

WHENEVER

I'M

WITH

You

X LYDIA
SHARP



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I've been pegged as the rich Latina from LA, because no one here except Kai knows much more beyond that. They don't know my mother is a household name, and her latest scandal is the reason I'm wearing a coat over a sweater over a thermal top while my friends in LA are probably lounging poolside tonight, flaunting their half-naked, sun-kissed bodies at one another. Same coastline, different world.

Mel pulls at the charred outer shell of her marshmallow, leaving a gooey white glob on the end of her stick, and then pops the crunchy part into her mouth. Jase watches her chew, his whittling forgotten until she swallows and asks him, "What would you do with all that money?"

"Buy a one-way ticket from Alaska to Hawaii," he says. Laughter rises up, and the conversation turns to lighter topics again. Even Kai smiled at that comment, and although Jase is not my favorite person, I can relate to his desire to ditch the cold.

"You wanna get outta here for a minute?" Kai whispers to me. "We can see the sunset better over there."

"Over where?"

"Over anywhere but here."

"Sounds perfect."

We excuse ourselves from the group and say our good-byes. Jase reminds us about his Halloween party coming up, and Kai mutters something in response, never slowing his steps.

"We'll be there," I say over my shoulder. We already have our costumes set, and the colder it gets, the less we can do

outdoors. Going to a party, even at Jase's house, is better than doing nothing.

Kai tugs me along through the woods until the voices behind us are barely audible. We can't see the sunset at all over here.

But I do see an animal peeking out from behind a tree trunk up ahead and watching us with curious eyes. It has big pointy ears, a pointy snout, and red fur. It's about the size of a small dog, but it isn't a dog, or anything domesticated.

"Is that a fox?" I say, planting my feet.

Kai stops at my side and follows my gaze. "Yep. It probably smelled our food."

"Will it hurt us?"

"Not if we don't hurt *it*." He starts to move again, but I don't, and our arms stretch between us, hands still held tightly together. My eyes are locked on the fox, though, whose movements have become skittish, head snapping one way then the other, foot lifting then dropping, like it can't decide if it should go or stay.

Well, it isn't the only one. "Shouldn't we wait for it to leave?"

"Gabi, look at me," Kai says.

Slowly, I turn my head to face him. As soon as the fox is out of view, I let out a breath and relax. Kai instills a natural calm in me that I've never had around anyone else.