

We're returning to camp, to new friendships, to songs and s'mores around the campfire...and to the scene of our crime.

I lean between the front seats to get a better look out the windshield. "There it is," I say as we drive under the large camp pine lake sign. It's exactly as I remember it, the name carved into the wood.

Glancing down, I trace one finger across identical bold lettering on the pamphlet I received earlier this year. Kayla and I both got letters asking us to consider becoming counselors-in-training.

We're back.

My best friend of fifteen years glances at me as the cab crawls to a stop. She pouts her glossy lips, which makes her eyebrows pull together. "Does it seem, I don't know, smaller to you?"

"Everything seems bigger when you're a kid, Kayla," I remind her. The last time we were here was nine years ago.

Compared to the other camps nearby, which really aren't that near, we're the smallest. But the best. Camp Pine Lake takes girls and boys ages seven to ten. Kayla and I spent two epic summers here when we were seven and eight.

We didn't come back when we were nine or ten. We didn't dare.

But we're seventeen now. It's time.

Kayla squeals as she opens the cab door. "Yes! This summer is going to be amazing." She winks at me. "We can even stay up late this time."

“We stayed up late when we were campers.”

The very second, I open the other passenger door and we lose the AC, I feel like I’m going to melt. At least our uniforms are shorts and T-shirts. Texas summers can be brutal. I forgot how insane the heat is.

“Yeah, but this time we’re actually allowed to.”

Kind of. “We have to stay in the same cabin as the kids,” I remind Kayla. It feels like more of a lateral move.

Kayla grins. “Esme, we’ll be in our own teeny room, though. A bedroom in a bedroom. We’ll have some privacy.” Her eyes flit over the grounds. “I hope they have some cute counselors here.” There’s my bestie. Kayla is boy crazy, loves pink and heels, and falls in love about every three minutes.

We thank the cab driver, then pay and tip him as he removes our bags for us. I lick my lips, swallowing as I take a look around. I’m really back. I feel a little ping in my stomach. I reach for Kayla’s arm as she goes to pick up her pink camo suitcase. “Kay . . . are we doing the right thing coming back?”

She groans. “Don’t overthink it. We’re going to be fine. Every- thing is going to be fine.” Nodding, I pretend to agree. “We’re not kids anymore.” “Exactly. No one here knew us back then, so no one knows what happened. Chillax.”

“Do people still say ‘chillax’?” I let go of her and smile as she glares. “All right. I’ll chillax. We’ll be fine. The last of my nerves have officially gone, I promise.”

What a stupid promise.

“I did not miss the Texas heat,” she says, her shoulders slumping.

I wave my hand in front of my face like a lunatic. “Can air be on fire? Because I think it is. Why has no one put more research into outdoor AC? Look, there they all are. The counselors and the other CITs.”

Kayla squeals and we drag our suitcases across the grass to the group gathered outside a cabin. How can they stand to be exposed in this heat?

“We need to find Andy,” Kayla tells me.

Andy Marson is our boss. His name is on all the starter paper- work we were sent. He’s the one in charge. Kayla and I have been paired together and assigned a counselor we’ll do most of our activities with, along with our small group of campers.

“Which one do you think is Andy?” she asks.

I scan the group. “My money is on the redheaded guy with the clipboard.”

He lifts his chin as we approach, and his pale eyes light up. “Ah, our final CITs are here. Kayla Price and Esme Randal?”

“Kayla,” she says, lifting her hand. “I’m Esme,” I say.

Andy scribbles something on his clipboard. “Glad everyone is here. We’re going to have a blast this summer, but first we need to get to know each other. Then I want to run through some rules and safety information.”

He motions to two girls behind him. “This is Rebekah and Tia. And over there are Olly and Jake. They’re all CITs too. You’ll have your free evenings with them.” Andy then rattles off some rules, but I know Kayla isn’t listening. Her eyes are firmly on the two very cute guys standing behind Andy. Olly and Jake.

Camp just got a lot more interesting.

Rebekah and Tia step up to us with identical toothy smiles. That's the only thing similar about them. Rebekah is tall, with pale skin and shoulder-length ash-brown hair. She looks kind and a little bit lost, with her gentle, nervous blue eyes. Tia is petite, with black skin and large brown eyes. Her silky dark hair is so long it almost touches her butt.

