

Lanterns

B O N N I E T O R B E T

CHAPTER 1

Summer

I needed to get on my plane and out of here, before one more person told me I was running away from my problems.

Mum stood at the end of my bed and watched as I sat on my last suitcase to squeeze it shut. 'I've changed my mind. I don't think this is a good idea. It's not too late to cancel.'

She stepped forward and offered to help me with the zipper, but she couldn't hide the concern in her voice.

'Mum! Stop.' We'd had this argument a hundred times.

Frustrated, I raked my blonde hair out of my face. I was sick of people telling me that studying overseas was a bad idea.

'Four years is a long time and I'm going to miss you! Then, what if you do further study? I'll never see you again!'

I pulled my suitcases off the bed, the weight causing me to drop them to the floor.

Hoping to calm myself down, I took in a deep breath. I had to remember that Mum just watched a friend lose her child. It was only fair that she'd be nervous about my leaving.

'I *need* to do this, Mum,' I pleaded.

Deep down, she knew how badly I needed to do this. It was giving me closure.

Something to remember him by.

‘Summer, look at me.’ Mum placed her arms on my shoulders and turned me around to face her. She had bags under her eyes due to lack of sleep. She was tense. No matter how much I reassured her I would be fine, she wouldn’t believe me. ‘You’re my baby girl. I can’t protect you from the other side of the world.’

‘You keep asking Blake to leave,’ I replied.

She smiled softly, just enough that I could see a small amount of tension leave her frown. ‘It’s about time your brother left. He’s old enough, but I don’t want my baby girl to go. I don’t even know where you got this motivation from. It definitely wasn’t from my side of the family,’ she rambled.

‘I’m going to miss my plane,’ I said, reaching for my suitcases.

She gave a sad smile and pulled me in towards her.

At first, I didn’t hug back because I knew her hug would make me emotional, but then I gave in. I wrapped my arms around her and hugged her tight.

I didn’t think I was the type of person to get homesick, but I knew I would. It was just a matter of time.

My family waited with me at the airport, lingering at the souvenirs shop.

‘How about some magazines? You need something for the plane,’ she said, showing me a couple of options.

‘I have my Kindle and my iPod. I’ll be fine.’

‘It’s a long flight!’

Turning toward her, I gave her a reassuring smile. ‘You know me. I’m happy to read for two days straight.’

‘I just don’t want you to get bored.’

I heard the bell as the woman over the announcement spoke. ‘Flight 1708 for Los Angeles is now boarding at terminal 2.’

My heart skipped a beat. I slapped my hands together in

excitement and squealed. 'That's me.' I power walked over to the flight attendant, leaving my family trailing behind me from the souvenir shop.

The flight attendant reviewed my ticket. 'We hope you enjoy your flight, Miss Campbell.' She handed it back to me with a large smile.

'Don't rush off so fast, Summer.' I heard my dad say.

When I turned around, I could see he was watching me with tears in his eyes.

He pulled his glasses off and wiped his eyes with his thumb and middle finger.

I dropped my bag, running up to hug him. 'I'll come home and visit, I promise!'

Dad smiled at me as I pulled away. 'I'm so proud of you, Sum.'

Mum kissed me on the cheek and pulled me in for a tight hug. 'I'm going to miss you, honey,' she said, her voice shaking.

'I love you guys.' My face was heating up and tears were forming in my eyes. 'Even you,' I said as I leant in to hug my brother.

'Have fun, Nerd.' Blake gave me a quick hug and stepped back.

After one last glance at my family, I picked up my bag and walked to the entrance, stopping once more to give them a final wave.

My mum blew a kiss.

I dropped my hand and walked away, not turning back.

The anxiety started building in the pit of my stomach as I walked further away from them, but I knew that if I dragged out the goodbye, I would never leave.

As I stepped onto the plane, I scanned my ticket and re-read my assigned row.

Slowly, I made my way down the aisle, passing couples, friends, families, but no one seemed to be travelling alone. Everyone seemed to have someone. It made me regret leaving the only family I had. But when I thought about the family I'd lost, it was a massive reminder of why I was here.

