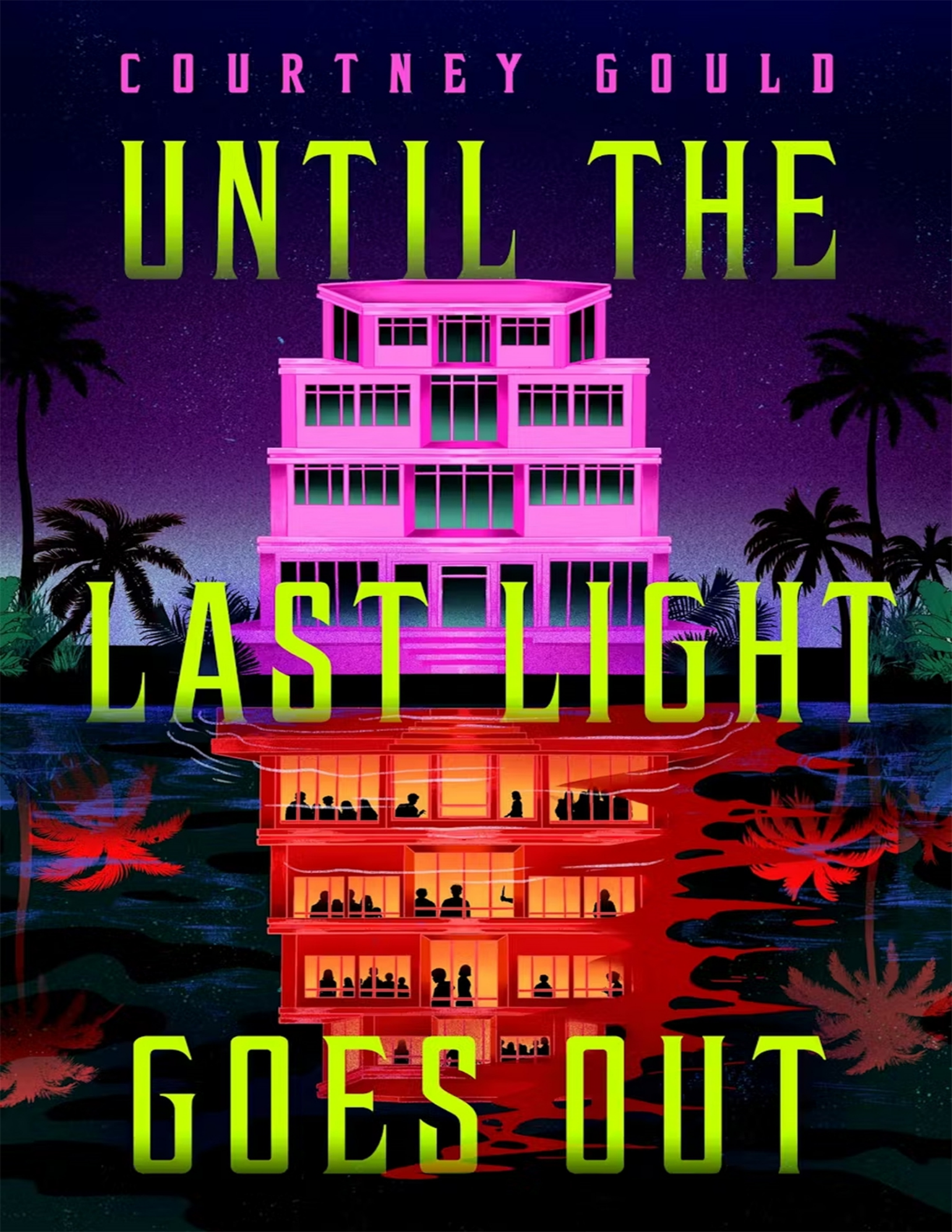
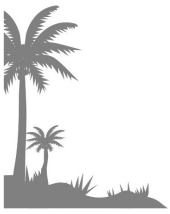
COURTNEY GOULD

UNTIL THE LAST LIGHT GOES OUT



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COURTNEY GOULD



FIRST INK

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To anyone aching for a different world than the one they were given

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Until the Last Light Goes Out is a novel that seeks to portray the ways that violence endured at a young age can shape the lives of both its victims and its perpetrators. Therefore, some of the material included contains depictions of extreme violence against children, blood, gore, self-harm, death, and suicide. For a more detailed description of sensitive content, please visit the author's website.

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Prologue

The evening is sticky hot with summer when they arrive, sunset bleeding red across the water. The beaches that border the marina aren't nice. Elsewhere you might find white sand and discarded beach towels, clumpy ruins of sandcastles, couples snuggled on plush towels to watch the sky darken. Here, brackish water meets dirt tangled with red mangrove, the air tangy and too thick for a full breath.

On a normal night, they wouldn't have stopped. But tonight is not a normal night.

There are two of them, with matching pert noses and silvery-blond hair that ripples like disturbed water. Their blood buzzes with the same frequency: mother and daughter, echoes of one another. The mother unbelts herself from the driver's seat of a dinged-up minivan and presses her forehead to the steering wheel. She takes a long breath, then another. She must confirm a terrible truth tonight.

She steps to the back of the van in a trance to find her daughter has fallen asleep with a half-melted Popsicle in her fist.

The mother fusses over the mess, wiping orange slime from her daughter's fingers. She feels it behind her, immovable, both near and far away. She doesn't look because she has perfectly tailored her life to avoid looking. Eventually she'll have to see it again and she'll have to remember.

Just not yet.

She scoops her arms under her daughter's back and knees, hoisting her from the van, laughing a little as she slides the girl's backpack straps from her shoulders. It was nearly a three-hour drive to this shore, and her daughter wore her backpack the entire time. Despite how upside down everything has become, there's still a little silliness in her.

Halfway to the water, the girl stirs. And then, eyes half lidded, she wraps her arms around her mother's neck. "Mommy, you found it. Where I go swimming."

“You’re sure this is the place?”

The girl considers. “I didn’t know you could go swimming, too.”

However wrong the mother thought things were, they’re worse.

The mother sets her daughter down in the muck. They walk the rest of the way to the water hand in hand, the mother lifting her daughter over fat-knuckled tree roots and untamed shrubs, until they find the slippery wood of the docks. She focuses on the ground because she still can’t look. She won’t see it until she has to.

She sees it all the time, anyway, even without looking. Thirteen years is a long time, but to the mother it feels like the blink of an eye. If she lets her mind wander even an inch, she sees it. Like everything else in the world is just a distraction.

The mother has done all she can to keep the lonely pink building across the water all to herself, but it wasn’t enough. Something has leaked through.

“Oh,” her daughter says when her bleary gaze finds the sunset water. Her little face is pointed toward the horizon, big brown eyes wide and full of dying light. “That’s where I go.”

She says it distantly. A memory only half recalled.

“How do you get there?” her mother asks.

Her voice doesn’t tremble. She makes sure of it.

“I swim,” the girl says.

The mother stoops and pushes wisps of hair from her daughter’s face. When she looks hard into the girl’s eyes, it’s like looking at a childhood photo of herself. A version perfectly preserved, undamaged by that place. She takes her daughter’s shoulders and pulls her close. The shirt she wore on her last day of school is damp with sweat and humidity, and it’s her bedtime, and they haven’t had dinner yet. She’s done *so* much of this wrong. She certainly won’t be winning Mother of the Year.

“Paigey,” she whispers, “tell me what happens when you swim there, okay? Everything you can remember.”

The daughter stares across the water and beholds the faint glow of the thing.

It sits on a white spill of sand freckled with palms. The ocean shimmers all the way out to reach it, but the beach itself is empty. From here, the building hints at a beauty that can only be understood up close: faded walls the color of deep-sea coral, blackened windows soaking up swaths of hot Florida sunlight, emerald-green stripes of AstroTurf wrapping the thing

around. After all this time, its lonely light still blinks like a heartbeat.

The girl's eyes don't leave the resort as she begins: "I start here, and I swim for a really long time. I get so tired, it's like I'm dying. And the door is *so* far away."

"Do you go to the door?"

The girl nods. "That's where my friend is."

"Your friend?"

"The one who takes me inside."

The mother stills. "What does your friend look like?"

"She has red hair," the daughter says. "She can't come outside, so she waves. She's always wet even though I never saw her swimming."

"What does she say?"

"She doesn't talk," the daughter says. There's a crinkle of unease in the center of her brow. "Did I do something bad?"

"No," the mother says softly. "No, you did *nothing* wrong."

When the mother finally follows her daughter's gaze, she doesn't see a lovely swim. She sees a tomb, hears screams bouncing down a maze of hallways, feels nails splitting from the skin of her fingers as she scrapes for an exit she'll never find. It's been thirteen years since she and the others arrived at this marina, but when she looks at the resort, she wonders if she ever really made it back home.

The mother loads her daughter back into the minivan, and they putter away from the docks toward the city.

The next morning, the mother will drop the daughter off at a friend's house and promise to be back soon. The daughter won't see her again that day or the next. In a week, police will find the body of Casey Keller in that pale pink building, lying face up on a bed she might have slept on the night her life changed forever. They'll find her lifeless eyes trained on the ceiling, not a note or message left to explain. In a week, the headlines will read, KALEIDOSCOPE MASSACRE CLAIMS ONE MORE.

The girl will be alone, and the dreams will stop for a time. Her world will grow quiet.

Years later, someone will tell the girl about the blood that was spilled in the halls of that building and the countless lives that ended there. She will try to understand it, she will try to forget it, she will try to make herself whole again, but it won't work. It never does.

And I will still be hungry.

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One

The first thing Paige saw when she stepped out of her rideshare was a logistical issue.

Others might be pleased to see a massive turnout for the memorial, but given that Paige was already a half hour late to meet the Mamanis, a crowd was the last thing she wanted to see. The narrow parking lot choked traffic to a halt, and gobs of people in black milled outside the gym. By coming in May, Paige had at least avoided the worst of the moist inferno that was Miami summer, but her sundress was damp with sweat anyway. Body heat rolled off the crowd and she smelled overwhelmingly like an airport.

Her return to Florida was going great.

The *ding* of a text message sounded from her pocket:

Look up.

Across the crowd, she spotted Mateo Mamani. It helped that Mateo, despite being a year younger than her, was almost a foot taller than most of the attendees. He jumped and waved an arm over his head, motioning her over. Mateo wasn't her brother by blood—his parents had taken her in after her mother's death—but eleven years of living together made the familiarity of his face a relief.

Paige gripped her luggage and started muscling through the crowd. She didn't miss the way eyes found her as she passed. *That one is Casey's daughter*, the onlookers likely whispered. *The one who died later.*

By the time she was within reach of the gym doors, Paige was ready to turn around and get a ride back to the airport. It had been a year since she'd lived in the orbit of one of America's greatest unsolved mysteries, and she'd forgotten the way the attention burned.

Mercifully, Mateo's hand found her elbow, and he tugged her to safety. He pulled the suitcase from Paige's grip and playfully pushed her into the gym.

"Huge turnout, right?" Mateo beamed. "There's too many butts and not

enough bleacher."

"What are we looking at?" Paige asked, wiping the thin layer of sweat from her brow. She thanked the Ripley Memorial school board for finally installing air-conditioning in the gym. "Friends and family? True crime people? I want to brace myself."

Mateo shrugged. "A little of both. You could've gotten away with skipping."

"I considered."

Considered was an understatement. When Mateo's mother first called to invite her to the memorial, Paige said no without hesitation. It had taken her twelve years to climb out of the muck of this mystery after her mother's death. She was less than eager to dive back in. But there was someone here she needed to see and one more conversation she needed to have before she could be rid of the past.

Paige followed Mateo into the gymnasium. In front of the bleachers, a massive projection screen was pulled down, displaying a deceptively cheery photo montage. The beige-and-red-striped walls were covered from end to end in what Paige realized were blown-up yearbook pictures. A name, a fun fact, and a date of death under each. If she inspected them individually, she was sure she'd find the same date of death the whole way around.

Except on maybe one.

Before Paige could focus on any of the individual photos, Mateo took her by the shoulders and spun her toward the bleachers. "I'm stashing your suitcase. I'll grab a water bottle while I'm at it. Find my mom."

And then he was gone in the mass of bodies, leaving Paige overwhelmed and empty-handed. She scanned the crowd and found her target in the front row, legs crossed elegantly, with a handbag reserving the space beside her. Claudia Mamani's hair was caramel streaked with honey, her black blazer and slacks perfectly pressed, her trained expression impassive until it landed on Paige and she came to life.

"All the way from Michigan," Claudia said, hardly audible over the crowd. "Come sit."

Paige slipped into the seat next to Claudia, the sweet floral scent of her perfume a balm to Paige's rising blood pressure. She wasn't a fan of crowds, and especially not crowds gathered specifically to talk about her mother's death. Her face felt hot, her stomach churned, and if Mateo didn't arrive soon with that frosty bottle of water, Paige wasn't sure she would

make it to the actual service.

“Where’s Saul?” Paige asked, noting only one more saved seat.

“The city asked him to speak,” Claudia said, brushing a bit of Paige’s hair from her eyes. “He acts like it’s no big deal, but he was up all night practicing. He gets so nervous talking in front of people. Especially when it’s so . . . personal.”

When Mateo finally arrived with a water bottle, Paige uncapped it and emptied it in one go.

Behind them was another pair of familiar faces. Jason Dettweiler, current owner of the Kaleidoscope, sat directly behind Claudia with his spine unnaturally straight and his face trained into a somber frown, tugging at the collar of his shirt. For most of Paige’s childhood, she’d only thought of him as the Mamanis’ sweaty, anxious friend. It took her years to understand that, just like the Mamanis and just like her mother, Jason was one of the few Ripley Memorial seniors to make it home.

Before the massacre, Dettweiler Holdings was one of the most lucrative real estate investors in Miami, with money backing casinos and beach clubs and exclusive bars all along the water. Now, Jason managed a string of poorly maintained Airbnbs and spent most of his time trying to keep his son, Caleb, out of prison.

Caleb sat next to his father in a matching suit, his curly mess of sand-colored hair hanging over his eyes. Caleb was two years older than Paige, though conversation with him made it seem the other way around. Both of the Dettweilers shifted uncomfortably, suffocating in their funeral garb.

Paige supposed she’d missed the memo on dressing in black.

Jason leaned into Caleb’s shoulder and sniffed before furrowing his brow. “Were you smoking?”

Sheepishly, Caleb looked at his feet.

“The lack of respect . . .” Jason muttered, apparently under the impression no one else could hear him. “You smell like a casino.”

Paige wasn’t the only one who didn’t get the memo about the dress code. At the very top corner of the bleachers, the final living survivor sat alone in a navy tank and denim shorts, inky black liner smudged at the watery edges of her eyes. In some ways, Tess Collins looked the same as always. Paige was sure her mother’s best friend was wearing this exact outfit—complete with a crinkled plastic water bottle tight in her grip and a pack of cigarettes visible through the fabric of her pocket—the last time they spoke a year

ago. No doubt Tess wanted a seat close to the exit so she could retreat before anyone recognized her.

The sight of Tess usually stirred pity in Paige's gut, but today it made her anxious. Her gaze swept over the crowd once, then again. If Tess was here, that meant—

"KJ isn't here," Mateo said, nudging Paige's shoulder.

"Oh," Paige managed, gathering herself. She felt a lick of cold disappointment. "I wasn't looking for her. I was trying to . . . Did they replace the bleachers?"

Mateo raised a brow. "Nope."

It wasn't like KJ to miss something like this. Her life practically revolved around the Kaleidoscope, and more than that, it revolved around her mother. There was no way the KJ she'd known a year ago would let Tess come here unsupervised.

Before she could ask Mateo more, the slideshow changed. Whatever photo had lingered on the screen seconds ago gave way to a grainy photo of the Ripley Memorial girls' track team with their arms all linked together, doubled over with laughter at a joke long forgotten. In the center, being pulled two ways, was a blond girl with big brown eyes and a brightness Paige had never truly seen in the flesh. Even with her face contorted in the photo, it was uncannily like looking in a mirror. So much of her was like her mother.

Just as quickly as the photo appeared, it vanished. The slideshow flashed through dozens of other random yearbook photos: a robotics club holding up first-place ribbons, a quarterback leaping through a flood of stadium light, a group of teens embracing outside the county fair.

Ghosts. Every single one.

Finally, once most of the crowd had crammed onto the bleachers, Saul Mamani appeared at the edge of the gym. Just like Claudia, Saul was in immaculately pressed all black, hair perfectly trimmed, with glasses that cast a dark line along his brow.

Saul made it to the podium in a few sure strides. If he was as nervous as Claudia had said, he was exceptionally good at hiding it. There was something about his quiet confidence that captivated the crowd before he'd breathed a word into the microphone. It was what made him an excellent lawyer, Claudia told Paige once.

"Hey, everyone," Saul said, tapping the mic. "Yeah, thanks for coming

out today. And thanks to the folks who put this together for asking me to speak. And for still caring. Twenty-five years ago, I lost almost everyone I knew in a single night. My wife and I have often wondered why we got to come back when the others didn't, but I think this is why. So we can be the ones to remember."

On the other side of Mateo, Claudia pressed her hand to her heart. It betrayed more feeling than usual for her, but she wasn't alone. As Saul spoke, every face in the audience sank into grief like the massacre was only yesterday, like they'd just learned of it when they stepped into the gym. It wasn't that Paige didn't care, but this was a story she'd heard a thousand times already. It was a story she could recite almost word for word.

As far as anyone knew, this was how it went:

In late May of 2001, Michael Dettweiler made a generous donation to the senior class of Ripley Memorial High School in honor of his son Jason's graduation: one free night at the brand-new Resort at Kaleidoscope Key.

The Kaleidoscope was a luxury resort a few hours south of Miami. Nestled on one of the sandy white keys along Florida's southern shore, it was accessible only by boat and only to the very wealthy. At the time, it had only been open for a week, and it boasted multiple golf courses, scuba lessons off the pristine beaches, swim-up bars, and all sorts of other grandiose amenities. Inside, you'd find the resort's real treasure, according to the brochures—a laboriously crafted interior of beachy opulence. The Kaleidoscope's advertisements teased movie theaters, bowling alleys, fine dining, and more. Compared to the usual Glo-Stick pizza parties and midnight bowling venues, a senior night in paradise seemed too good to be true.

On the evening of May 21, 2001, the senior class piled into four school buses and trekked south to the marina where they would board charter boats to the island. The last of the bus drivers recorded that, at 5:08PM, they had dropped the teens and chaperones off at the docks. Marina staff chartered the guests across the water and finished transporting them and their luggage to the Kaleidoscope's entrance without trouble. They spoke briefly with resort management, who believed the night would be a massive success, before leaving the island.

In the morning, when marina staff arrived at Kaleidoscope Key, no one waited at the boat ramp. They made their way to the resort's entrance around 9:00AM and found a small group of teens sitting outside. When staff

entered the resort, they found the rest of the senior class still in their rooms, faces pale, eyes wide open. Dead. Like it caught them by surprise.

The surviving teens—seniors Casey Keller, Jason Dettweiler, Tess Collins, Saul Mamani, and Claudia Ramirez—quickly became the center of what would be known as the Kaleidoscope Massacre. In total, 183 seniors, 13 chaperones, and 15 members of the Kaleidoscope staff were found dead in the resort. For each victim, there was no sign of foul play, none had serious underlying health conditions, and none had indicated that they had any reservations about senior night. While most of the world came to believe that flaws in the resort's construction must have caused the deaths, a thorough search of the building turned up nothing.

Despite pressure from the families of the victims, the survivors would always insist they had no idea what had happened. That they fainted shortly after arriving like everyone else, only to wake and find their classmates dead. While some believed the survivors were hiding something, most massacre fanatics accepted the survivors' innocence wholesale. For years, the Kaleidoscope Massacre fascinated the world, but for all the internet detectives who threw themselves at the case, nothing ever surfaced. The Kaleidoscope sat abandoned, its lights never to brighten the horizon again. Interest in the case would never truly quiet, but attention cooled to a simmer. In the lives of the survivors, the world kept spinning.

That was until, thirteen years after the massacre, Casey Keller's body was found inside the abandoned resort, turning the surviving five into four.

At least, that was how the story went.

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Two

Once the service ended and the mingling began, Paige snagged a plastic cup of lemonade from the refreshments table and slipped away from the Mamanis, finding an inch of quiet at the wall of student memorials. Most of the attendees had inspected the photos before the service began, leaving the stretch of dead students mostly empty now. A blessing, since Saul's speech had thoroughly rubbed her nerves raw.

The photos were arranged in alphabetical order by last name, and Paige waded toward the *K*s with nausea in the pit of her stomach. She came to a stop, pressing her fingers to the paint-smoothed brick between Marcus Keen and Denise Kerr.

It wasn't that she'd expected to find her mother among the dead. By most metrics, it wouldn't make sense. Casey Keller might've died in the Kaleidoscope, but she wasn't like the others. She'd died thirteen years later, and she'd died alone. Still, she couldn't stop her stomach from falling at the absence.

At any second, Paige was sure someone would approach her to ask about her mother's death. For years, the public had been desperate to find some meaning in any of it. Everyone wanted to be the one to finally complete the puzzle, and Casey Keller was the piece that didn't fit. The other second-generation survivors never had this much attention, which Paige tried not to resent them for. The problem was, Paige was in her own circle of hell.

She was the child of a survivor, but her survivor hadn't survived.

The photos of victims began to blur together the longer Paige paced, until a flash of red caught her eye. She paused, lemonade sealed against her lip, and eyed the memorial for Summer Hayes. The girl had a near-manic smile, cheeks red like a sunburn, and wide, moss-green eyes. A mass of hair was twisted into a braid the width of her shoulder, and maybe it was the heat and the exhaustion, but there was something *familiar* about her beyond the vague recognition Paige felt about most of the victims' faces.

A dribble of lemonade leaked from the rim of her plastic cup. Paige unearthed the memorial program from her purse and dabbed it to the spill before considering, briefly, how that might look.

The program itself was in poor taste. The picture on the front fold was one she'd seen a thousand times, usually as a thumbnail for videos titled "11 Pictures with Disturbing Backstories" or "Photos Taken Moments Before Tragedy." A picture recovered from the night of the massacre, pulled from a dead chaperone's camera. It was taken in one of the central hallways of the Kaleidoscope, gaudy with banana-leaf wallpaper and seashell sconces. Each door was open wide with a handful of teens popping their heads out, waving to the camera.

Paige's thumb found a face she recognized at the front of the hall. Casey Keller hung from her doorway with her silver-blond hair gathered in a messy bun. She was blowing a kiss to the camera, eyes closed. Behind her, a face Paige would hardly recognize if she wasn't (formerly) best friends with the younger version. Pin-straight black hair hung like a curtain over Tess Collins's narrow shoulders. Her eye makeup was dramatic, her pink-and-denim outfit hideously on trend for the time. Her hands rested casually on Paige's mother's shoulders. She'd seen this photo a thousand times, but for the first time, Paige noticed just a hint of red hair hidden behind Tess's shoulder.

A few feet away from Paige, back in the present, someone was whispering. Two someones.

"I just think it's a little silly that you won't even talk about it," a smoky voice said. "Given everything else."

The real-life Tess Collins braced herself against the wall, facing a very sweaty and clearly irritated Jason Dettweiler.

"I said I don't want to discuss it *here*," Jason spat. "I don't want you making a scene."

"Oh yes, wouldn't want to disturb the waters," Tess said. "What do you get out of leaving it there? Tax stuff?"

"Tess—"

"I mean, really. Don't you need cash?" Tess jabbed her finger into Jason's chest. Despite Tess being a full head shorter than him, the impact made Jason recoil. "What's the harm in tearing the thing down and selling what's left?"

Jason grabbed Tess's finger and pushed her arm away. "Who would buy

the island where two hundred kids died?”

“Why keep it?”

“I don’t need this from you,” Jason said, shuffling back a step. With a sneer, he added, “And I think you have your own problems to deal with, *Theresa*. Where’s your kid these days?”

This seemed to genuinely wound Tess. She bristled, shoulders raised like she might strike, which made Jason flinch. The survivors had always harbored complicated feelings toward each other: Saul once called Tess and Jason *magnetically opposite garbage fires* when he thought Paige couldn’t hear him. But whatever pecking order was established between them after their rescue, it was clear Tess outranked Jason by miles.

“Who wanted this whole memorial thing? You? Or Saul and Clauds?” Tess asked. When Jason didn’t answer, her posture went slack and she sighed. “Stop keeping the light on for them. What’s done is done.”

This struck an even deeper fear in Jason’s expression. He did a quick scan of the gym and his eyes landed on Paige, widening at the realization that she’d overheard most of their conversation. Jason clenched his fists at his sides and returned his glare to Tess.

“One function,” he huffed. “I’d like to organize one function without you ruining it.”

With that, he shook his head and wandered into the exiting crowd. The gym emptied in a slow crawl, but as the numbers dwindled, the chances of escaping notice dwindled, too.

Tess turned in a wobbly, exhausted way, palm to her brow. From afar, she might have looked exactly like Paige remembered, but up close, she realized that Tess looked much older than she had a year ago. Her black hair was crisp and wiry at the ends, her gaze heavy. Her clothes hung from her bony limbs, and fresh off a heated argument, she looked like she might pass out.

All she managed was a weary “Oh shit.”

Her voice had the deep rumble one only achieved by smoking like it was a sport. When she was sober, Tess had a knife-sharp paranoia to her, and when she was drunk, her eyes were sunken and glazed over. Gone was the gleaming, playfully mischievous girl from the memorial brochure. The Tess Collins of the present was a zombie, and the only thing Paige felt looking at her was a time-dulled pang of frustration.

As haggard as Tess was, though, she was unmistakably KJ’s mother. KJ,

the only member of the Survivors' Kid Club not in the gym right now, whom Paige had been certain she'd have to see today. In fact, she'd prepared for it—script and everything. Now that KJ wasn't there, she felt . . . disappointed? She was only in Florida for a day and a half. There wasn't enough time to reopen that wound, let alone restitch it shut.

Finally, Tess ambled toward Paige. "You know something?"

Paige's eyes widened. Maybe Tess's rampage wasn't over, and maybe Paige was her next target. Maybe this was about KJ, which wouldn't be completely undeserved. She braced herself, but Tess merely clapped a hand on her shoulder.

"I think it's messed up they didn't do one for your mom," Tess blurted. She motioned to the series of memorial photos. "I looked. She should be there, too."

"Oh," Paige managed. "I . . . it's okay."

Tess's eyes lingered on Paige's face a moment too long. Years ago, Paige might have flinched at the intensity, but a life spent in proximity to the Collins family was like learning a language in full immersion. Both Tess and KJ had an unrelenting intensity, magnetic and suffocating, that crept out even when they meant to hold it back. No doubt Tess looked at her and saw someone else completely. Casey Keller come back to life, a ghost attending this memorial twelve years after her death.

Tess reached up and ruffled Paige's hair. "Oh, whatever. Tell me if you see KJ."

With that, Tess meandered toward the exit. Paige stood in her wake, hands cold and head spinning. *Tell me if you see KJ*? What was that supposed to mean?

"I might start a pool," a voice said from behind her. "Dettweiler versus Collins. My money's on Tess, though."

This time, Caleb Dettweiler was the one interrupting her alone time. His suit seemed to fit even worse now that he was standing, shirt buttons clasped chokingly to his neck, giving him the aura of a pet shoved into a holiday sweater. Paige's grip on her lemonade tightened; she had clearly picked the worst possible place to avoid conversation.

"You'd bet against your own dad?" Paige asked.

"My dad couldn't win a fight if the other person was asleep," Caleb mused. "Do you think Tess's swing gets better or worse once she starts drinking?"

Paige grimaced. If KJ were there, Caleb wouldn't have had the chance to start the joke, let alone finish it. A pang of guilt swept through her.

She hadn't kept tabs on Caleb the way she'd monitored Mateo (and, at one point, KJ). As far as Paige knew, Caleb's entire personality had become his strange YouTube channel where he busted into abandoned buildings all over Florida. She'd watched a few seconds of the first one he ever posted before deciding they were simply not for her. It was nice to see Caleb alive and well and not dead by tetanus.

"When do you leave?" Caleb asked.

"Tomorrow night."

Caleb's expression brightened, and Paige was suddenly sure she'd given him ammunition in a battle she did *not* want to take part in.

"Listen, I've got kind of a proposal."

Paige's eyes narrowed. "No."

"Have you seen my movies?"

"Is that what you're calling them?"

"*Paige*," Caleb said, hand to his chest. "I have feelings, too."

Maybe she was being a little harsh. She relented, but she would not be forced to call the videos Caleb made *movies*. "You mean the ones where you break and enter?"

"They're *explorations*," Caleb continued. "My last video at the old Tampa hospital blew up. I need something special to take this to the next level."

Paige arched a brow.

"And being that this is the twenty-fifth anniversary, I thought, what if we . . . you know, would it be kind of special if we did an exploration at the Kaleidoscope?"

She'd known the question was coming before he started speaking, but the audacity still caught her off guard. It was a sick ask and he knew it, but even now, the idea of it tugged right in the center of her chest. Going couldn't be that simple, after the way it had loomed over her life. It was a door open that she'd always known, bone deep, should stay shut. Proposing it with the same tone he might use to ask if she wanted to get dinner was insulting.

"Cool," Paige said, killing whatever ugly curiosity reared its head. "You should go, then."

"Mateo already said he'd go," Caleb said quickly. "But I need you, too.

It would suck with just us."

Mateo agreeing to this was unexpected. Caleb was prone to schemes and impulses, but Mateo was usually more cautious.

Paige was acutely aware of the thinning crowd in the gym. Her time having to endure reminders of the massacre was almost over. She was almost out of this life for good. Really, she'd barely had to stick her toe back into it. She would spend the rest of the day reading on the beach, then sleep in the guest room at the Mamanis' house, and tomorrow she would fly back to Michigan. What was the point in looking back when there was so much ahead of her?

"Let me get this straight," Paige said. "Are you asking me to come with you to the actual place my mom died? So you can make a video?"

"I'd pay you," Caleb said.

"There isn't enough money in the world."

"Aren't you curious?" Caleb took a step forward, which Paige met with a step back. "It's one night. You and KJ used to be so obsessed, I thought you'd be dying to see it up close."

The mention of KJ was a slap. He wasn't wrong, though. Being friends with KJ meant years of imagining the Kaleidoscope. She wondered if she would be able to feel the heft of the tragedy when she stood on the white sand, or if it would just be a beautiful, undisturbed beach. She wondered, given the chance to inspect it herself, if she could uncover something no one else could.

Paige imagined all the time, but she'd learned the hard way that making it real was pointless. Telling other people about the things she saw and felt, leaning into the fantasy, bringing the ghosts back to life was how you ended up like her mother. Like Tess and KJ. Like everyone else orbiting around this unforgiving black hole until it swallowed them.

Paige crossed her arms. "I assume she's going with you."

At that, Caleb scoffed. "Unless you have a way to contact her, I think we're ruling that out. Three out of four is fine."

"What do you mean?"

"Mateo didn't tell you? No one's heard from her in, like, a month."

Where's your kid these days? This wasn't just a case of KJ not coming to the memorial. Paige blinked at Caleb, but she couldn't think of a thing to say. KJ wouldn't leave the city if her mother was still here. But if no one had seen her, where was she?

This wasn’t her problem. So what if she didn’t get to have that final conversation? They weren’t friends anymore, and whatever KJ was going through, Paige was certain her involvement would only make it worse. But disappearing completely . . . it wasn’t like the girl she knew a year ago.

“I think I’m actually gonna leave,” Paige said, head whirring. “I really don’t want to get sucked into—”

“Come on.” Caleb’s voice was heavier now. “Don’t tell me a slideshow and the vaguest speech of all time gave you closure.”

“*Closure.* Breaking out the big words.”

Caleb’s brow furrowed. “College made you mean.”

“If you want someone to be nice, you already have Mateo. Leave me out of it.”

When Caleb’s shoulders slumped in defeat, Paige felt a swell of pride. She’d resisted the madness everyone else seemed to fall under, and she’d done it easily. When she got back to Saul and Claudia’s, she’d convince Mateo to ignore the proposition, too. Caleb was just like his father, the owner of a resort he couldn’t bring himself to tear down. Fixated on a past with nothing to offer.

But KJ’s absence nagged at her. She gave Caleb her goodbyes, and then she was standing in the gym alone, searching the stragglers for the face she knew better than her own. A straight-edged nose and a hot intensity to her eyes.

A feeling came over her: static in her ears and an iridescent blur like an oil spill at the edges of her vision. It was a feeling she’d had a thousand times growing up, like something loomed just behind her. Something she’d forgotten about. Like everything else in her life was just a distraction.

Paige crushed her lemonade cup and threw it in the garbage on her way out of the gym. She followed muscle memory, turning away from the beach toward the one place she was sure she would find answers.

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Three

It took only ten minutes to walk to the Collinses' house from the school. Three blocks past the track, turn left at the corner store where they sold ice-cold soda floats for a dollar, meander halfway down one of the only streets in this neighborhood without ocean access, and you were there. The Collinses' house was a shabby white one-story with a rusting bicycle permanently keeled over on its cracked, overgrown front step. The shrubs that lined the front of the house were wild and unruly from neglect, and the busted front window blinds were down, obscuring whatever waited inside.

As Paige had suspected, Tess's beater was nowhere to be found in the grassy driveway, meaning she'd decided to lick her wounds from the memorial at the bar instead of wallowing at home. Years ago, this would've been perfect. Tess's absence meant KJ could relax a little, be herself, have some fun without playing nurse to her mother every other second.

Today, it meant Paige had time for espionage.

She wandered past the overgrown shrubs and squeezed herself between the fence and the side of the house. She grabbed a dirt-stained white pool chair from the jungle of a backyard and slid it under the nearest window. A quick feel along the top of the window revealed the serrated edge of a nail file. Paige snatched it, jammed it under KJ's window latch, and jimmied it open.

The first thing she noticed when her sneakers met the carpet of KJ's bedroom was the stench. There was a pungent staleness to the room, like laundry left to mold. The bed was unmade, KJ's striped navy sheets crumpled and spilling onto the floor. Around her bed were piles of books, clothes, loose papers, and folders without order. The fluorescent ceiling light was burnt out, obscuring some of the mess, but what Paige could make out sent a pang of sadness through her.

When they were friends, they might've spent the next several hours in this room just talking. KJ would lie on her bed and toss a deflated volleyball

at the ceiling, groaning about Tess's newest nightmares and the homework she was behind on, opening the latch to finally release the steaming frustration she kept inside. And Paige would pick up the pieces of her life scattered everywhere, tucking homework assignments into desk drawers and folding clothes to slip into her dresser. KJ would get embarrassed, but when they were still friends, Paige had enjoyed sorting out the stray bits of KJ's life, touching all the little things that made her real.

"Where are you?" Paige muttered, dropping her tote bag at her feet.

She began at the desk, shuffling through a legal pad covered in KJ's scrawled notes. Dates and times, prices for things Paige couldn't parse, packing lists that implied she planned to be gone for weeks, even months. There was a brief bloom of hope in Paige's chest. Maybe KJ had finally gotten tired of living a life shackled to her mother's trauma. Maybe the things Paige had said during that final fight had taken root. Maybe spending this last year apart hadn't been for nothing.

But when she pulled a folded bit of printer paper from between two notebook pages, her stomach sank.

A map of the Florida Keys littered with red pen. KJ had circled several marinas along the highway and scratched out a note beneath every one. Faint red lines were drawn from each marina to one little island a few miles from the shore. Paige didn't need to read its name to recognize it.

KJ's open laptop was adorned with sticky notes, but their messages were nearly incoherent. For as long as Paige had known her, KJ had a way of sorting her thoughts that only she could understand.

She sucked in a breath, slipped into KJ's desk chair, and tapped her laptop to life.

Unsurprisingly, KJ hadn't changed her password since the last time Paige used the laptop. Despite the computer having been asleep for an unknown amount of time, KJ's browser was still open. The last tabs she'd been looking at were frozen in time. There were a few Paige ignored—store pages for new T-shirts, the menu for the pizza place down the street, a bank account summary for Tess which, upon refresh, depleted to a measly thirty-two dollars. KJ was still logged in to Instagram and, surprisingly, it was open to Paige's feed. Paige's cheeks warmed and she immediately closed the tab.

Eager to think about something—*anything*—else, Paige clicked into KJ's search history and found what she was really looking for. A series of

searches for boat rental costs and tutorials on how to maneuver them. Before that, a search for the senior photo taken the night of the massacre. Before that, a search for the name *Summer Hayes*.

It was then that Paige spotted the clues tucked into the rest of the mess. A 2001 Ripley Memorial yearbook was hidden under a pile of notes, and when Paige cracked it open, she found a mixture of ancient messages from long-dead seniors and more sticky notes scribbled with KJ's handwriting. KENDRA MITCHELL: FRIENDS? ROOMMATES WITH CR. BEAU FRANKLIN: VIOLENT REP W JASON. And at the very back of the book, Paige found a business card for the Mexican restaurant next to the school that KJ was using to bookmark a page in the senior ads. REMEMBER THIS NAME, a header read. "Summer Hayes will be finding her muse in New York City. The next time you see her face, it will be on the back of a novel!"

Paige's gaze found a square photo couched at the bottom of the page: a girl lying on her side in a patch of grass, red hair draped over her shoulder. The same girl from the memorial photos. She'd seen the name dozens of times over the years, just like every other victim's name, but paired with the photo, it was a buried memory resurfacing.

A tickle crept over the back of Paige's neck, and she found her breath coming short and hot. She slapped the yearbook shut and stepped back.

The rush of air pushed something white from KJ's dresser. Paige plucked it from the carpet and her nausea deepened. A hospital bracelet from a year ago.

KENDRA JADE COLLINS
GENDER: F / WARD: Emergency
Baptist Health Fisherman's Community Hospital

Last year, Paige had thrown away a matching one with her own name. For reasons she couldn't begin to understand, KJ had held on to a souvenir of the night that ended their friendship. Just like her relationship with the Kaleidoscope, KJ was incapable of cutting away the things that hurt her.

On a whim, Paige plopped back into KJ's desk chair and opened a new search: boat missing florida keys news. If KJ had somehow managed to rent a boat and drive it all the way out to Kaleidoscope Key without coming back, surely her disappearance would be news by now. That was how it went when her mother did the same thing.

In fact, all of this felt oddly familiar: the boat theft, the map to the island, the leftover evidence of frantic preparation. Over a decade ago, police had gathered all the same things from the apartment she shared with her mother, but here in KJ's room, it was untouched. Had Tess even looked at what KJ left behind? Paige found a single article from a local news site claiming that a boat stolen from a private residence in Layton had yet to be found. Exactly a month ago.

It didn't mean it was her. It didn't mean she'd done it.

For years, KJ had dreamed of finding her way to the Kaleidoscope in the flesh. And for years, Paige fought back every half-planned journey and reckless idea. She'd made sure the speculation was only ever just speculation. KJ had promised to never act on it, no matter how badly she wanted answers, because they'd both lost enough already. For most of their lives the fascination was a harmless thing. It was a threat so quiet, Paige made the mistake of letting her guard down.

A year ago, they'd tried to inch a little closer to the resort, just to see, and that was a mistake. A friendship-ending, waterlogged, near-lethal mistake. It was the night that made Paige run from Miami without looking back.

In the year she'd been gone, KJ had decided to follow in Casey Keller's footsteps.

The practical side of Paige told her to leave this alone. There was a reason she'd cut out the chaos of KJ's life. The dread she felt now was nothing new; left to her own devices, KJ would always veer toward self-destruction. And if Paige spent her whole life trying to keep KJ afloat, they would both drown.

Instead, Paige opened her tote bag and swept every note she could find inside. She slipped back out through the open window with everything she would need to find KJ. Twelve years ago, the person she loved most in the world vanished into that place. A piece of Paige died with her.

This time, she wasn't going to wait for the inevitable bad news. She was coming home with KJ, and they would both be alive.

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Four

Back at the Mamanis' house, Claudia laid out a spread of steamed broccoli and grilled chicken, humming an airy tune that Paige found vaguely familiar. She'd made it back from KJ's house just in time for dinner, kicking the tote bag full of evidence under her chair. She would need to hide it better if she wanted to keep it a secret; the Mamanis' house was too pristine for a mess to go unnoticed.

Their house wasn't like the Collinses' house with its suffocating halls and smoke-stench carpet, and it wasn't like the Dettweilers' empty shell of a dated mansion, a ghost of the wealth they used to hoard before the massacre tanked Dettweiler Holdings. In contrast, Saul and Claudia kept their house neat and warm, with big open windows and pine-scented candles and throw blankets from fancy designer stores. It was miles from the apartment she'd shared with her mother once, years ago—hardly real enough to recall. If she thought hard about it, she could remember eating microwaved macaroni and cheese surrounded by a hurricane of discarded toys in the living room.

All things considered, Paige was lucky she'd ended up with Saul and Claudia after her mother's death. As far as anyone knew, her biological father was a stranger her mother had met only briefly, and Paige preferred to keep it that way. Legally, at the time of Casey Keller's death, Tess was her godmother. But everyone involved—especially Tess—knew that was a nightmare waiting to happen. Even if they hadn't really settled into the role of *her parents*, the Mamanis had never been anything but kind to her. Saul and Claudia were living proof that life could go on after the Kaleidoscope. It didn't have to wear people down to nubs like Jason and Tess and her mother. Saul and Claudia went to college, got married, owned a law firm, and even with the mystery of the massacre swirling around them, they found a way to claw respect and admiration out of this city. Just like their personal lives, everything in the Mamanis' house was measured and calm.

Healthy and good.

Still, when Paige looked at the perfect order of the dinner table, she stung for the taste of plasticky cheese.

“Paige’s great return,” Claudia mused, sliding into her chair across from Mateo, who had already eaten half his food. Saul’s seat at the head of the table was still empty. “What’d you get up to after the memorial?”

Paige cut into her chicken. “Walked down to the beach for a bit. Read a book. Just trying to make the most of it since I fly out tomorrow.”

“Ugh, how nice does that sound?” Claudia said dreamily. “I wish Matty liked stuff like that. Last summer before college, and he spends all his time in his room.”

Mateo didn’t look up from his meal. “That’s not true.”

“You haven’t been playing with the boys at all.” Claudia leaned down, forcing Mateo to meet her eyes. “Tell me you at least got your final decision paperwork to the school. Paige, did you know Matty is going to school in *California*?”

Paige blinked at him. “I didn’t.”

“UC Berkeley,” Mateo muttered, apparently humiliated by his mother’s bragging. “I guess you won’t be the only out-of-stater.”

There was a strange lack of enthusiasm to his tone, but Paige didn’t have time to interrogate mood swings. Mateo was a pliable enough person, and whatever he was going through, he’d get over it. Paige kicked her tote bag a little deeper under her chair, trying not to fixate on the contents. She needed to talk to Mateo about going to the resort tonight, but she needed to do it alone. There was a very strict *no Kaleidoscope talk* rule here, meaning Saul and Claudia couldn’t know about what she’d found in KJ’s room, and they *especially* couldn’t know about Caleb’s newest “exploration.”

The front door creaked open, and Saul shuffled in from the heat, dropping his keys and jacket in the entryway. There was an uncomfortable quiet to it. Mateo and Claudia watched him, waiting wordlessly until he made it to the table. They hurriedly complimented him on his speech, which Saul met with a faux-humble nod.

“Yeah,” Paige added. “The speech was beautiful.”

Saul put his hand to his heart. “You know, Paige, it means a lot from you. I just wanted to honor all those kids. Your mom, too.”

Paige looked down.

For a while, Claudia and Saul chattered about their days like nothing

was wrong. Saul told Claudia about a new client meeting, Claudia went over accounting questions, and Paige tried to get Mateo to look at her. Whether or not he still planned to go to the Kaleidoscope tonight, Paige needed answers about KJ. She needed answers about the bag of things under her chair. When she closed her eyes, she saw the curl of the hospital bracelet fluttering to the carpet.

Once Paige devoured the broccoli on her plate, she cleared her throat. “Do you guys remember someone named Summer Hayes?”

Immediately, conversation between Saul and Claudia ceased. She’d said it to get a reaction from the older Mamanis, but the moment she said the name, Mateo froze, too. He stared into his plate with wide eyes, grip on his fork white-knuckled. The name meant something to all three of them. What had KJ found while they were apart?

After a moment, Claudia smiled and pointed her fork at Saul. “She was from school, wasn’t she?”

“*Right*,” Saul said. “You must have seen that name in the program today? I don’t think either of us really knew her.”

It was plausibly true, but Paige didn’t buy it. Saul’s voice had warped into the honeyed, charming voice from the service. The same one he used in court. It was the voice he used when he knew someone needed to be convinced.

“Did my mom know her?”

Saul’s and Claudia’s eyes met.

“Now that you mention it, I think she and your mom were friends,” Saul said. He set his fork down. “You know, we’ve talked about this a lot today. I’m feeling a little tired. You mind if we take a break from Kaleidoscope talk?”

That was it, then. They wouldn’t budge on information. She knew what it sounded like when the grief made speaking about the massacre impossible, and this was different. Whatever KJ had uncovered about the connection between Summer Hayes and the massacre, the Mamanis were eager to sweep it under the rug.

And if KJ had found something real, she’d want to follow it to the bone. If she thought there was more to find in the Kaleidoscope itself, if she planned the route to get there, if she thought no one would come looking for her . . .

“Mateo,” Paige said. “Did you still want to go to that bonfire tonight?”

Mateo finally looked up from his plate, meeting her eyes with a question. “The bonfire . . . ?”

Paige’s eyes widened.

“. . . at Caleb’s?” Mateo finished.

“Yeah.”

“You told Caleb you wanted to relax for the night,” Mateo said.

“I changed my mind,” Paige said carefully. “I’ve only got one night here. Are you still in?”

“I didn’t know you had plans,” Claudia said, masking a twist of disappointment in her voice. “I thought we could watch some movies. We got fancy popcorn.”

“Sorry, Mom,” Mateo mumbled. To Paige he said, “You’re sure you’re not too tired?”

There was a tension between them now, taut as a wire. If it was just for Caleb’s video, Paige would forget it all. She wasn’t like the Kaleidoscope truthers constantly being chased from the island. She didn’t care who had killed whom or what it all meant, but if KJ was there—if something had happened to her—Paige would never rest again.

She nodded.

“We’ll be back later,” Mateo said to his parents. “Maybe we can do movies tomorrow before Paige leaves?”

Saul and Claudia exchanged a look that bordered on concern, their silent conversation stretching on past comfort. With a sigh, Claudia stood and gathered up the empty plates.

“Just a bonfire at Caleb’s?” she asked.

Mateo nodded, too scared of his mother to lie out loud. Paige was unfamiliar with the feeling.

