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OUTER BANKS

LIGHTS OUT

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CHAPTER 1**JOHN B**

THE SECURITY GUARD ALMOST SAW ME, BUT JJ PULLED THE back of my shirt and I ducked just in time. The four of us crouched in the darkness as the guard drove past in his golf cart.

“Do you think the hotel has special golf carts just for security guards?” JJ whispers. “Like, all tricked out with sirens like police cars?”

“Maybe,” I answer, though I didn’t see any special equipment on the cart that passed us. Not that I had a chance to look that closely.

All four of us—JJ, Pope, Kiara, and me—stand and continue our trek across the hotel’s golf course.

Now that the security guard is out of earshot, JJ doesn’t bother whispering. “Spring break sucks,” he announces firmly.

JJ’s not exactly a “look on the bright side” kind of guy. Trust me, there’d be no point in telling him, *Hey, at least it’s a week or two off school*, because it’s not like he cares about school anyhow. Or I could point out that the temperature this afternoon got all the way up to 70 degrees (even though the average high on the island this time of year is only 60), so we got to spend the day in

shorts and t-shirts, but he'd just point out that it's dropping down into the 40s overnight anyhow. Plus, then Kiara would launch into a lecture about climate change, and even though she's totally right about all that, Kiara's lectures aren't exactly a whole lotta fun. And we came out tonight looking for a good time.

Plus, the thing is, JJ's right. When you live in the OBX like we do, spring break *does* kind of suck.

You know those videos people post online, on some beautiful sandy beach with everyone in bathing suits and partying in the sunshine? Or maybe they're, I don't know, skiing on a mountaintop. Or staying at some luxury hotel getting spa treatments. Or skydiving or yacht racing or something in some exotic location. (Whatever rich people do in their spare time.) Anyway, those images come from places like *this*. The places where the rich folks—we call 'em Kooks—forget there are actual people who *live* in their vacation destinations all year round. Here in the Outer Banks, spring break means dozens of mainland Kooks breezing onto the island, filling the hotels, crowding the beaches, and taking up every seat at every restaurant. They clear out the local shops so there's no bait and tackle left for the rest of us to go fishing.

Then, two weeks later, they go home, leaving their (literal) messes behind for the locals to clean up.

So why argue with JJ when he's right? (It's hard enough arguing with him when he's wrong.) Spring break *sucks*. Or anyhow, it sucks for Pogues like us.

"At least you don't have to work the entire time," Kiara offers.

Kiara's definitely a "look on the bright side" type of person. Or maybe it's more that she believes that she can somehow *get* to the bright side, if only people would listen to what she has to say and learn everything she knows about inequality and environmental justice and that kind of thing.

She says all these parties are bad for beach erosion, but they're also good for business—her parents' business. Her dad owns The Wreck, one of the most popular restaurants on the island, and spring break brings in a ton of customers. Ever since she was big enough to hold a tray, Kiara's had to work at the restaurant while everyone else is on vacation. Her parents could definitely hire someone else, but her dad thinks it's the sort of thing that builds character. Plus, he wants Kie to know all there is to know about running that restaurant. He thinks she's going to take over the place someday.

Of course, Kie has other plans. (Kie's also the type of person who always has other plans.) But her parents don't know their daughter wants to spend her life fighting for environmental justice, not serving platters of fresh oysters to rich folks who couldn't care less about stuff like that.

Kie tells me stuff she'd never tell her parents.

Not just me, I guess. Sure, I like to think she's closer to me than she is to JJ or Pope, but I bet JJ and Pope like to think the same thing. Kie's our best friend, but she's also a *girl*, and a really gorgeous, really cool girl. She's not even really a Pogue like the three of us.

I guess I should explain: Here at the OBX, the locals (and the spring breakers) are divided into two camps: the Kooks and the Pogues. The Kooks,

like I said, are the rich families who spend their money at beachfront restaurants and hotels, and the Pogues are the ones who work at those restaurants and hotels. There's not really anything in between, not around here. On our island, you have either two jobs or two houses.

Anyway, the three of us—JJ, Pope, and me—act like we're not jealous or competitive about Kiara, but there's an unspoken thing in the air among us sometimes when Kie pulls her long hair up into a ponytail, exposing her soft neck, or emerges from the water in a wet bathing suit.

"At least your dad gave you tonight off," Pope offers, the voice of reason like always. Pope's not a bright side or dark side kind of guy—he just tells it like it is. He believes in truth and logic, that kind of stuff. So right now, he's pointing out that *yes, Kie has to work all through spring break, but she does have tonight off*. Which means the four of us get to hang out.

And maybe make some trouble, too.

"You sure you want to do this?" Pope asks, turning to me. I think sometimes he expects me to be the voice of reason, too. After all, I've been living on my own ever since my dad disappeared and I haven't burned the house down yet, so I must be doing something right.

