

Fireflies

By ReadWorks

"Once you're in the field, make a beeline for the climbing wall," Vivian said to a circle of girls crouched behind the cabin. "And no flashlights."

It was Greta's first year at Camp Kalawallah, but Vivian had been going each summer since she was six years old. As Fern 6's cabin vet, Vivian was the one to ask about sneak-outs and socials. When it was time for the first social, Vivian made sure that all the girls knew the drill: no one dances until the oldest girls, the Sequoias, dance on their own with the oldest boys, the Oaks. Also, if a boy particularly likes you, he'll ask early in the night for the last dance.

She also knew just what to do when, only a couple minutes into their journey, they saw a counselor's flashlight in the distance.

"Shhh. Art porch," Vivian whispered.

Greta and the rest of the girls followed Vivian as she veered off their course and to the art house, shuffling underneath its deck. Greta breathed into the darkness. A set of eyes seemed to pop out of the pitch black in front of her, and she nearly shrieked. In a millisecond, her mind raced between conclusions: was it a fox, a deer, the camp director, or maybe Liam?

"Hey, Greta." There was an unmistakable squeak in the voice. It was Meredith, one of the Sequoias.

"Hey," Greta whispered back, noticing sets of eyes younger and older all around her.

A beam of light shone from across the tennis court. It moved forward, hitting the path in front of the art house, but leaving the slope beneath the porch dark. Greta smiled. Not only had they not gotten caught, but Meredith knew her name.

Once the light was out of sight, it was a mad dash across the field, the girls weaving around each other in a sort of focused chaos. Greta was a fast sprinter, and she was the first to make it past the climbing wall to the little clearing in the woods. She was so caught up in the excitement of it all, she'd practically forgotten what she was there for.

Until she saw the boys. All twelve of them, Liam included. She sat right next to him. She tried to quiet her heavy breath and wiped the sweat from her forehead. She prayed that she'd remembered to put on deodorant.

"You're fast, huh?"

It was the second time he'd spoken to her. The first time, she'd been balancing all the Fern 6 girls' empty cups on her tray, bringing them to the dishwasher. Every snack time, it was a different girl's duty to put the cups away. Her stack had just toppled on the tray, and one cup was about to hit the ground when a hand caught it in midair.

The hand rose up, placing the cup on the tray and restacking the other cups in three shorter towers. "Four to a stack. Any higher and they'll fall."

She smiled, unable to say anything more than "Thank." Not "Thank you," or "Thanks." Just, "Thank." Mortifying.

Yet, here he was, smiling at her. Maybe he hadn't noticed how weird she was being after all. She remembered that she had put on her deodorant, and she smiled back.

"Gotta be quick. The watchdogs are out."

Those eyes. Even in the dark, she could see the flash of green, and they gave her the same unbearable pang she'd felt that time in the kitchen. Even in the dark, it was too much to handle.

She looked away, down at her wrists. She played with the bracelet she had made in her arts and crafts elective, focusing on the maroon and navy threads.

"So, where are you from, anyway?"

Greta looked up. He was still looking right at her. She decided to focus on his forehead. That she could handle.

"A small town near Boston. You?"

"Do I have something...?" Liam touched his forehead.

"Um, just a mosquito. It's gone now."

"Oh. I'm from Iowa. Middle of nowhere."

"Don't they have sleepaway camps out there?" The question immediately felt stupid and rude.

"Yeah, they do, but my dad's from Maine and wanted me to get the 'real New England camp experience' like he did."

"Did he go to Kalawallah?"

"Yep. And to tell you the truth, I was pretty upset that he made me come here. My two best friends were going to a camp closer to home. I just wanted to go with them."

"Well, my sister told me that sometimes it's best to do new things on your own. I think she's right," Greta said, surprised at the ease with which she was speaking. "You might feel lonely for a second, but then you can make new friends and experience new things."

She looked around. All the other girls were there now, too, chatting and giggling. A few seemed to be staring at her. Her face turned hot.

"Anyway," he said, so close she could feel the warmth of his breath, "I'm pretty glad I'm here now."

Could he possibly be saying he was glad he was there because of her? No. If he really liked her, he would've asked her for the last dance at the social instead of dancing with Julia from Fern 7. She was a fourteen-year-old. Greta didn't stand a chance.

"Truth or dare, Evan?" Vivian asked, bringing Greta back to everyone in the woods.

"Always dare," Evan said with a grin.

Vivian huddled with two other girls for a minute. They erupted with laughter before turning back to the group, and everyone was eager to hear what they had come up with. Evan looked ready for anything. But just as Vivian was about to deliver the dare, a light flashed in the woods.

"Hey! Don't move!" a voice called, the flashlight coming toward them.

"Run!" everyone seemed to yell at once, and the group took off, dispersing in the field and woods.

Greta started to run anxiously, her stomach tumbling. The nervous butterflies were suddenly gone. These were fireflies.