“Just Caleb’s,” Paige promised. “And we’ll text you if anything changes.”

With that, they gathered up their things and stumbled into the slippery summer air. The sun crawled down to the horizon, painting the ocean bloodred where it met the sky. Once Paige was secure in Mateo’s passenger seat, tote bag draped over her knees, the shock of what they were going to do finally hit her.

Paige clapped a hand over Mateo’s. “Pause. I have questions before we go.”

Mateo groaned.

“Why are you doing this? You’ve never been into the conspiracy stuff before.”

“I’m not into conspiracy stuff,” Mateo protested. “But it’s, like, *super* illegal to go inside. I figure the only way we’re getting away with it is if we go with Caleb. And this is my last summer here. I just want to see what it’s like in there before I go.”

“That’s it? Sightseeing?”

“I’m a simple guy,” Mateo said with a shrug. “What’s the worst-case scenario? It’s super gross inside?”

She had to admit, it was a refreshingly pragmatic take. She’d spent her whole life insisting that there was nothing paranormal about the Kaleidoscope. If she really believed it, there would be nothing scary about this. And since Mateo was younger than her, he wasn’t allowed to be the brave one. If he wasn’t scared, she wouldn’t be, either.

“What was with the face in there?” Paige asked. “When I said Summer Hayes. You looked like you saw a ghost.”

Mateo’s lips made a flat line. “Were you talking to KJ?”

“Uh, not directly.”

“Okay, I won’t ask what that means,” Mateo said. “But before she stopped responding to messages, she got really obsessed with this girl, Summer. Said her mom got wasted one night and kept saying she needed to tell *Summer* she was sorry.”

“Did you ever ask your parents about her?”

Mateo shook his head. “You know the rule.”

“But their reaction was super weird, right?” Paige asked. “They were hiding something.”

Mateo tapped his fingers on the steering wheel, staring straight out the windshield. Breaking his parents’ trust was one thing, she supposed, but pointing out their weird behavior was a bridge too far. Coolly, he asked, “Are you going? Or are we staying here?”

Paige closed her eyes. “It’s just one night, right? Caleb boats us out, we film his stupid video, we leave in the morning?”

“That’s the plan.”

Paige mentally checked one box: *Clear timeline for escape*.

“And do we have emergency supplies for if we get stranded? Food? Water?”

“I think I have some snacks,” Mateo grumbled, fishing through the

center console of his car. With a triumphant grunt, he produced a bag of jerky. Judging by the wadded-up receipts and discarded fast-food wrappers left in its wake, Paige didn't feel optimistic about how edible it was. She should never have expected the boys involved to think logistically. Once they stopped at a convenience store, she could check another box: *Won't starve.*

"And it's just us and Caleb going?"

At that, Mateo's expression softened. "Are you scared of seeing KJ?"

Paige froze. "No, that's not what I . . . I meant for the video. Caleb doesn't have a crew or anything?"

Mateo snorted. "Have you watched any of his videos?"

"Point taken."

One more box checked: *No strangers.*

But the boys hadn't seen what Paige saw at the Collinses' house. They hadn't seen KJ's desperate planning. They hadn't seen the way her grip on reality had deteriorated over the last year. For KJ's sake, maybe they didn't have to. If KJ had actually visited the Kaleidoscope, she probably found the same thing they were going to find tonight: nothing. There was no need to raise the alarm bells and give the worst-case scenario life. KJ most likely got to the island and realized her mother was a liar. Maybe it was the last push she'd needed to get away from this town. To go somewhere new and start a life worth living.

For an ideal scenario, it tasted surprisingly bitter.

"One more thing," Paige said. "And it's not really a question."

"Shoot."

"Can you promise we'll be normal?" Paige asked. It felt embarrassingly vulnerable. "Like, if this is some kind of setup for the camera. Or if Caleb is tricking us. Or if there's something freaky we can't immediately explain, can we promise we'll both be rational?"

Mateo studied her. His dark eyes were weighty, forcing Paige to stare into her lap. Then, he lightly pushed her shoulder. "Scared you'll scream on camera? I don't think your fancy new college friends are gonna find Caleb's channel. He has, like, twenty followers."

Paige expelled a breath. Mateo had a talent for deftly slicing the tension out of the air. Really, what was there to be scared of? She knew every possible outcome: find KJ alive and bring her back to Miami, find nothing and confirm that the Kaleidoscope was never more than a building, or find

KJ not alive and—

“I’m not worried,” Mateo said, cutting through her panic. “I’ve got you, and you’re the most normal person I’ve ever met.”

“Thank you,” Paige said. “What a compliment.”

Mateo tossed her a sly wink and started the car. *You’re the most normal person I’ve ever met.* Paige imagined by the end of the night, he would regret saying that.

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Five

Daylight was nearly gone by the time they reached the marina. The sky was dimmer, heavy with the pungent heat of near night. The weight of what she was doing didn't hit Paige until Mateo's car turned off, until the quiet leaked in and her hand found the door latch. She'd managed to stave off the anxiety for most of the drive, happily buying a dozen granola bars and a pack of water bottles from the supermarket twenty minutes north. She'd even kept her breathing steady as they drove past the bit of highway she'd visited with KJ a year ago. She'd thought that seeing the place where everything fell apart would make her afraid, but she didn't succumb to memories of black water and black sky, of the burning in her lungs.

Looking at the sparkling stretch of ocean beyond the dock, though, she thought she might be sick.

Mateo hesitated before opening the driver's side door. "Last chance. You're sure you wanna do this?"

"Are you?"

"We'll call it a mutual *kind of*," Mateo said.

Caleb's silhouette moved along the ramp, tossing bags of equipment and luggage onto the boat. Paige was shocked he'd thought to pack, given that Mateo hadn't brought a single thing with him.

Paige slung her bag, now heavy with supplies, over her shoulder and climbed out of the car. She focused on keeping cool as Caleb waved them over. Mateo somehow managed to look completely unbothered about this whole situation, and Paige needed to match him. She would *not* be the scared one.

"How're we feeling?" Caleb beamed, motioning out to the water.

Paige stopped focusing on her feet and the hollow clunking noise they made on the ramp to look up. Beyond the horrifyingly vast stretch of water, there were a dozen little islands blackening the horizon. When her eyes found the only one that mattered—the familiar pile of sand a mile out—the

world pulsed. The pink was invisible as the sky darkened, but the slow-moving palms, the tiered layers of the resort itself—she let out a breath between her teeth.

"Did you just . . . hiss at it?" Mateo asked.

She hadn't meant to do that out loud.

"Let's all take some calming, meditative breaths," Caleb said slowly, helping Mateo onto the boat. He wore all black tonight, from his baggy sweats to the beanie that hardly wrangled his fluff of beige hair. He carefully cupped his palms over Paige's shoulders. "We're going to see things none of us have ever seen tonight. We will be rewarded for our bravery. We are soldiers of the truth, Paige."

Paige met Mateo's eyes and forced back a laugh.

Before Caleb could turn his attention to the boat's helm, Paige cleared her throat.

"I have a few ground rules," she said, producing her phone from her pocket, "before we take off."

"She did this to me, too," Mateo groaned.

Paige wanted to hit him.

"Please, Paige," Caleb said. "Detail thine demands. I am nothing if not eager to please you."

"Ew," Paige scoffed. She pulled up the rules she'd written during her walk back to the Mamanis' (and spent the entire drive editing) and cleared her throat. "First rule: You can't spring anything on me while you're filming. Anything we do, you have to tell me first."

Caleb nodded. "Okay, but I'm not psychic."

Paige ignored him, scrolling to the next item. Caleb laughed in a tone she did not appreciate.

"Second rule: I'm allowed to film everything once we get there. I don't know how you edit these, and I want my own proof."

This one made Caleb hesitate.

"I'm not trying to compete," Paige said. "But if you upload something that's like . . . if you make it look like something it isn't, I want to have the real version."

"Paige, I am wounded," Caleb said painfully. "You're making me sound like a cartoon villain. I am a *filmmaker*."

Paige rolled her eyes. "Yes or no?"

With a groan, Caleb conceded.

Paige fought back a smile. This was going great so far.

“Last rule: If we find an emergency, or if things get weird and I say I want to go home, you have to take me back. Right when I say it. Even if it’s tonight.”

To her surprise, it wasn’t Caleb who protested. Mateo’s eyes narrowed. “It’s just one night.”

“If everything is normal, we won’t have to leave.”

“You’re not the only one who’s scared,” Caleb offered, tone cloyingly empathetic. “We’re all nervous. But me and Mateo won’t let anything bad happen to you.”

Paige’s frown deepened. She wanted to believe he was right as much as she wanted to believe KJ was completely fine and this was all an overreaction. But there was something electric and dangerous in the air. The resort stood dark and alone, and no matter how many years Paige and KJ had spent imagining what was inside its walls, she was forced to admit now that she was afraid of it.

If it meant she didn’t have to spend the rest of her life wondering what had become of her best friend, though, she’d do it. She would just have to do it her own way. Maybe her rules and the precautions were overkill, but if she couldn’t strap this thing down, examine it, and make it easily digestible, she at least needed to have control over everything else.

“If it goes wrong, we bail. That’s it.”

Caleb nodded. “Fine. We bail.”

Reluctantly, Paige climbed onto the boat, and Caleb eased them away from the docks.

Since the near-drowning a year ago, the open ocean made Paige uneasy. The boat skipped casually over the rhythmic black waves, and the water glittered with dying light. As beautiful and calm as the stretch from the marina to the island might be, Paige couldn’t help imagining the uglier side of it: the swallowing, immeasurable depth of the water and the lonely silence under the surface.

On the other side of the boat, the resort drew near. This was the closest she’d ever been to the real thing, and the cold that settled over her was sudden. Or maybe that was just the daylight finally dying on the horizon. The Kaleidoscope was mostly intact despite having been abandoned for twenty-five years. Towering palms swayed over its geometric head. Bushels of overgrown dry grass were combed over immortal patches of emerald

AstroTurf, blending the dead and the endlessly alive. White sand tufted out to the water, and Paige imagined that if it weren't permeated with death, lounging on the beach of Kaleidoscope Key might be serene.

It wasn't until Caleb eased the boat up to the Kaleidoscope's defunct dock that Paige got a good look at the resort itself. The building was just like it was in the old photos, a mile-wide first floor that the sunset made vibrant. Narrow second and third floors were stacked evenly atop the first, and the fourth floor was the smallest of all. It was a decadent cake of a building, positioned to give guests the best view of the ocean possible, but it was a view no one had taken in for decades.

Paige's palms were slick with sweat.

Caleb and Mateo were silent as they tethered the boat to the dock and gathered their things. Paige slipped off the side, scrambled over the decrepit dock, and planted her feet in the warm white sand for the first time. She fought the voice screaming in the back of her head that this was a mistake. Somewhere on this island, over two hundred people had died, including her mother.

But tonight, she was going to be brave, she was going to find KJ, and once she was back on land, she would forget the Kaleidoscope ever existed. This place was not going to have power over her anymore.

Caleb shouldered his bag and faced them. "Last call for cowards. Anyone too scared to go in?"

Paige eyed Mateo, Mateo eyed her back, and neither of them said a word. If he wasn't chickening out, neither was she. Paige gripped her bag tight to her side.

With that, they ascended the beach until they found the paved walkway to the Kaleidoscope's grand entrance. It was lined with perfectly round white stones, but hardy yellow weeds wormed through the gravel. Their entrance was barred by a massive double-wide glass door that Paige assumed had opened automatically at one point. Sitting at its feet was a chunky length of iron chain.

Iron chain that was once meant to block entry.

A point toward her KJ theory. Taking the chain in her hands, she mumbled, "Someone's here already."

Caleb half jogged up to the door and dropped his bag at his feet. He examined the broken chain with a grim frown that didn't look quite right on his face. "It was cut."

“Who do you think it would be?” Paige asked, attempting to mask the quaver in her voice. She could only picture KJ’s body lying just inside, lifeless and alone. “Should we call someone?”

“There’s no one in there,” Mateo said, joining Caleb at the door. “This was probably cut a long time ago.”

“Let’s just check it out and see. And I didn’t forget your rule, Princess Paige,” Caleb said, sticking his fingers into the space between the doors. “If anything does give us trouble, we leave. Right?”

Paige’s nose scrunched up. “Right.”

“Then let’s do this.”

They’d asked her a thousand times if she wanted out, but this was the real moment of truth. Sparks twitched in her fingertips. The moment she stepped over the musty threshold, something would be different forever.

She just couldn’t tell what.

She nodded at Caleb.

With that, the boys eased their fingers between the sliding doors and pulled them apart. A cloud of dank, stale air wafted out to greet them, making Paige’s eyes water. Of course there were no dead bodies left inside, but the stench of death still hung in the air. She steeled herself, closed her eyes, and took one long step into the waiting, open mouth of the Kaleidoscope, letting the light die behind her.

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Until she hears the sound of lobby music twinkling in the hallway, she hardly registers where she is.

There's a faintly floral scent that puffs from the mess of mint-green comforter under her and, somewhere a little farther, the hush of softly running water. She gets the nagging feeling that she was just in the middle of something, but the harder she tries to catch it, bring it back to the light, the quicker it slips away.

"Case?" a girl's voice asks. "Did you say something?"

She presses the heels of her hands to her eyes, holding until starbursts of color blot out the confusion. *Case. Casey Keller.* She sits up and reality rushes her, sudden and squeezing. Soft bed, floral scent, grating music—*Kaleidoscope*. She's in the Kaleidoscope, eyeing the ceiling, and Summer Hayes just asked her a question.

Casey finds Summer on the pink velvet love seat across the room, legs tucked beneath her with the TV remote slack in her grip. Her spill of auburn hair has been messily woven into a braid that hangs over her shoulder. She blinks at Casey, confused.

"Did I?" Casey whispers. "Were we just talking?"

"Were you literally mid-sentence telling me which movie you want to watch?" Summer teases. She unzips her travel bag on the seat next to her and fishes out a couple of VHS tapes. "I brought some from home, but it's mostly kids' stuff. This is a fancy hotel, so I bet we could get the good channels."

Casey's suitcase is unzipped on the bed, a handful of tops and shorts spilling over its sides. Too much for one night, but she had to pack extra outfits in case Tess didn't like one. She remembers making that decision, even if it feels like forever ago. She touches the back of her head, half expecting to find a gaping wound where her memories should be.

No, she *can* remember what's happening. If she closes her eyes and thinks of nothing else, the facts return.

She's sitting in a room she shares with Tess and Summer, her best

friends in the world. Summer, who didn't want to come on the senior trip in the first place and would probably prefer to stay home and curl up with a book any night. Tess, who's in the bathroom humming a song Casey doesn't recognize, releasing curls of shower steam into the pink-drenched bedroom while she shaves. It's senior night and the resort is their oyster. Every lavish amenity, every dark corner, every inch from top to bottom.

"Sorry, I spaced for a second." Casey shifts off the bed, sinking her toes into the rosy shag carpet. "Aren't you going to explore?"

Summer's eyes widen. "Explore? Where?"

"The resort. It's supposed to be massive," Casey says. "You're not gonna stay shut in here all night, are you?"

Summer's smile falters.

"With how everything's been, I don't think I—"

"Hey Case, can you come help me?" Tess calls from the bathroom. "I can't get this thing zipped."

When she steps into the white marble bathroom, the air is heavy and drenched in steam. Casey finds nothing to zip. Tess stands at the sink in the outfit they picked together—denim low-rise shorts and a pink top she's tied just above her belly button. The kind of thing her mom would never let her out in. Her black hair falls to the small of her back, and her olive skin glows in the gauzy light.

"What did you—" Casey starts.

Tess puts her finger to her freshly glossed lips. Through her teeth, she hisses, "Can you stop?"

"What?"

"Did you forget about Claudia's thing? Summer is *not* invited."

The running water from the bathtub drowns out the silence, but Tess's dark stare is unyielding. *Claudia Ramirez.* The one dating Saul Mamani. The one having a get-together in her room, which Tess has been talking about for weeks. The one only a horrible friend would forget about, Casey realizes with a flush of shame. Tess searches Casey's face, at first with annoyance, then with confusion.

"Are you okay?" she whispers. "You look . . . I don't know."

Casey presses her fingertips to her forehead and expels a breath. "Yeah. Sorry. I feel like I just woke up from a nap."

"It's fine. But you need to go lie to her," Tess says, plucking a pair of tweezers from her makeup bag before turning back to the mirror. "Some

reason we have to leave. She can't come. It'll make everything weird."

"Right," Casey offers, only half understanding.

"And put your stuff on," Tess adds, looking her over. "What've you been doing this whole time?"

Casey closes her eyes again, willing the haze of forgetfulness away. There's a reason tonight is so important to Tess. Casey's flight to Georgia Southern is only a few weeks away, and then Summer will be off to New York, unpacking her life at Barnard, and Tess will stay in Miami until she finds a job that can take her away from her mother. A dark cloud lingers over every second they have left.

For some reason, though, Tess's version of tonight doesn't include Summer.

As Casey exits the bathroom, she finds Summer studying her. Over the last year, things have become . . . strained. The more Tess pushes Summer away, the harder Summer tries to win her back. Casey, the glue stretched between them, has never felt flimsier in her life.

For tonight, she just has to find a way to keep them both. Mediating the inevitable nuclear fallout of their friendship can come later.

Casey shuffles back to her suitcase and grabs the pieces of her outfit: a baby-blue top to match Tess's pink one and an unpleasantly snug white skirt that Tess convinced her to buy. Nothing like the clothes she'd usually wear, but what's one night of discomfort?

After changing, she turns to the ornate gilded mirror beside the bed, but there's something unnatural in her reflection. It's not just the boldness of the outfit—there's something strange about her skin, about her face, about the ease of her posture. Wisps of silver hair settle at the nape of her neck, but she doesn't feel them tickle. She presses her fingertips to her cheeks, moving the skin in deliberate circles. Flesh sliding slick over bone, familiar and foreign all at once.

"Whoa," Summer says. "What are you wearing?"

When Casey jolts back to earth, she finds her fingernails poised to tear through the skin of her face. She inhales, ignoring the hot tears blurring the bottom of her vision. Summer watches her with a twitch of concern in her doe eyes.

"I think we're going to grab some stuff," Casey manages, dabbing at her eyes before meeting Summer's gaze.

"Oh?"

“Just drinks and snacks.” She eyes the door. “There’s a little food court by the lobby.”

“Is that what the outfit is for?” Summer asks.

Casey touches the hem of her shirt, and her palms begin to sweat. Lying to Summer feels like killing a baby animal at point-blank range. “I wanted to look cute. We’ll be right back. Do you want anything?”

Summer watches in silence. Her lips are flat, expression unreadable, and for a moment it seems like she might call out the lie. Instead, she pushes herself off the love seat and tucks the tapes back into her bag. “I’ll go with you.”

“*No*,” Casey spits, too quickly. “I mean, why don’t you just hang out? I know you don’t really want to see anyone.”

“If we were all together, it would be—”

Rescue comes in the form of a knock at the door. As Summer goes to open it, though, a cold fear pools in the base of Casey’s stomach. A dull recognition of the shag carpet tickling her ankle, Summer grabbing the doorknob, and Tess turning off the shower. Something she’s seen a thousand times, and something happening for the first time. When Summer opens that door, something Casey can’t name is going to begin.

On the other side, Mr. Gregory from sophomore math stands impatiently with his hand at his hip. “Are you girls ready?”

“Uh . . .” Summer trails off, casting a questioning look over her shoulder. “Ready for . . . ?”

“The class picture,” Mr. Gregory says. “It’ll only take a few seconds, then you girls can get back to gossiping and doing each other’s nails, okay?”

It takes all of Casey’s willpower not to gag.

“Tell him we’ll be there in five seconds,” Tess calls from the bathroom, certainly within Mr. Gregory’s earshot.

“We don’t have all night,” Mr. Gregory says, irritated.

With that, he heads down the hall and Casey’s eyes land on Summer.

“Summer,” she whispers. “I’m feeling really weird. I think I’m missing some—”

Summer breaks into a grin and she takes Casey by the hand, tugging her into the hallway. The assaulting pink light makes it hard to see, but there’s an oddness to the quiet of the resort outside the room. Unmoved by the silence, Summer grabs the door frame and leans into the hall. Casey almost

does the same when something catches her eye.

Behind them, the rest of their class leans out of their doorways, already posed for the photo. But they aren't smiling. They stare forward, blank faced, and they look startlingly unfamiliar—faces Casey is certain she's never seen in her life—and not one of them is making a sound.

"Why are they . . . ?"

Something collides with her back. Tess drapes herself over Casey's shoulders, smelling like her new almond vanilla body mist and shaving cream. She tugs on Summer's braid with a grin. "I told you I'd be five seconds, but you just couldn't wait, huh?"

Casey tries to peel Tess off her and get a better look at the faces behind them. She tries to speak, but her tongue is cement.

Tess tenderly takes the back of Casey's head and angles her face toward the lobby, where Mr. Gregory waits with his camera. Summer gives her hand a reassuring squeeze as Mr. Gregory pulls the camera to his eye.

Somewhere behind them, the twinkling lobby music begins again. Casey's stomach clenches in fear. There's a swirl in the back of her head that says, *It's happening again. It's all happening again. There's no way to stop it.*

Then the camera flashes and the hallway is gone.

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Six

For a place she'd only ever seen in photos, the Kaleidoscope felt strikingly like somewhere Paige had been before. The central lobby of the resort looked almost exactly like it did in pictures, just with a healthy layer of grime and rot. Not that Paige had spent much time staring at the photos, because she hadn't. Not in years, and not of her own free will.

Only a few steps into the abandoned lobby, the summer day vanished behind Paige and a cold quiet settled in. She held up a photo of the lobby on her phone and tried to imagine old and new bleeding together. A grand central staircase, lined with strips of once-colored lights that had long since burned out, led to a second floor with banana-leaf wallpaper, flanked by hallways that petered into darkness. The chandelier overhead was gaudy geometric glass. A great hideous thing that, at one point, had been the definition of luxury.

If the resort's exterior was drenched in pink, the interior was drowned in it. Even without the neon, and even faded with time, the colors popped. The Kaleidoscope was an immortal high-voltage beam of light: from defunct vending machines to gold-framed flamingos in watercolor to a misshapen concierge desk. Growing up, Paige had thought the decor in the pictures she'd seen was outdated because the massacre happened so long ago, but she realized now that this place called back to a time long before the seniors arrived. It was an homage to a world even further away.

"It smells foul," Caleb muttered, T-shirt collar tugged over his nose.

"Yeah, it's old," Mateo offered, almost dreamily. He nudged a rust-splotched pot that Paige assumed used to house a small decorative shrub. "I'd be scared if it smelled good."

Paige hardly cared about the mildew or the stink of rot. In fact, she'd expected it. She extracted a surgical mask from the front pocket of her bag and slipped it on. When she turned, Caleb and Mateo eyed her expectantly. *Typical.* With a sigh, Paige pulled out two more and handed them over.

They really were lucky she'd agreed to come.

"I thought it would feel more . . ." Mateo trailed off, using his inhumanly long legs to catch up with Paige. ". . . I don't know? Powerful?"

"You'd think," Paige said.

Under the skylight, motes of dust twinkled like snowfall. Paige tilted her face up to the silent spill of light until it warmed the skin of her cheeks. From here, she could see every floor of the resort, all the way up. Layers of cement railings stacked over each other on each side like ribs. Twenty-five years ago, her mother had walked into this very same lobby. Almost two hundred teens stood where she stood now, and hours later, they had died. Whether it was toxins in the air or food poisoning or mass hysteria, their deaths happened *here*. And Paige felt . . . nothing?

Nothing except a vague irritation that she'd come in the first place. There was no sign of KJ in this lobby. There was no sign of KJ on the beach, either, and no boat. If she'd been stuck here at any point in the last month, surely there would be signs drawn in the sand, fires lit, *something*.

More likely, KJ got to this lobby and realized the exact thing Paige was realizing now: There was nothing in the Kaleidoscope to find.

Caleb moved in front of her, camera in hand. He took her shoulder. "Let's pause for a second. Hold still."

"Me, too?" Mateo asked.

Caleb held up a hand to quiet him.

He pulled his camera up to his shoulder, revealing a shoddy tape job that held a flashlight to its head. A flashlight that he now shone full beam into Paige's eyes. She winced, shielding her eyes with her forearm.

"What?"

"Tell them what you're feeling right now," Caleb said, motioning to the camera.

"Annoyed."

"Seriously, please."

Paige rolled her eyes. "I feel like the resort is exactly what I said it would be. Abandoned."

"Okay . . ." Caleb dragged the word out several seconds too long. "But what about, like, the energy in here? It doesn't make you think of anything?"

Paige considered. "No."

With a groan, Caleb put the camera down. Paige blinked through the

spots in her vision, eventually focusing on the distinct downturn of Caleb's mouth. Given how objectively goofy Caleb's whole persona usually was, his disappointment stung. She found herself puffed up and defensive before he even managed to say a word.

"I'm not going to lie about how I feel," Paige said flatly.

"I'm not asking you to lie," Caleb said, leaning down to her eye level. "But you making fun of this the whole time is gonna kill the vibe. It's supposed to be, like . . . emotional."

"If you wanted someone to cry, you brought the wrong person."

"I don't know, I might be starting to feel *something*," Mateo said, shockingly close. "It's doing nothing for you?"

Paige spun to find him standing beside her shoulder, crestfallen like she'd told him there was no Santa. Maybe she was coming off as unfeeling and rude. She reset. "I think it's sad what happened here. And I think people assigning all this superstition to it is the reason we've never figured out how everyone *actually* died. But do I feel anything magical just standing here? No."

Caleb's face went funny at that. He leaned away, gaze uncharacteristically icy. "Then I guess you're better than us. Because we're both feeling it."

Paige scoffed. "Feeling *what*?"

"This weight . . ." Mateo trailed off, pressing his palm to his chest. "It feels heavy in here."

"Our parents went through something," Caleb said. "Whatever it was, they locked it up and kept it in the dark all our lives. But now *we* have control of the situation. We get to find the answers to our questions. That doesn't make you feel anything, either?"

Paige's jaw clenched. She fought the urge to remind them that *their* parents kept their secrets locked up. Her mother had, unfortunately, let them take over. If there was something eerie about this place, it was only because they'd spent years treating it like the bogeyman. There was nothing *paranormal* happening. There was only fear and grief making monsters out of shadows.

"I'll stop being annoying," Paige said. "But I won't pretend to believe in something I don't. If I think there's nothing, I'll say that."

Caleb shrugged, defeated.

After taking a quick interview from Mateo, Caleb led them farther into

the resort. Under the ugly chandelier, Paige found herself facing four branching hallways, each entirely dark save for a thin square of light at the end coming from what she assumed was a window. She had no plans to stay in the lobby forever. If all the brochures KJ had scrounged up were to be believed, this resort was nearly unending. Which meant that KJ could be hiding anywhere—if she was ever here in the first place. Paige had only one night to search. There was no time to waste.

Paige unearthed her own flashlight from her bag. When she clicked it on and cast the beam into the first hallway to her left, a wave of familiarity crashed over her. Doors lined both walls of the long pink hallway. Despite the dust and the dark, she recognized it on sight. *This* was the hallway from the infamous final photo.

Now, it was a musty tunnel, empty and undisturbed.

No, not quite undisturbed. When Paige leaned closer, she found the pale shadow of sneaker soles imprinted in the dust. The prints weren't new—in fact, another shallow layer of dust had settled into each groove—but they were certainly recent enough to be KJ's.

"This is the hall from the picture," Mateo said. "Isn't it?"

All Paige managed was a quick nod. She stepped over the first footprint and tried to imagine herself as KJ a month ago, entering this hallway. She tried to imagine where she would have gone first.

"My mom's room is here," Paige said, tracing the footsteps farther into the hall. She passed the first door on the left, the second, the third, and paused at the fourth.

Her fingers twitched at her side, but she squashed the prickly, invasive fear that began to rear its head. She wasn't afraid of dusty old buildings, but the idea of finding something on the other side of the door was ice in the pit of her stomach. She shook her head to untether herself from the dizzying familiarity. She'd already done this a thousand times, in dreams she'd almost forgotten. Swimming across the water, trudging up the sandy slope, wandering the imagined halls inside.

A tarnished copper plate read 4 on the beveled pink door.

Before she could touch the doorknob, it swished open an inch.

"No fucking way . . ." Caleb breathed right behind her. "Did that actually just happen?"

Paige was unclear if he was talking to her or his imagined audience. She steeled herself and fought the urge to tell the camera about the power of a

cross breeze. She eyed Mateo, nodded, and elbowed her way inside.

A cloud of dust greeted them, forcing Paige to cover her face with her wrist. Caleb choked on it, and Paige pointed to the mask crinkled under his chin. Obediently, he pulled it over his nose.

Beyond the dust, the room was just how she had imagined. High ceilings were dressed in elaborate crown moldings, ornate beaded lamps sat on glass tables rimmed with gold, velvet curtains that Paige assumed were once a lush green were now dull and gray, pooling on the shag carpet. Everything was faded, made slightly rotten by aging. The dust-caked carpet squished under Paige's weight, crunching a little like snow. On the bed, there was a once-plush comforter that had been eaten away by the moths that now flitted around in shards of dying light.

"Check it out," Caleb cackled, pushing past Paige toward the bathroom. He bounced onto the lip of a Jacuzzi tub. "Think it works?"

"There's no way," Paige scoffed.

Caleb turned both dials on the Jacuzzi's side to no effect.

Across the room, Mateo fished through a collapsed vanity. A pocket-size leather Bible was splayed open, its pages warped so badly they curled over each other. Other bits of faded paper and wood littered the wreckage, but Mateo's eyes were fixed on one particular piece: notebook paper turned stiff and yellow from twenty-five years of neglect.

"What's that?" Caleb asked, scooting off the Jacuzzi to rejoin them in the bedroom.

Mateo shrugged.

Caleb settled beside Mateo with wide, curious eyes. Paige, on the other hand, was *not* interested. She stepped to the side of the bed, fighting the urge to fling herself onto it. To plant her skull on the rotten pillow her mother had slept on. Had she been right here when everyone died? What did she see from this angle? Or did it happen before she had ever lain down? Was this where she was when they found her? It occurred to Paige that she didn't know.

If KJ had been here before them, she hadn't left a trace of herself behind. But if she hadn't been here, where was she? There was a squeeze in Paige's chest. A dawning sense that there might be no KJ anywhere in the resort. For half a second, she felt unbearably lonely.

"In the presence of dark unyielding, I offer the gift of blood."

Paige froze. She turned to find Caleb cradling the frail bit of paper in his

palms.

"Wait," Paige said. "What?"

"*Caleb*," Mateo hissed, scrambling to snatch the paper back. "I don't wanna mess with that. I—"

Caleb thrust his arm in the air and careened out of Mateo's reach. "There's a creepy poem on the ground in the place where almost two hundred people died. Could be a clue, or it could be a bunch of bullshit. If you don't think anything *paranormal* is happening, it shouldn't matter either way, right?"

"It doesn't," Mateo insisted. "But—"

"Paige?" Caleb asked.

Paige's jaw tightened. None of it was real. The thing was, Paige wasn't sure where this paper had come from, but she recognized the words. The same words Tess Collins had insisted were pure evil. The ones they'd once found among Tess's hidden school things, and the ones Tess made them promise to never say out loud. Either KJ had been here before them after all, or someone was fooling with her. And if it was KJ's, why did it look so old?

"Fine," Paige said. "Read it."

"In the presence of dark unyielding, I offer the gift of blood," Caleb repeated smugly. "Tie me to you and you to me, drink of me and let me drink of you. Let me end where you begin, and let it go on forever. Good night."

A silent moment passed, but as far as Paige could tell, nothing happened. Nothing was ever going to happen, obviously. The room was just as quiet, just as muggy with heat and decay, and just as unhelpful as before. Caleb seemed to realize the same thing, shoulders sinking in disappointment. But Mateo's reaction was more dramatic: eyes squeezed shut and hands clapped over his ears like he thought a bomb might go off. When he dropped his arms, relief warmed his expression.

"As I said," Paige retorted, turning back to the bed. "None of that ritual stuff is real, and—"

There was a lick of pain in Paige's ankle.

She clapped her hand to it and found a tear in her skin. Sticky blood clung to her fingers, and it took her a moment to understand the blood was hers. A glint of light cut through the dark of the room as she realized that there was a shard of glass wedged into the side of the mattress. Its jagged

edge was wet and red, matching the glistening blood that seeped from her wound. She must've run into it, though even now, she hardly felt the pain.

She lifted the glass into the light, inspecting it, and found an eye looking back at her. Her own eye, it seemed. It was a shard of mirror, blood welling along its most broken edge. At least she'd gotten her shots.

Her blood continued to slip down the shard of mirror until, finally, a drop of it plummeted. The moment it touched the carpet, there was an uncanny shift in the air. Paige yawned, trying to pop the pressure in her ears.

"I felt that," Caleb said.

Maybe it was Paige's constant internal skeptic, but this was all too . . . on the nose. In their faces. If this building was really so unbelievably haunted, there was no way they would be the first ones to discover it. They'd only been inside for a matter of minutes. There was a sound machine in this room somewhere, maybe. Something to make their ears pop. Maybe KJ had orchestrated this, and the whole thing was some petty revenge setup.

Paige pointed her flashlight at her own face. "Scared? Did the bad poem give you guys nightmares?"

"Paige," Caleb sighed, massaging the skin between his ear and jawbone.

"Don't *Paige* me," Paige snapped. "I asked you not to play any tricks, but—"

A noise sounded from the bathroom. A gurgle from the Jacuzzi drain, low and wet. Paige wandered toward it with the boys at her back, and she was *not* scared. Old buildings made gross noises. She peered over the Jacuzzi's spongy blue lip into the stale white linoleum. The moist groan of plumbing shifted, and for once, Caleb and Mateo went silent. Only the meaty sounds of the resort's bowels remained. The air skirted, restless, over the bare skin of her arms.

She bit the inside of her mouth so hard it stung.

She was *not* scared.

Paige plucked her phone from her pocket and tapped the flashlight on. She hoped Caleb was still filming this. There was something sickly satisfying about the camera capturing proof that she was unimpressed.

She angled the light into the drain, climbing into the Jacuzzi for a closer look.

"Okay," Caleb said. "You are officially very hardcore. You're invited to

—”

“*Shhhhh*,” Paige hissed.

The drain sound morphed. It was now almost a word, though she couldn’t make out the consonants of it. She pressed her ear close to the drain, ignoring the way her pulse picked up speed.

The air went heavy, wet and tangy with iron. Sweat in the stagnant heat, like a breath only inches away. A shudder ran through Paige.

“What did you do?” Mateo asked Caleb. Paige was certain she heard his voice tremble. “We never should have read that thing.”

“Quiet,” Paige said. “I’m trying to hear what—”

With a soft *plink*, every flashlight in the room flickered out.

Inches from her face, from the depths of the drain, a familiar voice whispered, “Paigey?”

Paige stumbled back, phone slipping through her sweat-slick fingers before clattering against the plastic. Before she could reach for it, it slipped into the open mouth of the drain and vanished into the dark. Paige hardly registered it. She stared at the black hole of the drain, eyes hot with tears.

“Mom?”

The flashlights came back to life, and it was as though the room itself expelled a breath. Clarity washed over Paige, and she sprang for the drain, shoving her hand deep into the plumbing.

“Paige,” Mateo gasped, grabbing her beneath her armpits. “Don’t touch anything in there. You’re gonna get lockjaw.”

“I’m not staying here without my phone,” she snarled.

But the farther Paige’s hand slid against the wet, mucky inside of the drain, the more she was sure her phone was already long gone. She ignored the squeeze of panic: no way to call for help, no way to access the real world, no control of the situation. She’d just screwed herself so royally she went hot with shame. She’d reacted to something that wasn’t real, and the consequences were immediate.

“I can’t believe I got that,” Caleb whispered somewhere behind her. “I can’t believe I actually just recorded that.”

He’d nearly stopped the recording to show them what he’d caught when another noise rattled across the room. Paige shifted against the slippery slope of the Jacuzzi seat, facing the small linen closet. The door clicked faintly against its frame.

“Hello?” she called.

This explained everything, actually. Caleb had hired someone to do practical effects on the room. She clung desperately to that, pouring what was left of her sanity into the only explanation that made sense. With confidence, Paige climbed out of the Jacuzzi. She was going to make Caleb buy her a new phone when this was all over.

"Paige," Caleb whispered. "I don't think we should . . ."

"You don't want me to expose how you're doing this?" Paige asked with a smirk. "Who is it? Someone from school? Or did you have to hire an expert?"

She exited the bathroom and padded across the bedroom's shag carpet, puffs of dust springing up with every step. But once she came to a stop in front of the closet, she hesitated. All of the strangeness happening in here was fake because it *had* to be, but that didn't stop the quiver in her hand. It didn't stop the nervous flutter of her heart. The broken chain on the door, the voice in the drain, the air thick with ozone . . .

She braced herself, grabbed the closet handle, and threw it open.

Inside, she found that it was not, in fact, empty.

A girl was huddled in the corner of the closet with a baseball bat hugged to her chest, silky black hair draped over her shoulders like a shawl. Her dark eyes were watery with fear, just like her mother's, and when her gaze fell on Paige, her confusion only deepened.

After a year apart, Paige was finally looking KJ Collins in the face.

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Seven

At first, Paige couldn't comprehend what—or who—she was seeing.

All that anticipation, and they'd just . . . *found* her. Mateo and Caleb quickly helped KJ from her hiding place, shedding their fear of the resort to check her for obvious signs of injury. But there were none: no wounds, no blood, no limp once she was on her feet. The only thing different about her was the frenzy in her eyes and the strange stiffness to her silence. Caleb plied her with softball questions—"Are you okay? How did you get here? How long have you been here?"—which KJ answered with shrugs and a mumbled "I don't know."

There was something wrong with her. Beyond the obvious issues that came with being stranded in an abandoned building for a month. Once the boys got KJ onto the bed, her shoulders relaxed a little, and the wild animal fear in her dissolved, but she didn't let her guard down. Even if everyone in this room had known each other since birth, KJ clearly didn't trust that she was safe. She didn't look at them like she was being rescued; she looked at them like she thought they might be a trick of the light.

"Have you been here the whole time?" Mateo asked while Caleb inspected the now-empty closet. "I haven't heard from you in . . . in a *month*."

The way Mateo put a hand on KJ's shoulder now was surprisingly familiar. Paige narrowed her eyes. The two of them were never as close with each other as they were with Paige. In the old world, Paige would have served as the bridge between them, but it seemed a year had changed much more than she realized.

KJ didn't seem to notice Mateo's touch, tightening her grip on the baseball bat instead. "A month?"

"It's May," Mateo said quietly. "Last time we checked in was at the end of March. You remember?"

KJ met his eyes, her gaze dull with confusion. "Yeah. Yeah, I remember.

Sorry.”

“What have you been doing here?” Mateo asked.

“Exploring.”

Whatever *that* meant.

If Paige was a good friend, she would check on KJ, too. But the adrenaline rushed through her so fast and hot that just looking at KJ made her dizzy. She’d expected the worst-case scenario: KJ dead on the island. She’d imagined that everything she still wanted to say to KJ would go unsaid, and like her mother, KJ would become another ghost made of more questions than answers.

It was just that, for the last year, she’d had a very clear vision of how her reunion with KJ would go. They would meet in a neutral location, preferably the sushi place on Washington that served complimentary sesame balls with orders over twenty dollars. She would apologize for the year of silence and any hard feelings that had created, obviously. Then KJ would apologize to her for everything else because, in the time Paige had spent reflecting, she’d come to realize that their breakup really *was* KJ’s fault. She was the one who was obsessed with throwing her life away over nothing. It was her inability to stop fixating on the thing that nearly killed them. Her need to dote on her mother despite her numerous problems. Her absolute refusal to improve her life at all. Best-case scenario, KJ would see the error of her ways, and they could be friends again.

She’d been willing to abandon her perfect apology plan if KJ was in danger. In fact, there was a little piece of her that enjoyed the idea of starting their reunion by mounting a rescue operation. But now that KJ was here and unharmed and not in immediate need of evacuation, all the little bubbles of Paige’s frustration came to the surface. They would finally have to talk this out, and in the worst possible place.

Instead of facing KJ, Paige found Caleb beside the closet. Light and shadow danced over his face as he reviewed their footage, probably enjoying how scared she looked in the Jacuzzi. She straightened, squared her shoulders, and said, “Delete that.”

Caleb glanced up, equal parts amused and vaguely offended.

“Huh?”

“The footage from the tub,” Paige clarified. “I need you to delete it.”

“Why?”

Paige frowned. Now that there was light in the room and they’d found

KJ alive, she felt more grounded. And with her newfound clarity, she knew that she had *not* heard her dead mother's voice calling to her via the resort's rotten plumbing.

"I don't want you to post it."

"Why not? It's amazing," Caleb said. "I've never gotten anything like this. Ever."

"Pfft." Paige put her hands on her hips. "Yeah, probably because you've never rigged the room beforehand. But this? I know you said you wanted to take your channel to the next level or whatever, but your fans will know you faked it."

Caleb fixed her with a puzzled look that gave Paige pause. Her breath came short, and her face was hot, and she wasn't sure whose fault this mess was, but someone needed to fix it. Someone needed to get her back to reality.

"And then you got KJ to help you? After . . . after what you promised me?"

"What?" Caleb dropped the camera to his side, finally giving her his full attention. "Paige, are you good? I said I didn't know where she was. I meant it. I don't know why she's . . . I haven't talked to her."

"Sure."

"I'm surprised *you're* not checking on her," Caleb said, softer. He leaned toward her. "I mean, I thought you guys were . . ."

Paige waved a hand to shut him up. "*Whatever*. Delete that clip. I don't consent to you posting it."

"Not happening." Caleb donned an almost smile, which made Paige's blood boil. He had a surprising bite for someone so seemingly toothless. He put a hand on her head. "Per *your* rules, if you want to upload your own footage, you can."

"The agreement is void. My phone's gone."

"That's a you problem."

Paige narrowed her eyes. "It's not a *me* problem if this whole thing is a setup. Do you actually think I'm that gullible? Sound machines, practical effects, stuffing KJ in the closet . . . if this is an intervention, I'm not—"

"Is she being serious?"

Finally, it was KJ's voice. Paige turned.

All three pairs of eyes were on Paige. But she didn't care about what Caleb thought of her. She didn't even care what Mateo thought of her in the

end. KJ's eyes burned, and it was all Paige could do to keep from shrinking.

KJ sat on the bed with her baseball bat resting lazily across her lap. The confusion etched into her brow earlier was now replaced with irritation. It was the face she used to make when Paige said something unfathomably stupid, but it was usually followed by a laugh. Paige hadn't earned this look in a long time, hadn't heard the laugh in even longer.

"Paige, no one is trying to trick you," Caleb said, gently now. "I don't know how to make you believe me. I didn't set anything up. I didn't know KJ would—"

"Don't bother arguing with her," KJ said through a laugh. "It's pointless. This whole place could flip upside down in front of her and she wouldn't believe you. She's gotta protect her peace or whatever."

Paige clenched her jaw. "I really didn't expect this from you."

"Paige—" Mateo warned.

KJ held out a hand to him. "She thinks this is all about her. That you'd stage a haunted building just to get footage of her. Because she's *so* interesting."

Paige furrowed her brow. Okay, *that* stung.

Mateo's eyes widened. "Can we just be nice for a second?"

Paige did not care for Mateo's pacifism, especially considering his weird friendliness with KJ earlier. This interaction was miles from the way she'd wanted to talk about the state of their friendship, and she'd never been good at adjusting. The fact that they had to hash things out here, in their mothers' room . . . wasn't ideal. It was so full of history it threatened to burst.

"I do not think everything is about me," Paige clarified, cheeks hot. Each consonant was sharpened to a point. "In fact, I only came here because I was looking for *you*."

KJ blinked at her, and then her expression shifted, settling somewhere between relief and sadness.

In the split second of quiet, Caleb threw his hands up in surrender. "I think me and Mateo are gonna go check out the rest of the hallway. And you guys can, uh . . . talk it out?"

The boys cleared out, and Paige was left to face KJ alone. Although the room was still coated in dust and grime, it felt a little more alive with just the two of them. The immortalized details of it came into focus—the decayed tissues in the trash that her mother probably discarded the night of the massacre, three untouched goody bags on the TV stand, a collapsed sack

of what appeared to be mostly rotted VHS tapes. She wondered if, twenty-five years ago, her mother had found herself standing in this exact place, staring at Tess Collins on the bed like Paige now stared at KJ.

A dizzying feeling came over her at the idea. Like she'd stepped into something that had been in motion for a long time, and would be in motion long after she left.

She swallowed the lump of fear that formed in her throat.

KJ, looking infuriatingly unbothered by their situation, leaned back on her elbows. Her flat, broad shoulders relaxed. Like she *hadn't* spent the last year dreading the moment they would come face-to-face again. In a way, it seemed like she'd expected it.

Which was fine, because Paige, too, was cool and unbothered.

"I looked at your computer," Paige said, not sounding cool or unbothered. "You planned how to get here but nothing on how to get back?"

"Wait," KJ said, sitting up. "I thought you were off at college. How did you look at my computer? Did you break into my room?"

"I came back yesterday for the memorial. I looked for you. Everyone was saying they hadn't heard from you in a month. And I thought . . . well, I thought if I came back to Miami, maybe we could talk. I . . ." Paige clenched and unclenched her fists. Vulnerability had a nasty tendency to make her sweat waterfalls, and she felt the perspiration slick on her palms. "I wanted to know you were safe. But based on the stuff I found, clearly not."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Paige motioned toward the front of the resort. "Did you steal a boat to come here?"

KJ looked away.

"Why would you come here alone? Why didn't you tell me?"

At that, KJ let out a laugh so sharp it slapped. "Why didn't I tell *you*? We weren't friends anymore."

"But—"

"Actually, let me clarify," KJ spat. She didn't sit up any straighter, but there was a rigidity to her shoulders. This was KJ with her hackles raised. "*You* didn't want to be friends anymore. And you didn't want anything to do with the Kaleidoscope. Or your own mom. So I'm sorry I did what you asked me to and left you out of it."

Softly, Paige asked, "That's what you thought I wanted?"

“It’s fine,” KJ said, looking down. “It was a long time ago.”

“A year,” Paige said. “Not that long.”

The memory might evade KJ, but Paige remembered it like it was yesterday. Still in the hospital, head still foggy from the drowning and subsequent resuscitation. The hospital lights searing into her retinas while nurses warned her that she was still too weak to speak, too raw to understand. Too tender to be making big decisions.

