



## The Newbie

It was 8:45 AM and I was doing what I did best — talking to myself.

“I’m going to start recording now,” I announced to my mom as we zipped along the I-95 expressway on the way to camp. I cleared my throat and pressed record on my brand-spanking-new palmcorder. “Hi, Mal!” I greeted my best friend excitedly. “I know it’s only been an hour . . .”

“Forty-five minutes,” my mom interrupted, side-eying me.

“I know it’s only been *forty-five minutes* since we said good-bye,” I corrected myself, “but I wanted to send you your first of many messages. I know you’re bummed about my decision, but I swear I’m going to send you as many videos as I can to keep you company, and you’re going to be so busy with Mark you’ll barely notice I’m gone.”

“The allure of Malomark,” Mom said with a smirk.

My jaw dropped. Mom had interrupted my first message by

uttering the secret moniker I'd given Mal and Mark's relationship out loud. I fumbled for the pause button on the recorder, panicked. "Mom!" I complained. "Now I have to start over." I pressed the rewind button. "What if Mal heard you say that?"

"I can't help it." My mother laughed, gripping the steering wheel of our car tightly for support. "It's funny, Sam."

In past years, the day after school ended for the summer, I would sit on a faded pink plastic beach chair in Mal's backyard, slathered in SPF 30 while we read aloud the latest Britney Spears incident in *US Weekly*. But that was before Mal became Mal and Mark, Mark and Mal, or as I now secretly referred to them: Malomark. I got the idea because their names fit the description and definition of a Mallomar cookie: super sticky sweet, and if you eat too many you get sick to your stomach.

That's why I was worried about that upcoming summer. I knew how it would play out: Mal would beg me to hang out and I'd be Malomark's third wheel 24/7. The thought of being with them (I can imagine it now: "You're cuter, babe!" "No you are, baby!" Gross.) was more torturous than getting a wisdom tooth pulled. I made up my mind to make the first bold move I've ever made in my life: I signed up to be a camp counselor-in-training (CIT) at a sleepaway camp two hours away from home, Malomark, and any "baby" references. But now that the first day of camp was finally here and we were an hour away from Whispering Pines, part of me was so nervous that I wanted to jump from the moving car. The other half of me couldn't wait to get there. I looked over my outfit again. It took me weeks to settle on one I was happy with. I finally went with a red (my

favorite color) cotton halter top, lightweight denim shorts that were fringed mid-thigh, and black flip-flops.

“I hope you’ll consider going into advertising someday, Sam. ‘Malomark’ is such a clever name.” Mom was still talking and had tucked a strand of her shoulder-length brown hair behind her ear. I’d always been jealous of how Mom’s hair hung perfectly straight while mine frizzed up five minutes after I flat-ironed it. “It shows real creative thinking. I think you were born to be in the business, just like me,” she added, and then a devilish smile spread across her full lips. “You’ll have no trouble getting a job. You’re already a media sensation in the field.”

I practically felt the light tan I’d been working on slide right off my face. “You promised to stop bringing that up,” I begged weakly.

“I will,” Mom protested. “But you should be proud of your accomplishment. Not everyone gets to star in a —”

“Mom,” I warned, interrupting.

“Fine.” She sighed and then the two of us lapsed into silence. I hated when Mom brought up my Dial and Dash moment, as we called it. I just prayed no one at camp figured it out and drove me crazy about it the way the kids at Carle Place High had been for months. I stared out the car window at the pine trees as they whizzed by.

“I think you’re really going to enjoy yourself this summer,” Mom said. “Alan was telling me all about Whispering Pines the other night and your camp sounds wonderful.”

“Who’s Alan?” I asked, confused.

My mother's face colored slightly. "Alan Hitchens is your camp director."

"I thought his name was Hitch." I stared at my mom curiously, but she was looking straight ahead with her long, manicured fingers placed firmly on the wheel.

"It is. I mean, you are supposed to call him that," Mom muttered. "He asked me to call him Alan since I'm a parent." She cleared her throat and made that weird gurgling sound she always made when she was nervous. Thank God I didn't inherit that habit.

"Anyway, he seems very nice," Mom said quickly. "I've talked to him a few times — just about signing paperwork — and he told me he's been running this camp since his thirties. His wife ran it with him until she passed away from cancer a few years back. Now it's just him and his daughters Alexis and Ashley. Ashley is the same age as you."

"Uh-huh," I said blandly, but inside I was sort of shocked. My mom had a thing for my camp director! Too bad camp was so far from our home on Long Island; otherwise I would have rooted for Mom to snag a boyfriend. She hadn't met anyone she liked since my dad left a few years ago. I hoped this camp director crush worked out for her, but if it did there was no way I was moving to the boonies. I'd been a suburbanite New Yorker since I was born and that was not about to change now.

"So you like your present?" Mom changed the subject quickly. "Al — Hitch — said you can't have electronics, but I'm sure he means cell phones." Mom winked at me. "Besides, if you hide this at the bottom of your trunk, no one will find it."

I was not going to let this camera out of my sight. It was much better than the clunky five-pounder I had been using to record my video diary. (I had been taping my woes since the seventh grade. I wanted my future children to understand the hardships faced by teens in the new millennium. Sure, we had iPods and things like *The Hills*. But we also had to deal with global warming and killer hurricanes.) “I love it,” I gushed.

“I expect you to send me a few video postcards — that is, if you have time after doing all the ones you promised your friends,” Mom said wryly.

“I didn’t promise *that many*,” I said.

Mom looked at me skeptically. “You promised at least four people I know of, plus Mal, video postcards. How you’re going to have time to sleep or shower I have no idea.”

“I’ll have plenty of time,” I insisted stubbornly.

