

EMMA

"And then something happened which changed Elizabeth Ann's life forever and ever!"

-Understood Betsy

"I can't believe I gave up my internship for this," moans Megan, staring glumly out the rain-streaked window.

Cassidy turns the windshield wipers on the minivan to the highest setting. "Whose idea was it, anyway?" she asks, scowling at the road ahead.

"C'mon, you guys!" Jess protests. "It's not that bad."

My friends have been needling Jess ever since we left Concord. Not that I blame them—I haven't seen this much rain since that soggy year I lived in England. It drizzled all week back at home, but Mother Nature really turned on the faucets when we crossed the border from Massachusetts into New Hampshire a couple of hours ago.

"Things won't seem so bad once it clears up," says Becca, who is calmly filing her nails.

I give her a sidelong glance. Becca's not usually this cheerful. I'm guessing her good mood is the result of the care package she got from Theo Rochester, her long-distance crush. He sent it care of Pies & Prejudice, Megan's grandmother's tea shop, where Becca has been working part-time after school. It's kind of our hangout—and by "our" I mean the mother-daughter book club that we started back in middle school that's been going strong ever since.

We all happened to be at the tea shop when the package arrived yesterday afternoon.

"Box of snakes?" Cassidy had asked, smirking.

Snakes are Theo Rochester's passion in life.

Becca had refused to take the bait. She'd just laughed and opened the box eagerly, pulling out a University of Minnesota T-shirt—the one she's now proudly wearing—some fudge, and a small stuffed gopher with an M on the front. Goldy Gopher is the university's mascot, as Becca has told us about a zillion times since she got her acceptance letter. A gopher isn't exactly the most inspiring mascot—it's not like a tiger or a bear or something—but Becca is so ridiculously happy about the fact that she's heading to Minneapolis for college this fall that no one wants to burst her bubble.

"Where are all the other cars?" asks Megan. "I haven't seen one for ages. It feels like we're in the middle of nowhere."

"That's because we *are* in the middle of nowhere," Cassidy replies, scanning the road ahead from under her baseball cap—her favorite Red Sox one, of course.

Jess suddenly lets out a screech. "There's the sign! On the left!"

"Sheesh, Jess, way to give me a heart attack!" Cassidy slows, flipping on the blinker, and a moment later we turn off onto a gravel road marked CAMP LOVEJOY.

She pulls into a parking area in front of a small log cabin. There's a sign over the front door that says OFFICE, but no lights are on inside, and as far as I can tell, there are no people, either.

Cassidy frowns. "Are you sure this is the right place? It seems kind of deserted."

"I thought for sure we were supposed to check in at the office," Jess replies. Pulling the hood of her rain jacket over her head, she opens the minivan door and hops out. "You guys wait here, I'll go check."

We watch as she picks her way gingerly across the puddle-pocked gravel, knocks on the door, peers through the window, knocks again, then looks over at us and shrugs.

"Nobody's there," she reports, climbing back in beside me again and shaking raindrops from the end of her long blonde braid.

"Oh good, we can go home," chirps Megan. "Maybe Wolfgang will still let me be an intern."

"Shut *up*, Megan," Jess snaps.

Megan was offered an internship at *Flash* magazine this summer, and even though the editors assured her that it wasn't her only chance and that she could take them up on the offer any time she wanted, and even though she signed up of her own free will to be a counselor here along with the rest of us, she's been lamenting her choice ever since we started our road trip this morning.

"I guess we should head down to the dining hall," Jess says, pointing Cassidy to where the road disappears into a forest. "We're kind of late, so maybe everyone else is here already."

The minivan lurches and swerves as Cassidy tries to avoid the potholes in the unpaved road. A moment later, we plunge into darkness. The sky is completely obscured by tall trees overhead. Tall, wet trees, their branches dripping nearly as much rain as the clouds above.

"They should call it Camp Sleepy Hollow instead of Camp Lovejoy," says Megan. "It feels like the set of a horror movie."

"*Megan!*" Jess protests again. Her face is flushed. "Will you knock it off!"

I reach over and pat her knee. She's my best friend in the whole world, and because I know her inside and out, I can tell she's just about had it.

The thing is, though, Megan's got a point. It's only 4:30 in the afternoon and it's the middle of summer, but this road is as dark and gloomy as something out of one of Grimm's fairy tales.

I stare glumly out the window. This was supposed to be a fun adventure—what could be better than spending our last summer before college together, working as camp counselors?—but so far the adventure hasn't been off to a good start. I'd been so looking forward to getting away from Concord. Too many memories in our hometown right now, and too much heartache.