But she’d known then what she knew now. That this resort, haunted or not, held nothing good for her. The past was only monsters and shadows, hands in the water that wanted to drag her down. And so she’d told KJ that she couldn’t die for this place. That she wouldn’t watch KJ die for it, either. She’d tried to pour her whole soul into her words, to warm her voice with love and show KJ the version of the world she deserved to live in. They could be normal people who lived normal lives, who didn’t have famous massacres looming over them. All she’d wanted was to grow up.

All she’d wanted was for KJ to grow up with her.

“We can talk about this later,” Paige offered, forcing herself to breathe evenly. “Are you in some kind of . . . trouble?”

“I am in a *lot* of trouble,” KJ mused, much too calm. She swept her hair over her shoulder. “We all are. Have you looked around?”

“You’re going to have to be more specific,” Paige said. “I see an abandoned building. That you have apparently been living in.”

KJ let out a mirthless laugh. “You’re right. You haven’t seen the real stuff yet. I think you should go look around for ten minutes and then come tell me this is a totally normal abandoned building.”

“If it’s so dangerous, why not leave?”

“I can’t.”

Paige studied her face. She was no stranger to this stubborn, immovable streak in KJ, but something was different now. She didn’t say it out of spite. Her voice was flat and dry, like she spoke a universal truth. Even if the surface pieces of KJ were familiar, something dark and turbulent lived underneath. There was a layer of delusion that KJ had waded into since coming here. Paige understood now with startling clarity that she couldn’t be the one to drag KJ out of it.

But she could do the next best thing.

“Fine. If you can’t leave, I will.” She grabbed her tote bag and pivoted toward the door without waiting for KJ to protest. “And I’m going to send

people back for you.”

KJ did not protest. Instead, she let out an exasperated huff, rolling her eyes like *she* was the adult in the situation. Paige schooled her expression, careful not to show the way her blood began to boil.

“Okay. Let me get through this quickly. You can relay it to the guys.” KJ stood, propping her baseball bat on the carpet like a cane. Her hair fell to her elbows; it was even longer now than it had been at the hospital. She stood a few inches taller than Paige. Just tall enough to look down the slope of her nose when she spoke. “Every room has an exit, even if it doesn’t look like it. And—”

“What?”

“—and elevators are not your friend. Wherever they decide to take you is not a place you want to go. Oh, and when you hear something kind of like . . .” She cupped her hand over her mouth and made a low grumbling noise like a belch. “If you hear that, just hang tight and wait to feel better. I think I’m forgetting some. It’ll come back to me by the time I see you again.”

“I don’t understand what you’re saying,” Paige spat. “I’m not . . . I don’t want to do any of this. I don’t want to do this haunted resort thing with you. I’m going to *leave*.”

KJ held her gaze for a moment, and there was something strangely . . . *sad* in her eyes. As pointless as this whole trip had been, Paige hoped that maybe this was a glimmer of regret that they couldn’t work this out. But Paige had tried to lean into the obsession her whole life. She’d yielded to it and let it shape her. She’d convinced herself that she was just as hungry for answers as KJ, because it was the only way to hold on to her best friend. She’d wasted so many years of her life looking for truths that didn’t exist, and she had nothing else to give.

KJ sighed, and the sadness was gone. “Well, that’s going to be hard.”

“Why?”

“Because I’ve been wandering around forever,” KJ said. “And I still haven’t found the way out.”

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“You don’t think she’ll be mad when we get back, right?”

Casey is not where she was a moment ago.

She is on the ground now, bits of shag carpet worming between her fingers and into the space behind her knee. The lights are dimmer here, and there’s a sweat in the air like she’s just stumbled out of a crowd. The white from Mr. Gregory’s camera flash still burns in her eyes, but when the blindness finally wanes and the world shimmers into place, Casey finds the same mint-green bed and white-lit bathroom as the one she shares with Tess and Summer. Except everything feels backward.

“Earth to Case,” Tess says from beside her on the floor, long legs folded up beneath her. “Please don’t tell me you’re feeling guilty about it. Because then I’ll have to feel guilty. And I *really* don’t want to.”

Casey blinks at her and tries to attach Tess’s words to a concept she can grasp. The last hour comes back to her in slivers. Bumping shoulders with Tess as they stumble out of the room, promising Summer they’ll be back in a few minutes with snacks, Tess looping their arms together and tugging Casey away from the vending machines. Teetering on heels toward a room far deeper in the resort. For something that just happened, her memories of it are strange and hazy. Like it was a thousand years ago. Like it happened to someone else.

A quick scan of the room tells her that the reason everything seems backward is because it *is*. They’re already in Claudia’s room; maybe they’ve been here a while.

Claudia herself, all big dark eyes and smooth brown skin, is tangled up on the bed with her boyfriend, Saul Mamani. She takes a long swig of clear liquor from a chunky bottle and passes it to Saul, wincing. At the foot of the bed, Jade and Kendra inspect each other’s nail beds, dark hair styled to match—flattened straight to their shoulders with a spiky chunk pinned up in the back like a splayed-out paintbrush. Gel-slicked strands of hair hang like yarn over their cheeks.

“Sorry,” Casey chokes out just for Tess, pressing fingertips to her

eyelids. “You feel okay? My head is killing me.”

Tess’s mouth slants. “You’re trying to go back. You *do* feel guilty.”

“No,” Casey spits, and the effort throbs in her skull. “Well, maybe. Summer probably has meds. And she thinks we’re coming back right away.”

“Okay, well whose fault is that?” Tess asks, tilting her head to the side. Her hair tumbles over her shoulder. “You were supposed to come up with a reason for us to leave.”

“Maybe you can stay,” Casey offers. “And I’ll go back and keep her company. I’ll just say you ran into some people?”

“I’m not hanging without you,” Tess whispers.

“But—”

“Is this about Summer?” Claudia asks, suddenly tuned in to the conversation. She wipes a bit of liquor dribble from her lower lip. “I feel so bad for you guys. Is it awkward in your room now?”

“Why would it be awkward?” Casey asks.

“It’s not like you guys are friends anymore,” Claudia says. “Right?”

Casey opens her mouth to protest, but Tess’s voice cuts through first.

“The three of us grew up together,” she explains, shifting away from Casey to face Claudia on the bed. “We thought it would be nice for her. To share a room for the last time.”

It’s oddly . . . *charitable*. Like her friendship is a gift she’s chosen to bestow on Summer. More and more, something nasty creeps through the cracks of Tess whenever Casey looks away. The more time Tess spends trading what she has for what she wants, the more the other part comes through. Sometimes, when Tess flips her hair just right and says the exact thing to make the whole room laugh, Casey wonders if the real Tess is there at all.

“Yeah, but what if she looks at you while you’re changing?” Jade asks, wedged between Kendra’s knees so the other girl can play with her hair.

“I already thought she was creepy,” Kendra adds, voice as tinny and shrill as a door hinge. She loops a slick bit of Jade’s hair around her fingers. “She always just stares at you when you’re talking. I don’t think she blinks.”

It’s obvious what they’re talking about.

Reality might be blurry, but this, Casey remembers.

It’s been a year since rumors started circulating that Summer Hayes,

pastor's daughter and all-around "good girl," went to summer Bible camp and tried to kiss another girl. It started as disbelief: *Summer wouldn't do that unless she's been lying about who she is.* Then it became images of swimsuit models taped to Summer's locker to mock her and notes pretending to be Ripley Memorial girls asking her out. At first, Summer told them she thought disappearing from the public eye would make the whispers stop. But after a year, it's clear that the only way Summer will know peace again is in a city somewhere far away.

Summer was never popular in the first place, but neither was Casey. Neither was Tess, until she managed to wiggle her way into Claudia's good graces. As Summer made herself invisible, Tess slid into the spotlight.

That, Casey supposes, was when all the trouble with Tess and Summer started.

What Tess can never let the others know, though, is that Summer's secret was never a secret. Not between the three of them.

"She doesn't have any friends." Tess doesn't look at Casey when she speaks, but there's a rigidity to her shoulders. A silent plea for Casey not to correct her. "I don't *love* hanging out with her, but you need three people per room. Who else was she gonna stay with?"

Saul sits up, shuffling Claudia off him. His eyes are half lidded and his hair is mussed, but there's a laser precision to his focus on Tess. "Bullshit. I think you just like having someone around who's completely obsessed with you."

Tess scoffs. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"You're telling me it's not weird at all to have someone who's, like . . . *into you* as a best friend?"

Claudia, Jade, and Kendra all laugh under their breath as Tess's face goes red. The easiest answer would be the true one: that there's nothing romantic between Summer and Tess. Or Summer and Casey. Or Summer and anyone, after the nightmare of the church camp incident. When Summer talks about her love life—which she's almost always too embarrassed to do—she dreams of Barnard. She dreams of a girl who's never even heard of Ripley Memorial, who might make the shadows of her life here go away.

But all Tess manages is, "Didn't I just say we're not best friends?"

Saul shrugs and leans back into Claudia's arms. But Tess's shoulders are still raised and her eyes are still wide. If there's one thing Tess is afraid of

more than anything else, it's being the butt of the joke.

"Besides," Tess says, motioning to the bed. "You're one to talk. You're telling me you couldn't spend *one night* in separate rooms?"

"Clauds and I are completely different," Saul says casually. "I think you just gotta face it, Collins. The only thing that matters to you is attention."

Claudia smacks him in the chest. "*Saul*."

"What? We can talk about it when she's not around, but we can't say it to her face?" Saul taps Claudia on the nose like the comment is meant for her, not Tess. Like he can't see Tess's hands balling into fists. "You said she's your friend. Good friends don't keep secrets from each other."

It's too much. Tagging along as Tess courts her new friends is one thing. Casey's endured so many excruciating mall dates and pointless five-way phone calls she can hardly count them. But lying around and slandering Summer while she waits in the room alone just so Tess can be berated by these strangers . . . The seeds of guilty nausea start to take root. Even if the others lump her in with Summer over it, even if Tess gets mad, she has to draw the line somewhere.

When she turns to the door, though, she freezes.

Summer stands in the doorway, fingers curled around the door. She looks tired. Not devastated or angry, but exhausted. Whether she's been there for ten seconds or ten minutes, it's clear she's heard enough. The nausea building in Casey's gut begins to twist. She should have defended Summer more, she should have shut down this conversation the minute it started, she should have been a good friend for once in her life. Her attention snaps to the rest of the room as they burst into laughter over a joke Casey didn't catch.

"*Guys*," she hisses.

But when she turns back to the doorway, Summer is gone. The door is closed and Casey isn't certain it was ever open in the first place. Summer *was* there, though. Wasn't she? Clear as day, wearing an expression that couldn't have been her imagination.

She's broken out of her daze by glass shattering across the room.

Kendra stands in front of an ornate gold mirror identical to the one in Casey's room. Except the mirror itself is gone, reduced to a pile of shards at Kendra's feet.

"You *asshole*," Kendra shrieks, stepping carefully out of the mess. "I actually thought it worked."

Saul's laughter comes out in a burst, startling Casey. Mostly because, instead of coming from the bed, Saul's laughter comes from directly beside her. She spins to find him lying on the carpet with a fistful of pennies. Piece by piece, the scene comes back together: Kendra chanting spooky nursery rhymes into the mirror, Saul throwing pennies at the glass until it breaks . . .

Something is missing again.

The others have all changed positions, too. Claudia still lies across the bed, but it's Jade sitting beside her, fingers deftly weaving Claudia's hair into small braids. The liquor bottle sits on the nightstand beside them, completely empty, and there's something liquid to the way Claudia lolls her head to look at the damage. She groans and swivels her gaze to Saul.

"Can you *not* damage the super-expensive furniture? Mr. Gregory's doing rounds again soon."

"Your dad can pay for it," Tess says from the bathroom. "And Mr. Gregory probably went to bed an hour ago."

She sits on the bathroom counter now, angled up toward a crack in the window as she puffs a cigarette. Casey blinks at her and tries to figure out where she's been mentally for the last ten minutes. When did everyone change places? And since when does Tess smoke?

"Besides," Tess continues after a long drag, "Bloody Mary is for kids. It was never gonna work."

The words are intensely familiar. She's heard them in this exact order, in this exact cadence, in this exact room. Like a scene from a movie she's watched a dozen times, the next line comes to her more from memory than anything else.

Almost numbly, she says, "Claudia's sister knows a real one."

All at once, the rest of the room turns to her. Maybe it's been too long since she said something out loud, and maybe everyone else forgot she was here. But Claudia eyes her suspiciously, whipping her head up so hard she tugs a braid from Jade's grip. Tess, on the other hand, stares at her like she's finally lost her mind.

Then Claudia clears her throat.

"My sister said she knows a spell that only works on the islands. I don't know if she meant *this* island." Claudia watches Casey carefully through a net of thick black lashes. "Did I tell you about it before?"

"I think so," Casey says quickly.

"Are we done with the Satanism yet?" Tess asks, putting out her

cigarette in the sink. She strides back into the room like she owns it, but it's clear she's trying to pull their focus away, get their eyes off Casey. "I'm so bored."

"I don't think you're bored," Jade teases. She plucks the pack of cigarettes from Tess's grip and takes her place in the bathroom. Before she lights up, she flashes Tess a mischievous grin. "I think you're scared."

Tess meets her gaze, and Jade stiffens. Just like with Saul and his jokes about Summer, Tess won't live on her back foot. She won't be a joke to these people. Behind the glittering of her dark eyes, there are gears turning. She's recalibrating, trying to grab control again.

"You think I'm scared?" She laughs. "Teach me the spell."

While Claudia tries to conjure up the words for Tess to say, Kendra and Jade start picking up the shards of glass littering the carpet. Casey thumps onto her back and tries to fight a nauseating sense of déjà vu. Something tickles the back of her neck and she gets the odd feeling that she's being watched.

"Okay, I got it." Tess, apparently done learning Claudia's sister's spell, turns to Jade with a sly grin, plucking a shard of mirror from her fingers. "Would someone who's scared do this?"

Tess takes the shard and presses it to the corner of her palm, waiting for the room to collectively gasp. Just like the moment after Summer opened the door, Casey is sure this has happened before. It's the cadence of Tess's voice, the way she waits with the glass to her skin, a pinprick of red staining its tip. "In the presence of dark unyielding . . ."

The world around Casey pulses, and she understands with sudden crushing clarity that this is the beginning of the end. Something bad is going to happen. It's going to happen *again*. People are going to die.

She tries to stand. If she can just get the shard from Tess . . .

Tess drags the glass over her hand in one fluid motion, rending the skin into a gaping red smile across her palm. Wickedly, she says, "I offer the gift of blood."

Before Casey can reach her, a dribble of blood slides down from Tess's wound, curling around her wrist before plummeting. Its fall lasts a silent century. Even if Casey can't remember what comes next, fear blossoms in her. Throat raw from screaming, limbs aching and feet blistered and head spinning. No getting out, no one left alive.

Tess's blood hits the carpet, and for the second time, Casey's world goes

black.

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Eight

KJ was right, and Paige wanted to kill her for it.

They reversed the exact path they'd taken to reach the bedrooms, but when they arrived at the Kaleidoscope's lobby, it was . . . *changed*. Despite the lights somehow flickering to life along the banisters, the lobby was significantly darker than when they'd arrived. Most of the molded wreckage they'd trekked over had been cleaned up, leaving the smooth gleam of linoleum to glow faintly under their sneakers. That wasn't the part that disturbed her, though. All of that could be explained away by a very efficient cleaning crew.

The thing that really struck her was the absence of the front door.

"No way," Caleb said, panning his camera over the uninterrupted expanse of pale pink wall that stood solidly where the door should have been.

The door—or lack thereof—was too much for Paige to look at. Easier to tackle something smaller. Something manageable, so she could keep her pulse under control. While the boys clapped their hands over the wall, searching for an exit, Paige found herself drawn to the banister lights. She ran her fingers over the sticky silicone coating and found it warm.

"There shouldn't be power, right?"

"Not unless Dad turned it on remotely?" Caleb said, voice echoing across the lobby.

Paige considered. "Could he?"

Her voice came out more like a plea than a question.

"I don't know," Caleb said. "I don't think so. He . . . he doesn't like to think about this place. It could sink into the ocean, and he'd just be glad he didn't have to deal with it anymore."

The Mamanis were the same when it came to the resort. They employed a "never speak about it, never think about it, never waste a breath on it" rule in the house. But that was when they were on the mainland, far away from

danger. Surely Jason Dettweiler could face his abandoned island if it meant saving the three of them—his own son included—from being stranded. She felt her pockets before remembering her phone was somewhere in the guts of the resort, probably covered in sludge and rust and god knew what else.

"Call him," Paige said. "I don't have a phone."

"Do you think he already knows we're here?" Mateo asked. He paced to the sealed wall and pressed his palm against the pink. "Like, if he saw us come here on the cameras?"

Caleb scoffed. "What cameras?"

"If there were cameras, he would've known KJ was here," Paige said, fingers still fixed to the light strips. "I assume it was you who cut the chain out front, then?"

Paige turned to KJ, but there were only three of them in the former lobby. KJ, who she was positive had been standing behind her only a second ago, was nowhere to be found.

"Where'd she go?"

Mateo and Caleb shrugged in unison.

"I don't remember her following us," Caleb said.

No, Paige was certain KJ led them out here just a minute ago. The rhythm of her angry gait lingered, the ghost of a sound Paige was sure she had *just* heard. Maybe everything was upside down, but she'd spent the last year anticipating the day she'd have to look KJ in the face again. KJ was the reason she had agreed to this nightmare. She couldn't lose track of her that easily.

She pointed to Caleb's pocket. "I know you don't want to get in trouble with your dad, but someone needs to come get us. Especially her. She's . . . KJ's been here for a full month. And she's clearly having some kind of episode. We need her off this island."

Obediently, Caleb pulled out his phone and punched in a number.

Mateo stood at her side and said nothing, though Paige imagined he was working through his own parental dread. However scared Caleb was to get his father involved, Mateo was a thousand times more afraid of Saul and Claudia. He tilted his head back to eye the ceiling. Then, softly, he said, "Oh."

Paige followed his line of sight, and her stomach sank.

The skylights that had illuminated their first few minutes in the resort were dark as midnight. Darker, even. Like black paint had spilled over the

glass from somewhere high above them, choking out the light. *That* was why it felt darker here, even with the power on. Either they'd spent longer talking to KJ than Paige realized, or the sky was broken.

Caleb pulled his phone from his ear to stare at the screen. "No service. It didn't even ring."

Paige nodded at Mateo, who pulled out his phone. One glance at the screen, though, told her his had the same issue.

So they had no service on the island, which complicated the rescue situation. Paige exhaled and closed her eyes. Maybe she wasn't panicking enough, but between Caleb and Mateo, there was enough fear to go around. She wanted—*needed*—to be the one with her head on straight. If she lingered too long on the impossible, she'd be lost.

Paige dropped to her knees and rummaged through her tote bag while Mateo tried to position his phone high enough to ping a cell tower. This wasn't out of control yet; in fact, Paige had prepared for this as well as she could with the last-minute notice. They had enough food and water for a few days, and best of all, they had the bag of things she'd scrounged from KJ's room. Presumably, they also had KJ to explain what she knew about this. Somewhere in the chaos was a way out. Easy peasy.

Gingerly, Paige unearthed a map of the Kaleidoscope and laid it flat against the linoleum. Despite the missing front door, they were still clearly in the lobby. If she followed the lights up the grand staircase, she would hopefully find herself facing the gym and spa. She traced the map key and found what she was looking for on the fourth floor: the main office.

"Okay," she said, standing. "Okay, we're going to the main office. It's on the fourth floor, and probably has some kind of emergency phone."

"We're in a vortex," Mateo said. "How would it—"

"There'll be maps of emergency exits, too. I mean, they wouldn't have opened it without a plan."

"A plan for what?" Mateo's voice came out shaky. He was on the brink of tears. "All the exits disappearing?"

Before Paige could protest, there was a roar and a crash across the lobby. Caleb's leg was outstretched, and a few feet away, a trash can rolled violently across the floor. His face burned red, and his fists were clenched at his sides.

Paige was very quickly losing her grip on this situation. KJ was missing again, Mateo was having an existential crisis, and Caleb was undergoing a

complete meltdown. She needed to get the boys back in line if they were going to make it out in one piece.

"Caleb," Paige said, aiming for somewhere between stern and comforting. "I need you to take a deep breath. Try to remember anything your dad told you about this building. Literally anything at all."

Apparently, this was Caleb's last straw. He crumpled to his knees in frustration, smacking his fists on the lobby floor, and Paige stopped her approach. She'd never known Caleb as well as she knew Mateo and KJ, but the sudden outburst seemed strange for him. She wasn't sure she'd ever seen him express a negative emotion more intense than slight irritation.

"I don't know anything," Caleb howled. "I didn't do this. I swear, I'm not making this up."

Against her better judgment, Paige believed him. Beyond the sincere despair in his voice, she doubted Caleb had any way of putting together an illusion like this. The strange noises, the sudden cleanup, the missing doors . . . it was a little above Caleb's budget. Mateo was just as unlikely a suspect, pacing around the room with his knuckle to his lips like an old-school detective. He didn't scream mastermind.

But that only left KJ.

"You don't remember anything your parents said about the Kaleidoscope?" Paige asked Mateo, startling him from his daze. "Any description of how they got out?"

Mateo shook his head.

The sting of it took Paige by surprise; the other second-generation survivors had plenty of chances to ask their parents questions. They'd had a lifetime to get a firsthand account, but they were completely clueless. If her mother had lived just a little longer—if she'd just held on long enough for Paige to understand what to ask—maybe this would be different.

"Paige?" Mateo asked, staring wide-eyed into his phone screen. "What day is it?"

"May twenty-first," Paige said.

"No, I mean what day of the week."

"Thursday."

Mateo turned his phone to face her:

MONDAY, MAY 21

8:42 PM

“What am I looking at?” Paige asked. “Your phone doesn’t understand what day it is?”

Before Mateo could say anything else, a song chimed from somewhere deep in the hallways, echoing from all sides. All three of them froze, staring at each other as the song grew louder. Paige was almost certain she recognized it, though the exact memory was impossible to place. It was twinkling and nostalgic. Like the peppy, obnoxious music that filled the silence in elevators. But something somber churned under the melody.

She used to hum this, maybe. Or had she heard it from her mother?

She almost missed the rumbling in the linoleum under their sneakers. Caleb squatted and stuck his arms out for balance, but Mateo reached for her. He took her hand like he thought they might fall through the floor. When she met his eyes, for just a second, she felt it. The gut-wrenching fear that flooded the dark of Mateo’s stare. She didn’t understand how any of this was happening.

She closed her eyes.

The rumbling stopped, and the music went quiet. Paige turned to find that the grand staircase to the second floor was now completely cleared of debris, banister lights shining at full beam. Even though she hadn’t been there, Paige was sure this was what the lobby had looked like the day the seniors arrived. It shone so bright it briefly distracted Paige from the fact that her hand was empty.

Her hand was empty.

Paige pivoted and found herself alone in the now-pristine resort lobby. Mateo and Caleb were gone.

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Nine

Paige stood there in the lonely lobby.

She blinked at the empty space that Mateo and Caleb had occupied only seconds earlier and tried to wrap her head around what could possibly have happened to them. The buddy system was a little difficult when people could vanish in the space between breaths. She hadn't even heard them leave.

How had she lost control so quickly?

A little trickle of the despair she'd heard in Caleb's voice crept into her. She considered dropping to the floor and lying down until someone came to find her. Until someone else figured this out and hauled her back to safety. But she'd survived every horrific thing thrown at her thus far—drownings and breakups and dead moms and all the rest. What was a missing door and an incorrect date and a batch of vanishing friends? She had chiseled herself into a person who was brave and logical and persistent. She didn't have time to be afraid of things that seemed impossible. There was an explanation for everything.

She needed to find that main office.

On a second glance, she saw there were actually two rooms listed as offices on the Kaleidoscope map: an admin office on the first floor, just behind the reception desk, and the main office on the fourth. One of the two of them would have an emergency plan. Maybe getting out of the Kaleidoscope would be as easy as that.

Paige found her way behind the reception desk and, unsurprisingly, located no working phones. A handful of guest maps were scattered on the floor, apparently swept from the desk, and Paige gathered them up. They were identical to the one she already had, but she stuffed a handful into her tote bag anyway. When she threw open the door behind the desk, though, she was immediately presented with a problem.

Where the map said she would see an office, Paige saw a hallway.

An open archway led to a short alcove with three plain wooden doors, a sheeny velvet armchair the color of deep water, and a framed photo of the Kaleidoscope's ribbon-cutting ceremony. When Paige stepped into the alcove, she found another hallway crooked like a finger, stretching at least another hundred feet before opening to a near-black room at the end. When Paige squinted, she could make out the gemlike gleam of midnight-blue tiles covering the floor and walls of that final room. Flashes of pink shimmered fluidly against the tiles. *Light bouncing from water*, she thought. *A swimming pool?*

She didn't like the idea of that.

But she didn't have time for the confusion of this mysterious hallway and the missing admin office. There was an ice machine (completely empty of ice, Paige noted) propped in front of the third door like a barricade, and above the barricade, emblazoned in red neon, were the four letters she'd been looking for: EXIT.

It might not match the map, but the sooner she was outside, the sooner she could ask questions.

She shoved the ice machine out of the way and stepped through the door when a rush fell through her, like she'd moved her leg forward only to find she'd taken a step back. When her senses returned, she found she was not, in fact, on the white sand beach of Kaleidoscope Key. Instead, she stood in a hallway again, this one with gold-flecked beige wallpaper and carpet plush enough to sink into. The only door in this hallway was an unassuming, unlabeled door at the very end.

She turned and opened the door she'd come through and found a chrome-faced chef's kitchen where the passage to the lobby had been. It was all she could do to blink at the new foreign room. Maybe she was dreaming.

Paige sucked in a breath and slapped herself across the face.

The chef's kitchen was still there. The gold-flecked hallway was still there. And Paige's cheek really, really stung. This was not a dream.

"Okay," Paige said in an exhale. "*Okay.*"

Promptly, she sank to the floor.

It was just that, since the beginning, this had been the hill she was ready to die on. She'd told KJ for years that nothing supernatural happened in the Kaleidoscope. But as she fished her fingers through the carpet, lightly touching the threshold between rooms, she struggled to come up with any

reasonable explanations. Maybe an extremely skilled cleaning crew could have the place looking like new again, but to make rooms manifest where they weren't before? To make people disappear in the blink of an eye?

The surreality of having a core belief—a *worldview*—dismantled so quickly was dizzying. But there was no denying something beyond the scope of human ability was happening in the Kaleidoscope. That, or they'd all inhaled whatever toxic fumes killed the seniors, and this was all a premortem hallucination. She wasn't sure which was worse.

The idea came over her in a rush. *The vents.*

Paige shot back to her feet and studied the walls. The most popular theory about what had happened to the seniors revolved around toxic gas in the ventilation system, though building inspections never turned up any evidence. The only problem was, between the gold hallway and the chef's kitchen, there wasn't an air vent in sight.

Highly illegal, but given the metaphysical state the resort seemed to be in, staying up to code was probably not a priority.

She wove through the shiny appliances in the kitchen and found another door on the other side. Although she doubted there would be vents in the next room either, she threw the door open and prayed. What waited on the other side wasn't a room, though; it was an empty elevator shaft.

Warm air gushed from the dark space, whipping through her hair and the hem of her sundress. Almost silently, an empty elevator slid into place from above, followed by a cheery *ding*. Its carpet was deep green and its walls were lined with mirrors.

There was something strange about her reflection in the mirrors. The basic elements of her were the same—the deeply regrettable sundress and the chin-length blond hair dangling limp at her jaw—but her eyes were wrong. Too tired, reddened, swollen . . .

In the hallway, the ceiling lights began to flicker.

The elevator let out another soft *ding*. Maybe it was the fumes, but it seemed almost impatient.

The elevators are not your friend. KJ's voice rang in her ears. *Wherever they decide to take you is not a place you want to go.*

Paige took a resolute step back, then another. As tempting as it was to take a shortcut to the fourth floor, she needed to come up with an actual strategy. She kept backing away from the elevator until she was out of the kitchen, then shut the door behind her and decided not to check if it had

changed again. She slapped her map of the Kaleidoscope on the floor and produced a pen from her bag. Maybe the rooms insisted on presenting themselves out of order, but if she explored enough, she would find an office. She just needed to check off the rooms she'd already seen.

Lobby? *Check.* Kitchen? *Check.*

The methodical way of tackling this was a relief. *This* was manageable. She gathered herself, took a deep breath, and carried on down the gold hall.

At first, she found a windowless bedroom with no actual beds, just a flickering table lamp abandoned on the floor. Then she stumbled into a computer room packed with mismatched desk chairs. Next: what appeared to be a massive indoor jungle gym with foam floors and walls. A gym and computer room were listed on the map, but the versions here felt wrong. She couldn't quite recall the way the rooms looked in the old pictures, but there was nothing familiar here.

Still, she checked them off. Gym? *Check.* Computer room? *Check.*

Deeper, she found rooms that weren't listed on the map: a small arcade with dozens of plinking pinball machines, a fully functional diner painted in vibrant teal and coral with gleaming chrome accents, a darkly serene salon with earthy wooden walls and potted bamboo, a bowling alley complete with TV screens that bounced the Kaleidoscope's logo from one corner of the frame to the other.

Gone was the debris and decay they'd found when they first entered. The farther she crawled into the Kaleidoscope, the more it came alive. She found hallways brightly lit with pink and carpets so clean someone must have *just* vacuumed. The Kaleidoscope that existed now, one way or another, was very much not abandoned.

When her exhaustion began to burn, Paige slumped on the soft floor of a rosy hallway devoid of furniture, arms and legs splayed out. It was hard to say if she'd been at this for an hour or a day. She wondered how long it had been since she was separated from Caleb and Mateo.

Maybe it was the fact that she hadn't spoken to anyone, maybe it was the lack of a phone to check the time, maybe it was the fact that she couldn't shut the lights off to rest her eyes, or maybe it was the way her mind clunked over the ridged gears of itself, trying to make sense of this nightmare, but she wished KJ were with her. She wished they were lying on the floor, inches apart, pink light burning into them. KJ would pose her wild theory about the resort being an infinite labyrinth for them to run around in

like rats, and Paige would shoot her down. She would cry logic until her throat was sore, but eventually, she would have to tell KJ she was right.

She would rather admit it than spiral into madness here on her own.

Before she could pass out, something broke the silence of the resort. It began quietly, a soft growl like a nervous dog from several rooms away. Paige opened her eyes, but didn't stir. The noise swelled, now more like overburdened pipes than an animal, and it was closer. Much closer.

She sat up. "Hello?"

The moment she spoke, the noise grew even louder. It was throaty and gurgling. For one quivering second, Paige was sure that anyone who came around the corner in the next moment—if it was a person at all—would kill her.

So she ran.

Abandoning the illusion of being able to map this place, Paige darted between rooms and hallways, breath wheezing and feet pounding against tile and carpet. Sweat dampened her hair against the back of her neck and wet the fabric of her sundress, but for once, looking put together was her absolute last priority. If she listened closely, she was sure there were footsteps right behind her. Faster than hers, maybe. Gaining on her if she stopped for even a breath.

The thought of seeing Caleb or Mateo or even KJ trailing after her didn't lessen her fear. It was Caleb's idea to come, and Mateo had easily agreed. They must have known what would be lying in wait, and they must have lured Paige into it. And if KJ had really been here for a month, who knew what she was hiding. No, Paige needed to be wary of them all. As she flung herself through bedrooms and lounges and cantinas, she became sure of one thing: There was no one in this resort she could trust.

The footsteps behind her grew so loud she could hear nothing else. In one desperate motion, she dove through a door to her right, skidding her knees on a long stretch of velvety red carpet. A quick glance over her shoulder told her that she'd toppled into some kind of movie theater.

Whoever was chasing her would only be a second behind. There was no time to hesitate. She found a collection of black stanchion poles near the projection booth and grabbed them one by one, propping them beneath the door's push bar. The only thing that mattered was putting something—*anything*—between her and the rest of the resort. Between her and death.

Once she finished jamming the last stanchion pole against the door, she

waited for her stalker to make impact. Seconds passed, Paige's breath ragged and her pulse stuttering. Nothing happened. If they were waiting for her to let her guard down and remove the barricade, they would be waiting a long time.

Paige slumped to the carpet. Adrenaline fizzled in her veins until she felt almost calm again. The sweat on her arms cooled, and her breath went heavy and full.

As soon as she regained her footing, her panic felt . . . silly? Not just silly; it felt incomprehensible. Had she actually heard footsteps chasing after her? And wasn't half the point of this exploration to find someone else? Minutes earlier, running away had felt like her only option. Now that she was barricaded in the theater and completely alone, it felt like an obvious mistake.

Before she could undo the barricade, the brassy lights that lined the aisle to the screen dimmed, and with a click, the projector came to life. Blocky pink letters swept across the screen like a shooting star: A KALEIDOSCOPE ORIGINAL FILM. Beneath the letters, a simple countdown timer began at 3, then 2, and then 1.

Paige shuffled back against the door before the footage even began.

What appeared on the screen, which should have been playing *absolutely nothing*, was a room in the resort that somewhat resembled a school cafeteria. Pink-and-white linoleum made a checkerboard of the floor, the room itself noncommittally furnished with wide round dining tables and cushioned green chairs. A boy cowered beneath one of the tables, shivering with his arms wrapped around himself. He made a strange half-hummed, half-sung noise as he rocked back and forth. Paige thought she recognized him. Was this live footage from somewhere in the resort? The video itself didn't look grainy with time. In fact, Paige thought, if she reached for the screen it looked like she might be able to step right into the cafeteria with him.

A crashing sound startled her from her daze. It startled the boy, too, who immediately stopped his humming to grab a kitchen knife stashed beside his leg. Snot dribbled down his lip, and the longer Paige studied him, the more she was sure he was crying. Across the cafeteria, another group of teen boys burst into the room.

Paige did recognize them. At least, she recognized the boy leading them: Rudy McCarthy, captain of the Ripley football team, whom KJ had circled

as a suspect on the list of Ripley Memorial seniors. The week before senior night, a rumor had spread that Rudy was going to hunt down a teammate who looked too suggestively at his girlfriend and “end him.” It was a weak theory, but there were few suspects who made any sense.

Which meant this was not live footage.

And every single person in the clip would die in this resort the same night.

On screen, Rudy cupped his hands around his mouth and called out, “If anyone’s in here, come on out. No one’s gonna do anything to you. We’re just gonna stick together, okay?”

Another of the boys wedged his way into the room wielding a long metal bar. *A rod from one of the closets*, Paige thought. He gave the cafeteria a quick scan and narrowed his eyes. “Before that noise happens again—I know everyone’s acting real weird out there. Let’s team up and—”

Before he could finish, a noise growled through the cafeteria, bouncing from the linoleum until the whole space was drowning in the echo. It was the same noise Paige had heard earlier. Even now, it sent a chill skittering through her veins. The boys in the doorway clapped their hands over their ears and dropped to the floor.

But the boy under the table didn’t block out the noise. If he’d been even mildly tempted by the idea of banding together with the others, that thought died the moment he heard the sound. His grip on the knife tightened; his jaw went square and knuckles turned white. Even from a distance, the look in his eyes was familiar. So familiar it made Paige’s breath stop short. The fear that coursed through him now was the same fear that had her barricading the door to the theater. Paige understood, only a second before the boy sprang from his hiding place, what he was going to do.

The boys in the doorway, with their ears covered and eyes closed, didn’t have time to react.

The scared boy plunged his knife into Rudy’s neck first.

Paige screamed, squirming back against the barricaded door. A spurt of blood burst from Rudy’s neck before he realized he was dying. He collapsed to the ground as the scared boy tore out his knife and sank it into the shoulder of the next, letting loose a feral scream. As he did, the remaining boys in the doorway tackled him to the ground. Vicious and wild-eyed, they brought their fists and knees against him. The groaning noise continued, and the boys became a blur of fists and screams. Both the

boy on the ground and the ones attacking him had the same look in their eyes: life-or-death, mindless panic.

Whether or not it was real, Paige needed the footage off.

She crawled toward the projection booth, her chest too tight to breathe. Was she having a panic attack? This was *not* the time.

With sweating, fumbling fingers, she hauled herself up into the beam of light from the projector. The boys' screams had shifted into a chorus, and she needed it to stop. She didn't care how. Even if she had to rip the projector from the booth, she needed the screaming to stop.

Before she could get her hands on it, the theater went silent.

Paige prayed that when she turned around she would find the screen blank again. She prayed that, for the first time since she was separated from the boys, she would have a moment to breathe.

Instead, when she turned, a new video was playing in complete silence. This wasn't footage from the Kaleidoscope at all. It was a distant shot of a lonely highway at night, sleek and empty. A small swampy embankment fell away at its shoulder, and trekking through the muck, there was KJ. A silent scream erupted from her open mouth as she waded into the black water. Headlights beamed against the velvet night, illuminating a darkness that spread in the water. Paige recognized this footage.

If she couldn't breathe before, she was suffocating now.

The scene flickered for a nanosecond into something else: a black screen and a single line of text.

I WAS THERE EVEN IF YOU DIDN'T LOOK

Panic burst in Paige's chest, but as quickly as it rose, the screen went black and an incredible weight came over her. Her limbs went heavy, and her eyes drooped shut. She clung to the nearest theater seat, desperate to stay awake, but it did nothing to break her fall. She collapsed back to the carpeted theater floor and the world melted away.

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When Casey wakes, her world is different. *Again*.

Saul and Claudia's room is gone, replaced by a hallway full of garbled noise. Her body is slick with sweat, her breath is short, her limbs burn. Has she been running? The back of her skull lolls against something solid, and voices stab through the haze. Shouting voices, drenched in shapeless panic.

"Show me your arm," a girl says, voice low and even. Jade. "Are you bleeding?"

"I don't know," another girl cries, her voice shrill and razor edged with fear. This one is Kendra. "What happened? Did she . . . oh my god, did she fucking *stab* me?"

Casey's eyes open in an exhausted flutter to Jade cradling Kendra's arm. In the warm light, a river of blood spills from a wound gouged into the meat of Kendra's upper arm. Mascara streaks her cheeks and her hands shake. For reasons she can't fathom, Casey is briefly sure that Tess is the one who did this.

"Case?"

Tess's voice comes from inches away, startling Casey back to life. She hovers nervously at Casey's side, curled almost like a shield to protect her from the other girls. Her eyes are wet with tears, and Casey begins to suspect she was out for more than a few seconds again.

"Where am I?" she asks. "What . . . what happened?"

"You fainted," Tess says gently. "But listen, we gotta find someone. Claudia—"

"—is possessed," Kendra hisses. "She completely freaked. Told us to get out of her room. And then she *stabbed* me."

"It's because of that ritual you did," Jade adds without taking her eyes off Kendra's wound. This is clearly aimed at Tess. "It put a demon in her or something. She was fine before that."

"Bullshit," Tess protests. "Spells aren't real."

"You were the one who made it all Satanic. You started the blood stuff with your hand. She didn't tell you to do that as part of the spell." Jade turns

her dark glare on Tess's wound. "What did you do?"

The others must have turned on Tess while she was passed out, Casey realizes. For someone who makes a habit of filling up every room she's in, it's strange to see Tess look so small.

"I didn't do anything," Tess breathes, leaning away from Casey. "It was a kid's game. Maybe you should be more focused on the fact that your best friend just flew off the handle because she saw a little blood."

"Where's Saul?" Casey asks, still trying to get her head on straight. "Sorry, I've been getting a little confused. I'm having a hard time, uh . . ."

"Saul stayed with her," Jade says, apparently giving up on helping Kendra's weeping wound. She throws her hands up in defeat. "He kicked *us* out. Even though Claudia's the one trying to kill us."

"You don't think he was protecting us from her?" Tess suggests. "Let's just take a breath, okay? We'll find someone to take care of Kendra's arm and then—"

As she speaks, a figure rounds the corner. It's Mr. Gregory again, camera swapped for a clipboard with a pencil attached by string. His stride is casual and disinterested, completely oblivious to the panic radiating from their small group. Casey isn't sure why she thought the chaos that came over Claudia would be everywhere.

"Mr. Gregory," Tess calls out, pushing herself to her feet. "We need help!"

Mr. Gregory's gaze flicks up from the clipboard and locks on them. He studies Tess, then Casey, then Jade and Kendra before he finally registers the problem. In an instant, Mr. Gregory appears at Kendra's side, tossing his clipboard to the carpet. "What happened?"

"It's Claudia," Kendra cries. "Our mirror broke, and then she stabbed me with it! She's still in our room with Saul!"

Mr. Gregory blinks. "Claudia Ramirez?"

Kendra and Jade nod in unison.

"Is she bleeding to death?" Jade asks. "I can't make it stop."

For a moment, Mr. Gregory is speechless. It's clear he came into the night expecting nothing but noise complaints and confiscation of illegal substances. Stabbings and feral students seem beyond his depth. Still, he steels his jaw and collects his clipboard, scanning a page before huffing out a calming breath.

"Okay, let's not panic, girls. There's an infirmary off the lobby." He

drapes Kendra's arm over his shoulder and motions to the hallway ahead. "Let's get you fixed up, and then we'll get Claudia sorted out. Is that okay?"

Mr. Gregory pulls a walkie-talkie from his belt and mutters into it about Claudia's room. With that, Kendra, Jade, and Mr. Gregory begin hobbling toward safety as a unit.

Tess waves a hand in front of Casey's face, eyes wide. "Good morning? Can you walk?"

"I don't know," Casey says. She eyes the nearest bedroom door and presses her palm to her brow. "I'm being serious, Tess. I don't remember what happened with Claudia. Did I pass out before it even started?"

"I was a little distracted," Tess admits. "Honestly, it's good you didn't see. It was . . . bad. I've never heard someone scream like that."

"Kendra?"

Tess shakes her head. "Claudia. I'm surprised no one came running."

Gingerly, Tess links arms with Casey and pulls her to her feet. The light from the wall sconces stabs, and Casey's head feels as heavy as a bowling ball, but at least she can walk. She leans on Tess's shoulder and forces her breath to even. Has she always been this flimsy? She has a hard time remembering.

Ahead of them, a shriek echoes down the hall.

It happens almost too quickly to comprehend. One moment there are three people in the hallway—Mr. Gregory with Kendra propped on his shoulder and Jade trailing dutifully behind them—and the next, there are four. Mr. Gregory is upright, and then in a blink, he's on the ground. The assailant is mostly a blur, but for a second, she looks back at Casey and Tess and recognition strikes. A girl they've known since freshman year. Melody, maybe. She'd been Casey's fill-in lab partner for a dissection once.

Now she brings her fist down at Mr. Gregory's face with a feral scream.

The hall erupts into chaos, and this time, Casey is wide awake. Jade makes a half attempt at pulling Melody off Mr. Gregory before she gives up. She grabs Kendra instead, dashing left toward another hallway.

"What the hell . . ." Tess breathes. She takes Casey's arm and jerks her upward as Mr. Gregory screams. "Case, we gotta go. *Move*."

But she can't. Casey watches as Melody smashes her fist to Mr. Gregory's face again. He finally gains enough sense to throw his arms up, trying to block the force of her swings, but it isn't enough. A crack

reverberates off the narrow walls as Mr. Gregory's arm breaks. Finally, Casey spots the chunky plastic of a resort hair dryer tight in Melody's grip. The next swing sends a splatter of blood across the carpet.

"He's dead."

Casey's voice comes out numb. She knows it without proof, knows it deeper than bone. It's like dropping a stone down a well and waiting for the eventual splash. The reality of it—of watching a girl she knows beat their teacher to death with a hair dryer—doesn't make an impact. She stares at the carnage, and it's like she's falling.

She's never seen someone die before. She feels positive of that, but even as she watches the blood pooling in the carpet, even as she comes to understand that the man she just watched helping Kendra toward the lobby is gone, the only thing that scares her is how little she feels it.

Apparently satisfied with her work, Melody rises from Mr. Gregory's body and wipes her arm across her face. Then, she turns to Casey.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" Melody calls out, voice ragged. Her eyes go wide with . . . fear? Shakily, she adds, "Stay away from me!"

It takes Casey too long to realize that in the moments she spent fixated on the violence, Tess has vanished. Casey finds her on the other side of Melody, halfway around the corner in Kendra and Jade's footsteps. Wisps of her hair stick to her temples, and her fists are clenched in fear. "Case, *run*!"

And then she disappears around the corner.

Tess *left* her. In a way, the shock doesn't reach her. She's never seen a corpse, and the mass of skin and blood left in Melody's wake doesn't look like a body. Mr. Gregory was only just taking their picture. He was only just helping them to the infirmary.

This must be a nightmare.

Melody's pale face is smeared with blood, flecks dripping from her hair and fingertips. But there's no anger in her eyes. There's only wide-eyed, bloodshot fear. She looks at Casey like she's facing down a bear.

"I won't let you hurt me," she cries, poised to charge. "Leave me *alone*!"

The absolute absurdity catches Casey off guard. Leave *her* alone? Melody's the one soaked in blood, standing over the body of someone she just killed. Melody's on the attack, not the other way around.

But that doesn't matter to Melody. She sprints, giving Casey only a millisecond to react. She scrambles to her feet and veers around the nearest

corner, wishing she were half as good at track as Tess is. Melody skids a few steps in the wrong direction and collides with a wall somewhere behind Casey, giving her another few seconds in the lead.

The moment she finds more bedrooms, Casey smacks her palms to the wood of one of the doors, loosing a wordless scream. Someone *has* to help her. The whole resort can't devolve into madness this fast.

Confused shouts ring out around her, but Casey doesn't look back. She sprints to a door at the end of the hallway and rams her hip into the push bar.

Instead of the Kaleidoscope lobby, Casey catches a glimpse of dark blue tile. She detects the faint sting of chlorine in the air. Then she's under water.

Briefly, she lingers in the warm flush of pool water. Sounds swirl, shapeless, above her. But Melody can't get her underwater, can she? At least she can't kill her the same way she killed Mr. Gregory. Not even the hissing pool filters can block out the wet, crushing echo of his screams still ringing in her ears.

Again, the otherworldly sense of familiarity comes over her. Did she jump into this pool earlier tonight? The soft pink lights are comforting, and she's sure she's already felt the chlorine in her eyes a thousand times. If this is all a nightmare, she wants very badly to wake up.

The water breaks above her, and hands are hooked under her armpits.

Casey thrashes against her unseen attacker, jabbing with elbows and heels as hard as she can. But the stranger doesn't relent. Instead, they haul her toward the surface one kick at a time, bursting out of the water with one final thrust. Casey's lungs flood with air.

Gasping, she's hauled like a caught fish onto the tile. She waits for the impact of plastic to her face.

It doesn't come.

Once the chlorine in her eyes clears, she realizes that Melody isn't hovering over her. The copper that crowds her vision is unmistakable. Casey springs up, throwing her arms around her savior's neck.

