

Lily Easton

Afterglow

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To anyone looking for a little light in dark times.

Prologue

Alice

‘Do you want to know a secret?’

The words coming out of Briar’s mouth didn’t slur, didn’t give away the amount of alcohol they’d drunk that night. Then again, Alice was the one who was usually embarrassing when she was tipsy – she’d always envied that Briar only got cooler, as if that were somehow possible.

Alice laughed, tipping her head back and immediately dizzyed by the sight of the stars. ‘Is there anything you could tell me that’s actually a secret?’

There had never been a more perfect night than this one, the embers of a dying campfire crackling next to them, just her and her best friend squeezed onto one log in her favorite place in the world.

She knew they were shirking their responsibilities – technically, they should have been in their bunks, supervising the campers, but some other counselors were covering for them so they could clean up the final campfire. The other counselors *definitely* knew they weren’t just cleaning up. When Briar and Alice were together, work was usually the last thing on their minds. They were famous amongst the campers and counselors for their tight-knit friendship and associated hijinks, which they

could get away with on account of Briar being the camp director's daughter and Susan having a soft spot for Alice.

Briar's next words cut through her reverie. 'I don't tell you *everything*, you know.'

When Alice looked back at Briar, she was frowning, her nose scrunched up. It only made her freckles more pronounced, constellations that reminded Alice of the sky. She'd always been jealous of Briar's freckles. Everything about Briar was interesting to her, had captivated her since the day they had met, next to this fire pit, eight years before.

'You don't?'

She was trying to be funny, trying to be the version of herself she felt most when she was at camp and when she was around Briar. Carefree and full of life. Still, maybe because camp was ending the next day and with it the best version of Alice, a hint of anxiety played at the back of her mind. What Briar had said couldn't really be true – Alice was sure she knew everything there was to know about Briar. They spent every moment of every day together. Sometimes Alice thought she knew Briar better than herself. But what if she was wrong?

She couldn't say their relationship hadn't changed over the past few years, first with her boyfriend, Noah, entering the picture and then when Alice had decided to go to college in Scotland. At the time, college had seemed so far away. They'd still had the full summer ahead of them. Now, a part of Alice worried that things wouldn't be the same when Briar came to visit her at St Andrews for fall break.

Briar breathed out slowly. 'I lied about something.' Her accompanying smirk was enough to put Alice at ease.

Alice turned to her. Their thighs were touching now, but Alice didn't feel the need to move away. They were

always touching like this, accidentally, or hugging or holding hands on purpose, because that was what friends did. And right now, Alice needed something to anchor her to the earth so she didn't float away.

'What did you lie about?' she asked, focusing in on Briar's hazel eyes, finding the freckle on her left iris. It was a trick she used when she needed to stop her thoughts from racing.

'You know how I said I kissed Trevor Mac at homecoming?'

Alice's eyebrows knit together. 'Yeah...?'

'I didn't,' Briar said simply, and it was only after she leaned away that Alice realized how close their faces had been. 'That's all.'

'Oh,' Alice blinked, and Briar's features realigned in front of her. 'Why did you say you did?'

Briar fiddled with her shorts, and Alice's eyes traced the movement, admiring the smooth skin of Briar's thigh.

'I dunno. I guess I felt like everyone else had done it, and I didn't want it to be like, a *thing* that I hadn't. You know?'

'Yeah,' Alice said, nodding. She had the urge to grab Briar's hand to stop her from messing with her shorts. 'I get lying to everyone else, but why couldn't you tell me the truth?'

Briar looked up again, and Alice struggled to swallow. She glanced over at the fire pit and saw that the smoke was blowing towards them now, making the air more difficult to breathe. At least now she knew the reason. 'It was mostly *for* you.'

'What do you mean?'

'I guess,' Briar started, then chewed her lip as Alice just stared at her, 'it felt weird that you'd done all these things

that I hadn't. Because usually we do everything together. And I didn't want you to think... I don't know how to explain it.'

Alice couldn't stop herself from giggling at Briar's skewed logic. 'Oh come on, do you really think it matters to me if you've kissed someone?'

Except suddenly, it seemed to occupy every corner of Alice's mind, and the more she tried to not think about it, the more it repeated itself over and over again. Images of Briar kissing Trevor, or some faceless man, things Alice had never really thought about that deeply before. And it was quickly ruining her good mood. Which didn't make sense, because Briar had just admitted it hadn't even been true.

Briar smiled, oblivious to Alice's thoughts. 'No, of course it doesn't matt—'

Alice didn't let her finish. 'I'll kiss you.'

Briar's mouth gaped, and Alice found herself wondering what it would be like to kiss her. What those images in her head would look like if she got to be the one kissing Briar instead.

'What?'

'I'll kiss you,' Alice said, adopting her bossiest tone. 'So you can go to college having kissed someone.'

'But you just said it didn't matter,' Briar countered.

'It doesn't. But it seems like you want to kiss someone, and I'm here...' Alice was quickly losing steam as Briar stared at her as though she were speaking a foreign language. 'One kiss couldn't hurt.'

'I didn't tell you so that you would kiss me,' Briar said, and her voice sounded strange. For once, Alice had no idea what she was thinking. She suspected Briar was trying to bow out gracefully, but she tried one more time to

make her see the benefits of the situation. She knew she could help Briar with this, if she was given the chance. And she wanted to be a good friend to her.

‘Obviously,’ Alice said. ‘I mean, I know I’m not exactly your first choice, but I’m here. So if you want to try, just to see...’

Briar’s cheeks went pink. ‘Um, oka—’

Alice kissed her before she lost the nerve to. It took a few seconds for her to realize that Briar had probably expected some sort of build-up, like what would normally happen before a first kiss. But for some reason, Alice hadn’t been able to wait.

Their mouths were frozen, touching but not moving, for a long moment. And then Alice realized she had done exactly what she’d promised, that she should pull back. So she did. For exactly one second before she leaned in more slowly and kissed her again, harder.

And Briar responded this time, her mouth moving, getting the hang of it quickly. *Very* quickly. Alice got lost in it in a way she hadn’t expected, because kissing Noah had never felt this good, this right. It occurred to her that maybe this was how kissing someone was supposed to feel, that maybe Briar had been the missing element from all her previous kisses.

Because of course the person who knew her better than anyone else would also know exactly what she liked, exactly how to suck on her lower lip to get her to moan, in a way Noah never had. It should have occurred to her sooner that kissing your best friend was actually the most sensible way to go about having a good kissing experience. It was only logical.

Alice had never felt better, freer, more herself than she did while kissing Briar.