When I made it to my assigned row, I couldn't help but notice the guy sitting across from me, both of us with an entire row to ourselves.

Nestling into my seat, I turned my music on and stared out the window until the plane slowly filled with passengers, pausing my music briefly to listen to the emergency information.

When the stewardess mentioned a life jacket could be found underneath the seat, I bent down and reached for it, just to check.

As I sat up, I turned to my left and saw the guy in the row next to me smirk. He'd clearly caught me. I felt my cheeks flush.

He snickered to himself like he had his own private joke and looked back down at his phone.

To hide my embarrassment, I turned to the window again, putting my headphones back on and drifting into my own little world.

I looked out the window for over an hour, watching Melbourne disappear beneath the clouds.

As we flew higher, I couldn't help but smile to myself. After everything I had put myself through, this day had finally come.

With the aeroplane Wi-Fi, I messaged my mum to let her know I was okay.

My home screen lit up with a picture of Cayden and I.

Cayden was my boyfriend and my best friend. He died when we were seventeen. It was the worst year of my life.

I never really knew what I wanted to do with my life until Cayden died. That was the moment I knew I wanted to help find a cure for cancer.

When Cayden passed, everything in my life changed. I had a hard time focusing on my studies. I wasn't socialising with my friends anymore. My best friend was gone, and I couldn't adjust to live without him, so I isolated myself.

My psychologist convinced me I needed to remember him in a better way. She encouraged me to focus my thoughts on something good, so I did. Dedicating myself to a future in medical research

was a good distraction and now I had someone to dedicate my research to.

I could find a cure for cancer.

I was going to find a cure for cancer!

I studied hard, and my grades reached a standard that allowed me to study anything I wanted.

For a year, I studied, ate, worked and slept, over and over. I was still isolating myself, but my parents were happy that I was keeping busy. That I had a goal.

All the study meant I had no social life, but I was dedicated.

Finding a cure for cancer was what I was meant to do in life. I saved every penny so I could get myself into this school.

I have never been so excited about something in my life. And I wasn't going to let anything, or *anyone*, get in the way of that.

The stewardess tapped me on the shoulder, waking me up.

'Are you having dinner with us this evening?' she asked with a large smile on her face and a dinner tray in her hands.

I rubbed my eyes and pulled myself out of my dazed state. 'Yes, please.' I pulled the tray down from the seat in front of me and she placed my food down. She handed me a small bottle of water and headed to the next row.

Not realising how hungry I was, I ate my dinner fast.

I turned to peek at the boy next to me. He was watching the TV on the back of the seat in front of him. His dark eyes looked sad or tired, one of the two. My eyes were drawn to the tattoo down his right forearm, but I couldn't make out what it was.

Hoping to focus my eyesight in the dark, I leaned forward a little and squinted.

He slowly turned his gaze from the TV to my direction.

I quickly snapped my head the other way, hoping that he didn't

catch me staring at him like a total creep.

When the stewardess cleared my tray, I pulled my Kindle out and started reading.

As the night drew on, and passengers' lights started going out, the cabin crew began handing out pillows.

Leaving my Kindle on the seat, I headed to the bathroom.

Quietly, I walked past the guy next to me. He was fast asleep on his pillow, so I slowed, almost to a stop, and tried again to study the tattoo on his arm.

He moved slightly, and I startled, quickly moving down through the cabin.

As I washed my hands in the sink, I looked at myself in the mirror. I was wide awake. Sleeping earlier was a bad idea. I raked my hands through my tangled hair and wiped the mascara from under my eyes before heading back into the cabin.

I felt disoriented as I approached my seat. I stopped and looked around, wondering if I'd walked too far.

There was a small patch of dark hair peeking out from the top of my seat.

In a couple of quick strides, I was standing in the aisle, staring at Tattoo Guy. He was sitting in my seat, reading my Kindle.

'Excuse me, what...' I started to say.

'Shh!' A passenger turned and glared at me.

