

SUMMER OF EGRETS

Present
Chelsea

1

The lake house hasn't changed in the ninety-one years of its distinguished existence. Solid, stately, a relic of the Rockefeller and Durant era, it has survived three hurricanes, countless termite infestations, and a flood. It's survived death itself. A bold claim if you can make it, but in this case, it happens to be true. Last summer, it burned to ashes with Emily Joiner trapped inside, and it was simply resurrected in its own image by its benefactors. It's indestructible. Impervious to death and all that nature and beyond can summon. I've always thought of the lake house as a special place, but as I stare up at it, risen from ruin a year after its demise, the word that comes to mind is *miraculous*.

Has it really been a year?

To the day.

I pull the stiff, custom-made postcard from the pocket of my faded army-green capris, a pair that Emily designed herself. On the front of the card is a gorgeous snapshot of the house. It was built in the Adirondack architecture style—a million-dollar mansion with a rustic stacked-log-and-stone aesthetic, a wraparound porch featuring delicate columns of hand-carved trees with branches winding up to the roof, and a sculpted arch of briar framing the door. Out back is a killer view of Lake

George, a serene little corner exclusive to the handful of neighbors scattered sparsely along the coast. Completely secluded by majestic pines, the lake house is something out of a fairy tale, a lone cottage in a deep dark forest.

I do think it gets lonely. I would.

The house is in its own little world, buffered from civilization by the wilderness and a strict back-to-nature philosophy—no internet, no cable, no Netflix, satellite, or cell service, just peace, quiet, sun, swimming, boating, and plenty of misbehavior. It's been our summer haven for the past ten years. Me; Emily; our best friend and my ex-girlfriend, Kennedy; Emily's twin brother, Ryan; his best friend, Chase; and as of two years ago, Chase's girlfriend, Mila. Last year should have been *the* last year because that was the year of the fire. The year we took things too far. The Summer of Swans. The year Emily died.

But then, the postcard came.

I flip it over and read it again. It's a hot day, and my car is like an oven. It only takes the interior of a car about half an hour to reach a deadly temperature when it's in the mid-sixties outside. The gauge on my dashboard reads 81. I pull back the dark frizzy curls clinging to my neck and twist them into a bun on top of my head, yank the keys out of the ignition, and kick the car door open. A cool breeze sweeps off the lake and touches my face, fluttering my T-shirt against my skin. It's like a blessing from the lake gods. The sound of wind chimes rings softly, an arrangement of notes both strange and familiar, like a music-box song. I imagine the sound of my name in my ear, a whisper in the breeze. I am home. I take my sunglasses off and close my eyes, shutting out the light, and allow the delicious

air to wash over me. The scent of pine and soft earth. The promise of cool, clear water on my skin. The taste of freshly caught fish, charred on the grill; gooey marshmallow, melted chocolate; Kennedy's lips, sweet with white wine. Our voices, laughing, swirled around bonfire smoke.

Jesus. I open my eyes, and the bright sunlight makes me dizzy. *Charred. Smoke.* Just thinking the words gives me a sense of vertigo, even now. My mouth feels bitter, full of bile, and the phantom smell of smoke stings my nostrils and makes my eyes water. How could I think about fire in that way, here of all places, today of all days? Where Emily died. Where her bones were burned black.

I don't know that for a fact. She may have asphyxiated. The rest of us were assembled on the lawn, in shock, immobile, separated from Emily. My parents wouldn't let me know the details. I haven't been allowed to find out for myself. It's been a nightmare of a year. A year without my friends. A year without *any* friends. Any fun. Of seclusion, doctors, fucking arts and crafts and therapy animals. Which, yes, they're cute, but it's insulting. Five minutes petting a golden retriever before he's ushered away into the next room does not repair an unquiet mind.

And witnessing your best friend die because of something you did—or didn't do—is as disquieting as it gets.

You're asking, okay, yeah, why go back, then.

The answer is opening the door.

"You came," Kennedy says. She lingers in the doorway, holding a frosted glass with a lemon wedge stuck on top. Her long, cop-

per hair hangs loosely around her sunburned shoulders; I can see a navy swimsuit strap underneath her pale blue sundress.

I hold up the postcard wordlessly, then glance down at it again.

One last night, before we all go.

The Hartford Cabin.

June 17th.

Or what was it all for?

The card stock is thick and creamy, the kind they use for wedding invitations. Expensive-looking. The words are handwritten in a deep, watery blue; a practiced, whimsical scrawl so light and airy it seems to dance off the postcard. I recognize it instantly. It's Marilyn Monroe's handwriting. More accurately, it's Kennedy Ellis Hartford's best imitation. Kennedy, in some bizarre, ironic twist, has been inexplicably obsessed with Marilyn since we were in kindergarten.

