," Dylan said. "Keep all the staff in line when they come into town. Piece of shit richies."

"Those assholes never tip." I swiveled my head to find Cal Drummond looking at me with curious eyes, peeking out from under a neon beanie. "That's what my dad says, at least. When the counselors come into the diner on days off."

His jawline had gotten more defined over the years, and his dark facial hair had grown in, coating the lower half of his face in a neat beard. He looked so much older, so different than he had when we were best friends in elementary school. Before his mom died of an overdose.

I knew I should defend the counselors—the lifers—but it was easier to nod and smile and agree by omission that yeah, the Alpine Lake staffers were leeches.

Heller leaned over and whispered in my ear. "Wanna dance?"

He didn't wait for an answer. Instead, he led me to the living room, which was dark and sweaty, pulsing with the heat, the need of my peers. He wrapped his arms around my waist and held me at a respectable distance.

But I was feeling bold, hungry.

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As the music picked up and the lights stayed low, I pressed my body to his, ran my forefinger down the back of his neck. I sensed him smile, smelled his skin.

Heller closed the gap between us and I felt his mouth on mine, firm and still, and with such purpose, my legs shook.

Heller paused for a second as if to catch his breath. “Finally.”

CHAPTER 5

Now

Ava's naked from the waist up, standing in front of the full-length mirror in the empty main room of Bloodroot. "Imo's sequined halter top or my linen sundress?" she asks, holding the two items in front of her.

"Sequined halter top," says Imogen. "Definitely."

I nod my agreement and sip on a too-strong rum and Coke, which Imogen mixed and poured into water bottles. It's day three of maintenance week and my muscles are sore from hours of threading buoys and cleaning the motors on the boats. Ava got stuck on kayak duty, while Imogen had to scrub the lifeguarding shack. But no one dares speak of exhaustion because day three also means it's our first night out.

Meg peeks her head out from the counselor room. "You lot never change, do you?" She laughs and shakes her head. "When you were fourteen, you'd do this whole *fashion show* thing for hours before the DJ socials."

I let out a laugh. As a camper, I adored Meg, not just because of the secret sweets, but because one night when Ava and I got into one of our big blow-out fights, Meg traded beds with me so I could sleep in the counselor room and cry into a pillow in private. She never asked me about it. Let me be.

“That’s half the fun of coming here,” Ava says. “Your wardrobe triples.”

I look down at my threadbare tank top, which I plucked from Imogen’s dresser an hour ago. “You have to wear it for our first night out,” she said. “I got it at a sample sale in SoHo.” That distinction meant nothing to me, but when I saw how excited she was to see me wear it, I knew I couldn’t take it off.

“Sequined halter it is,” Ava says, wriggling into the shirt. It fits snug around her chest and shows just a sliver of torso above her high-waisted denim skirt.

The loudspeaker crackles overhead and the first notes of Prince’s “Little Red Corvette” begin to blare through the air.

“Ah,” Imogen says. “Our signal.”

“Chug on three?” Ava asks.

We all nod and I can hear Meg laughing at us in the counselor room.

“One,” I say.

“Two,” Ava calls.

“Three!” Imogen finishes. Together we throw our drinks back and set the water bottles down on the floor, erupting into a fit of laughter. When I can finally breathe again, I look at Ava and Imogen, the three of us huddled together in this empty cabin, our favorite cabin, wearing mascara and going-out tops, thick platform sandals strapped to our feet. This is what I always dreamed of. The three of us together, getting ready for a night off as counselors. I wish my insides weren’t cramping from dread, that I could get excited about spending a few hours in Roxwood. But I can’t. Not when I know most of the town hates me.

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“Come on,” Ava says. “Let’s go.”

We scramble to our feet and hold hands as we rush to the buses, waiting to deposit all the Alpine Lake counselors into Roxwood. Ava finds us a seat in the back near Dale and Tommy, who make whooping noises as we strut down the aisle.

Imogen sticks her tongue out at Tommy and grabs his baseball hat as she passes. She wears it backward as we cram into one seat. “Fight me for it, asshole.”

“I’m gonna hit that later,” Tommy says to whoever’s listening.

“You wish!” Imogen calls.

Ava pushes her knees up against the seat in front of her and laughs in her deep, hearty voice. Then she looks up, her eyes alert. “Truly’s?” she asks.