Tattoo Guy hadn't even noticed me, though. He was deeply focused on my book, and he had large, noise cancelling headphones on.

I reached over and pulled one to the side. 'What are you doing?' I whispered this time.

He didn't even seem phased that I'd caught him going through my things.

'You looked really intrigued by this book. I wanted to know what it was about. I like to read too.' He kept his eyes on my Kindle as he spoke.

'This is an invasion of privacy!' I whispered fiercely.

He looked up at me and smirked. His smirk was lopsided, dimpled and way too memorable for my liking.

He handed me my Kindle and I felt my cheeks flush again.

I snatched it from his hand.

‘Seriously? A princess who falls in love with the guy who isn’t good enough?’ he said, looking up at me. ‘Overused trope.’

For the first time, I was able to really look at him. His eyes were soft, but full of pain.

I recognised it, I had the same eyes.

His gorgeous, dark eyes scanned my face and for a moment my brain couldn’t form sentences, but I quickly recovered.

I crossed my hands over my chest, annoyed. ‘You got all that in five minutes?’

‘I skimmed.’ He shrugged, still unmoving from my seat. ‘It’s a gift,’ he said with a cheeky, crooked smirk.

I swallowed hard, trying to remind myself how to speak to people. I’d barely interacted with anyone other than my family for the last year.

‘So, why are you creeping around looking at other people’s stuff?’

‘Why? Does it bother you?’ He ran his hand over his mouth, almost like he was trying to mask a smile.

I clenched my jaw, trying hard not to take his bait. ‘You have nothing better to do?’

‘I was bored and curious.’

‘So, mess with your own stuff. You have an iPod, listen to that,’ I said.

‘Nobody has iPods anymore, except you, clearly.’ He chuckled. His laugh radiated warmth, the complete opposite vibe than his eyes were giving me. ‘I was curious about what was on yours.’ He lifted my iPod from its place, wedged between his legs.

With a sigh, I held out my hand to him, not realising it was *my* iPod he was listening to. ‘Leave my stuff alone! And get out of my seat.’

He placed my iPod in my hand and frowned at me. 'Will you relax? It's a long flight, just thought a little conversation wouldn't kill anyone. I know you're not going to sleep at all tonight because you slept earlier, plus you snored, which was really annoying.' He stood up and shuffled out of my seat. 'I thought I'd be nice and chat, since you and I are going to be the only ones awake, but I guess my presence isn't wanted.'

He intentionally made a scene by overdramatically squishing himself past me. But I stood my ground and refused to move for him.

Right as his body grazed past mine, he let out a breath of a laugh and stepped into the aisle. Then, he fell into his own seat.

'Why will you be awake?' I asked, curious.

'I don't sleep well. Enjoy your night.' He pushed his headphones back up onto his head and adjusted his pillow. His eyes were closed, but my guess was that he wasn't even trying to sleep.

I sat back down in a huff, trying to contemplate what had just happened.

How rude of him to go through my stuff! It was embarrassing too. Now he knows I read romance!

Tucking my iPod back in my bag, I flicked back to the correct page on my Kindle, even more frustrated that he'd passed my spot. Nestling back against the window, I started to read again.

My eyes betrayed me and I glanced up at him, slightly intrigued, before getting back to my book.

Half of my book later, I still wasn't tired. I moaned, annoyed that everyone else on the plane was fast asleep but me.

A small snort came from across the aisle and I looked up to see Tattoo Guy turn to face me. 'Bored?'

'No,' I said sternly, refusing to admit that I needed someone to talk to or something else to do.

I didn't need Tattoo Guy to entertain me.

As I got off the plane, I was dreading my next connecting flight. I was so tired; I just wanted a bed.

We had landed in Los Angeles, and I slowly made my way through the airport. When I finally found my next terminal, I slouched into a seat and closed my eyes.

Someone kicked my feet and I jolted awake. 'Wakey, wakey, Bug.'