“I keep telling you, Sam, until you learn how to say no to people, you’re never going to get the things you truly want out of life and — oh no.”

Thankfully our car came to a screeching halt, distracting Mom from her well-worn Sam lecture. I looked out the front window. There were red brake lights as far as the eye could see. Mom frowned. “Must be an accident.” She turned on the radio and scanned the dial for traffic news.

I looked nervously at the clock on the dashboard. It was 8:58 AM. I was supposed to be at orientation at ten. Being the new girl was nerve-racking enough. Being the new girl who was late was ten times worse.

Mom read my thoughts. “I’m sure we’ll be past this jam in

a few minutes.” She didn’t look sure about that and neither was I as I heard a siren wail in the distance.

I pressed record on the palmcorder again as my stomach started to do flip-flops. “Mal, I think my first message will have to wait.”



Two hours later, Mom and I were practically running to the mess hall, which according to the map was right down this super-green, grassy hill. My heart was in my throat as I raced up the wood building’s well-worn wood steps and pulled open the double doors. The large, open room had high ceilings with wood beams that held up rows and rows of camp banners. THE GREEN MACHINE — 2003 COLOR WAR VICTORS! announced one. WELCOME (BACK) TO THE PINES! declared a large red one. And across the back wall was a glass cabinet full of trophies. The only thing missing were the people. Mom and I were standing in front of rows of empty picnic tables covered with folders and papers and discarded jackets. “They’re not here.” I freaked out. I was actually yelling. One of my biggest pet peeves was being late.

“Samantha Montgomery?” I heard someone bellow, and I turned around.

“Yes?” I said uncertainly.

A tall man wearing camouflage fatigues and holding a megaphone was walking toward us. He had white hair, was tan like it was the middle of August instead of late June, and his teeth were an eerie shade of white. The man bounded up the steps

and shook my hand vigorously. “Alan Hitchens, but you can call me Hitch.”

“Hi, Hitch,” I shook his hand lightly and smiled nervously. “I’m really sorry we’re late. There was an accident on the expressway and . . .” I stopped talking.

Hitch had dropped my hand and was looking at my mother. “Pamela, it’s so nice to finally meet you,” he said with a large smile.

My mom made that weird gurgling sound again. “It’s nice to meet you too, Alan,” Mom gushed, smoothing her fitted, white button-down shirt self-consciously. “I’m sorry Sam is late.” Now that we were out of the car and I could get a good look at Mom, I realized she had dressed up for this meeting. Gone were her usual working or weekend attire (suits or sweats and oversized tees, respectively) and in their place she had on tailored khaki capris and Coach ballet flats that didn’t mask her height (5' 9½"), but did look nice. She was wearing makeup on her pale face and her brown hair, so similar to my own in all but texture, was its usual straight self.

“A few counselors are late and I suspect they’re all in the same position,” Hitch said and turned to me. “Sam, why don’t you say goodbye to your mom, and I’ll help her unload your bags so you can head down to the field and join the game. Ask for Alexis. She’s my eldest daughter.”

“Game?” I had only been here five minutes and I was already confused.

Hitch looked from me to my mother. “I find the best way to figure out which CITs belong with which counselors is to get

them involved in teamwork. There's time to go over rules and paperwork during grub or campfires. Today they're playing dodgeball."

"Dodgeball?" I asked. I hadn't played dodgeball since the sixth grade and I wasn't good at it back then. I had a hard time playing any game that involved flying balls, which ruled out most gym activities and really aggravated my gym teacher, Mrs. Pepper.

"That's a wonderful idea," my mom gushed. Now that I'd met Hitch, I wasn't so sure he was my mother's type. Where he was all outdoorsy and tanned like a camp director should be, Mom's skin was milky white from too many hours at the office. The last time she did something outside, it was directing the guys from Crate and Barrel on how to unload her new dresser from the truck. Mom gave me a hug. "Well, this is it," she said, sounding choked up. "Have a great time and I'll talk to you in a few days, before I leave on my business trip."

"Thanks, Mom," I said, feeling awkward in front of Hitch. As I walked away, I could still hear Mom laughing at something Hitch said, but suddenly I felt very alone.

What was I thinking, going to camp? I had no idea what camp life was like, and I certainly had never flown solo before. I didn't know anyone on that dodgeball field. I didn't have a best friend to stand next to or even a semi-good friend I could chat with about stupid stuff. I was the newbie, and being the newbie was awkward.

Baby steps, I thought to myself. Just take baby steps. I breathed

in the pine scent of the evergreens that lined the dusty dirt path that was spraying dirt all over my feet. One step. Two. Three . . .

I could do this.

When I got to the bottom of the hill, I could see the game had already started on a slightly muddy field that was boxed in by white spray-painted lines. Just a few yards away were the tennis courts and another field that had bags of athletic equipment waiting on it. There was an overwhelming scent of manure and I realized that to my left were the horse stables. I stood there, taking the scene in, and tried not to pass out from nerves.

That's when I saw him.

He was running across the field — shirtless, I might add — and he leapt in front of me and caught the dodgeball seemingly in slow motion. This guy was like an Abercrombie ad come to life. He was tall, but not so tall that I'd have to stand on my tip-toes to reach his lips. He had longish, dirty blond hair that would make Zac Efron's look lame, killer tanned abs that looked like they'd been airbrushed in, and eyes as green as my jade bedroom comforter.

“Hunter!” A pretty girl screamed as the guy threw the ball and it whisked by her face. “You almost hit me,” she whined.

His name was Hunter. Hunter and Sam “LastNameUnknown.” It had a nice ring to it.