My stomach drops, but Imogen claps her hands in front of her face and bounces in the seat. “Yes yes yes yes yes!”

Tuesday nights off are for Truly’s, the dive bar in town. And Thursdays are for West Lake, the questionable sushi place that serves sake bombs and doesn’t card. The routine is tradition, which means it’s sacred. But all I want to do is run.

Ava must see the reluctance on my face. “Oh, come on, Goldie. Don’t pull that *Roxwood sucks* crap on us tonight.”

“I know,” I say. I roll the words around in my mouth, wondering how many ways I can say *I’m scared*. “I don’t want to see all the losers from my high school tonight.” I’m buzzed now, and I try to find an explanation. “What if camp were in New York and I was like, let’s go to the one bar where all the dicks from your health class hang out? And you thought you never had to see them ever again, but, hey, you do! And it’s on a night that’s supposed to

be fun, but then turns to shit. Huh?” Ava and Imogen stare at me with their mouths open. After a second, they break out into laughter.

“Oh my god, Goldie, you kill me,” Ava says, wiping her hands across her face as the bus rolls out of camp. She waves a hand in the air. “As if we have *health* class at Excelsior Prep.”

I elbow her side, which makes her laugh harder.

“This is totally different, though,” Imogen says, draping her legs over my lap. She pulls our heads in toward one another. “This is camp.”

I’m not going to win this one. Because in their minds Roxwood is an amusement park, a facsimile of a real town. Even after all this time, they don’t get that this place is my whole world—and that I’d rather be anywhere else. Best to grit my teeth and sidle up to the Brits to get them to buy me drinks. To hide behind them and blend into the background, out of sight of whoever else is at the bar.

But as we careen toward Main Street, a bubble of hope forms in my chest. Maybe it’ll be a good thing to show the people from Roxwood High that I fit in at a place like Alpine Lake, where, let’s be real, they’d all *kill* to go if they could. I tilt my chin up and remind myself I’m not who they think I am. Not that anyone would believe that after New Year’s Eve.

The bus deposits ninety-four Alpine Lake counselors in front of Town Hall at the end of Smith Street at 8:05 p.m. Everyone knows we have until midnight to get as loaded as possible. That’s when the buses head back to camp. If you miss curfew, you either walk back or hitch a ride with Bart’s Taxi Service, which every

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girl in town knows is a major no-no. As I step down from the bus, I'm reminded how much we stick out here in Roxwood.

The glitzy tops and platform heels that seemed totally appropriate for a night out back in Bloodroot are obvious and impractical here in the casual lakeside town. The people I grew up with only own T-shirts and flip-flops, fleeces and cargo pants. The international counselors' accents ring out loud as they take swigs from flasks. The older ones, Meg and her crew, head off to the marina, where they can rent a fishing boat for a few hours. The straight-edge counselors make their way to Grandee's for famous maple creamees. But everyone else, even those of us who are underage, walk the few blocks to Truly's.

There's a big wooden sign out front that displays the name in red script, set against silver and gold stars. The tables are sticky, the floor is coated in sawdust, and the walls are covered in New England memorabilia that makes it feel kitschy, like it's meant for tourists. Newspaper clippings proclaiming Roxwood's minimal greatness sit in chipped frames behind the bar. Every year, the Alpine Lake counselors compete to see who can leave the most ridiculous trinket in the place, tacked to the wall or hanging from the ceiling. Winner gets to drink for free on our final night off. That accolade went to Imogen last year when she pinned her rejection letter from Juilliard's summer program to the wall.

There are no bouncers here. No ID checks. Just a bunch of old dudes with silver beards and missing teeth pouring two-dollar beers and three-dollar well shots in plastic cups behind the bar. As long as you don't puke, they'll let you stay.

"I've been dreaming of this place for ten months," Imogen says, wobbling in her heels.

“No one in Manhattan knows how to make a proper vodka gimlet,” Ava says.

“You’re joking, right?” I say.

Ava looks at me with those wide blue eyes and plants her palms on my cheeks. “My golden girl, you cannot see the magic of this place like we can.”

Imogen nods solemnly next to her, and I fight the urge to say something mean and bitter about what a shithole this place is in the winter, when everything freezes over and everyone takes their frustration out on the easiest punching bag. Or how that punching bag was me.

