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A G H O S T S T O R Y

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For Artemis who spooks me out and makes me laugh.

For Nolan without whom I would never have dared.

For Sheila for giving me some really weird opportunities.

I owe you guys big time. Thank you.

I A M Watson

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

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CHAPTER 1: ARRIVAL.....	6
CHAPTER 2: MESS .....	15
CHAPTER 3: SPOOKED.....	25
CHAPTER 4: GIFTED .....	43
CHAPTER 5: SLEEPOVER.....	67
CHAPTER 6: SWIM.....	80
CHAPTER 7: PLAN .....	98
CHAPTER 8: OFF LIMITS .....	107
CHAPTER 9: LEAP .....	124
CHAPTER 10: RULE OF THREE.....	155
CHAPTER 11: THUNDERBIRD .....	164
CHAPTER 12: THE TRUTH .....	173
EPILOGUE.....	187

## CHAPTER 1: ARRIVAL

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Dahlia stared out of the shotgun window of the Malibu. Her mom droned on and on about the excellent reviews on the website, about how girls check into camp scared and "troubled," as her mother so often put it, and they came out with a new, confident lease on life.

"Plus, they all learned how to swim! Isn't it about time that you learn to swim? The counselors are all very nice and knowledgeable. You'll make so many friends and unforgettable memories! It's a very expensive camp, Dahlia. Please try to make the best of it. It could help more than you think."

Dahlia was trying. She was distracted by a strange shift in the energy as they pulled up the drive to the wrought iron gate, with "Camp Effigy" forged in big, black letters, with a stone wall extending a long way around the property. The gates opened automatically as the car approached and closed behind them when they entered. The front was more beautiful than the photos. The topiary lions were immaculate, rearing with their mouths open. The English cottage garden was symmetrical around the grand front stairs, leading to a porch with three rocking chairs and ornately carved large double doors. Camp Effigy was in a castle? The building was made from ancient white stones, three stories high with actual turrets. It was stunning if a little foreboding. Dahlia's eyes moved down to the front doors, where a woman stood erect with her hands clasped.

She met Dahlia's eyes and nodded. Dahlia glanced away, not ready for this interaction. Not ready for this uncertainty. Not ready for this summer at Camp Effigy.

The Malibu parked. Her mom was a tall, dark, and willowy woman with a perpetual look of worry, and the two had the same big, deep brown eyes and pouty lips. She always told Dahlia to "get out of her shell" and "make some friends." Dahlia preferred the company of her brushes and paints over the girls her age, but this summer, she had no choice. Her mom wouldn't allow her to pack any supplies on this trip. Well, except for a pencil and sketchbook. Dahlia was able to negotiate for those in exchange for the promise to smile in photographs. It was a steep bargain. They parked and stepped out into the cool, damp late May air. It must have rained last night.

A woman stood at the top step in a white coat, black turtleneck, black slacks, and low heels. She wore smart-looking glasses and had a tight bun sitting directly on top of her head. Dahlia thought that this woman looked like a scientist in a comic book. Dahlia looked up to see a knowing eye contact between her mom and Dr. de Roux. It lasted only a moment but seemed full of secrets they weren't planning to share. Her mom must have talked to Dr. de Roux about her. There was no way to know what they'd discussed. Dahlia felt the heat rise in her cheeks.

"Welcome to Camp Effigy, Dahlia. My name is Doctor Valeria de Roux. I am a clinically seasoned and licensed

psychiatrist, and I will also be your camp guide and counselor. Let's take your bags inside, dear," said the woman on the front step. She did not address the adult. She spoke solely and directly to the 13-year-old girl. Dahlia's mouth went dry as she opened the car door, stepped out, and pulled her suitcase and baby blue backpack from the backseat.