"Casey," Summer breathes, posture going rigid. "Why were you in the pool? What happened? I heard screaming. Where's Tess?"

"Summer," Casey whispers. "Everyone here is going to die."

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Ten

When she woke, Paige was lying on something soft, cheek sinking in while the rest of her body blossomed into one big ache. It took her a moment to remember what she'd been doing before. She hadn't passed out after too many hours at the campus library or an evening spent walking the piers back in Miami. She was sore because she was at the Kaleidoscope, lost, and . . .

Her eyes crept open to the plastic backs of theater seats. The flat expanse of the screen was now powered down and no longer waterboarding her with horrific images. She saw, hovering just above her, the stringy ends of raven hair about to tickle her nose.

She wasn't resting on a pillow; she was lying with her cheek pressed to the soft cushion of KJ's thigh.

Paige bolted upright.

KJ didn't look at her when she said, "Take it easy."

"How did you get in here?" Paige glanced over her shoulder and found her barricade still intact. "And how . . . how long have I been asleep?"

KJ shrugged. She had a piece of paper tight in her grip. It took Paige a moment to recognize it. The map of the resort—*her* map of the resort—with half the rooms crossed out in black ink. Her bag was open on the floor, thoroughly searched.

Paige's cheeks burned hot. "You went through my stuff?"

KJ snorted. "Well, it's mostly *my* stuff. Which I forgive you for, though I was really wishing I had the yearbook. I'm a mess, I can't believe how much I forgot at home."

"Sure . . ." Paige murmured, still dazed. Things had been so hostile in their mothers' room, but the KJ next to her was infinitely more upbeat. She was happier than Paige had seen in a long time, even in the years before they split.

"Did you mark this map yesterday?"

Yesterday felt like an arbitrary term, and KJ's lack of answer on how long Paige had been asleep didn't help. "Yeah, but I got a little . . ." Paige pressed the heels of her hands to her eyes. She wasn't sure what was more surreal: trying to explain what had happened to her, or talking to KJ this casually. "I gave up."

"The rooms don't make sense," KJ said with a sigh, handing back the map. "I tried the same thing at first."

"Pause," Paige said, turning to face KJ. "You need to help me understand what's going on. I have a million questions."

"I assumed."

"When did you get here?"

"According to you, I got here a month ago," KJ said. "So it's May now?"

Paige narrowed her eyes.

"You mean *why* did I come here," KJ corrected, as if Paige cared even slightly about wording, given the circumstances. "You won't believe me, but I actually only came here to burn it down. Once I got in here to light the match, it . . . yeah."

"Are we literally walled in?" Paige asked. "I mean, the rooms I'm seeing aren't even in the planned additions. Where did it all come from?"

KJ shrugged again.

"And where does it end?" Paige continued. "Have you tried . . . I don't know, breaking through the walls?"

"Oh yeah, a while ago," KJ mused. "I used some kitchen stuff to start carving a hole but it took forever. Fell asleep, and when I woke up, everything I did was gone. Like the wall healed."

Paige shook her head. "But with two of us, someone could keep—"

"Nope," KJ cut in. "I did it again without falling asleep. When I finally broke through, there was just another room on the other side."

"Then you weren't at the edge," Paige insisted. "I know the Kaleidoscope is massive, but there's an edge somewhere. There has to be."

"How long do you want to spend trying to find it?"

"I already spent hours walking," Paige groaned. "Maybe longer. I have no idea how long it's been since it ate my phone."

"I wouldn't try to track it," KJ said. "Rooms or time."

"What does that *mean*?"

"It means that you said I've been here for a month, but I feel like it's

been way longer. And I've tried just about every way to map this thing out, but it doesn't work like that. Whatever you do to understand it, it'll change. You remember Churro?"

Paige recalled KJ's childhood hamster, a tiny creature with a brown-and-white coat and a twitchy little nose who used to nibble on her fingers. She especially recalled one very sad morning when Paige arrived at the Collinses' house to find all of Churro's things gone. He'd been packed up and given to one of Tess's coworkers at the supermarket. A pet was another thing Tess couldn't handle, and another small joy KJ had to give up too soon so her mother could stay afloat. The memory was sour on the back of Paige's tongue.

"You remember when we used to play that game with him?" KJ asked, picking at the skin under her thumbnail. "We'd hold him up and have him jump down our hands like stairs? It was only our four hands, but we could just keep swapping them under him forever. Even if he kept jumping toward the ground, he was never gonna reach it."

"Wow," Paige said. "We were assholes."

"Correct," KJ said, and Paige was sure she saw a hint of a smile. "And now we're Churro. Doesn't matter how far you walk or how many rooms you see. There's always more."

"But . . . *how*?"

KJ's smile flattened. "You don't want me to say what I think."

"Is this your mom's demon thing?" Paige asked, trying her best to stamp out the incredulous tone she wanted to use. "Don't tell me . . . was it true all along?"

KJ shot her a glare. "You've looked around. What's your rational, logically consistent explanation for a totally normal building turning into a maze with no windows or exits?"

"Fumes."

"Fumes with no vents?"

"I'm not saying this isn't . . . impossible," Paige conceded. This "admitting you're wrong" experience was proving to be very annoying. It was made more annoying by the fact that KJ wasn't gloating. She sounded *excited* about it, like they were back in Miami spitballing theories out of boredom. This whole thing would be simpler if she would just be terrible. At least Paige had prepared for that. "It's just . . . where are Caleb and Mateo? We heard this weird music, then they were gone."

KJ pressed her palm to her forehead. “*That* was the other thing. Elevators, evil noise, exits, and the *jingle*.”

Paige’s eyes widened. “Excuse me?”

“Before you tried to leave. I warned you about all the rules I could remember, but I forgot the jingle. That one means everything shuffles. I think Mateo and Caleb are probably fine. They’ll have ended up somewhere else.” She leaned back, resting her head against the theater wall. “They’ll probably pass out soon, too.”

“Pass out?”

“Either they won’t realize how tired they are or the resort will scare them so bad they drop,” KJ said. “It won’t hurt them. But it might freak them out.”

After the horrifying movie, it was as though her body had powered down against the wishes of her brain. She didn’t like the idea that she of all people could be “scared so bad she dropped.” She straightened.

“Okay . . .” Paige narrowed her eyes. “It’s sounding like you know a lot about how this works. But Caleb and Mateo don’t know anything, and they’re alone.”

“I’d know if they were dead, and I promise they’re not.”

“You’d know?”

“If I tell you how, will you be nice about it?” KJ asked, one dark brow raised. “It’s more ‘demon things.’”

Reluctantly, Paige drew her fingers across her lips, zipping them shut.

“I think when you’ve been here awhile, you start to kind of . . . *feel* what’s going on. Like whatever this thing is, you start to get in tune with it. After a while, it was easier to find my way around. I have a good sense of what’s happening anywhere in the resort. That’s how I knew the minute you guys showed up and I can feel that the guys are still here. I felt when you were out cold. I didn’t expect you to pick the theater as a home base.”

Paige shifted, straightening her sundress over her shoulders. She deserved a medal for the restraint it took to let KJ finish her explanation. Because there was no way on earth a month in here gave KJ a sixth sense. Even if KJ fully believed what she was saying, it just meant someone had fooled her. It just meant the fumes were more potent than she realized. This was exactly what Paige was afraid would happen if they stopped being friends.

“This isn’t a home base,” Paige protested. “I didn’t even mean to end up

here. I was looking for the admin office. Then I heard this weird noise, and . . .”

“. . . you got scared?” KJ asked.

The panic that washed over her in the immediate wake of the growling seemed too big to describe as “being scared.” But it was fear, wasn’t it? She was afraid of seeing any of her friends, afraid of what they might do to her if they found her, and afraid to learn why they might have led her here in the first place.

“If it happens again, just try to remember it’s not, like . . .” KJ pondered, eyes finding the ceiling. “Whatever you think is happening, it isn’t. If you hide and wait the panic out, nothing will happen.”

Paige meant to come up with something sarcastic to say in response. Instead, she only managed, “I don’t like this.”

KJ’s sympathetic frown was genuine. She took the map back and tapped the fourth-floor office. “This is the office you’re trying to find?”

Paige groaned. “*Yes*, that one. Honestly, I haven’t even seen a way to get up one floor, let alone four. I almost got on an elevator at one point, but then I remembered you said something about the elevators. We’re still on the first floor, aren’t we?”

“I’m shocked you listened,” KJ said. “So I know I told you to ditch the idea of time and maps . . .”

Paige sighed. “There is no fourth floor?”

“I’d say ditch the idea of floors completely.”

Paige planted her face in her palms. It was too much to comprehend. Even in a hundred years, she doubted she could properly get her head around all of this. She had to be experiencing a horrible nightmare or some kind of karmic justice. Maybe she was the Ebenezer Scrooge of this haunted resort. Maybe, when she’d successfully changed her ways and apologized to all the people she loved for having a bad attitude and a bit of a superiority complex, she would wake up and find herself back in her dorm room a week before finals, Miami and this island thousands of miles away. Or better yet, maybe she would find herself dangling over the edge of KJ’s bed a year ago, and she would have the foresight to keep her from ever coming here.

“Chin up,” KJ said. Her expression was a little mischievous and a little relieved, and despite the situation, Paige found herself hanging on to a sliver of hope. KJ gathered herself and stood, motioning for Paige to do the

same. “There’s no fourth floor, but I can get you to that office.”

Paige blinked.

KJ tapped her temple, tilting a little so her hair spilled darkly over her shoulder. “I told you, the longer you’re here, the more you get it. I know that office. I’ve been in it.”

There was no way it was that easy.

“I’m guessing you have some magic spell to transport us?” Paige glanced over her shoulder at the stanchion barricade. “That would explain how you got in here without using the door.”

“I didn’t use *that* door,” KJ said.

She trotted down the nearest aisle until she was level with the screen. Casually, she dug her arm behind it and produced a long thin metal rod. Even with her long arms and athlete’s coordination, it took her a moment to line the rod up with the ceiling perfectly. Then, with a pop, she hooked the rod under a ceiling latch and pulled open a crawlspace entry from high overhead. With a few more tugs, she managed to grip the bottom rung of a ladder and pull it within reach.

She blew a wisp of hair from her eyes in a proud huff.

“I’m editing the rule I gave you earlier,” KJ said, a little breathless. “Every room has an exit, even if it’s somewhere you wouldn’t look.”

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Eleven

At first, Paige took comfort in the fact that climbing a ladder meant they had moved, generally, *up*. Maybe there were no legitimate floors in this resort-esque maze, but if the office was meant to be approximately four stories above her, ascending was a move in the right direction.

As quickly as hope was dangled in front of her, though, it was snatched away. They reached the top of the ladder only to face an immediate staircase back down. KJ started the descent without hesitation, but Paige paused.

"Is this not leading us exactly where we came from?"

KJ laughed. "Not even close."

Paige swallowed a rude comment and followed. After all, before she had passed out in the theater, she'd seen things she couldn't begin to explain. At least, that she couldn't explain without the possibility that she was genuinely losing her mind. This had to come down to toxic fumes or bad water or mass hysteria from exhaustion. There was nothing else it could be.

But the longer Paige and KJ wandered, the more the illusion felt immovably, horrifically real. And just like their childhood game with Churro, it was unending.

The rooms were just as disorienting and random as before, but KJ didn't need to open doors methodically or check things off a map. When she got turned around, she would simply pause mid-stride, close her eyes, and press her palm to the nearest wall. When she opened her eyes, her dark gaze would gain an unsettling clarity.

Intuition or not, Paige couldn't fathom how someone could make sense of the Kaleidoscope. But if KJ's sixth sense for the floor plan wasn't real, it meant Paige was very possibly following her deeper into the madness with no escape.

So, for now, Paige chose to (at least somewhat) believe.

"I can't believe you're actually just . . . here," Paige said finally, bursting

through the quiet of their exploration. “Part of me keeps thinking we’ll turn a corner and you’ll disappear.”

“That would be a reversal.”

Paige narrowed her eyes. It was hard to tell if it was meant as a joke, or if this was KJ presenting a wound. She redirected, eager to talk about something more productive than the fiery end of their friendship. “Who’s Summer Hayes?”

Briefly, KJ was quiet. “You saw the yearbook?”

Paige nodded.

“You recognized her, right?” KJ asked. “I’m sure you and Mateo already swapped stories.”

It took Paige a moment to understand that KJ meant the redhead from her childhood dreams. It was true, the pictures of Summer in the yearbook were strangely familiar, but she hardly remembered her dreams. There was something else about what KJ said that bothered her, though.

“What does Mateo have to do with it?”

KJ arched a brow. “He didn’t ask you about the dreams?”

“He did not,” Paige said, fighting back the bitterness in her voice. “What did he tell you?”

KJ waved a hand. “Forget it.”

It was confirmation that there was something weird happening between the two of them. Something they wouldn’t loop Paige in to. Irritation sparked hot in her cheeks, but she held her tongue. KJ’s friendships were her own business; Paige had decided to stop being involved. Mateo, on the other hand, needed to explain himself.

They reached the end of an ever-narrowing hallway, shimmying to the other side before KJ spoke again. “Summer was friends with our moms, I think. She died here and . . . you won’t believe me, but I think some of the people who died here are still here. I’ve seen her.”

Paige stopped. “*Seen* her?”

KJ shrugged. “She’s never done anything to me. I don’t even know if she *can* do anything. She’s always just kind of . . . there.”

“Like a ghost?”

“Maybe.”

KJ was right; Paige found that a little difficult to believe.

They walked for what felt like hours, pushing through heavy doors that sighed open, changing directions every few rooms as KJ saw fit. There was

something coy about the way the Kaleidoscope presented itself to them, teasing out the journey. Like it only bared the parts it wanted to.

Paige was not encouraged by her newfound instinct to refer to the resort as a living thing.

“It’s being weird,” KJ groaned as they pushed their way into a pink-drenched nail salon. “I’ve been to that office a million times by accident. The one time I want to go on purpose, it’s hiding.”

“Do you feel like we’re getting closer?”

“Yes and no.”

They stepped through a door on the other end of the nail salon and found themselves in a pink-and-white-checkered cafeteria. Paige’s stomach clenched in recognition.

“This is—”

“Oh right, you were in the theater,” KJ said.

So KJ had seen the Rudy McCarthy footage, too. Paige swallowed, unsure of how to describe the carnage of it. Until now, she had been sure the clip was just a horrible dream. She’d been exhausted.

“Did they actually kill each other?”

KJ considered. “I think so.”

“But . . . why?”

“You remember how you felt when you heard that noise?”

“That’s the current theory?” Paige asked. “A weird noise made that kid kill everyone?”

KJ’s expression went stony. “You’ll see more movies. He’s not the only one who was killing.”

Goose bumps pricked up all along Paige’s arms. She flexed and unflexed her hands at her sides; all illusions she’d had about being different from the seniors in 2001 were beginning to slip through her fingers.

They left the cafeteria in silence, and as KJ walked, Paige watched her back. KJ was more relaxed than she had been when they found her in the closet, but there was still something off. The KJ she knew a year ago wasn’t cagey. She didn’t keep secrets or shudder away answers, and she didn’t speak in cryptic riddles. Maybe it was because they weren’t friends anymore, but even a few feet behind KJ, Paige felt miles from her.

Finally, KJ led them to the door at the end of a narrow hallway and hooked her fingers through the brass handle. When she pulled it open, Paige’s shoulders slumped in relief. It was a barren room, hardly more than

a desk and a file cabinet and an aggressively green potted plant, but it was an office.

“Jackpot,” KJ said, voice colored with relief. “Knock yourself out.”

Paige made a beeline for the desk, immediately pulling open the top drawer, only to find it empty. “You’ve been here. Did you find anything?”

KJ shook her head. “You can give it a shot, though,” she said, plopping into an armchair jammed like a barricade against the office’s exit door.

When Paige turned back to face the door they’d entered through, it was changed. She didn’t have time to process that.

“You’ve figured out some of the . . . what would you call them?” Paige asked. “Rules?”

Through a yawn, KJ said, “Yeah, but those are survival rules. Stuff to make your time easier. By the point I figured that stuff out, I already knew I was stuck. Permanently.”

Eventually, Paige would need to interrogate her more about the logistics of her month here. It was long, sure, but KJ spoke about it like a prison sentence. Like she’d been here her whole life already. They would have years to discuss it once they were outside, though. Which wouldn’t happen until she found something useful.

While Paige tore through drawers of useless paperwork and empty notepads, she tossed everything she’d already read onto the floor. One by one, KJ wadded up the discards into weapons she could aim at the ceiling. Even if they weren’t talking, there was an uncanny familiarity to it. Like a long night spent watching TV until their eyes threatened to cave in, having KJ there with her was calming.

Assuming she was done, Paige slid away from the desk only to spot an unassuming stapled packet resting atop a defunct printer. The very first page of it was a printed email dated June 1999. Almost two years before the massacre. The sender and recipient information were missing, but the name at the top of the email told her everything she needed to know. There was only one Michael who would have had access to this office: Michael Dettweiler, Caleb’s grandfather.

Hey Michael,

Other than one newspaper story from a hundred years ago, I’m not finding anything. My guys double- and triple-checked the land and it seems completely fine. Superstition doesn’t show

up on a building inspection, but in my experience, locals will hear one nasty thing and start adding to it for fun. Who knows how much of this “haunted island” nonsense even has roots. I once had a loose floorboard turn into a demon infestation by word of mouth alone.

I tell you this because if the locals have decided this island is a no go, you’re going to have a tough battle changing their minds. My advice? Ignore them. This is a resort, not a community center. You don’t need the local population to buy what you’re selling, and what’s a tourist going to know about dead guys and bad feelings?

The guys are ready to break ground on this. It’s going to be a slam dunk.

Just say the word,
Greg

“Hey,” Paige said cautiously. “Did you see this when you looked around?”

KJ glanced up from her mess of paper balls. Apparently somewhat interested, she pushed herself up from her seat to inspect the packet. Maybe there *were* new things to find.

Paige flipped the email over and studied its blank underside. This was from long before senior night; in fact, based on the nature of the email, she imagined it was from before the Kaleidoscope had even been built. Paige shuffled the first email to the back of the pile, but if she’d expected any answers from Michael’s response, she was sorely disappointed. There was only a single sentence in the body of the email:

Hey Greg,

Can you send me that newspaper clipping?

Thanks,
Michael

The next email, Greg’s response, was attached to a photocopy of a seemingly ancient newspaper clipping. Delicately, Paige peeled the

newspaper away and handed it to KJ. She studied Greg's explanation, ravenous for *something* concrete.

> Hey Michael,
>
> Here's what I found. It's up to you if you think this even happened on the island you're looking to buy. It's all pretty vague.
>
> I should tell you that a few folks have also gone missing in the area over the years. Again, no way of knowing if they were anywhere near your island, but if you're already digging for potential issues, you might want to look into them. My guess is drunks falling off their boats.
>
> Take a few days to do your research, and let me know what you want to do next.
>
> Thanks,
> Greg

"Well, as long as *Greg* thinks it's safe," Paige mused.

She glanced at KJ, who was clearly not listening. Her eyes raked over the minuscule text of the newspaper, knuckle drawn to her lips in thought. Another thing KJ hadn't found in her solo explorations. Despite herself, Paige was proud she'd thought to come here. She was proud she'd taken the time to inspect every piece of paper in the room. She'd only been here a day (or at least, what felt like a day), and she'd found something new. Judging by the hunger in KJ's stare, she'd found something new *and* helpful.

"What does it say?" she asked.

Without a word, KJ handed her the article.

> **SURVIVOR SAYS ENTIRE CREW LOST TO MADNESS**
>
> THESE MEN DID NOT BEHAVE AS MEN, BUT ANIMALS, HE SAYS
>
> **MIAMI, May 12**—Unclear is the fate of more than a dozen men aboard the USS *Kaleidoscope* following news of its grounding on an unnamed island south of Long Sound. The men, who were en route to the Caribbean for exercise and patrol, unexpectedly ran ashore on the

evening of May 10, 1910, where they made radio contact with land and waited for rescue.

When a rescue ship arrived on the island, however, only Chief Petty Officer George W. Rogers was alive to greet them. The rest of the men assigned to the USS *Kaleidoscope*—68 in total—were present, but deceased. Early autopsies suggest no foul play or issues with starvation or wildlife. “Sun exposure is the most likely culprit behind such a tremendous loss of life,” said Dr. James Mahler, Miami PD.

“It called us to shore,” said Officer Rogers when interviewed. “We could not have steered into open water if we’d wanted to. But we did not want to.” Officer Rogers has suggested that, in the time spent waiting for rescue, the crew of the USS *Kaleidoscope* behaved violently toward one another, resulting in many of the deaths. His story continued in much graphic detail that will not be repeated here. Despite Rogers’s tales of torn limbs and devoured flesh, all men aboard the USS *Kaleidoscope* seem to have died peacefully and without fear. In addition to Rogers’s claims of violence, the naval officer reported that he and the other grounded men waited months for rescue, not days. “Sunstroke and dehydration will cast magic in even the strongest man’s mind,” Dr. Mahler reiterated when presented with Rogers’s story.

Regardless of uncertain facts, the fate of the USS *Kaleidoscope* is a great loss to our community and to the security of our nation, and precautions must always be taken when navigating shallow waters. Medical examiners will continue to update the families on possible causes of death for the 68 deceased, and Chief Petty Officer Rogers will resume his service following psychiatric evaluation.

Underneath the newspaper clipping was one final email to Greg from Michael Dettweiler.

Greg,

I don’t see any confirmation that we’re looking at the same island. Don’t mention anything to the guys, and let’s keep that article under wraps.

It’s a green light on my end.

Thanks,
Michael

P.S. Kaleidoscope isn’t a bad name for a resort, is it?

“Unbelievable,” Paige scoffed, looking over the emails one more time. “I don’t blame him for doubting the magic stuff, but naming the resort after the shipwreck is pretty tacky. When we find Caleb, we need to ask if there were any problems when they built the resort.”

It wasn’t an escape route or an emergency phone, but it was *something*. There was a potential history of bad happenings on this island. There was a pattern, and Paige was a big fan of patterns. The chaos of the resort had scared her before, but now the mystery had shape. The sailors were called toward the island, trapped briefly while waiting for rescue, and then found dead from exposure. Those events felt . . . familiar.

When the quiet of the office stretched on too long, Paige looked up to find KJ’s eyes still trained on the newspaper clipping.

“Hey,” Paige said. “Are you okay?”

“What?” KJ blinked. “Yeah, I’m fine. I just can’t believe I missed this stuff the other times I came through here.”

Paige nodded, but she wasn’t convinced. She scanned the article again, her attention catching on one detail. “It’s interesting. The survivor guy says the crew was stranded for months. Didn’t you say it felt like you’d been here a long time?”

“Yeah.”

“And your mom also said she was here longer than one night.”

KJ nodded.

“So there’s something that makes it seem that way,” Paige concluded, disturbed by KJ’s lack of enthusiasm. If they’d uncovered proof that her mother’s delusions were more than fantasy a year ago, KJ would have framed it and hung it on the wall. “I’m not saying time is actually slowing down. But if all three of you feel that way, then—”

KJ took a resolute step back. Away from Paige.

“I think I need to go somewhere,” she said, pressing her hand to her forehead. “I’m sorry. I’ll come find you in a bit. I just . . .”

She reached for the office door.

“Wait. You can’t leave me here.” Paige looked desperately around the office, her pulse picking up speed. Outside this room, she had no clue where she was going. They were deeper than she could wrap her head around. Without KJ, she would never make it back.

“I have to. I . . .” KJ pressed her hand to the wall. “Go out the other door, walk to the end of the hallway, take the stairs up, and then go through the third door on the left. You’ll be back at the bedrooms.”

“KJ . . .”

“I’ll find you,” KJ promised.

And then, a little wobbly on her legs, she pulled open the door they’d entered through and slipped out. Paige lunged after her, but when she swung the door open, she found a small food kiosk instead of the hallway they’d come from. The resort had changed on her again, and all familiar ground was gone.

So was KJ.

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Twelve

Once she was sure KJ was gone, Paige screamed.

It felt good, actually. She screamed until her throat felt raw and her lungs were tight from exhaustion, until every last ounce of frustration and paranoia was drained from her. Until only the exhaustion was left. KJ had actually, genuinely *left* her.

Paige couldn't fathom what had scared her off.

Once common sense washed over her, she grabbed the nearest piece of paper and wrote down KJ's instructions: OTHER DOOR, END HALLWAY, UP STAIRS, 3RD DOOR LEFT.

She gathered the rest of the paperwork and stuffed it into her bag with the emails. Then she gave the office a final scan and exited through the second door. She could still salvage this investigation. She could still find a way out of here and get the others out with her. Something was deeply wrong with KJ—at this point, Paige was sure *deeply* was an understatement—but she could be saved. If Paige could find the boys and show them the clues she'd uncovered, they could put their heads together and come up with a way out.

Other than the strange implications of the time discrepancy, the more Paige thought about the newspaper story, the more the details nagged. In both the USS *Kaleidoscope* incident and the resort massacre, there were barely any survivors, but the victims hadn't died by physical violence. Despite the brutal murders in the movie earlier, none of the seniors' bodies were found with stab wounds. Come to think of it, her mother's body had been the same. Officials had assumed for a long time that Casey Keller induced her own death somehow, but stacked up against the two massacres, that seemed . . . suspect.

If the clipping was genuinely from May of 1910, the evil here existed long before the Kaleidoscope was built, before it was even conceived, before Michael Dettweiler himself was even a thought in the universe. That

meant the problem wasn't the resort, but the island itself.

And that seemed more difficult to tackle.

KJ's instructions were exactly accurate. At the end of the hall, Paige found a narrow room that housed only an ascending staircase, and at the top of the stairs, a long row of identical doors to her left. When she opened the third one, she stumbled into the exact same hallway she'd started in hours ago.

Behind her, the row of doors was gone, and the Kaleidoscope lobby had taken their place.

It wasn't even worth trying to understand physically.

She *could* walk back to her mother's room and wait like KJ had instructed. But passively waiting was not Paige's favorite way to kill time, and KJ was not currently her favorite person.

Instead, she unearthed a document she'd looked at briefly in the office: a room chart for senior night. And to her surprise, she found three names listed per room, not two. Her mother's name was listed just under Tess Collins's, and under that, a name that gave her pause.

Their third roommate was Summer Hayes.

Another set of names stuck out: Claudia Ramirez, Kendra Mitchell, Jade Carter. Kendra and Jade? It could be nothing, but it was strange to see KJ's first and middle names paired so closely together, and in the same room as Mateo's mother.

On instinct, Paige walked past her mother's room and farther into the resort, clinging to the room guide with both fists.

When she reached room 47, her luck ran out. She opened the door to reveal nothing but a small tiled bathroom, complete with a bucket and mop. If Claudia's old room existed, it was somewhere else in the resort. And if it was somewhere else in the resort, she wouldn't be able to find it without KJ.

She didn't notice the note taped to the door until she closed it behind her.

Paige :)

Went to get breakfast. Come find me!

Take ramp up to eighth-floor mall. Go to end of hall, if there's a bowling alley, go down walkway between lanes 5 and 6 and use staff door, then down escalator, turn right + pass six doors on

left side, open 7th door and you will see me!

If door opens to teal hallway, go straight through to other end, take ramp up to eighth floor, walk toward pawn shop. Before pawn shop, find women's restroom door down hall with drinking fountain and enter. You will see me!

If door opens to swimming pool, don't bother. Go back to room, wait an hour, try again.

Pancakes are so good!

See you soon,
Mateo

At some point in the hours she'd spent with KJ, Mateo had not only found his way back here by himself, but also found a way to navigate consistently. In the time it took Paige to wrap her head around the general rules of this place, Mateo had mastered them.

Paige ground her molars in frustration. There was nothing in the world she hated more than being outsmarted.

With the note in hand, Paige opened the door at the end of the hall and found herself staring at the shiny waxed wood floors of a bowling alley.

To her relief, it was the same bowling alley she'd seen briefly during her first exploration. Twelve lanes, each one overseen by a perfectly square TV screen angled down like a watchful eye. But instead of dancing with the Kaleidoscope's logo like before, now each screen played an identical animation. A cartoonish bowling pin sliding down a fuchsia-lit hallway. As the pin slid, soundless and without any text on the screen, Paige got the creeping feeling that someone had been here recently. That the animation was initiated. She steeled herself, clutched Mateo's note tighter, and stepped inside.

She counted the lanes as she passed, trying not to linger on the eerie emptiness of the place. The untouched bowling balls, glimmering and pearlescent, were colored like candies and perfectly uniform in their chrome racks. The shoe desk, lined with pink-and-green bowling sneakers, was unstaffed. Which Paige supposed she was grateful for, actually.

Still, she couldn't shake the feeling that she needed to tread softly. There were too many corners of the room she couldn't immediately see. An

electricity in the air she couldn’t describe. She found herself sliding quickly to the lacquered walkway between the fifth and sixth lanes, hair on the back of her neck pricking up. Out of paranoia, she decided to walk the rest of the way to the utility door backward, keeping her gaze trained on the rest of the unmoving bowling alley with a knot in her stomach.

Once she was in the dark behind the lanes, she sucked in a breath, pivoted, and yanked open the staff door.

Just like Mateo had said, she found herself presented with doors to her left and right and, directly before her, a downward escalator. An escalator in theory, at least. It was silent and motionless, so Paige considered it more of a staircase. The only thing that kept the escalator in line with the rest of the Kaleidoscope was the utter nonsense of it being here and the strips of pink lights that illuminated it on the way down.

Once Paige’s foot touched the first step, the escalator began moving.

She did not like that.

At the bottom of the escalator, Paige found herself in another hallway—really, whoever had designed the nightmare version of the Kaleidoscope had an overreliance on hallways. Paige ignored the grainy black-and-white stripes of the wallpaper in favor of counting the starkly plain eggshell doors to her left. With each she passed, there was a tingling fear at the back of her mind. She tried to imagine what was on the other side, how many veins of this place were still unexplored, how much farther it could possibly go.

She passed the sixth door, landed squarely in front of the seventh, and exhaled. Mateo said once she opened this door, she would see him. After the nightmare everywhere else, it seemed too simple.

Paige opened the door and was presented immediately with the same diner she’d seen briefly in her first exploration, all coral and aqua and shining. Seated alone in the nearest booth, miraculously, was Mateo.

“How did you find this?” Paige called, flooded with relief.

Mateo spun in his booth at the sound, his angular face briefly painted in raw fear. But once recognition settled in, his shoulders relaxed and an easy smile broke over his face. He stood, beckoning her into the unnamed diner that, just like the escalator moments earlier, didn’t belong in a resort. The decor matched the rest of the Kaleidoscope, though; all the same green-leafed plants that mirrored the blush-colored light in their plasticky sheen.

They were alone here, too, it seemed. It didn’t feel like it.

Paige slid into the booth opposite Mateo, who looked lovingly at a paper

boat of chili cheese fries. Unlike KJ, Mateo didn't seem to be drained of color and life. In the warm light, his skin was a rich coppery brown and his dark hair was as buoyant and springy as Paige had ever seen it. He dug into his fries with the ravenous urgency of a meat-starved wolf, shoveling food into his mouth with no apparent qualms about having an audience.

"Would you consider this a breakfast?" Paige asked, gesturing to the fries.

"I already ate breakfast," Mateo said around a mouthful of food. "Went back, looked to see if you had found my note yet. Now it's lunchtime."

"How long ago did you find the diner?"

Mateo paused before his next bite. "Dunno how long it's been since we got here in the first place."

"That's not an answer."

"Well, we can't really tell time." Mateo shoveled a hearty spoonful of chili into his mouth and swallowed before adding, "Feels like a few hours probably?"

Paige glanced out the other side of the diner, which opened into an ornate archway. Beyond it were four more doors that led to god-knew-where. It was pointless to keep a map, as she'd established with KJ, but her fingers still itched for it. She wanted to create order. She supposed, given his note, that mapping the Kaleidoscope would have to start with Mateo.

"So?" Paige asked. "What happened to you after we got separated?"

Mateo finished his bite of food and considered. "I actually ended up in that bowling alley by the bedrooms. So not that far away. By the way, did you know the bowling alley totally works?"

"I did not."

Paige usually found Mateo's childlike wonder endearing. She even felt vaguely protective of it. But right now, with escape on the line, she didn't particularly appreciate the pauses for bowling and fries. She hadn't forgotten about KJ's comment—*He didn't ask you about the dreams?*—but for now, she kept her comments to herself, leaning her chin on her knuckles to listen more intently.

"I played a few games waiting for someone else to show, but got kind of bored after a while. I started looking around and ran into Caleb."

"You did?"

Mateo's expression soured. "Well, I saw him. But the second he saw *me*, he ran away. I've never seen him run that fast in my whole life."

Paige narrowed her eyes. “Why would he do that?”

Mateo shrugged. “He yelled something. Either ‘I heard you’ or ‘I heard about you.’”

This threw a wrench in her plan. She wanted to question Caleb about what she’d found in the office, but if he’d already completely lost his mind, that would be difficult. Paige ran a hand through her hair and forced herself to remain calm. She added rescuing Caleb from himself to her ever-growing list of things to do.

“Between the two of us, everyone is accounted for, then. I ran into KJ.”

Mateo’s eyes widened. “Oh. Was that . . . are you good?”

Paige cleared her throat and pulled her bag onto the table, carefully extracting the documents she’d snatched from the office. “She helped me get to that fourth-floor office. No phones or emergency exit maps, but I did find some interesting stuff on the history of the island. Sounds like it’s had issues for a long time.”

Mateo wiped his fingers on his napkin and pulled the newspaper clipping into view. He studied with the casual quasi focus of a child reading a birthday card while pretending not to notice the twenty tucked into its crease. In all the years Paige had known him, she’d never considered Mateo a very *serious* person. It was different from the goofiness of Caleb’s demeanor—Mateo liked to keep things surface level. He’d never been particularly interested in the Kaleidoscope, never broken his parents’ house rules, always gotten along with everyone at school, and even managed to remain neutral when Paige and KJ called the friendship quits. She’d made him promise to be normal about everything they found in the Kaleidoscope, but now that they were here, she wished he would take it a *little* more seriously.

“That’s wild,” Mateo said too casually, scooting the paper back toward Paige with his elbow. “You think it’s the same as what happened to our parents?”

“I don’t know what it is,” Paige said. “But it does sound like it. If we can find KJ again—she knows her way around the resort. Like, she *really* knows it. Not that you seem to need help.”

Mateo arched his brow.

“Your note was very helpful.”

“Oh. That.” Mateo wiped his mouth with his wrist. “I try.”

Another nonanswer. Not only was he not telling her about the dreams, he

was being evasive. However vague he could be, Paige could be a thousand times more precise. “How’d you get it down to a science like that? I’ve been in here the same amount of time, and I just figured out the rooms move. You had two different routes for me to take.”

“Whoa,” Mateo chuckled. “Jealous?”

Paige considered. “Yes.”

“I only know how to get between here and the bedrooms. I promise.” After a moment, Mateo’s expression darkened. “Did you say we need to *find* KJ?”

“There’s something wrong with her,” Paige said quietly. She wavered on how much detail to offer, given Mateo’s shady answers. “She . . . I don’t know. I think she’s been here too long. It sounds like Caleb has, too, if he’s running around screaming. The main thing is we need to find a way out.”

“Oh, for sure,” Mateo said.

Again, he sounded too casual.

“Are you okay?” Paige asked, leaning over the table. “Is there something you need to tell me? You seem . . . not scared by any of this.”

“I am. Kind of,” he said in a tone that didn’t convince Paige of anything. “But, like, isn’t this the most amazing thing you’ve ever seen? The resort’s been abandoned for twenty-five years and is still perfect. It has *everything*. I got to go bowling, and I saw an indoor gym with a soccer setup. The food’s great. You even got to go clue searching with KJ. That’s your favorite thing, right?”

Paige was certain she’d need to gather her jaw from the floor. “You forgot about the fact that it won’t let us out.”

“Maybe.”

“Stop whatever you’re doing right now,” Paige snapped. It was like they were back at the Mamanis’ house when she had first moved in, butting heads over bathroom usage. “I can’t tell if you’re doing a bit or if the Kaleidoscope has scrambled your brain.”

Instead of conceding, Mateo looked past Paige, fixing his gaze on the shadows behind her. Paige swung around to follow his line of sight, but the space behind them was empty. After a moment, Mateo blinked. “Yeah. Sorry. I’m not doing anything, I think I just . . . I’ve had a really different experience here so far. That’s all.”

Paige was not convinced. But there was something genuine in Mateo’s eyes now. There was a little of the boy she’d grown up with as a brother,

and as insufferable as he could be, he wouldn't hurt her. The Kaleidoscope was warping their minds in strange ways; Mateo wasn't immune to it either, it seemed.

"What about Caleb?" Paige whispered. "The screaming . . . did it seem like he was hurt?"

"No. Just panicking. You saw him in the lobby," Mateo said, finally clearing his boat of fries. "He was freaking out even before we got separated. But we can go find him and calm him down. KJ, too. It'll be better with the four of us."

"I saw something," Paige said more quietly, leaning over the table so far it began to jab her in the ribs. "On the theater screen. Footage from senior night. Mateo, I saw the seniors *kill* each other."

Mateo put a hand to his chest. "Do you want to kill me?"

"What? No."

"Good," Mateo said. "I don't want to kill you, either."

Paige folded her arms over her chest. Mateo could be a perfect imitation of his father from the right angle. Condescension ran thick in his blood, and it was in full force now. Mateo thought this was some kind of vacation. He hadn't seen that film, and he hadn't felt the bone-deep fear. For reasons unknown, the resort was keeping his stay much more pleasant than hers.

"KJ told me you were having dreams," Paige said finally, voice flat. "Before we got here. Is there a reason you left that out when I asked why you wanted to come?"

Mateo went still.

Paige sat up straight. "Someone needs to start filling me in, or I'm gonna get really, really unpleasant."

"Things got kind of weird after you left. For me, I mean," Mateo said finally. "I started having these dreams. I'd be driving down the highway toward the keys, and I'd stop at this dock and get out. And I'd just get right in the water and swim. It was so trippy. It was like I always knew where I was going . . . I always knew that I was coming here."

Paige's heartbeat tasted like iron on the back of her tongue. All she managed was a soft, breathy "Yeah?"

"I'd get to the resort in the dream and go inside. I don't even know how I knew what it looked like up close. And I knew the way to my mom's room every time. My parents were always just lying on the beds." Mateo's gaze bored into the tabletop. "They wouldn't sit up. They couldn't hear me. And

they were . . . so pale. Not dead, because I could see them breathing, but they couldn't move. They were so weak."

"Then what?" Paige asked.

Mateo nodded. "And then this voice would come on the intercom and tell me my parents needed me. It said they couldn't wake up without me."

There was an eerie familiarity to what Mateo was saying. She hardly remembered her own nightmares, but the marina, the swim, the resort . . . it was the first time she'd heard it from someone else. As far as she knew, even KJ had never had the pleasure. There was only one part he was missing.

"You never saw a redhead in your dreams?" Paige asked.

Mateo's eyes didn't move from the table, but they widened a little in surprise. Under his breath, he said, "Only from a distance. Same as you."

Something wasn't adding up.

"Did you ask your parents about it?"

"I tried," Mateo admitted. "But you know how they are. No Kaleidoscope talk. They wouldn't even let me explain the dreams. Told me to ignore them and focus on Berkeley."

Admittedly, it did sound very much like something the Mamanis would say.

"After they shut me down," Mateo continued, "I went to KJ."

Something nasty and electric rocketed through Paige. "Of course."

"Before you say it's my fault she came here, I didn't tell her to. If she had asked me, I would've told her not to go. I promise."

"I believe you," Paige said. "What happened?"

"She told me you used to have dreams like that, too. A long time ago. Before your mom." Mateo looked sadly at the blacked-out skylights in the hallway. "You never told me, either."

"Yeah," Paige said, adjusting the neckline of her dress. "I didn't tell you because I was trying to forget them. I wasn't following them."

"I *know*," Mateo whined. "Which is why I didn't want to get you involved. KJ . . . I think she was trying not to get obsessed with it all over again, but then I brought up the dreams and—"

"—she went full conspiracy mode?" Paige guessed.

Mateo nodded.

Paige bit the inside of her cheek. For at least a little while, KJ had been trying to amputate the Kaleidoscope from her life. She was trying to do

what Paige had advised. Maybe she was trying to find a way they could be friends again without this place looming over them. And then, before she could truly break free, Mateo showed up and it took root again.

She tried not to resent him for it.

“She helped me,” Mateo said. “At least, she told me all the stuff Tess told her. That the Kaleidoscope has a mind of its own. And that it’s . . . different inside than it is outside. Tess always told KJ that there was a part of her still trapped here. I thought maybe that’s what the dreams were about. My parents needed me to free them. Me and KJ were on the same wavelength about it and I thought everything was fine. Then one day I went to her house, and Tess said she was gone. Said she ran away.”

That was it, then. The moment KJ decided to come to the Kaleidoscope herself. Paige tried not to judge Mateo for waiting this long to say anything. If she’d been in Miami, if she’d caught even a whiff of KJ’s plan forming, this never would have happened.

There was an uneasiness in the air that Paige couldn’t shake, no matter how deep she sank into the booth. The feeling of someone she couldn’t quite see watching her from around a corner.

And then an intercom mounted in the diner sputtered to life, releasing a garbled noise so loud Paige had to clap her hands over her ears. When the noise died down, a familiar voice called out: “They can’t hurt me here. It’s safer.”

Paige grabbed Mateo’s wrist and found that, finally, he was rigid with fear, too. When he met her eyes, they spoke at the same time: “Caleb.”

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By the time Summer urges Casey away from the pool, the resort air has gone thin. Every step is unsteady, the floor tilting under her stumbling gait. Her knees shake as she rams into walls and armchairs and open doorways in each room they cross. Sloshes of pool water leak from her sleeves and squish between her toes. Eventually, Summer wedges herself under Casey's arm, dragging her toward safety.

Through her waterlogged eyes, the very edges of the chaos are just visible. A wall sconce ripped from its socket, leaving the severed cords dangling from a misshapen hole in the plaster. Somewhere out of sight, a girl's scream blisters through the quiet before being suddenly and violently silenced. At the end of the hall ahead, a streak of blood forms a perfect arch across the wall, faintly dripping toward the carpet.

"Summer?" Casey starts.

"Not yet," Summer breathes. "We need to find a place to hide."

The bathroom they stumble into is drenched in violet light, the floor and walls matching in their neat square tiles. Summer moves Casey to the counter and quickly pushes her to a seat. She brushes the hair from Casey's face in a way she is absolutely positive she doesn't deserve, given the circumstances.

"Are you hurt?" Summer asks, peeling more wet hair from Casey's face. "I don't see any blood."

Casey takes Summer's shoulders. "What is happening?"

"I don't know." Summer's gaze turns to the floor. "I heard a really weird noise outside our room, and I hid under the bed. I don't know why. I waited for you guys to come back, but people were screaming. And I knew you and Tess went for snacks."

"You came to look for us?" Casey breathes.

Summer pulls her into a hug. "I'm so happy I found you. I think . . . I think people are dying."

Dying. Of course they are. The sick splash of Mr. Gregory's blood was enough to prove that. If the screams from deeper in the resort are real, Mr.

Gregory was just the beginning. The confusion burns away and panic squeezes Casey's skull.

"We have to leave," Casey says.

Summer's eyes go dark. "I don't think we can."

"What?" Casey wipes a dribble of chlorinated water from the corner of her mouth. "If we move quietly, we can make it back to the . . ."

Even as she speaks, Casey can't quite remember what the entrance looked like. A grand lobby, probably, but she can't picture it. She tries to summon the memory, but instead, all she can recall is picking her way over broken bottles and fallen light fixtures and inches of dust.

"I passed the lobby when I came looking for you," Summer says. "The door is gone. The windows are gone. All the ways out."

"All of them?"

Summer dips a wad of paper towels under the faucet. Tenderly, she dabs the damp paper to Casey's forehead. It's shockingly cold. Refreshingly cold. Did she hit her head at some point? Casey sighs into the touch and the world calms just a little. The counter feels sturdier under her, the lights less drowning and the air less boiling hot.

When Summer pulls the towel away to rewet it, Casey looks her in the face, and for what feels like the first time, she sees the quiet beauty Summer usually hides. Maybe it's the almost drowning and the chasing and the adrenaline flushing from her veins, but Casey leans to Summer's shoulder and sinks into a hug, breathing as deep as she can manage.

"Summer," she starts, "something's wrong with me."

Summer's gaze flicks up.

"It's like I'm coming apart," Casey continues. Her hands curl around the bathroom counter, and she squeezes until she feels the linoleum cut into the creases of her fingers. "Like I'm alive, but I'm barely here. Does that make sense?"

"There's a lot going on," Summer whispers. "Everyone is feeling things that . . . none of us understand what's happening. We're all scared we're gonna die, and—"

"I'm not scared of dying," Casey cuts in. "I'm scared I won't even know it's happening."

Summer's expression wilts a little at that. She glances at the bathroom door again with a frown. "Where's Tess?"

"She's . . ." Casey pauses. It's hardly the time to worry about stupid

friendship things, but the idea of telling Summer that they ditched her feels almost as bad as walking back into the fray. She closes her eyes before she confesses. “She’s with Jade and Kendra. I don’t know where she went.”

Disappointment flashes across Summer’s face. Then her auburn brows knit in concern. “She left you alone?”

“She left us both.”

“Yeah, well . . .” Summer trails off, and it looks briefly like she might cry. When her expression sobers, she says, “I don’t get sad when it happens to me anymore. But I’m sorry it happened to you.”

A hearty thud sounds from somewhere above them. Casey flinches out of Summer’s hands and the temporary feeling of safety fades. There’s an anxious twitch to her fingers and a panic tight in her chest, a cry in the back of her skull warning that the danger isn’t even close to over. It’s hardly begun.

“Do you remember seventh grade?” Summer asks out of the blue, stepping a little away from Casey. She begins checking her own face in the mirror, prodding the skin like she might find some unseen wound. “When Tess’s mom took us to the mall? We got those huge cinnamon rolls at the food court and did a race to see who could eat it fastest. Tess won.”

Casey’s confusion morphs into molten shame.

She knows this story. She knows what it will turn into if Summer keeps telling it. The memory is a lance piercing her through.

“Tess saw those guys at Macy’s and said she wanted to talk to them. But there were two of them and three of us. She didn’t want to scare them off, so you guys told me to wait at the bookstore until you were done.”

“Summer . . .” Casey starts, though she hardly knows what to say in her defense. “I’m—”

“It’s okay,” Summer says sadly. “I waited there for a long time, but you guys never came back. I had to have the guy at the counter call my mom to come pick me up. Did you know that?”