Ava drops my face and wraps me in a hug. “First round’s on me!”

She leads us inside and I’m hit with a waft of cigarette smoke and stale beer. One of the bartenders mumbles something under his breath. No one else seems to hear, but I make out the words. “The interlopers are back.”

I press my lips together in a tight line and watch Ava make her way to the bar. Imogen and I post up with Tommy, Dale, and two new counselors who sound like they’re from Scotland, while the rest of the Alpine Lake crowd spreads out among the booths.

Suddenly, I’m desperate for a drink. For something to give me the excited feeling I had an hour ago and to make me forget where I am. I take a peek around the room and spot a few women who were seniors when I was a freshman, holding court in the back corner playing some sort of card game. Off near the bathrooms are a bunch of guys who work down on the dock. And over by the bar are a handful of teachers’ aides from the library.

“Think if I give those townies a hundred bucks, they’ll let me

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on the pool table?” Tommy asks, his words already slurred.

My face reddens and I can’t tell if it’s from the word *townies* or what he’s implying—that he can buy his way around Roxwood. Which, to be fair, he probably could.

Imogen swats him on the shoulder and throws me a worried look. I shrug and watch the bar, willing Ava to come back.

“All I’m saying is those guys look like they could use a few extra,” Tommy says. He nods over to the billiards area, and I follow his gaze to Cal Drummond laughing and holding a glass beer bottle by the neck. My whole body tenses.

He doesn’t seem to notice me. Not yet.

Cal’s with the usual crew. Guys from the hockey team who barely graduated, though I can’t really talk shit about that. My heart quickens as I search the table looking for Heller, but he’s not there. Dylan Adler’s absent, too. Obviously. But his older brother, Jordan, hangs at the back of the group, rubbing chalk on a pool cue with a concentrated look on his face.

They’re all huddled close, throwing their heads back in laughter as they lean against the felt-covered table to shoot another round. Cal runs a hand through his cropped hair and crosses his arms over his chest, revealing a cheesy barbed wire tattoo snaking around his bicep.

“Three vodka gimlets,” Ava says, setting the plastic cups down on the sticky high-top. She holds hers up to cheers, and I remember where I am and who I’m with. It’s going to be okay. Nothing bad will happen tonight. Not with Ava and Imogen by my side.

I take a long sip from my drink and perch on a stool, trying to hide behind Ava’s height as Imogen starts talking about if she should live on the east or west side of Los Angeles in the fall. Ava

scans the room and I watch her, wondering where she'll land. Who she'll set her sights on this year.

Last summer it was Scott Schroeder, a first-time general counselor from New Zealand who had a cute dimple on his left cheek and a habit of leaving hickeys on Ava's neck. The year before it was Joy Arlington, the soccer coach from Vancouver who spent the next six months begging Ava to visit her in Canada. They both fell in love with her, heartbroken when she dumped them, unscathed and detached.

Ever since her parents' divorce, Ava has detested relationships, said they could only drive us apart from one another. We were her true loves. Everyone else was a distraction, a story to tell at parties, a way to pass the lazy hours of the day. I wonder which Alpine Lake employee she'll go for this year.

But then her eyes land on Cal.

"Who's that?" she asks, nodding her head in his direction.

"Ava," I warn. "No."

"Aw, come on. What if I want to mix it up with some Roxwood ass this year?"

I bite my lip and try to figure out how much to share. "That's Cal Drummond."

"You know him?" Ava asks.

"There are 7,569 people in Roxwood. Yeah, I know him."

"Feisty, G," she says, tapping me on the nose with her straw. "What's he like?"

I sip my drink slowly. I guess I could tell her about when we were little, how he would come over and play dress-up with me, fighting fairies and killing dragons on my parents' lawn. Or I could tell her that when his mother died, he slept in a sleeping bag on my

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bedroom floor for a week since his father didn't want him to see him so distraught. Or maybe she'll want to know that when we got to high school, he called me a *dumb bitch* because I didn't want to do whip its in the alley behind the community pool.

Of course, I could tell her how he encouraged the hockey team to torment me after the accident, that he laughed along with everyone else when his friends spat on my locker. Or that she actually met him once before, dismissed him as trash.

