


NIGHT OWLS AND SUMMER SKIES

REBECCA SULLIVAN

CAMP
MAPPLEWOOD

wattpad books 

Night Owls and Summer Skies

Rebecca Sullivan



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Dedication

To my tea suppliers.

To the girls who like girls.

To the people who support me on Wattpad.

One

My dad held his hands at the bottom of the large steering wheel. It drove me nuts because when he'd tried to teach me how to drive (and failed miserably) he'd yammered on about keeping my hands on the ten and two positions. But that was the past, and it wasn't me who had been driving for an hour straight. I couldn't complain about my sore and stiff leg muscles, at least not out loud—not unless I was willing to listen to him rightfully grumble in return.

A couple of days before this trip, he sat me down and said that no matter what, by the end of June we had to make the trip up from Boston to Maine to visit Mom. Now, seeing the beach along York Harbor and the happy families emerging from their campers and making their ways to the rocky beach made me regret my choice to come. Once upon a time we were them, spending hot days together swimming in the sea and eating ice cream. We didn't need to take this route to get to York Heights, but it was as if Dad sensed I needed a few minutes to absorb that we were back. The salty breeze caressed my face from the open window and memories of us as a family washed over me.

The coast couldn't go on forever, and the van found its way to York Heights, passing by my old elementary school and onto the road that led to my mother's house. Tall trees stood on both sides, offering the long row of houses a sense of privacy. I'd gotten so used to the city—the high-rise buildings, the masses of people, the wide sidewalks—that I had forgotten that we used to live so uncomfortably close to nature.

In a way, I missed the coast of York Beach—this little village in Maine and how it always felt like summer. Not that I remembered much. When I tried to picture my old classmates' faces, they were just blurry images and one semidecent image of my childhood best friend, Jessie. On the day we left this town to move to Boston her freckled six-year-old face had tears running down its cheeks, and her hands were wound in her curly brown hair. When we came back briefly for eight months when I was fifteen, it helped that she'd sent pictures in the mail. Jessie and I didn't connect that much—so much for the lifelong friends you're supposed to make at age six—and I made few friends. No one particularly memorable.

Dad pulled up beside the four-foot high, grey stone wall that separated the road from my mother's house. Once he turned off the engine, the noise of the tools clattering around in the back of the vehicle stopped. With all the traveling he did for work, it always came as a surprise that none of his carpentry equipment or projects smashed into smithereens. He'd had this blue work van for years, and it always shone, tended to with care, as he did with all aspects of his life, namely me. We didn't do anything, not so much as move to get out of the van. We couldn't believe this was how our day was going.

"Okay, I'm willing to compromise," I said, breaking the silence.

"Emma, we are at your mother's doorstep. I think it's a *little* late to compromise. You'll have the summer to catch up with Jessie. It'll be fun."

"Dad, we weren't all that close to begin with. I sat with her at lunch sometimes, that's about it."

"You've been writing back and forth since you left. You're probably closer than you think."

"Writing someone and being friends with someone are completely different things," I insisted.

"You used to be close. Don't you remember?"

“When we were *six*, not so much when we were fifteen.” I dismissed him. “I’m willing to spend two weeks of summer with Mom.”

“Emma,” he said, and then sighed.

“Two weeks is a significant amount of time.” Prodding his leg with my shoe made him turn in his seat to look at me. His face held reluctance, and I knew he didn’t want to drop me off here. “Two weeks with you? That’s like blinking. Two weeks with her? Just the idea of blinking hurts. That’s constant arguing, possibly crying—angry tears, of course—slamming doors, endless swearing . . .”

“Since when do you slam doors?”

“I don’t,” I said pointedly.

His expression was torn, and he mumbled to himself, “This was the arrangement, Em. If we don’t go with it . . .”

“I turn eighteen near the end of summer. I’ll legally be an adult. She can’t request access to me.”

“Think of it this way—one more summer and then you’re an adult. Neither your mom nor I can tell you what to do. But I sure as hell don’t want you vanishing into thin air when that happens. You hear?”

“This isn’t a compromise in the least,” I complained.

“It’s all I’ve got,” he said. “Are you being testy because you’re leaving someone *important* behind?”

“Nope.” Choking on my own laughter, I continued. “Did you know that depression can and will deter people from interacting with you? Not even bullies. The lack of reaction freaks them out. Besides, being homeschooled for the year didn’t give me a chance to meet someone. Or reunite with anyone, really.”

Dad gaining custody and moving me in with him and out of York when I was nearly sixteen was the right decision in the end. He took action and

got me a personal tutor at home while I worked on my mental health. I spent my senior year, my final school year, at home.

He snorted, turning away to rub his jaw. “You react to plenty nowadays. Don’t roll your eyes. You can rejoin civilization next year, if you want,” he offered. “You don’t have to put off college for a year.”

“It’s not that I’m not ready—I honestly don’t know what I want to do with my life.”

“You are ready,” Dad said. “You can put up enough effort to joke about it. You’re managing it much better now. You’ll call if you . . . can’t? I’ll always be here for you.”

“Yup, Dad. I will.”

“So, no girlfriends?”

“No girlfriends,” I confirmed.

After we got out of the van, he helped me with my luggage. In with my belongings were all sorts of his equipment: a toolbox with hammers, screwdrivers, and nails; a saw with its rusted handle; and a bunch of black-and-yellow chisels, a constant reminder that carpentry was a form of art. Then there was his latest project: a bed’s wooden structure. The smell and the dust made me feel warm inside—it was familiar, homey; it was him. I missed him already, even the ugly purple work sweater he insisted on wearing that morning even though it was practically summer.

In front of me was the house that wiped the joy out of my life in one full swoop. It was where I spent the first six years of my life, and random spouts of vacations whenever my mom was available, but the memory of the last time I tried to live here was a shadow I couldn’t escape. The house had always been painstakingly quiet. During the day while I was at school, my mother spent her time out, and she was also out during the night doing who knew what. According to the planner on the fridge, she went to her book club, wine tastings, any number of social outings she never spoke to me

about. The one time I put a parent-teacher meeting on her planner, she scribbled over it and missed the meeting.

My dad lugged my suitcase onto the doorstep, and he was as reluctant as I was to ring the doorbell. With a grunt, he turned to his side and jabbed his shoulder into the bell. When nothing happened, he knocked against it again, and this time it rang.

“Next summer, you can lay on the couch and do nothing. You can volunteer somewhere, though. I know back home Elizabeth down at the wheelchair association always needs a helping hand. Getting out there, getting real life experience, and helping people. Sounds a little tempting, doesn’t it?”

“It doesn’t sound like the worst idea,” I admitted.

“But the rest of your time? Fair game.”

“Mom doesn’t know that lying around’s my favorite pastime.”

“There will be a dent in her couch. One week in and she’ll figure it out.”
We shared a grin.

The door flew open. I had just enough time to grab the handle of my bag before Mom ushered me inside. The door slammed shut behind us. The last time I’d see my dad for two months ended abruptly as she dragged me down the hallway without a word.

The house had changed so much since the last time I’d been here. New paint, barely used furniture, a fresh pinecone smell, and any pictures that might’ve included my dad and me were either in storage or thrown out. There were only pictures of my mom partying with friends, and of the pets she had throughout the years. The rejection clung to me like a cloak that ran all the way down my back and stretched on for miles and miles. My mom sat me on the couch in the sitting room.

“Emma, honey,”—she flopped onto the opposite couch—“as you can see, I’m a little frazzled. We’re going on a cruise for the summer. Exciting,

right? Don't unpack."

"A cruise?"

"Yes, we're leaving once our ride gets here."

"Ri-i-i-ght," I dragged out. "How long is this cruise for?"

"Two weeks," she answered. "Then we'll likely go to another vacation spot for the rest of summer. Spain, maybe? Rome sounds nice, too, right? Maybe we'll go to both."

"I guess so."

She buzzed around gathering toiletries and phone chargers and either dumped them into one of the many suitcases spread across the floor or into her purse, perched on the coffee table. The television blasted the weather report, so it wasn't too awkward. The lack of conversation wasn't a big deal because we never made eye contact. In fact, the paucity of interaction made it easier for my brain to pretend there was no one else in the room.

When a car out front honked, my mom and I lugged our stuff outside. The driver was kind enough to help us push it all into the trunk. I spaced out as they chatted with each other, and climbed into the backseat. Mom climbed into the passenger seat instead of into the back with me. What the hell?

"I've heard a lot about you, Emma," the driver said. "You're going to have a fun summer. Fresh air, a hell of a lot of sun—"

"I suppose Mom gets your services a bunch?" Practicing small talk could be preparation for being out on the open water on a giant floating hotel where I'd be stuck in a tiny room with my mother. "Sure. Maybe once the shock wears off, I'll be able to process it better."

"Services . . ." he mumbled.

"Speaking of surprises, Mom, you should have told me when I called you last week about this cruise. Do I need my passport?" The bag on my lap grew heavier. "Have I packed the right stuff? Do we have time to go

shopping? Hell, where are we going? It's a lovely surprise, but it would've been nice to be prepared."

"I have your passport in my purse," she said.

"Has it not expired yet?" I asked. "I'm almost sure it expired in March?"

"It's not expired, Emma. Relax, I have everything we need."

Her calm tone didn't soothe my rigid muscles. "Where does the boat cruise to? Where are we boarding? Where are we going?"

"I have the itinerary here, one second." She took her time fetching the pamphlet from her purse. "Here we go. We're departing from Boston, don't huff at me, Emma . . ." She deserved it—I could have waited at home for her to pick me up to take me on this grand surprise. ". . . that's leaving at four. It's eleven, isn't it? We have plenty of time."

"You're the planner, you tell me," I said. "Where are we going, though? On the cruise?"

"The Caribbean—St. Thomas, Virgin Islands; St. John's, Antigua and Barbuda; Bridgetown, Barbados; Castries, St. Lucia; Basseterre, Saint Kitts and Nevis; and Tortola in the Virgin Islands again," she read from the list. "There will be a few days at sea, that'll be fun, right?"

The anxious pit in my stomach slowly dissipated, and my head filled with circus music and flashing images of long days exploring different islands with sandy beaches while eating exotic fruit at beautiful resorts.

"I've heard nothing from you in a while." Mom ignored the driver and twisted in her seat to face me. "Any news? Boyfriends I should know about?"

"Still gay, Mom. I suppose the correct term would be lesbian, but gay kind of sits better with me."

"Emma, please. Not in front of our company."

“He drives people places—I’m sure he’s heard a lot worse than girls loving girls.”

The driver stared at the road and the atmosphere in the car grew uncomfortable. I couldn’t blame him—being stuck with arguing customers sucked. My mom flicked on the radio and stuck in a random disk. Apparently, listening to Christmas music in June was better than talking about my sexuality.

There had to be something positive about the situation. For one, being on a cruise ship meant constant activities, exploration, and space. The amount of time in a confined space where my mother and I would scream and shout at each other would be minimal. Especially on the days we explored, when hopefully we would be too tired to talk when we returned from whatever adventure awaited. With those thoughts circulating in my mind, sleep soon took over.

The car came to an abrupt stop, jolting me out of my quick, fifteen-minute slumber—definitely not long enough to have reached any port back in Boston. I felt impatient because I’d already spent enough time in a car that morning, hours that hadn’t been necessary, and I wasn’t prepared for this redundant trip. Gathering the bags around me, I exited the backseat. The car had pulled into the big, wide, grassy parking lot of Camp Mapplewood, the most heinous place on earth. Half asleep and only cluing into where we were now, I didn’t want to believe it.

