

THE COUNSELORS

JESSICA GOODMAN



PROLOGUE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER 1

Now

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Goldie!” someone calls.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You got it, golden girl.”

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

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

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

I hope that’s still true.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Those directors saved her ass.

Stu and Mellie pulled some strings for her.

She should rot in hell.

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

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

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

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

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