I opened my eyes and saw a dark pair of work boots at my feet. Tattoo Guy was smiling down at me. 'Unless you plan on missing your flight, I suggest you get a move on.'

My eyes darted to the screen that read, 'Oklahoma, TX boarding now terminal 3.'

Tattoo Guy wandered off and was headed down the tarmac to get on the same plane.

With a gasp, I collected my things and hurried after him.

As I boarded the plane, just like *déjà vu*, I threw my carry on into my overhead and crashed into the empty row.

I fell asleep and didn't wake until the plane was landing.

The taxi driver pulled up in front of the Oklahoma State University main building. I handed him some money before he helped me pull my luggage out of the car.

'Have a good night, Miss,' he said before getting in his car and taking off. I stood and looked up at the big, old building. This was my home for the next four years.

Shivering from the cold, I pulled my luggage up the stairs.

The front desk was empty, so I wandered aimlessly around until I found a hallway.

'You look lost.' I heard the southern drawl from behind me.

I turned around and a tall, light-haired guy was grinning at me. He had on jeans and an Oklahoma State hoodie with his fists dug deep into the pockets.

I laughed. 'Is it that obvious? I don't know where my dorm is.'

'What's your number?'

I hesitated for a moment. Was he asking for my number? I had barely been on campus two minutes and...

'Your dorm number,' he clarified. A small chuckle leaving his lips.

'*Oh!*' I scoffed at my own stupidity. 'Twenty-four.'

He jolted his chin down towards the hallway. 'Follow me.' He stepped forward and grabbed one of my suitcases.

'Oh, you don't have to...'

'No problem.' He smiled sweetly at me.

I followed him down the white hallway, passing door after door. 'I guess this would be what they call southern hospitality?' I teased.

He laughed. 'Not quite.' He peeked at me from the corner of his eye. 'Do I detect an accent? I'm guessing British.'

I laughed. 'Australian.'

'Australian.' He mauled over it for a moment. 'What brings you here?'

I raised my eyebrow at him this time, because the answer should have been obvious. 'School.'

'Right, but why here?'

I didn't really want to get into why I was here and didn't want to think too much about my choices or my past, so I changed the subject. 'I didn't realise your dorms were unisex.'

He narrowed his eyes at me, like my comment was silly. 'Obviously, the individual rooms aren't unisex, but the whole building is.'

Placing my bags down in the hallway, he pointed to my door. 'Enjoy your stay, number Twenty-Four.'

He gave me one last cheeky grin before wandering back to where he came from. I watched him walk away before turning to the door.

My lips pulled into a hard line, and I took a deep breath. This was my room for the next four years. Hopefully, I had a decent roommate.

I knocked and waited.

A short, dark-haired girl with a nose piercing answered the door.

'You must be Summer!' She grinned at me. 'I'm Piper.' Piper didn't

have the same southern drawl, but she still had a very strong accent.

‘Nice to meet you.’

She spun around and wandered back into the room ‘Welcome, welcome. They told me you were coming late. You’re lucky I’m a night owl.’ Her accent drowned every word, and I wondered how I’d ever get used to it. ‘Sleep all day and party all night.’

Piper sat down on her bed, and I dragged my stuff in, dumping it on my own. The room was small. My bed had a simple burgundy coloured quilt and single white pillow. The walls on my side were blank, but Piper had covered hers with photos and posters.

‘If you get some sleep now, we can unpack your things tomorrow. I’ll show you around campus and then we are going out.’

I turned to face her. Going out? It wasn’t something I’d done in a long time.

‘School doesn’t start for a bit, so just have some fun until then!’ she argued.

It was about time I let myself have a little fun.

I smiled at her. ‘Sounds good to me!’

I woke Saturday morning still tired and so unbelievably jetlagged.

When I checked my phone, I was shocked to see it was two in the afternoon. I couldn’t believe how late it was.

Piper was still tangled in her sheets, her mouth open and softly snoring.

Slowly, I unpacked my things. I put the photo of my family next to my bed, right next to the healthy photo I had of myself, Cayden and our friends Elle, Georgia, Mark and Pat. We had our arms around each other, laughing. It was my favourite photo. It was a better time. A happier time.