I haven't spoken to Kennedy for a year. I shouldn't be grinning at her, my body filling with lightness, the soles of my feet starting to bounce involuntarily like this is the reunion I want it to be. I have so many questions. Why did she leave things the way she did? What the hell was she thinking, inviting me back to the house that burned down with Emily trapped inside? And is this a private party, or was everyone else invited?

I think in the end, I had no choice. I had to come. There was no other way to get closure after the way things ended. And I need that. After a year of mantras and painting and snuggling with furry animals, I need closure like a motherfucker.

"Chelsea." Kennedy waves me over.

I resist the urge to run to her, and open the car door, tak-

ing my time retrieving my bags, then walk the gravel driveway slowly, pebbles crunching under my sandals. “No Beamer. Are your parents on a supply run?”

“They couldn’t make it.” She presses the glass to her forehead. One luxury the lake house does not have is air-conditioning. Her parents insist on some semblance of authenticity, of getting back to nature, hence the lack of technology. A whole summer of it would be torturous. But it’s a weekend home. And it was always worth unplugging now and then to get away from the noise and politics of high school and my summer job at the mall, peddling fast food along with half the rising junior class. Until now. Now, I have the awkward task of plugging back into my friends’ lives.

Kennedy sets her drink down on the porch railing and gathers me into a hug. It’s odd. I expected a burst of emotion, an apology maybe, some swelling moment of . . . something. Like maybe we’d broken up suddenly in the midst of a horrible tragedy and hadn’t spoken for an entire year. This should be a poignant moment in the story of us. Instead, it’s like we just saw each other a couple of days ago, around when the last day of school would have been, and now here we are, where we’d be every year, first weekend of the summer, always the first to arrive.

I press my cheek into her hair and close my eyes. Any other year, this time, Emily would have been standing behind me, politely waiting her turn, Ryan faded somewhere in the background, digging their luggage from the car. Emily was never one to pack lightly, even for a weekend trip. Kennedy’s parents would be inside, her father strutting around in a too-tight

swimsuit, juggling a craft beer and fishing pole, her mother mixing up ice-cold pitchers of lemonade and sangria.

A cloud moves over the sun, and I lift my eyes to the single window on the third floor, the attic window. I picture Emily inside, and for a moment, I see her pale face looking back at me. The sun returns from the cloud cover, and the sudden blaze of light burns spots into my eyes. I press my palms against them, blinking hard against the aching sensation and the momentary panic fluttering in my chest. When my vision clears, she's gone. Just a trick of the light.

"Come in," Kennedy says, but her voice is drowned out by the sound of a second car winding its way down the long gravel driveway. I turn to see who's here. Chase's jeep screeches to a halt and he bursts through the door, beaming like a supernova, and before I can even get a word out, I'm swept up into a crushing bear hug.

"It's been too long, kid," he says with affection. Chase smells like summertime, salt and sunscreen and slushies. His attention turns to Kennedy before I've caught my breath. Chase is warm, genuine, a true friend, but his attention is difficult to hold.

So it won't be just Kennedy and me this weekend. That makes sense. The lake house isn't a romantic getaway. Any romance by the lake is as private and intimate as the secrets told here: kept among friends, and you're never truly alone. There's nowhere to hide in this house. Still, I can't help a little sigh of disappointment. I want to talk about what happened. Not just with regard to Emily, although I want to talk about that, too. Someone needs to talk about that. But I also want to talk about what happened with *us*. It wasn't fair to leave things

the way Kennedy did. Silence is worse than the cruelest words, because it leaves room for hope, even when logically, there is none. Goodbyes are messy, and Kennedy hates a mess. But I needed her this past year. I would have assumed she needed me too. But Kennedy doesn't need anyone. She's made that clear with her radio silence. I just thought I was different. I know I was. Until the night of the fire.

A shiver runs through me at the thought, because seeing Kennedy and Chase again in this place, in the shadow of the lake house, surrounded by the whispering pines and under the watchful eye of the summer sun, feels too familiar. Like nothing has changed, Emily is still here with us, and we have learned nothing.

2

Can you hear me?

I hope so.

I've been so lonely this past year.

By the time everyone has arrived, it's nearly sunset. I've settled myself into the old hammock with the rusty chain on the screened-in sundeck with a dozen pillows and a battered copy of *Murder on the Orient Express*. Chase is off in the game room playing Ping-Pong with Mila, who arrived in a lime-green barely-there bikini and is still wearing just that, although the temperature has dropped considerably. Kennedy is whipping up some spaghetti and pesto with fresh basil from the herb garden, and Ryan has just arrived, uncharacteristically late. I see Kennedy's shoulders tense as he passes through the kitchen before he reaches my side. He settles down in a beach chair across from me, silhouetted against the screen panel, a shadow figure against the brilliant painted backdrop of pink and purple sky over the dark, still water. I struggle to raise my eyes to look at him. Emily's twin, her other half. The guilt I feel just thinking about him is overwhelming.