“Sorry Ash,” he said, out of breath. “It's a game. You've got to move or be moved.”

At that moment Mr. Absolutely perfect, aka Hunter “LastNameUnknown,” looked up and saw me. “Water break!” he

announced, not taking his eyes off mine, which were blinking rapidly. “Hey,” he said and smiled this absolutely perfect smile.

I looked around. Yep, I was the only one in this direction. My future husband was talking to me. ME! If I wasn’t nervous enough before, I was ready to freak out now. My experience with guys was limited, but when they were that cute, I could barely function.

“You’re the new CIT, right?” he asked.

“The new,” I repeated dumbly. “You mean I’m the only new one you have?” The thought was terrifying. That meant everyone already knew everyone. I was the only new girl my age. The only one? How could that be? My lack of camp experience was going to stick out like a sore thumb.

He laughed. Not in a mean way, just loud and deep. “As far as I can tell,” Hunter said. “What’s your name?” he asked me as I tried my hardest not to drool over his sweaty torso. “You look familiar,” he added.

Uh-oh. I knew that look. I really hoped to avoid this, but I guess that was asking the impossible. The Dial and Dash commercial was so popular it had aired on the Super Bowl twice and been dissected on everything from CNN to the pages of *US Weekly*. People at the Pines were bound to have seen it.

“My name is Sam.” I couldn’t take my gaze off his eyes. Up close I could see they were green with flecks of gold in them.

“Hunter,” he said, revealing a mouth full of perfectly straight, white teeth. Any sense of recognition he had a moment ago seemed to vanish, thank goodness. “Join us for dodgeball,”

he suggested. "We're short on my side so I guess you're with me. You can stand over there." He pointed to a line of girls who were staring at me curiously.

In a daze, I walked over to my designated spot, trying hard not to slip in the mud that came from the week's worth of rain we had just had in the tri-state area. I smiled awkwardly at the girl next to me. She had red hair and glasses and was wearing a Hello Kitty t-shirt. I looked at her feet. She was smart enough to wear sneakers.

"He's hot, right?" she whispered and took a puff of what looked like an inhaler.

It didn't take a genius to know who she was talking about. "Yes." I sighed. "I'm Sam," I said shyly.

She smiled, revealing her braces. "Emily Kate. But you can call me Em. You're the new CIT, right?"

I guess it was true then. I really was the only new girl. "That's me," I said, trying to sound at ease.

Em nodded. "At the opening breakfast this morning they said there was one new CIT. Everyone else in the program graduated from campers. I'm a CIT too." Em stopped talking and stared at me curiously. "I'm sorry. It's just . . . have we met before?"

Stupid Dial and Dash moment. I couldn't escape it! "Do you live on Long Island?" I asked. I put a hand over my forehead to pretend to block the sun when I was really trying to cover up my face.

I heard a loud laugh and turned around. The pretty, whiny blond girl from earlier was flirting with my Hunter. Okay, maybe

he wasn't mine yet, but a girl could hope! I watched as she touched his chest and pretended to push him. "That's Ashley," Emily told me. "She's a CIT too."

"Are they dating?" I had to ask.

"No." Em shook her head. "Hunter is a counselor. CITs can't date counselors. It's against the rules. Not that Ashley hasn't broken them before." Em grinned. "Ashley usually gets whatever guy she wants. They worship her."

It was easy to see why. Ashley looked like she belonged on *America's Next Top Model*. She had perfectly straight, non-frizzy blond hair, bronzed skin, and gray eyes. She was also super-skinny. She'd have to be to pull off that baby blue ribbed tank top she was wearing. I repressed the urge to hate her on sight. There was something very familiar about her. I felt like I'd seen her running across a field, or swimming laps in a lake. But how? "I feel like I know her or something," I said as several people started to take the field again. Water break must have been almost over.

"You probably saw her on the camp video," Em offered. "Ashley is the camp model. She's on the cover of the camp brochure, in the commercials, the camp video, all over the merchandise catalog. She's pretty much the Pines spokesgirl." I followed Em onto the field and waited anxiously for the game to start up again. I just hoped I didn't embarrass myself.

So that explained it! She's the one who told me and Mom — on video of course — that the Pines had world-class camping facilities and a list of activities to choose from that any camper would dream of. Before I could ask Em anything else, Ashley and a few other girls took places next to us and started talking.

“How was your year, Ash?” someone asked.

“Busy,” Ashley said, with a flip of her blond hair. “I had to shoot a whole new line of stuff for camp, on top of the cheer-leading calendar I agreed to do at school. My coach saw the Pines stuff and thought my face would so sell a charity calendar.”

“Wow,” a few girls said breathlessly.

“I met with some modeling agencies in New York too,” Ashley added as she examined her bright pink nails.

“Did you sign with one?” another girl asked.

“Not yet,” Ashley said quickly. “I’m still trying to decide who I like best. They all seem to want me, you know?” Ashley thumbed the girl next to her’s blue shirt. “Cute tee, Candace!”

“Thanks,” the girl said shyly. “You really like it?”

“Absolutely,” Ashley said, sounding chipper. “Old Navy, right? I have the exact same one. Well, the designer version. Mine is Juicy.”

“Hey,” a blond girl said to me as she jogged over and stood next to Em. She looked buff and super tan, but I got the feeling it came from being the outdoorsy type rather than a tanning-bed queen. Her whole look screamed sporty. “I’m Grace,” she said. “Are you the new CIT?”

“Yes, I’m Sam,” I said.

Grace was staring at me intently. “Do I know you from somewhere?” she said. “Do you play field hockey?”

“That’s exactly what I said!” Em nudged Grace in the ribs. “I feel like we’ve met before.”