We were all happy, Cayden was happy and healthy, and I was actually still friends with those people.

3 YEARS EARLIER

‘Oh, that boy is gorgeous,’ Elle said, fanning herself with her hand as an older boy walked past us.

‘He has a face like an angel,’ Georgia replied.

‘I’m never going to get a girlfriend, am I?’ Mark asked. We all knew Mark had a thing for Elle. Everyone but Elle.

The group took a moment to sit on the grass and rest. We were at the most anticipated music festival of the year, and we had spent the entire day dancing up by the stage.

A photographer stopped in front of us. ‘You lot want a photo?’

Elle and Georgia stood up so fast, I laughed. Mark, Pat and Cayden all gathered in a group.

They huddled themselves with their arms around each other. I was shorter than everyone else, so I jumped onto Cayden’s back.

‘Get your hand off my ass, Elle,’ Mark said. Everyone laughed and the photo was taken.

Elle turned around and shoved Mark backwards. ‘I didn’t even touch you!’

I was still on Cayden’s back. He started spinning in circles. ‘Please stop, I’ll throw up on you!’

He laughed and pretended to fall backwards and drop me. I gripped my legs harder around his waist. ‘Don’t!’

Cayden stopped and let me place my feet back on the ground.

He turned around and grinned down at me, placing his hands on my shoulders to steady the dizziness.

To my complete surprise, he grabbed a strand of my hair and tucked it behind my ear. Instead of pulling his hand away, he left it on the side of my neck.

I felt my smile disappear and my heart rate pick up.

‘Cay!’ Pat interrupted us. ‘Come look at this guy passed out behind the portaloo!’

He dropped his hand and followed everyone to see the commotion.

'You're awake!' I said to Piper as she sat up in her bed, pulling me from my memory.

'Sorry, told you I sleep all day. I'll get dressed and show you around.'

After registering and picking up my dorm room key, Piper showed me around campus. She explained how to get to all my classes and where to find the cafeteria.

'This is so different to home,' I said as we sat down to eat lunch.

'Why did you come all the way here from Down Under?'

'This school has a good research program,' I said.

'You're studying research?'

'Laboratory research.'

'Smart and beautiful,' she said with a giggle.

I gave her a small smile, taking a bite from my sandwich. Another girl joined us, taking a seat at the table.

'Hey, Pipes, is this your new roommate?' she asked, leaning over and taking a handful of Piper's chips.

'Yeah, this is Summer, she's here from Australia. Summer, this is my cousin Meg.'

'Hey.' I smiled at her.

'Meg's a year ahead of us. She is my eyes and ears and the only reason I know what's going around here.'

'You coming out tonight?' Meg asked.

I looked at Piper for conformation.

'Of course she is!' Piper grinned. 'We have to teach Summer the ropes of college life.'

I wasn't sure I wanted to learn about college life, but if I was going to be living it for the next four years, I may as well get used to it.

Piper and I dressed up and headed out. Wearing heels was an instant regret. I wasn't sure I'd last the night, especially since she'd informed me too late that we were walking.

'How exactly do we get in? You have to be twenty-one here, right?' I asked.

‘Don’t stress, we’re going to a frat party.’

I laughed. ‘Are you serious? You have frat parties? That is actually a thing? It’s not just something you see in movies?’

She nodded, and I followed her as we walked down the street. The house wasn’t far, but my feet already hurt.

We arrived at a gorgeous, two-storey house. People were crowding the yard and there were empty bottles, cups, and cans everywhere.

We walked across the grass, and Piper led me inside. I followed her through the crowded rooms to the kitchen, where she poured us both drinks.

We wandered from room to room. The lounge had been turned into a dance floor. One room had people sitting on each other’s laps making out and others passed out on the floor. Another was full of people vaping and cheering on a game of beer pong. There were even people dancing on the staircase. It was completely hectic.