My uncle Teddy is technically my guardian, but he's not exactly reliable. As in, I haven't seen or heard from him in weeks—he works in construction, and he splits whenever there's a building job to be had in some other city or town. As in, I'm living alone in the house where I used to live with my dad—no, wait: I still live there with my dad, he's just been gone. For a while.

But anyway, I've been on my own. And like I said, I haven't blown up the house yet, which is enough to make Pope think that I must be as mature as he is, which is why he's looking at me now, hoping I'll be the one to call off our latest plan.

Not a chance.

"Hell yeah, I wanna do this," I say. "Not about to let the Kooks have all the fun."

"Damn straight," JJ agrees.

What is our latest plan? It's pretty simple. Like I said, the hotels are packed to capacity with unfamiliar (Kook) faces for the next two weeks—families with whining kids, teenagers with their parents' credit cards. Which means hotel security already has its hands full looking for toddlers who wandered off when their parents were busy getting shit-faced, or trying to keep drunk Kook teens from diving into the freezing pools that are only open for show. Which means that four innocent Pogues like us have an opportunity to waltz right in without anyone noticing, lift some booze from the hotel bar or a forgotten room service cart or whatever they have at those places (Kiara stayed at a nice hotel with her family in California last summer, so she knows how hotels work better than the rest of us), and party like it's, well, spring break, on our terms.

Why did Kie stay at a fancy hotel last summer? Like I said, even though she hangs out with us, she's *technically* a Kook. Her family lives in Figure 8, not on the Cut, which is the south side of the island where JJ, Pope, and I live. Kie

even went to the Kook school for a year. But Kiara dislikes the Kooks as much as the rest of us and insists that she's a Pogue through and through.

That's why the four of us are currently dressed in shades of black and gray, sneaking across the golf course attached to the island's nicest hotel. I mean, go big or go home, right? If we're going to do this, we're going to do it at the *best* place, the sort of place where four Pagues wouldn't be caught dead.

JJ's got the hood of his sweatshirt pulled up over his blond hair. Kiara's wearing dark blue jeans with a black long-sleeved shirt on top. Pope showed up with a white t-shirt on over his jeans. I'd guessed he wouldn't really get it about stealth mode, so I brought an extra black shirt just in case and made him put it on over his white shirt before we stepped foot onto the hotel's perfectly manicured golf course.

"All we gotta do is get in and get out," JJ says. He's still wearing the shorts he had on this afternoon—when it was sunny and warm—and I can tell he's trying not to let us see that he's freezing now that the sun's gone down. JJ doesn't like to show weakness.

The golf course wraps around the hotel like a castle moat, but as we get closer to the main building, the silence of the empty course is taken over by a clamor of voices. Soon, we can see the hotel deck—there's a bright, shiny pool even though it's too cold to swim. At the far end of the pool is a hot tub that is full of littlish kids even though it's after ten. (I guess even rich parents don't care about bedtime on vacation.)

A bunch of adults—the kids' parents?—are milling around, fancy-looking drinks in their hands. Behind the pool is an elevated deck—the hotel restaurant—and a bunch of tables with heat lamps scattered among them so that people can sit outside regardless of the cold. Almost every table is occupied by a family—two parents, their daughters and sons, everyone clean and bright and smiling and dressed up.

"This doesn't even look like fun," I whisper, and I half mean it. At some of the tables there are teenagers sitting with their parents. Is that really how they want to spend their spring break, hanging out with their parents? Once we get out of here and back to my place, there will be no adults to tell us we're too young for anything, no Kiara's dad to tell her to get to work, no Pope's parents asking about his latest homework assignment, and definitely no JJ's dad getting into one of his moods.

I miss my dad, but I'd be lying if I said there weren't *some* advantages to living on your own.

I notice Sarah Cameron (local Kook princess) sitting at one of the tables with her parents and her brother. Her long, always-a-little-bit-messy blond hair is pulled into a ponytail. I already knew the Camerons weren't leaving the OBX for spring break because I work for Mr. Cameron—Ward—maintaining his yacht. Ward is smiling at all the tourists like he's the mayor or the island's official welcoming committee, but Sarah looks bored. Not that I know her so well that I can read the expression on her face, but the "bored teenager stuck with her parents" look is pretty universal.

"So much for stealth mode," Kiara whispers.

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"We don't exactly fit in in our current outfits." Kiara points to a group of middle-aged Kook women wearing long floral-print dresses with wedge sandals. They look freezing, like they didn't bother checking the weather before they packed their bags to head to the OBX. Or maybe they just thought, *Beach, island*, and assumed it was tropical even though the Carolina coast in March is obviously not. Sarah Cameron, at least—a local like us—is dressed weather-appropriately just like we are. (Well, except for JJ in his shorts.) Most of the men are wearing a variation on the exact same outfit: khaki pants, button-down shirt, navy blazer, striped tie. I wonder if their conversations are as dull as their clothes.