Oh no. They’d seen it. Any second now they were going to figure it out. I searched the group for Hunter. He was standing

a few feet away throwing and catching the dodgeball into the air as he talked to a few other guys. Start the game, I begged him silently. Before they realize that I'm —

Grace gasped. "You're that girl from the Dial and Dash commercial!"

Shoot. I glanced around. Grace was so loud, people looked over to see what the fuss was about. Including Hunter, and Ashley and her group, who had turned around and were suddenly listening.

"That's right!" Em seconded. "I love that commercial."

"It's so genius," agreed Grace. "Your cell phone dies and you can't call your boyfriend to say good-bye before his trip," Grace narrated as a small crowd started to gather.

"And so you swim through that river, jump over a building, and steal a motorcycle all so you can get to a store that sells a Dial and Dash phone so you can call him immediately," Em finished excitedly. The two of them looked at me expectantly. "That was you, right? Did you do your own stunts?"

There was no denying it now. "That was me," I said and people began to murmur. "But I didn't actually leap over a building or ride a motorcycle."

Stupid Dial and Dash moment. There were hundreds of commercials on TV every day, but for some reason the one I made, stuck. I liked making video diaries that were just for me, or video messages for my friends. I never wanted to be the next Jessica Alba.

"That was the best commercial," Grace gushed. "So are you a model?"

“No,” I said quickly and sighed. “It’s a long story, but the short version is that I did this low-budget test video for my mom’s company. It was part of an advertising pitch they were making to Dial and Dash Phone. The actress they hired dropped out last minute so my mom enlisted me. No one was supposed to see it but the Dial and Dash people. But when they did, they loved it so much they wanted to shoot the commercial for real. The catch was, I had to be in it. I can’t even get up in front of class to make a speech or read a report so it was kind of terrifying. But it was the only way my mom’s company could get the deal so I caved.”

“Lucky you,” Ashley interrupted. Her arms were folded across her chest and I could tell she was taking me in from head to toe. “I’m Ashley,” she said with a bright smile. “I’m actually a *real* model and actress. I’ve done some commercial work myself.”

“Sam,” I said for what felt like the tenth time today. Ashley was staring at me so intently I felt uneasy.

“Ash, isn’t that commercial the best?” One of her friends nudged her. “I loved the part when you jumped the building,” she said to me.

“She didn’t actually jump,” Ashley interrupted. “Didn’t you hear her?”

“Stunt double,” I told the girl.

“Have you ever done anything else other than that *one* commercial?” Ashley asked. “Because the business is tough, you know. I’ve been working for years and —”

“You made a commercial, Ash?” her friend interrupted.

“For the Pines, yeah,” Ashley snapped.

“But a national commercial?” the girl asked again.

“You guys ready to play?” Hunter interrupted the increasingly awkward conversation at the perfect moment. I had almost forgotten he was standing nearby the whole time. Now he knew my dirty little secret. Hunter had the dodgeball under his arm and he was grinning at me.

“Yes!” I said a little too loudly.

“Great,” Hunter said. “I like a newbie who’s ready for action.” I tried not to blush.

Ashley and the girls dispersed after that, and I walked onto the field and continued to stare at Hunter and his cute, tight butt, covered in navy nylon shorts, as he walked in front of me. “Hunter, wait! Time!” A girl on the other team said and waved him over to talk. I stared at Hunter’s bare, sweaty back as he ran. That’s when I heard a low groan.

“Oh no. I know that look,” a guy next to me said.

I looked left, then right, and then realized the guy was talking to me. “What look?” I asked him before I actually turned to face him, which was probably good considering he was beyond cute. He had slightly curly short brown hair that fell in his blue eyes and he reminded me of a Jonas Brother — tall, thin, and dark-haired. He was wearing red nylon shorts and a white t-shirt that was already muddy. I could make out the outline of his toned abs and muscles through the slightly sheer shirt and I quickly looked away and then couldn’t help looking back again.

He gave me a sly grin, revealing a dimple in his right cheek. “The look that all the girls here get when they’re falling for Hunter Thomas,” he pointed out.

I inhaled sharply. "I'm not falling for Hunter." I folded my arms. "I was actually looking at the other team. I'm just trying to scope out our competition."

He laughed. "Whatever you say," he said. "I'm Cole, by the way, not that you'd notice when you're drooling over Hunter."

"I wasn't drooling," I said, feeling a swell of indignation. I had no idea my Hunter infatuation was so obvious. What if Hunter overheard Cole? I'd seriously pass out right there and they'd have to play over me. "I do not like him, okay?" I seethed.

Cole looked at me curiously. "Good," he said softly.

Wait. What? "Why? I mean, what do you care?" I asked.

Cole shrugged. "The truth is, a girl like you could do a lot better than Hunter."

"What makes you say that?" I had to know.

"Maybe I'm wrong, but you look normal. And nice." Cole said. He had an arrogant grin on his face that I wanted to wipe off. "Nice girls with potential acting careers have a lot more going for them than to spend their summer fawning over Hunter."

"I'm not an actress," I pointed out. I guess Cole had overheard our conversation too. "I'm anything but."

"You could be," Cole said. "People flipped for that commercial. I bet Hollywood came banging on your door."

"They did," I admitted without thinking. I usually didn't tell people that. "But I wasn't interested. I'm not. I really don't." How did I explain it? "I'm not one for being the center of attention," I said. "I like to help people, and I like to get involved, but I don't really want to be the star." Wow. I had never really told a stranger that before.

Cole shook his head. "I get it," he said, "but I have a feeling that you're going to be one around here. Hunter is going to be all over that."

