

CHAPTER ONE

HANNAH

The bugle call came at dawn. I sprang upright in bed and covered my ears, trying to block out the off-key notes. The room was still dark. It took a few seconds to remember where I was. Camp. *I didn't ask to be at this camp*, I thought as the bugle blared. It was a waste of my spring break.

Angela spoke from the bunk across from me.

“What?” I asked, uncovering my ears.

“Make it stop, Hannah.”

“How do you suggest I do that?”

“Going to breakfast is the only way to make it stop,” Sarah said. She rolled out of the bunk below Angela.

“She’s right,” Koko said from below me.

We got dressed and stumbled out of the cabin. I shielded my eyes from the morning sun on the way over to the dining hall.

Once there, I spotted Alexis Martinez, who was already in the front of the line. She was in my class, but we didn’t travel in the same social circles. I wanted to change that.

I smiled and waved at Alexis. She smiled back. I took that as an invitation to leave the girls at the back of the line and go stand with Alexis.

“Morning,” I said, cutting in front of Alexis.

“Morning.”

After we grabbed our breakfasts, we had our pick of empty tables. “Let’s sit in the corner,” I said.

The girls arrived about ten minutes later. Angela dropped her tray on the tabletop before plopping down on the other side of me.

The camp director came on the microphone. “Good morning, kids,” he said in his booming ex-army sergeant voice. “It’s going to be hot on our last morning of camp. Make sure you drink lots of water.”

The director kept talking, but I stopped listening. Right now, it was a struggle for me to even keep my eyes open. *What time is it?* I didn't know. My watch was still back on the nightstand in the cabin. I nudged Angela and tapped my wrist. She looked down at her watch and muttered, "Seven thirty."

"It's too early," I groaned. "I'm sneaking to the cabin after breakfast and going back to sleep."

"Same," Angela said.

Then the director said something that made my ears perk up. "This morning, you will go canoeing. You will be dividing into pairs and spending some time paddling around the lake."

I immediately turned to my other side and grabbed Alexis's arm. Alexis smiled and nodded.

After Angela saw that, she pointed to Koko, leaving Sarah as the odd one out.

Sarah's eyes darted around seeking another familiar face in the crowded dining hall.

Alexis and I walked to the dock arm in arm. When we got there, we joined the line of kids waiting to climb into blue canoes. The line shrunk little by little. Finally, we stepped carefully into a canoe. It began wobbling. I put my hands out to the side to keep my balance. When we were both seated

with our life vests on, a camp counselor pushed us away from the dock.

Alexis and I spent the next half an hour paddling around the lake.

I tried to talk to Alexis about topics I found interesting, but she didn't know much about the things I liked.

"This is boring," I said and threw my paddle into the lake.

"Why did you do that?" Alexis asked, from the back of the boat.

I watched my paddle float away. "I was tired. But you can still paddle."

"I can't do all the paddling myself."

"Fine. Can you get us closer so I can grab my paddle?"

Alexis dipped her own paddle under the surface of the water. I heard her heavy breathing as she steered us in the right direction.

As we got nearer, I leaned over the left side of the canoe. The whole thing tilted.

"Careful," Alexis warned.

I ignored her. My fingertips reached out farther, dancing across the surface.

"You're about to tip us over."

"I've almost got it."

Finally, my fingertips grasped the handle of the paddle.

I pulled the paddle in and said, “Let’s go to shore.”

Tommy Reed was standing at the end of the dock when we arrived. He knelt and reached down to steady the back of the boat. I thought Tommy was helping us, like a gentleman. He wasn’t.

After we stood up, Tommy rocked the boat.

“Stop!” I screamed.

“Make me,” Tommy said.

Alexis grasped her paddle firmly. She swung it and smacked Tommy on his side. He let out a yelp, gave Alexis a dirty look, and ran off.

We climbed onto the dock. Unharméd.

“Are you okay?” Alexis asked me.

“Yes,” I said, shaking off my nerves. But I think I’ve had enough of this camp. Walk back to my cabin with me.”