If I was a different version of me—if I was brave—I could tell Ava the *real* truth, that he was the only person to see me get into the car with Heller McConnell that night—and that Heller was the one in the driver's seat. I could explain how Cal never pulled me aside and asked why *I* took the blame when he knew Heller was the one at the wheel.

Instead, I turn to Ava and say, "He's nobody."

Ava rolls her eyes. "No help." Then her focus moves above my shoulder and I turn around to see what she's looking at.

Fuck.

"Okay, now *that's* more appealing. Dish." Ava eyes track Heller as he leaves the bathroom, walking straight to Cal.

Even now, Heller has the power to make my stomach spasm, a lump form in my throat. He's wearing a nearly see-through Roxwood varsity hockey T-shirt and navy shorts that hang low on his hips. His jaw is a hard square, all edges and straight lines. He bows his head, laughing with confidence as his curls flop messily to one side. If I look closely, I think I can see his silver necklace dangling against his chest, a lightning bolt charm tucked between his skin and the thin cotton fabric. He never takes it off.

I squeeze my eyes shut and remember his touch, how soft his

finger pads were as they grazed the tender area of my stomach and how his palm was warm and assuring, rubbing my back as I drifted off to sleep in the back seat of his truck. If I block out the whole bar, I can still hear him whisper in my ear, “*Finally.*”

“Heller McConnell,” I say, my voice raw like a scab. “He’s another loser.”

“Maybe I can fuck with *loser* this summer.” Ava downs the rest of her drink and steps toward them.

“Wait,” I say, grabbing on to her elbow. Panic rises in my throat. “You can’t even bring him back to camp. It’s not worth it.” *It would also break my heart.*

“Aw, come on,” Ava says, yanking her arm away. “Let me have my fun.”

I look to Imogen for backup, but she rolls her eyes and turns to Tommy. We both know how hard it is to talk Ava out of something she wants.

“Come with,” Ava says, and tosses her hair over her shoulder.

I try to protest, but Ava grabs my wrist and yanks me with her over to the pool table. I clench my fists as Ava juts her hip out.

“Who’s willing to let me whoop their ass?” she says. The boys turn to us and I try not to crawl out of my skin as they look to Ava.

“You tryna play?” Cal asks her, a playful smile forming on his lips.

Ava smirks. “You gonna let me?”

I glance at Heller to find him looking down, his eyes hidden behind his curls. I wonder if he realizes *this* is Ava Cantor, that Imogen Wexler’s around here, too. I take a step back, hoping to retreat, but I should have known better than to make any sudden moves.

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“Not if you’re with this one,” Cal says, nodding in my direction.

Ava throws her arm around my shoulder, holding me close so I can’t escape. “Aw, you guys are jealous of our Alpine Lake night off, I see.” She smiles, but the boys don’t.

“That explains it,” Dylan’s brother, Jordan, says, looking Ava up and down with eyes I want to gauge out.

“What?” Ava asks, her focus on Heller.

“Why you’d hang out with Goldie.” Jordan shakes his head and crosses his arms over his chest.

Cal laughs and someone else slaps Jordan’s back in encouragement. Heller takes a sip of beer and lifts his gaze, but it doesn’t land on me. Instead, he’s drinking Ava in with the same look he used to give me.

My cheeks burn and I crack my knuckles. “Let’s go back to Imogen,” I say, tugging on her hand. Heller lifts his head fast, almost with concern. Or maybe intrigue. I confirmed his suspicion, that the stunning, sophisticated girl standing next to me is indeed Ava. He always asked questions about her. Imogen, too. Was bitter that I hadn’t told my camp friends about him. There were reasons. They seem so silly now.

Ava’s planted firmly in place. She hugs me to her even tighter and I know she’s going to defend me, which will make everything worse.

“Oh my god, there is no way you actually think you’re hot shit. You know that, right?” Ava’s heated now. “When was the last time you even left Vermont?”

Jordan looks at Ava like he wants to break her in half.

“We don’t fuck with Goldie,” Cal says. “Plain and simple.”

Ava looks confused, but I'm not. I know this game. I've been playing it for months.