We both looked over at Hunter, who had finished talking to the girl from earlier and was now leaning on two short CITs, laughing. Why wasn't he starting the game already? I wanted all these awkward conversations over with. "Don't get me wrong," Cole added. "I like the guy. He's a decent friend to other dudes, usually, but to girls, well . . ."

I was starting to feel defensive of my crush. "He's friendly," I said.

Cole sighed. "He is friendly. Too friendly, and I feel it's my duty to warn you that he's also a major flirt and a serial dater. He loves hitting on CITs because he knows it will never go any further than that."

I looked at Hunter again. I didn't see anything particularly flirty about him, even if he was talking to two CITs. Cole moved closer to me then and I took a step back. Wow, his eyes really were unreal. They were as blue as the cloudless sky, and he had long eyelashes that I would have killed for.

"Don't fall for Hunter Thomas, okay?" Cole told me, sounding serious, instead of just teasing, like before.

Em already told me we couldn't date counselors and besides, I hadn't come to camp to find a boyfriend. "Don't worry, I won't," I assured him.

"Good." Cole looked satisfied. But why?

"Game on!" Hunter yelled, interrupting my thoughts.

I hadn't taken more than two steps to get into position when the unthinkable happened.

BOOM!

The dodgeball smacked me in the face, dizzying me. The next thing I knew, my flip-flops were slipping on mud. I tried to regain my balance, but like a movie in slow-motion I felt myself slide backward. I was falling into the muddy grass below me and I couldn't stop myself. I felt a sharp thud, then blinding pain in the back of my head. I closed my eyes before the dizziness could take over.

What a way to make a first impression.



## Home Sweet Home?

When I opened my eyes, the first thing I saw was Hunter.

“Hey, champ. That was quite a spill,” he said as he leaned over me. “Are you functioning okay?”

I tried to speak, but all I could manage was a gurgle. Everything came flooding back. I got hit in the face with the ball and wiped out. In front of all the counselors. I’d only been at camp for an hour and I’d already made a fool of myself. Hello, bad camp nickname! Everyone was going to call me Slipper or something stupid like that all summer. I just knew it.

“Don’t try to get up too fast,” someone said, and I realized Cole was sitting next to me, cradling my head as he held an ice pack to it. He smiled down at me. “You hit your head on a rock. That must be some bump.” It sure felt like it. The back of my head stung even with an icepack on it. I was suddenly aware that Cole’s hands were on me and I struggled to get up. “Don’t move. We’re going to get the nurse,” Cole instructed me.

“Samantha! Are you okay?” Ashley was standing over me

now, looking worried. "I'm so sorry. I threw the ball and I guess it went in the wrong direction."

Their faces kept coming in and out of focus and I could barely hear them my head hurt so bad. "It's okay," I managed.

"I'm just glad I didn't break your nose." Ashley clutched her chest.

Someone nearby snorted, and I could make out an African American girl in a tight black tank laced with bright pink ribbon, and short denim shorts, sort of laughing. Everyone looked at her. "Come on. You guys don't believe her, do you?" she asked incredulously.

"Nice, Courtney," Ashley pouted. "Trying to make the new girl hate me just because I *accidentally* hit her with the dodgeball."

While the two of them argued, Hunter spoke to me softly. "Do you think you can get up, champ?"

"Hunter, I think we should wait for the nurse," Cole said sharply.

"I can get up," I said and struggled to get out of Cole's reach. But everything went blurry and I had to let Cole's hands catch me. "Whoa."

"Cole's right, Hunter. She shouldn't walk right now," an older girl with brown hair and pretty gray eyes said. "Sam, I'm Alexis. I'm a senior counselor here. I think you should lie down and rest. We'll get you to your bunk. Your cabin is 8B."

"That's with us!" Em said excitedly. I didn't realize she was here. So was Grace.

“I think Meg, who is your bunk counselor, just got here so she’s probably setting up her bunk,” Alexis added. “I’ll ask Nurse Nancy to stop down.” I tried to lift my head again and Alexis grabbed my arm. “Don’t move. You should be carried.”

“I’ll do it,” Cole and Hunter offered at the same time.

NO WAY. “I can walk,” I insisted, feeling my face get hot at just the thought of Hunter scooping me up and walking away with me, like a scene out of some romantic comedy I’d seen one too many times on TBS.

“Hunter, you take her,” Alexis said.

I glanced at Cole and he gave me this weird sort of smirk. I looked away quickly.

“Sam, just rest,” added Alexis. “Everyone will be heading to their bunks for a break after lunch anyway. We’ll send food to you.”

I was missing lunch? Not only was I late that morning, but now I had to miss more social time by being on the disabled list. Some first day it was turning out to be.

“Okay,” I said, feeling weird as Cole handed Hunter the ice-pack and Hunter effortlessly lifted me into his arms. He had put his shirt back on, thank God, a gray one that hugged his chest. I might have imagined it, but at that moment, I thought I heard a few girls sigh. Now that I was airborne Hunter’s face was so close to mine I wasn’t sure where to look. Instead, I stared ahead at Em, who winked as Hunter carried me away.

This was awkward.

What do you talk about when a guy who is cuter than Orlando Bloom is carrying you across a field of sunflowers to bring

you to your new bedroom? Especially when you look like I did at the moment — my face probably covered in dirt, mud all over my clothes and makeup melted off my face. I didn't even want to think about the weight issue. I always hated sitting on a guy's lap for a school group picture. And here was Hunter, having to carry me what felt like miles. My blush was never going to go away after this moment.