"Hey, Kie," I try. "You know how to fit in with the Kooks, right? Couldn't you just go right up to the bar and order a bunch of drinks, tell them to charge it to your room or something?"

Kie looks at me with daggers in her eyes. She hates when any of us remind her of her Kook status. I grin because I know she'll do whatever it takes to prove she's one of us, not one of them.

"I have a better idea," Kie says, pulling off her black shirt (she's wearing a t-shirt underneath) and tying it around her shoulders. She tucks her t-shirt into her jeans and pulls her hair into a tight bun at the nape of her neck. She doesn't look as fancy as the girls in dresses down there, but she can definitely fit in when she wants to.

"Follow my lead," she says, and strides onto the deck like she owns the place.

JJ, Pope, and I exchange a look, but we follow. As we pass the Camerons' table, I hear Sarah complaining about spending spring break at home.

"Look around," Ward, her dad, says. "People go to great lengths to spend spring break here."

"Topper's family went to *Vail* this weekend, Dad." Topper is Sarah's asshole boyfriend. "And everyone else is gone for two whole weeks! Can't we go somewhere just for a couple of days?"

"You don't even know how to ski," Ward points out reasonably.

"*Snowboard*," Sarah corrects, "and that is *not* the point."

I shake my head. Rich people problems are weird. Sarah catches me looking and raises an eyebrow, but she doesn't mention me to Ward and the rest of her family, or ask what I'm doing at a place like this. She knows as well as anyone that my friends and I don't exactly belong here.

"Told you I didn't need this," Pope says, pulling at the neckline of the black shirt I lent him.

I shrug. "Whatever. It got us across the golf course, didn't it?"



CHAPTER 2

JJ

KOOKS HAVE NO CLUE HOW TO PARTY. I MEAN, THEY HAVE all the money in the world, but they waste so much time being, I don't know, *civilized*. Here they are, on vacation, and they're just sitting around in their fancy clothes and expensive jewelry, posing like they're mannequins in a store window instead of actual people having actual *fun*.

On the hotel deck, there's a maze of tables and heating lamps filled with middle-aged folks and their kids looking practically comatose as they sip their expensive wine—the middle-aged folks, not the kids—and stare out at the ocean, which, I'm sorry, it's dark out, you can't actually *see* the water. I mean, this hotel is right on the beach, so you could probably hear the roar of the waves or something if the people milling around would shut up for two seconds.

It's almost enough to make you feel sorry for them.

Almost.

Actually, nah, not even close.

In the summer, out-of-town tourist Kooks crawl all over the island, and they're pretty easy targets. I mean, they're on vacation, they just want a good time. I lost count of how many out-of-town Kook girls I made out—and then some—with last summer. But for some reason, tonight, none of this looks like a good time.

It looks more like a waste of time.

Kiara leads the way past the empty pool and the crowded hot tub, onto the deck, straight into the lobby, and toward the elevators. The lobby has literal crystal chandeliers hanging down from vaulted ceilings, and the floors are made of bright, shiny marble arranged into an elaborate flowery pattern. A group of women walk past us, heels clicking against the floor. My sneakers squeak with each step I take.

"Where are we going?" John B whispers to Kie, his lips right up close to her ear, which is totally unnecessary. I mean, I can hear him from here and he's not pressing his mouth to my ear, but whatever, any excuse to get close to her, I guess.

"I have a plan," Kiara promises. We crowd into the elevator and she hits B, and the elevator descends to the basement.

"Wait here," she says with a wink, and disappears down the hall.

The basement of this hotel is nothing like the lobby upstairs, all marble floors and bright lights. Overhead, there are dim fluorescent bulbs, and the walls are cinder blocks painted dark blue.

Up ahead, there's an enormous bucket on wheels that looks like it's filled with dirty sheets and a couple of discarded room service trolleys. I head over and look at the uneaten food the Kooks upstairs left behind. There's a bottle of red wine that's only about two-thirds empty. I take a swig. It tastes terrible.

"You know, John B," I say, "when you said you wanted to sneak into this place, I didn't think you meant hanging out in the basement."

"What do you think, boys?" Kiara calls out from down the hall. I don't even recognize her at first. She's wearing a maid's uniform—black short sleeves with a white apron sewn into the front. Kie spins around like she's a supermodel.

"Where'd you get that?" John B asks.

Kiara grins. "Laundry room."

"You're wearing someone's dirty clothes?" Pope asks, looking grossed out.

"What, you thought the shirt I lent you was clean?" John B winks.

"I knew it smelled!" Pope shouts.

"Shh, you guys, you're gonna blow my cover," Kiara says, but she's laughing.

"Kie," I say, "no one is gonna believe you work here." The uniform is wrinkled and at least two sizes too big.

Kiara shakes her head. "You're assuming rich folks actually *look* at the people serving them. Trust me, after years at The Wreck, I know better." The Wreck is a magnet for Kooks and tourists, which means it's a magnet