"Am I interrupting?" he asks.

"Of course not." I put the book down and struggle to sit up. It's easy to sink into the ancient hammock and get impossibly tangled.

He hugs me awkwardly. Ryan is all angles and few lines. It's hard to find a comfortable spot to hug. There's always a

sharp bone jutting out, a shoulder in my throat, a hip in my thigh. I don't know how he manages to arrange himself in that way. He's skinny, but so was Emily, and she was a great hugger. A clinger at times. Ryan never quite got the hang of it.

"How's things?" He relaxes back into the chair, and I hover over him for a moment, directionless. I'm not going to sink back into the hammock.

"You know." It's hard to casually talk about the past year I spent in a psych hospital. Or his, mourning his sister. The one I left behind to die. All the words I haven't said, paperweights. There are few casual details among us. But I can see how hard he's trying to make this all *normal*, and I appreciate it. "Hanging in there."

He studies the hammock, the intricate tangle of rope, and the rest of the room. "They did an excellent job."

They did. The whole building burned to ash, and Kennedy's family took pains to recreate it almost flawlessly. It's difficult to find even a single detail out of place. But that's the Hartfords. Stubborn, perfectionist, traditional. They wouldn't let a fire, not even a tragedy, ruin the four-generation vacation home built by Kennedy's great-grandfather. Not with all the memories it held. One terrible memory of an event that Kennedy's parents didn't even witness doesn't outweigh four generations of pleasant ones. I wasn't surprised that they rebuilt the house. It's perfectly in character for the Hartfords.

Although. It does make you wonder if there's more to the restoration than appearances—if there were some things the Hartfords wanted to stay buried. The demolition and reconstruction of the house left no evidence, no trace of the fire.

And although they weren't at the lake house that weekend, it *was* their house. I'm sure of one thing: If there was some code violation or structural flaw that contributed to the fire in the slightest, it *will* stay buried. Because Mr. Hartford, distinguished attorney, senior partner at Weston Hartford, would never admit to even the passing appearance of fault.

It's where Kennedy gets it.

"How are things going at home?" I ask tentatively. "I'm sorry I haven't sent a card or anything."

"I understand. I know it hasn't been an easy year for you, either."

"It hasn't." Such a delicate way of putting it. But I'll allow it. Ryan is the only one who doesn't make me feel like a weirdo. That means a lot these days. "How are your parents doing?"

He sighs. "I honestly have no idea. They're so completely closed off it's pointless trying to talk to them. But the truth is, they were that way even before the fire." He glances at me out of the corner of his eye. "What about . . . your situation?"

I laugh. "Smashing."

"You don't have to talk about it," Ryan says. "I don't mean to bring up bad memories."

"Other people have it worse, you know?" I really can't complain to Ryan after all he's been through. I had the same issue in group therapy, where I'd sit frozen to the tiny cold plastic chairs, lips sealed, silently waiting out all these horror stories about lives way worse than mine. I felt like I didn't *deserve* to speak. All I did was get out of the lake house alive. After the tragedy, I was afraid to sleep. I drank vats of caffeine. Stood for hours in icy showers. Walked around our base-

ment in endless loops, blasting the air-conditioning. Eventually my parents loaded me into the car, drove me to the hospital, and left me. The nurses stuffed me with pills, and I slept for a thousand years. And all I did was leave a friend behind. I can't imagine how devastated Ryan must have been losing his twin. I can't imagine ever being the same. I steal a glance at him. "Nothing to write home about."

"At least you had someone to write to, right?"

"Word travels slow. Kennedy and I broke up."

"Oh?" He's staring at me so intently that it immediately irritates me.

"Yeah, well, it's kind of hard to keep up a relationship with someone who never answers the phone. But you didn't either, did you?"

Ryan looks taken aback. "I would have picked up if I'd recognized the number," he says. "Why didn't you ever leave a message?"

"What was I supposed to say? Hey Ryan, it's Chelsea from the psych hospital. Sorry for leaving your sister for dead."

He recoils at the words, and I see something flicker in his eyes. I'm drowning in shame. Then the moment passes like clouds moving over the moon. "I see your point," he says softly. "But just so you know, I would have picked up."

"Thanks." But the mood is off now, tilted all wrong, and I feel naive for thinking this weekend could be anything but disaster. "Maybe it was a bad idea to come back so soon."