"Why don't you two go back over there?" Heller says, his voice soft but stern. It sends a shiver down my spine, so familiar it hurts. But still, he doesn't look at me. His eyes stay locked on Ava. The other guys shut up. They know Heller's in charge. Always has been.

"Well, fuck you, too," Ava says, her mouth curled in a smile. "Come on, Goldie." She spins on her heel, and I follow her back to Imogen and the rest of the Alpine Lake crew, my heart beating so fast I think my chest will explode.

Ava sets her drink down on our table hard. "Goldie has some enemies, you guys!" she calls out, like it's the most hilarious thing in the world. "What did you do, break their hearts or something?"

My limbs are like jelly and all I want to do is go home, back to Bloodroot, and crawl into bed for days. But I force myself to perch on a stool and grip the edge of the table so hard my knuckles turn white. "Something like that." I laugh. A deep hearty chuckle that sounds real. I hope.

Ava throws her arms around me again and kisses the top of my head. "Fuck 'em!" she shouts, holding her glass up into the air.

The rest of the table chimes in. "Fuck 'em!"

I know this should make me feel comforted, like I belong. But I can feel the Roxwood boys staring, judging, furious that I'm out here at a bar, enjoying myself. I hunch over the table and try to disappear.

The conversation changes and I check the clock to see how much longer we have to stay here. But then Heller, Cal, and the others start pushing their barstools back against the sticky wooden floor. They pile their pool cues on the table.

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“Let’s get out of here,” Cal says loudly. “Smells like the shit on the bottom of Alpine Lake anyway.”

They laugh and I force myself to keep my eyes trained down, to focus on the conversation going on at my table, to not catch Heller’s eye as he walks out the door.

Ava huddles close to me and I know it’s for protection. She leans down, resting her elbows on the table. “What was that about?” she asks, her tone quiet and understanding.

It’s a different Ava, tender and caring. The version of Ava I met when we were eight, before her parents divorced and before she grew nearly a foot. She would spend hours brushing my hair and twisting it into various updos, held in place with rhinestone barrettes, to make me feel pretty—or play the card game Bullshit, spitting out the word in a British accent because she knew it made me laugh.

She was loyal and sensitive, even after the divorce, when we both had grown breasts and leg hair and had body odor. That’s when she would go through her yearbook, metallic and hardcover, and draw devil horns on the people who called her dad a *cheater*, who snapped her bra straps during field hockey practice. *Dead to me*, she wrote next to Gina Flute, who told the whole class Mark Cantor skipped town with a mistress because Ava wasn’t smart enough.

That was when my life was still fascinating to her, so different than hers in New York. She wanted to do the same with my yearbooks, for me to show her who I was friends with, who I hated, who I wanted to kiss. But I always made up excuses. The Roxwood yearbooks were more like pamphlets, designed with Microsoft Word clip art, copied at the printer’s in town. The kids looked undercooked compared to Ava’s friends. We didn’t wear designer

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outfits on picture day. We didn't get blowouts or professional faces of makeup.

Plus, I didn't want to admit to her that I had no one to circle, no one to call out. After Cal, there were no best friends, no enemies, no crushes. Not until senior year, not until Heller. For most of my life, I was a shadow in Roxwood. Someone who was there, but barely, counting down the days until I could visit Ava and Imogen, or head back to Alpine Lake.

At camp I could be free. I could be special. Talented. Alive. I was desired and loved and welcomed. Why would I want Ava and Imogen to know that in my real life—in the world outside the Alpine Lake bubble—I was not?

Ava asks again, her eyes concerned. "What happened, Goldie?"
I shake my head. "Nothing."

CHAPTER 6

Then

I didn't mean to keep Heller a secret from Ava and Imogen. That wasn't my intention, not really. The day after we kissed, I planned to tell them during our weekly video chat. But before our scheduled call, Ava's name flashed across my screen.

"You're early," I said, propping the phone up against my laptop so I could paint my toes sky blue while we spoke.

But when her face came into focus, my stomach dropped. Her usually perfect skin was splotchy and her hair was frizzy in the front, matted on the sides. "Ava . . ." I started.

That's when she lost it, her sobs loud and heaving as her shoulders shook.

"Whatever it is, it's going to be okay," I said, quiet. I wanted to reach through the screen and rub her back like I had so many times before.

Ava held her face in her hands and after a few seconds, her breathing steadied and she finally started to speak.