Alexis and I tied up the canoe and returned our life vests to a nearby rack. Then we hurried back to my cabin.

“Tommy tried to tip us over!” I exclaimed when I barged in.

“You’re not wet,” Angela said, observing me from her bunk.

“Well, he wasn’t successful.”

Angela noticed Alexis slipping in behind me and sneered, “What’s she doing here?”

“I invited her. She stopped Tommy.”

“How?”

“She hit him with her paddle.”

“What?”

“Yeah, she hit him, and he ran away.” I looked at Alexis and asked her, “Can you wait outside a minute?”

“Sure,” she said. I watched her go. Her long black hair swished behind her.

After she left, I closed the door and turned back to the other members of my girl group—the Fab Four. “I have an idea,” I started. “We haven’t chosen a new group member this school year.”

“That’s because we’re the only cool kids in fifth grade,” Angela said.

“Alexis was amazing back at the docks. Let’s ask her to join our group.”

Angela pouted. “Then we won’t be the Fab Four anymore.”

“We can choose another name. We can be the Fierce Five.”

Koko and Sarah agreed immediately. But it took a few more minutes to convince Angela.

“Why do you want *her*?” Angela asked.

“Alexis is the one, trust me,” I said. “She is Meg’s only friend.” Angela groaned. “What?”

“Meg Greene is all we talk about, ever since she insulted you.”

“Angela, you don’t understand. Meg didn’t just insult *me*, but also the whole group.” Angela didn’t respond. “Don’t you see? This is how we get back at her. So, can Alexis join our group?”

“Fine,” Angela sighed.

I flung the door open and dragged Alexis back into the cabin. “We want you to hang out with us.”

“But camp’s over. We’re leaving soon,” Alexis said.

“No, you don’t understand. We want you to join our new group—the Fierce Five—and hang out with us at school.”

Alexis smiled.

I took that as a yes. “Okay, let’s celebrate our newest member,” I said, grabbing my book bag and held it upside down over Sarah’s bed. Candy came raining out, showering the bed with lollipops, chocolate bars, and gum.

Angela, Koko, and Sarah dove their hands into the large pile, grabbing fistfuls of candy.

“Do you want something?” I asked Alexis.

“My parents don’t let me eat candy,” Alexis said.

“You’re kidding? What about Halloween?”

Alexis shook her head.

“Wow, they must be really strict.” I picked up a lollipop and twirled it between my fingers. “Here, this one’s for you.” I held out the lollipop to Alexis. She looked at the treat. “Take the sucker,” I said, shaking it in front of her face. “It’s got your name on it. Don’t worry, we won’t tell your parents. I promise. Your secret’s safe with us.”

The other girls nodded with full mouths.

Alexis took the sucker, peeled the plastic off, and shoved it in her mouth.

A little while later, parents started arriving to pick up their kids.

I had already arranged a ride home with Angela. Her dad dropped me off at my house and waited in the driveway until I got the front door unlocked and stepped inside.

“Hello?” I called out. No response came, not even an echo to greet me. I lived in this enormous house all alone.

CHAPTER TWO

MEG

I've never been a morning person. My mom knocked on my bedroom door at 7:00 A.M., but I ignored her and snuggled deeper under the covers. She came back a few minutes later and knocked louder. "Meg, get dressed. You have school today."

I groaned and forced my eyes open. This was my karma for sleeping in every day of spring break.

Sitting on the edge of my bed, I yawned and bent over to pick up some clothes off the floor.

“We’re running late. Grab a granola bar,” my mom said when I appeared in the kitchen. “Are those clean jeans?”

I shrugged.

“Well, there’s no time to change,” my mom said, keys in hand. “Are you ready to go?”

“Can you drive me today?”

“No, I can’t be late for work, Meg. I have an important surgery at the hospital.” She glanced at her watch and added, “If you hurry, you can still catch the bus.”

I snatched a granola bar and my book bag and shuffled out the front door with my mom on my heels.