Maybe it took my mom tilting my chin up so that I saw the sign to get the message. That all-too-familiar sense of foreboding came back with a vengeance. The best way to avoid disappointment was not to expect anything from anyone. Yet my mother had sent my brain into a frenzy of excitement at the prospect of traveling and then snatched it away all too

soon. My expectations were dropped into the dirt and stomped on until they were buried deep.

“I’m not going on the cruise, am I? You meant you are,” I stated quietly.

“Well . . .” She patted her bag inside the trunk and shut it. “Not exactly, honey.”

The driver got out of the car and leaned against one of the doors and said, “I’m not your mom’s go-to driver, Emma.”

He scooped up Mom’s hand, and the light reflected off their rings perfectly. It was fortunate that I could blame my misty eyes on the glare of the silver. Before I could pull it back, my voice made a strangled, *hurumpfff*-like sound. The driver’s offended expression didn’t make me feel guilty in the least. He was a complete and utter stranger. It was uncomfortable that a person so important in my mom’s life knew about me, but I didn’t know about him. They were *married*. They’d had a *wedding*. I’d never gotten an invite. No matter how much it hurt that she didn’t think to invite me, let alone tell me about one of the most important days of her life, it pained me more that it didn’t come as a shock. The blow of my parents’ divorce hadn’t come from her either; it had come solely from Dad. Most news did.

This wasn’t only a cruise. It was a *honeymoon*. Another kick, another stomp, and the final light went out. The twists kept piling on, and with them, my chest heaved in an effort to breathe. My new stepfather’s face, the rings, the suffocating, towering trees—everything burned into my brain until all I saw was red.

“Let me get this straight,” I said, teeth gritted. “You’re going on a cruise with your driver. Your husband. You’re abandoning me here? At Camp Mapplewood? When you *only* get me from July to August.”

“Honey . . .”

“Stop ignoring me—the point. You’re leaving me at *camp*. Which is the place responsible for my PTSD?”

Beyond the sign was an entirely different planet. Everything about it terrified me, from the whistle of the wind under the moonlight to the raindrops that pelted against leaves or the top of the fabric of a tent. Even the roofs of the cabins beneath the stars gave me hives. The list continued as an endless line of things that contributed to this dark feeling in the pit of my stomach. Maybe it was the constant tension in my neck as I prepared for attack. Perhaps it was the creepy crawlies scurrying in the dark.

“I thought you would’ve grown out of this difficult phase by now,” my mother said. This statement caused a sharp pang in the middle of my chest. Another shot fired. She tossed her husband, whose *name* I still did not know, a look, like the stranger knew me at all. “Your father has always wrapped you up too tightly. He took you out of school. He took you away from York. He never encouraged you to broaden your horizons, Emma.”

“He concentrated on more important stuff like me getting help and showing concern for my mental health?”

“This is an opportunity for you to finally make some friends, to see Jessie again. Since her, you haven’t made an effort to engage with people. I want that for you, without your dad interfering and coddling you.”

“It was needed, Mom. I was a zombie when I lived here.”

“You seem fine to me.”

“Yes, now, after *Dad* got me help.” Silence. Speaking of help, where were my anti-anxiety meds? I rummaged through my bag and found the bottle. Good. Even if I planned on continuing to use the techniques my therapist gave me, it was nice to know they were there for short-term relief if I needed it. I admitted, “We’re pen pals, me and Jessie.”

“That’s good that you kept in contact, but face-to-face interaction is so much better. Trust me. This will be good for you,” Mom promised. “Ethan, help Emma carry the bags.”

“Sure,” Ethan said.

My teeth ground together and I trembled as we ventured into the grounds of the camp and stood in line for the sign-up table outside of the main building not too far away from the cars. Lots of kids were being dropped off by their parents, mine were no exception; from the outside it looked so normal, but it was anything but.

I knew I had to call my dad and grabbed my phone out of my pocket. He planned to stay with his brother up in the country to work with him. The phone reception up there was terrible, so I had to call now, before he reached my uncle’s house in the next few hours. I was about to dial when Mom snatched my phone out of my hands.

“Hey,” I protested.

“You’ll end up thanking me for this,” Mom promised. “Someday, you will.”

“You can’t force Dad to give you access to me for the summer, not utilize that visitation, and then restrict my communication with him.”

“I haven’t the slightest notion where your dramatic nature came from, Emma,” Mom said, powering off the phone. She kept it clasped in her hand as we moved up the line. “I’ve taken the phone from you because camping regulations dictate there are to be no cell phones on the premises.”

“Dramatic? Mom, I’m not the one who got married on a whim to Ethan here and didn’t tell her daughter. That was you. I want to speak to Dad. He’ll listen to me.”

“We didn’t want it to be a big deal, Emma. I’m sorry. I didn’t think you would want to hear that sort of news.”

“You found a guy who makes you happy, I am happy for you. But don’t you see why I’m mad? It’s one thing to not let me tag along on the cruise, which I wouldn’t have been hurt by if you’d let me stay with Dad, but I’m at Camp freaking Mapplewood.”

“I am paying a huge sum of money for you to be here, Emma. It’s an opportunity.”

“I never asked you to,” I exclaimed.

“And who knows? Maybe you’ll find yourself a boyfriend.”

“A what? The fifteen-minute car drive didn’t suddenly make me straight, Mom.”

She made a face and hushed me as we stepped to the top of the line. My mother handed my phone over to the camp’s director, Mr. Black, who had been in charge of the place the last time I’d been here. Mr. Black placed the phone in a tray full of the other campers’ various technologies. In return I was given a registration document and that day’s schedule. After I successfully signed in, I dropped my luggage with everyone else’s inside the hallway of the main building. I watched as my only way to freedom was carried away and out of sight—the only way to get out of this mess left with Mr. Black.

Mom brought me in for a hug and the warmth and care that lingered from Dad that morning vanished into thin air. No trace of my father’s reassurance stayed behind to keep me company.

“This *will* be good for you,” Mom said. “I swear it.”

“There’s no changing your mind, is there?”

“I’m afraid not. You be good, okay? Smile, honey, it’s the start of an adventure!” Those were her final words before she slid back into the car and took off with Ethan—the guy who wasn’t only the getaway driver.

Two

The edge of York sat next to the sea, but Camp Mapplewood was too far inland to feel the freshness of the salty air. The oddly earthy and damp smell of the woodland couldn't wash the bitter taste in my mouth away. The entire camp was trapped in a circular band of trees, none of which stood out or looked any different from the next. The extent of trees and general greenery that I could deal with was beside my mother's house—her little garden and shrubs. That's what I had mentally planned for: open spaces and beaches, not an assault of evergreens.

Ever since successfully managing my depression with my dad, I wasn't trapped by it as much. It had been nearly a year since I'd felt the swell, and in the moment when I was handed the clothes that weren't on my back, the moment it hit that I'd be stuck here against my will, the black clouds resurfaced, and it sucked. The shouting, the yelling, the harsh whispers between my parents in the night clawed at my brain.

Now surrounded by roughly fifty other teenagers, I was trapped at camp the same way I had been trapped in that unhappy home.

We were gathered like pigs for the slaughter, helpless to prevent the inevitable summer-long stay. Even though my mother had dropped me off at the campsite one hour ago, a certain amount of rage still coursed through my veins. A number of awkward kids stood around holding their middles and crossing their arms, but then there were a few like myself—those of us on high alert, desperate to be anywhere else—slapping the air, hoping to end the buzzing of blackflies. It couldn't only be me; there had to be others.

Mr. Black chose who went into which cabin. He put the campers into a distinctive category with a group of people that they'd pair up with for the rest of the summer—forced family-like conditions that resulted in some people making the best friends they'd ever have, and people like me feeling lonely and alienated for eight weeks. Even if we had the choice of who we could bunk with, it wasn't like I was close to anyone there.

As I waited to be called, I shuffled to the notice board to reintroduce myself to the camp layout. It had been years since I'd been here. On the map of the camping grounds, we were by the entrance, where the main building sat to the left, Mr. Black's office, the infirmary, and the canteen inside. Farther up was the arts and crafts building, the recreational hall, and finally the six counselor cabins. To the right were the campers' cabins. Farther up to the right was the court that could be used for activities like volleyball and general exercise, and next to it, a rock-climbing wall. There was a path dead in the center of the camp that led to several dirt trails through the woodland that all led to a giant lake. Like most things about this camp, I'd blocked the layout from my mind, and as a result, the only familiarity was the sensation of dread and heaviness in my legs.

Resting against the bulletin board, before I zoned out I made eye contact with someone familiar. Jessie. She shoved by campers who blocked her way and came to lean against the board with me. Her face had lost its baby chub and her freckles had multiplied, covering not only her cheeks but her entire face. Her hair was darker now, dyed a plum-brown color.

"Emma!" Jessie hugged me briefly. "I'm so happy to see you, but what the hell are you doing at this camp? I know you come back to York for summers but never to camp? Never again? Not after the first year you came here."

"Short story really—my mom told me we were going on a cruise. She eloped with a guy called Ethan, planned a honeymoon, and failed to

mention until an hour ago that I'd be here instead of joining them. So . . . it's nice to see you, too, Jessie."

"You realize you're at a camp, right? A summer camp?"

"I'm *too* aware," I replied, suppressing a shudder because the cabins behind the board, while homey in a cute way, were positioned directly beside the woods. The bark on the trunks was meant to act as a protective layer for the trees, but to the touch it was rough, scaly, and gross. Then there were the branches with their sharp edges covered by glossy leaves, pretending they were safe and hunky-dory. No, those trees couldn't trick me into a sense of security and safety. "I'm trying not to think about it."

"I'm happy you're here because now I don't have to send a letter about everything that happens," Jessie said.

"It was a little overwhelming to get an entire summer's worth of letters in one go," I admitted.

"I have yours with me. All of them." Jessie swung her backpack around to her stomach and unzipped it. "It gets boring at night, so I bring these with me every summer."

"I'm slightly flattered?"

"You should be."

I never read anything she wrote more than once, not because what she wrote didn't interest me—it did, of course it did, I cared about her life. The letters were more personal than an exchange of text messages, more personal than a phone call even, but I felt no need to relive the past. I wanted to move forward in life. My friend stood in front of me, in the flesh, and I had nothing to say. That was the lovely thing about writing letters—there was no pressure to say something right off the bat.

Jessie didn't have the same anxiety and asked, "When did you last go here anyway? Around twelve, right? If only they implemented the age limit

back then, huh? Who knew fifteen- to eighteen-year-olds like to camp? And is it still a thing? Your fear of camping?”

“If you’d asked me yesterday, I would have said no, maybe not so much, but now that I’m here . . .”

“At least there are cabins to hide out in.”

“Cabins beside the woods. Woods that contain a variety of scary creatures, Jess. And trees. Trees are the absolute worst.”

“You never told me what really happened, though. It’s time to spill the beans, the suspense is killing me,” Jessie said. “Your mom knows, right, and she still dropped you off here?”

“That sums her up. She either doesn’t care or doesn’t believe me.” I kicked some gravel. “I climbed a tree and got stuck for the night. Stupid, I know. It wasn’t some big, bad traumatic event, but the woods are something that I’d rather avoid, you know?”

“Maybe if you focus on the positives instead of the negatives, this summer won’t be as bad as you think it will be. Project what you want to happen! What do you like about the place?”