Casey shakes her head.

“When we got to school and I asked what happened, you said those guys were boring and Tess decided to leave. You said you just . . . forgot.”

“I’m sorry.”

Summer stops her self-inspection and sets her towel on the counter with the gentle precision of a surgeon. Collected, she adds, “You said it was Tess who decided to go talk to them without me. And Tess who decided to leave

without me. But I heard you guys in the bathroom before. When she said it, you just agreed."

Casey's eyes widen.

"It was years ago," Summer says. "It's fine. I knew you were lying when you said you were leaving for snacks, but what was I supposed to do? I used to sit there in my room while you guys were out, and I wondered, if we could do the last few years again, would you be different? If I never told you guys about . . . about being different. If I was funnier, or dressed more like Claudia, maybe you would stay with me instead. I know Tess would always choose to leave me, but I wondered if you would, too."

"Summer . . ." Casey says. "It's not about—"

"I know it's not about the lesbian thing. I know that." She puts her face in her hands like she's too embarrassed to show the weight of her sadness. "It's just been . . . I've been lonely without you guys. And I'm sorry Tess made you lonely, too."

Casey flings her arms around Summer's neck and pulls her into another hug. She smells like a hundred memories at once: like arcade pizza and grass stains and every soda from the fountain combined in one cup. She's never been a good enough friend to Summer, not once in her life. Maybe it's because Tess is the friend she deserves, or because being friends with Tess is easier. But here, intertwined and breathing and alive, Casey wonders if the two of them might be able to survive this together.

Just as Summer relaxes into the hug, something crashes outside.

Summer staggers back, pulling Casey from the counter as someone bursts into the bathroom. A boy Casey barely recognizes. Evan, maybe? Or Ethan? His heavy brown curls are damp with sweat, and his eyes are wide with panic. His breath comes out in a rasp.

"*Hide*."

Silently, Summer grabs Casey by the wrist and tugs her into the closest toilet stall. They close the door and tangle together, feet up on the toilet seat, as Evan does the same in the next stall. Just as quiet returns, there's a crash at the door again.

Casey folds herself into Summer, pressing her face into Summer's shoulder, and sickness bubbles in her stomach. There is a part of her that already knows what will happen next.

"I know you're in here," a girl's voice bellows. "I saw you come this way."

Without hesitation, the unknown assailant kicks in Evan's stall door.

"Please, Carmen," he says, voice quivering. "Please. I didn't mean to hurt you. I didn't say that stuff about what we did. I never told anyone. I swear."

"Then who did?" Carmen, presumably, snarls. "The only people at your place were me and you."

Evan has no defense. "I'm sorry."

"Your friends made fun of me for a *year*," Carmen rasps. "And now they're going to come for me. They're going to try to kill me. You'd kill me, too, if you got the chance."

"Carmen, I would *never* . . ."

A silent moment passes between them, breath heavy and tension thick. Summer wraps her arms tighter around Casey and seals them together, holding her breath.

The sound begins softly. A dull roar that builds through distant hallways until it fills the whole bathroom. Summer's grip on Casey tightens painfully, and the sound stirs in Casey, too. It's a fear so deep that she considers dashing out of the stall and into the resort proper just to get away. It's a fear that defies common sense, that blots out everything else.

But it changes something even deeper in Evan and Carmen.

"*Get away from me!*" Evan screams, lunging from his hiding place.

At first, there's the sound of flesh against flesh. A punch, then a kick, then a fall to the floor, then Evan's scream. For a moment, it seems like it's over as quickly as it started. Then the sound of heavy scraping fills the bathroom as Carmen pulls the lid of the toilet tank from its resting place.

Static races through Casey's veins, and she buries herself in Summer, but it does nothing to block the noise of the first wet, cracking blow.

Summer flinches, gripping Casey so hard it crushes. Casey's breath comes out in a whimper, but there's no point in covering her ears. There's no point in trying to block it out. There's nowhere to hide from the inescapable, suffocating violence of it.

Carmen brings the ceramic lid down until the cracking becomes squelching, until it's all replaced by the sound of ceramic meeting the tile floor over and over. At first, she doesn't make a noise as she beats him. Then she begins to scream with each blow. Long after Evan's protests quiet, long after the tank lid shatters, Carmen keeps swinging, huffing with animalistic rage, groaning in what sounds like pain.

When she’s done, she drops the tank lid at her feet and walks to the center of the restroom, panting. Quieter than Casey expects, she whispers, “Is it safe?”

Summer clutches Casey tighter, sliding a palm over Casey’s mouth to keep her quiet. Carmen drops to her knees and, under the stall door, Casey can just make out hands lying flat to the tile, glistening and red. Carmen chokes, but nothing comes up.

To herself, she mutters, “He hurt me first. It’s okay . . . it’s okay now. He hurt me first.”

As if on cue, the gurgling noise resumes, filling the bathroom with its echo. Carmen’s hands ball into fists against the tile, and she screams again. For half a second, Casey is sure the mindless rage will turn her on them next. That Carmen will kick in the door with that primal scream and beat them to nothing. That here, wrapped up in Summer’s arms, will be the end. *The end.* As if anything in the Kaleidoscope ends.

Casey isn’t entirely sure where that thought comes from.

Instead of attacking them, Carmen leaps to her feet and crashes back out of the bathroom. Her scream fades as she runs deeper into the resort, the noise quieting until only the hissing sound of Summer’s desperate breath remains.

Casey tries to duck from Summer’s arms, but Summer squeezes her tighter. Her breath comes out in a shudder, and her fingers press hard into the back of Casey’s neck, curling so that her fingernails begin to stab.

“Summer . . . ?” Casey whimpers.

She angles, pushes, tries to look into Summer’s face. For once, Summer’s expression is unrecognizable. Not fear like Evan, but something more violent. Her eyes are squeezed shut so tight the skin folds, and her lips are parted to show her teeth grinding together in quiet fury. She digs her fingers harder into Casey, and for a split second, it seems like she might *mean* for it to hurt.

“*Summer*,” Casey cries, shoving her away.

Casey collapses off the toilet onto the floor as Summer blinks out of her daze. Her eyes are watery and wide like she’s just woken up. She flexes her hands and climbs off the toilet, taking slow, measured breaths. “Sorry. I’m sorry. I don’t know what . . .”

If there’s more to her thought, she doesn’t manage to say it.

When they open the stall door, Casey expects a mess of blood and

carnage. She expects a smear where Evan used to be. She expects the kind of thing she'll never be able to burn from her mind.

But on the other side of the door, the floor is empty. The tiles gleam back, almost coy in their perfection. There is no body, no blood, no guts. If she hadn't heard the whole thing, Casey might think it didn't happen.

"Where . . . ?"

"I don't know," Summer says, but her skin has gone pale and her eyes are half lidded like she might faint. Shakily, she says, "I need to . . . I'll check that the coast is clear. You stay here."

"But—"

"*Please*," Summer says, before hobbling into the hallway.

With Summer gone, the quiet of the bathroom sets in and Casey exhales. A sensation washes over her again, like water flushing from her ears. She studies the clean tile floor, and she tries to make sense of it.

She turns to the bathroom mirror and gasps.

The girl looking back at her is wrong. Every detail of her is wrong, from the wrinkled sundress to the short crop of hair to the heavy bags under her brown eyes. She's an approximation of Casey, right in some of the broadest strokes but different in the details. Her eyes are stormier than Casey's, and her lips part in what looks like surprise.

Casey reaches for the glass, presses her fingertips to it, and her reflection doesn't follow. Fear jolts through her, but she doesn't pull away. She waits until, slowly, her reflection moves. Until it presses hesitant fingertips to the glass, too.

For a split second, Casey feels the warmth of someone else's skin meeting hers.

Then the power goes out.

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Thirteen

Just before the power went out, Paige noticed something wrong with her reflection.

She'd only stopped in the bathroom for a second to relieve herself, splash some water across her face, and get it together before they continued looking for Caleb. She'd just slapped a palmful of cold water over her eyes when she saw it: not her own reflection looking back at her, but her mother's. And not her mother as she had been when she died—exhausted and skittish in equal measure. It was a version of her that Paige had never met, though it was often the version that felt more real. The one in the documentaries and articles, with the glow of youth in her cheeks and hair that looked like white gold. The one with answers hidden somewhere in her unknowable eyes, and the one Paige wished she could talk to just one more time.

Twenty-four hours ago, Paige would have assumed seeing the teenage ghost of her mother meant she'd lost her mind.

As the bathroom fluorescents flickered back to life, there was a knock at the door.

Paige opened it to find Mateo on the other side. He slumped in relief, taking her by the hand to tug her back into the intensely bright corridor they'd been searching.

"Thank god," Mateo said, glancing into the bathroom behind her. "I thought maybe things got switched around again."

"No, I just . . ." She looked back at the mirror, and a twinge of anxiety roiled in her stomach. "I thought I saw something weird. Let's keep going."

So far, they'd found no sign of Caleb, and his voice hadn't played again from the speakers. It wasn't reassuring.

The corridor they walked through looked like an old mall in Miami that Paige and her mother had visited once, a mall long since torn down. Paige suspected it was somehow connected to the mall and pawn shop Mateo had

mentioned in his note. Hundreds of doors attached to this single hub, and she imagined all the disparate pieces of the Kaleidoscope that linked themselves to it. Once she and Mateo found the others, this would be a good place to regroup.

If this physics-defying nightmare *had* to exist, she would at least learn how to use it.

At first, Paige thought this corridor might have an opening to the sky. There was a brilliant white light that filtered in from above them, illuminating the corridor under its eye while cutting long shadows beneath everything else. But just like every other room in this maze, the light from above was only an ungodly fluorescent beam. A false sun there to taunt her. There was no glimpse of the world outside, only doors leading to more doors that ultimately led to nowhere.

“If we don’t find him soon, we need to find KJ,” Paige said. “She’ll know where he is. Apparently, the longer you’re here, the more you start to understand the way around. I’m hoping we’re out of here long before we start . . . changing.”

Mateo’s pace slowed, and he tucked his hands into his pockets. “What do you mean?”

“I mean I don’t want to be here long enough to get magic powers.”

“No, what do you mean about starting to understand?” Mateo clarified.

“KJ told me about it,” Paige said, fighting to keep her pace even with Mateo’s. “She knows where everything is.”

“Oh. That’s helpful.” There was a nervous quiver to Mateo’s voice that Paige didn’t miss. “Like she memorized the rooms?”

“I think that’s part of it, but she also knows where we are.” Paige huffed a bit of hair from her face. “She was the one who found me. She knew I passed out, and she knew you and Caleb were still fine.”

Mateo scratched his chin. “I wish we could do that.”

Paige narrowed her eyes.

“What? I’m tired of walking. I wish we could just go straight to Caleb,” Mateo whined.

“You don’t seem very surprised by the supernatural abilities,” Paige said. She stopped and waited for Mateo to meet her gaze. “Look me in the eyes. Is something wrong? Or are you just being unnaturally chill?”

Mateo held eye contact for longer than Paige expected. When she searched his face, she found the same boy she’d known her whole life.

Mateo was weekends spent on the bleachers with a book, watching him play soccer. He was intel on the boys in her class until she'd decided, resolutely, that she was not interested in them. Mateo was the normal she felt herself grappling for, the surface she was desperate to break.

He was the same now as he'd always been. She had to believe that.

"I promised you I'd be normal," Mateo said. "I'm trying."

"You're right. I'm sorry," Paige conceded. "If KJ can actually find her way around, she could come find us. She could find Caleb. She's choosing not to."

Whatever the scope of KJ's strange abilities, finding Caleb was the priority. He'd already been a mess in the lobby, but there was something different about the voice that came over the intercom. There was a ragged edge to it, primal and scared and furious all at once. She hoped it was just the resort toying with his mind.

"What happened with you guys?" Mateo asked eventually, when they'd checked nearly a hundred doors for signs of Caleb. He added, "If you feel like saying."

"Me and KJ?"

Mateo nodded.

Paige chewed on her thoughts, because she didn't really know how to explain. It was just . . . *difficult* to have KJ without taking on the demons that came with her. The Kaleidoscope, the conspiracy theories, the constant justifications for Tess's complete emotional abandonment. There was a time when Paige had been good at holding KJ close while keeping the rest at arm's length. But that was before the drowning.

Paige sucked in a breath. "It was this."

"The resort?"

"The resort, Tess's issues, KJ's obsession with Tess's issues," Paige clarified, motioning to the wide-open space around them. "She just . . . she doesn't know how to get rid of stuff that hurts her. She doesn't even recognize it's hurting her. I love her, but I can't keep watching her self-destruct over nothing. I can't . . . babysit her through this stuff she inflicts on herself."

Mateo considered. "That sounds very healthy of you."

He did not sound complimentary. It wasn't the first time Paige had been accused of being pragmatic to a fault, but Mateo of all people should have understood the importance of keeping yourself safe. His parents were

masters at protecting their own peace. They didn't engage with Tess—in fact, they hardly engaged with Jason—and they kept the shadows of their trauma out of sight and out of mind. They'd *made* something of their lives, and after her mother's death, they'd given Paige a chance to make something of her life, too.

She wanted to be like them. She tried to be like them. But maybe her heart was just too soft.

"Obviously not, because at the first sign she was in danger, I came to the Kaleidoscope. Which I said I would never do," Paige said. "Maybe I don't know how to let go of things, either."

"Well, I hope you guys go back to being obsessed with each other." Mateo offered her a playful smile. "I feel like a child of divorce."

Paige nearly choked. Even though they'd lived together almost their whole lives, maybe Mateo still didn't understand her. If he did, he would know she and KJ were never like that.

As they kept searching, Paige willed the fire to leave her cheeks. She and KJ were never *like that*, but when her new friends in Michigan talked about the people they'd dated in high school, Paige only had stories about KJ. When night stretched on long and lonely, and Paige ached for someone to talk to, it was KJ she had to avoid calling. When she dreamed, she saw the spill of KJ's hair as liquid and black as blood dripping over the side of her bed. It was never *like that*, but for as long as Paige had known what love was, she supposed she'd been a little in love with KJ.

Love was a double-edged sword, though. Saul told her once that one of her mother's greatest flaws was her love for Tess Collins. He said no matter how bad Tess got, Casey always believed she was good deep down. Love was the reason her mother couldn't let go of Tess, of the Kaleidoscope, of the pain. Love that ignored everything else was a poison, and Tess only ever sucked the life out of Paige's mother. Paige supposed some things followed you through the blood.

Which was why she never should have come here. She was supposed to cut it off clean. No room to regrow.

All at once, the dozens of intercoms in the hallway came to life. Each of them played Caleb's voice, and he sounded more frantic than before. More ragged and more desperate. More afraid. "They're coming, aren't they? They're going to find me."

Paige met Mateo's eyes, and they picked up the pace. The intercoms sent

the sound in a wave, leading them past a stretch of storefronts. When Caleb's voice cut out overhead, the sound of his labored breathing continued. They followed the sound through a series of doorways and halls that eventually dumped them in an industrial kitchen. It was the same kitchen she'd seen the first day, which sent a shiver down her spine. The moment the door closed behind them, the breathing stopped. Whatever was urging them forward ended here.

Mateo began throwing open cupboards left and right. He crashed through a door on the far end of the kitchen only to find an empty hallway on the other side. For all of his relaxed platitudes earlier, he was frantic now.

But Paige's gaze found the massive walk-in freezer door along the back wall. Without a word, she undid the latch on the freezer and slid it open.

Just inside, someone had stacked boxes upon boxes across the entrance. A panicked madman's barricade. By the time Paige pulled the first box away from the pile, Mateo was at her side, straining to see over the wall. She handed him another box, and silently, they removed the bricks of the barricade one by one. Maybe there would be nothing on the other side. Maybe this was another senseless Kaleidoscope anomaly.

But dread pooled in her, cold and heavy.

"Oh," Mateo said, and it was half a gag.

He stumbled back, coughing into his elbow, but Paige needed to see it herself. She pulled away one more box at eye level and, on the other side, she found what had made Mateo gag. A boy with an achingly familiar face, skin gone gray as he leaned against the back wall. His camera was still tight in his grip, eyes open wide and trained lifelessly on his carefully constructed barricade.

It was Caleb.

And he was dead.

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When the power skitters back to life, Casey finds herself in yet another foreign hallway, broken from her daze by the sound of three distinct *thump*s against wood.

Summer puts her hands on her hips and stares at an unremarkable bedroom door. If they aren't in the bathroom anymore, it means she's lost more time. When she closes her eyes and tries to remember why they're here, it floats back to her: Summer taking her wrist and leading her out of the bathroom, whispering, *If anyone knows what's happening here, it's the guy whose dad built it.* The part that's missing is how they got here. It's like someone else piloted her body while she was asleep.

"I know you're in there," Summer calls, smacking her palm to the door again. She leans close to the peephole. "Let us in, Jason."

"*Not* interested!" Jason's muffled voice barely makes it through the door. "Get lost."

"Jason, you have to help us," Summer tries. "No one can get out to get help. Everyone's acting like murderers!"

"Why would *I* be able to help?" Jason asks.

"You need to help us talk to your dad!"

Summer glances over her shoulder, checking Casey's face. She wants approval. Did she ask something? Casey simply stares at Summer until she slumps in defeat. With a huff, she tells Jason, "If you don't let us in, we're breaking the door down."

"Summer," Casey says.

"Someone could walk by any second," Summer hisses. "Even if he doesn't know anything, he should be helping. He should be doing something to stop this. He could at least give us somewhere to hide."

When Jason doesn't respond, Summer's hands ball into fists.

"Get ready!"

"Good luck with that!" Jason calls back.

Summer sucks in a breath and rams her shoulder into the center of the door. It bends, but it doesn't break. It doesn't even splinter. There's a

resolute *thud* to it, like the door is feet thick.

Another memory sweeps over Casey, dizzying and misplaced. *Is it from now? Or later?* Jason stacking furniture against his door, breath rapid and wheezing, sweat beading at his brow. Or maybe it's a boy who looks like Jason with arms full of boxes. The two images twist into one until Casey is forced to squeeze her eyes shut for relief. She puts a hand on Summer's shoulder and says quietly, "He made a barricade."

Summer meets her eyes with a question.

"Did you wall yourself in there?" she asks through the door. When he doesn't answer, she adds, "You're a coward, Dettweiler."

"I can hear you all out there," Jason spits. "I'm not letting anyone in. I don't know if you'll freak out. I don't trust anyone—*especially* not you."

"Me?"

"I heard about you."

At that, Summer goes still. The fog that clouds Casey's mind finally burns away a little, allowing anger to take its place. Jason Dettweiler may have *heard* about Summer, but he doesn't know a thing about her. He's never laced fingers with hers on sandy summer days, he hasn't raided the last handful of pizza rolls from the freezer with her, he hasn't snuck out to the roller rink during adult hours with her. He doesn't have the right to say anything about her. None of them do.

It strikes Casey suddenly—how much more of herself she remembers when she's with Summer.

"Jason," Casey says, moving in front of Summer. "You need to . . . you should apologize to her. And let us in."

"Casey . . ." Summer whispers, tentatively touching Casey's elbow from behind.

"Is that Casey Keller?" Jason calls out.

Under any other circumstances, Casey wouldn't pay Jason Dettweiler a scrap of attention. He's a greasy, weaselly type, and the few friends he has are the same. The only thing that makes Jason different from the other creeps at school is his father. Michael Dettweiler owns half the resorts in Miami, a fact that is impossible not to know if you've spent more than ten minutes in Jason's vicinity. There's an untouchable quality to Jason: the nice cars, the designer clothes, the new technology. A tangible assurance that he's better than everyone else. For too long, he's used the perceived superiority as a substitute for a real personality.

But he’s in here, too. No different from anyone else.

“People are dying,” Casey says, smacking her fist on the door. “*Actually* dying.”

“I know,” Jason calls out. “Who do you think they’re gonna want to kill the most? I own the building they’re all trapped in. They’re gonna . . . they’re gonna put my head on a spike.”

“No one else is around right now,” Summer says, looking the hallway up and down. She even leans over the banister to check the space below. “We’re the only ones here.”

“Someone will come,” Jason cries, voice a little closer to the door. “I’m not going out there. I’m waiting for rescue.”

When Casey closes her eyes, flashes of the night burn in her memory. Mr. Gregory’s blood painting the walls, the sound of Evan’s screams coming to a sudden wet end. The absolute violence of it searing away everything else. She hardly knows if Evan was the boy’s name, hardly remembers the shape of Mr. Gregory’s face. The brutality is all she can think of, and Jason probably hasn’t had to see a drop of it from inside his sheltered suite. He’s barricaded his door and covered his ears as the rest of the class rips each other apart.

“Don’t you have any friends?” Casey snaps, mouth close to the wood. “Isn’t there anyone you care about? When rescue comes, do you want to be the only person left?”

For a moment, there’s only quiet.

“Because I don’t,” Casey huffs.

Casey waits in the silence as Summer’s gaze burns at the back of her skull, but Jason doesn’t respond. Eventually, there’s a scuffle on the other side of the door, and then it groans partially open. Half of Jason’s face appears through the crack and he looks like he’s, for lack of a better term, melting. He’s gone sallow and slick with sweat, his wheat-blond scruff of hair tangled and unkempt. He’s been pulling at it, maybe, and it’s heartening to know he’s been at least a *little* conflicted about hiding.

Just inside, the standard armchair and end tables sit askew, up to their ankles in water. It spills into the hallway from inside the room, buckling over the toes of Casey’s sneakers, and she staggers back. In Jason’s bathroom, pillows and blankets jut up from his Jacuzzi tub. He’s been using it as some kind of trench. Or, given the apparent flooding problem, as a lifeboat.

“Why is your room so . . . wet?” Casey asks.

“I think it’s trying to flush me out,” Jason breathes. “But I’m not going out there. I mean it. I only opened the door because I want to talk a little quieter.”

“Who’s trying to flush you out?” Casey asks.

Jason gestures to the space around them. “I don’t know. Whatever’s causing all of this.”

“Your dad has to know something, right?” Summer asks. “I mean, was the resort like this when you visited before?”

“No way,” Jason says. “My dad has nothing to do with this.”

“There weren’t any problems when they were building it?” Casey asks. “I don’t know if you noticed, but all the windows are gone. And there’s no front door.”

“It’s not our fault!” Jason hisses, and it briefly seems like he might slam the door in their faces. Once he calms himself, he adds, “It was perfect. Everything about it was perfect. The land was cheap, the construction was fast, the state approved everything . . . My dad talks about it all the time. He says the island was *meant* to have a resort on it. It was like it wanted one.”

“That didn’t sound creepy to you?” Summer asks.

But the phrasing of it casts a weight over Casey. A heaviness blanketing her skull, forcing the whole room to dip. The way he speaks about what the resort *wants* . . . it’s like a line in a song she’s heard a thousand times. She presses fingertips to her temples, but the memory is deep underwater, and only the faintest outline of it is left in the dark.

“Why does it want us to be scared?” Casey finally asks, and she’s not sure if it’s anywhere near the right question. “Whatever is doing this to us. It plays those sounds, and we get scared. Why?”

“I think the bigger question is *how*,” Summer says. “I think we can figure out the motivations later, right? There’s something about the sound that makes us . . .”

“. . . go into attack mode?” Jason finishes.

“Against each other,” Summer adds.

Jason doesn’t look at her.

For one aching moment, Casey wishes she could burst from whatever drags along in her shadow. It’s been following her all night, first during the class picture, then in Saul and Claudia’s room when the lights went out. It was with her when Mr. Gregory died, and it was there in the bathroom

when she hid with Summer. It comes and goes with her memory, like a tide rushing in only to pull the sand back out with it. Whatever lives in the Kaleidoscope is here again. It's more than just the violence. It wants something from her. It waits now in Jason's room, silent and invisible and impossibly hungry.

With a grumble, the same roar from the bathroom fills the hallway.

On instinct, Casey claps her hands over her ears.

Jason moves in a flash to slam his bedroom door shut, but Summer wedges her hands in before he can vanish. There's a wildness in her eyes and a hard set to her jaw. Just like in the moments after Evan's death in the bathroom, the change in Summer seems almost animal.

Jason opens the door a little, only to slam it on Summer's knuckles in frustration. "Let *go*."

"We need somewhere to hide," Summer snarls through her pain. "Someone's going to—"

From the end of the hall, a new voice cuts through the quiet. A girl's voice, also tinged with panic, screaming, "Did you hear someone over there?"

"*Jason*," Summer cries, wedging her hands further into the gap in the door. "Let us in or we'll die. You can't just—"

With a grunt, Jason slams the door closed as hard as he can on Summer's hands. The scream she lets out is immediate and blistering. Summer rips her hands out of the gap and her knuckles are split and glistening red.

Jason must be back in his tub by the time he finally shouts a pathetic "Sorry," because it comes through the door muffled and weak. Summer meets Casey's eyes as she nurses her injured hands, and Casey's sure they come to the same realization at the same time: Jason has left them alone to die outside his door.

By the time their attackers round the corner, called by the screaming, Summer has morphed from disappointment into panicked rage. Just like Melody and Carmen before her, it's life-or-death panic that makes Summer's shoulders rigid and her eyes wide. She sets her sights on a trio of other seniors at the end of the hall, and she doesn't run away.

Instead, she knocks over the nearest plant, smashing the bulbous ceramic pot under her heel. She reaches into the mess and grabs a shard, turning the pointed end outward. It takes Casey a moment to understand she means to actually fight back. No real weapon, outnumbered, without an athletic bone

in her body.

And Casey knows she should take her hands off her ears and grab something, too. If it's two against three, they might stand a chance. Maybe if she lets the sound fill her up, that animal rage will change her like it does the others. Maybe it will make her fearless and brave like Summer. But all she can see is blood.

As Summer dashes toward their attackers, Casey uncovers her ears and pounds on Jason's door. "At least give us something to use!"

Jason is silent.

The groaning sound—half animal and half mechanical—floods Casey's mind the moment she uncovers her ears, vibrating in the base of her skull. It's all she can hear. She imagines the other seniors closing in on her with their weapons—maybe a knife, maybe a shard of glass, maybe fists—and she tries to picture herself fighting back. But she isn't brave like Summer and she isn't cold like Tess. Maybe, after all her big words, she's a coward like Jason.

Maybe the only thing she can do is run.

Summer collides with the group of other seniors—a boy and two girls. Other seniors, surely, but Casey can't remember ever seeing them in her life. They grab Summer's arms and wrest the ceramic shard from her grip, throwing it over the banister.

"She can't hurt us now!" one of the girls yells.

There's a flash of fear in Summer's eyes as they back her into the railing, and Casey is sure this is where she loses Summer. It's happened over and over and she already regrets it. She already wishes she could be a little braver, a little faster.

Summer pushes back against her attackers, and as she collides with the railing again, it breaks, sending all four bodies plummeting over the edge.

The world moves slowly as Casey runs, like a childhood nightmare come to life. She's almost reached the stairs when the groaning stops and the jingling, cheery music begins. It barrels down the hallway, pleasant and uncanny. Mocking.

If she can just reach the stairs before everything changes, maybe this time will be different.

But the music catches up with her just before she sets foot on the first step. When her sneaker meets the ground, she finds herself facing an impossibly long hallway, wallpapered in buttery yellow like sunlight.

Summer and the others are gone. Jason’s door is gone. The hallway radiates a quiet peace she hasn’t found anywhere else in this nightmare. It smells like summer, like fresh-cut grass and flowers opening to the sky. Faintly, she hears the splash of waves and imagines water hissing over sand.

Somewhere behind her, the skeleton of the Kaleidoscope shifts and changes shape again. When she turns to look back, she finds only a brick wall behind her. The only way is forward.

For the first time since this night began, she is completely alone.

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Fourteen

Paige wasn’t sure how long she stayed crumpled on the floor at the threshold of the freezer, wrapped in Mateo’s arms. She hardly registered that he was holding her at all. Reality came to her first in the way Mateo shook, the quiver of his skin against hers. The boxes Caleb had used to build his barricade were scattered all around them. Paige could hardly raise her eyes from the wreckage to look at the body.

Though the freezer had changed him, the body in front of them was undeniably Caleb. His eyes had gone gray and dull as cement, but she couldn’t help imagining them storm-cloud blue again. They’d never been real friends, but her relationship with Caleb spanned the entire length of her life; memories of him followed her back to the beginning. They surfaced now like a gentle but insistent tap on the shoulder: Caleb helping her finish a Lego set on one of the rare occasions Jason visited her mother; Caleb sending her a candygram her freshman year, making everyone else gasp over her knowing an upperclassman; Caleb being the only Survivor’s Kid to message asking if she would be at the memorial. There was a piece of her life, however small, that was gone now.

A numbness she hadn’t quite gotten rid of was resurfacing in her. She couldn’t get lost in the sadness. It never helped anyone.

She peeled Mateo’s arms away, stood, and began shifting the boxes out of her way. There was no time to sit and cry. Caleb was dead, and it looked like he’d chosen this frozen death for himself. It made no sense, and the senselessness of it choked her. What would make a person lock themselves inside their own tomb?

“Get up,” Paige said. “Quick.”

“I don’t understand,” Mateo gasped. “What happened? Did someone chase him?”

Paige took Mateo by the shoulder and guided him to his feet. It felt like someone else was piloting her, like she’d shrunk into herself and was

watching everything from far away. She led Mateo away from the freezer and sat him on a stool at the edge of the kitchen. Maybe he wasn't ready to look, but Paige *needed* to.

She entered the freezer and stood in front of Caleb without breathing. There were no wounds on him, and no signs that he'd tried to leave the freezer. If she didn't know Caleb better, Paige might think he'd chosen to sit here peacefully until his heart stopped.

Paige bit her lower lip and put her fingers to the cold, hard flesh under Caleb's jaw. No pulse.

She wasn't sure why she'd hoped.

Delicately, Paige pried the camera from Caleb's grip and backed out of the freezer. It was a slim chance that he was filming when he died, but she had to take it. She powered up the camera and opened a video that was nearly eight hours long. The thumbnail, she realized, was a shot of the freezer door.

This was what she was looking for.

She rewound the video until she saw movement, pressing play at the beginning of Caleb's wobbly march into the freezer. Unsurprisingly, the metadata that might have told her when this was filmed read Date: ??? and Time: ???. As if anything in this place was capable of simply presenting itself outright. In the footage, Caleb's shuddery breath came through so loud it caused static. He hobbled through the kitchen like his body was threatening to give out. When he found the freezer, he placed his hand on the lock and hesitated. In an almost childlike voice, he whispered, "Here?"

There was a beat of silence, and then he opened the door and stepped inside.

Carefully, Caleb placed the camera on a shelf in the freezer and stepped into view. Other than a small gash across his temple, he looked relatively unharmed. He shut the freezer door behind him with fear in his eyes, and for almost two full minutes, he pressed his ear to the door and listened. Finally, he took the camera back off the shelf and cradled it to his chest. "It's cold in here. I thought it wouldn't be."

To Paige's surprise, Caleb wasn't talking to himself. A girl's voice, slippery and silver, replied, "You're imagining things again."

Sitting in the corner of the room seemed not to work for Mateo, since he was immediately back at Paige's side, neck strained so he could see the camera screen. One hand was firmly knotted in his hair from the stress. "Do

you recognize that voice?”

Paige shook her head. “No. It’s not KJ.”

Caleb in the video, apparently satisfied with his mystery companion’s answer, took his camera and settled on one of the boxes at the back of the freezer. The longer he sat in the cold, the more he swung his camera around wildly, checking the corners of the freezer in paranoia. If there was someone else in there, surely they would be visible. Despite the stranger girl’s clear voice, there was no one with him.

“What will you do if you see one of them?” the girl’s voice asked after several minutes of quiet.

“I don’t know. KJ has a weapon,” Caleb said matter-of-factly. “I don’t have anything.”

“Do you think you could hurt them with your hands?”

A shiver ran up Paige’s arms. As much as she wanted to pause the footage and take a breath, there was something darkly magnetic about it. About the girl’s voice and the slice of her words. The stranger had been somewhere in this kitchen. Maybe she still was.

“I don’t know,” Caleb said.

“What is he talking about?” Mateo asked. “Who—”

“I can’t see who he’s talking to,” Paige interrupted. “Let me listen.”

“If you don’t hurt them, they’re going to hurt you,” the girl’s voice said, followed by a dainty sigh. “Paige knew KJ would be here. She knew they would outnumber you. And Mateo convinced you that coming here was your idea, didn’t he?”

“I know . . . you’re right,” Caleb agreed.

“They planned for you to die. They’re looking for you now because they want to hurt you. I can feel them hunting. They’re getting closer.”

“I don’t know what to do,” Caleb said.

Paige thought she heard tears weighing down his voice.

“What if you found a weapon?” the girl asked. “You’re strong enough, right? They’re younger than you.”

“But KJ did track. She’s faster and stronger than me.”

Paige glanced over her shoulder to see Mateo’s frown deepen. There was still a raggedness to his breath, but at least the footage seemed to distract him from the very real dead body only a few feet away. He scratched the back of his neck. “Faster than him? Did he think KJ was going to hurt him?”

Despite KJ's oddness earlier, Paige couldn't understand this. KJ would never hurt Caleb. She would never hurt anyone, not even with the strange noise flooding her ears. Mateo was focusing on the wrong part of this, more concerned about KJ than the voice of a stranger who apparently roamed these halls with them.

"They always liked each other more than me," Caleb continued. "I should've known . . . once we found her, I should've known it was a trap."

"It's okay," the girl's voice said tenderly. "My friends did the same thing to me. But if you can't fight back, you'll need to keep yourself safe. Even if you put your body against the door, they could get in, couldn't they?"

"They could."

"I bet I know a way you can keep them out," the girl's voice taunted. "What if you made a really big wall? That way no one can get in, no matter how hard they try."

"A wall?"

"If you can't fight them, you have to keep them out. You'll be safe in here, even if they all kill each other."

For several seconds, the freezer was silent. Then Caleb set the camera down and went to work. Box by box, he built his barricade against the freezer door. The same one she and Mateo had to unmake to find his body. There was a machinelike speed to the way he worked. After every few boxes, he pressed his ear to the door and listened, wide-eyed, with his hand clapped over his mouth.

When he was finished, Caleb returned to his seat and pointed his camera at the barricade. His voice came out heavy and panicked. "How long should I stay here?"

"However long it takes."

From there, the conversation went quiet and the camera went still. When Paige scanned through the footage, she found two more rounds of barricade building. Each time Caleb rose to strengthen his makeshift fortress's defenses, he took a moment to press his ear to the door, listening. On his last trip to the barricade, his face was ghostly pale and his pace was glacial.

Paige's stomach twisted even more. The reality of it finally struck her, and she had to suck in a breath to keep from being sick. They were watching Caleb die, and he thought it was the only way to stay alive. Just like the boy in the film who killed Rudy McCarthy, Caleb had a wild fear in his eyes. It was the same fear that had made her think everyone else had

brought her here to kill her. It wasn't real, but Caleb didn't have KJ and Mateo to talk him down. He only had this mystery girl's voice egging him on.

"He froze to death because he was hiding from us. . . ." Mateo trailed off. "Why? Why would he think we would hurt him? I don't get it."

"I don't know, either."

"I wasn't hunting him," Mateo said. "Why would she say that?"

"I'm more worried about who she is," Paige said, scrolling through the footage again. "KJ has this theory about ghosts in the resort, but she thought they were harmless. This . . . I mean, whoever was with him made him do this. They wanted to kill him. They *did* kill him."

"I don't know who she is," Mateo said, a little too stiff.

Paige looked Mateo hard in the eyes, desperate to look anywhere but at Caleb's body. Sure, the girl's voice on the camera had convinced Caleb to stay in the freezer, but the level of fear it would take to actually *do* it . . .

"I . . . I think I know what he was feeling," Paige confessed. "Maybe. There's this sound . . . have you heard it?"

Mateo shook his head.

"I heard it right after we got separated," Paige said. "I was in the middle of looking for you, but the second I heard it, I—"

Mateo's gaze dashed away from her as the freezer began to shake.

Paige turned and found that the shaking, to her horror, was coming from Caleb. His body shifted violently off the frozen box he'd been sitting on and then he began to sink. He began to *sink*.

The floor of the freezer swallowed Caleb hungrily, splitting his exposed skin and cracking his bones. It choked him down like a clot of dry biscuit, the plumbing gurgling in sick satisfaction. Inch by inch, Caleb disappeared. The resort was *eating* him.

If Paige had felt like a sinking stone before, she'd reached the bottom now. She was drowning again. This was more than she could take.

Outside the freezer, the lights grew brighter. They grew blinding.

Mateo ran to Caleb, grabbing his shoulder to try to pry him from the floor. It was pointless, though, and Paige was sure she should jump in to pull him away. She should do *something*. As he tugged again, a little of Mateo's shirt rode up above his rib cage, and Paige saw a small network of cuts all along his skin. Screaming red cuts.

Fresh ones.

She opened her mouth to speak, but her gaze caught on her reflection in the freezer door. There was something odd about it again. Her face was distorted, but it looked distinctly unlike her. Actually, it looked distinctly like her mother again. Independent of Paige, the reflection slowly raised her arms, cupping her hands over her ears.

Numbly, Paige did the same.

Once Caleb was gone, the horrific guttural moan she'd heard before came back in full force. Paige clutched her ears tighter, drowning out whatever Mateo shouted to her. She closed her eyes and crouched, shouting, "Plug your ears!"

When the groaning stopped, Paige opened her eyes to find Mateo standing in front of her, knife tight in his grip.

"Mateo . . ."

"What happened to him?" Mateo breathed. "And where was . . . where was KJ?"

Paige blinked. "What are you talking about?"

"She was telling him the truth," Mateo said shakily. "You knew KJ was here and you lied to us about it. You pretended you were scared, but you've been secretly talking to her. You got mad at me about my dreams, but you lied about why you wanted to come here."

"I didn't know," Paige blurted out. "I thought maybe, but—"

"Where's KJ now?" Mateo demanded.

"I don't know!" Paige raised her hands in surrender. "This is what I was trying to tell you. It's the sound. It's making you scared, but—"

"Is she waiting to jump out?" Mateo asked.

Underscoring the end of his question was the sound again, grumbling and incessant. This time, Paige didn't have time to cover her ears. The sound bored into her, scrabbling quickly into a panic. Why wasn't Mateo reacting to the right things? Why wasn't he afraid of the stranger's voice? Why had he lied to her about his dreams? What were the cuts that marred his side?

"You know something you aren't telling me," Paige said through her teeth. "Don't pretend like I'm the one attacking you. Put the knife down."

Mateo closed his eyes and gritted his teeth. "Stop trying to . . . to get in my head!"

"Mateo," Paige breathed. And even though the panic spiked in her, she forced herself to hold on to her sense. "I'm sorry. You don't have to be

scared of me or KJ. Whatever is going on with you, we can . . . we can figure it out.”

Paige briefly thought Mateo might listen to her. The humanity leaked back into his eyes and his hand holding the knife fell, just an inch. The cloud of panic was thick, but if she could just find the boy she knew like blood, they would come back from this. If she could just break through the wrought iron wall of fear, they could find KJ together. He had never been one to get scared, had never let his emotions fly out of his control like this. She couldn’t lose him now.

“I’m not dying here,” Mateo finally muttered. “You act like you’re protecting me, but you only care about yourself. I won’t let you hurt me.”

“Mateo!” Paige shouted, bracing herself for his attack.

But instead of attacking her, Mateo turned on his heel and ran.

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Fifteen

For a gangly giant of a boy, Mateo was shockingly easy to lose. From the moment he took off, Paige knew there was no catching up to him or his unnaturally athletic legs. Even if she could still hear his footsteps clapping somewhere far away, Mateo was lost in the haze of paranoia and Paige was left to pitifully jog toward nowhere. She was alone again, and alone wasn't a good thing here. Caleb was alone at one point, too.

Doors and hallways and punches of vibrant color blurred in the shaky rush of Paige's peripheral vision. Her breath whistled in her throat, and the soreness in her limbs flared back to life. This whole thing was spiraling so far out of her control.

No. It had never been in her control in the first place.

Her feet turned to lead as she stomped to a halt, doubling over to brace herself against her knees. There were a handful of things she needed to process as true, no matter how impossible they seemed: KJ was hiding from her somewhere in the resort, Mateo was drunk on paranoia and currently in the palm of the resort's hands, and Caleb was dead. Caleb was *dead*. Possibly killed by someone in this resort they hadn't seen yet. Someone very powerful who wanted to hurt them.

The Kaleidoscope wasn't only killing people in the past.

She could die here. Paige's mouth was dry.

"Mateo!" she cried out, hands cupped around her mouth. "Are you actually *leaving* me?"

She expected the footsteps thundering away from her to pause, but they didn't. Mateo continued until there was nothing left to hear. The eerie quiet rushed in afterward, and the sweat coating Paige's exposed skin went cold.

She regretted yelling.

The unblemished pink walls of the hallway she had stopped in felt narrower than they should. Caleb's eaten body was somewhere far behind her, and Mateo was sprinting away somewhere far ahead. But Paige got the

feeling, suddenly, that the resort didn't have its eye on either of them. The heat of its gaze, its hungry attention, slid to Paige.

If it's not you, then it's one of us.

A girl's voice came from Paige's left, echoing down an unlit hallway she hadn't noticed a moment ago. She pressed the heel of her hand to her eye and tried to remember if she'd just failed to see it, or if in true Kaleidoscope fashion, it had materialized between blinks.

Paige stepped into the unlit hallway, and an electric chill scurried over her. A metal door with a push bar met her at the end, its narrow slot of window revealing a room Paige had seen already on the other side. The first time she had explored on her own, it was just a glimmer at the end of a hallway. The floor and walls were all deep-blue tile that shone like beetle shells, faintly lit by ripples of pink. *Pool water*. The pool she didn't explore because something about the glow of it had made her uneasy. She pressed her hand to her stomach to quiet the bloom of nausea rising even now.

We gotta cut the deadweight.

Deadweight? Even if the voice was unfamiliar, she knew it wasn't the one from Caleb's tape. It wasn't the person who had hurt him. There was someone on the other side of the door. Maybe it was another trick of the resort, maybe it was someone dangerous, but maybe it was someone who knew the way out. With a deep breath, Paige pressed her hip to the push bar and stepped into the pool room.

As she did, a sense of free falling sank into her again. Her knees buckled as the door sighed shut behind her, but she stayed upright. The sharp stench of chlorine meant that at least this place was probably clean. Finally, it struck her that the walls on all sides of her were that perfect, gleaming midnight blue. Even behind her, she found uninterrupted ceramic tile, flickering with watery light. No doors.

No doors.

Paige pressed her palms to the tile where she'd just seen a door, but nothing moved. She continued frantically around the pool room, desperately tuning out the lapping of the water behind her with the sound of her own ragged breath. She shoved her hands to the wall every few steps, testing for something with give.

"Hello?" Paige called, rubbing her palms over the walls for a second lap. A girl's voice had been there a moment ago, but she was alone in this tomb now. "Hello? Is there a password here?"

The Kaleidoscope was, unsurprisingly, silent.

KJ's rules were wrong, then, which was difficult to swallow since rules were one of the very few comforts Paige had in this world. This room did *not* have an exit, and Paige was very much stuck in it. She scanned the ceiling when the second part of KJ's advice came back to her: *Every room has an exit, even if it's somewhere you wouldn't look.*

Paige caught a ripple of pink dancing over her forearm, and the realization struck her, equal parts relief and horror. She peered over the shiny lip of the pool, into the electric pink water, and saw it at the very bottom: *a door*.

This felt personal.

"You won't get me in the water," Paige said. "If this is some kind of cruel joke, you're going to be disappointed. I'll just sit here until someone lets me out."

Why was she talking to the resort? And why was she waiting for a door to form from nothing? How would an underwater door even work? Wouldn't the contents of the pool flood whatever was on the other side?

Paige closed her eyes, bumped her head against the tile, and felt the last dregs of rational thought slapping against the back of her skull in time with the water. There was something fraying in her now, snapping apart thread by thread, and she could feel the dangling end of it. Maybe she should have understood how doomed she was hours ago, but she felt it now in this room perfectly tailored to ruin her. Mateo was gone, Caleb was gone, KJ was gone, and only the resort was left with her. The only sounds in the pool room were the gurgle of the plumbing and the labored sound of her own panicked breathing.

If she focused, though, she could hear a faint *drip, drip, drip . . .*

When Paige opened her eyes, she wasn't alone.

A girl stood across the water from her, her long mop of red hair dangling all the way to her hips. Water dripped from the curly ends of it to her feet, but Paige could hardly register that. The girl's eyes were fixed on her, and her mouth was curled in a horrible smile. The longer Paige looked at her, the deeper the recognition grew.

Paige remained frozen, but the name danced off her lips like she'd been waiting her whole life to say it. "S-Summer Hayes?"

The girl didn't move, but the light reflecting off the water shifted over her. It lit the deep green of her eyes, then the pale blue of her lips. Her skin

was ghostly enough to let the lightning strikes of blue veins show through on her exposed arms and legs. Her yellow dress was sopping wet and near brown in splotchy patches. If she weren't standing there smiling, Paige might think she was a corpse.

Finally, Summer opened her mouth. Instead of words escaping, though, she let out a low groan. The same groan Paige had heard on the intercom earlier, warped and grainy with static, guttural and inhuman.

And then she was moving.

She dropped to all fours almost too quickly for Paige to see, elbows and knees jutting out like some stick-legged beetle. The sound of her flesh slapping the tiles was wet and sticky, but her movement was quick. Within seconds, she'd made it around the corner of the pool and scurried directly toward Paige, sickly smile unwavering.

Paige eyed the girl's face, then eyed the water. Iron flooded her mouth as her pulse spiked. The monstrous girl barreling toward her was a nightmare, but throwing herself into the water . . . that was a death she already understood. She couldn't sink to that door. She couldn't bring herself to do it. But she couldn't die like this, mauled by the ghost of a girl she didn't understand, either.

Paige sucked in a breath, dropped her tote bag, and dove in.

Being submerged felt exactly how she remembered it, warm and slick against her skin. Heat spread through her dress's sleeves and skirt, soaking her through until she was heavy enough to sink. The water that flooded her throat was salty. It was ocean water.

It was just like a year ago. Her body remembered drowning like it was yesterday.

Paige's eyes opened and she didn't feel the sting of chlorine. Instead, salt burned in her eyes, turning the pink floor of the pool hazy and soft. She couldn't tell if the tiled wall was inches or yards from her face.

As much as she tried to burn it away, the fear settled in whether or not she was hearing the inhuman sound. She felt the impact of the water all over again, the rush of briny, black ocean flooding everything. And a pale hand drifting toward her as the world went black.