Ryan sighs. "It was messed up to come back at all. But I always do. And I always regret it."

"Then why do you?" I study his pale face, his reserved jaw

and delicate lips. His eyes, set on mine, always so difficult to read in between smiles. There was a reason I fell for him once.

He smiles faintly, flushing pink in the embers of the sunset. “Aw. Don’t make me say it.”

I hear Mila scream in the other room, and Chase bursts through the sunroom door carrying her over his shoulder. The new girl. I don’t know why I still think of her that way—Chase has been dating her for a while. She pounds her fist into his stomach, and he deposits her on the floor, his amber eyes gleaming.

“You’re such an asshole, Chase.” She carefully combs her long, black hair until it falls in a perfect sheet down her back. Then she smiles at me, ignoring Ryan. “Chelsea, it’s so good to see you.” She doesn’t mean it. She leans in and taps my shoulder blades with her palms. Her hugs are ten thousand times worse than Ryan’s. Her brows crease in a display of concern, her big brown eyes wandering over my face. “You look rested.”

“Thanks, Mila. I’m all sane again.” It’s what she means by *rested*. It grates on me when people use those little euphemisms. *Rested*. People should say what they mean, or shut up. I know what they’re thinking. That it’s not okay to *say* that they believe I lost my grip on reality, but it’s perfectly respectable to treat me like it. Like a girl made of glass, poised to topple and shatter. Like I’m a different person now somehow. I thought long and hard about words like *sane* in the hospital. Some of the girls in group didn’t like words that aren’t precise and clinical, words that aren’t *depression* or *anxiety* or *bipolar* or *post-traumatic stress disorder*, but some of the others thought the messy words like *sane*, and the others, the *not sane* words,

were important too—because those are the words other people use like weapons against us, like sharpened scythes, and the only way to make them feel dull and blunt is to allow *ourselves* permission to use them. I like that idea. It feels naked, armorless, to have certain words hurled at me, and have my own mouth sewn shut against them. So I will not allow my mouth to be sewn shut. Not against the word *sane*. Not in reference to myself. I am as sane or not as I have always been. But I am not rested.

“Great!” Mila smiles at Chase and disappears back into the living room, like she did what she promised and she’s done with me.

Chase rolls his eyes. “Sorry. Mila’s a little . . . awkward about . . . personal stuff.”

I wave my hand vigorously. “Stop. None of that. We’re not here for me.” I flick my eyes over to Ryan. His pale eyes are fixed on the lake, the last rays of sunlight bringing out ginger highlights in his sandy hair, his hands shoved into the pockets of his beige shorts.

Chase flips the back of Ryan’s collar up to get his attention. “You all right, bro?” Chase says playfully, but there’s a gentle undercurrent of concern in his voice.

“Just thinking.” Ryan draws the words out, his eyes faraway.

Chase shoots me a troubled glance. I don’t know what to say. I wasn’t expecting this weekend to be easy. Part of me really was hoping for it to just be me and Kennedy, a chance to work out what happened between *us*. But the invitation said all of us, and I guess that’s only right. It’s always been all of us. The Summer of Eagles, when we first came to the

lake house. The Summer of Flickers, when Kennedy and I first kissed on the Fourth of July. Every summer a bird, named for Emily's peculiar obsession, even at age eight. Our teacher had encouraged her and named our class the Eagle Eights. That's how it started. Eagles for eight. Nightingales for nine. Thrushes for ten. It strikes me that this summer will go nameless, and the weight of it, the sadness, is unbearable. We aren't in sync anymore. Emily's gone. I'm a year behind. We should all be seniors now. Together. Emily always had the most marvelous birds at her fingertips. Flickers. Firecrests. I imagine them like little cinders swooping through a starless sky, sparking light in the darkness. I owe her a name. It's the least I can do when I can't do anything at all.

"Summer of Egrets," I say suddenly.

Chase shakes his head.

"What?"

"You never explain your thought process. How you get from A to B. I can never keep up with you."

I twist the left corner of my mouth into something like a smile. "Isn't that the fun of it?"

"*Egrets* is perfect," Ryan says. He grins ironically. "It sounds like *regrets*."

Chase's eyes linger on him for a minute, and then he smiles. "I'm glad you came, Ry. I have a good feeling about this year."

Chase always has a good feeling. Even when things are going spectacularly wrong. Maybe that isn't always such a good thing. Maybe sometimes a bad feeling is a gift. A warning. A red flag on dangerous waters. And too many good feelings rise like a fog and swallow those little red flags up until it's too late

to act. We do need to talk about what happened between all of us. Because if things hadn't gone so wrong in this house, if each of us hadn't played our own part in the destruction of our happy little family, then Emily would probably still be alive.