

REST HAVEN



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AUTHOR OF MORTOM

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Published by Kindle Press, Seattle, 2016

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*For my two favorite girls,
Samantha and Joslyn*

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Listen.

That's my father's favorite word. I'm pretty sure that's why he left my mother and me: we never listened. What does he expect? My mother hides behind a computer sixty hours a week, and I'm only fifteen. It's not in our nature to listen. Case in point: I think my mother just asked a question I didn't catch—which is bad—because she hates repeating herself almost as much as I do. My best defense is to keep staring out the car window, pretending I didn't hear.

“Well?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I said, “I get it. You hate me.”

“Kaylee, I don't hate you. And we both know you brought this on yourself.”

“Me? How is this *my* fault? I haven't done anything—”

“Exactly. It's been three weeks since we moved here, and in that time you've made zero effort to make friends or leave the apartment. If it wasn't for Anna, you wouldn't do anything but come home from school and sulk in your room.”

I slunk down further in the passenger seat. “Yeah, and if it wasn't for Anna I wouldn't even *be* here right now.”

“Well, I think it was very generous of these girls to invite you over tonight, so at least *try* and make an effort. It's only for a few hours.”

I scowled out my window, knowing it was pointless to argue. Once my mother made up her mind it took an act of God, or an argument with my father, to change it.

“I'll make you a deal,” I said, scrambling upright. “We'll go back to the apartment, make popcorn, and watch old, sappy movies the rest of the night. Deal? OK, deal. Let's go.”

My mother was shaking her head. “You never get tired of this dance, do you?”

“What are you talking about?”

“How many times have I *made* you go do something and you end up having a great time? Remember when you didn't want to take that trip to

Colorado and begged to stay with Grandma?”

“No,” I lied.

“You fell in love with the place and had tears in your eyes when it was time to leave. *Real* tears.”

“This is different. I don’t know any of these kids. You’re abandoning me with strangers.”

“A stranger is just a friend you haven’t yet met.”

I lowered my eyes at my mother. “Did you seriously just say that? You have no idea what junior high is like, do you? Think back a hundred years.”

My mother laughed. “It’s one night. Whatever doesn’t kill you—”

“Bores you to death,” I finished smartly. My mother abused clichés as often as my grandparents clipped coupons. “Why couldn’t you be one of those super overprotective parents? For all we know these people are serial killers.”

“Anna’s mom spoke to them on the phone and said they were perfectly pleasant. I trust Anna’s mom, and you have to trust me.”

I framed my hands in the air. “I can see the headlines now: fifteen-year-old’s severed head found on the outskirts of town.”

“I doubt it will come to that.”

“Dad would never do this to me,” I said.

My mother stiffened. I was immediately sorry I said it, but not sorry enough to take it back. A cell phone chirped, and my hand instinctively moved toward my empty back pocket.

“Hello?” my mother answered wearily. There was a long pause, and when she reached for her notebook I kicked open my door and slid out. It was just her office—like always—and if I escaped now, I’d at least avoid the inevitable follow-up speech.

I started up the driveway and told myself I was lucky she hadn’t insisted on walking me to the door to meet Jamie’s parents. That would have been the final humiliation.

“Hey!” a shrill voice shouted. “Get down here *right* now!”

I quickened my step as I rounded the house and saw a girl jabbing the handle side of a rake into a small tree. A black cat was pinned inside the tree’s fork, batting and hissing against every thrust.

“What are you doing?” I cried.

The girl barely glanced my way. “Washing my hair. What does it *look*

like I'm doing?"

I stared, dumbstruck, as the handle made contact and sent the cat yowling down the opposite side of the tree. For a horrible second I thought she was going to give chase, but she only tossed away the rake and swiveled in my direction. It was like looking into a full-length mirror: same height, shoulder-length blonde hair, double-pierced lobes. Her skin was clearer than mine—almost elfish—and she had a small mole above her upper lip.

"You the cat police?" she asked.

"Huh?"

"You ever had a cat throw up on a pair of hundred-dollar sandals?"