"He's sending them to Alpine Lake," she said. "My dad."

"The twins?"

Ava nodded. "Camp is *mine* and he's sending them there."

Part of me wanted to roll my eyes and tell her *who the fuck cares?* But Ava had barely met the girls. To her, they were symbols of her

dad's infidelity—of all the ways people who are supposed to love you can betray you. His decision to send them to Alpine Lake may as well have been a knife through her heart.

"It's going to be okay. There's no way Mellie and Stu would make you their counselor."

Ava hiccupped as she tried to catch her breath. "But knowing they're there loving the things that I love . . . it's too much. It's going to ruin the summer."

"No way. Right after graduation? Not a care in the world?" I scoffed. "Come on, how can it *not* be incredible?"

Ava groaned. "How can you know that?"

I shrugged. "Roxwood Spidey senses."

Ava laughed then and fell back against a bunch of pillows on her bed. "I wish I had your outlook on life."

"Get out of that city life for a weekend. Come on up and smell the fresh air."

"We could sneak onto camp in the middle of the night and swim in the lake."

I could picture it, how I'd introduce her to Heller and bring her to one of his hockey parties, how I could finally show her off. Ava would dazzle them all like she dazzled me, proving maybe there *is* something special about being one of the Alpine Lakers. That they're not all leeches, sucking Roxwood dry of its resources.

"How about Thanksgiving weekend?" I said, hope pooling in my voice. "Come up the Friday after?"

Ava winced. "Excelsior Prep has a big alumni gala thing that night. Another time, though, yeah?"

All traces of tears had disappeared from her pretty face, but my

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heart dropped. I had cheered her up, but still, even in her darkest moment, she didn't want to come to Roxwood. "Yeah," I said. "Another time."

"Promise me you won't ditch me for some loser this summer? I don't think I could stand it. Having to share you and Imo with a couple of douches? Not when the brats are running around camp."

I laughed and wondered if she could tell my voice was hollow, that I was holding something back. It would have been so easy to slip in a mention of Heller. To tell her about our kiss and ease her in to the fact that my heart was changing and growing and turning toward someone else's. But I pushed him out of my mind, worried that if I did tell her about Heller, she would assume I was betraying her, too.

Both our phones buzzed and Ava sat up. "Ah, there's Imo."

Imogen's face appeared on the screen, zombie makeup still smudged from whatever Halloween party she had been to the night before. But before she could say hello, Ava launched into a monologue.

"You'll never guess who my garbage can of a father is sending to Alpine Lake . . ."

Imogen listened intently and I continued swiping polish on my toes, tasting Heller's name on the tip of my tongue.

CHAPTER 7

Now

It's 7:45 a.m. and I wake up to the sound of reveille blaring over the loudspeakers. I groan, pulling my pillow over my face. My ears ring as the trumpets blare through camp.

"Morning, buggers," Meg says from her bunk beneath mine. I glance at her with one open eye to see she's already showered, dressed, and spraying herself down with sunscreen.

"How are you even awake right now?" Ava asks. She's curled up against my back, spooning me into cozy oblivion.

Meg laughs. "I'm on breakfast duty. Leaving Advil for you." She tosses the plastic bottle up onto my bunk. "You two look like you need it."

"You're a hero," I call after her as she darts out of the cabin.

Ava sits up and leans back against the wall, draping her legs over mine. The air is thick with humidity and our skin sticks together.

"I'm gonna miss cuddling with you when all these annoying campers get here," Ava says, reaching for a water bottle. She throws back two Advil and chugs. "Especially since those little goobers will be here in Bloodroot."

I grimace. "Maybe they'll be cool?" I ask, taking the water bottle from her and swallowing the pills. But we both know her twin half

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sisters will probably be the worst kinds of campers—needy and spoiled, furious they have to change their own sheets and sweep their own floors. Ava and Imo were never like that. But we had a few in our cabin. Cindy Hall, who told the counselors her parents weren't paying her tuition so she could wipe down shower stalls for Sunday inspection. Lora Jenkins, who only ate food her private chef shipped up from Manhattan. Ashley Nevins, who had her own horse brought in on Mondays to ride.