I wasn’t sure how long I could stand being here. I felt like I’d already drained my social battery for the day, but after a few rounds of drinks, I made it to the dance floor.

I let my hips sway to the music, dancing with my cup up in the air, only realising it was a bad idea when I spilled alcohol on my head.

‘I’m going to go find a bathroom!’ I shouted to Piper over the music. She gave me a thumbs up and I wandered out of the room and to the stairs.

After walking into two different bedrooms, I finally found a bathroom.

I sat down, checked my phone and tried to focus on the words on my screen, but failed miserably.

As I wandered back down the stairs, I noticed Piper had disappeared from the dancefloor.

The house was flooded with people. I knew there was no way I was going to find her.

I bit my lip. ‘Crap.’

After an unsuccessful attempt at finding her in the crowd, I pulled out my phone and messaged her. Being at this party alone was the last thing I wanted right now. I was finally out partying, socialising, ‘being a teenager’ as my dad used to say, and I needed to find her before I made the conscious decision to never do this again.

Me: Are you still here somewhere?

She didn’t reply. Groaning at my phone, I thought about trying to find my own way back.

There was a possibility she’d come looking for me, so I turned on my heels and made my way back up the stairs.

‘Hey, Twenty-Four.’

I spun around to face him. The guy that showed me to my dorm room was standing on the step below, still taller than me.

He smiled. ‘Fancy seeing you here.’ I loved that smile. I hated that I loved that smile.

‘Yeah, fancy that.’

‘I saw you on the dance floor. I was almost tempted to come over and join you.’

That sounded tempting, but I didn’t come here for a relationship, and I wasn’t planning on getting into one. I had one goal and one goal only.

‘Maybe next time.’

He responded by giving me that smile again. I shouldn’t have said ‘maybe next time’. I had just given him permission to ask again.

I left him and wandered back up the stairs.

‘Where are you going?’ he asked, following me around the house.

‘I’ve lost my roommate,’ I said, looking through the crowd, trying to spot her freckles and nose ring.

Luck was on my side. I caught sight of her sparkly dress. She was against the wall, her tongue down someone else’s throat.

I stopped in my tracks and sighed.

He laughed. 'She seems busy.'

'I'll be fine. You can go back to your party.' I waved him off.

'I'm happy here.' He grinned at me again.

Ignoring him, I tapped Piper on the arm. She pushed me away without taking her mouth off the guy.

Looking around the room at all the drunk people, I wasn't sure what to do. How does this work? Was I supposed to leave her or wait around? I figured it was a bad idea to leave just in case anything went wrong. Instead, I went back to the kitchen and poured myself another drink. I'd never been in this situation before. When I partied with Cayden, things were different. He never left me to hook up with someone.

It took me years to work out why...

'How much have you had to drink?' he asked. I hadn't realised he'd followed me to the kitchen.

'How much have *you* had to drink?' I threw his question back at him, narrowing my eyes.

'Nothing, I have a game tomorrow.'

Assuming my new friend would follow me, I made my way out of the kitchen to keep my eye on Piper before she wandered off again.

'I don't want to leave you alone,' he said, leaning against a wall.

'I enjoy being on my own.'

Before Cayden, I would have never uttered the words 'I enjoy being on my own'. That was never me. I was always a social butterfly. Fun and outgoing.

But then Cayden happened, and I built a wall. A tall and sturdy one.

'You should go back to your party.' This time, he didn't follow as I walked away. I was thankful. He was gorgeous, but he had the complete player vibe and he was making me enter territory I wasn't keen on getting into.

I caught Piper wandering towards the kitchen, hand in hand with her guy.

‘We need to get out of here,’ I said as I caught up to her.

‘You’re right.’ She bid her date a goodbye and then followed me out of the house.

Outside, she pulled her heels off and walked barefoot. ‘Sorry I left you alone! I’m a bad friend already.’ She slurred her words as we stumbled down the road.

‘You didn’t leave me. You were still there.’

It took me almost a week to get over my jet lag. It was hard to focus on class when I was spending most of my efforts trying not to fall asleep.