I surveyed the area while thinking about how to explain how much of this place caused a severe contempt to rise in my system.

Ever since Mr. Black and his wife moved to town and set up Camp Mapplewood back when I was ten years old, the kids and their parents at my old school never stopped talking about it. My old classmates raved about their time at camp during the summer, and couldn’t wait to go back the next year. Mom had always wanted me to go back, wanting me to socialize and to get a little sun on my skin. After the first year that I went, I was no longer eligible to go because they raised the ages of those allowed to attend to fifteen to eighteen. When I finally did come of age, Dad had moved me to Boston with him.

“Like? That’s a hard question. Hate on the other hand? The people, for sure,” I offered. “And to add insult to injury, they took my phone away.”

“Everyone’s phones have been taken away,” she said. “It’s so we’re not distracted from talking to each other in person or something. Mr. Black said it a bunch of times last year. It makes sense.”

“I’m beginning to understand why you have my letters.”

“I need something to put me to sleep,” she teased.

Mr. Black was a poster for a middle-aged dad. He had collar-length hair and stood a couple of inches above six feet, with a well-toned medium frame. He flipped through his chart and started calling out names. As he called our names, he gave us one camp hoodie and five camp uniforms, which included orange T-shirts, with cute little pockets on the top right of the chest, and black shorts.

“Emma Lane, Abby Thompson, Lauren Peterson, Gwen Black, Jessie Anderson, Kendra Marshall, Mike Hanley, Mason Erikson, and Bennie Crowley, you’re in cabins thirteen, fourteen, and fifteen, and a counselor will be assigned to your activities as a group, known as the Beavers.”

“Beavers?” My scoff was loud.

“Can you let it go, it’s not as bad as it sounds,” Jessie whispered.

“We’re not even ferocious bears that bite or jellyfish that sting. What does a beaver do? Slaps the water with its tail and chews on some wood? Ohhh, I’m terrified.”

Hearing me speak, Mr. Black said, “I’m afraid those names have already been taken. You can find the full list of groups on the bulletin board later if you want to check those out and apply for a transfer. But keep in mind, beavers are the second largest rodent in the world. They adapt to new environments quickly and defend their territory quite aggressively. You’re quite the predator.”

“Emma,” Jessie said, “we’re at the top of the rodent food chain. That’s something ferocious.”

“Second best to a capybara,” Mr. Black said.

“I’m not even going to ask what that is, but I can assure you, an investigation is in order,” I said.

“I’ll set aside time to discuss the creature with you,” Mr. Black promised, handing over our cabin keys to Jessie. “You can head back to your cabins and settle in. The introduction assembly starts in half an hour in the recreation building. And lunch is late today, two o’clock—starting tomorrow it’ll be at noon. You’ll all get an official time schedule when you are appointed a counselor after lunch. You won’t be lucky and land my wife, Julie—she’s one of our camp cooks. Two other favorites of mine are my kids, Walter and Vivian.” He whisper-shouted, “Don’t tell the other counselors, though.” In a normal tone he continued, “All the information you need to have a successful summer is in your registration packet.”

Jessie dragged me over to join our group, and we headed for the main building to grab some of our luggage before heading to our assigned cabins to set up.

I purposefully dragged my feet. “Calm down.”

“One of the cabins is supposed to have a big hole in the floor,” she stressed, tugging harder. “We don’t want that one. Especially with your fears of creatures and whatnot, you don’t want to end up in the one where they can actually get *into* the cabin.”

“I don’t think I’m the only one with that particular apprehension. Don’t they do inspections? They used to.”

“They have the counselors do random inspections at least once a week.”

“Maybe the hole has been filled?”

“Still, not a risk I’m willing to take.”

After grabbing only my backpack from the hallway in the main building, I zoned out during the walk to our cabins, and my roommates were decided for me. Jessie was pulled into a small group with two other girls: one short and graceful with spiky black hair, and the other, who laughed excitedly. Their names were Kendra and Gwen, I guessed, but I didn't know who was who.

Now with the girls in my own cabin, their faces seemed familiar, but I had blocked out so much. The taller girl, Abby, was someone quiet, and Lauren was someone at the top of the social food chain. Well, as far as the fifteen-year-old version of her could get.

Sidestepping, I checked under the single bed, their stares boring into my back—no gaping hole. Clearly the camp was on top of their maintenance.

“Aren't you going to take that single bed?” Abby asked, taking the lower bunk bed as I put my backpack on the top bunk.

“Not unless I want to shiver to death,” I said.

“Being closer to the ground is warmer,” she said.

“No, heat rises. Plus, creepy crawlies are more likely to attack you than me all the way up here.”

Plus, the single bed sat beneath the window, with a clear view of the forest. At night the light in the cabin would attract moths, and suddenly I could hear the fluttering and could see them butting against the window vividly, waiting for the opportunity to sneak inside and fly up my clothes. From the bunk bed, I could *choose* to look down to see that horrid sight or not. I changed into one of our assigned orange camp shirts and slipped on a pair of the shorts.

Lauren surged toward the single bed and groaned. Shoulders rigid, I was prepared for a fight for the top bunk—after all, if I was maybe in for nearly a two-month stay, it was sure as hell was going to be a comfortable one. Instead, she slumped onto the bed, roughly shoving her luggage to the end.

“Wait . . . you went to camp before, right? Shared a cabin with Jessie?” she said as I was about to attempt to escape the musty, moldy cabin.

“Lauren, right?” Saying her name out loud? *Something didn’t feel right.*

“You remember my name?”

“I just said it, didn’t I?”

Lauren stood still, as though in deep thought. “Jessie probably talks about me.” She gestured toward the other girl, quietly sitting on the bed.

“And this is Abby, in case you forgot.”

“Nice to see you again, Emma,” Abby said.

“You too,” I said. “Now that the reintroductions are over, I’ll see you all later . . .”

Lauren called after me, “There’s an assembly . . .”

I couldn’t have cared less about the assembly. I was on a mission.

When you’re a kid and you remember places—buildings, structures—they seem big, but when you come back to them, they’re regular sized. The opposite was true of Camp Mapplewood. The forest sprawled out from every angle, huge, looming, and ominous. Beyond the campers’ residences, there were the counselors’ cabins, the lucky ones who weren’t forced to share. The arts building was a greenhouse with tables and shelves overflowing with supplies, from what I could recall. Curiosity drove me to peer inside. It wasn’t brand new anymore, that was for sure. Paintbrushes were jammed in jars, the projects of old campers clung to the walls, and they even had a mural on the ground of handprints. The Blacks had added a garden plot to the grounds a couple of feet away from me, adding the reds, yellows, and purples of vegetables to the ever-same background of the green and brown trees.

My surveillance had a mission—the toolshed beside the arts and crafts cabin, where the counselors had carried the plastic boxes full of technology.

It was one thing to be forced to sleep in an unknown location for nearly two months, but taking my phone was another thing altogether. Even if I didn't have anyone to talk to outside of the camp other than my dad, it was the principle of the matter.

It was broad daylight, the least expected time for someone to break into the locked shed. My strides were long, yet casual enough not to draw attention. I plucked a bobby pin out of my hair and got to work on the padlock, cautiously looking around every once in a while.

A slight breeze brushed a cold wave over my warm skin. The day so far had been calm, the weather betraying my emotions. As soon as the door was unlocked, the shed offered a totally different atmosphere from outside—for one, there was no window, the dust-filled space creepy and prisonlike. My foot edged the door open, revealing a surprisingly fresh scent of roses that caused my senses to go haywire, the base of my neck burning hot. Stepping inside, my instincts screamed that this probably wasn't a smart idea, considering I could immediately feel a pair of eyes on me.

"Maybe you should have waited until it was dark for this oh-so-surprising break-in," a velvety voice said. "It happens every year. Aren't you going to turn around?"

"With my arms where you can see them?" I said.

"No. I've changed my mind. Go on, retrieve your phone. I'm curious as to what's so important that you'd risk getting kicked out camp."

My eyes finally adjusted to the dark. "I can get kicked out?"

"The idea sounds appealing to you?" she said.

I walked farther into the shed, my fingers brushing against boxes in my search. "You should go fetch your superior. Write a detailed report. I'll get this and my bags while I'm at it."

"No," she responded dryly. "I don't think I will."

I whipped open the box labeled *L*. There were too many phones of the same make as mine, meaning I had to go through them one by one to see if any of the home screens matched.

The girl stood inside by the door. It was too dark to really see her. Her body language was relaxed. She was in complete control of the situation, and for some reason unknown to me, it was infuriating.

“May I ask, why the hell aren’t you reporting me?” I questioned.

There was a low chuckle. “Because you want me to.”

“That is . . .”

“Counterproductive?”

“Evil. You sound young enough,” I noted, refraining from cracking a few phones. “Young enough to be a camper. You could be here to get your phone back too.”

“Or I’m doing my job.”

“What job is that?” I found my phone and held it up to my face. “Camp counselor, are you? Bit young to be management.”

I shone the flashlight of the phone in her direction but her back was to me, as she stood facing the door with her hand on the door frame. “I wonder if you can lock pick so well in the dark.”

“Not something that I want to find out.”

“Maybe you don’t. But I do.”

The door slammed shut and locked itself. Her footsteps crunched against the gravel and grew quieter the farther she traveled from the shed. This mysterious girl clearly reveled in tormenting the campers. I tried to use my phone’s flashlight, holding it toward the door while simultaneously attempting to unlock it, but the mission was futile as my hands were too clumsy, and I kept dropping either my phone or the bobby pin.

I slid down the smooth surface of the door until I landed on the floor. By then, all sounds of outside movement vanished, meaning I was trapped

in the shed. Our interaction left me reeling; my body felt warmer than usual, more shaky and clumsy.

Five Years Earlier

It was the night before the last day of camp. I was resting in my bed, breathing in the warm air and listening to the chirping of the crickets. It was the first time that they'd made an audible appearance all summer long. They were cool little insects, able to jump three feet forward, and when they chirped it almost always guaranteed rain was on the horizon. A superstitious belief—Mr. Black had dropped facts about crickets once.

As much fun as summer had been, I missed my parents. It seemed like everyone else was content, too, asleep in their bunks, but a knock came on our door, disrupting the peace. My two cabinmates didn't budge. The next knock came louder and more insistent, and so, reluctantly, I got up to answer it. Lauren stood on the other side of the door, rocking back and forth on her feet.

"Hey," Lauren whispered. "Is Jessie in this cabin?"

"She's asleep."

"Do you think she'll be mad if I wake her up?" she asked.

"Probably. But I won't stop you."

Lauren poked and prodded her, but it was impossible to wake Jessie. I had tried countless times throughout the summer and all I got in return was Jessie's loud snores and an occasional flailing of her hands. Lauren gripped Jessie's wrist before she got a whack to the face. She gave up, but before she stepped out of the cabin, she said, "It's Emma, right? A bunch of us are hanging out as it's our last night here. Want to come?"

"Let me grab a jacket."

"It's still warm out," Lauren said.

"Cool. Let's go, then."

She was right. Even though the sun had set, my skin felt like it had an extra layer of warm and fuzzy protection, like a woolly coat. Each breath was refreshing and pure, flowing freely in and out of my lungs. It helped that by “a bunch of us,” Lauren actually meant herself and a guy called Mike. It was easy to sneak around when the counselors’ cabins were on the opposite side of the camp. We could do anything and be anywhere, but we tracked along the outskirts of the camp.