She closed the car door and heard her mother call out the window, "I'll see you in June, Dolly!" Then she reversed out of the driveway and back through the gate. It closed behind her, and Dahlia's mom was gone. What an awful way to leave. Dolly was such a stupid nickname. She was alone with this severe-looking lady at this creepy castle they called a camp. Dahlia rolled her oversized floral print suitcase to the steps and started heaving it up each step by the handle, acutely aware of Dr. de Roux patiently holding open the front door and watching her struggle.

Once inside, Dahlia couldn't help but marvel at the foyer, with its crystal chandelier casting rainbows around the marble floor. The bookshelves lining the walls to the tall ceiling had the kind of sliding ladder that Belle swung on in *Beauty and the Beast*. Dr. de Roux wordlessly began to ascend the grand curving staircase in the center of the room. Dahlia followed, dragging her heavy luggage up each step.

"You'll find your room to the left, the first door with the placard of your name. Please do not enter any room that is not yours without permission. You may unpack while we wait



for the other campers." Dr. de Roux gestured to the door with the name "Dahlia" on the placard and then walked back down the stairs before Dahlia had even lugged her bags to the top step. She opened the door and stood frozen. This was a camp? This was the most luxurious room she had ever witnessed in her almost 14 years of life.

A large, four-poster bed with a dainty botanical quilt was centered against the wall, surrounded by a gauzy curtain. The wallpaper was a monochrome pale green floral. There was a vintage vase arranged with wildflowers, an electric kettle, a mug, and a Mason jar of tea bags on the nightstand. She would definitely make a cup of tea in the morning. She walked to the desk at the window overlooking rolling hills and a courtyard with a view of a swimming pool directly below, surrounded by a wrought iron fence. Is that where she would learn to swim? It was picturesque. She sat on the pink chair in front of the desk and gazed at the old typewriter.

No technology was allowed at Camp Effigy. This would be her laptop for the stay. She pecked out a sentence with her two index fingers.

"i can't believe this place."

Her eyes wandered to a reading corner in a bay window with a comfy armchair and an antique floor lamp, which was adjacent to (her heart leaped, and she stood to walk to it up close) an easel and open shelves stuffed with rolled canvases, paints, brushes, pencils, sketchbooks, and papers. She looked

down at her feet on the giant rug in the center of the floor, which looked like a daisy. She dropped her bags on it and kicked off her ballet flats. It was so soft under her feet. On the right side of the room, there was a door that led to a walk-in closet and a door to a bathroom. She had her own bathroom? With a claw foot bathtub and everything! The toilet was funny-looking: the tank was high up, and there was a chain that flushed. Dahlia pulled the chain and laughed out loud. This room was seriously cool.

She heard footsteps on the staircase. More campers? Her stomach lurched. She heard voices.

"Thank you. Is there a key for my door?"

Dr. de Roux's voice responded, "No, we don't lock doors here, but I can assure you that you and your possessions will be quite safe."

Dahlia thought about this. Oh no. What if she had an episode? Her mom always locked doors to keep them safe at night, including the one that kept her bedroom door closed. She was prone to wandering at night and forgetting where she was and how she got there. Her mom knew this. Why would she overlook this detail? She thought back to when she was found by someone driving by. They'd called the police, who found Dahlia sitting with her teddy bear in the middle of the road. During the ride to this camp, they had passed by miles of woods that sprawled in every direction as far as the eye could see. What if she sleepwalked right into the wilderness? Or worse, what if

she walked straight into one of the other campers' rooms? How would she explain? That would be humiliating.

Someone knocked on the door. Dahlia froze. Dr. de Roux called through the door, "Dahlia, I want to introduce you to Serena. Serena, may I invite Dahlia to your room so you may become acquainted?"

There was a scoffing noise, and then, "... Sure, I guess."

Dahlia opened the door and stepped out to the second-floor landing. The door nearest hers did not say "Serena"; It said, "OFF LIMITS". Dahlia turned to her other side in time to see Dr. de Roux walking back down the staircase as a black leather duffle bag disappeared into the room marked "Serena". Dahlia did not want to knock on that door, even as she did so very gently.