Stewart and I were done. He'd gone off to Middlebury College and gotten himself a shiny new girlfriend, and even though we're technically still "friends," it's been really hard seeing him around town all the time these last few weeks. Which is pretty much inevitable, since he's Becca's brother, and the Chadwick family and my family live on the same street. Plus, Stewart got a summer job at Vanderhof's Hardware, just a few doors down from Pies & Prejudice, and we'd been crossing paths almost daily ever since he got home from Vermont. So when the opportunity came to get out of town and head to a camp in the New Hampshire woods, I'd jumped at the chance.

Jess's mom and aunt were the ones who suggested it. I guess they went here when they were kids, and Jess was a camper for a couple of summers, too. Her aunt and uncle

own an inn not too far from Lake Lovejoy, and when her aunt saw an ad in the local paper that said the camp was hiring, she told Mrs. Delaney and Mrs. Delaney told Jess.

Technically, Camp Lovejoy prefers that their counselors spend a summer as CITs first—that's short for "Counselor-in-Training"—but we were all too old for the program. Jess's Aunt Bridget is good friends with the camp director, though, and she vouched for us, so here we are.

Cassidy swerves to avoid another pothole, and Jess and I bump shoulders. She glances over at me. "Everything's going to be fine, I promise," she whispers.

She's not just talking about the weather. Jess is my best friend in the whole world, too, and she knows me inside and out. She knows how hard these past few months have been. "I hope so," I whisper back.

She leans forward as the minivan rounds a sharp curve in the road. "We should be able to see the lake soon."

"Good," Cassidy mutters. "I'm beginning to think you made it up."

As we emerge from under the protective canopy of trees, water drums against the roof. The rain isn't letting up a bit. If anything, it's coming down harder.

"There's the Dining Hall," Jess tells us, pointing through the water-streaked windshield to a large, rambling log building ahead. Lights gleam from the windows—that's a promising sign—and there are a dozen or so cars in the parking area near the flagpole. "See?" she says triumphantly. "We aren't the only ones here after all." Then she shrieks, and the minivan swerves again.

"Jess!" Cassidy hollers.

"Sorry," Jess replies meekly. "But check it out—there's the lake!"

Sure enough, in the distance beyond the Dining Hall, shrouded in mist, I can just make out the expanse of gray that is Lake Lovejoy. Right now, though, it doesn't look the least bit inviting. Just big and cold and wet.

Cassidy pulls into a parking spot and we all climb out, trying to avoid the mud puddles as we huddle together in our rain jackets, peering at what we'll be calling home for the next seven weeks. My heart sinks. It's not exactly the picture-perfect postcard setting I'd been expecting.

A gust of wind sends the rope on the nearby flagpole slapping soggily against the metal pole, and drives a rivulet of cold water under my hood and down my neck. I jump, letting out a yelp of displeasure.

Jess turns around. Spotting the expression on my face, she shoots me a look that clearly says, "Not you, too?"

"I'm fine," I mutter, flinching as another gust rattles the big wooden WELCOME TO CAMP LOVEJOY! sign.

I'm feeling anything but welcome right now.

The door to the Dining Hall flies open, and someone emerges carrying a giant umbrella.

"Jessica Delaney!" the someone cries, splashing over to join us. She enfolds Jess in a one-armed hug while raising the umbrella high in an attempt to shelter the rest of us. We crowd under it like chicks under the wings of a mother hen.

"It's so wonderful to have you back, Jess!" says our greeter, a woman who looks to be about the same age as my mother. "And these must be your friends?"

Jess nods. Under the hood of the woman's rain poncho I catch sight of close-cropped Afro-style hair flecked with gray. Beneath it, a pair of bright brown eyes regard me cheerfully. When the woman smiles, I can't help smiling back.

"I'm Guinevere Olsen," she tells us. "The camp director. You can call me Gwen. I was beginning to worry you'd gotten lost. We tried to call, but cell service can be spotty around these parts."

Behind me, I hear Cassidy give a quiet snort. "Spotty?" she whispers. "How about non-existent."

"Leave your gear in the car, girls," Gwen continues, pretending not to hear her. She tucks her arm through Jess's. "We'll help you take everything to your cabins after dinner. First things first—come inside where it's warm and dry!"

We follow her across the parking lot to the Dining Hall's wide front porch. I make a mental note to revisit it on a sunny day, as the row of rocking chairs looks like a promising spot to sit and read. Inside, we hang up our rain jackets on wooden pegs in the coatroom, then continue on into the main dining area.