I was determined to do well. I wanted to experience college, but not like last week.

The tattoo on my wrist reminded me why I was here. It was a heartbeat that connected to the word ‘fighter’ in cursive script.

Cayden was the reason I was here.

I hurried out of my chemistry lecture to meet Piper in the cafeteria.

‘I’m already stressed,’ I said, dumping my textbook down on the table and falling into my seat.

‘Why?’ Piper asked, her mouth full of food. ‘It’s like second week, it’s pretty much still holidays!’

‘She’s right, you need to calm down,’ Meg said, taking a bite from her lunch.

I shrugged, pulling my plate towards myself. ‘Sorry, I just worked so hard to get here, I don’t want to screw it all up. At least not straight away.’

Someone pulled the chair out from its place next to me.

The guy I’d met the first night I arrived turned the chair around and sat down, resting his elbows on the back.

Piper and Meg gasped, catching my attention.

I raised an eyebrow at Piper, but she was distracted. She stared at him, looking like she was going to melt.

‘Hey, Twenty-Four.’ His voice pulled my attention back to him. Resting his chin on his arms, he flashed me a grin.

I smiled. ‘Hey, again.’

Someone laughed from behind me. Two guys were standing next to him. They were both wearing basketball shirts that said Oklahoma State on them.

‘I never introduced myself. I’m Fletcher.’ He held his hand out to me.

I reached forward and shook it. ‘Hi.’

He laughed. ‘As much as I enjoy Twenty-Four, it would be nice to have a name.’

I shrugged. ‘It wouldn’t matter.’

‘And why is that?’ He narrowed his eyes playfully at me.

‘I need to focus on study, and I need to find a job. I don’t really have time for anything else.’

Fletcher chuckled. ‘And what do you think this is?’

I studied him carefully. ‘Well, if it were anything less, I’m sure you wouldn’t have bothered to come over and introduce yourself.’

The guys behind me snickered, and Piper gave me a death stare.

Fletcher’s mouth opened and closed again, like he was contemplating what to say. ‘You’ll change your mind. Come to the frat party this weekend.’

I shook my head. ‘That was a onetime thing. I really can’t.’

‘It’ll be fun!’

‘I don’t doubt that.’ I held back a smile.

He stood up and walked away, the other boys following him. As they walked toward the exit, Fletcher stopped on his heels and spun around. ‘At least give me your name!’ he yelled across the cafeteria.

I crossed my arms over my chest and leant back in my chair, smirking at him.

‘If not, you’ll always be known as Twenty-Four!’ he yelled. We

had the attention of the entire room now.

Piper rolled her eyes and sighed. She spun around to face him. 'Her name is Summer!'

'Pipes!' I said in a hushed whisper.

She shrugged. 'It's Fletcher, he'll find out one way or another. Plus, you'll thank me later.'

'Summer... it suits you.' He winked at me before leaving the room.

'Are you insane?' Meg asked, completely dumb struck. 'That was Fletcher Carr!' When I gave Meg a blank expression, she continued. 'Fletcher got in on a basketball scholarship. He belongs to the frat you partied at a couple of weeks ago and he is every girl's *dream!*'

'He's cute, but that's not why I came here. I can't have any distractions.'

Piper sighed. 'Oh god, I think I just died a thousand deaths. Summer, if you managed to get yourself here, I'm sure you're going to do great with school. Fletcher is a once in a lifetime opportunity.'

'This school is a once in a lifetime opportunity for me.'

'As you wish.' Piper fell back into her chair in defeat.

I got a job at a bar called Miss Malibu. I was used to working behind a bar back home and I was keen to earn some money.

Working at Miss Malibu made me realise how much I missed my car. I had to walk thirty minutes to work, which wasn't great for the late shifts.

I spent my first shift shadowing a girl named Kia.

'I'm glad you already know how to work in a bar, because tonight is going to get crazy,' she said as I followed behind her. 'I'm going to pretend I don't know you're underage and let Marcus deal with that when it comes back to bite him in the ass. Maybe when we have some quieter shifts, we'll do some waitress training.'