We ignored those girls, rolling our eyes at them from our bunk beds. But I could see shades of my friends in them, in the way they never broke eye contact with authority figures and walked with confidence. In moments of doubt, I wondered if Ava and Imogen *were* like them—that they were better at hiding those parts of themselves from me.

Ava shrugs and we're both silent for a second, listening to Stu read the morning announcements and the weather for the day. When he finishes, we chime in for the final line he says every morning. "It's going to be an amazing Alpine Lake day!"

Ava smiles thinly. "Not with this hangover."

I nudge her with my foot. "It'll go away by the time we head down to the waterfront."

"Always looking on the bright side." Ava pushes herself to the edge of my bed and peers over the edge. "Bombs away," she says, launching off my top bunk, so she lands on the floor below. I dangle my legs over the side and she grabs on to my ankles, moving them up and down like I'm a doll.

"Hey, you okay after last night?" Ava asks, resting her chin on my knees.

"Yep," I say, trying to ignore my own dragon breath and the

memory of those boys looking at me in disgust, of Ava realizing not everyone sees me the way she does.

Ava turns around and gathers her hair in a ponytail. Her skin is slick with a morning sheen, but she still looks so much more comfortable in her own body than I ever could be. “Musta done a number on you, huh?” she asks.

“What?”

“I’ve never seen you as freaked out as you were last night with those guys,” she says, turning back to me with a furrowed brow. “What happened?”

I look at her pretty face, the one I’ve known for so long and have seen shift and grow and change. I could tell her the story that everyone in Roxwood thinks is true. But I know things would change, that she and Imogen would look at me differently. The way my parents do. Sometimes when they think I’m not paying attention, I can see it in their eyes, how they can’t believe their daughter is a monster. That she hurt someone so badly.

Telling her the real truth isn’t an option. Not after the deal we made, the NDA Heller’s dad slid in front of me and asked me to sign with a shaking hand. So instead, I say nothing at all.

Ava sighs. “Look, I know I’ve got my own shit going on with my fucked-up family and everything. And I know we didn’t really talk that much this year.”

We’re both quiet, the reality settling between us. She *was* MIA in the beginning of the year, so caught up with her world of black-tie functions and long weekends in Paris that she rarely returned my texts with more than a one-word answer. There was that one visit over homecoming, but even that was tense. And then after I

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ditched them on New Year's, we both stopped trying. I sent her and Imogen to voice mail. I responded to our group chats with single words instead of full thoughts. It became clear they were texting more and more without me. It was all for the best, I figured. If I couldn't tell them the truth, I couldn't tell them anything at all.

Ava looks at me square in the face. "I want you to know that no matter what, I'm here for you. We're a team, you, me, and Imo. Nothing will change that." Before I can respond, she steps up onto Meg's mattress and wraps her arms around my neck, planting a sticky kiss on my cheek.

"You're never getting rid of me, golden girl," she says. "I know you like I know myself." Then she opens her mouth wide and sticks out her tongue, breathing heavily in my face.

"Ugh, gross," I feign. I've always known that being in Ava's morning breath orbit is worth it. When she shines her spotlight on you, it's like standing in the sun.

"Meet you out front in five," she says. "I need six plates of hash browns to get me through today."

I climb down from the top bunk and make the bed from the ladder. When I pull the sheets back to tuck in tight hospital corners, I can still smell Ava and her blueberry-scented shampoo. She's used it for years, like it's her own natural perfume. Rich and vibrant. It's a scent that lingers, marking what's hers.

"French toast sticks!" Imogen squeals as we approach the dining hall. Today's menu is written on the chalkboard in a loopy

scrawl, and my stomach growls when I see chicken patties are for lunch.

“It’s like Christina *knew* we’d need hangover fuel after the first night out,” Ava says, tossing her hair over her shoulder. “Come on.”

Ava pushes through the screen doors, and the room is bright, sun streaming through the windows. There’s a buzz in the air, an ease that has set in now that all the counselors are comfortable with one another, familiar within days. I inhale deeply and remind myself, *You are home*.

Imogen nods toward the breakfast queue and we line up behind one another. Ava rests her chin on Imo’s shoulder.

“That bad, huh?” Imogen asks, reaching back to pet her like a puppy.

Ava groans and buries her face in Imogen’s neck.