My fingers trailed along the smooth and waxy leaves of the nearest trees, pinching and tearing them. No kids screamed, ran, or laughed; it was as if the camp was devoid of humans. Lauren and Mike walked ahead a couple of steps. The evening was my favorite time of day because there was no structure or pressure to do anything but be yourself.

“I wish we could stay here longer,” Lauren said, slowing her pace so that I walked next to them.

“Same,” Mike agreed.

“Summer is time to spend with family. You guys see each other every day at school,” I pointed out.

“Why did you move to Boston anyway?” Lauren asked.

“Dad said it was because they wanted a fresh start . . .” My parents lied. Their fighting didn’t stop when we moved to Boston. It had been six years and they still acted like they were on the verge of divorce. “I don’t think we’ll be living together much longer. I want to spend as much time with them as possible before . . .”

“They divorce?” Lauren said.

“Yeah.”

“I want to be a camp counselor when I’m older,” Lauren said. “It’s the best job in the world. Dad says it’s a great way to build character or something, but I don’t care about that. I love being away from them.”

Something far at the corner of my eye moved. Or was I imagining things? If we were caught out of bed after hours, we'd get into trouble. They'd tell our parents, and then when I got home, I'd be grounded, ruining the few days with my parents before school. Holding my breath, I came to a standstill. Lauren gripped both of our wrists and dragged us into the woods to hide behind the first line of trees. Something tumbled against the trail, the stone crumbling beneath quick footsteps.

Without so much as a word, Mike raised one finger and pointed up. We climbed the skeleton of the trees. Once we stilled, there was no more rustling of the leaves. The trees stood eerily still in the summer air. In between my shallow and quick breaths, there was a sharp scent of soil. Trying to deepen my breathing, I concentrated on the ground, where the dirt around the tree was lumpy with roots, and tried ignoring the part of the branch that cut through my cotton shirt.

I was overcome with dizziness and when I closed my eyes my thoughts spun round and around in circles. I'd never climbed this high in my life. My knees and hands *needed* to touch the dirt, but my shaking limbs wouldn't let that happen. Over the sound of my heart thumping I couldn't hear what Lauren or Mike said to me. When I did manage to peek over at them, they were descending from the tree. No words tumbled out of my mouth to ask for help, and they didn't offer.

When I finally dared to attempt to get down by myself, I reached up to grab the branch above me to keep myself steady and saw a wasps' nest. If I moved, they would wake up and sting me to death. I was deathly allergic.

Lauren and Mike left me to suffer for hours up in that tree, and to no surprise, it started to rain.

The crickets' chirps guaranteed it, after all.

I startled myself awake gasping from that memory/nightmare. My body's normal response to stress was napping, but now I had to work on getting out of the toolshed, working in the dark because my phone was at ten percent. I had shoved it in my bra, considering our uniform shorts didn't have pockets.

“This, this is why I *hate* camping.”

Three

I managed to escape the toolshed after thirty minutes, and meandered around the nearly deserted camp. I headed to the check-in point where we registered, outside the main building. Grabbing my luggage, I noticed a plastic bag with a mattress protector and sheets, and another with brand-new swimming gear. My mom had planned this to the smallest of details.

A prickling sensation appeared at the base of my neck. A sense of danger lurked when that shiver appeared. The first time I'd felt that rush of anxiety was the night Lauren and Mike left me to fend for myself in the tree. Now it was a nonsensical terror as it was the middle of the day, yards away from the outskirts of camp where the trees stood, but it wasn't something that logic could remedy.

Trying my best to look as casual as possible, I met the eyes of a few worn-out strangers fixated through a window of the recreation building. I should have stayed in the shed—that was a far better option than listening to whatever instructions, camp spirit, or other garbage spilled from that room.

Abandoning all intentions of actually attending the welcome session, I slipped into my cabin, after searching for it for ten minutes because I forgot which numbers belonged to the Beavers.

“Here, let me help you with that.” The sudden voice made me jump.

“I think I can—nope. It's an impossible feat.” When I turned around, there stood a frail-looking pixie-like person with short, spiky hair. “I might

be the least athletically inclined person ever to exist, but even I could flick you away with my thumb.”

“I’m sensing a challenge.”

Compared to the bag, she was tiny. “Are you considering accepting?”

The girl snatched it from my grasp and held it like it weighed nothing at all, leaving me with my mouth gaping open. She leapt into the air to plop the bag into the compartment above my bunk, then she hopped back down with a broad grin.

“You might want to sit down,” she suggested, amusement evident.

“People tend to get testy when standing. And we can’t have that grouchiness during our first-impression stages.”

“And after we’ve gone through that hell?”

“Be your typical grouchy self.” She had mad psychic abilities. “You have that look about you. That aura. I dig it.”

Up I went via the ladder to the bunk, and the girl flitted up next to me, eventually pulling my pillow onto her lap. I folded my hoodie next to me and muttered to myself, “I solemnly swear not to judge a book by its cover again.”

“That might save you a lot of time,” she agreed.

“You’re judging me right now,” I accused.

The girl placed a hand over her heart and broke into tinkling laughter. “I have a feeling we’re going to be the best of friends, Emma.”

“How do you know my name?”

Deadly serious, she said, “I’m a psychic.”

“Wait, what?”

“Relax.” She flicked a tag on my hoodie. “Name tag on your clothing?”

“It says Lane,” I said, raising an eyebrow.

“You were in my year at school. You sat in front of me in home economics. Always made me tie your apron. Never could return the favor,

Ms. Lane, but you always let me sample your food, and it was always amazing.”

One of the side effects of deep depression was memory loss, so I wasn’t surprised I didn’t remember her. “Nice to see you again . . .”

“Gwen,” she filled in for me. “No one takes notice of me at school. It’s Gwen Black.”

“Nice to meet you again. If it helps, I barely even noticed myself then.”

“I can understand bizarre tendencies. After all, I am from a rather insane family. And that’s being polite. But this, name tagging clothes? No, this doesn’t make sense. You must explain.”

“You never know when someone might want to claim something as theirs,” I said.

“That’s your reason? I don’t see you being at all devoted to the art of clothes shopping.”

“It’s a travel day.” I looked down at the camp clothing, then at the grey sweatpants I had previously worn, tossed on my other pillow.

“Speaking of, why aren’t you at the assembly?” Gwen asked.

“Why aren’t you there?” I countered.

“Like I said”—she grinned—“destined to be best friends, Emma.”

“You’ve been here at Mapplewood before?”

“Uh-huh. My name is Black, after all,” she said.

“Your parents own the place?”

“Guilty as charged; it’s the family business. I’m still technically a camper, but my older brother and sister are counselors.”

“At least now I’ll know someone cool around here,” I said.

Over the next few minutes, campers walked by the cabin window, letting us know that the assembly was over. Thankfully, no one from my cabin came back right away.

Gwen hopped down from the bunk bed and chatted about how it was such a coincidence that she, too, didn't plan on staying at Camp Mapplewood for the season, and the time passed quickly. Her parents insisted that she spend the summer with her siblings, Walter and Vivian, before the latter went back to college. Mr. Black roped his brother Manny into being the camp nurse for the summer too. The entire place was run by various members of the Black family when you included Gwen's mom, who was in charge of the kitchen.

Looking up at me with big eyes, Gwen asked, "Would it be okay if I put my number in your phone? You know, for after summer? To cement our friendship?" She hopped up and down on her feet, preparing to beg. She looked at my very pointy boob, where I had shoved my phone for safekeeping. It was an awful hiding spot. I took it out of my shirt and slipped down from the bunk bed so we faced each other. "I promise not to be too overbearing with emoticons."

"I don't mind, I guess . . ."

As quick as a flash, she snatched my phone from my hand and typed rapidly. When I got my phone back, her number was in there, coupled with several hearts beside her name and even a perfect picture of her grinning at the camera. Gwen grabbed me for a death hug. By that, I mean she hugged me so damn tight that I thought my ribs were going to crack. She might have gotten the hint when I started coughing and spluttering about seeing the light.

"I'm going to get my stuff organized before lunch, maybe set up my bed," Gwen said. "Don't be a stranger."

"You live next door," I pointed out, but she wasn't appeased. "I mean, you did say we were going to be best friends."

"Oh, and Emma? You should really hide that phone."

As she spun around and walked out of the cabin with a quick, graceful lope, I saw a strange, orange flower pinched in her hair.

Gwen was right. As much as I wanted to, I couldn't go around with the phone shoved down my bra. There had to be a hiding place in the cabin, somewhere a counselor wouldn't think to look until I was good and ready to break the rules. There was no point trying to get myself tossed out on the first day, especially when there would be no one to pick me up. My dad would be hours away by this point. As much as I wanted to see his overly sparkly blue van outside of camp, the image of his worn-out face after hours of traveling spurred me to scour the cabin in search of a good hiding spot.

Under my pillow? Too risky. Other than my luggage, the only personal space I had was the bed, and even then, it was only the top bunk. Our bathroom was small and already cramped with all our personal stuff and the as-yet-unpacked generic cleaning supplies that had been placed there before we arrived. Under my mattress? I tested the spot, lying on the bottom bunk and looking up. It was visible between the wooden bars. I knocked Abby's pillow off the bed, and when I stretched out to grab it, a higher than usual floorboard beneath Lauren's bed caught my attention. With a prod, the floorboard moved. When I shoved it to the side, a little hole appeared. No one would think to look there. After bundling the device into a hoodie, I hid the phone inside the hole.

Come lunchtime, we didn't have to scavenge for our food. When I shared that thought out loud with the woman serving us, she gave me the strangest expression, piled a splat of mushy goop on my plate, and told me to beat it. I didn't have the energy to get anything other than potatoes after her apparent dismissal.

The canteen was already full to the brim, so I sat down at an outdoor picnic table with my tray. The rest of the Beaver group soon came out and spotted me. They made themselves comfortable with Jessie and Abby sitting on either side of me, Lauren opposite me along with Kendra, and the guys to my right at the other end of the table, speaking among themselves. The only person from the Beavers who wasn't there was Gwen.

"Is this, like, a thing?" I asked, nudging Jessie as soon as she sat down. "All the other groups are meshed together. But the Beavers are staying united."

"We're genuinely friends, that's why," Jessie said.

"Is Gwen still back in your cabin?" I asked.

Lauren scoffed and fixed me with a look that resembled a goblin, like the idea of being friends with Gwen was absurd. She wore the same expression as she had on the day she'd left me up in that tree all alone. How didn't I recognize that face straight away? Sure, blocking out that memory was the only way to move forward, but when we were grouped together by Mr. Black, and then when we were in the cabin, she hadn't looked familiar. Knowing who she was now? It would be hard to forget.

She took a sip of her apple juice, maintaining eye contact with me. Did she remember doing that to me? There was no way she could know how leaving me up there had impacted me since then, but that didn't mean I wanted to forgive her. Not until she apologized at the very least. When Jessie opened her mouth to answer, Lauren glanced at her, shutting her response down. There was a gleam in Lauren's eye, as if she liked the power she held over her friends, but, more importantly, she wanted to impress me for some illogical reason. Behind proud eyes, she didn't realize that she was, in fact, doing the complete opposite.

"I don't know how Gwen's a part of the Black family. Her brother and sister are cool. She's too weird to be one of them." Lauren looked around

and raised an eyebrow. “Especially her hair. Did you see it yet? She’s a freak. She dances everywhere she goes. How weird is that?”