"Well, no—"

"Then don't be judging." She arched an eyebrow and laughed. "You are rockin some serious eyeliner there, girl. How many pencils you go through in a month? Fifteen? Twenty?"

I shook my head, completely at a loss.

"Forget it. I'm Jamie. You're Anna's baggage, right?"

"I'm just . . . I'm Kaylee."

She grinned. "Come on, then."

She drew out her cell phone and shuffled toward the backyard. "I just downloaded this killer app. I ask you questions and it calculates your personality. Ready?"

"Sure," I mumbled. The night was already off to a great start.

"Favorite brand of tampon?"

I flinched. "I don't know."

"*Pass*. Has your dad ever been convicted of a felony?"

"What?"

"A felony. You know: murder, drugs, money laundering—"

"He's a psychiatrist," I said, completely caught off guard now. "He listens to people's problems."

Jamie raised her eyebrows. "That doesn't answer the question . . ."

"No," I answered shortly. "He's not like that."

"Uh-huh. So how many hot and heavy make out sessions in the last month—"

"Can we talk about something else?"

Jamie let out a theatrical sigh. "Don't be such a B, OK? They're just questions." She narrowed her eyes. "You're not a religious nut or

something, are you?”

“No. I’m just normal. I’m from Shellsburg.”

Jamie uttered a small laugh. “Sounds *turtley*.”

“All my best friends are back there.” For some reason I felt this was important to say. “It’s only forty miles, so I usually get to see them on weekends.”

“Uh-huh.” She was messing with her phone, not even listening.

“Fascinating.”

I bit back my annoyance. “What about you? How’d you end up here?”

“Who knows? Sometimes I’m not sure what state I’m in until I open my eyes in the morning. We never stay in one place very long.”

“Must be rough.”

“Naw, keeps things interesting. Ethan freaks whenever we move, so that gets old. Since we came here he mostly naps and stares out the window.”

“When he’s not under attack,” I said under my breath.

Jamie looked up from her phone. “What was the question?”

I faked a smile. “Have you had him long?”

“Fifteen years and counting.”

“Really? Cats live that long?”

“I’m talking about *Ethan*, my brother. He goes to our school. I’m sure you’ve seen him. He’s a tall, gangly drink of water.”

The first day of school the principal had told me there were close to 400 kids in my grade alone. The only people I knew were Anna and my teachers.

“Speak of the devil and the devil appears,” Jamie said.

I lifted my eyes and saw a boy with dark, tousled hair with a spray of freckles across his nose. He was dressed in a green knit shirt, and his shoes were so white they were almost blinding.

“This is Kaylee,” Jamie said loudly, as if speaking to a child. “She’s a girl.”

“Hey,” he said in a small voice.

“What do you want, Ethan? Are you here to spy on me and all my friends? Come to watch the *girls*?”

He diverted his gaze into the ground. “I was looking for Todd. He didn’t leave, did he?”

“Duh, like he’d go without you. Go find him and give us some

privacy for two seconds.”

Ethan gave me a glance before scurrying off.

“He’s such a loser,” Jamie said. “I still can’t believe I shared a womb with him for nine months.”

“Womb?”

“Doesn’t Anna tell you anything? We’re twins, but the way Todd and Midge baby him you’d think he was three years younger than me, instead of just three minutes.”

“You call your parents by their first names?”

“Parents is such a *strong* word.”

“What does that mean?”

“Look, we can spend the whole night passing pointless information, or we can have some fun. This is the first get-together I’ve had in this new place, and I have a lot planned. Don’t rain on my parade, OK?”

“Sorry,” I huffed.

We stepped into the backyard. To my surprise there was no pool, but there was plenty of room for one; the lawn rolled out forever before sloping upward toward a massive, brick building that looked like an old school.

“BRB,” said Jamie.

She disappeared into the house leaving me standing there, feeling like an idiot. I looked over my shoulder and debated making a break for it. With any luck my mother would still be chatting away, and I could slip into the backseat of our car unnoticed.