A crash sounded somewhere above her, and when Paige looked up, the girl she was sure was Summer Hayes broke through the spill of red. Paige screamed, but it only came out in a stream of throaty bubbles. Salty water filled Paige's mouth again and she realized if she didn't find the door, she

was going to drown.

She turned over in the water, pushing through the fear that stiffened her limbs, and kicked her way to the bottom of the pool. The space around her was streaky and colored like blush, but through it she could see the black door only a few kicks away. She just needed to pull it open, and she would deal with the aftermath once she could breathe. Her head throbbed under the weight of her held breath, and her lungs ached for air.

One kick, another, and then her hand closed around the sleek black doorknob.

Before Paige could twist it open, she felt ice-cold fingers slide into her hair. She screamed again, but no amount of thrashing broke Summer's unyielding grip. She didn't dare look behind her, didn't dare come face-to-face with the ghostly girl who clearly wanted her dead.

Paige lashed out against her attacker. She kicked toward the surface, but each inch she gained was immediately snatched back. She was pulled down by her hair, and then by her ankles, her elbows, a hand around her throat. Paige couldn't tell if the dark above her was the ceramic tile of the pool room or a vast night sky. She couldn't tell if she was drowning now or a year ago. If she couldn't break the surface, she needed to open the door.

Just as she aimed herself toward the door, the girl's grip tightened, then slammed Paige's head against the tile.

For a moment, it didn't hurt. Paige only felt the sudden *thwack* of it, the impact reverberating through her brow, her skull, the roots of her teeth. She came away from the door floating, and when her eyes blinked open, she saw a silky strand of red twisting in the space just before her. *More blood?*

When she touched her fingertips to her brow, she was met with a starburst of white-hot pain. It screamed all the way to the tips of her toes. It was pain that cut through everything else and struck right to her bone. The hurt was so vicious it forced her to gasp, and the water that spilled into her lungs was a relief for only a moment. Fire burned through her chest and vomit ate its way up her throat and the swimming pool went white. The last thing Paige felt before everything left her was a hand closing around her wrist.

And then, unceremoniously, she drowned.

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With Casey alone, the Kaleidoscope becomes . . . *strange*.

From the moment the staircase disappears from under her, the hallways become almost sunny in their brightness, and the sound of distant chaos goes quiet. Panic racks her, forcing her to brace herself against the nearest wall. She doesn't know if Summer is alive, doesn't know if Tess is still out there, doesn't know if the attackers made it into Jason's room. They could already be dead. They could have been dead for a long time.

In fact, from the moment Casey loses them, she isn't sure she knows anything about anything. Without the others, she isn't sure who *Casey* is.

Casey Keller. Casey who wants to find a way out. Casey who wants to be with her friends. Casey who has a life she wants to keep living.

Is that really all she can scrape together?

With nothing behind her and only one way forward, Casey begins walking. This hallway is different from the ones she explored with Summer. Where before she might have found doors leading into other hallways, directing her closer to the other seniors, this hallway offers no escape. It only stretches forward, peaceful and calm with nowhere else to go. Under the serene facade, though, the Kaleidoscope's attitude is different. No more exploration, no more discovery. She gets the uncanny feeling that, now that she's alone, there's something this resort wants to show her.

The first anomaly in the hallway comes in the form of a lone vending machine.

Casey presses her palm to her stomach, but she feels no hunger. Still, she'll need to eat eventually, and the resort has a funny way of hiding the things she needs most. She searches her pockets for change, but comes up empty. When she squats to shove her arm into the dispensing slot of the machine, she catches the vague shape of her reflection in its mirrored back.

Wrong again. Her face is wrong again, even in this blurry reflection. That same gut-deep fear comes over her, looking at the strange not-her that stares back. It's a face she knows, and it's a face she's never seen in her life.

With her arm still wedged into the machine, she whispers, "Are you the

one doing this?”

Silence.

“*Why* are you doing this?” Casey shouts at the warped reflection, breath sharp as knives in her chest.

The reflection’s lips move along with hers, but answer nothing. Overhead, the lights begin to flicker.

Casey grits her teeth and tries in vain to get a small packet of cookies from the bottom row of the machine. No matter how she stretches and bends, though, the food doesn’t budge.

The second anomaly she finds in her exploration appears as she rounds a corner. Halfway down the segment of hallway, streaked across the fluff of carpet, is a slot of light. *Genuine* light. Particles of dust swirl in it like magic, promising her it’s real.

Casey rushes to the source of the light. Just like the mirrors in the bedrooms, the opening in the wall is framed in ornate gold. But instead of a mirror at its center, it’s a *window*. The beach outside is a quiet expanse of white sand and sparkling ocean out to the horizon. Palms rock back and forth slowly, peacefully, blissfully unconcerned with the carnage inside the resort.

Without thinking, Casey rams her fist against the glass.

It doesn’t budge. Doesn’t even give a centimeter. Her fingers creep along the edges of the glass, but it’s sealed shut the whole way around. Even with the sun beating on it, the glass under her skin is cold. The water is within sight, but it’s like she’s no closer to it than she was before. This beach is only bait on a hook.

Just outside, a seagull lands on the white sand. It tucks its beak under a matted bit of white feather, nuzzling into its skin with an impatient thrust. It digs deeper, burrowing incessantly, until its beak draws back tipped with wet gemlike red. It snaps its beak in the thin white light, shaking out its full-feathered neck, and a little of the blood flings into the sand.

The change is almost imperceptible. Casey wonders if she would notice at all if she hadn’t felt the same change herself. A closeness in the air, like a car summiting a particularly steep climb.

The bird’s eyes widen, and its gaze snaps to another flock of seagulls nearby, idly picking at the sand. As quick as lightning, the bloodied bird launches itself at the others with a wretched, desperate squawk.

When she was a girl, Casey saw birds fighting on the beach all the time.

More than a few of her picnics on the sand were ruined when a flurry of feathers and rage blew through. Whatever madness comes over the seagull outside this window, though, is different. It's blinding. The bloodied one comes over the others like a storm, tearing and gnashing as the screeching intensifies. Casey closes her eyes, but when she opens them, the only things left on the beach are the still, ravaged carcasses of the attacked seagulls, a smear of feathers, and blood soaking into the sand.

A hot breath brushes the shell of Casey's ear.

She jumps back, but there's nothing behind her. No strangers, no bird, no beach, no blood. Just more hallway, exactly as expected. The window she spotted the seagulls through has changed, morphed back to clean reflective glass. Only her haggard, fearful face looks back. Casey doesn't linger long enough to decide whether the face is really her own.

From there, the carpet begins to sink as she walks. A quick inspection of the shining soles of her shoes tells her that it's gone wet and spongy. When she presses her fingers to the carpet, she finds every inch soaked through with icy-cold water. A memory comes in Jason Dettweiler's grating voice: *It's trying to flush me out.*

But there's nowhere else to go. No doors, no forks in the road, only a single hallway leading her forward. So, quelling the anxiety roiling in her stomach, Casey keeps walking. She finds the next window on the left side of the hallway, spilling sunlight across the squelching expanse of carpet ahead.

This time, she doesn't rush to the window. She approaches the gold-framed portal holding her breath, fists clenched at her sides. There was no way out through the last window, and she's learned better than to expect anything good to come easily.

But outside this window, she doesn't find an empty beach. In fact, she finds a beach crowded with life.

In all directions, men in stark uniforms of navy and white sprawl across the beach. On the far end of the shore, the nose of a massive metal ship is sunken into the shifting sand. The men's faces are rosy from sun exposure, and they laze miserably, clustered in slivers of shade beneath the palms.

Against her better judgment, Casey tries again. She rams her fists into the thick glass of the mirror-window, screaming with all the air she can muster. They *have* to hear her. She doesn't recognize the uniforms, but these are adults. These are adults with some kind of training, presumably. If

they can’t launch a rescue, who can?

Just like the birds, though, the men don’t seem to notice her. A few of them meander to the shipwreck and inspect it, but the rest of the men on the beach don’t move at all. She wonders briefly why they haven’t explored the resort if they’re so desperate for shelter. They don’t even seem to notice the building.

Near the wreck, it begins.

This time, she recognizes it instantly. One of the men is throwing his full weight into removing something stuck to the side of the ship when he loses his grip, toppling to the sand. He lifts his hand and, under the relentless sunlight, the smile of blood across his palm winks at her. The idle chatter of the men on the beach falls away, and a deadly quiet comes in.

Casey turns away and slides to the ground, clapping her hands over her ears. It does nothing to quiet the chorus of violence outside. Some of it she can distinguish; fists and kicks and battle cries are all things she’s heard a thousand times by now. But the sheer volume is unfathomable. Just as many men as there are seniors in the resort now, she suspects, but with nowhere to hide. The noise is ripping and smashing, wet and guttural.

There’s something evil that lives on this island, and its pattern finally seems clear. A drop of blood, a blur of carnage, and then nothing but the silence of ghosts.

At first, Casey crawls away from the slaughter outside without checking the beach for survivors, the water in the carpet pooling around her quivering fingers. Then, when the water is as deep as her elbows, she forces herself into a stumbling walk. The water collects around her ankles, then her shins, icy cold and numbing. Casey holds tight to her flimsy denim jacket, teeth chattering, and she keeps moving. By the time it reaches her knees, she convinces herself that this is only because there is something at the end of all these passages that might get her—get them *all*—out. They don’t have to end in blood and silence.

There are more windows as she moves, though Casey watches the scenes unfolding outside less carefully. A small family in old clothing rowing onto the island’s shore. A young couple with surfboards shoved in the sand. More animals than she can even name. She’s certain if she stops to watch a single one of them, the same thing will repeat. Blood, carnage, silence. She thought, when she saw that first window, that their resemblance to the mirrors was just a coincidence. But she understands now that the visions on

all sides of her aren't windows at all, but more mirrors. *Look here*, they seem to taunt, *this will be you, too.*

Finally, what she sees in one of the windows makes her pause.

Through the glass, she finds a bowling alley from elsewhere in the Kaleidoscope, dancing with saturated lights and cheery music. In the center of the bowling alley is something dark and indecipherable and unmoving. A few feet away from the mass, connected to the carnage by a faint trail of blood, are two very-much-alive people. The shape of them is familiar in a way that surprises Casey: The wild tangle of caramel curls undeniably belongs to Claudia Ramirez.

The second figure crouched at her side, she realizes, is Saul.

"I'm not . . ." Claudia sobs. "I *can't* . . ."

"It's okay now," Saul says soothingly, pulling her tight to his chest. "I saw it, too. They were going to hurt us. You didn't do anything wrong."

Claudia's hands lift into the rotating beams of emerald and sapphire light. They're stained and gleaming with blood, same as the streak on the floor, same as the indistinguishable mass. Casey braces herself against the wall, shuddering so hard she nearly vomits. It's *bodies*. They're crouched next to a pile of bodies.

"It won't stop." Claudia tucks her head against Saul's chest, shivering. "Every time I think we're alone, there's someone else. But I . . . I would never hurt anyone. I would *never*—"

"You would never hurt anyone who didn't try to hurt us first. But those people . . . I felt it, too. They were going to kill us."

Claudia peers at the mess of bodies a few feet away and gags. Saul holds her fast to his chest again, tenderly stroking the back of her neck. There isn't a drop of blood on him, unlike Claudia, but he watches the rest of the bowling alley with hawkish intensity. His gaze scans every door, every dark corner, every angle of the wide-open space where ambushers might hide.

Jade and Kendra said that Claudia was the first to lash out when the killings began, although it feels like centuries ago now. With the way the violence of this place seems bent on ripping people apart, Casey assumed, maybe pessimistically, that Ripley Memorial's most popular power couple would have long since split up. But the way they cling to each other now says the opposite. They justify the blood in each other's names. Instead of clawing for their lover's throat, Saul and Claudia have morphed into a single entity bent on keeping each other alive at any cost.

Casey’s heart squeezes for Tess. For Summer. For someone to hold her through the violence, too.

“Just us,” Saul whispers into Claudia’s hair. “No one else will ever know.”

When she leaves Saul and Claudia’s window, Casey finds a surprise waiting for her. Only a few feet away, quiet like it’s been there all along, is a door. It’s halfway submerged in water, which dyes the wood grain near black. The water here is warmer than it was before, and Casey realizes that, at some point, her shivering stopped.

She takes the door handle in her wet grip, turns the knob, and opens it onto something genuinely impossible.

Beyond the door, she finds a night sky full of stars, the moon round and bright as warm silver. Below the sky, almost imperceptibly different in its infinite darkness, is the open ocean. A swath of warm water bulges out to meet her, swelling through the open door and sliding silently down the half-flooded hallway behind her.

It can’t be that easy. Leaving can’t *possibly* be this simple.

But there’s nowhere else to go except forward, and however impossible the ocean outside the door might seem, it’s her only hope of escape. Casey steels herself and wades into the open ocean.

As she swims away from the shrinking door behind her, she spots something on the other side of the water. A thin slice of highway, maybe, and a beam of yellowed light cutting through the night.

A *light*. From a *car*. Presumably driven by *people*.

Casey’s panicked swimming picks up pace. The new warmth of the water loosens the ice in her bones, and her disbelief begins to morph into something almost like hope. If she swims fast enough—if she finds someone who can get back to the island in time—maybe they can still save most of the others. Not those already dead, but maybe Saul and Claudia. Maybe Jade and Kendra. Maybe she’ll find Tess and Summer in the hospital and she’ll be able to hold them both at once again.

When she finally swims close enough to make out the shape of a small car and two girls standing in the beams of its headlights, she recognizes where they are. It’s the same marina her class used when they boated to the island in the first place. It looks changed—the boathouse is different and the logo has changed colors—but she would recognize the tangle of mangrove and muck that lies beyond it in her dreams.

As she wades closer, the girls begin to speak.

“This is where we were,” one of the girls says. She takes a few steps to her left and huffs out a breath. “Or here.”

“Exactly here?” the other girl asks.

Casey kicks forward a little, whipping her head up from the water, and she screams toward the girls.

They don’t react.

“I don’t know if it’s down to the centimeter, but yeah,” the first girl says, flicking a bit of her silvery-blond hair out of her face. “I remember the angle.”

“Great,” the other girl says. She’s dark haired and slender in a way that reminds Casey of Tess. The girl presses her palm to her brow. “I can’t see shit.”

“Probably because it’s the middle of the night,” the blond snipes. “I told you my mom made sure it was still daylight when she got here. When it’s dark, you can’t see anything.”

Casey gulps down another lungful of ocean air and screams again.

The blond pauses, but her eyes don’t find Casey. “Sorry. When it’s dark all you can see is the light.”

“The light?”

“The pink one,” the girl says. “It blinks. It just started now.”

“I can’t see it.”

The blond stills. “You can’t?”

The two girls hold each other’s gazes for a long stretch of quiet, a silent conversation that Casey can’t begin to decipher. She screams again, although she already knows this is the same as the windows. The girls are debating the presence of a blinking light, oblivious to the girl screaming at them from the water. She is an invisible force here, unable to leave even an impression on the world in front of her. These girls will not see her and will not help her. They can’t.

“Okay, how were we supposed to do it in the daytime?” the dark-haired girl groans. “Mateo’s parents track you, like, all day. We couldn’t have come while they were awake.”

“You didn’t need me here for this.”

“Yes, I did.”

The blond girl scoffs, but she doesn’t argue. The recognition is so overwhelming that, for a moment, Casey forgets to keep her head above

water. The countless mirrors of the Kaleidoscope come back to her, the false reflection surfacing now in her mind's eye. It occurs to her that the reflections were never really reflections at all. It was a vision of this girl on the docks, with her silver hair and her dry voice and her big dark eyes. But *why*?

She spins in the water and, just at the horizon, she finds exactly what the blond girl sees. A pink light suspended in the clear black night, blinking every few seconds in complete silence. And she knows without seeing the geometric outline of it, without hearing its haunting tune, that the Kaleidoscope is emitting that light. That as far as she swims, it will always be right behind her, pulsing to call her home.

Home?

"I really thought I'd see something," the dark-haired girl says wistfully. "I don't understand why I can't."

"I don't know what I thought I saw," the blond says, softer than before. "There's no light. I don't see anything. I probably didn't see anything back then, either."

Casey doesn't have to know the mystery girl to tell this is a lie.

"I shouldn't have dragged us out here."

"It's okay," the blond says. "I just think . . . maybe there's nothing to see. Maybe there's something in our moms that just . . . broke. And we'll never know why."

"But—"

Without a word, the blond slips her hand into the dark-haired girl's. They share another silent, knowing look, and there is a warmth that blooms in Casey's chest. These girls who might be her age, whom she only knows through a nightmare, are connected like she used to be with Summer and Tess. In that deep, wordless way. Casey wonders if these girls feel the same fear of losing each other that she does when she thinks of her friends. She wonders if, in each other's eyes, these girls are fleeting and impermanent.

Something stirs from deep below Casey, pushing toward the shore. It isn't like the rest of the ocean's rolling waves, rhythmic and sure. This moves quick and slippery as a snake from miles deep. It's heading past her, toward the docks and toward the girls.

"I'm gonna walk a little farther down the highway," the dark-haired girl says. "Just to see."

The blond girl nods, face slackened with relief. There's a rosiness to her

gaze as she watches the dark-haired girl leave, and she looks so familiar it makes Casey sick. It makes her dizzy like she's drunk. She needs to get these girls away before whatever haunts these waters finds them. She doesn't know them, but she can't let them find the Kaleidoscope. If she can't make it out, they have to.

Once the dark-haired girl is out of sight, the blond turns back to face the water. Pearlescent moonlight washes over the fine angles of her face, and then her expression twists. Her gaze falls lower, seems to land squarely on Casey only a few feet away, and she freezes.

No one else in this strange mirror place has been able to see her; surely this girl can't see her, either. Or maybe, somehow, there's something special about the way this girl haunts her. Maybe the thin connection between them makes her different.

The girl puts a hand to her chest. "Mom?"

All at once, the world clenches. It throbs at Casey, dizzying her so badly she sinks under the water's surface. *Mom.* It doesn't make any sense, but it feels right, the way a final puzzle piece slides in to make a picture whole. The way the twist of a kaleidoscope turns one image into something new. She understands nothing, but everything makes sense.

The point was never to swim here for the girls' help.

When Casey resurfaces, the blond girl has already stripped off her jacket and shoes. Her gaze is foggy and distant, like she does it in a trance. She mechanically removes one sock, and then the other, before stumbling to the edge of the dock. Without hesitation, she leaps into the water.

"No, no, no . . ." Casey mutters.

She searches the inky depths under her feet. It's with a jolt of horror that Casey understands that this girl is nothing but food, and that Casey herself bobs in the dark waters as bait. There is something in the water with them, and the moment the girl disappears under the surface, the beast comes alive. It swishes excitedly through the water, ravenously hungry. Once the girl surfaces and begins swimming, Casey inhales all she can manage.

"Go back!" she shouts at the girl. "Get out of the water!"

The girl doesn't seem to hear her, though. She keeps swimming like her life depends on it. Casey searches the dark waters below, but whatever she felt earlier doesn't show itself now.

Then, with a gasp, the blond slips under the water.

As if on autopilot, Casey sucks in a breath and swims down after her.

She doesn’t entirely understand the desperation pulsing through her, but she lets it guide her anyway. There is something sinister and hungry in these waters, and now that she’s under the surface, she feels it like oil, slippery against her cheeks. Moonlight cuts through the water, and once Casey’s eyes adjust to the sting of the salt, she sees the girl sinking fast into the depths.

Somewhere above, another body jumps into the water. The dark-haired girl cuts through it like a knife, swimming fast for the blond.

Before Casey can reach the girls, a cold voice echoes from everywhere at once. *It takes what it is owed.*

“No,” Casey screams into the water. “Let her go.”

The dark-haired girl finds the blond and attempts to pull her toward the surface, but it’s no use. The current swallowing the blond is stronger. She thrashes for freedom, but the thrashing quickly stops.

The presence is stronger than ever as Casey swims down to them. She can feel the swells in the water as its grip on the girl tightens. As her eyes adjust, she sees it move like a lump through the water. The same rushing, drowning, tightening feeling she’s had all night comes over her again, and in a moment of perfect clarity, Casey understands the beast for what it is. This is the Kaleidoscope. It is the creature that trapped them in the first place.

Through the rushing current, she hears the voice again. Its body slithers through the waves, coiling around her, around the other girls. In a low groan, it says, *It takes what it is owed*.

Casey thrashes against the water again.

It will not be alone.

Even though she doesn’t understand what it wants, even though she doesn’t understand how it created the never-ending hell it has trapped her in, and even though she doesn’t understand these girls with faces both familiar and foreign, Casey understands the very fundamental questions the deep, dark water asks. Will she let the girl go in her place? Will she let the beast in the water take this stranger in her stead?

Casey closes her eyes and reaches for the creature.

The lump loosens its grip on the two girls, lobbing itself to Casey instead. She leans into the murky, magnetic swell of it. Its oily body slides over her mouth, then something punctures her sternum. It doesn’t hurt, not really. It takes from her quickly, ravenously, spinning the dark waters into a

dizzying half sleep.

As the creature drags her back to the surface, Casey imagines the girls, free of the current, kicking back to shore. As the marina shrinks in the distance and the Kaleidoscope draws closer again, she imagines them trading stories about this night, if they're even real. She imagines they'll never find themselves wandering these neon-drenched hallways, and there's some comfort in it. Even if the creature sweeps her back to the very place she began, at least no one else will be sucked inside.

As her world folds into darkness, Casey imagines the dark-haired girl dragging her friend to the muddy shore with the sky spinning overhead. With a raw, salt-scorched throat, the dark-haired girl screams for help. She pushes her palms to the blond girl's chest, parts her lips, and breathes into her. She sobs into her arm and then repeats it all again: *Pump pump pump breathe. Pump pump pump breathe. Pump pump pump—*

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Sixteen

The first thing Paige thought when she came back to life was that she wished she hadn't.

Beyond the fear of water, she'd forgotten there was something eerily pleasant about drowning. Once she stopped fighting, there was a strange peace in the way everything bleached white, like sun caught in her eyes forever. She'd almost died once before, and it wasn't as scary as she remembered. There was a ringing somewhere far away, growing louder until it was the only thing left. Paige had no body, no memory, no fear. No blood in the water and no hands in her hair, no neon-pink tomb swallowing her alive. Only the vague idea of sleep and a hand slipping warmly into hers.

Something tickled her face.

She burst up and the fire in her lungs came racing back. In one violent twist, she folded to her elbows and threw up the contents of her stomach. Water splashed over the carpet before the retching came over her again. When she couldn't expel it fast enough through her mouth, the water spurted through her nose instead. Stomach acid scorched her sinuses and she gasped for air.

Paige imagined this was how it felt to be used as a punching bag. Moments ago, she'd been at peace. Now pain was the only thing.

"Breathe," a voice said, hovering over her. Paige didn't need to open her eyes to recognize who it was. In fact, she'd known who saved her the moment she felt hair tickling her nose. "You're gonna be okay. Just breathe."

"KJ?" Paige croaked.

She was acutely aware that she was lying in a puddle of her own vomit. When she tried opening her eyes, the fluorescents overhead blinded her. A hand came over her face, blocking out the light. KJ's hand, attached to KJ's very lithe body, which Paige realized was straddling her, knees tight against

Paige's hips. Panic exposed the whites of KJ's eyes. Her shoulders were rigid and her jaw was set. When Paige tried to remember how she'd gotten here, the last several minutes crashed over her.

The pool, the girl, the blood, the door, the—

Paige touched her forehead and her vision went white.

KJ grabbed her wrist and pinned it to the carpet, swiftly brushing a wet bunch of Paige's hair from her brow. "Don't touch. You're still bleeding."

In an impressively swift motion, KJ brought one flap of her button-up shirt to her mouth and tore it between her teeth. She delicately wrapped it around Paige's brow. Paige tried—she *tried*—not to be mesmerized. Maybe it was the head wound.

"You can . . . stop now. I'm impressed," Paige managed. Her throat was swollen and sore, but it couldn't stop her from sounding like a lovesick child. The impact to her skull must have been something.

KJ's laugh came out in a single huff. "Don't be. I have no idea what I'm doing."

"Reassuring."

Paige closed her eyes and leaned into the pressure of KJ's sure hands fastening the makeshift bandage. KJ might not know anything about first aid, but Paige had taken babysitting very seriously in middle school, and she knew the basics. The pressure squeezed every inch of her skull at once, but she clenched her fists and endured. Vomiting was already humiliating; she didn't need to add whimpering to the mix.

When KJ was done, Paige touched the fabric. "What happened?"

"No clue," KJ said, sitting back to admire her handiwork. "All three of you were in trouble. I didn't know who I was gonna find. And I did not expect to open a door and find you *underwater.*"

"Okay, so that wasn't a nightmare."

"Looked like a nightmare to me." KJ swung her hair over her shoulder. "You're lucky I got CPR training after last time. If I had a nickel . . ."

Paige's eyes widened. The pain in her chest made sense then, but that was the least of her concerns. Her fingers shot to her lips and a flush of shame burned in her cheeks.

As if sensing Paige's humiliation, KJ quickly climbed off her, stumbling awkwardly to her feet. Paige didn't miss the way she pointedly avoided eye contact. The sleeve of KJ's right arm was dripping, but otherwise, she was mostly dry. Even the carpet around the door was only faintly freckled with

water. Paige, on the other hand, felt the residual pool water heavy in her clothes, anchoring her.

Finally, KJ broke the silence. “Caleb’s dead?”

“Yeah.” Saying it was a punch in the gut. “I’m sorry.”

“How?”

Paige thought of the girl’s voice, of her accusations about KJ. “You weren’t . . . you didn’t see him?”

KJ shook her head. “I knew he was in trouble, and then he was just . . . gone.”

Paige blinked up at her. If she described Caleb’s death exactly how she saw it, she would sound like she’d lost her mind. Maybe she *had*. She would sound just like Tess Collins after two beers, or just like KJ in the hospital the day after the almost drowning, claiming she’d seen a monster in the water with them.

But would explaining Caleb’s freezer barricade sound any stranger than explaining what happened to her in the pool room? Something in here was trying to kill them, and it had already succeeded once.

“He barricaded himself in a freezer. Hiding from us.”

KJ’s expression faltered, but she righted herself and held out a hand to help Paige upright. “We need to get you cleaned up.”

Paige took KJ’s hand and, wincing, made it to her feet.

As they navigated out of the narrow, pistachio-colored hallway the pool had dumped her into, Paige took stock of herself. Considering she’d been 90 percent dead a moment ago, she was surprisingly intact. Her ribs ached when she took in a breath and her throat burned from vomiting and there was a tight squeeze in her head, but she was moving.

“I didn’t jump in that pool, by the way,” Paige said when her voice finally came back to her. “It was the girl from the yearbook again. Summer. She . . . chased me in.”

KJ didn’t slow her pace, but there was a rigidity to her shoulders. In the end, all she managed to say was, “I haven’t seen her in a long time.”

“You said she was harmless.”

“I said she’s never hurt me,” KJ clarified.

“Could she? Could she have killed Caleb?” Paige asked. She hadn’t heard Summer speak at the pool—hadn’t heard the redhead speak in her dreams, either—but it was possible that the voice in Caleb’s video was hers.

KJ shook her head. “The resort killed Caleb.”

Without another word, KJ led Paige through hallway upon hallway lined with unremarkable doors. She moved with a cool confidence that felt unnatural here. While Paige navigated this place like the badly equipped protagonist of a horror game, KJ skimmed through the halls like this was her childhood home.

When she finally paused at a door, it looked no different from any of the others they had passed. But KJ pressed her ear to the wood, listened for a moment, and pushed her way inside.

“I don’t know who was here before I took over,” KJ said, ushering Paige into the room. “Just hop in the shower. I’ll find clothes.”

“My dress is fine,” Paige insisted. “I’ll just—”

“You literally puked all over yourself,” KJ said matter-of-factly. “Stop with the thing where you pretend you’re above help.”

Paige opened her mouth to deliver a retort, but even that much movement made her vision swim. Instead, she nodded and stumbled into a bathroom that was nearly identical to the one in their mothers’ room. Black-and-white-checked floors and walls bled into stark marble counters. This bathroom wasn’t uninhabited like the other one, though. There was an assortment of toiletries, toothbrushes, razors, and . . . her own hairbrush? Pink with an orange flower painted on the back, slowly peeling off with age. She’d lent it to KJ years ago and assumed it was long gone.

These were KJ’s things. This was where she’d been living this whole time.

Paige opened the shower curtain, turned on the hot water, and something deep in her chest seized. *Salty water in her throat, quiet ribbons of blood in her eyes, black sky overhead.* She couldn’t be alone again. She pivoted and grabbed the handle, yanking the door open to find KJ standing just outside.

“Jesus. Sorry.”

Paige stepped back. “Sorry.”

“I’m just leaving clothes,” KJ said.

“Right.” Paige let out a small breath and closed her eyes. “Could you stay, though? In case the rooms switch. I know you said you can find me again, but I just . . . I thought it would be safer if . . .”

KJ set the clothes on the counter and considered. Her expression softened and she covered her eyes. “I’m not looking.”

Hot relief rushed through Paige so fast she nearly crumpled. She peeled off her damp, ruined dress and her makeshift bandage and stepped into the

steaming hot shower. Once she scrubbed the vomit from her neck and washed the built-up grime from her arms and legs, she pressed her forehead to the cool shower wall, wincing through the pain.

KJ didn't say a word.

It was only a few years ago that they'd snuck an armful of canned beers from Tess's fridge and drunk them all while sprawled out on the floor of KJ's bedroom, watching pointless videos of car chases until they were so sluggish and bubbly the room spun. Back then, when KJ helped her into the shower and washed the vomit from her hair, she'd let Paige wear her clothes the next morning.

It was so easy to fold into KJ back then. It was easy to let someone else take care of her. It was easy to let KJ see the furious, broken heart beating in her chest without feeling ashamed. Now, even if nothing was different on the surface—KJ was still taking care of her—everything had changed. The ease was gone, and saying anything true made her want to choke.

She swallowed the mound forming in her throat. Finally, she managed, "Can I . . . say something?"

KJ didn't speak, but the silence was full and heavy. With a curtain between them, Paige didn't have to watch KJ's face. She could keep everything close to her chest and miles away at the same time.

"I never explained it to you the right way. After last year, Saul and Claudia were the first ones to visit me in the hospital," Paige said, letting the scalding water distract from the way her hands began to shake. "They already knew we were trying to see the island. You know about their rule. All Kaleidoscope talk is off-limits, so actually going there . . . I never really thought of them like parents, but I knew they'd be so disappointed.

"They weren't mad, though." Paige ran her fingers through her hair, massaging out the last of the pool water. "They said everyone who had lived through the Kaleidoscope was haunted by it. Even them. Claudia said she still wakes up in a sweat most nights forgetting that she made it out. Apparently, Saul even tried to find a way back to the island at one point. Thought he might be able to burn the whole thing down. Just like you wanted to."

"Paige," KJ said finally, "what does this have to do with anything?"

"They said my mom was haunted, too. She just never figured out how to get away from it. Claudia said our moms were stuck in this cycle with the resort, constantly getting obsessed and scared only to crash and burn."

Claudia and Saul had looked lovely at her bedside, dressed in crisp black with genuine tears in their eyes. At the time, she'd wondered how she'd known them so long and never seen them so weak. The Mamanis were the only ones who managed to scrape the shadows of the Kaleidoscope from the bottoms of their expensive shoes, and for most of her life, Paige had admired them for it. But in that hospital room, she understood what ignoring their demons had cost them.

"They told me the only way they'd managed to live good lives was to cut it all out. No mercy."

"No mercy," KJ repeated with a sigh.

"I was so scared," Paige said finally, so quiet she wasn't sure KJ could hear. "The night we almost drowned, I thought that was it. I . . . I mean, I *died* for a second. There were so many things grabbing on to me, pulling me back toward it, but every time we got close, it was a nightmare. I tried to be like Saul and Claudia. I tried to cut all of it out, but . . ."

"By 'all of it,'" KJ asked, "you mean me?"

Paige let the water rush over her for another silent moment. "Not just you. I . . . that night . . ."

There was a rustling outside the shower as KJ straightened.

"At first I just wanted to never think about the Kaleidoscope again. I didn't want to feel scared anymore. And then, eventually, I convinced myself there was really nothing here." Tears leaked from the corners of Paige's eyes. Because she had felt it that night. She'd felt the magnetic pull toward the water, felt the uncanny current pull her under, and more than that, she'd seen a ghost. A year of denial wasn't enough to make her forget her mother's face floating toward her in those black waves. "Something tried to kill me. And you saved me. Because you always have to save me. And I'm so, so sorry that the only way I ever said thank you was by abandoning you."

When KJ said nothing to that, Paige turned off the water and let the dripping quiet drown out everything else. Really, why would KJ care that she was sorry now? Why would KJ forgive her for taking this long to see the truth? She'd spent her whole life thinking that if she had been here in the Kaleidoscope twenty-five years ago, she'd simply have been better than the others. She would do the right thing, she would be logical, she would survive. But even before she came to this island, she'd never been capable of saving herself. It was always others keeping her head above water, and

Paige had tricked herself into thinking she was the resilient one.

KJ was both the survivor and the one with the open heart. Paige was the deadweight she had to save over and over.

The shower curtain parted by an inch, and Paige found a bundle of dry clothes extended like an olive branch in her direction. She took the clothes tentatively—a pair of too-wide jeans and a white tank with a button-up men's shirt covered in palm trees—and slipped them on in silence.

When she finally threw the shower open, she found KJ facing her, expression unreadable. Matter-of-factly, she said, "I don't *have* to save you. But I always will."

Paige blinked.

"And now that we've got the crying out of the way," she said, easily cutting the tension, "maybe you can use that big, rattled brain to help *me*."

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Seventeen

KJ's home base—a bedroom just like all the others tucked somewhere deep in the maze of the resort—was a complete disaster. A mix of her clothes and various pieces of beachy menswear was strewn across the carpet, both beds were unmade, and KJ's baseball bat sat among a scattering of other makeshift weapons on one of the bare mattresses. It had KJ written all over it. The familiarity of the mess, in this place that felt realities away from home, ached more than Paige expected.

KJ flopped onto the somewhat clear bed, motioning with her foot to an armchair littered with crumpled clothing. "Just throw the stuff off that one."

Paige picked up the wad of clothes and slid onto the cushion below. Succumbing to her instincts, she began folding the clothes into a neat pile as KJ launched into her spiel. Tidying up felt more like a coping mechanism than a real need, but she gave in to it.

"Since we're good again," KJ said, "I think this might be a tag-team situation. You know I'm good at ideas, but not as good at—"

"—facts," Paige finished.

"Reality," KJ corrected, eyes narrowed. "But yes. The concrete details feel a little . . ."

She made a confetti motion with her fingers.

"You want to brainstorm like we used to?" Paige asked. "About a way out, I assume?"

"There is no way out," KJ said. "I mean, I know that's the goal. But it doesn't want us to find it. It doesn't want us to know what it wants, and the more you look, the more you get its attention. You don't want its attention."

Paige frowned. "Do we have its attention right now?"

KJ shook her head.

"Why not?"

"Where's Mateo?" KJ asked.

Paige's expression darkened. Between the shock of losing Caleb and her

second near-drowning, she'd forgotten about the way things ended with Mateo. "He heard that sound and took off."

"I'd guess it's paying attention to him right now, then," KJ said calmly. "Which means we've gotta find him."

"I thought you could *feel* people," Paige said. "Can't you tell where he is right now?"

Again, KJ shook her head. "He's too far away for me to sense more than a general direction. He's alive, though."

Paige nodded. In this reality, where she accepted that this was all actually happening, it was a relief. She couldn't deny that, in the moments before she had entered the pool room, she'd felt something watching her. Something fixed on the back of her neck, hungry, looking for the killing angle.

"Maybe this is a dumb question, but . . . what *is* it?"

At that, KJ's shoulders slumped. "The best I can guess, some kind of supernatural creature? In my mind, everything we can see is its body. We're running around inside of it. It can change shape, it can make you see things that aren't there, and it can make you hear noises that change the chemistry of your brain."

It can change shape. Caleb and Mateo disappearing right before her eyes in the lobby. *It can make you see things that aren't there.* The redheaded girl chasing her in the pool room. *It can make you hear noises that change the chemistry of your brain.* Shoving stanchions under the door in the theater. A shudder ran through her from head to toe.

"What are we supposed to do, then?" Paige asked, incredulous. "I mean, it already killed Caleb. I assume that's why Mateo and I didn't feel it as much in the beginning? It was fixating on him?"

"It went for him first," KJ said.

"It's never done any of this to you?" Paige asked.

A shadow fell over KJ's face. "Not that I can remember. I think more people being inside is making it act different. Violent. I've mostly just been lonely." She motioned to the mess. "Obviously I wasn't expecting company. At first, I didn't even think you guys were real."

Paige arched a brow.

"It can make you see things that aren't there, remember?" KJ said. "I . . . it wouldn't be the first time it made me think my friends showed up."

Paige relented a little at that. She'd only been here for a few days, and

she already didn’t trust the world around her. KJ had been here far longer, and she’d had no one to help her learn to stay alive. It was a miracle she hadn’t been killed by the time they arrived. If she was the only one here all this time, if its attention was on her alone, she’d endured things Paige could hardly imagine.

“Okay, well, let’s brainstorm, then.”

She made her way across the room, sliding open the drawer of one of KJ’s nightstands. To her surprise, she found a standard notepad and fountain pen rolling around inside, along with one of the Mylar goody bags identical to the one on her mother’s TV stand. She dumped its contents—a pair of earplugs, a pink mint, and a feedback card—into her pocket before grabbing the pen and paper.

“Let’s start with the stuff we both know,” Paige offered. “Can I take notes?”

A hint of a smile crept through KJ’s stoic expression. She nodded at the pen and paper. “Whatever helps.”

Paige sank back into her chair and jotted down the few rules she’d learned from KJ in their first conversation. “We know the thing about the jingle and the . . . would you call it a growl?”

“I would call it terrifying.”

“Well, yes, but . . .” Paige pinched the bridge of her nose. “We’ll call it the demon noise. I think that might be closest.”

“Don’t forget the doors.”

“Right. No entrance without an exit.” She tapped her pen to the paper. “But what about things that are bigger than just the rules? We found that stuff in the main office that made it sound like it’s the island. Not the resort.”

KJ considered. “I don’t know. For as long as I’ve been here, I’ve only been inside the resort. Unless it’s just making itself look like a resort . . .”

“Distinctly possible,” Paige said, scrawling out the idea quickly. “If this is the same thing that affected those sailors, wouldn’t we feel violent toward each other?”

“Were the sailors violent?” KJ asked. “Or were they scared?”

“So scared they killed their friends?”

As soon as she said it, she remembered the pulse of intense fear she’d felt during her first exploration. A mind-warping fear so thick and unshakable she thought someone she’d known since birth might want her

dead. If someone had found her then, would she have run? Or would she have attacked? Even now, she wasn't sure.

"Assuming it's the island itself," Paige continued, "I would want to figure out how it works with actual reality. Obviously the amount of space in here is not equal to the space outside, so we can assume it's completely separate."

"I guess time doesn't exist here, either," KJ said.

"Doesn't exist . . ." Paige repeated.

She tapped her pen to her lips and felt the crinkling of an idea forming. It wasn't that time didn't exist here. She felt it passing just like she did outside, even without daylight. She felt it in the way she got tired periodically, in the way her stomach began to grumble every few hours. Days rotated through their incessant loop here, too.

"What if it does exist, though?"

KJ sat up.

"What if it's not that time doesn't exist? What if it just scales differently? Your mom told you it felt like a full month in here. The sailor also said it'd been a long time when it had only been a day. The seniors made it to the resort around five at night and the pickup boats got there around nine in the morning." Paige flipped to a new notebook page, holding her pen in her teeth. "Did your mom ever say how long they waited for pickup?"

"After getting outside?" KJ twirled a bit of hair around her finger. "An hour, I think?"

Paige mulled it over. "Around eight in the morning, then."

"Why?"

"Because if we know exactly how many hours they were actually inside, we have a start." She sketched it out swiftly: FIFTEEN HOURS (?) OUTSIDE IS ONE MONTH INSIDE. She pointed to KJ with the butt of her pen. "If this is true and if the time is consistent . . . well, if one night turned into a month—"

"—then what's a month in the outside world?" KJ finished numbly. She pinched the bridge of her nose. "I can't do the math. But it's been a long time. A *really* long time."

Paige's stomach sank. She scrawled out a few more numbers, ultimately settling on a multiplier somewhere around fifty. If fifteen hours was a month, then thirty full days was infinitely more. An unfathomably long time to be stuck here alone. The moment she scratched out the number, dread

seeped in.

“Four years?” Paige asked.

KJ chewed on the inside of her cheek. “Yeah. I’d say that’s about right.”

“KJ . . .”

“So how long do you think you’ve been here?” KJ cut in, swiftly moving away from her own nightmare. “In resort time, obviously.”

“It feels like three-ish days?” Paige guessed. She quickly did another column of math and narrowed her eyes. “That would only be an hour and a half on the outside?”

“Lucky you.”

“Okay, let’s slow down,” Paige said. “I don’t know if that’s legitimately how it works or if I’m just making things up. But if the time is scaled down, maybe the space is, too? Maybe the space we’re moving through is smaller than space in the real world. Maybe we really are just walking around the island, even when we run for miles.”

KJ mulled this over before shaking her head. “It could be, but that wouldn’t get us a way out. I’m telling you, I’ve walked so far you wouldn’t believe it. If there’s an edge, we aren’t getting there.”

Paige swallowed. KJ was probably right—understanding the relationship between this place and the real world wouldn’t necessarily find them an exit. But there was nothing Paige loved more than a detail. There was no puzzle that couldn’t be solved by intimately understanding the shapes of its parts. If this thing wasn’t an animal, if it was a machine instead, wouldn’t understanding every function be the key to turning it off?

“Let’s go back to what you said about it being a creature,” Paige said, flipping to yet another blank page. “You wouldn’t escape the stomach of a creature by walking to the edge. You’d have to get back out the way you came in.”

“That would be helpful if I knew how I got in,” KJ mused. “I tried reading the chant again. You obviously bled in the water. Neither of those things undid it.”

Paige lingered on the details. She supposed she and the boys had done the same thing when they arrived: said the chant and spilled a little blood. That was when the atmosphere changed, and that was when they’d found KJ. “I’m assuming you’ve tried doing both at the same time?”

KJ shook her head.

“Why not?”

“I don’t give it any of my blood,” KJ said. “The more you give, the more control of you it has. That’s what my mom told me.”

Paige touched her head wound and found it still throbbed at the pressure. “What does that mean for me?”

“I think you’re okay,” KJ offered. “I know you got some in the water, but that’s why I tried to wrap it right when you got out. I don’t think you got too much on the floor. And you didn’t do it on purpose.”

Paige shuddered. “If we’re in the stomach of this thing, and I assume we don’t want to get, uh . . . *digested*, then we would need to figure out where its mouth is, right?”

“Hard to find the mouth on something that can change shape at will.”

“Maybe even impossible.”

The ease in KJ’s expression faltered. Growing up, Paige had never been under the impression they would ever uncover any definitive answers on what had happened at the Kaleidoscope, but the uncertainty now felt more dire than it did back in Miami. If the math was right—if KJ had really been wandering these halls for the equivalent of years—this was probably the last thing she wanted to hear. Paige was supposed to be the one who turned ideas into answers, but even she had limits.

“I wish you’d called me,” Paige said. “Before you came here.”

“Yeah.” KJ’s taut frown melted. “Me too.”

Thoughtlessly, Paige reached across the space between the chair and the bed and touched KJ’s knuckles. What was meant to be a comfort immediately felt like a mistake. KJ’s gaze fell on the place their skin met, and Paige knew she should pull away. It wasn’t *her* comfort that KJ wanted, but there was a strange electricity that simmered in the air around their hands. Like completing the hard part of the inevitable conversation made space for something else. Like there was something she’d told herself was impossible all her life, but here in this place where impossible things reigned, it was gasping to life.

Something was different about touching KJ now.

KJ drew her hand away quickly. She sprang up straight, and her gaze snapped to the door.

“I just felt Mateo, but he’s with . . .” KJ’s eyes narrowed.

Above them, the lights flickered, and there was a slick, puckering sound like serpents writhing through the plumbing. Paige braced herself against her chair, but just as quickly as the disturbance came, it died. When she

looked back at KJ, she found her stiff as death.

"Get up," KJ said, hopping off the bed. "We need to go."

Paige followed KJ out of the bedroom and back into the maze of the resort, though there was something about being freshly showered and panicked that made her feel incredibly small under the Kaleidoscope's all-seeing eye. As they wove through corridors, there were no more flickering lights or hauntings waiting around dark corners. But that didn't stop KJ from moving like they were being chased, bounding with the same relentless speed she'd employed when she was on the track team.

Paige desperately needed to find nonathletic friends.

When KJ finally stopped and threw open a set of white double doors, she went still.

Inside was a pastiche of vaguely island-inspired decor, buffet tables, and plucky summer music. An empty bar at the center of the room was tiki themed, flanked by unlit torches and wads of fake pink flowers. Bamboo letters fixed across the bar read CABANA.

Just as KJ had predicted, Mateo was inside.

But Mateo wasn't dead, and he wasn't alone. He crouched beside a heap of a woman, hands hovering cautiously over her shoulders. When his eyes darted to the doorway, he startled before clambering to his feet.

"She wasn't here when I got here," Mateo said, angled toward KJ. "I swear to god, she fell through the ceiling."

It took Paige only a moment to recognize the woman lying face down on the cabana floor, arms underneath her like she'd meant to stop her fall. Raven-black hair, olive skin, and long, lithe limbs. She'd only just spoken to this woman at the memorial. She'd only just watched this woman amble miserably into the sweltering light.

Tess Collins was not supposed to be here.

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After what feels like a century, Casey breaks the surface of the water.

She gasps for air, clawing at the waves as sunlight blinds her. The splitting pain in her skull blots away everything else. It takes her too long to recognize the stale flatness of the blue sky and distantly, the infinite Miami skyline. There is an overwhelming loneliness to this pretend beach in this pretend world. Her heart races and her mouth fills with water and she scrambles, helpless, until the waves push her toward the shore. The heel of her hand sinks into warm, wet sand, and she claws through it until she's sure the water can't carry her away.

When she flops onto her back, she expects to find that she's covered in that strange, oily presence. But her clothes are only wet from the water, and she is, somehow, intact. She spits water onto the sand.

Just as quickly as she understands she's alive, something else grabs her full attention: She is *starving*.

The hunger isn't the only thing. She sinks into the sand like she weighs thousands of pounds, but when she glances at her arms, she sees they're thinner and bonier than before. A wound is gouged into her chest. The pink jagged edges of it are wet with infection, and its raw, bloody center is fresh. The thing in the water wasn't a hallucination, then. Whatever it took from her is gone for good.