“She seems pretty cool to me,” I said.

“Trust me.” Lauren took a sip of her drink. “She isn’t. That’s why she’s not sitting here. Doesn’t matter what she’s like, though. It’s pretty much guaranteed she’s getting that camp counselor position next year after Connor leaves. Look at how the rest of the camp is run. Julie Black, Philip Black, Manny Black, Walter Black, Vivian Black . . . next year Gwen will join them. How is that fair to anyone?”

“Essentially, you isolated her.” I deduced. “Who does she sit with at school?”

“Why do you care?” Lauren asked.

I picked up my tray and stood. “Even if I don’t know Gwen very well, or at all, I know she’s damn better than your bossy ass.”

Lauren stood up to face me. “Like you’ve even spoken to her.”

Ignoring her, I turned in search of my new friend. Lauren reacted immediately by squirting apple juice all over my camp shirt. One second my head faced the ground, and by the next I had flung my tray right into Lauren’s face, hitting her square in the nose. Mash toppled onto her T-shirt. Maybe a little blood spurted from her nose.

“Oops.”

“I am going to murder you,” she snarled, wiping mash from her top. “I am, literally, going to kill you.”

“Literally literally, or literally?”

“What?”

“Like, literally, it won’t happen at all, or will you literally take my life?” I said.

“Who do you think you are? I could ruin you. Absolutely ruin you. Just like I did to Gwen fucking Black.”

To say that I was disappointed in the response from the Beaver group would be an understatement. Most of them were nice nerds who didn't like confrontation, if the horrified expressions on their faces were anything to go by. Mike, well, Mike had always been a follower, just like when he was twelve, leaving me stranded in that tree during a rainstorm, maybe because Lauren had told him to or maybe they'd come to that decision together. Either way, it was my bet that Lauren had taken charge in deciding to leave me there. And Abby was always the quiet girl from what I could recall, so not much had changed there. Shockingly, Jessie, despite the many thoughts she displayed in her letters, didn't have one word to say in response to the scene. What the hell happened to her after I left York?

I tried my best at cleaning my shirt in the canteen bathroom, but the scent of apples wouldn't go away, and the stickiness on the fabric refused to loosen its grip. I ended up tying the shirt in a knot so the lower part of my stomach was on display. For a second I hesitated, but the more I thought about it, the more I realized people wouldn't give a crap about my stomach as much as I did.

Lauren's casual remarks about Gwen infuriated me. That wasn't the worst of it; it was the fact Jessie and the rest of the Beavers didn't make a move to oppose what Lauren said about Gwen or the rest of the Black family. Either they shut down and couldn't stand up to Lauren or they condoned her ongoing behavior to isolate Gwen.

Jessie crossed my path as I joined the crowd heading out to the next assembly. "These people are my friends. You can't create drama because your mom left you here for the summer. It's not their fault that they don't like Gwen. Some people don't get along. That's life, Emma."

"It seems like the only reason they don't like her is because of who her family is. That's not right." I pulled my elbow out of her hold.

“Look, Lauren’s always wanted to be a counselor. She’s been talking about it for years and there will be only one spot next summer. Of course she’s fuming. She has no chance against Gwen.”

“It’s still bullying, Jessie,” I scoffed. “You’re sharing a room with Gwen, right? Maybe Lauren and Gwen can switch rooms. Bunch you guys together.”

“Lauren wants to share a room with Abby.”

“All right, you and I can swap.”

“I want to share with Kendra . . .”

“Do I look like I give a crap?”

“No,” she said, turning away so she faced where the counselors stood. “You don’t.”

“It’s like you have an entirely different personality. Your letters made you sound at least decent.”

“Look at you. Still the same depressed, lonely Emma Lane. You haven’t changed a bit.”

“At least I’ll never follow someone like Lauren. She’s a bully. And the fact you stood up for her and not Gwen says everything about you.”

My skin itched, and I regretted sending Jessie those letters and exposing my deepest and darkest thoughts to someone I thought was a trustworthy pen pal. Moving as far away from them as I could, I waited for Mr. Black to assign the Beavers a counselor. Abby gave me an empathetic squeeze of the arm as I settled in beside her, safely away from Jessie and Lauren. The air was toxic.

“I hope we get Walter,” Abby said, motioning to a bulky guy with curly hair. “He’s competitive. His set of campers always wins in the head-to-head competitions between the groups. And even if his campers don’t win, they don’t get beaten all that badly. Plus, he’s nice.”

“No, don’t think I want him. Is there anyone laid back? I want to chill on the sidelines, maybe cheer you guys on if I’m not napping.”

“Maybe Connor? But if Walter’s and Connor’s groups are against each other, they’re scarily competitive. Same with Walter’s sister, Vivian. It gets . . . messy.”

Lined up against the wall, the Beavers and the Jellyfish were the two last groups to be assigned a counselor. One of the counselors was late, meaning Mr. Black would assign a group to the late counselor before they arrived. I didn’t know the logistics behind pairing a counselor with a group, but I trusted that he knew what he was doing.

“First of all, Jellyfish,” Mr. Black said, clapping his hands together. “You’re assigned to my son, Walter, and Beavers, you’re assigned to my daughter, Vivian. Because you won’t have time to organize another activity, you guys can play dodgeball in here, after which you’ll all receive schedules of your day-to-day activities at camp. If you have questions or concerns, seek out your counselor or drop by my office.”

“Why is this clicking now?” I asked, glancing to my right at Gwen, who indulged my surprise. “You have, like, an unlimited number of siblings running this joint.”

“Only Walter and Vivian.” Gwen dismissed them, waving a hand carelessly toward the other campers. “My dad’s brother, Manny, is over there—the guy with a permanent sulk on his face. He does this every year. He takes inventory of the faces he’ll probably treat.”

“Treat?”

“He’s a nurse. Dad roped anyone he could into spending the summer here. So Manny’s here part time.”

“I can relate.”

“Camp wasn’t your plan either?” she asked.

“No,” I said. “I wanted to spend the summer with my dad.”

She placed her hand on my shoulder, offering a sympathetic squeeze.

“He sent you here?”

“Nope. Mom has court-ordered visitation, but then she went on a cruise. Or a honeymoon. She dropped me off on the way and went off with her new husband. Her excuse was she wanted me to socialize more.”

“Drama,” she whispered to herself.

“Stupid, useless drama.”

“Still, you met me.”

“Mission accomplished.” I matched her grin. “Is it worth being forced to play dodgeball, though?”

“Play and find out!” Gwen laughed.

That was the thing, I didn’t want to play at all. Dodgeball required patience, stealth, and stamina, none of which I possessed. Besides, it brought back memories of standing in line against the wall in gym class and not having my name called. Being the last person standing usually decided which team I’d join. Shoes squeaked on the court and voices echoed in the large room, and remnants of that anxiety pooled in the pit of my stomach as we stretched out on the court. Dodgeball had never been fun; would never *be* fun.

The door opened with a loud bang, and it was impressive how a person could command the room as quickly as this girl did. With wavy black hair that ended an inch above her elbows and her head held high, she sauntered into the recreational room. The rhythmic clicking of her shoes added to the sound of the sports balls bouncing. Everyone seemed captivated by the swinging of her hips. She was beautiful, like the view staring out the window of a car on a clear night—no matter how impressive the landscape was, the stars always regained my attention.

Her eyes met mine and she scowled. I didn't know what I looked like to the common eye at that moment but I didn't scowl back, not straight away. She didn't look familiar. If I saw someone who looked like that in the past, I would certainly remember. The troubling thing was, that by the way she did a double take, it appeared she knew me.

Gwen's brother hooted and jumped up to his other sister, pointing in our general direction, causing her visibly sour mood to deepen. Vivian. Our counselor. I couldn't blame her. She was left with the Beavers. Our group name alone told her all she needed to know. We weren't about to be victorious.

"I still can't believe that Vivian Black is our counselor," Lauren said, her eyes sparkling.

"Nepotism at its best!"

"Tied that apple juice up nicely, didn't you?" she said.

"I did."

Lauren halfheartedly tossed a dodgeball in my direction. Gwen spun around like a ballerina in my direction, then, with her dainty hands on my shoulders, nudged me to the side so the ball missed me completely. The pair of us walked away to one side of the dodgeball line.

The Jellyfish gathered around Walter like ducklings, whereas the Beavers were too scared to approach Vivian.

"Come on, Em, she's mostly harmless," Gwen said, tugging on my hand. "I pinkie swear, okay?"

"Got to link pinkies for that to work, Gwen."

"Right, what was I thinking?" She stopped abruptly and wrapped her smallest finger around mine. "She's harmless."

"Do I have to go through the mind-numbing process of explaining the rules to you?" Vivian said.

I nearly choked on the saliva in my mouth because that familiar, heavenly, one and only voice belonged to the girl from the shed. No wonder she looked at me like that earlier. She was one who locked me in there and left me there to fend for myself. Gwen tipped up my chin to snap my jaw back into place.

“Run, get the ball, then throw it,” Lauren answered, preening under Vivian’s attention. “How hard can it be?”

“For the Beavers? Usually it’s catastrophic,” Vivian said.

“It’s a cursed group,” Gwen told me.

“We’re the second largest rodent in the world,” I muttered helpfully, turning around to stand at the end line, trying not to stare at the Jellyfish team—they had so much muscle.

Gwen patted my shoulder and said, “Dad would be so proud.”

“If only we were the capybara, whatever the hell that is.”

“The largest rodent in the world,” Gwen quipped.

“Hilarious,” I deadpanned.

Gwen matched the determination of the Jellyfish as she hopped up and down on her feet, readying herself for the match by drumming her fingers on my shoulders. The rest of the Beavers did not match her enthusiasm. Abby and Kendra stood with their arms crossed, while Jessie and Lauren didn’t even look in the direction of the dodgeballs, too busy whispering to each other. The guys on our team stood frozen—their defeat apparent even before the game started. Vivian leaned against a wall with some magazine and a bored expression on her face. Walter boomed encouragement from the sidelines, riling his team up. The only indication that Vivian was involved in the game at all was the whistle between her lips. When she determined that everyone stood behind the allotted line, she blew the whistle.

“Run, Emma!” Gwen cheered, gracefully plucking a ball from the ground and launching it at someone.

“No.” I refused, not moving an inch.

“Run, or you’re going to get clobbered!”

“The floor looks comfy.”

Gwen hit a six-foot guy cleanly in the shoulder, knocking him out of the game. “It’ll hurt.”

“Pain is less exertion.”

“Man,” Mike groaned, rubbing where he got hit in the knee.

I sidestepped a shot to my arm and let it bounce against the wall behind me but wasn’t so lucky the second time as a red blur smashed against my left cheek. My knees buckled from the impact but I managed to stay upright. The court line, painted white on the floor, wiggled like a snake. The pain didn’t even register, but then right below my eye felt warm, and the sting became prominent. Then the silence gave me a chance to notice I was sprawled on the ground.

“She’s on your team.” Mike’s tone was accusatory. “That’s just . . . that’s just plain stupid, Lauren.”

“Oops,” Lauren said.

“I’ll show you oops.” I sat up, rolled onto my side, grabbed the ball, and flung it at the offending target. Lauren turned around in time for it to clip the back of her head.

A loud laugh came from the other side of the court over the chaotic screaming. Walter asked, “What the hell’s happening on your team, Viv?”

