

No one else says anything until we swing around a woody bend and reach a darkened parking lot. Jen turns the car off and she and Callie get out. Joey and I are stuck in the back until they pull their seats all the way flat for us to crawl out.

Joey points out the window at Kevin's approaching figure. Callie leaps toward him and mauls his face with hers. My nose wrinkles automatically. "That," Joey says while shaking his head, "is what you encouraged."

I climb from the back of the car, watching as Callie and Kevin disappear toward the soft orange glow of fire. Turning to Jen, I point in the same direction. "I guess we go this way?"

She winces. "Sorry. I'm meeting someone too." Her head turns right as another car pulls into the parking lot and a tall guy with a head full of curly black hair jumps out of the back. She waves enthusiastically before spinning back to me. "Sorry," she says again. "I figured you'd have Callie and Joey to hang out with. I didn't know Kevin would be here..."

I shake my head and wave a hand. "Don't worry about it. I'll be fine. You have fun."

She doesn't wait and runs off giggling toward her *friend*.

Behind me, Joey grunts.

So much for not being worried about being alone with him anymore. He started out the night in a bad mood; it wouldn't surprise me if he stays that way. Especially now that it's just the two of us.

"So, this way?" I point again toward the smell of fire and the curling stacks of smoke. He nods, stepping in front. "Yeah. It gets kind of crazy, though, so watch out."

Crazy isn't the word for what we step into.

Past the parking lot, through the grove, the lakefront is filled with kids our age. Tents speckle the sand, along with fires of all different sizes. The black water glistens from their glow, and the air ripples with music and shouting and premature fireworks coming from somewhere I can't place.

Even if I wanted to find Callie and Jen, it'd be impossible in this mess.

*Boom. Boom. Boom.*

Instinctively, I step closer to Joey as a trio of fireworks blasts through the air from the middle of the water. Joey's arm circles my waist as he attempts to steady me.

Hands out for balance, I inhale. "Thanks."

Straining my eyes, I might be able to make out a boat of some sort way out there. But everything's so dark and hazy with the smoke all around.

He steps back a few inches. "Come on."

We weave through bodies stretched out across the sand, girls in bikinis on beach towels and a group of guys playing the most intense game of beach volleyball I've ever seen. Under a weeping willow up on the grass a big group is gathered and someone yells, "Go! Go! Go!" and pumps their fist into the air. The group sticks together too tightly for me to see what's happening, but I don't think it's necessarily a secret.

By the time Joey stops walking, my ears buzz against my skull and blisters form on the backs of my feet where my sandals rub. Hands on my hips, I lean forward and yell loud enough for him to hear. "Where are we going?"

He gestures vaguely ahead. We leave behind the majority of people and the space between fires gets farther and farther. Maybe he's taking me away from everyone else so

he can push me into the lake without any witnesses. He's pretending to tolerate me long enough to not be the main suspect in my eventual drowning. Or maybe he's as wary of the crowds as I am and wants to find an emptier spot. At this point, I wouldn't be too surprised either way.

As if reading my mind, he suddenly stops and turns his head toward me. "I'm not leaving the beach to murder you or try to kiss you or anything."

Interesting that he lumps those two very different scenarios together. Really interesting.

One of my eyebrows shoots upward, questioning.

"I happen to know of a better spot to watch the fireworks. And since we both got ditched, I'm letting you in on my secret."

In spite of myself, I grin.

Joey leads us around an overflowing trashcan with honeybees circling the back of it. He points ahead to a bench covered in sand near the edge of the blocked-off sand dunes. I follow.

"So that stuff my dad was saying? You know, earlier at my house?"

I squint. "Yeah."

Joey ruffles his hair. "He's not, like, mean or anything. He's crazy about me making something out of myself. He wants me to be super successful and own a business like his. Exactly like his."

I nod. "He wants you to take over his shop?" The day Joey helped me find the stationery to send to my parents stays burned in my brain. His voice hits the same frustrated tone now as he explains his dad's expectations.

“My mom’s kind of like that,” I say. “She doesn’t even expect me to be successful, though. It’s kind of like she thinks the opposite. But that’s the whole reason I’m here in Texas, because she’s scared I’ll end up a complete loser or something. I guess that’s why she wants me to go to boarding school.”

Joey laughs softly. We sit on the bench, and I tuck my feet under myself.

“That sucks. My parents would never send me anywhere. They’re too afraid I wouldn’t come back. They wouldn’t even let me go off on my own when we visited Brazil last summer.”

I shake my head. “You’d come back. Believe me.”

He stretches his arms behind his body. “Don’t you hate it here?”

Combing the ends of my hair with my fingers, I stop to think. Do I hate it here?

No.

I hate that I was forced to come. But Ally and her family, and Callie and Jen, even Joey—they make it better than what I had in Washington. It’s the fact that Mom left me no choice that needles at my nerves every time I’m reminded of how my summer *should* have gone.

I scoop up a round pebble near my feet, and rub at the smooth spots with my thumb. “I don’t hate it here. I hate feeling like I’m my family’s unwanted afterthought.”

“What’s it like having so many siblings?”

Rearing my arm back, I toss the pebble as hard as I can into the water. It lands with an echoing *plonk* as it sinks to the bottom of the lake.

“Sometimes it’s really fun. Like on holidays when everyone’s home together, we don’t need anyone else to come over because we already have a full team for anything.

Board games get really crazy because we're all so competitive and my twin brothers always cheat."

He laughs, warm and happy-sounding. I watch him a second too long before tearing my gaze away to speak again. "What about being an only child? Do you love it?"

He smirks. "Will you hate me if I say yes?"

*Boomboomboom. Boom.*

The explosions start with a burst of white and red light directly over the water, interrupting our conversation. They pause long enough for me to consider his question.

"No." I shake my head. Being the last one stuck at home with my parents has sometimes felt like being an only child. It'd be a lot simpler if it didn't come with the weight of everyone else's accomplishments hanging over me at all times.

We lean against the bench and tilt our heads to the sky as light explodes above us.