Waves crash against the beach. There's no sign of the girls from the water.

Shakily, Casey rolls to her feet and sweeps some of the sand from her wet limbs. Only a few feet away, a door is planted in the sand.

Casey stumbles forward, closes her hand around the doorknob, and pulls it open to find the resort waiting for her again on the other side: a slate tile floor and a long stretch of pink hallway and neon light bouncing from everywhere, casting a glow over her face.

She looks back at the beach, and her chest squeezes. Maybe she could walk along the beach for miles and find rescue, and maybe that would be smarter than stepping back into the hell she just escaped. But there's

something not quite right about the sunlight, about the breezeless air, about the distant city. She imagines, no matter how long she walks, there will be no one to find on this beach.

She hasn't left the Kaleidoscope yet, even if it wants her to think she has.

And so, with a deep breath, she steps back into the resort and lets the beach collapse behind her.

The Kaleidoscope is quieter now than it was when she lost Summer.

Maybe *quieter* isn't the right word. It was often *quiet* at the beginning, too, like the dark seconds of confusion at a surprise birthday party just before her friends jumped out. It was a quiet that simmered under the weight of an impending scream. The Kaleidoscope she wanders now is a forgotten place, only breathing through its ghosts.

Without seeing another face, she's sure there are far fewer living people in this building than there were before.

After what feels like a century of walking and walking some more, Casey opens the door to a kitchen. Unlike most of the resort, the kitchen isn't drenched in color and light. It's a sleek silver tunnel of a room, all industrial ovens and deep-basin sinks. Dome lights drip from the ceiling, casting the whole thing in a sickly gray. It takes Casey only a moment to find the thing that matters: At the very back of the kitchen, a row of chrome refrigerators gleam seductively. Like they've been waiting for her.

Casey hobbles the length of the kitchen, ignoring the searing pain in her chest. They've been at the resort long enough that the likelihood of this place being untouched is slim. But after the white light of the fridge blinds her and cool air rolls out to meet her, Casey finds that it isn't empty at all. Her mouth waters.

On the top shelf, a tray of plump cinnamon rolls waiting to be baked. Under that, some type of turkey pinwheels and a bowl of perfectly round meatballs. She finds freshly cut salad and a sheet cake covered in confetti sprinkles with icing that reads CONGRATULATIONS RMHS CLASS OF 2001. Her fingers twitch at her sides, and before she fully understands it, her eyes are hot with tears. There's a pain in her belly she's forced herself to ignore, but now it's like her organs go concave.

She pulls the cake out of the fridge and throws it onto the nearest counter. Gracelessly, she unwraps it, smearing frosting over her knuckles

and wrists before fisting chunks of it and shoving them into her mouth. The sweet buttercream flattens over her tongue, perfectly sugary and smooth. She drags handfuls to her mouth until half the sheet is gone, and the center is left reading HS CLASS OF 2001. Until her stomach is sore and tears leak each time she blinks. She doesn't have a chance to wipe the frosting from her hands before her world goes dark.

Casey understands there's a bag over her face only moments before her assailant pulls it taut around her throat and whirls her violently toward the ground.

The fridge was a trap.

She sticks her hands out just in time to break her fall, but the moment they're on the ground, her attacker gathers her arms from under her, pinning them sharply across her back. Casey cries out, and the body above her shifts, jamming a knee against her spine. Voice heavy, they hiss, "Don't make a sound."

The moment Casey hears the voice, she stops fighting. She gathers all the air she can with the burlap grating against her throat. "Tess, it's *me*."

Above her, Tess freezes.

"You're lying," Tess snaps, voice quivering. "You're not . . . I haven't seen you anywhere, but—"

Before she can finish the thought, Tess releases her arms and flips her over, tearing the bag from her face. Casey blinks up into the light until Tess's face comes into focus, hovering just above her. Her normal stream of black hair is gone, and what's left is just feathery layers that fall unevenly to her ears. A long gash runs the length of her neck and shoulder, swollen and weeping with pus, matching the wound in Casey's chest.

Her eyes flood with tears when she says, "You know there's forks in here, you idiot."

Then she collapses onto Casey's chest and weeps.

Casey rakes through the blur of her memory. How long has it been since they've seen each other? Before she went into the water, it felt like everything that happened here was all in one night. But now, she feels . . . *fragmented*. The wound in her chest pulses in hot pain, but whatever was taken from her, she can't remember it now. And she can't remember anything that would justify the sobbing mess Tess melts into.

"Why did you . . . ?" Casey trails off, touching the sore strip of her throat where the bag strangled her. "Were you trying to *kill* me?"

Tess scrambles up, wiping her eyes with the heel of her hand. “No. Oh my god, I would never kill you. But I didn’t know you were you.”

Casey blinks. “Would you kill me if I wasn’t?”

“Well . . .” Tess hoists herself to her feet, grabbing something off the nearest counter. She points to the refrigerator with a gleaming object that Casey realizes is a kitchen knife. “If it wasn’t you, it would’ve been completely different. Everyone else is, like . . . have you been hiding under a rock or something?”

“I wasn’t hiding,” Casey says, finally sitting up. The rush of sudden food and Tess’s attack makes her head spin, and the cool tile of the floor does little to slow it. “I was . . . I don’t know where I was. How long has it been?”

“Since when?”

Casey’s eyes narrow. “Since you abandoned me.”

It’s Tess’s turn to blink at her absently. Then, she presses her wrist to her forehead and groans. “I did not *abandon* you. I was trying to get you to come with us. Are you mad at me about that?”

“I’m not mad. It’s just . . .”

Tess makes a *spit it out* gesture with her knife-wielding hand, which Casey does not appreciate.

Still, she mutters, “What happened to you? Where’s Jade and Kendra?”

Tess’s face goes steely. “I don’t know. I lost them.”

“Lost them?”

Something darkens even more in Tess’s face, and Casey wishes, suddenly, that she’d never asked.

“Kendra started freaking out whenever that noise came on. You know the one. Started saying that we should get rid of ourselves before anyone else gets us.” Tess rolls her shoulders and closes her eyes. “She tried to get Jade while we were sleeping, and they got into it. I ran when it got bloody, and I didn’t see how it ended. But I . . . I haven’t seen them.”

The way she says it is jittery. Indirect. It stirs some deep and cold fear in Casey, raising the hair at the back of her neck.

“I lost Summer, too,” Casey admits. “I was with her right after you guys . . . we were together, but when that noise came on, she tried to save us. She was outnumbered, and when I tried to catch up with her, the whole place changed.”

“You think she’s still alive?” Tess asks.

“She has to be . . .” Casey huffs out a breath. “But I guess that means you haven’t seen her, either.”

“Case, you haven’t . . .” Tess pauses to reconsider. “Have you had to hurt anyone?”

“Had to?”

“This place is special.” She motions to the wound just visible above the neckline of Casey’s shirt. “Obviously you already know. It unlocks all the stuff people try to keep hidden. And I’ve learned that under all those smiles and laughs, the rest of our class is evil. I mean *evil*.”

Casey shakes her head. “I don’t think I did.”

Tess squints.

Casey tries to explain everything. Summer finding her in the pool, the bloodbath in the bathroom, the talk with Jason, Summer going over the railing. That all feels like solid ground, at least. It’s the next part that gets blurry as she tries to capture it in words, like the frantic way she used to write down her dreams before they slipped away. She explains the hall with no doors, the seagulls and the shipwreck and the girls scrambling for air, crushed under the cruel waves. She tries to explain the infinite expanse of her time in the water, the way it left her distant and unraveled, a million disparate pieces all at once.

“Something started happening to me the minute we got here,” Casey says. “Before any of the ritual stuff in Claudia’s room. But it’s worse now. It’s *way* worse.”

“Wow,” Tess manages. “While you were in the void, I’ve been living through a battle royale. I don’t even think people are looking for the way out anymore. No one’s coming.”

“But . . .” Casey runs a hand through her still wet hair. “If no one’s coming, what do we do? Just *live* here?”

Tess points to the fridge with her knife. “Could be worse. I’ve got infinite food, lots of hiding places. And if anyone comes in here, I set up a million different traps. We’re safe.”

“Was that bag one of your traps?” Casey asks, massaging her throat.

“Only because the trip wire didn’t work,” Tess says casually. “I’ll have to test it again and make sure it’s working for when the real deal happens.”

Just inches before the fridge, Casey spots a glint of fluorescent light reflecting off the clear plastic of a bit of fishing line. She presses her fingers to her temples and closes her eyes and tries to adjust to this new reality.

“What is happening?” Casey asks. “These are people we go to school with. You’re practically hunting them.”

“They are not people we know,” Tess says. “Not anymore.”

The same fluorescent light caught in the fishing line glints briefly from the flat edge of Tess’s knife. Involuntarily, Casey comes back to herself. Tess’s fear doesn’t come in panicked bursts like the others’ fear; hers builds slowly, one brick at a time. She’s built a fortress of her panic in this kitchen and convinced herself it’s safe.

Casey raises her hands in surrender. “Okay. We don’t trust anyone. What else do I need to know?”

Tess mulls this over, and it’s unclear if she’s trying to think of more survival rules or if she’s deliberating on whether or not she trusts Casey’s concession. Finally, she says, “I assume you already know how we make the deals.”

“Deals?” Casey asks.

Tess’s eyes narrow again. “Your chest?”

“What do you mean?”

“That’s how you talk to this place, right?” Tess prods. “Give a little blood, get a little power. I’ve just been doing little bits, getting food and supplies. Looks like you gave a *lot*.”

“Gave . . . ?” Casey trails off.

She touches the edge of her open wound, and the pain makes her dizzy. Her eyes flutter in time with the lights flickering overhead.

“Whoa,” Tess breathes, falling to her knees. She presses her palms to Casey’s shoulders, helping her to a seat, but it does little to stop the spinning. “You’re not looking great. Can you stay with me?”

Casey nods, but the wound in her chest throbs, and the colors of the room all run together. As she slumps into Tess’s arms, her dreams bleed into the static air around her. A hot, muddy beach and a starlit marina and a little silver-haired girl watching a blinking pink light across the water.

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Eighteen

“Where did she come from?” Paige asked, before pivoting to Mateo. “And where did you go?”

It sounded uncomfortably similar to a square dancing song they’d been subjected to in grade school.

Mateo stopped waving his hand in front of Tess’s face to stare at Paige, slack-jawed and afraid. He didn’t look injured, but he looked distinctly different. Paler and more jittery. Certainly *worse*. She struggled to process which of her emergencies was more pressing: Mateo or Tess. Last time she’d seen Mateo, he was accusing her and KJ of hunting him for sport.

Still, Tess was the more urgent problem.

“She genuinely *fell* on me. Through the—”

Mateo pointed up at the perfectly unmarred ceiling.

“. . . never mind.”

Paige crouched beside Tess and resisted the urge to poke the woman in the shoulder for signs of life. Her stomach rose and fell slowly, so she wasn’t dead. Relief shot through Paige, but alive wasn’t good enough. They needed Tess awake and lucid to explain how she got there. And more importantly, they needed her to explain how she and the other survivors had gotten *out*. That had to be why she was there—to save them.

“KJ, can you . . . ?”

Paige looked up and found KJ turned completely away from her mother. Her face was drained of color and her eyes were wide, focused on the shelves of liquor behind the bar. There was a slight quiver to her bottom lip. Paige bit the inside of her cheek and focused on Mateo.

“Can you watch her for a second?” Paige whispered. “KJ needs a breather. We’ll be right outside, and if it . . . I don’t know—*changes*—stay here. We’ll come find you.”

“How?” Mateo hissed.

“We just will, okay? Hang on.”

With a quick nod from Mateo, Paige stood and ghosted to KJ's side. Maybe it was an overstep, assuming they'd repaired more of their friendship than they had, but Paige slipped her hand into KJ's, laced their fingers together, and tugged her out of the cabana. If KJ thought the touch was too much, she didn't show it.

Paige guided KJ around one corner, and then another. She tried to keep track of what rooms they passed, but her attention snagged on the dent between KJ's dark brows. It was exacerbated by the harsh lights, a little notch of fatigue and anger that Paige wasn't used to seeing there. It wasn't the usual worry she wore around her mother.

"She can't be here," KJ finally breathed. She didn't pull away from Paige's grip. Instead, she squeezed harder. "The whole point of this was . . . if she's here and she's stuck with us, then why did I even . . ."

"Slow down." Paige touched the curve of KJ's shoulder, slowing her from a power walk to a gentle stroll. "What do you mean? I thought you came here to burn it down."

"Yeah, for *her*."

"She sent you here to fight her demons," Paige huffed.

"Please don't do that right now," KJ whispered, finally tearing away from Paige's grip. She returned to a blistering pace, and Paige found herself jogging to keep up. "You know she's always said this place . . . *owned* a piece of her. I could feel it taking more. I could feel her getting weaker. I heard her in her sleep, asking it to take the rest of her. Was I just supposed to sit there and wait? If it got her like—"

Paige came to a stop. "Like it got my mom?"

KJ stopped and eyed the ground, and the quiet was suffocating. "I didn't want her to come here and never come back. I tried to destroy it for her, and I . . . if she's here, trying was pointless. It got her anyway."

"You don't know anything yet," Paige said. "When she wakes up, maybe she'll know the way out. This could be great."

"It's not great," KJ snapped. "Being here is not great. For anyone. Ever."

A fair point, Paige thought.

"We need to think of what we'll ask her," Paige tried, veering the conversation back to something with a goal. "We need to figure out how they got out of here last time. And what happened to Caleb. And how she got in here. And—"

"Paige."

KJ held up a hand. The neon-pink light mounted on the wall beside her flickered, strobing hot across her face. Her eyes were closed, long dark lashes flush against her cheeks. She was listening to something, Paige thought. Or trying to remember something. When she opened her eyes, the fear and panic were gone from her. What was left was a tangle of confusion.

"There something weird in here."

She pointed to an unassuming brown wooden door across the hall. While the resort ahead sprawled into veins of conjoined walkways, all drenched in color, the door KJ fixated on offered nothing. No label, no decor, no ominous sounds luring them inside. If KJ hadn't pointed to it, Paige might not have seen it at all. It was the nothingness of it that made Paige uneasy. There was something especially ominous about a place the resort tried hiding in plain sight.

KJ reached for the doorknob, and Paige caught her wrist.

"We need to talk to your mom first."

"We won't find it again," KJ said, distant and dreamy like she herself didn't understand it. "I've . . . I've never been in this room."

She pulled the door open, and a rush of warm light nearly blinded them. When Paige managed to focus past the flash, she went stiff. The room on the other side of the door—if you could even call it a room—was more impossible than anything else she'd seen. Not a sprawling arcade or a multilayered shopping mall, but a beach. A fully outdoor, wind-off-the-water *beach*. The air was salty and gentle. Water lapped against the shore somewhere inside, and the ground was a rusty muck, wet and slick under the spindly roots of red mangrove. Docks laden with sailboats stretched out into the water, tilting slowly as the ocean rolled in. It was an impossible thing to see inside a resort, but one look told Paige it got worse.

She'd been to this beach before.

"How is this . . . ?" KJ started. "It can't be that easy."

"It's not the way out," Paige said.

"How do you know?"

Paige took a numb step toward the spill of tangerine light. Sunset at the park, seagulls crying high overhead, red streaks of light glittering on the water. And far away, a little island on the horizon with a blinking light getting brighter the more the sky grew dark. "Maybe you don't recognize it in the light. But this is where we . . ."

"How?" KJ asked. "How is it *here*?"

How is anything here, Paige wanted to ask. But as KJ prodded her with questions she couldn't answer, she found herself wondering if they'd switched roles. Once upon a time, it would have been KJ making outlandish claims and Paige begging her to focus on something real. Something she could prove beyond a gut feeling. But maybe there was something to trusting that gut feeling. Through this door, there was something she needed to see. She nodded at KJ, then stepped inside.

The marina was exactly how she remembered it. Mud squelched under her sneakers, and the trees along the highway were dense and tangled together over the water. Even though the plain door behind them still stood upright, planted between two coarse shrubs, they were absolutely outside. There was a dampness to the air that felt like a memory. Was it the exact same temperature as that night? Was it the same four birds soaring overhead? The details of the memory were always a blur to her, but everything here was solid. Tangible. She couldn't tell if she was looking at history or something projected from her own head, but it was alive and it was all around her.

To her right, a hundred feet down the road, Paige watched a minivan putter toward the marina.

"Is that . . . ?" KJ started.

Paige sucked in a breath. "It's us."

Cautiously, the minivan pulled into the marina parking lot and went still. It was a solid thirty seconds before the driver's side door popped open, and Paige felt her stomach plummet to her feet. Her mother slid out of the car and shut the door behind her, and Paige had to take KJ's arm to keep from buckling.

It was one thing to see photos of the famously dead Casey Keller. For years, Paige would sneak into the Mamanis' attic and rummage through pictures of her mother, brushing fingers over her face, begging for some way to understand her. She wished she could hear stories of the Kaleidoscope in her mother's voice, see it in the shadows of her eyes. When no one was watching, Paige would slip into her mother's old T-shirts, pin her hair up, and look in the mirror. She would try to force Casey Keller to appear somewhere in the landscape of her face.

But here she was now, wisps of blond hair trailing from a sloppy bun, wearing her too-long hoodie with an ice-cream stain permanently streaked over the right shoulder. Paige remembered her dressed more formally, but

this felt right. Casey walked around the side of the van with her eyes trained on the ground, as if looking at the blinking light might suck her right back into the resort.

“Is this really happening?” Paige asked. She couldn’t look at KJ, but she needed to hear her voice. “Do you see her, too?”

“I see her.”

The ghost of Casey Keller walked to the side of the minivan and slid open the back door before hoisting a little girl from her car seat. And it all went just how Paige remembered, from start to finish—a jumbled walk to the water’s edge, a thousand questions about her dreams, and her mother spiriting her back to the van as quickly as she’d taken her out. But in this half reality, something happened that Paige didn’t remember.

Just after Casey buckled Paige into her car seat and shut the door, she moved to the back of the van and sat on the bumper. She slipped a cigarette from her pocket, lit it, and began punching numbers into her phone. After an impatient couple of seconds, she pressed the phone to her ear.

“She’s been dreaming about the Kaleidoscope. Like I told you.”

Casey waited a moment, then rolled her eyes and took a long drag. It was funny, Paige thought, that this version of her mother felt so unfamiliar to her. The real Casey had been replaced with the one in Saul and Claudia’s stories, in pristine high school photos, in haunting tributes. A sweet girl, troubled by survivor’s guilt. A tragic mystery of a girl.

“I am not overreacting. You’re *under*reacting.” Casey stood, indignant, before sitting on the bumper again. “I took her to the marina—no, you know I had to. I’m not like you. I don’t just wait for emergencies. And guess what? The first thing she says when we get here is that she’s *been here before*. What am I supposed to do with that?”

Whoever was on the other end of the call began speaking, Paige gathered, and whatever they were saying was the opposite of what Casey wanted to hear.

“I knew something was wrong, but you said you knew what you were doing.” Casey angrily took another puff of her cigarette. “We didn’t have enough. Did we actually think it would just let us off the hook?”

Casey glanced over her shoulder, into the minivan.

“You know what we have to do.”

The other voice said something so loud, Paige could hear the static of it from feet away, even if she couldn’t quite make out the words.

“Of course it’s dangerous,” Casey said, exasperated. “You know what else Paigey said she saw? A girl with red hair who looks sad. *That* is what’s showing up in her dreams. Sound familiar?”

This time, the other end of the line was quiet. Casey closed her eyes and let the warm breeze roll over her.

Paige crossed the highway and stood inches from this specter of her mother, and she resisted the urge to touch her. To poke her and see if the skin on her face was real. She wanted to speak and see this haunted version of her mother react. But there was a tender, tentative current in the air, and Paige imagined that the moment she interrupted the memory, it would vanish. Maybe the Kaleidoscope was trying to kill them, but for a few minutes, she was in awe of what it could create. For a few minutes, there was a world where she and her mother existed at once.

“Then I guess I’ll do it for both of us. I’m the one who should,” Casey finally said, standing. “And when you wake up tomorrow free of this thing, you’ll know I did it. And I didn’t need your help.”

A beat.

“Jesus Christ, would you rather wait until your kid is gone?”

Without waiting for an answer, Casey ended the call and pocketed her phone. She huffed out a single defeated breath, and she turned back to the water. Paige followed her out to the dock, and she tried to understand. Casey was silent, though, as her eyes locked on the blinking pink light.

Paige had nearly touched her mother’s shoulder when, suddenly, Casey sucked in a breath and began to cry. It was a private kind of cry, shoulders rigid to keep from shaking, breath stilted in an attempt to stay even. It was the kind of cry she wanted to hide from the child in her van. She wiped her nose with the back of her wrist. “I’m sorry,” she choked. “If you can hear me, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to.”

Paige pressed her hand to her chest, and she knew, bone deep, that this apology wasn’t for her. But the words sank into her all the same.

Once she had wrung the tears from her system, Casey nodded at the distant resort and made her way back to the van, drying her cheeks with her sleeve. Something in Paige finally . . . *snapped*. A dam breaking after years of threatening collapse. Her lip quivered and her throat tightened and, when her gaze flitted up from her mother, she found KJ standing at the back of the van.

In only a few strides, KJ made it to Paige and pulled her into a hug.

Paige melted into KJ, burying her face in her shoulder. KJ's fingers caught in her hair and she brushed through the tangled mess without a word. Just like they'd done a thousand times before, as if they'd never stopped. It was familiar in all the ways Paige was starving for. If she couldn't make sense of her mother, at least she could find sense here. The hug was warm and solid and, Paige thought, if KJ wasn't holding her upright, she might crumple.

"How is she here?" Paige asked. "How is she . . . ?"

"I don't know," KJ whispered against her ear. "Was this the night before she left?"

Paige nodded.

"Who was she talking to?" KJ asked. "Do you remember?"

Paige drew back so she could look KJ in the eyes. It struck her suddenly that their faces hovered much closer together than they had in years. So much about KJ was different now—hollower cheeks, black lashes long and full, shoulders square and sturdy. Paige might have hugged KJ a thousand times before, but breathing in her air and looking close into the speckled copper brown of her eyes felt brand-new.

The hurt over her mother burned away and was replaced with something much more confusing. Much more magnetic.

"Uh, I don't . . ." Paige said, quickly averting her gaze toward the minivan as it pulled away from the marina. She took a full step back, letting the sunset light slide between her and KJ. Just to be safe. "I don't even remember her making a call. This feels like . . . I don't know. It's what I remember, but clearer than I remember it?"

"Because this isn't your memory. It's hers."

The voice came from behind them. Paige glanced over KJ's shoulder and found Tess Collins with her arm slung over Mateo's shoulders. The plain wood door couched in the brush was still open, revealing the Kaleidoscope hallway just inside. Tess brushed her hair from her eyes and watched the minivan until it was nearly gone from view.

"And I was on the other end of that call."

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Nineteen

Without the minivan, the marina fell into a deadly quiet. Even though dusk was settling in, the breeze was blistering hot and made Paige's already damp neck sticky with sweat. She scanned Tess Collins head to toe. She really looked more like KJ than Paige remembered. It was more striking when they stood only a few feet apart: the same straight noses and intense eyes and tawny skin, effortlessly warm like they'd spent their whole lives outside. A thousand questions stacked up at once, but the only one Paige managed was, "How did you get here?"

Tess blinked into the dying sunlight and scrunched her nose. "This place has really branched out. I mean, really. Never seen anything like this."

"Mom," KJ cut in. "What are you doing here?"

"Oh . . ." Tess trailed off, still admiring the landscape. "I could feel it squirming all the way from home."

A year ago, this would be when Paige rolled her eyes, because Tess's antics were an inside joke. Because, back home, nothing Tess said ever really made sense if you looked too long at it. But given everything they'd seen in the resort, Paige was inclined to think Tess was talking about something real for once. Or, more likely, she'd been talking about something real the whole time. It didn't mean Paige had to like her.

Tess motioned down the empty highway with a groan. "That was the meanest your mom had ever been to me. Saying my kid's gonna die, calling me a coward. I was so pissed at her that night I thought I'd never speak to her again. And . . . well, I guess that's how it went."

"Ms. Collins, could you—" Mateo began.

Tess put up a hand to quiet him in a way that seemed almost personal. "It's been a long trip. Mind if we take a seat before the grilling starts?"

They moved to a warped picnic table at the edge of the marina. The ocean sparkled softly behind them, but no boats skimmed the waves as far as Paige could see. In fact, as she slid into her seat at the picnic table, she

noted that there was no one anywhere in this false marina. She wondered if night would ever come in this half place. If she walked along the road as long as she could, would she reach Miami? Was this world real only as long as she inhabited it?

KJ's hand found her knee, tugging her back.

"Okay," Paige said, pivoting to what mattered. "Let's get everything on the table. All of us. Everything we know."

Wordlessly, all eyes fell on Tess.

She raised her hands in surrender. "I'm feeling a little cornered, kids. Before we get into my sob story, I need to know who's been feeding it."

"What does that mean?" Paige asked.

"*She* knows." Tess pointed at KJ, arching a brow like she'd caught her daughter borrowing the car without permission. "The bleeder. Who bled and got this thing going in the first place?"

It was only when Paige tried to dig up the memory that she felt the sting in her ankle. *The mirror shard in the bedroom*. It felt like ages ago now, but wasn't that when it all started? A drop of blood seeping into the carpet and a change in the air.

"It was me," Paige admitted, returning her shoe to the sand. "Is that what happened? The blood triggered the same thing as your graduation trip?"

"The same thing?" Tess pondered, watching a cream-colored cloud slide by. Paige thought her question warranted a simple yes or no, but it was never that easy with Tess. "The blood takes you from the real world into this one. But is it the same one? I can't really tell."

"Paige bled, but Caleb was the one who said the chant," Mateo blurted out. "We told him not to."

"Is that how your parents told you it started?" Tess chuckled. "After all that, they actually think it was your mom's dumb little chant?"

Mateo shook his head. "My parents didn't tell me anything."

"Then they've got thicker skulls than I thought," Tess snapped. "At least I had the sense to prepare my kid for when this happened."

Disbelief ran hot in Paige's veins. Tess spoke like she knew this was going to happen all along. Like being trapped in a never-ending labyrinth trying to kill you was a normal part of growing up. After a lifetime of feeding her daughter nightmares and trauma, she had the audacity to pat herself on the back.

Tess narrowed her eyes. She counted, pointing to KJ, to Mateo, and then

landed on Paige with a resolute “three.” Then she asked, “Where’s Dettweiler?”

Paige looked down. “He’s uh . . . he died.”

Tess pressed her knuckles to the table and closed her eyes. If Paige didn’t know her better, she might think Tess was praying. She didn’t ask a single question about how it happened. She only sat in a mournful silence.

When she opened her eyes, they were aimed at KJ. “Why are you being quiet?”

KJ shrugged.

“Did you kill him?” Tess prodded.

At that, KJ’s eyes widened.

“How could you ask that?” Paige snapped.

“Oh brother,” Tess groaned. “I’m sure you’ve put it together by now. That’s how this thing works. Lock the doors, close the windows, get the heart pumping, and let the bloodbath start. This whole place is designed to show you who your real enemies are. Remember, there were a lot more of us back in 2001. Not everyone decided to be a pacifist.”

“You’re saying that’s actually what it was?” Paige asked. “They all killed each other.”

“Most of them, yeah.”

“Why?”

It was like Tess couldn’t hear her. She leaned toward KJ with a flash of something insidious in her eyes. “Look at me. What did you do?”

KJ looked up from her knuckles and met her mother’s gaze, but she kept her stare unflinching and raw. There was an intensity to Tess that overtook the clumsy mess of her. In moments, she could be terrifying. When they were little, KJ was quick to fold under that pressure, but now she met it with a fire of her own.

“I came in on my own,” KJ said. “I didn’t come with them.”

“How long have you been here?”

“A month,” KJ said evenly.

“A month in *here* time?”

KJ shook her head.

“Jesus,” Tess spat.

Paige bristled at that. It was classic Tess to show up to the only place she could possibly help and refuse to be useful. They needed answers from her, and all she had the capacity to do was make KJ feel small. Paige regretted

being kind at the vigil when she should have said what she really felt. “You didn’t notice she was gone for a month?”

Tess slapped a palm on the table. “Hey now—”

“I’m sorry,” Mateo said, finally butting his way back into the conversation. He sat as far as possible from Tess on their side of the table, and even that didn’t seem to be enough distance. “I know there’s a lot going on. But maybe we should think more about the way out? Ms. Collins, how do we leave?”

Tess shook her head in disbelief. “They really didn’t tell you shit.”

Paige tapped her fingers impatiently against the table. “There has to be an end, right? Or a loophole? We can’t just be nowhere.”

Tess considered. “Well, no.”

Paige fought the urge to scream.

“First thing you have to do is forget this is a building. It *pretends* to be a building. It’s . . . it’s alive just like the rest of us. It just wants to eat. No matter where you go, you’re in its throat. You’re just trying not to get swallowed.”

“What happens if you get swallowed?” Mateo asked.

“What happened to Dettweiler?”

Paige flinched. Caleb’s frozen body fusing with the floor: purple skin, mouth open in a gasp, skin peeling from the parts of him left. *Swallowed* was a good way to describe it.

“But anything that’s alive, you can form a relationship with, right?” Tess asked. “You just have to work with it a bit. As long as you’re feeding it, it doesn’t want to kill you.”

When no one said anything in response, Tess groaned.

“Imagine something this big,” she said, squinting through less than a centimeter of space between her thumb and pointer finger. “Imagine you had it in your mouth and you needed to keep it alive. How do you keep from crushing it?”

“Not to start poking holes,” Paige cut in, “but it is absolutely trying to kill us. It forced Caleb to lock himself in a freezer. It tried to drown me.”

Tess mulled it over. “Here, I’ll show you.”

Paige met KJ’s stare, questioning. But KJ’s expression was difficult to parse. She was unsteady here, both fixed on her mother and itching for an escape. There was something strangely comforting about knowing they were coping with mom woes at the same time. When Tess fisted the fabric

of her sweatshirt and shimmied up her sleeve, KJ seemed almost relieved. Like she thought Tess might show them something worse.

There was a knotted scar, white and sinewy, engraved on the flesh of Tess's inner arm. The skin seemed to twist around this ghost of a wound. Tess pressed her thumb to the scar and looked at them expectantly. "You've got to offer it what it wants. This thing likes to trade."

"You were giving it blood?" Mateo asked.

"Oh yeah. Lots of it." Tess smacked the inside of her arm almost affectionately. "A lot of people in here gave it blood by killing. Probably didn't even know that's what they were doing. But it was never really that demanding with me. If I didn't ask for a lot, I didn't have to give a lot."

"Is this how my parents did it? Or . . . did they kill someone?" Mateo asked.

Tess didn't meet his eyes when she shrugged.

This didn't seem to satisfy Mateo, who straightened a little and sobered. "Did *you* kill anyone?"

This time, Tess met his eyes, and a shadow passed over her. Paige understood without a word, and her blood went cold.

Before Mateo could press her more, KJ huffed out a breath. "If blood gives it power over us, how do we use it to get out?"

"Don't worry about it," Tess said. "I don't want you kids making any trades, okay? I can be the adult this time. I'll take care of it."

Before they could stop her, Tess flicked a knife from her pocket and pressed the tip against her scar.

"Wait—" Paige gasped.

"*Shhhh*, don't sweat it," Tess said. She flashed a smile at Paige. "The key is, you gotta do it where it won't really matter. It barely even hurts."

With that, she plunged the knife into her arm, expertly tilting the blade back to let the blood escape quickly.

"I'd rather I be the one to do it. If there's one thing I learned the first time around, it's that you've got to limit how much you make deals with this thing," Tess said. A fat dribble of blood spilled from her arm, ran the length of the knife, and plunged toward the ground. "Once you start trading, you always—"

The moment the blood touched the ground, Tess's eyes rolled back and she crumpled.

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Casey wakes to the sound of lobby music. As if the resort is gasping back to life, the sound begins quiet and wobbly, almost unsure, before escalating into full-bodied merriment. Somewhere outside, the rooms are shifting again.

She blinks and finds her mind trapped somewhere between the muddy sunset marina and the stark metal kitchen she fell asleep in. At once, she feels mealy linoleum under her fingers and warm wind off the sprawling ocean blowing through her hair. She is two people at once, but more than ever, it's as though the two of her might meet somewhere in the middle. At just the tips of their fingers, they might touch. When she rubs her eyes, she sees the silver-blond hair of a little girl who calls her *Mommy*. A minivan door slamming shut mixes with the sound of distant screams hallways away. She presses her fingers harder to her eyes until every other sense burns away and the pressure is the only thing she can feel.

When her eyes shoot open, she realizes she's still in the kitchen, but she's alone. Tess is gone and hefty metal carts have been shoved underneath the handles of both kitchen doors. The second thing she realizes is that she is very, very wet.

She springs to her feet and a splash erupts upward with her. All across the kitchen, a layer of water an inch deep coats the floor. Just like the water in Jason's room and in the hallways she waded through, this room is slowly flooding. The Kaleidoscope is flushing her out.

But where does it want her to go?

Once she's positive the kitchen is empty, Casey quietly wades to the chef's station and extracts a knife from a wooden block. It's slippery in her grip, though that's more because of the floodwater than her fear.

Whatever is happening to her and to this resort, one thing is clear: If she ever wants to see daylight again, she needs to keep moving.

The only thing stopping her is Tess's makeshift barricade. Not because she can't manage to roll the carts away, but because it means either Tess somehow put the barriers in place without leaving the room, or she has a

way out Casey hasn't seen. Maybe she meant to block the doors to protect herself and Casey, and maybe she's watching now from a different vantage point. But why not come out now that they're both awake? Casey eyes the darkest corners of the room, breath held tight, and she waits for any sign of life.

Nothing.

With a deep breath, Casey grips the edge of one of the rolling carts and tugs. She only manages one exhausting heave before a hand grips her shoulder, tearing her back.

Somehow, it's Tess who wedges herself between Casey and the counter. Tess, who she's *certain* was not in this room a moment ago. Casey fumbles her knife and takes an attack stance, even if she's far more likely to stab herself by accident. Tess's face is unreadable, both tired and wide awake, neither angry nor confused.

Without warning, Tess's knees buckle and she grabs Casey's wrist to keep from hitting the floor. Her long dark hair falls over her eyes as she slumps over and then goes completely still. If Casey didn't know better, she'd think Tess fell asleep standing up.

She holds her knife steady in her free hand, heart in her throat.

Just as quickly as she went limp, Tess shoots straight up with a gasp. There's an electric fear in her eyes as she presses her hands to her cheeks, her shoulders, her stomach. Her wild gaze searches the kitchen until, breathily, she whispers, "What the fuck is going on?"

"Tess?"

"Oh my god," Tess breathes, pinching the skin of her cheeks and pulling it away from her face. "I'm dead."

"What?"

"Is this hell?"

Casey shakes her head. "What are you *talking* about?"

"I probably deserved it, but damn . . ." Tess laughs incredulously. She scans the kitchen quickly, face wild with disbelief, lingering a moment too long on the freezer door behind them. Then she says it again. "*Damn*."

"Tess, you need to start making sense." Casey reaches out and takes her by the shoulders, jolting her back to reality. There's something strange about her, though Casey can't quite put her finger on it. A bit of black hair tickles her knuckles and she watches it float, staticky, from the long stream of Tess's ponytail. A ponytail Tess didn't have a few hours ago. "Wait—

what happened to your hair?”

Tess steps away from her and takes her ponytail in her hand, twisting it around her palm in wonder. She picks at the unmarred pink cotton of her shirt before extending her leg to observe it. “It’s like we never left. I was with the girls one second, then . . . is this where we end up?”

“The girls?” Casey narrows her eyes. “Kendra and Jade? You said they were—”

“It’s okay, you wouldn’t know about them.” Tess runs her fingers through her hair again, distracted. “You probably don’t know anything about anything. You’re not even real.”

It’s this comment that knocks Casey off-balance. She grips the nearest counter and fights off the dizziness. Just like the silver-haired girl calling out *Mom* before she entered the dark water, something about this feels both true and impossible. Nothing in this place makes any sense, and she can’t remember if it ever did.

“Yes, I am,” Casey says through a clenched jaw. “Aren’t I?”

“Listen, Case, whatever you are,” Tess says, only half listening. “There’s these two girls who are very important to us. Trust me on that. And they’re stuck in here, too. There’s a boy, also, but his parents suck, so let’s prioritize him last.”

“In *here*?”

“No, like in the hotel. If that’s still where we are.” Tess shakes her head like she’s explaining something to a very obnoxious toddler. Of all the people with the right to condescend to her, though, Tess is last on the list. She’s the one trapping her classmates, leaving people behind, speaking in complete gibberish. Clearly exasperated, Tess adds, “I need to get the girls out of here. How much does that cost? Assuming I’m dead, I just made a *huge* donation.”

“Do you mean the girls from the ocean?”

At this, Tess narrows her eyes. “This is useless. Obviously the real you was right. This thing was just waiting for us to come back. For the kids to come, too. I think we should’ve just toughed it out when we tried to skip town. Even if it killed us, that’s better than this, right?”

The memory comes over Casey like a flood. Driving up the highway with the windows down, screaming a Shakira song at the top of their lungs with sunlight bleeding across the dash. A familiarity, warm and blooming in her. Hope that they might make it away from the shadows that clung to

them. But it was never far enough.

“We couldn’t stay,” Casey says. She’s not sure where the memory comes from, if it’s even hers. “I had to go to the hospital.”

“Because you started puking the minute we left the state,” Tess finishes. She stumbles to the nearest chair in the kitchen and sits. “We were trying to get to Savannah. 2006.”

Casey blinks and finds her vision blurry. “What does this mean?”

“Case?” Tess says tenderly. “Does the name Paige mean anything to you?”

Without prompting and without reason, her mind wanders back to the girl haunting her in the mirrors. The one plunging into the ocean at night, swimming after her. The one she can’t remember for the life of her, but the one she’s seen all night. The one it feels like she’s seen for lifetimes. “Who is she?”

“She’s someone who means a lot to you.”

“She called me *Mom*.”

Tess’s shoulders slump and her expression goes slack. When she speaks, her voice warbles with tears. “Oh my god, it’s really you.”

She reaches out and snaps Casey into a crushing embrace. She smells like vanilla and almonds—the perfume they picked out together at the mall—and the warmth of her is overwhelming. The Tess who holds her now is worlds different from the one who threw her to the ground. Despite the confusion spinning violently in her head, Casey melts into the hug, tucking her chin to Tess’s shoulder, and inhales. It feels like the first full breath she’s taken in years.

“I said I was real,” Casey says.

“Is this where you’ve been?” Tess asks, just beginning to cry. “This whole time? Just . . . living in this?”

Casey doesn’t let go of Tess, but she stills. The whole time? The whole time since they arrived at the resort? Or longer? There’s something about the Kaleidoscope that feels centuries long, and when she tries to remember her life outside, it’s distant and dreamlike. But they came here together, that much is clear in her memory. However long she’s been in this dizzying mess of a resort, Tess has been here just as long.

Before she can ask more, though, Tess begins to go limp in her arms.

Casey tightens her grip and holds Tess upright until she finds her footing. When Tess pulls back, she’s gone pale. Her steely eyes are glazed

with exhaustion, and fine lines decorate every angle of her face. She looks impossibly tired, like she's lived more lives than Casey can fathom.

"Oh shit," Tess says, stumbling back to her feet. "Maybe I'm not dead. 'Cause I think it's making me leave."

Casey swallows hard. "You're not my Tess, are you?"

"I am." Tess braces herself against the nearest counter as her knees buckle. She's getting weaker, but there is something in her that fights to hold on. To stay—whatever that means. "I'll find my way back to you. I promise."

"Tess," Casey pleads, grabbing Tess's wrist. "Please. You have to help me understand. You can't—"

"Open the freezer," Tess says weakly, nodding toward the massive freezer door behind them. "You have to. And when you see what's in there . . . just try to remember everything else we've been through, okay?"

"What?"

"It'll be okay. I'll find my way back, and we'll—"

It happens between blinks. One moment, she's holding on to Tess and begging her to stay. The next, she's staring into an empty space, fingers wrapped around nothing. From all angles, it's as though no one was ever here. The kitchen is empty and waiting, just like it was when she woke up.

Casey considers pulling away the barricade and getting out while she has a chance. Whatever just happened with Tess is beyond her understanding, but the part about the freezer door sticks with her. Whether or not it counts as a separate door, it's the only thing she hasn't opened. She might not comprehend most of what Tess talked about, but this is clear enough: *Try to remember everything else we've been through.*

Casey holds her breath and unlocks the massive freezer door, then slowly pulls it open.

The first thing she sees is Tess—the Tess who ambushed her, with cropped hair and ragged clothes—hunched over with her knees to her chest. Her dark gaze whips up to Casey and her eyes are swollen with tears. Snot runs down to her upper lip and her hands shake, but the moment the door opens she flies to her feet, attempting to cover up the rest of the freezer.

Whatever Tess screams, Casey doesn't hear. Because the second thing she finds, slumped over at the back of the freezer with their perfectly identical hairdos meshed together in the ice, are the bodies of Kendra and Jade.

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Twenty

“Mom,” KJ breathed, dropping to Tess’s side the moment she fell. “Mom, *wake up*.”

In a strange way, KJ’s hushed desperation now reminded Paige of a scene she’d witnessed countless times. Maybe not here at the marina, but a thousand times before that back in Miami. Tess slumped over a ratty brown couch just inside the Collinses’ front door, KJ nudging her with the inside of her knee, delivering a whispered plea: *Wake up. I need you.*

“Is this what was supposed to happen?” Paige tried.

“No,” Mateo breathed.

His voice was farther away than Paige expected, and she spun to find him looking out over the water with his hand cupped over his brow. She hadn’t forgotten there were still questions he needed to answer. She’d seen fresh wounds on Mateo when they found Caleb’s body. That, combined with the certainty in his voice now, rang alarm bells in the back of her skull.

“Is there something you know?” Paige asked.

Adamantly, Mateo shook his head. He wasn’t fooling her, though; she’d seen him pull the exact same move every time he lied to his parents growing up. He was lying to her—maybe he’d been lying to her since they got here—but she couldn’t understand for the life of her what he was lying *about*. She thought of Tess’s knife dribbling blood, thought of the cuts on his ribs.

“Have you been making trades with this thing, too?” Paige asked.

Mateo pulled down his sleeve. “We need to be working on Ms. Collins, and we can talk about—”

“No, I don’t think so,” Paige said, stepping between Mateo and the water. “If you’re in trouble, if it said something to you while you were alone . . .”

Mateo met her eyes. “Leave it.”

“But . . .” Paige’s lips drew into a flat line. This didn’t make any sense.

They were supposed to know everything about each other. Even when she didn't have KJ, Paige had Mateo. "You can trust us. More than you can trust a haunted resort, at least."

At that, Mateo's expression warmed. "I know."

"Then you have to stop," Paige said. "If you're feeding it, you have to stop. It's going to kill you."

"She's breathing," KJ cut in, fingers pressed under the corner of her mother's jaw. "She's got a pulse. She's still alive."

Paige nodded. This was *fine*. Tess wasn't dead and Paige would interrogate Mateo more once she was dealt with. If Tess had some kind of power over this place, maybe they would be out sooner than Paige hoped. Maybe they wouldn't all end up like Caleb. Even if the Kaleidoscope was impossible, the impossible could still be understood, couldn't it? It had to operate by some kind of rules. If Tess Collins of all people could comprehend them, Paige could, too. She had to.

In a sudden burst, Tess gasped back to consciousness. She sat up and took one ragged gulp of air, then another, and clutched her chest. Her eyes searched the marina like those of a wild animal, but when she found KJ's face next to her, she relaxed.

"What happened?" KJ demanded, hands ghosting over her mother's face.

Tess slumped onto KJ's shoulder to catch her breath. She was frailer than Paige had realized, arms thin and bony and eyes set with deep wrinkles. She panted like she'd just run ten miles. Was she like this when she got to the Kaleidoscope? Or had something been taken from her while she was unconscious?

"I'll tell you what," Tess managed. "I sure was wrong about what's going on in here. Forget everything I just said."

Paige blinked. "What?"

"Yeah," Tess said. "We're totally screwed."

KJ paused her assessment to meet Paige's wide-eyed stare. No, that couldn't be right. They had an expert here now; they had a woman who'd managed to steal her way out of the jaws of the Kaleidoscope before. That had to be enough. She waited for Tess to clarify—to say it was a bad joke—but she simply pressed her brow into KJ's arm and went still.

"What did you see?" KJ asked.

"I saw, well . . ." She glanced up at Paige and seemed to rethink her

answer. “I saw a very old friend. But I didn’t see what I used to see when I offered this place some food. It used to be that I would just think really hard about what I wanted, give a little blood, and wait for the white light. I think the rules have changed.”

Maybe it was the stress, or maybe it was just the mounting list of reasons she hated Tess Collins with a fiery passion, but Paige was running out of patience for the cryptic answers. “Can you just say something real? Because we’re going to *die* if you don’t get us out of here.”

“Paige,” KJ snapped.

“No, no, she wants some answers . . .” Tess reached for her daughter’s hand, miserably hauling herself to her feet to dust the sand and muck from her clothes. “Listen, when we got here twenty-five years ago, we did all the things you did. Bleed, kill, repeat. That’s the part I understand. The first time you bleed, you move from the real world to this one. It costs blood to get back out, but when I offered this time, it was not interested. At all.”

“If it doesn’t want blood anymore,” KJ said, “what does it want?”

“That’s the question, isn’t it?” Tess mused.

The back of Paige’s neck went cold—not for the first time, she felt certain they were being watched. When she looked up from Tess and KJ, it occurred to her that the sky looked exactly the way it had when they entered this impossible place. It was the same shade of sunset, unchanged by time. Four seagulls soared overhead, and she wondered, if she stayed longer, how many times those same birds would float by. She saw the imperfections. The repetition, time stammering to a halt, edges blurring when she looked at them too long. There was only so much the Kaleidoscope could do. This was only ever a room.

“You gave it blood to get out. In a deal.” Paige wished she still had her notebook. “Maybe you didn’t give it enough just now. But if we all contribute, would that work?”

“Maybe,” Tess said. “Maybe we can try giving our donations at the same time. Maybe, once we’ve bled dry, it’ll let our bodies out for someone to find.”

“What was my mom talking about, on the beach?” Paige asked. “She said you didn’t have enough.”

“Yeah, but this time it wasn’t into the blood at all. How have you kids been trading with it?” Tess asked, though her gaze fell squarely on KJ. “If you’ve been here this whole time, you must have fed it something.”