“Self-sabotage,” she said, her head inclined to the side.

“More like revenge,” I grumbled, slumping over to the sideline.

“You weren’t knocked out,” Vivian told me.

“Mike can take my place. Can’t you, Mike?” I asked.

He high-fived me. “Yeah, let’s win this thing! We’ll do it for you, Emma.”

He ran onto the court, and a ball immediately whacked against his groin area. A range of *oohs* circled the court. Mike was left flat as more Beavers were thrown out of the game. Gwen swirled around, plucking dodgeballs off the ground and whipping them at the Jellyfish with perfect accuracy and lightning-quick speed. It was like her hands were the ideal catapult for the dodgeballs from hell.

I grabbed a bottle of water from the bench, not caring who it belonged to, and pressed it against my hot cheek.

“That’s unsanitary,” Vivian commented.

“So is your face.”

The scent of roses surrounded me, and I felt the presence of a person delicately sitting beside me. “You must be so proud of your wit.”

“It made you scowl, didn’t it?” Even talking was painful. “Ow!”

Her finger prodded my cheek, making me hiss, splutter, and lean back so that I fell off the bench.

“What do you have to smile about?” she asked, eyes narrowing. “Your cheek is swelling.”

“Why didn’t you report me?”

“How long did it take you to get out of the shed?” she asked. Then, “You need ice.”

“I’m fine.”

She stared at me blankly. “You’re fine?”

“One hundred perc—the heck! Stop. Dammit, stop pinching me!”

“You’re fine,” she mocked.

I pushed myself back until there was enough space between us so that she couldn’t prod my cheeks again. Vivian wasn’t the only threat in the room, though. I backed up too far and a ball hit the back of my head, forcing my head to slam down on top of my knee. The room went deadly

silent, and I felt tears sting my wounds. My hearing took a little trip away to save itself from the destruction that seemed to find me attractive.

“Emma? You okay?” I grunted my response. “Shh. There’s so much blood,” Gwen said, returning to running her fingers through my hair. “I’ll take her to the nurse, and you sort out . . .”

“You’re not a counselor yet,” Vivian said shortly.

“Does it matter?” her sister asked, sounding a little whiny. “She’s my soon-to-be bestie.”

“I’m fine,” I claimed.

“I’m taking her,” Vivian said. Another set of hands hauled me up to my feet. “And you, you’re not fine. It’s like you want me to prove to you again through mild clips to the face how not fine you are.”

“Have I mentioned that you’re evil?” I asked.

“Once or twice, yes,” Vivian said.

With one hand covering my face, I linked my other arm with Vivian’s. Walking across the camp with my face bleeding so much was mildly embarrassing. People stared a lot. It was like they’d never seen blood or someone battered by a bully with a dodgeball before.

What made the journey worse was how perfect Vivian was; she didn’t have a blossoming black eye and a bloody nose. Everything about her—the composure, the limber walk, the glare that kept people far enough away but close enough to stare at her clear beauty—was perfect. Then there was me, the clumsy couch potato.

“I don’t know how one manages to knee themselves in the face.”

“You ram your face against an opposing bone and voilà!”

“It’s been one day,” she said quietly.

“It’s all going according to plan,” I said. “Enough of an injury to send me home?”

She helped me up the steps and knocked on the door to the camp infirmary next to Mr. Black's office in the main building. "One day and you've already got yourself enemies. Maybe it is a good idea to get yourself kicked out. End the drama. Save your body the trauma."

"I told you so," I said.

The door swung open, revealing not the nurse, but the camp director himself. Mr. Black blinked slowly as he took in my face. Once his daughter nudged him to the side, he allowed us through, quickly clearing the bed of some new equipment.

My feet dangled off the bed, swinging back and forth in rhythm with my dizziness. Instead of a sharp pain coming in short intervals, a consistent dull ache took over.

"I had a bad feeling, leaving you and Walter in charge of dodgeball." He directed his comment to his daughter. "How did this happen?"

"It's not my fault if the children . . . bicker. Besides, it's the name of the game."

"Children?" I asked.

"Yes, *children*," Vivian confirmed.

She couldn't be *that* old. "How old are you, exactly?"

"None of your business."

"Nineteen," her dad supplied.

"*Pfft*, please. You're a baby yourself," I accused.

Vivian faced the wall with crossed arms, refusing to acknowledge the two people in the room.

Mr. Black left the room to get an ice pack. We didn't move the entire time he was gone.

"I'll call in Manny, he'll help with the swelling," he said when he returned. "In the meantime, there's this."

“Thank you,” I said gratefully, receiving the ice pack wrapped in a tea towel.

“You’re welcome. Should I expect any more casualties?”

“No,” Vivian said.

“Maybe,” I answered. “Mike Hanley got hit pretty badly.”

Vivian finally took notice of me. “Mike was hit?”

“Are you telling me I imagined Mike getting hit in the privates?”

It wasn’t a moment later when Walter, along with his uncle Manny, carried the faint-looking Mike into the room and deposited him on the couch. Vivian didn’t seem bothered that two of her assigned campers were harmed. Wincing from the pain, I positioned the ice pack against my cheek. “Poor guy.”

“Are you feeling anything other than fine?” she asked, tilting her head to the side.

“Meh.”

“You’re insufferable.”

“Meh.”

“Dad,” Vivian said, “have enough children been hurt now to put an end to this activity?”

In the end, Mr. Black decided that dodgeball was much too violent to be allowed to continue, and it needed to be replaced on the activity list with something tamer like handball or badminton. Manny gave me a pass to rest in his infirmary for up to an hour. Vivian left behind the schedule for me to look over, and seeing it made me wish that Lauren had injured me enough to send me packing and out of camp. Every morning we were to get up for breakfast at seven o’clock, which was served until eight. Summer sleep-ins? No longer possible. From eight we had arts and crafts until ten, then a team activity chosen by the counselor until noon. Then we had an hour of lunch. From two until five we had to participate in an exercise-based activity,

either based in the recreational hall if it happened to rain, in the courtyard behind our cabins, or in water activities down by the lake. Then, finally we were fed dinner from half past five until half past six.

It was a jam-packed schedule, and I sure as hell didn't like the sound of it at all.

Four

A full week later, my face was still bruised and sore. I'd made it through the dreaded Fourth of July celebrations the previous day. The early mornings were impossible. I missed winter when my bedroom wasn't bombarded with a blinding light and was instead greeted by the welcomed darkness. Squeezing the last few minutes of comfort out of my bunk, I refused to jump down until the last possible moment.

Lauren grew more frustrated by my leaving the cabin in shambles. There were enforced tidiness rules: our beds had to be made, our gear stored away, and our cabin put to right. My usual routine was to topple my mattress, move my duvet onto the floor, spread my clothes everywhere, and move random pieces of furniture around. It was all part of my plan to escape. Except Vivian didn't react or report me.

That left me no choice except to target my cabinmates so they could complain. That morning, I took my time in the bathroom, Lauren whispering angrily outside about how we were going to get docked points for being late to breakfast. I folded three ketchup packets that I'd stolen from the canteen the day before and placed them under the toilet seat.

"Emma!" Lauren shouted. "Abby still needs to brush her teeth."

"I'm done." I got out of the bathroom and sat on the bottom bunk, only noticing when Abby rushed into the bathroom that there was another person in the cabin. Gwen stood near Lauren—too closely for comfort—rocking back and forth on her heels. "Gwen, what brings you by? Were you two arguing?" I asked.

“Nope. Came by to make sure that you’re up,” Gwen told me.

“We’ll probably be punished this time because we’re so late,” Lauren grumbled.

“You can go ahead without us.”

“No, if I leave, you’re going to trash the place. We’ll get warnings if they do an inspection.”

“Shit!” Abby yelled. “Oh my. . . . What the hell? Emma?!”

Lauren shoved me so I toppled back on the bed as she went into the bathroom. “Abby? What is that? Is that blood?”

“No! I hope not. What’s that on the floor?”

“A ketchup packet,” Lauren said. “That’s it! Emma, I’ve had enough of your shit!”

“Emma, what did you do?” Gwen asked.

“Nothing?” I lied. When Lauren barreled into the room, I asked, “Report me?”

“That’s what you want, though! I’m out of here. Let’s go, Abby.”

“Is that a no?” I asked as they stormed out of the room. “That was a waste of time.”

Gwen flicked my ear. “Stop trying to get kicked out of camp.”

It was after our arts and crafts session that the Beavers were scheduled for our daily bonding activity. The only information Vivian had given us was that it would be held down by the lake.

I was never one to eat before ten o’clock. My body considered that time as one that it should be resting and fast asleep, and not a time when it should be conscious and consuming food. At breakfast, I’d been sneaking an apple into the pocket of my hoodie and leaving it there until I was good and ready to eat it.

Throwing the hoodie on over my camp T-shirt, and pulling my hood up, I followed the rest of the Beavers from the arts and crafts cabin and walked into the gorgeous day. The daylight made the bruising on my upper cheek glaringly obvious. The camp's nurse, Manny, said he couldn't do anything for my eye, not really. I had to massage around the bruised area, and after the first day or two, I switched from ice packs to pressing a warm cloth against my face. Despite it being a week since the terrible dodgeball incident, my face didn't look much better.

I hid a yawn behind my hand as we traveled through the woods to the lake. My shoulders were hunched, not to keep the hood over my face, but as a reaction to the environment. The sky was clear, so it was unlikely that it would storm, but my rigid back didn't accept that, nor did my buzzing brain. The trees stood unwavering, and that was the only reminder I needed of being confined and frozen in place, the numbness of my fingers clawing at the bark of the tree, my back aching from sitting on that high branch for what seemed like hours with bullet-like rain drilling into my eyes.

Vivian bumped my shoulder, disrupting my mildly panicked thoughts. "Walk faster? I don't want to have to keep looking over my shoulder to ensure that you're not dead." She ran a hand through her hair and complained, "Grab someone and walk with them. They can make sure that you don't trip and kill yourself."

"Even when I don't try, I can be a great burden."

"The fact that you're turning your face away is a dead giveaway. I'm sure you've got a ridiculous grin plastered all over your face."

"You're not far off," I offered, fighting the urge to do just that. "If I see how much I annoy you, I'll want to smile, and if I smile, it will hurt. Your pain will be my pain."

She tugged my sleeve. "As interesting as that fact is, look ahead and call someone over to keep you company."

“They’ll want to talk,” I complained.

“And that’s awful because . . . ?”

“I’m not a morning person.”

She studied me for a moment. “Clearly.”

I didn’t make a move to grab my only friend, Gwen, who happily walked beside Abby, chatting enthusiastically despite the not-so-subtle glares shot her way by Lauren. Gwen was good like that, creating a happy bubble that seemed impenetrable. It was nice seeing Abby relax for a little while, and it was nice to see someone other than me talk to Gwen.

Ever since our fight last week, Jessie had stayed away. She and Lauren walked with their heads close together. Even when I visibly struggled to stay composed, Jessie didn’t come up to me; she didn’t speak to or acknowledge me. It went to show that words on paper were ultimately meaningless, that the care and the time spent writing to each other for the past couple of years meant nothing. She was the one person who knew my deepest thoughts, my hopes, dreams, pitfalls, and anxieties. She could deal with me on paper but not in person, and it was an unexpected, crippling blow.

