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NOW

SATURDAY AFTERNOON. ONE YEAR AFTER.

Finally arrived at Highmark! So freakin' ready to ~~endure~~ enjoy some vacay time with my family ~~who I've barely spoken to in months~~. Two weeks at the lake resort where ~~I killed a girl last year~~ we've gone every summer since I was twelve! ~~As long as I don't think about what happened on that night~~, this place is seriously amazing. ~~And I'm seriously screwed~~. Yay!

I hit the delete button a little too hard on all the parts I can't share. Anddddd post. Post it. Post the photo, Mandy. It doesn't matter that most people won't pause their scrolling long enough to read. Not the girl I made out with last week at a party, or the boy from my dorm who insists I'm amazing but doesn't really know me. My roommate Em insisted I take pics, so they'll care, but they'll never know that it took me twenty minutes of typing and deleting to produce a fake smile and an even faker caption.

My sweaty finger smudges the screen. I have to leave this sauna of a car before I melt straight into the seat. With each passing minute, the smell of formerly iced coffee gets thicker, and the amount of pastel--blue hair sticking to my neck increases at an alarming rate. Disgusting.

I'm disgusting.

Coward.

My shoulders curl. Stalling is ridiculous, but I need a few more minutes to collect myself. I'm fine. I'll be fine. This is fine. I toss the phone onto the passenger seat and grip the steering wheel.

I'm going to spend the next two weeks at Highmark Inn & Resort.

Where a girl---

Where Sara---

Where someone---

Where *I* killed my friend.

Stop it. But I *can't* stop seeing her face. I bite down on the scream, knuckles going white around the wheel. Daffodils, dandelions, dahlias, crap need another that starts with *D*, daisies uhhhh nope, don't think about Sara, keep thinking about flowers, okay carnations, calendulas—

“Shit,” I whisper to the empty car.

My gaze flicks to the rearview mirror, where the wood--paneled walls of the main lodge loom behind me, partially hidden by a line of trees. We both have so much to hide. Me, and this place where rustic charm lies like a bad filter over couples that “don't fight in public” and kids who treat consequences like fairy-tale villains.

Sara and I were those kids too.

My chest aches, and my hands fall to my lap, balled into fists. I have to get it together. Mom's been “checking in” too much lately. The insinuations are impossible to miss.

“Come to Highmark with us, Mandy. If it's too much for you, we'll work something else out.” Her voice was so gentle, so reasonable on the phone that day, but her meaning was crystal clear.

Show us how well you're doing. Prove we made the right decision letting you start college early.

The annual summer vacation is a test this year, and if I fail, I'm screwed. Mom and Dad are going to yank me out of school in Virginia. And maybe they'd be right to do it, but then what? Eighteen years old with no skills besides breathing through a panic attack and keeping my eyes open during an art history class after only three hours of sleep. Move home and go to community college? That would be a nightmare with Mom hovering every step of the way and Dad watching me like he wants to say the right thing, but has no framework for navigating this new version of his daughter.

And Kelsey. I have to face Kelsey too.

God, I hope my sister doesn't hate me. Fifteen--year--olds hate a lot of things, but an older sister who ignored any and all texts for the better part of a year has to be pretty high on the list.

My sigh comes out high--pitched and thready, more like a wheeze. I haven't made it out of the car, and I'm already a mess.

I slip my fingers beneath my round black--framed glasses and rub my eyes. A lash falls out and pokes me in the eyeball. I hiss, reaching for the visor and ignoring the way my hand shakes.

In the small hazy mirror, bloodshot lines splinter through the whites of my eyes, making the brown irises look muddy and tired. And *goddamn* am I already tired. Ah, there! My nails are cut so brutally short that it's easy to run my finger back and forth over the cornea. Gotcha.

I replace the glasses and blink until the eye isn't watery anymore. I force a warped smile in the mirror. Highmark's main lodge lurks just over my shoulder, and I can't quite ignore the too--fast beat

of my heart. Everyone here will remind me of the gap between now and how things were last year, and I'll continue to smile, exactly like this. Lips curled. Eyes crinkled. Screaming inside.

Screaming

Screaming

Screaming

Stop. Peonies, poppies, pansies...think...think of nothing, think, petunias, periwinkles.

I'm okay. I just need a little more time to forget. This will be difficult, not impossible. I give myself a quick shake and half--heartedly brush at the flaky orange crumbs littering my lap. In the passenger seat, the crumpled empty Cheez--It bag is a foil tribute to the only food I've consumed since driving seven hours straight from school. The knot in my throat grows.

Here, Mom will insist I *eat more than just junk*, because *chips and coffee aren't a meal*. Dad will touch his fingers to the line of silver stud earrings running up both sides of my ears, and he'll say, *Those are new*, but he'll look at me sidelong for a while after. Kelsey will---

I don't know what Kelsey will do, but I know the most important part.

I know Sara Ellis is dead because of me.

2

NOW

SATURDAY AFTERNOON. ONE YEAR AFTER.

The path from the parking lot to our cottage suite wasn't this long last year. There are the same number of slate slabs, and it hugs the front side of the main lodge as it always has, but the path is longer today. It must be, because otherwise, time is working wrong.