The door swung open, and there stood a tall, thin girl dressed all in black. A black t-shirt that said SLAYER, black ripped jeans, black high tops, long, straight, black hair, and striking blue eyes with lots of black eyeliner smudged all around them. Dahlia felt like a toddler compared to this girl in her own flowery sundress and bare feet. Serena was scary, and she was not going to like Dahlia. Then, the bedroom behind Serena came into focus. It was a completely different world in there.

It was like a vampire's bedroom. It was almost funny how the girl in the doorway matched the room. The walls were painted into expansive black chalkboards. Ornate dark wood

furniture filled the space up to the dark crown molding and pressed tin ceiling tiles.

Serena noticed Dahlia staring and cleared her throat. "So, what's your damage?"

Dahlia didn't know how to respond to that. She just stared at her, wide-eyed.

"Whatever," Serena muttered and walked back into her room. Dahlia hesitated. So much for making friends... Did Serena expect her to follow her in there? Would it be rude not to? She decided to follow her and took a tentative step inside.

The door of the armoire had a skeleton key in the lock. Dahlia didn't recall her room having a lock on the closet door. This was unfair, especially if other doors would be unlocked throughout their stay. The bedding was black crushed velvet with red satin sheets resembling a coffin's interior. The silver chandelier glistened with red bulbs, making the room look like a photography darkroom. There was a fireplace, and in it was a crackling fire. The mantel above it displayed two bouquets of dried, blood-red roses and many candles. Above it hung a giant gold framed mirror with three overlapping ovals.

A car door slammed outside, and both girls went to the tall, narrow windows that faced the front of the building. Serena pulled aside the black velvet drapes. They peered down to the courtyard, where they saw the top of the newcomer's head, which was bright red, and pulled into two French braids. The truck she pulled her bag from took off unceremoniously as well.

"I bet they told our parents to do that. Dump us off and leave," Serena said with a frown.

"I guess drawn-out goodbyes are harder," Dahlia heard herself reply.

The girls watched as Dr. de Roux escorted the newest member of the Weird Girls Club up the stairs, gesturing to the door on the other side of Serena's. The placard read "Aria". Once she was at the top of the stairs, Dahlia could hear music blaring from the headphones around her neck. She looked, Dahlia thought, older and very cool. Maybe she would make a friend? Dahlia wanted to paint a portrait of her and give it to her as a surprise, or maybe that's creepy...? Dahlia didn't move, but she studied the pattern of Aria's freckles and her hazel eyes. Aria thanked the counselor and pushed the door to her room open with a creak. Flecks of rainbow lights danced on the floor of the hallway for a moment and then disappeared as she closed the door behind her with the same creaky noise but in reverse.

"So what's your name?" Serena asked, turning back to her own dark room. Dahlia looked calm on the outside, but Serena sensed that underneath, she was kind of fragile.

"Dahlia," Dahlia said.

"Like the flower?"

"Yeah."

"Or like the Black Dahlia?"

She had heard of the movie. She planned to never watch it.

"No, not like that," Dahlia said.

Serena shrugged. "Whatever. I'm Serena."

"I know."

"How do you know?"

"Your name is on your door."

"Oh, yeah. Kinda creepy; Dr. de Roux even decorated our rooms how she thinks we'd like it."

Dahlia nodded. She did like her room. But did they need name tags on their doors? Did Dr. de Roux think they would forget who they were?

"So, what are you here for?" Serena asked.

Dahlia hesitated. She didn't want to tell Serena about her episodes. She didn't want to tell anyone about anything. She was afraid they would judge her, pity her, or worse, fear her.

"I have... insomnia," she lied.

Serena raised an eyebrow. "Insomnia? That's it?"

Dahlia nodded.

"That's lame. I heard only the weirdest of the weirdos go to Camp Effigy," Serena said as she closed the door between them.