"So, champ, you didn't tell me your name," Hunter said suddenly. He wasn't even huffing or puffing and we were heading up a hill, walking past several old, worn wood buildings with signs that said POTTERY, NEWSPAPER OFFICE, and ARTS AND CRAFTS. They were nestled between lots of large leafy trees that the sun was poking through, sending bursts of light everywhere. None of the buildings looked modern. As far as I could tell, most of them didn't even have air-conditioning. This wasn't meant to be a tour of camp, I know, but my first thought was that the place was really pretty in a rustic sort of way.

I knew I told him my name earlier, but after all that happened, I wasn't surprised he'd forgotten it. "Sam," I said without looking at him. "Sam Montgomery."

"I think I prefer champ," he told me. I snuck a glance at him. Hunter's face was all sweaty, in a cute way. I wasn't even sure what to say to that so instead I said, "I'm sorry you have to miss the start of lunch."

"No biggie," Hunter said and shifted his hands under my body. His hand skimmed my butt when he did it and I couldn't help but jump slightly. "I'm sure Beaver — that's our cook — will make me a burger if they run out," Hunter added. "The

most important thing is getting you back to your cabin in one piece. I'm sure no one's taught you how to ward off a wolf yet."

"You have wolves?" I croaked. "The brochure didn't mention wolves."

Hunter started to laugh. "I'm just kidding," he said and his hand closest to my arm tickled it slightly. "You should have seen your face!"

"It's not funny," I insisted. For weeks, I had a recurring nightmare that they ran out of beds and I was forced to sleep in the middle of the woods where I was attacked by a family of wolves.

"It's not funny," he repeated in a high voice. "I'm sorry. You're just adorable."

Adorable? How could Hunter call me adorable? Baby chicks are adorable. Golden retriever puppies are adorable. Fifteen-year-old girls like me are sweet, or smart, or any number of adjectives I couldn't think of at the moment because my head was on fire. Hunter had stumped me for a response again.

"Hey," he said, after he stopped laughing. "Look up there." He nodded toward the top of the hill and I could see what looked like several life-size wooden dollhouses. They were white with red porches and screen doors and red shutters. "That's what we call Candy Land," Hunter said. "Upper campus is where we house the senior campers, aka marshmallows, some counselors, and CITs. Lower campus, which we passed before, near the zip cord course, is dubbed Gumdrop Forest. That's where the peeps and pez sleep." He smirked. "That's where I sleep too. Senior counselors bunk with their charges and I've got peeps."

“Peeps, pez, and marshmallows?” I repeated.

Hunter grinned. “Cheesy, right? I know. They’re all campers. Peeps are eight and under, pez are nine to eleven, and marshmallows are twelve to fourteen. The cabin division names are the only lame thing about Whispering Pines.”

I tried to memorize the categories, but it was hard with a throbbing head.

“You’ll get the hang of it.” Hunter read my thoughts. “The most important thing you need to know is where I chill. That’s the counselors’ lounge.” He nodded past the cabins and I saw a Swiss Alps–style wood lodge, the roof touching the ground, forming a large triangle. The building was surrounded by a huge porch. “I’m sure you’ll get to hang out there sometime, if we counselors like you enough.”

“I’m beginning to feel like I just parachuted into a foreign country and I don’t speak the language,” I admitted.

“Well, first things first.” Hunter headed up the steps of a cabin that had a sign that said 8B. “Let’s introduce you to your home away from home.” The white front porch was adorable with red-trimmed windows and a red roof and three cute blue rockers waiting to be rocked in. The place looked like the dollhouse I had when I was little. I used to spend all my Christmas money sprucing it up. One year I even retiled the roof with real miniature shingles. They only lasted a month before my cousin Cara pulled them off one by one, thinking they were dominoes.

I reached out, since Hunter’s hands were tied up, and pulled open the creaky screen door.

“Meg!” Hunter yelled. “You’ve got your first injury.”

“What?” I heard a girl shriek. She ran out from the other room wearing a maroon Boston College tee and khaki shorts. She was pretty even with zero makeup, which let you see her freckles, and her blond hair was pulled casually into a loose ponytail.

“This is the champ — I mean Sam,” Hunter corrected, giving me a lopsided grin. “She got slammed in the face by a dodgeball during the game and hit her head on the way down. Alexis wanted her to rest.” He walked me over to the single in the room and gently placed me on it. I looked around. The room was full of black metal bunk beds, covered by saggy mattresses. The walls were made of — surprise — wood, that was decorated like the back of a bathroom stall. Etched everywhere were things like “Jess and Sara were here! 2006!” and “Kyle will love me 4EVR! — Sue ’08.” The room smelled faintly like bug spray.

“Are you okay?” Meg asked me worriedly. “I’m Meg Bauer, your bunk counselor. Do you want some ice? Something to eat? A magazine to read?” She looked around. “Your bags are probably in that pile over there.” She pointed to a mound of duffels. I could sort of make out my oversized olive green sack on the bottom.

“Thanks,” I said gratefully. “But I think I’ll just lie here.”

“Well, my knight in shining armor duty is over,” Hunter said, bowing slightly. “I guess I’ll see you at dinner, champ.”

“Thanks, Hunter,” I said awkwardly.

Meg sat down at the edge of my bed and waited for the screen door to slam behind him. “I have a feeling you’re the

envy of every CIT girl here right now,” she said with a grin. “I could name a dozen girls who would kill for alone time with Hunter Thomas.”

I blushed. I didn’t know why the topic of boys was so foreign to me. I guess my lack of boyfriends was part of the answer. “He’s really nice,” I said.

“We’ll see if you still think that way halfway through the summer,” she said wryly. “That’s the trouble with being the newbie. You don’t know everyone yet. But I’m sure you’ll catch on. Do you have any questions so far?”

“A million,” I laughed. “But I guess Hitch will go over everything at orientation.”