But then, why shouldn't it be? Everything else is wrong.

I walk faster, careful to mind my step and avoid the spot where an underground root shoves the slate upward. Just like last year, and probably just like the next. Highmark is all subtly frayed edges clinging to appearances for dear life.

My own edges are fraying rapidly.

Every window fronting the single--room accommodations on the second story is a pair of potential eyes watching me. The wraparound porch buzzes with guests. If I look too closely, I might make accidental eye contact, and I don't want that. Would I see recognition, and if I did, what else would I find? Pity? Curiosity? Blame? I scowl. I'm overreacting. No one's watching me, because I'm not special. She's dead because of me though, which makes me a monster, which is kind of special.

Knowing that if I'd been seen that night, someone would've come forward by now is a pitifully small comfort. Surely the time for grand revelations is long past.

My suitcase wheels bang over the uneven walkway, and I grit my teeth against every rattle and roll. It's too loud. The tension between my shoulder blades pinches tighter until it feels like there's a large fishhook lodged in my back.

"Welcome!" a paisley--clad Mrs. Miller calls from the porch. Her perfect honey--blond highlights gleam where the sun hits.

So much for not being recognized. She and her husband watch their regular guests arrive from their rocking chair thrones, just like they do every year. Has *anything* changed?

One thing, for sure. No more Sara.

Mrs. Miller—or the Replacement, if the adults are whispering behind her back—waves, iced tea in hand. Mr. Miller does the same, and the softly wrinkled lines of his face stretch as he flashes a crooked smile. It's safe to assume Leigh isn't around. Mr. Miller's seventeen-year-old daughter will be steering clear of anywhere her stepmom is, if she came at all this year.

Lips tight and chin stubbornly tipped down, I return the wave and keep moving. Back then, the cops said it was a tragic firework accident, and Sara was an unlucky drunk teen, but I'd bet the iced tea in Mrs. Miller's hand that she and her husband still blamed me for police swarming their dignified resort. After all, I was with her; then I left her out in those woods, and now she's dead. They don't need to know the whole story to know I screwed up.

Please God, don't let them recognize me.

And they don't. Because Mandy Jenkins doesn't have choppy blue hair or wear frayed shorts with her leather boots. Mandy Jenkins wears her sun-streaked brown hair long around tanned shoulders, with cute jeans and sandals. She sticks to contacts instead of glasses.

Or, she did before—

Soaked jeans clinging to my legs, dirt beneath my fingernails.

A little girl shrieks as she bolts across the rolling stretch of lawn to my right. I flinch. Get to the cottage. Get to my room and put my stuff down and just *chill*.

To my left, a perfectly manicured patch of grass sits between the main lodge and a row of cottages running the length of the river as it curves around to the lake. The water surrounded by oak and pine-covered mountains is picture-perfect, and when I inhale, the air tastes like sunshine and childhood, but there's something distinctly rotten about the nostalgia worming its way through my chest. I look away.

She died out there, tucked beneath those trees, with the water gently lapping at her blood.

"Mandy?"

The voice is uncertain. Deeper than I remember too.

"Alex," I breathe. I lied for him and he lied for me, but facing each other, now, feels painfully honest.

It's not, though.

I've forgotten how to be honest.

His dark brown hair, burnished with coppery highlights, is pushed back from his face, as if he's just run his hand through the waves. A whistle hangs around his neck, swinging in the center of a T-shirt that looks like he's tugged it on and off too many times. Red swim trunks cut across his thighs, and when he walks, the pale, untanned skin flashes as the shorts shift upward.

Alex is as stunning as ever, maybe more, and as terrible as it is given, well, what happened, my cheeks warm. Quick, say something. Anything. Literally anything at all.

"You're here." Not that.

His brows dip over blue eyes—my *God*, and those lashes—-and he retreats a half step. "So are you."

Shit. We're off to a great start. Fresh sweat trickles down my spine.

"You're lifeguarding again this summer?" I ask, which earns me a hesitant smile.

He smells like sunscreen and coconut. I bet his skin is warm.

"Exclusively. No more splitting time between the stand and shifts in the Shack."

"That's great. Con--congratulations." I don't quite get the last word out smooth. It feels obscene to be congratulating him on a summer job when the last time we talked, we were deciding to lie to the cops about our whereabouts. "I figured you probably wouldn't be back, what with..."

His jaw clenches, and I instantly regret having said anything. It's weird that he's here, but it's weird that I'm here too.

"Alex!" someone calls from the opposite end of the lawn. She sounds annoyed.

I glance toward the voice and find Hannah waving Alex over. She's dressed in her staff uniform, with khakis and a forest--green polo, and her thick brown hair swings from a high ponytail.

I raise a hand to wave, but she completely ignores me, which is...~~weird~~ interesting, since Hannah and I were sort of friends. I frown. We were at least friendly. What's her deal?

I swallow. I guess none of us ended on exactly great terms, last summer.

"I've got to get to the lake. I'll see you around," Alex says, but the words feel dull, like he's saying them out of obligation and has absolutely no desire to *actually* "see me around."

~~I'm sorry. Sorry for the way things played out and the way I used you and~~ "See you later."