Kia watched over my shoulder as I served a few customers. We

got into the swing of things and after the dinner period, the bar was flooded with customers. I was bouncing around like I owned the place. I was comfortable behind a bar. I had mastered the art of reading the names of drinks off people's lips so that I didn't have to strain my ears over the music.

'Damn girl!' Kia said as the rush died down and we cleared away empty drinks. 'You have mad bar skills.'

I grinned. 'Thanks.'

'Marcus,' she called out as he lifted chairs up onto tables. 'We need to put her on every weekend, she did well tonight.'

Marcus nodded, trusting her every word. 'Good. Done.'

I grinned. Guess my probation was over.

I opened the dishwasher and unloaded, putting away the glasses.

'So, what's your story?' A tall and clean-shaven guy said as he approached me from the dancefloor with a mop and bucket in tow. I hadn't seen him all night, but he was wearing the same uniform as me, so I figured he was staff.

'Moved here from Australia. I go to OSU. I'm living on campus for the next four years.'

He leaned over the bar. 'You have a boyfriend back home?'

I shook my head and continued to unload the dishes.

'Liar,' he joked.

I laughed. 'Seriously.'

He raised his eyebrows in shock and rounded the counter. He picked up a broom and started to sweep.

'Ash goes to OSU as well,' Kia said, looking up from the register she was counting.

I turned to him for clarification, and he gave me a big nod.

'What do you study?'

'Event management. What about you?'

'Laboratory research.'

'Oh no, you're smarter than me. I'm intimidated,' he laughed.

Kia laughed. 'Ash intimidated? Never.'

'I'm going through the list of single guys in my head.'

I laughed. 'Thanks, but no thanks.'

'You sure? I know someone who would lose his mind over you.'

I gave him a look that said I was serious.

'Hey, I have a great idea!' Ash said, rushing over to me and sitting on the counter next to where I was trying to clean.

'Get off the counter, Ash,' Kia said.

He jumped down and continued talking. 'You should come out tonight! We're having a bonfire down at the lake.'

'Yeah, you should!' Kia added. 'Ash and his friends from OSU will be there, so you might make some other friends from campus.'

I was about to argue, but I didn't really want to say no to meeting more friends at school. As much as I wanted to get back to the social life I used to have before Cayden died, I drew the line at the frat party with Fletcher. A bonfire sounded much nicer.

'It's already late and I have no car.'

'I'll take you down and drop you back at campus later,' Kia suggested.

Ash gave me a hopeful smile. He reminded me of my friends back home, the friends I used to have. I missed having people I could always rely on. I needed that here. I couldn't isolate myself for four years.

'Sounds great,' I smiled.

'Yes! Let's finish up here and go.'

As we walked to the lake, I wrapped my cardigan tighter around myself and shivered softly.

A small group of people were huddled around a fire. They were laughing and chatting happily. Suddenly, I felt nervous that I didn't know anyone. Cayden was always the talkative one. He'd walk into a room full of strangers and leave with at least one new friend. I relied on him to meet new people.

'Don't stress,' Kia said, noticing my uncertainty. 'Everyone is great. They'll love you!'

As we got closer, Ash stood up from his spot by the bonfire and pulled me in for a hug. He squeezed tight before letting go. I knew instantly that Ash was someone I could be friends with. Someone I could rely on.

He took my arm and started naming off people in the circle. I forgot everyone's name immediately.

'And lastly, this is my roommate, Lincoln.' He gestured to a guy with jeans, work boots and a hoodie on. He was looking down at the sand and the hoodie was pulled over his head, hiding his face. 'Everyone, this is Summer.'

Most people replied with a hello or nice to meet you, but the only voice I really noticed was the one coming from the guy in the hoodie.

'Hey, Bug.'

The second he spoke, I recognised his voice.

He looked up at me, his gorgeous, dark eyes piercing mine.

It was Tattoo Guy from the aeroplane, and he was giving me his best dimpled, crooked smile.