Meg nodded. “The most important stuff you’ll pick up quickly. The camp is co-ed, which you know, and we have about 250 campers, most of which stay the whole seven weeks. Each bunk has six to eight campers and one counselor and either a CIT or a junior counselor. By the end of your third day here, Hitch will assign each CIT to a senior counselor. You’ll work with that person all summer taking care of that one group of campers. You’ll spend two sessions a day with them, and have occasional kitchen duty, but for the most part you’ll still get to have regular camper privileges.”

Meg went over more camp logistics — what the canteen was (the snack shack), what food to avoid (tuna salad was awful), and the best camp activity to sign up for (she swore by the hiking group that got to take an overnighter). Before we knew it, the nurse was there to bring me a plate of food (a hamburger with all the fixings and fruit salad) and check my head. (“Just

a nasty bump,” she decided, and handed me some packets of Tylenol.) Before I knew it, the screen door was bursting open and a group of girls was racing toward the bunk beds.

“I call this one!” I heard Grace yell as she zipped past me. “Em, I have our bunk!”

Ashley and two others ran by. One I recognized as the spunky girl who had the nerve to take on Ashley at the dodgeball game, and another I didn’t recognize: tall, thin, dark tan, big chest, tiny waist, with perfectly curly, long light brown locks — looked like a model, too. The three of them stopped short at my bed.

“Did you already claim the single?” The brunette supermodel-in-training asked me icily.

“Gabby, I’ll handle this,” Ashley told her. She grinned. “I usually get the single,” she said. “I don’t know if anyone told you, but I’m the camp director’s daughter, and the single usually goes to me.”

“Give it a rest, Ashley,” snapped the fiery girl, pulling angrily on the pink ribbon of her tank top. “You use that excuse every year. You’re a camper just like the rest of us. It doesn’t mean you automatically get the only single every season.”

“Sam was here first,” Meg tried to intervene kindly, but the way Ashley and the supermodel girl were looking at me, like I had a huge red bull’s-eye on my forehead, made me instantly want to move. I hated being the cause of tension.

“That’s okay,” I said quickly. “I prefer a top bunk anyway.”

The minute I slid off the bed, the three of them dove on top of the mattress. Ashley was on the bottom and she screamed

triumphantly. "I was here first!" she said, sounding like a three-year-old. "This is mine."

Her friend dove on the bunk next to the bed, her chest cushioning her fall. "I call lower bunk! And since we're short one girl in here, this bunk is mine *alone*."

The African American girl with short brown hair, whose attitude was growing on me, looked disgusted. "Nice one, Gabby. I wouldn't do upper bunk again this year anyway. You snore." She looked at me and smiled. "I guess I'm going to be your bunkmate." She extended her hand. "Courtney, but you can call me Court," she said with a smile, and then leaned over and whispered in my ear. "To be honest, I didn't want the single. I just like watching Ashley squirm." I tried not to laugh.

"You're lucky you're with us, Sam," said Court as she looked over her shoulder at Ashley. "8A is super cliquish and they're stuck with Sara for a head counselor. She snores. Loud. Sort of like a few people in here." Ashley and Gabby glared at her.

"Girls, I'll give you a half hour to set up and then we can chat," Meg told us. "I'm just in the other room if you need me." Meg looked at me. "I share a room with Sara, 8A's head counselor. Our room bridges the two cabins." I nodded.

The other girls dove for their duffels and started pulling things out quickly. Within minutes, Ashley and Gabby were fighting over where to hang their Jonas Brothers poster — over Ashley's bed, or Gabby's bunk. Em was stacking what looked like romance novels on a shelf above her top bunk and the whole shelf looked like it was going to come crashing down at

any moment. Below, Grace was hanging these inspirational sports posters that said things like COURAGE and BELIEVE IN RAW WILL.

Court laid her bright yellow comforter on the bed and fluffed a pair of royal blue pillows. They had bright shiny stars all over them. Then she started to decorate the wall behind our bunk with hot guys from every ad I'd ever seen in a magazine and a Chris Brown poster, and filled her half of the stacked egg crates next to our bed with *US Weeklys* and *Cosmos*.

How come all I brought was my dated jade comforter and my drab brown trunk? Everyone else was decorating with millions of cool stickers from camp, bands, and their schools. I made a mental note to call Mom and tell her to send some Carle Place stickers, Orlando Bloom pictures, and Magnolia Bakery cupcakes in her first care package so that I had some sugar to bargain with around here. Since I hadn't brought any decorations, the only thing I had to do was make my bed.

"Has everyone met Sam?" Ashley asked. "Gabby, you haven't, right?"

"Hey," Gabby said unenthusiastically, and looked at Ashley out of the corner of her eye. Gabby was just as pretty as Ashley, but in a more California-girl kind of way. She was wearing terrycloth shorts that had the word *sweet* embroidered across the bottom in hot pink, which matched her belly-baring tank top. Suddenly I wished we had to wear camp uniforms. We only had to wear our red Pines counselor tees on a few special occasions.

"So, Sam, other than the fact you're the Dial and Dash Phone

girl, we don't know anything about you." Ashley was sitting on her fluffy comforter. "What camp did you go to last year?"

"Warning," Court whispered to me. "Watch your back."

"I haven't been to camp before," I said uncomfortably.

"Never?" Ashley's eyes opened wide. I shook my head, aware that everyone in the room's eyes were on me.

"Then how did you get picked to be a CIT?" Grace asked, sounding more than a bit miffed.

"I applied online and Hitch called me and did a lengthy interview," I explained. "I had to fax him all these recommendations from teachers and people I babysat for."