The line starts to move and I grab a warm plate from the dishrack as we enter the kitchen. There’s a clicking of silverware, and steam rising from the hot water trays full of French toast sticks, shiny syrup, and bright yellow scrambled eggs. I try to imagine what these heaps of food would look like to an outsider, someone who didn’t know that the head chef, Christina, has been here for thirty-one years, loves to drink whiskey, and plays the banjo on her nights off. Or that she always makes buttered noodles on the side for the picky kids who hate anything that isn’t beige. Or that she lost her own son in a ski accident one winter and came back the following summer divorced and hollow.

When it’s my turn, I look up to see Christina, spooning eggs, her kind eyes and her graying hair pulled back under a hairnet. “Goldie, girl, what a delight!” She gives me double with a wink. “I was telling your folks how excited I was to see you. I missed you all

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spring.” Christina also runs the cafeteria at Roxwood High. But I avoided that place after New Year’s.

“Yeah, well, you know . . .” I say quietly, grateful that Ava and Imogen have already moved through the line and are now filling their mugs with coffee.

“If you ever need to talk, dear—” Christina starts to say. But I cut her off with a big smile.

“I gotta get going. Line’s backing up.”

Christina takes the hint. “You got it, doll.” She winks again, one of her big green eyes disappearing for a second.

I shuffle away from Christina and her kind smile, grab my own mug of coffee, and make my way to the table right in the middle of the room, where Ava and Imogen have set up shop. I slide into my seat and house a French toast stick.

“So good, right?” Ava’s eyes practically roll into the back of her head. “I need all the carbs I can get today.”

But I barely register her comments because when I look up from my plate, I see Stu and Mellie talking closely with a tall, older white man with curly dark hair and khakis. His arms are crossed over his chest and he looks frustrated and uncomfortable. He scans the room and I hold my breath, waiting for him to see me. When he does, his eyes stop.

Judah McConnell.

Heller’s father.

I force myself to look down, but now the eggs on my plate resemble a pile of vomit. Judah’s wearing his McConnell Landscapers jacket with dirt stains on the elbows. I didn’t notice him this morning, tending to the sports fields, but he must have been here, making sure the vast expanses of grass were manicured to perfection before

the kids arrive. Landing the Alpine Lake contract this year was the best thing that happened to the McConnells, Judah told me once.

His frown deepens and he turns back to Stu. They're talking quietly, but Stu's brow narrows and he lifts a hand, extending his pointer finger directly at Judah's chest. Judah takes a step toward Stu, his mouth forming a snarl.

"The check's late, Stu," he says, his voice carrying throughout the dining hall. "Really fucking late." But before he can keep going, Mellie stands and puts her hand on Stu's shoulder. In an instant, Stu's demeanor changes. His straightens his back and the muscles in his face relax. He says something under his breath, and Judah shakes his head and throws up his hands. Like he's mad he has to be here, like he'd rather be off fly-fishing with Heller and his buddies, cracking open cans of beer and planning their next backpacking trip.

"That the new landscaper dude?" Imogen asks loudly, waving a French toast stick in the air.

"Yep."

"Stu looks pissed," Imogen says. "Probably because he's been messing up the grass."

"What?" I ask. Maybe I misheard Judah.

Imogen shrugs. "The baseball field's super long and uneven. Tommy was bitching about it, saying the kids are gonna get ticks."

"He kinda looks like that guy from the bar," Ava says.

"That's his dad," I say.

"Strange." Imogen turns back to her plate, not waiting to see Judah storm off, the side screen door slamming behind him.

I whip my head around the room trying to find my parents. But they're not here yet. My chest tightens and I wonder for a

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split second if Judah's presence had something to do with me. But I know I'm being paranoid. They were probably arguing about how many coats of paint the sidelines on the soccer field need or the uneven grass. Judah is a perfectionist when it comes to his work, like his son. Maybe he hates being told he messed up. Also like his son.

A paper straw wrapper thwacks me in the forehead. "Hellooo," Ava says.

I turn back to her. "Sorry, what did you say?"

She rolls her eyes. "*I said* are you ready to set up the docks today? My arms are *still* sore from yesterday's manual labor." Ava massages her biceps and pouts.

I nod and look down at the puddle of sticky syrup spreading across my plate. "Ready for anything," I say. I have to be.