“Be right back,” a new voice spoke up.

I reeled with a start and saw a girl my age parked in a lawn chair by the fire pit. Dark hair curtained one side of her expressionless face as she stared at me without moving.

“*BRB*,” the girl said. “It means ‘be right back.’”

“Have you been sitting there this whole time?” I asked stupidly.

“Twelve minutes. I lost track of how many seconds.”

She flashed me a dry smile. I didn’t know if she was joking or not.

“You’re Kaylee,” she said. It wasn’t a question.

“How’d you know?”

“You brushed against me in the hallway last week wearing a gray V-neck shirt and jeans with a hole in the left knee. I also remember wondering where your sand dollar bracelet came from. I had one like it

years ago, but I lost it somewhere.”

“What does that have to do with you knowing my name?” I asked, confused.

“When we bumped, I snatched a notebook from your backpack, checked the inside cover for your name, and slipped it back before you noticed.”

My mouth fell. “Really?”

She pushed out a partial grin. “No. Jamie told me your name earlier. Then she called you a word I won’t repeat and made a comment about charity cases.”

I waited for her to say she was joking again, but she only sat there, watching me shift uncomfortably.

“This is the part where you ask my name,” she said.

“Sorry. Um, what’s—”

“Wren. Like the song bird. Say it five times in your head. It will help you remember.”

I was pretty sure I wouldn’t forget. Her cheeks were long and narrow, and her nose was just a little too big for her face, almost like a beak.

“Are you and Jamie good friends?” I ventured.

“I help her study. She’s not good with math.”

“I don’t really know her,” I said. “I mean, we just met. Anna invited me.”

Wren’s lips lifted into a smile or grimace—I couldn’t tell which. I racked my brain for something else to say as she continued to stare. I was pretty sure she hadn’t blinked since we started talking.

“I should probably go check on Jamie,” I said.

“Surely.”

“And I know what BRB means,” I added, sliding open the patio door.

She gave me a mechanical smile. “GFY.”

I told myself that meant ‘good for you’ and not something worse.

I moved swiftly through the hallway, unsure where I was going, but knowing anywhere was better than awkwardly standing there. The carpet was so thick it was like wading through grass, and the entire house smelled like that horrible canned air freshener my mother always sprayed before having company. I accidentally bumped into a table and quickly steadied an expensive-looking vase before it fell over. There was no question Jamie was rich: the place was a mansion compared to the curiosity we currently

called home. My mother had apparently worked her real estate connections to find the smallest, cheapest apartment child support could rent.

“It’s not right,” said a deep voice, “and I’m *tired* of it.”

I slowed my step and drew closer to the wall. The voices were coming from the room ahead, and I ducked behind the staircase railing for a better look. Through the doorway I could see a large man with a gray-flecked beard staring out the window with one hand on the wall. The woman in the chair beside him had a red blanket thrown across her lap and was working a pair of knitting needles. Her face was thin, heavily lined, and her hair was swept into a bun.

“It can’t go on like this,” he said, shaking his head. “We can’t go on like this.”

“Hush,” the woman said. The needles clicked endlessly in her fingers. “Jamie’s friends might hear you.”

“I don’t care,” he said, but lowered his voice. “In six months we’ll be living somewhere else and she’ll have all new friends. It’s been five years now and nothing has changed. Every new place we go she says it will be the last, but it never is.”

“What else can we do? We agreed to all this years ago.”

“My crazy brother . . . what was he thinking? He made us prisoners when we signed those papers. Can you really stand to do this for another three years? Can you?”

She said, “We agreed—”

“I know we agreed! But I never thought it would happen!”

He pushed away from the window, and I shrank back as he took the chair across from her. The woman set down her needles.

“We could always leave,” she said softly.

“And do what? Go where? And how would we live?”

“Then we stay. We stay another three years and then it will be done. Then we can go and never have to see them again. Is that what you want?”

“Yes,” he grumbled. “No. I don’t know . . .”