"So you got picked even though you've never done anything to prepare for being a CIT?" Grace looked baffled. "I thought Hitch had a strict system for picking his CITs. I wrote a thousand-word essay on my merits when I handed in my application."

Essay? What essay?

"That's because you're a psycho overachiever, Grace." Court rolled her eyes. "Hitch didn't even ask for an essay."

"Your campers are going to eat you alive," Gabby snorted. "They can spot someone who doesn't know what she's doing from across the lake."

"So what if Sam's never been to camp before?" Em sounded defensive and I couldn't help but smile at her gratefully. "Maybe she'll be better at this CIT thing than any of us because camp is all new to her." She turned to me and smiled. "I've only been coming here for five summers. Before this I went to Bellcrest, but they were super cliquish. The Pines is much friendlier. You're going to love it."

“Okay, lame-o, we get it, you want her to be part of your geek squad,” Gabby said, sounding beyond bored. Then there was a knock on our cabin door. A group of girls walked in and rushed over to Ashley, talking a mile a minute about clothes, bunk groupings, and some sort of party they were all keyed up over. Each girl was prettier than the next.

“Do you think you’ll get to have another sleepover at the ranch this summer?” a girl with a midriff-baring top asked.

“Absolutely,” Ashley said. “I can only invite twelve girls, of course, but everyone will be considered.”

I looked over at Court, confused, and she whispered in my ear. “Ashley has this invite-only sleepover at her dad’s ranch, on the property, for her birthday every summer. Girls get desperate to be invited because then it means they’re on Ashley’s accepted list.” She rolled her eyes. “Lucky them.”

A girl who looked like Barbie stared at me. “Hey, you’re the CIT who is in that Dial and Dash Phone commercial, right?” She walked toward me and the others followed. “That guy who played your boyfriend in the commercial was so hot and —”

“Guys?” Ashley interrupted. “I don’t mean to be rude, but we have to finish unpacking. Catch you at dinner?”

As they filed out, I heard Court gasp. “I forgot! Everyone hide your cell phones,” she warned as she started flinging even more clothes out of her bag looking for her phone.

“Meg will find it,” said Em. “She can find anything. She once found the stash of chocolate I stuck below a cut-out in the floorboard. I wasn’t allowed to go to the canteen for a week. She was so mad. She said I could have given the bunk termites.”

“Why can’t you have a cell?” I asked. I had to find a good spot to hide my video camera. I could go without my cell phone, but I was not giving up my palmcorder.

“No cells. It ruins the camp experience,” said Grace without a hint of irony. “Camp would be lame if everyone was walking around with phones all the time.”

“You are such a purist, Grace,” laughed Court. “Sam, I hate to break it to you, your cell phone is a goner, but don’t worry, you can use mine.”

“Meg isn’t taking yours?” I wondered.

“She’s taking what she thinks is mine.” Court held up a Voyager. “I’m giving in my old phone, which still works, and keeping my new one on me at all times.”

“Nice,” Em said with admiration. “Wish I’d thought of that.”

“I’ll let you eat up some minutes if you share some of those cookies your mom sends,” bargained Court.

“Deal,” said Em.

“That’s my plan too,” said Gabby, showing everyone two matching pink Coach cellphone cases. “I can’t go a day without talking to Joshy. Have I mentioned my almost college freshman boyfriend?”

“Three times already.” Ashley sounded annoyed. “While we were supposed to be talking about my prospects this year. And my theme for this year’s sleepover.”

“You have nothing to worry about this summer,” Gabby pointed out. “I’m the one who has the major dilemma. Stick with Joshy or go after Gavin. He’s so cute.” She sighed and clutched her pink throw pillow to her chest. “I totally missed

camp, but so much happened while I was away. My parents took us to the Greek Islands for Christmas and I got a killer tan. I went out with both Tommy Waters and Blake Edmonds, and then dumped them both when Joshy asked me to go to prom.”

“And that’s got to do with me, how?” Ashley looked bored. “We were talking about me finding a boyfriend. I’ve never gone a summer without one.”

“It could happen this year,” said Em, looking up from one of her books. She was holding one of those saucy romance novels that had a guy on the cover with a steroid-looking oiled bare chest and a loincloth as his only cover-up. “You’ve dated almost every guy here. There’s almost no one left.” Ashley glared at her and Em’s face turned pink. “No offense.”

“There are the counselors,” Ashley reminded her. “Technically I am one so it’s okay.”

“Pul-eeze. You’re a CIT and rules are rules,” Courtney corrected her. “We may be almost sixteen —”

“I am sixteen,” Gabby declared. “At least I am in two weeks.”

“Well, the rest of us are almost sixteen and that means we’re barely a step-up from a camper,” Court corrected. “Not that I don’t have my eyes on a counselor myself.”

Gabby squealed. “Who cares about any of that! The point is we’re back here. I’ve been counting down the days till camp for months. TGIH!” she said, breathing in deeply.

I looked at Em. “Thank God I’m Home,” she explained. “Gabby likes to abbreviate everything. Or at least she thinks she

is. Sometimes her made-up abbreviations are longer than the real words.”

Ashley was sitting on top of a serene blue comforter and a mound of throw pillows. Behind her head was a black and white poster of two people kissing in the rain along with pictures of her with friends and guys. There was even a picture of her with Hunter and Cole. Cole looked really cute in a navy polo, his curly hair blowing in the wind. “Girls, this is going to be an amazing summer,” she said confidently. “As long as you do things my way, of course.”

Gabby laughed sort of uncertainly. Court rolled her eyes at me. Grace and Em just shook their heads.

Ashley caught me staring and smiled thinly. I got the feeling that the “you” she was referring to was me. And that what she wanted to add was: And Sam, don’t you forget it.