The longer I stayed at the back of the group, the more Vivian slowed down her pace, calling out instructions to her sister if we had to turn or for which trail to take. Even if she did huff once in a while, she stayed behind, bound by the duties of camp counselor to herd the campers safely in the right direction. Because I was paying attention to Vivian’s annoyed antics and trying not to laugh, a branch whacked me across my face. The good thing was, it was the other side of my face. The terrible thing? Vivian cackled at my expense.

“This camp is going to be the death of me,” I mumbled.

“You’re still here, because?” she pressed.

“If you want me gone so badly, report me.”

“I condemn idiocy.”

“And how am I an idiot, exactly?”

“People who make declarations of plans and don’t follow through. It’s frustrating.” She flipped her hair out of her face then tied it back, the long strands seemingly a bother. “It means you’re unreliable. Untrustworthy and a waste of time.”

“It’s been a week. Give me some time, and maybe some credit.”

“No.”

Gwen glanced back at the sound of my laughter. She offered a cheeky thumbs-up that made her sister, for some reason, flounder. Vivian stormed ahead, leaving me in the dust.

The youngest Black family member danced over to my side. We stopped and she pulled the hood from my face back to take a closer look at my injury.

“What made Lauren do that to you?” Gwen asked for the thousandth time since the incident occurred.

“It sounds like you’re insinuating that I did something to her first,” I said, pretending to be offended, then admitted, “I might have thrown a tray at her face.”

“Oh my God, Emma!”

“It was retaliation! She squirted apple juice all over me . . . do you know how sticky that stuff can be?” I shuddered. “So sticky.”

“And why did she do that?” she persisted, looping her arm around mine. I didn’t exactly want to tell her that Lauren was talking smack about her family, so I lied. “I can’t remember. Something about pain and misery.”

We followed the path that everyone else had already gone along until we reached a clearing protected by a mass of leaves, branches, and cracked twigs on the ground. Gwen hopped over the mess of branches quick like a

monkey and helped me stumble across. She gripped my forearms and somehow managed to keep me upright when I fumbled around.

What I saw next was beautiful, and that came from someone who didn't appreciate things like dirt and water. This side of the lake had wildflowers surrounding the shore of the crystal-clear water. The water was so transparent that the smallest of pebbles was visible and the way it remained entirely still freed my mind of its continuous whizzing of problematic thoughts.

Ten brown, narrow log boats laid upside down on the wooden platform at the edge of the lake so they would be easy to slide into the water. One oar stuck out on either end of the logs and one orange life jacket was positioned next to each oar. What was strange about the oars was the red cushions tied to the ends of them. They had clearly been set up before we got here, and it was a small mercy that we didn't have to fetch the log boats ourselves. More inland, beside the tree line, was a two-roomed hut meant for changing, and a red portable toilet sat to the left.

"Looks like that hoodie will have to come off," Gwen chirped, delighted.

"Dude, I'm injured. I'm not doing this activity."

"Water's harmless, you overdramatic grumpy pants," Gwen said.

"Preventing further injury isn't being overdramatic or grumpy."

Besides, there was a small boulder that beckoned.

"I think I'm going to have to set up a tally for how dramatic you and Vivian are," she whispered to herself. "Your first day here you kneed yourself in the face."

"Which was a subsequent response to being whacked in the back of my head."

"You've already gained enemies," she told me.

“That’s what your sister said.” I looked at her, suspicious of the playful tilt of her head. “She’s been totally complaining about me, hasn’t she? Is she my archnemesis in this camp?”

“Further proving my point,” she sang.

“Damn, an archnemesis. That’s going to be high maintenance.”

Gwen slipped into the group surrounding Vivian as I sat on the boulder. The Beavers stood statue-like, afraid of what was going to come out of Vivian’s mouth. We hadn’t spent much time by the lake as Beavers—ironic, considering our name.

Studying the siblings, you could see only one physical characteristic that was the same—their brown eyes. Gwen’s were sweet and warm, like the surprise you get when caramel oozes from a chocolate. Vivian’s were different, a shade darker than butterscotch.

“Emma,” Vivian called, catching my eye. “You stay there.”

“Sir, yes, sir,” I said, mock saluting.

“I mean it, you’re not getting into the water.” Vivian addressed the group: “We need to clear the air, as there’s obvious animosity between us. It’s perfectly fine to have your feelings. Not everyone’s going to get along. That’s human nature. Acting on that aggression means you have no impulse control. Today, you’re going to be knocking your opponent off the log and into the water. This is your only chance to act like animals. Savor it because you’re not going to be afforded this opportunity every time you don’t get along.”

Lauren complained. “What if your opponent is not participating?”

“Way to be subtle,” I muttered.

“Then you’ll help me demonstrate,” Vivian said.

Vivian and Lauren went inside the hut, where the lockers designated for our swimming attire were, and changed into their bathing suits, gearing up for the event. After they came back out and started to put on their life

jackets, Lauren's cheeks reddened when her shaking hands couldn't put it on, forcing Vivian to help buckle her up.

I flung my hood over my head again as Mike lumbered onto the boulder quietly.

"I'm sorry about what happened to you last week." He scratched the back of his neck. "You offered me another chance at playing dodgeball. I got hurt. You got hurt, again. It couldn't have gone any worse."

"A giant mess," I agreed. "But I don't see why you're apologizing, Mike."

"You didn't deserve to get hurt," he explained. "And I don't know if you remember, but a couple of years ago . . ."

I left you stranded up in that tree?

"I remember," I said.

"I'm sorry about that too."

"I appreciate that, Mike."

Vivian and Lauren flipped over the log at the end of the platform and slid it into the water. Once settled inside, they stood up within the confines of the narrow log boat, testing the balance of the oars within their grip. The logs were heavy, so the occupants could move however they wanted to knock the other person into the water.

Mike and I were too far out to hear what Vivian was saying, so we hopped off the boulder and went to stand beside the rest of the Beavers. I didn't want to miss a thing. Lauren visibly shrank with each word from Vivian.

"Lauren must have a death wish," Mike muttered.

"I'm pretty sure she wants to suck up to her. You know, for that counselor job next summer or whatever."

"But she got rejected last year by Vivian. There were multiple crying fits but . . . rumor has it that Vivian went on a rampage last summer after

Lauren asked her out for the millionth time, and tore down a cabin. I think it was your cabin, actually. You're number thirteen, right?"

With one gigantic hit to the shoulder, Lauren was flung out of the log by at least four yards, grunting in the most ridiculous fashion—until her head went under water for a moment.

"I wasn't ready," she shouted, wiping her eyes and spitting water out of her mouth.

"I asked you three times," Vivian said.

"You swung when you knew I was blinking!"

"Fine. Let's say I accept that excuse." Vivian reached out to grab Lauren's hand. Before she pulled her up, she wore a feral grin. "Would you like to go another round?"

Lauren spluttered. Vivian spoke, "I take that as a no."

Now that the demonstration was over, the rest of the Beavers paired up and tended to their own logs. Since I was not part of the exercise, there was an even number of campers. I stayed a few steps away from the platform until I was sure that Gwen wasn't partnered up with Lauren, and once Gwen hopped onto the same log as Mike, I returned to the boulder to watch the violence from afar and got around to eating my apple. Vivian sat at the edge of the platform, legs beneath the water, watching her campers like a hawk.

Seeing as she made it her mission to block my way out of camp, I had only one option left, and that was to expose my phone to a counselor or someone in authority who wasn't *her*. As if sensing my thoughts, Vivian glanced over her shoulder in time to see me take a bite out of my contraband apple. I winked and chewed happily because she'd already proved that she wasn't going to do a damn thing about it.

"You've sat long enough," Vivian said. "Up, bathing suit—you're going in the water."

It was one of the tightest things that I'd ever put on. The awkwardness of the fabric of the bathing suit was a creative punishment. The only good thing was we had our own lockers inside the hut by the lake with our own swimming supplies, so we didn't have to wear them all day long under our camp shirts and shorts.

I waddled uncomfortably toward where Vivian stood on the platform. Without a word, she tossed the life jacket into my arms, and when it was over my head, she spun me around and tightened the straps with a tough tug. When we flipped over the log and slipped it into the water, that's when it hit me that we were going to actively *whack* each other. My muscles barely held up my arms, never mind heavy oars.

Vivian hopped into the log boat with ease. She turned to me and offered her hand—a Trojan horse gesture? Luring me into a false sense of security before she pummeled me with all her might? I took her hand, marveling at the white crescent-moon design on her black painted nails, and stepped into the log. If Vivian hadn't gripped my forearm and held me steady, the rocking back and forth would have thrown us overboard. I missed the warmth and softness of her hand when she let go and handed me an oar.

I gripped the oar and braced myself for a wallop. Vivian, out of nowhere, casually sat down and untangled the cushion from the oar. "You don't think I'd set out to intentionally harm an already injured camper, do you?"

"Thank God."

"Just because you're injured doesn't mean you can't at least float in the lake for a while."

"That's . . . thoughtful of you."

"Do you feel different out here?" she asked. "It's the first time since you've come to camp that you don't look like you want to punch everything and anything. You seem relaxed. Steadier. Your shoulders aren't hunched.

There isn't that annoying frown on your face. You're smiling. Don't tell me you're now content at camp?"

My fellow Beavers were splashing and crashing over one another in the lake, and it was at least entertaining.

"Do I still want to leave? Hell yes."

"But . . . ?"

"But . . . it's not so bad being out on the lake." My body wasn't rigid and my muscles didn't spasm in anticipation of threats. From Vivian's brown eyes to the clear lake there wasn't a hint of greenery. She spotted my safe spot before I did. If camp was like this twenty-four-seven I wouldn't have minded staying in the least. "Do we get to come down to the lake a lot?"

Vivian dragged her oar through the water and then quickly whipped it up, splashing me in the face. "I think we might in the future."

We relaxed in the log boat, floating to the VIP section of the lake with the best view. There was a sweetness to her under all that antagonism and the fancy words she used. At the end of the day, she wasn't that much older than us, one or two years at most, but she carried herself like a true adult who knew what she was doing.

Even so, I still needed to show that phone to someone in authority who wasn't her to get myself kicked out of camp.

Five

When I woke up the next morning, there was no desire to pull more pranks by moving furniture or placing ketchup in the bathroom again. My idea was simple: wake up, fetch my phone from under the floorboard, walk around camp, and *job done*. My temporary stay would be no more. It was inevitable that I'd be kicked out. All I had to do was confess to breaking into the shed and then I'd be gone. I had proof, after all.

I could have called my dad at any point, but the problem was Mom. I didn't want to create a shit storm in their already volatile relationship. Getting in trouble at camp meant my mom would have to deal with the fallout; she was the point of contact. Spending the rest of the summer with her and Ethan on their honeymoon? It didn't sound fun. But it was a hell of a lot better than putting Dad in the middle of this mess. He'd already saved me too many times.

The sound of shuffling around the room woke me up. The noise encouraged me to snuggle farther into my pillow. It was my last day, I was going to sleep in regardless of the repercussions. My cabinmates left and got their breakfast, obviously not concerned about my stomach. I didn't account for said mates to be so pushy about the morning arts and crafts activity.

"Come on, Emma, get up," Lauren groaned an hour later, tapping my leg. "They punish by cabin, not camper if someone's late."

"We can't force her up," Abby said.

"We'll all be punished because of her. You know that, right? Emma?"

I wiggled away from her. “Cool story, bro.”

“Get the hell up.” She pinched me. Really hard. I kicked out boldly, hoping to get her in the face. “I’m not kidding. I will . . .”