A silence fell and I heard a noise behind me. Ethan stood at the end of the hallway, his eyes fixed on mine.

“Are you and Ethan still going into town?” the woman asked the man.

“So I’m told. And what are we getting again?”

“Materials for the science project.” The needles in her hands began again. “I don’t expect it should take more than an hour or so.”

“If I’m lucky,” he said in a tired voice. “Sometimes, just sometimes, mind you . . .”

She gave a noncommittal grunt as he trailed off.

“You best get going,” she told him. “When you get back we’ll have dinner and retire early.”

My muscles tightened as the man rose from the chair. Ethan still hadn’t moved or spoken, and our eyes stayed locked as I slipped past him in a quick burst. I took the corner at full speed and ran smack into Jamie, knocking her backward a step.

“Watch for traffic,” she barked.

“Bathroom,” I sputtered. It was the first thing that came into my head. “I was looking to go pee and then I ended up here, but it’s OK because I don’t have to go anymore, and then I saw Ethan . . . and then you showed up . . . and . . . uh . . .”

“Wow,” she said, “thanks so much for sharing that great story.” She pushed a backpack into my hands. “Now make yourself useful.”

She started down the hallway and I quickly followed. Even if I wanted to try to explain what had just happened—which I didn’t—this wasn’t exactly information to share. The last thing I was going to do was invade her personal life.

“What am I carrying?” I asked.

“Essentials.”

“For what?”

Jamie let out a long, exasperated breath. “Do you always ask so many questions? Take some quiet lessons from Wren already.”

“Yeah, thanks for introducing us. I didn’t even know she was sitting there.”

“Wren-visible,” Jamie said with a chuckle. “I mostly keep her around for her brains. She’s pretty smart. Almost as smart as me.”

I kept my mouth shut as Jamie slid open the patio door. Wren was still sitting with her hands folded across her lap like a pale life-size statue.

“We need to get moving before Ethan sees us,” Jamie said. “He’ll freak out if he knows we’re going to the dead folk’s home.”

“The what?” I asked.

“*Resthaven*,” said Jamie, flapping a hand at the building in the distance. “He’s up there all the time like it’s his own private clubhouse or something. So let’s *go*, OK?”

She started briskly across the lawn with Wren in tow. I hiked the backpack over my shoulder and hurried to catch up.

“Why do you call it the dead folk’s home?” I asked.

“Old folk’s home, dead folk’s home, *whatever*. When you reach that age you might as well be dead.”

“It was a retirement home for elderly people,” Wren interjected. “Like a nursing home. My grandparents lived there until it closed three months ago.”

“And why is it part of your backyard?” I asked Jamie.

“The people who owned our house also ran the dead folk’s home. When the dead folk’s home closed, those people moved away and we moved in. It’s a *fascinating* tale that I never get tired of repeating.”

I ignored her sarcastic smile.

“It’s a shame that it had to close,” said Wren. “The place has tons of historic value. It was originally built as a boarding school back in the 1800s.”

“Borrerrrrrrring,” said Jamie.

Wren shrugged. “I did a report on it last year.”

The grass beneath our feet changed to concrete as we stepped onto the road that led to the building, and my insides shifted when we passed a flattened, dead bird. All that remained were a handful of broken bones and a few dingy feathers.

“Shouldn’t we wait for Anna?” I asked.

“She’s already up here with Sidney,” said Jamie. “You’ll love Sid. Life of the party.”

“Are a lot of people coming?” I asked.

“Don’t get me started,” Jamie answered bitterly. “Shea is blowing us off for Stacy Frick’s party, and Cara claims that she has a migraine. *Again.*”

The road began to widen as the trees thinned out, and I spotted Anna stretched out in the grass. Her mud-brown hair was pulled into a pony like always, and it looked like she was wearing the same blue shirt as yesterday. Her face brightened when she saw me.

“You came!” she shrieked, springing to her feet. I pinned my arms across my chest as she hit me with a running hug. She grinned at me through a mouthful of braces. I was almost happy to see her. Any familiar face was comforting.