"If Camp Lovejoy has a beating heart, this is it," Gwen tells us, raising her voice to be heard above the hubbub. The other counselors are clustered around a crackling fire in the big stone hearth at the far end of the room, talking and laughing. For a moment, I feel that familiar flutter of anxiety in my stomach that comes from being with a bunch of people I don't know, but I tell myself to quit being an idiot. I'm not in middle school anymore. I'm heading to college in a few months, and the girls all look friendly enough.

Jess glances over at me, her blue eyes glinting with sly merriment. "Not gonna barf, are you?"

I give her a rueful smile. Sometimes it's a pain to have a best friend who knows you so well. Jess loves to remind me about the day we met. It was the first day of school, and I was so nervous I threw up on our kindergarten teacher's shoes.

"Help yourselves to hot cider or cocoa," Gwen instructs us, waving a hand toward a long table under one of the banks of windows. "I'll be back to introduce you in just a moment—the cooks want to speak with me."

She heads to the kitchen, and my friends and I make a beeline for the hot drinks. As I take a sip of cocoa, I feel myself start to relax. Jess is right. Everything is going to be just fine. The rain will stop, the sun will come out, and we'll all have an idyllic summer by the lake with a bunch of adorable girls to mother.

The best part? Jess and I are going to be co-counselors. We'd been assigned to Nest, the cabin for the youngest girls at camp. Becca and Megan will be right next door in Balsam, with the eight-year-olds, and Cassidy gamely volunteered to share a cabin with a stranger. She's been assigned to Twin Pines, along with a seasoned counselor named Amanda Dixon. They'll be in charge of the nine-year-olds.

"Ladies! Listen up!" says Gwen, clapping her hands as she returns to join us. "I know you're all excited to see each other and I know you've got a lot of catching up to do, but there'll be plenty of time for that in a moment over dinner. We have a lot to accomplish this week to get everything ready for our campers. First of all, some good news: The rain is supposed to let up by morning."

This announcement prompts a hearty cheer.

"Next, I'd like to introduce our new staff members." The camp director gestures toward my friends and me. "With the exception of Jessica Delaney, who was a camper

here many moons ago and whom some of you may remember, they're all first-timers. Let's give them a big Camp Lovejoy welcome!"

The girls by the fireplace start clapping rhythmically, then burst into song:

Welcome to Camp Lovejoy,

Welcome one and all!

Welcome to Camp Lovejoy,

Welcome short and tall!

Summer is our favorite time

We wait for it all year—

It's gonna be the best time

Now that all of you are here!

The song ends with a chant:

L-O-V-E-J-O-Y, GO CAMP LOVEJOY!

Cassidy elbows me in the ribs. "Stanley would totally love this place," she murmurs, and I have to stifle a laugh. Her step-father has a cornball sense of humor. We all love him for it, though.

I'm not much for being the center of attention, but I muster a smile and wave gamely when Gwen announces my name. The other counselors smile and wave back, and I feel the flutters in my stomach subside.

Then Gwen drops a bombshell.

"I'm afraid there have been some last-minute changes," she says, glancing at her clipboard. "Amanda Dixon's family is moving unexpectedly, and she's needed to help out at home with that, so she won't be joining us this summer."

The fireplace crowd groans loudly. Amanda is clearly a favorite. I look over at Cassidy to see how she's taking the news about her co-counselor, but it doesn't seem to faze her.

"In thinking about her replacement," Gwen continues, "I've decided to do a little reshuffling. Jess? Would you be willing to move up to Twin Pines?"

Wait, what? Aghast, I turn to Jess. She looks flustered. Flicking me a glance, she replies, "Um, OK, I guess."

Panic washes over me. We're not going to be together?

"Excellent," says the camp director. "I appreciate your flexibility."

And then the bombshell explodes.

"I'll be assigning Felicia to take Jess's place in Nest," Gwen continues.

The crowd by the fireplace parts. A girl steps forward and I stare at her blankly for a moment. There's something familiar about those blonde braids coiled around her ears like a pair of cinnamon rolls. For a moment I can't put my finger on it.

And then it hits me.

The Felicia that Gwen is talking about is Felicia *Grunewald!* Jess's know-it-all cousin!

"You didn't tell me she was going to be here!" I whisper frantically to Jess.

"I didn't know!" Jess whispers back, just as frantically. "Mom told me she was sick of camp, and was going to work at the Edelweiss Inn with Aunt Bridget and Uncle Hans this summer!"

I look over at Gwen, hoping beyond hope that she was kidding. She had to be— Felicia nearly ruined my friendship with Jess the last time our paths crossed.

But she wasn't. "Wonderful," the camp director says. "It's all settled, then."

I clutch Jess's arm. This couldn't be happening! Our summer was ruined. With Felicia as my co-counselor, camp wasn't going to be any fun at all.

It was going to be a disaster.