“Touch me again, and I’ll end you. I’ll ask Vivian to do another logrolling session. There’s so much animosity in this cabin. Can’t you feel it?” I said.

“Lauren, let’s just go,” Abby urged.

My bunk shook when Lauren jumped off. There were a few more minutes of shuffling until they left, slamming the door shut behind them. I fell back to sleep rather quickly. It was short lived. One moment I was dreaming about following a rabbit down a hole, violating some copyright from the movie *Alice in Wonderland*, the next, there was an earthquake. My eyes snapped open as I flung the covers off and swung my body over the edge, breathing far too heavily for it to be healthy. Something grabbed my foot through the sheet, making me screech.

“Oh my God, hell, it’s haunted!” I yelled, jumping off the bed, tumbling to the side.

“And I’ll continue to haunt your dreams if you don’t go to arts and crafts,” a familiar, silky voice said.

“Black,” I grunted, watching as she played with some key chain. The angle of her hand changed so the thing with wild googly eyes looked down in unison with hers at me, sprawled on the ground. “Is that a beaver?”

She made it snap its mouth. “Indeed, it is.”

“That’s creepy as hell. Or cute? I don’t know.”

Vivian stood up from Abby’s lower bunk and stalked toward the door. “Two minutes, get dressed.”

My phone. The plan. I could bypass this mess.

The door slammed shut behind her. I quickly tugged a clean camp shirt over my head and hopped around as I pulled on some shorts because I

wasn't risking her barging back in while I was in a state of undress.

After brushing my teeth, I pulled back the curtain and peeked out. Vivian leaned back against the railing of cabin's deck with closed eyes, looking both peaceful and beautiful. She was lost in her own world and she couldn't possibly intercept me getting the phone. I could walk out of the cabin without her knowing if she stayed right in that spot. I spun around and crawled under Lauren's bed. My hand slid along the floor until it came to the edge of the loose floorboard and I pried it out of the way. Reaching inside the hole, I pulled out my spare hoodie and flopped it onto the floor. As it unfurled, my lips turned downward. There was nothing inside.

"Time's up," Vivian said impatiently, already by the door, watching me.

Instead of throwing the hoodie away and onto the bed like I should have, I pulled it over my head. "Let's go."

"You're acting strangely."

"Your face is strange."

She ignored my comment and walked ahead, muttering something under her breath.

The sun was blinding, and I was freaking out because my phone was missing. Lauren was the only person I could think of who might have taken it, but how did she even know it was there? Maybe she wanted to speed the process along and kick me out sooner personally? Not that I could blame Lauren after our daily morning routine. Abby wasn't a suspect. Not yet, at least.

The only other person I could think of who knew of the phone and had the means to steal it was Vivian. I studied her from behind, looking to see where she could've hidden it. There were no pockets in her shorts, no bulge in her socks, and she wasn't carrying around any extra bags or anything. In an odd way, it made sense if she'd taken it. Maybe that entire conversation the day before about being disappointed in my attempts to get out of camp

were to rile me up and set me up for disappointment when I went up a level and used the phone to get kicked out.

“Stop checking me out.” She sighed.

I couldn’t stop the snort, and Vivian stopped abruptly. “Ow?” I rubbed my face, taking a couple of steps back. “Can I see the key chain?”

“No. You’re the most annoying person,” she said.

“*You* dragged me out of bed at who knows what time . . .”

“Eight o’clock,” she supplied.

“Treated me like a dog, stole some of my possessions, and now restrict me the fun of learning how to replicate that adorable beaver-sock-key-chain thingy?” I finished my rant, giving her my best foot stomp. “Who the hell do you think you are?”

An eyebrow quirked at me, and she looked smug as hell. She let go of my arm. “Daughter of the camp director, that’s who. I’m a lot of things, Emma, but a thief isn’t one of them,” Vivian said. “You seem stressed.”

“Oh, you know, I never did get to take out my frustrations on anyone yesterday.”

“How tragic.”

“How do you think I would’ve fared?” I asked.

“You wouldn’t have been sent to the infirmary . . . you would’ve been sent to the morgue.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “You know, Vivian, despite that vague death threat, I think you really like me.”

“And how did you come to that conclusion?”

“I’m still here at camp.”

Other than the fact that arts and crafts was held too early in the morning, it was the one activity that didn’t make me panic, as long as I avoided the larger than life windows that had a stunning view of the entire camp. Inside the building there was a colorful mess that wouldn’t let my gaze linger out

the window for too long. Each group had a shelf in the big unit that was dedicated to their projects. Newspapers stretched across the long table that was in the middle of the room, but there were no jars with paintbrushes or trays full of paint—there was a bunch of socks and buttons.

Mr. Black had hired Marissa, an art student, for the summer for arts and crafts. I liked her. I truly did. Then she ruined it by announcing that I was on my first formal warning for being late, and if I got three, I'd be kicked out of the camp. While getting kicked out of camp was precisely what I wanted, that didn't mean I wanted to get dressed down in front of everyone.

"We've already begun, find a seat and start making a sock animal that you can attach to these key chains. You can collect them when you leave," Marissa said. "Remember, the puppet has to be small enough to attach to the key chain!"

Taking a seat as quickly as possible, I tried not to interrupt the work already in place.

"Stop with the puppy dog eyes," Vivian whispered, sitting down beside me. "It's beneath you. Maybe it's a good thing that you're in arts and crafts."

I pulled a sock from a bucket. "I know I'm going to regret asking, but why?"

"You need to work on expressing yourself."

"Hah-hah, very funny."

Starting below the heel and cutting the ankle part of the sock from the foot part, I snipped it, trying to make the rounded curve for an owl's head. My hands were shaky, but I didn't nip my fingers. The opening of the sock would be the bottom of the owl's body. The toe part of the sock cut away fine, the very tip, and it formed two teeny-tiny wings for my owl. With the remaining section of the sock, I cut up the

side to open it up, and then cut a rough circle that formed the base of the owl.

“Cute.”

“It’s a deformed ostrich or something, Gwen. Not cute.”

She prodded me on the shoulder and slipped me an apple under the table. “From now on, I’m dragging you out of bed—no more warnings. You can’t get yourself kicked out. And don’t get caught with that apple. I’m going to ask you something once, okay?”

“It doesn’t sound like a nice question.” I took the body part of the sock and turned the right sides together. Gwen diligently handed me a thread and needle. “Don’t ask.”

“Are you trying to get yourself kicked out?” she asked.

“Dammit, Gwen.”

“What?”

“I told you not to ask.”

The needle pricked my thumb, and I glanced around to see if anyone other than Gwen noticed. She good-naturedly thumbed behind her toward the sink and proceeded to prod me until I found the strength to get up from the stool. Most of the Beavers group acted like meerkats, necks straining to see exactly what I was doing, except Lauren who was too busy studiously making her sock animal beneath the table board. Or she was too busy going through my phone.

The cold water sprayed against my thumb, washing away the blood.

“Emma,” Vivian called, her tone too casual. “You need buttons for the eyes.”

I chewed on the inside of my cheek. “I think I’ll stick to one eye. Name him Mike or something.”

“Hey,” responded an offended boy.

“I meant Mike Wazowski,” I explained, plucking the box from the shelf.

“Who?” Mike asked, blinking at me stupidly.

I studied him for a moment. “Nope. If you don’t know who that is, you don’t deserve to know. Stop looking at me like that. It’s your own fault, you uncultured swine.”

The lid came off the little box and as it did, I tripped over something invisible, and the plastic lid flew like a Frisbee in one direction, followed by at least one hundred buttons pooling on the table and around my feet. Finally, the apple slid from my hoodie pocket. Marissa let her disapproval be known. My body stilled, then slowly, I raised my head and looked at her, taking in the wide eyes and parted lips, like she didn’t know what the hell to do.

I bent down. “I’m going to . . .”

“Emma,” Marissa said.

“I’m sorry. I’m *really* clumsy.”

“She really is,” Vivian said.

“I don’t need a character witness,” I said, throwing a handful of buttons into the box and missing entirely so that they fell onto Marissa’s shoe.

“Maybe I shouldn’t do this. I won’t invade your sock because that’d be weird.”

“You’re on kitchen duty,” Marissa blurted, shocking everyone as she plucked the apple from the ground. “I knew I heard crunching noises this week. I knew it.”

My finger tapped against a button. “What?”

“Yes, that. For a . . . week. There. Now you all know to not mess with me . . . because I’m a—”

“Cruel, cruel woman,” I muttered.

“Two weeks,” Marissa said. “No food outside of the canteen. Be on time for activities. You broke the rules, these are your consequences.”

“Today is *not* my day.”

“Two and a half weeks.”

“What the fu—”

Gwen’s hand covered my mouth, preventing me from cursing. Marissa shook her head, walked to the side of the room with the apple in her hand, and dropped it in the trash can.

Gwen brought me back to the table so that I sat across from Vivian, who looked much too delighted at the situation. I quickly sewed a beak and one eye onto the owl and shoved it in the counselor’s direction.

“Send that owl to me when you get me an invitation to Hogwarts and out of this camp.”

“No,” Vivian said. “You’re stuck here forever.”

“You want me here to make you more of these owl key chains,” I teased.

“Hmm. No, that’s not it.”

“Why, then?” I inquired.

“Does there need to be a reason?” she asked.

“Absolutely.”

“What’s the reason for you wanting to leave camp?”

There was no way in hell that I’d admit to being afraid of literally everything there was about Camp Mapplewood. “All right.”

“You’re going to give me an answer?” Vivian asked.

“Nope. I’m standing down. I was serious, though. You can keep little Mike there as a reminder of me when I’m out of here,” I said.

“A token of your dishonor.”

“Exactly.”

We finished the sock-animal key chains half an hour earlier than anticipated and sat waiting to see what we would do with the remaining time as Vivian and Marissa chatted outside. Vivian sauntered back in and

positioned herself in the space in front of the long table. Prolonging the silence, she dragged her gaze around the room, as if looking for inspiration for something to keep us occupied, until eventually her eyes landed on me. That seemed to spark an idea.

“Draw each other,” she said as she gathered pages from the edge of the table and handed them out to each camper. “Use any style you want. Realistic, cartoony . . . you’ve got twenty minutes. Your time starts now.”

Gwen and I spun around in our chairs to face one another and began to draw. It was my favorite activity at camp, but that didn’t mean that I was any good at it. Soon after we started, I gave up and posed with a pencil between my upper lip and nose. Gwen took it seriously, peeking up at me briefly and then returning her attention to the page below.

Twenty minutes flew by, giving us ten minutes to clean up so as to not leave a mess for the next group of campers to come in. As we cleaned, Vivian gave us one key chain each. Vivian gathered the pages, not bothering to flick through them, and ordered me to pin them up on the empty bulletin board to show off our artwork for the week. It was like I was four years old and buzzing with energy, wanting to show off the work I did that day to my mom and dad.

Gwen’s depiction of me was scarily accurate. The picture was a true reflection of my face, somewhat-healing black eye and all. I put Gwen’s drawing first because it was the best of the bunch. I pinned the rest up on the board, subjectively choosing the order. When I got to the last page, it was as though I swallowed a fire pill and forgot to drink something cool because the inside of my stomach raged and sizzled. The word *LOSER* was stabbed into the page, drawn harshly with deep indents. It was the title of the piece, which showed one girl drawing another one who was covered in green and had black hair that was rattlesnakes, *Gwen* hastily scribbled beside her.