"Hi," Rebekah says with a Southern twang. "We're going to have the best summer," Tia says.

"Absolutely. Do you know which cabin is yours yet?" I ask. "Rebekah and I are in Verbena. You're in Bluebonnet, the one right next to the food hall." Tia leans in, and I realize we're about the same height. "They're kind of small, but the beds look comfortable enough. Me and Rebekah are sharing a cabin with those two, and they're a little scary."

Tia points at two older girls who are full counselors. They both have dark heavy bangs and short bobs. One is pale like me, and the other has a gorgeous olive tan, the kind that Kayla pays for every six weeks.

"Mary and Catalina," Tia tells me. "Otherwise known as the Buttercups. Like the Powerpuff Girls."

I laugh. That's exactly who they look like. "Why are they scary?" I ask.

"Kind of intense when they're talking to you. You'll see what I mean."

"I wonder who we'll report to," I ask, looking around.

"Oh, I heard Andy talking. You guys report to Cora. She seems super nice. I think she just went into the food hall. It's kind of a mess in there, with a lot of equipment that needs sorting before the campers arrive. Final checks apparently."

"You get the impression that this is, like, the tenth final check?" I ask, watching Andy rushing from cabin to cabin with his clipboard.

Rebekah and Kayla are chatting, having a similar conversation to ours, but Kayla is doing all the talking. My bestie can talk. Rebekah seems kind of overwhelmed.

Tia laughs and pulls me to the side. “Rebekah’s from Kansas and applied to be a CIT because she wants to gain confidence before college. She’s so sweet I feel like I’m getting a cavity just talking to her.”

“Well, we can definitely help her out,” I say. “We get our evenings off together. I wonder if we’ll be allowed to leave camp.”

Tia groans. “Apparently not. But I did a little research before I arrived, and there’s a shortcut through the forest, right by the bramble bush at the side of the lake. It takes you to the edge of town, and there are no lights up that way.”

I remember the shortcut. But I don’t want Tia to know I was a camper here. My eyes widen. “I have heart palpitations already.”

“You don’t want to come?” she asks.

“Oh no, I’ll come.”

She smirks. “Do you scare easily?”

“No, but it’s not often that I walk through an unfamiliar forest at night. Kayla is going to freak out.”

“Why is Kayla going to freak out?”

“I’ll tell you another time.”

Kayla is so scared of any kind of danger. It’s a fear that not even extensive therapy has managed to calm. She doesn’t need to be worrying about sneaking through a dark forest yet.

“CITs, if you can finish unpacking and then head back out to the fire for lunch, we’ll eat and then go to the multiuse cabin so I can assign you a job!” Andy shouts, looking at something on his clipboard.

Tia cuts me a look. “He’s going to be a nightmare.”

Yeah.

Kayla and I head to our cabin to unpack. Kayla stands in front of the full-length mirror in our little room. The separate room gives us a little privacy while also making it easy to keep an eye on the campers.

We’ll be sharing a bunk bed and a minuscule dresser since the cabin is so small.

I take the top bunk because Kayla doesn’t like heights.

The cabin smells like wood and pine trees. Big surprise, right? The bunks look new, not like the old ones with names and private jokes scribbled in Sharpie on the sides.

“Which one do you like?” Kayla asks, and because I know her, I know she’s referring to Jake and Olly.

“That didn’t take you long.”

She arches one perfectly shaped eyebrow in the mirror and fluffs her blond hair. Kayla is gorgeous, with fake tanned skin, huge blue eyes, thick lips and a killer figure with curves in all the best places. I’m pretty sure I’m going to look like a middle schooler—petite, skinny and pale—in the camp uniform, especially next to her. Texas might give me a nice tan, though.

“Which one, babe?” she asks.

“Hos before bros,” I tell her, shoving my few belongings in the closet. I place my parents’ picture on top.

“Fine. I like Jake.”

Tall, sandy blond hair, blue eyes and built like a football player, Jake is definitely Kayla's type.

"Shocker," I say sarcastically. "Go for it."

Kayla has unpacked all her clothes and hung them neatly. "Summer's going to fly by, Esme. We have to move fast."

"So, does that mean you'll sneak out with me into town one night?"

Her eyes narrow. "Seriously? Nothing good ever happens when you sneak into a forest at night."

I give her a nudge. "Things are going to be different this summer. Please, you baby, there's nothing scary in the woods."