On the way to the bus stop, I noticed some daffodils—a sign of spring.

I stopped and picked three for my teacher, Ms. Mallory. A rabbit was munching on some grass nearby. “Hey there, little guy,” I whispered, making no sudden movements. The rabbit looked at me. His nose twitched, but he didn’t hop away.

Suddenly there was a loud sound like thunder. The rabbit darted off into the trees. I looked up and saw a flash of yellow go by—the bus.

I jumped to my feet. “Wait for me!” I hollered, waving my flowers in the air. The bus didn’t stop or even slow down. It never did.

I chased the bus. It grew smaller and smaller until it disappeared around the corner, but I kept running.

Five minutes later, I dashed into Garrett Grove Elementary, sprinted down the hall, and raced into my classroom.

The kids in room 109 were chatting and laughing with their friends when I flew in. I wasn’t late.

Ms. Mallory sat behind her desk, ignoring everyone. I put my hands on my hips and caught my breath. Then I strolled over to Ms. Mallory and stuck out my fistful of battered daffodils. She jumped slightly. “Oh, thank you, Meg,” she said. “You can leave those here on my desk.”

After leaving the flowers with Ms. Mallory, I saw Hannah sitting at her desk. Other girls were standing there talking to her. It was a familiar sight. Except, today, Alexis was one of the girls. She was my friend. Not Hannah’s. *Why is she over there?*

I stumbled across the room and stood a few feet away from the group.

Alexis smiled at me.

“How was your break?” I asked her.

“Good.”

“What did you do?”

“She was with us,” Hannah said, smirking. “We were all at camp together.”

I thought that was weird. I wanted to ask Alexis more, but I had no interest in being anywhere near Hannah. So, I spun on my heels and marched over to the classroom windows like I was following orders from myself to get away from those girls.

As I left, I heard Hannah mention Tommy’s name and something about getting revenge.

I stood at the middle window and gazed outside until Ms. Mallory blew her red whistle. It was time for class.

Turning to go back to my seat, I heard a loud honking sound.

I looked around for Tommy because he always made a honking sound when he blew his nose. But Tommy wasn’t blowing his nose. *How odd.* I heard the noise again. This time, I could tell where it came from.

Garrett Grove was like most schools, except it had a courtyard. The school formed a rectangular wall around it. My classroom was one of the lucky rooms that had a view of the courtyard.

The honking sound was coming from the courtyard. I looked out. Nothing appeared strange at first. On my left, a small pond sat in one corner. My eyes traveled from the pond over to the dogwood trees that grew in the middle. Pretty pink flowers would bloom on them soon. Benches sat underneath the trees. Grass covered the rest of the courtyard, and bushes grew under some classroom windows.

Then, something caught my eye. There was movement near the bushes across from my classroom. Two geese. One goose was parked on a nest, while the other one stood nearby and turned his head back and forth.

“There’s a goose outside, sitting on a nest,” I said. Then I turned around and realized that Ms. Mallory had already started a math lesson. Oops!

Ms. Mallory frowned, but the class jumped up and crowded around me. We all stared out at the geese.

Ms. Mallory hesitated and then joined us. She stood behind all the kids for a few seconds before turning and heading for the phone near the classroom door. She picked it up and dialed a number.

After the call, the principal, Mr. Wilder, came on the intercom with an announcement.

“Students and teachers, please pardon this interruption. I am canceling all morning recesses in the courtyard today. Teachers, please hold morning recess in the classroom. Afternoon recess, behind the school, will continue as usual. Staff, please check your email at lunch for more information. Thank you.”

Ms. Mallory listened politely to the announcement. The class groaned and complained, but her face remained flat. “All right, children. Return to your seats,” she said.

Everyone chatted about the geese and the announcement on the way back to their seats.

“This is horrible,” I overheard Hannah tell Angela. “I wanted to sit on the benches at morning recess.” Then, without warning, Hannah whipped her head around and stared straight at me. “This is all your fault,” she hissed before narrowing her blue eyes and adding, “Goose Girl.”