Wordlessly, KJ shook her head.

This answer seemed to confuse Tess, who stared at her daughter expectantly, waiting for clarification. When KJ said nothing, Tess looked back into the false sunlight and blinked. “When you do, it doesn’t speak in exact measurements. All you can do is think really hard about what you want. When we went to leave, it . . . well, it was clear we didn’t have enough. Between all of us, there wasn’t enough. Not for what we needed.”

“Then how did you—” Paige started.

“You put it on your tab,” Tess said. “I think everything happening now is the last call. Pay up before the whole thing closes down.”

“Okay,” Paige drawled. “But how do we—”

“You know, I’m absolutely certain that Mamani here has talked to it more recently than I have,” Tess cut in, twisting to look behind her. “Wait, where is he?”

Paige followed her gaze to the empty place in the mud beside her. The waves continued to crash against the marina, the same four birds soared past them again, and Mateo was gone.

After a quick search of the nearby brush, KJ found a series of footprints leading to the marina’s small boathouse. It was only a shack, really, but if an indeterminate amount of time in the Kaleidoscope had taught Paige anything, it was that nothing here cared about reality. If she accepted that Mateo had somehow slipped away in plain sight and was now somewhere deep in the bowels of the resort, that still left an important question: Why?

“Because when things get bleak,” Tess said, answering the question no one had asked, “there’s a certain kind of person who stops thinking about how we all survive and starts thinking about how *they* survive.”

“Not Mateo,” Paige said. “He’s scared of something.”

“Yeah,” Tess scoffed. “Dying.”

Paige didn’t have patience for Tess’s pessimism on top of her own. For as long as she could remember, Tess had had an irrational hatred of the Mamanis, and it seemed that hatred leaked down to Mateo, too. Maybe it was the way they’d managed to live somewhat fulfilling lives without constantly dwelling on tragedy, or maybe it was the way they’d raised Mateo and Paige at the same time without any of the difficulties Tess had raising one child. Maybe it was something before that—something that had happened here in the Kaleidoscope—but whatever it was, Tess didn’t have

the clarity to see this objectively.

Paige had grown up beside Mateo. She knew him happy and she knew him sad. Whatever he was keeping from them now was something that scared him. Whatever he thought he was going to face, he was doing it alone. And, historically, Paige couldn't let that stand.

As Paige had suspected, when KJ threw open the rickety boathouse door, they found a descending staircase on the other side of the room. The walls and ceiling over it were painted a swallowing black, engulfing the stairs in shadow.

"I'm not getting a great feeling from this," Paige said.

"We either go or we pick another door," Tess said, eyeing the pink sky overhead. Still unchanged, still the exact portrait of sunset as when they arrived. And then, the light over the water began to flicker. Like a spent lightbulb, the sunset was dying not slowly, but in spurts. Tess's frown deepened. "We can't stay here. I don't think it's got much juice left."

Strange. The way Tess talked about it almost made it sound like the resort was too tired to sustain the marina much longer. Like it only had so much stamina. *Everything happening now is the last call*.

At the bottom of the stifling black staircase, Paige found the first repeat room she'd seen in hours. Maybe days, if she'd been here for days. It was the coral-and-teal diner from Mateo's note, unchanged.

"This is where I met up with him," Paige said. "Before we found Caleb."

"Would he come back here?" KJ asked.

"As if you can go anywhere in the Kaleidoscope on purpose," Tess said. "I don't get the feeling that kid is particularly gifted with intuition."

"He's gifted with directions," Paige said, checking behind each diner booth for signs of life. She recalled the note pinned to his door. "Within a day, he had detailed instructions on how to get around. If he found this diner, he could find his way to a bunch of other places."

"Detailed instructions . . ." Tess trailed off. "I doubt it. Any mapping he did was because this place let him. And it can change if it wants to. It's not very consistent with the floor plan."

"Why would it help him get around?" KJ asked, leaning over the diner counter.

"Because it wants something in return," Tess said like it was a fact. "He feeds it, it shows him where to go. I don't see any other way."

"Maybe he found a different way?" Paige suggested.

“Yeah, maybe,” Tess conceded before eyeing KJ. “Maybe it’s the same way she’s been eating without making trades. Any thoughts?”

As Tess mentioned it, a vicious growl blossomed in the pit of Paige’s stomach. She patted herself down, and her eyes widened. She’d lost her tote bag in the latest near drowning, along with all of her notes and maps. And her granola bars. “I had snacks. But I guess they’re gone now.”

“Was Mamani sharing?”

Paige shook her head. “He got food from here.”

“Oh, yeah?” Tess teased. “It was just serving him free of charge? That didn’t seem weird to you?”

Of course it had seemed strange to her at the time, but it was difficult to tell which strange things were simply a part of the Kaleidoscope’s function and which things were devious tricks meant to ruin them. Something she was sure Tess had battled with when she was trapped here, too. She’d expected Tess to feel for them, to want to protect them from facing the same things she had. But instead, she scoffed at the way they struggled. She mocked them for their weaknesses. She was more in line with the resort than the rest of them, it seemed.

Paige couldn’t stand her.

“You can’t just weasel out of answering me,” Tess said to KJ. “Mamani has been bartering with the resort for snacks and maps.”

KJ looked from Paige to her mother and frowned. Thinking about it, Paige realized she hadn’t seen KJ eat a bite this whole time. But there wasn’t a hint of a lie in her face when she said she’d made no deals. She’d offered no blood. The longer the silence stretched—the longer Tess’s stare drilled into her daughter—the more Paige was sure it wasn’t the same thing.

“Whatever,” Tess snapped when KJ remained quiet. “If it’s trying to get him away from the rest of the group, it either wants to eat him next or it’s trying to find him a way out.”

“A way out?” KJ asked finally, drawing her hair behind her ear. “Without us?”

Tess’s expression fell. “It doesn’t reward you for playing fair.”

“He wouldn’t do that,” Paige snapped, cheeks burning. “He wouldn’t leave us behind.”

“Wouldn’t you?” Tess asked, almost singsong. “We all agreed to it at one point, even if it sounded just *so* wrong. When that door finally opens, you’re not thinking about anyone else. When you want to live—when you

really want to live—you start doing stuff that any normal person would say is worse than dying."

Paige wanted to hit her.

KJ hopped the counter and began exploring the unstaffed kitchen, leaving Paige and Tess in awkward silence. She kicked herself for not forcing the truth out of Mateo back at the marina. He'd been jittery when they found Tess, but she'd simply chalked that up to shock. It was so easy to glide past Mateo because he was always *fine*. He was always okay, always levelheaded, he always rolled with the punches. Mateo was one of the only people in Paige's life she'd never had to worry about. It felt nauseating, doing it for the first time now.

"He was here," KJ said, sliding out of the kitchen. She held a sizable wooden knife block and tapped the single open slot for the biggest knife of the batch. "He took one."

"Hopefully not to use on us . . ." Tess said.

"If he was trying to get away without us, why would he bring a weapon?" Paige asked.

KJ said nothing, but she pressed her palm to the counter and closed her eyes. By now, Paige was more than used to her strange sense of tracking magic, but the sight of it caught Tess off guard. She took a tentative step toward her daughter, head cocked to the side in wonder. Paige supposed she'd just believed KJ when she said intuition about the Kaleidoscope was an ability that developed over time. Judging by Tess's face, it wasn't an ability she'd ever seen.

"I know where he went," KJ said. "Or which way he's going."

"He's still moving?" Paige asked.

KJ nodded.

Tess threw her hands up, eyes wide, an incredulous laugh silent on her lips. "Hold on, now. What was that?"

KJ looked down at her hands instead of meeting her mother's stare. "I don't know. It's nothing. Can we just go?"

Tess, clearly unsatisfied, nodded and waited for KJ to climb back over the counter. She led them out of the diner and deeper into hallways of the resort they hadn't explored. More and more, Tess's comment about the resort running out of juice nagged at Paige. All through the hallways, the wall sconces flickered incessantly as they passed. The rooms were scarcely furnished, sometimes completely empty save for a door on the other side.

No more grand escalators or mall-like corridors. They were in a labyrinth of simple, dying hallways, following KJ's quiet direction.

"Why would it be losing power now?" Paige asked eventually, climbing to the top of a motionless escalator in Tess's shadow. "If it runs on blood, it should be more powerful than when we got here. It ate Caleb."

"Try to remember that almost two hundred people died in here before," Tess said. "That's a lot of fuel for one night. I don't think Dettweiler was enough to quench the thirst, to be honest."

"If it runs out of blood, will it die?"

"I don't think it can die," Tess said, voice heavy. "It just sleeps. It waits for people to float on by so it can fuel up again. Though, given the way Dettweiler's had it closed off, I bet it's been starving."

Tess turned her gaze toward KJ and slightly picked up her pace. It was clear that her interest was no longer in the resort's energy levels or in the search for Mateo. She trailed at KJ's feet, struggling to keep up with her daughter's quick strides.

"A month, huh? That's a long time."

KJ didn't slow her walk. "It is."

"You know, if it was as hungry as I was feeling, I can't imagine it would let food run around for a month without getting a bite. If you haven't fed it with blood, then it was something else."

This seemed to give KJ pause. Eventually, she said, "Nope."

"And you never killed? Never even hurt anyone?"

To that, KJ was silent.

Before Tess could continue her interrogation, KJ reached the end of the hallway and pushed the final door open to reveal a bowling alley. Not just any bowling alley, but the one Paige had crossed before she met Mateo in the diner. A thousand echoes of the same cartoonish theme rang through the empty space. "STEE-RIKE," a warped voice called over the speakers. Paige shuffled across the walkway until she was on the right side of the lanes.

"He was here," Paige said.

Mateo's jacket, shoes, and bag were strewn over the seating area of lane 2, but Mateo himself was nowhere to be seen. Paige's feeling of being watched was gone, but its replacement was something worse. The feeling that someone had *just* been here.

"What is this?" KJ breathed when she stopped at Paige's side.

But KJ wasn't looking at the collection of Mateo's things. She was

looking up at the TV screens above the lanes. Each one was plain black with a single word at its center, and all together, their message made Paige's stomach sink.



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Twenty-one

“I lost him.” KJ’s voice was ragged with frustration, hand pressed to the lacquered wood floor of the bowling alley. “I don’t feel him anywhere anymore.”

She crouched to the ground just under one of the ominous TV screens, brow furrowed in thought. She had already approached every other door in the bowling alley and waited for Mateo’s presence to reappear, but something had changed the minute they arrived. Paige felt it too, a twitchy restlessness in her fingers and goose bumps that crawled over her flesh every few seconds. If the Kaleidoscope had been sluggish and slow when they arrived, she got the uncanny sense that it was now beginning to wake up.

She was going to be sick. “That doesn’t mean . . .”

“No, I don’t think so,” KJ said. Clearly, she thought the same thing. “No, when Caleb died, it felt different. This feels like . . . I don’t know, like he’s hiding. Or someone is hiding him.”

Across the bowling alley, Tess scoured the pinsetters for signs of life. Wherever Mateo was now, he’d left his things behind for a reason. Paige hoped it was because he planned to come back.

She slid into a seat near KJ, ignoring the incessant strike music, and leaned close. “What do we do?”

KJ eyed her mother. KJ’s shoulders were broader than Paige had remembered, and the handsome curve of her jaw held much less contempt than she expected. She looked at her mother with a kind of sadness that made Paige’s chest hurt, even if she hated Tess.

“We keep looking,” KJ said. “Or, I do.”

Paige shook her head. “No way. I’ll come with you.”

“No.”

“We’re not doing the thing where we split up again,” Paige snapped. “That usually ends with me almost dying.”

“I’ll come back once I find something, I just . . .” KJ eyed her mother again, who was filing through the collection of bowling shoes like one might provide insight. “I need to get away from her. And she can’t be alone.”

“Is it her questions?” Paige asked. “You can tell her to stop.”

KJ closed her eyes and took in a deep breath.

“I understand if you don’t want to answer her. I know it’s . . .” Paige shuffled through her thoughts, desperately seeking the right words. They were healing, but there was so much more ground to cover. Paige wanted to be the one to reach KJ when her mother couldn’t, but maybe that was the problem. Maybe there was no one who could reach KJ anymore. “I know you’re struggling with seeing her here. But if there’s something to what she’s asking . . .”

KJ’s expression hardened. “I don’t know.”

“You don’t know how you’ve stayed alive?” Paige asked. “Or you don’t know if you want to tell me?”

“I don’t know anything.” KJ looked at the floor. “But I’m trying to remember.”

It wasn’t really an answer, but it felt true in a way Paige couldn’t argue. There was still so much about surviving the Kaleidoscope that she didn’t know, and she imagined that even four full years of exploration wouldn’t make it all make sense.

“She can’t help us,” KJ said, gaze locked on her mother again. “I know you wanted her to save us, but she can’t. She’s . . . there are things she’s told me about what she did here. I don’t know if it’s true or if it’s just the guilt, but this is the most dangerous place she could be right now. I don’t know if she’s scared that she’ll do those things again, but I am. We need to get her out as fast as possible.”

There it was again: the KJ from the real world, who would cast aside everything she’d ever loved to protect a mother who’d never bothered to protect her back. At one point, Paige was sure she couldn’t fathom loving someone so much she’d die to keep them alive. It was the reason she’d ended their friendship in the first place. She didn’t want to be caught in KJ’s constant spiral toward death. But here she was, trapped inside a tomb she swore she would never enter, all for the chance to save someone she loved just as much.

“What happens if we can’t all make it out?” Paige asked. “She said there

might be a way out if you leave people behind. Would you let her out instead of you?"

"You already know," KJ muttered.

Paige closed her eyes.

To her surprise, KJ reached across the space between them and gingerly took her hand. Most people wouldn't be able to detect the hint of a smile that ghosted over KJ's lips, but Paige had spent a lifetime watching her mouth. She'd scoured it for hints of feeling, moments that betrayed the raw and bleeding KJ that lived underneath. And against her better judgment, Paige smiled back. Bittersweet and knowing, but hopeful all the same. Maybe there was a world where they didn't repeat the same dance they'd been doing all their lives.

Maybe.

"Let me find him," KJ offered. "Just . . . keep her here until I'm back. And if anything gets weird . . . if anything changes with her, run."

"Weird?"

"You've seen it make people scared," KJ said, pointing to the intercoms. "But I don't know what it does to her."

Paige swallowed.

"I'll find my way back to you," KJ said, more serious. "I promise."

They were words Paige had heard before, distant and echoing in the back of her mind. Was *she* the one who heard them? It was a memory that seemed plucked from someone else's mind. A promise made in a different voice, in a different context, in a different time. But it was enough for now.

Paige managed to ignore Tess for the next hour or so, mostly through sheer willpower. Just because she was left to babysit her friend's mother didn't mean they had to speak. She was perfectly content waiting for KJ's return in silence, eyes tracing the Kaleidoscope logo as it bounced across the alley screens. That was, until a voice sounded from the last lane in the long room.

"STEE-RIKE!"

Tess had, for some reason, decided to start bowling.

"*Hey*," Paige called, marching down the alley toward her. "We shouldn't be calling any attention to ourselves."

Tess considered this while the retrieval system churned her ball back to her. "I don't think it matters much, kiddo. It knows we're here, same as the

rest of the ghosts. If anything, we're doing your friends a favor, distracting the big evil eye for a second."

Maybe this was true, but Paige didn't particularly want the resort's eye on the bowling alley, either. It was absurd that Tess wouldn't be more concerned about KJ's solo journey, anyway. The idea of KJ facing the horrors alone made Paige feel ill; in a normal world, the nausea would be tenfold for KJ's mother. But she seemed relatively amused by the whole situation.

Tess bowled another strike—she was uncannily good at bowling, all things considered—before leaving her game unfinished and ambling to the nearest bench. Colored light poured over her exhausted face, injecting a little youth into her. It was easy to imagine what she might have looked like the first time she was trapped here.

"You look so worried," Tess said, mocking. "If she's lived in here as long as y'all say, she'll be fine."

"You don't think she has?"

"I'm guessing it was her idea to take off on her own?" Tess asked, spreading her arms across the back of the bench as if to ensure Paige wouldn't try to sit with her.

"She thought it would be faster."

"There's this thing she used to like doing," Tess said, mostly to herself. "If she got tired of a fight, she'd just go in her room and close the door. Didn't matter what I did after that. If she wasn't ready to talk, she wasn't there. I made her mad with all the questions. Of course she ran away."

Paige said nothing to that. Tess wasn't wrong about KJ's tendency to flee from conflict. For someone who favored running headfirst into danger, she did love to hide from the murky depths of talking through a problem. Even here in the resort, there was something flighty and immaterial about her. She was water cupped in Paige's palms, and no matter how well she sealed all the gaps and crevices, KJ still managed to constantly slip away.

"Did she say how that started?" Tess asked. "The tracking thing? I never picked that one up."

"KJ's been here longer."

"Hmm?"

"She's been here longer." Paige pressed her nails into the fleshy heels of her hands. "I know it felt like a month, but you were here for fifteen hours. KJ's been here for a real month. That's the equivalent of four years. It's

longer than I can even imagine.”

Tess’s eyes fluttered shut in what Paige hoped was defeat. Then she pursed her lips like she’d tasted something foul. “You did math on the Kaleidoscope. That’s gotta be a first.”

Paige looked at her—*really* looked at her—and tried to understand the point of all this. If Tess wasn’t worried about KJ, why was she here? And if she’d broken out before, why was she suddenly incapable of doing it again? Somewhere under her slippery, evasive layers, there was someone KJ was willing to die for. Someone Paige’s mother had once loved more than anyone else. There was a reason everyone who orbited Tess wouldn’t leave her side, no matter what it cost.

It was just that, the more time she spent trapped here with Tess, the more all that love made her unfathomably angry.

“Why did you just come now?” Paige asked. “She’s been here for a month. You didn’t wonder where she was?”

“I guess I assumed the same thing as the rest of you,” Tess confessed. “She got tired of taking care of her mom and took off. Who could blame her?”

Paige said nothing to that. She was trying very, very hard to be nice.

“Ever since I got out, there’s been a wire connected straight from me to the resort. I guess it likes to keep tabs on unfinished meals. When it’s out of juice, I don’t feel anything. When it charges back up, though . . . I knew something was up because it was like a jolt to the heart. I swear to god, I woke right up.”

“Why didn’t you feel it when KJ came here, though?”

Tess looked down.

“You did feel it when she came here,” Paige said.

“I felt *something*.”

“You didn’t think it was her?”

“I feel something every few years,” Tess said without meeting Paige’s eyes. “Always assumed it was some unlucky animals gnawing each other to death.”

“She didn’t come home, you felt the resort wake up. You had to put two and two together.” Paige’s face burned. “You just . . . you just didn’t *do* anything.”

“I’m here now, aren’t I? Better than the others, because they’re feeling it, too. They would’ve felt her get here a month ago—if that’s when it was—

and they would've felt the three of you getting here tonight." Tess narrowed her eyes. "They're just cowards."

The others. Paige assumed Tess meant Jason and the Mamanis. But that couldn't be true; surely if Saul and Claudia thought Mateo was trapped in the Kaleidoscope, there would already be a navy fleet outside to bring them home. Hell, even if they suspected KJ's disappearance had to do with the resort, she was sure this would have already been solved. Maybe Jason Dettweiler was a rat, but the Mamanis were good people. They were brave people.

They weren't so scared of the Kaleidoscope that they would let it eat their son. They were at least better than Tess.

"Listen, have you seen any weird marks on her? Like mine? Any injuries that won't heal?"

Paige shook her head. "She told you she wasn't making any deals."

"Right."

"You think she's lying?" Paige asked, tempering her tone as well as she could.

"I'm just saying, someone being in here that long without any help and with nothing to distract the beast? Seems unlikely to me."

"You were in here for fifteen hours," Paige said coolly. "You don't know everything about how it works."

"I don't, but I know when things in front of me don't make sense. And most of the time, when I saw things in here that didn't make sense, it's because they weren't *real*." She sat up, slapping her palms to her knees. "You know, weren't you supposed to be some kind of kid detective? You're doing all kinds of math and calculations on the resort, but you stop asking questions when it comes to her?"

At that, something inside of Paige snapped.

"You're her mom," she hissed. "If there's something wrong with her, that should scare you. You should be trying to save her. Wasn't that the point of you coming here in the first place?"

Tess met her accusations with a guffaw, leaning back against the bench like it was all a joke. "Yeah, I'm her mom. And I know that my kid listened to the things I told her about the resort. She never should've come here."

Paige's hands curled into fists. "She did it to save you. Because she thought the Kaleidoscope was killing you, and it was gonna call you back, and you were gonna end up just like my mom."

“Did you ever think I told her about how rotten this place was to keep her away?” Tess asked, tapping her finger to her temple smugly.

“If you thought that would stop her, you never knew her at all,” Paige spat. Her face was hot with a kind of rage that built slowly. Maybe she was shooting herself in the foot, attacking the only person with the knowledge to get them out. And Paige prided herself on being levelheaded and rational. *Pragmatic*, people used to say. But she’d only ever been levelheaded because she knew how to tuck the anger and the confusion and the fear away. Every time KJ showed up at the Mamanis’ saying that her mother couldn’t get her to school “because the Kaleidoscope.” Every night they stayed awake on the phone for hours because Tess had locked herself in the bathroom and refused to come out. Every span of days when Tess would simply disappear, leaving KJ to a house all alone. For years, Paige had tucked all the anger away because it wasn’t her mother to be mad about. It was KJ’s mess, and KJ didn’t want it cleaned up. But now they were all going to die, and her anger had nowhere else to go. Through her teeth, she said, “You . . . you never should have been a mom.”

“Wow . . .” Tess trailed off, hand to her chest like she’d taken a bullet. “That’s a lot of feelings, kiddo.”

There was an edge to Paige’s anger. Her breath was short and her fingernails cut into the meat of her palm and her pulse rocketed up so quickly it made her dizzy. It was too much anger, even if it was about Tess, and it took Paige too long to understand it for what it was. It was the resort creeping into her mind, swiveling the dial of her feelings up to the maximum.

When she finally sank to the bench opposite Tess, the older woman looked at her with something like sympathy.

“I didn’t want to be a mom,” Tess admitted. “Ask Saul and Clauds. But you get out of a place like this, and you start looking for company wherever you can find it. You look for people who can prove you’re alive.”

Tess’s lips curled into an almost smile.

“Your mom was the first one I called when I found out.” Tess ran a hand through her crop of black hair. “I told her there was no way I could do it. Said I didn’t have it in me. But your mom . . . she was so different from me. She was born to be a mom. So she told me, *Hey, let’s do it together.*”

It was strange: All her life, Casey Keller was something of a ghost in the lives of everyone around her. She was an unspoken thing, a sadness too

unbearable to even talk about. Other than the few memories Paige retained of her mother, the only thing she'd ever learned about the woman was that she was a tragedy. But Casey Keller had wanted a life with both of them together. She'd wanted to be a mother, and for reasons Paige still couldn't comprehend, she'd given it all up.

"I didn't know that," Paige said.

"I wouldn't have gotten through it without her. That first decade, with you girls running around together all the time . . . she really had me convinced I was meant to be a mom, too. But she was a better mom than me by far, because the minute she thought this place was after you kids . . ."

As if on cue, the multicolored lights that danced along the shining lanes began to flicker. Everywhere at once, the electricity of the Kaleidoscope faltered in time with Tess's confession. Paige's blood ran cold, both at the strange lights and at what Tess was telling her. She'd long since given up on trying to understand her mother's reasoning for returning. She'd had a family at home, a life out of the shadows, a future full of happiness she was only steps from claiming. Even if the monsters of the Kaleidoscope had haunted her, she was free. Paige supposed, for the last decade, she'd thought of her mother's return to the resort as a choice to die.

But if the Kaleidoscope hadn't called Casey back that day, Paige had it all backward. Maybe returning wasn't a choice at all. It was a sacrifice.

Paige wiped at her eyes with her wrist. "No. I wasn't in danger."

"That's what I told her," Tess said. "I told her the Kaleidoscope didn't have any control over you kids, but she said she was sure. *It's in their blood.* I thought she was overreacting, but after she was gone, I got it. The way you girls couldn't stop thinking about it . . ."

"I left," Paige whispered. "I stopped thinking about it."

"You're here now, aren't you?" Tess asked. "She was right. It wanted you, and it was willing to wait a long time to get you."

It wasn't right—there was no mystic call that brought her back to the resort. She'd only come here for KJ, and in all the years before that, she'd resisted. But that was the problem. All her life, it was resistance. It was the slow act of tamping down her wonder, snipping her questions before they could grow, looking away from the neon-pink starburst that shone at the edges of her mind. In a way, all of the goals and the preparations were meant to put distance between her and the Kaleidoscope. Some days, it felt like the resort was simply waiting for her to lose focus. Like everything else

in her life was just a distraction.

“After Case died, I hated seeing you,” Tess said finally, breaking Paige from her teary daze. “Every time I looked at you, it was like seeing her all over again. Like you were accusing me of letting her go alone. You know, I felt it when she went, too. Like a shot to the heart.”

“I barely knew her,” Paige said. “No one ever told me anything. If I knew she died to keep me from . . . I wouldn’t have come here.”

“You would,” Tess said casually. “That’s what it does best. It puts the thing you love most on a hook and casts.”

Paige supposed, this time, they’d both been drawn in by KJ on the line. It had lured her mother in with the threat to kill Paige, just like it had lured KJ with the thought of Tess’s death and Mateo with nightmares about his parents. Paige thought of her mother’s face in the water a year ago. Maybe the call wasn’t something magical, and maybe it wasn’t an illness of the mind. Maybe it was just loving someone so much you’d die to let them live.

“This has been a nice wake-up call, though,” Tess said, pulling herself to her feet. “I was wrong about you. You’re not like her at all. She always let me get away with things, even the stuff I knew I shouldn’t. She never would’ve told me off like that. Not until the end.”

Just then, a growl began to rumble from deep in the resort.

Paige turned to face the nearest door, heart racing. It had been hours since the last time the noise sounded, and she’d forgotten the way it changed her. She turned fast, searching every surrounding doorway for attack. Its grip was much stronger than the last time, like the whole room squeezed. The air went shallow. She knew for absolute certain she was going to die.

Before she could take a step, an arm came around her throat.

Tess yanked her back, pulling Paige hard to her chest. Then, methodically, her grip tightened until Paige felt her throat begin to pinch. The skin of her cheeks bunched up along Tess’s arm, and no matter how hard she clawed, she couldn’t manage a single breath. She parted her lips to scream, but there was no sound.

She really was going to die.

“Sorry about this, kiddo,” Tess said, pulling her arm even tighter. “But I see through its tricks. I’ll find out what really happened to KJ, and I’ll get us out of here. For your mom’s sake.”

Finally, Paige’s vision blurred, darkened, and disappeared completely.

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“It’s not what it looks like,” Tess says. “It’s—”

The rest of her words are swallowed by Casey’s scream.

She stumbles against the counter, hands over her mouth. Kendra and Jade lean together at the back of the freezer, skin blue from the cold. It collects in their synthetic eyelashes and turns their lips black. It isn’t clear how long they’ve been dead, but it’s clear they’ve been dead for at least as long as Casey has been in this kitchen.

Tess grips her by the shoulders, forcing Casey to meet her eyes.

“You’ve gotta believe me,” Tess says. “I know it looks bad, but I was mostly telling the truth earlier. The sound . . . it was freaking them out. Making them do stuff I know they’d never do. They were gonna hurt me.”

“You killed them?” Casey breathes.

She pries Tess’s hands off her and scrambles to the other side of the kitchen island. Anything to put distance between them. Shakily, she raises her knife and aims it at Tess. This can’t be happening. Of all the nonsensical things she’s seen tonight—however long *tonight* has been—this is the thing that can’t be real. Tess Collins is not a killer.

“You don’t understand how . . . you didn’t see what it was like,” Tess stammers. “Until you found me, there was no one I could trust. I’ve been so scared.”

“They were your friends.”

“No,” Tess spits. “No, they were different. This place changed them into something evil. They weren’t my friends anymore.”

“So you killed them?”

“In self-defense!” Tess cries. “How about you put the knife down, and I can explain everything. You trust me, right?”

Casey’s mind wanders back to the conversation she had with the other Tess moments ago. *Remember everything else we’ve been through.* She lowers her knife by an inch, but she doesn’t drop it. Tess was right when she said this place changes people, but she’s the one it’s changed the most.

“If this place changed me . . .” Casey breathes, “. . . would you kill me,

too?”

Tess’s eyes are questioning. “What? No, it . . . it *didn’t* change you. I could tell right when you got here. You’re the only one who’s still the same as before. Which is why we have to stick together.”

Casey doesn’t move.

Tess is wrong about that—the Kaleidoscope hasn’t left her unchanged. In fact, Casey can hardly remember what she was like before the Kaleidoscope. This creature she is now—jumbled and fragmented, pieces sliding against each other to form incoherent pictures of a life she doesn’t recognize as her own—must be something new. There must have been more to her before this.

“Why did you keep their bodies?” Casey asks.

Tess glances over her shoulder at Kendra and Jade, silent like she’s scrolling through potential answers. Casey knows long before Tess speaks that whatever she’ll say, it will be a lie. “It wasn’t eating them like everyone else. I think it’s full. I thought maybe . . . if rescue comes, maybe they can . . .”

“Come back to life?”

Tess says nothing to that, but guilt casts a shadow over her face. Casey imagines Tess is the same as all the others she’s seen devolving into violence within these walls. When it comes down to it, she doubts Tess had a reason to attack. That’s the thing about the carnage the resort creates. It shapes every shadow into a creature with fangs and makes monsters of friends. It floods her with fear, same as Tess and Summer and Claudia and the rest. In Tess’s mind, calling it self-defense might not be a lie.

But there’s something bigger than the fear, and after swimming in the dark waters, Casey feels it creeping at the edges of her vision. Every other human trapped in this place might be scared for their lives, but there’s something alive in the Kaleidoscope that isn’t scared at all.

Casey drops her knife on the counter and raises her hands in surrender. Maybe it makes her a fool, but when she tries to take a step back and see the bigger picture, one thing becomes clear: Tess is not her enemy.

The moment she drops the knife, there’s a crash at the kitchen door.

In a blur, Tess dives across the counter and snatches up the knife, but she doesn’t turn it on Casey. Instead, she motions for Casey to duck out of sight and turns her attention to the door, face sobering in an instant. The weapon is natural in Tess’s grip, making Casey’s stomach sink. Tess tiptoes through

the shallow water pooled across the kitchen floor and, silently, rolls away the barricade.

As the kitchen door opens, Tess slips behind it and waits. She's a hunter with a rabbit in her crosshairs.

Casey can only see the intruder's shoes from behind the kitchen island. A nice pair of sneakers, soles dyed rust brown with blood. In the stranger's wake, more water pours into the kitchen, rising to cover Casey's ankles. They stumble straight to the refrigerators like a fish on a line, just like Casey did when starvation silenced everything else.

They're only a few feet from the refrigerators when Tess crouches and gathers something from the shallow water. In one silent pull, she tugs a bit of wire toward herself.

The wire is connected to the end of the counter, Casey realizes. *Only because the trip wire didn't work*, Tess said. It snaps around their intruder's ankles, pulling his feet from under him, and he hits the ground in a blur of limbs and water. Even halfway submerged, Casey recognizes the pale terror in his face.

Jason Dettweiler has apparently been flushed out of his hiding place at last.

A growl sounds from deep inside the resort, but between Tess springing from her hiding place and Jason scrambling to find his footing, Casey misses the chance to cover her ears. The noise seeps into her quickly, and she finds herself splashing backward in the rising water, determined to put as much distance between herself and the violence as possible.

But as Tess mounts Jason, shoving him back down into the water, Casey is unable to look away. There's a ferocity to Tess now, a strength to the way she bundles Jason's arms behind his back and shoves her knee to his spine. A practiced kill maneuver, like an apex predator at work.

The noise started the moment her trap worked.

The resort—or whatever creature controls it—is egging her on. It loves the intensity of her rage and panic, and it hungers for the blood she's seconds from spilling.

Jason's scream is wet, his face half sunken in the water, as Tess raises her knife over the back of his neck. The resort tingles in anticipation, and Casey can feel it in the goose bumps that flash over her skin.

Casey jumps to her feet. "Stop!"

"Case . . ." Tess snarls, knife paused midair. "Can this wait?"

“Casey?” Jason cries, spitting out the water that fills his mouth the moment his lips part. “Is that Tess?”

Without confirmation, Jason Dettweiler begins to cry.

Tess grabs his neck and forces his face into the water, silencing him, but it doesn’t stop his squirming. He doesn’t have the strength to fight her off, but he very badly wants to stay alive. The panic seems to make monsters of some people, warping their fear into rage. But Jason is the same as Casey: The fear just makes him afraid. His ears are above water, so even as he drowns, Casey is certain he’ll hear every word they say.

“I want him to tell me where Summer is,” Casey says.

Reluctantly, Tess fists her hand in Jason’s hair and pulls his face up.

He gasps for air, water rolling from his cheeks and mouth. For a moment, Casey thinks he’ll start crying again, but he tamps down the panic and croaks out a sorry “I don’t know!”

“Think hard about it, Dettweiler,” Tess whispers. “Casey told me the shit you pulled earlier. We’d be safer with you dead.”

“After you guys left, I didn’t hear anything else,” Jason blurts out. “I didn’t see anything when I was leaving, either . . . because the whole place is under water. I swear to god, I don’t know anything!”

“We didn’t *leave*,” Casey hisses. “You closed the door on us.”

“Obviously he doesn’t care what happens to anyone,” Tess snarls, shoving Jason’s face back into the water. Through gritted teeth, she adds, “Let’s just get this over with. I don’t want the noise to bring anyone else.”

Casey doesn’t object. The growling of the resort continues, and in a way, she understands what Tess means. Jason is a liability, and he’s a weasel. He left her to die when she needed help most, and if Summer is dead, he’s the reason. There’s a boiling, building rage in her that thinks he should die for it. He should die instead of her. If he doesn’t die, then someone else she loves will. It’s what he would deserve, and she doesn’t even have to be the one to do it.

But her eyes trace the bulging veins in Tess’s arms as she holds him down, the grinding ire in her jaw and the wild fire in her eyes. The blood on her hands is already killing her. When they get out—*if* they get out—she’ll have so much to reckon with.

For Tess’s sake, this has to end.

“We shouldn’t kill him,” Casey says quickly, masking her panic. “It’s not smart. We should . . . we should take him hostage. So we can stay safe.”

Tess doesn’t let Jason up. “I don’t follow.”

“Look at him,” Casey breathes. “There’s no way he’s lasted this long without help. Think about it . . . his family owns the resort. For some reason, it doesn’t want him dead. It’s keeping him alive.”

Conflicted, Tess looks between Casey and Jason with wide eyes. Jason’s kicking and squirming continues, but he can’t have more than a few seconds left of consciousness. Casey isn’t entirely sure if her arguments make any sense, but she has to try. If there’s a way to stanch the flow of blood, even for a second, she *has* to try.

“Tess, please . . .”

Finally, Tess heaves a sigh and releases the back of Jason’s head.

As he bursts up from the water, screaming for air, Tess tucks the knife into her belt. She silently gathers more of her wire from under the nearest counter, wrapping it swiftly around Jason’s wrists. Before she lets him up, she grabs his hair again and yanks his head back.

“Why did you come here?” Tess asks. “Who else knows where we are?”

“There’s nowhere else to go,” Jason says shakily. “It’s all flooding. All the rooms are underwater. I don’t know how many people are left, but I don’t think there’s a lot. You won’t be able to stay here. The water is coming fast.”

Jason isn’t wrong: The water in the kitchen is now up to Casey’s knees, and it rises more by the second. Reluctantly, they help Jason to his feet and make their way into the hall, where the imminent danger becomes even clearer. Only a few feet away, the water is almost to the ceiling. The sconces, completely submerged, flicker and spark. It’s as though an invisible wall holds the mass of water at bay, but if Casey’s learned anything so far, it’s that the Kaleidoscope loves to change its mind.

The moment the barrier disappears, they’ll be underwater.

Jason was right. There’s only one way to go now.

“The question is,” Tess mutters, dragging Jason in her wake, “if it doesn’t want us here anymore, where does it want us to end up?”

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Twenty-two

Paige woke only a moment later, head spinning and heavy at once.

KJ hovered at her side, hand cupped over Paige's shoulder, but her eyes scanned the bowling alley. It was bright again, with the TVs dancing and the colored lights of the pinsetters strobing purple and pink and red. Paige covered her face with her hands and groaned. There was no true dark in the Kaleidoscope, and the flat brightness of it was beginning to make her feel even more disoriented than the lack of windows. No wind, no sun, no true sleep. She hardly knew if she was alive or dead.

The throbbing in the back of her head meant that Tess choking her wasn't a dream.

"Are you okay?" KJ whispered. "Where's my mom?"

Paige shot up to find the benches empty. KJ was here and Tess was gone—how long had she been unconscious? It couldn't have been more than a minute. KJ eyed the doors, fidgety like she might need to run. Her fists clenched and unclenched at her sides.

"She . . ." Paige started, but her throat ached from the choke hold. "The noise came on and she grabbed me. I barely remember."

"Shit," KJ hissed. "This is a nightmare."

"Unfortunately it is very much *not*," Paige said, massaging her throat tenderly. "I know you said she's done things, but I think she was trying to kill me. Like, actually kill me."

"Did you see where she went?"

Paige shook her head.

"We'll find her," KJ whispered. "There's something else."

It wasn't like KJ to be so dismissive when it came to Tess, especially when Tess was acting erratically. Which meant this was something serious. A part of Paige—the woefully optimistic part that reared its head once every few years—thought maybe KJ had found a way out of here. But her expression was too solemn to mean anything good.

“What’s wrong?”

“Once the noise started, I could feel Mateo again. I think whatever was hiding him moved on. But he’s hurt,” she said. “I don’t . . . I don’t want to find him by myself.”

Promptly, Paige rolled off the cushioned bench, miserably popping her neck and back. She followed KJ out of the bowling alley, into a long hallway walled with powder-blue lockers that stretched on as far as the eye could see. Halfway to the other end, they found a pool of something dark and liquid reflecting the overhead lights. Not just a pool, Paige realized, but a trail. Gobs of it were speckled all the way to the end of the locker hall. She knew without inspecting that it was a trail of blood.

Either tragedy had struck, or someone was making a trade after all.

“It’s either Mateo, or . . .” Paige didn’t particularly want to say the other option out loud. “What do you think?”

KJ crouched beside the pool of blood, studying it like she might be able to identify the owner by scent. “I think we need to keep moving. It’s too much for one person to lose.”

Paige tried to imagine how someone might lose this much blood and still be okay. Bits of it were smeared by sneaker prints, and Paige didn’t have to be a tracker to know that whoever did this wasn’t doing well. When they reached the end of the locker hall, they found the first of the bloody messages left behind. Each letter of the simple question dripped to the floor, though the blood itself was dried.



“What does it mean?” Paige asked.

KJ pressed her fingertip to the dry blood and grimaced. “I think it’s a question for us.”

“Return to the resort?”

KJ shrugged. “Maybe. Whose idea was that?”

“Caleb’s, I think,” Paige offered. “He’s the one who asked me to go.”

“But Caleb’s already gone.”

With held breath, they followed the trail of blood out of the hall of lockers and into another dark passage that seemed to go on for miles, occasionally lit by a bare, flickering bulb screwed into the equally dark

ceiling.

Paige met KJ's eyes and KJ nodded. In nervous silence, they pushed on.

The hallway stretched longer than it seemed like it should. After a full minute of walking with no clear view of the other end, Paige considered turning back toward the light of the lockers. But without a word, KJ brushed her hand against Paige's. Suddenly the silence burned and Paige was grateful she had the dark to hide the flush in her cheeks. When she didn't pull back, KJ knitted their fingers together and squeezed. It was only when she followed the line of her gaze that she realized why KJ had grabbed her. Another message was scrawled out in dripping blood.

WHO COMMITTED SINS THE REST OF THE WORLD FORGOT?

This one was slightly more puzzling. Whatever sins were committed in this resort, it was safe to say they were *all* forgotten in the real world. No one knew exactly what had happened inside these walls; even now, with Tess here to explain, Paige was just as clueless as she had been back home.

But there was one family that had conveniently made the scandal of the place vanish from their lives entirely.

With a lump in her throat, Paige said, "Saul and Claudia . . ."

The moment she said it, the flickering lights in the hallway went out, leaving them in complete darkness. They carried on until, with a thud, they met the other end of the hallway. Paige groped in the dark for a doorknob, but she hesitated when she heard something on the other side of the door. A moan, maybe, heavy with pain. A boy's voice.

She squeezed KJ's hand tighter and shouldered the door open.

The room on the other side was just as dark as the hallway, but the tang of iron was thick enough to taste. There was a sweat in the air, a suffocating ozone that made Paige gag. The whimpering was clearer from here—clear enough to know definitively that it was Mateo making the noise.

"Mateo?" Paige breathed. She didn't dare release KJ's hand.

Mateo answered in another moan.

Paige followed the sound, collapsing to her knees at his side. She still couldn't see, but when she felt around in the dark, she found the expanse of his torso. Her hand came away wet and sticky, and she had to suck in a breath to keep from panicking. It was Caleb all over again, but he wasn't dead yet. They could still help him.

“You’re bleeding,” Paige whispered, throat tightening.

“What happened?” This was KJ’s voice on the other side of Mateo, close and resolute. “How bad is it?”

Mateo shifted a little between them, but just barely. His fingers found Paige’s knee, then moved to close around her wrist. Weakly, he tugged her down so she could hear his faint voice.

“I’m so sorry.”

“Why?” Paige wished she could see his face. She wished she could see if this was guilt or pain or something worse. “Why would you be—”

Just then, the lights came on in a sputtering flash. They were huddled in some kind of gymnasium, complete with springy blue floors and a distant foam pit. Mateo was slumped against the wall, skin ghostly pale and eyes sunken like they were bruised. Raw wounds were gouged into his arms, his legs, his stomach. Deep red stains outlined rivers of blood residue caked to his skin and clothes. And the knife, dried blood flaking from its serrated edge, was clutched in his grip.

Over his head, scrawled in his own blood, was a final message:



“She lied to me,” Mateo whispered, taking Paige’s sleeve in his frail grip. “The redhead. Summer.”

Paige went still. Summer Hayes. The girl in the pool room on all fours, the girl she saw in her dreams growing up, the girl highlighted in Tess’s yearbook. The girl whose name haunted them from the moment they arrived. The girl she spent years actively trying *not* to see. A chill ran over Paige’s exposed arms.

Between Tess’s attack and this, the last line between her and reality began to fray. Her hands hovered above Mateo’s wounds, but she was paralyzed with indecision. “We need to . . .”

She didn’t know what they needed to do. She didn’t know where to start. He was bleeding from everywhere at once, but maybe there was still a way to save him. It couldn’t have been that long. He’d just been with them at the beach, whole and alive and fine. She had so many questions left to ask him. How could everything go so wrong so quickly?

Mateo shook his head. “Don’t bother.”

“Who did this to you?” Paige demanded.

“The resort made him do it to himself.” This was KJ, voice icy and flat. Her dark gaze looked Mateo over once, and she seemed to understand the situation more deeply than Paige could. “Was the other message about you? Was coming here your idea?”

Mateo’s eyes shut, and for a moment, it seemed they wouldn’t open again. When he finally blinked back to consciousness, he said, “She told me to. In my dreams.”

“Summer?”

Mateo nodded. “I’m sorry I lied. I convinced Caleb it was his idea, but . . . in all my nightmares, there was no way to save my mom and dad. Until I had a dream about her. She told me if we were all here . . . if we came here together, we could save them. She said no one would get hurt.”

There was a gurgling to Mateo’s voice now. His throat was clogged and wet, and his skin was clammy under Paige’s fingertips. She couldn’t just let this happen. She hadn’t been there in time to do anything for Caleb, but Mateo was still with them. No matter what wrongs he’d done, she wouldn’t let this place swallow him, too.

Paige quickly stripped away her button-up shirt, tearing a bit off like KJ had earlier. It was more blood than Paige had been leaking, but if they stopped the flow, maybe there was still a way. She began wrapping the gashes on his arms first, pressing hard to stop the blood, but it simply gushed through the cloth, wetting her fingers in the sticky warmth. She could tear apart the rest of her outfit, and it wouldn’t help him.

“What does this one mean?” KJ asked calmly, motioning to the message painted just above Mateo’s head. “Paying the toll to leave us behind?”

At that, Mateo groaned painfully. “No . . . she’s *lying*.”

“What is she lying about?”

“KJ . . .” Paige breathed. “We need to help him, then we can—”

“She wants us to say sorry for the things . . . for the things our parents did,” Mateo managed through gritted teeth. “For all the stuff they did before we were even born. She thinks I’d try to buy my own way out and . . .” He whimpers. “And leave you all here.”

Finally, it clicks. The blood everywhere and the knife in Mateo’s hand. *The resort made him do it to himself*. He’d disappeared after Tess tried to buy her way out of the resort in blood. After she said they didn’t have enough to get everyone out.

“But it isn’t true,” Mateo moaned, pushing his forehead into Paige’s arm.

“I only wanted to . . . I wanted to get out to find help. She told me I would have enough for just me, and I wanted to save . . . to save everyone.”

Across from her, KJ was shockingly quiet. Paige couldn’t tell if it was sadness or fear or some kind of silent understanding, but she needed more urgency. It wasn’t like Mateo to give up and accept his fate, and it wasn’t like KJ to let him. This was the same girl who’d brought her back to life over and over. Between the two of them, they could save him.

“You take his ankles,” Paige said. “I’ll take his wrists and we’ll—”

“I don’t think it’s smart to move him.”

The voice came from Paige’s left, a space she’d thought was empty. It was crisp and clear, much lighter than KJ’s voice and much livelier than Mateo’s. It was the voice from Caleb’s final moments.

When she turned, she found a shock of red hair only inches away. Summer Hayes—living, breathing Summer Hayes—was crouched at Mateo’s feet with a sad frown. Rivulets of copper hair twisted over her slumped shoulders, and her yellow dress was soaking wet. There was a clumpy red gash smeared across her hairline, only slightly redder than her hair. A drip of blood ran from her wound, catching in her eyebrow.

“What a mess,” Summer said with a sigh. “If you move him, it’ll probably just kill him faster.”

“What are you?” Paige demanded.

Across from her, KJ was frozen in place, eyes wide and fixed on Summer. It was as though she’d appeared from nothing, like she’d been with them all along. Above her, the lights began to surge, brightening to a near white.

Summer answered in a small girlish laugh that made Paige’s stomach drop.

“Summer Hayes is dead. Are you the thing that makes the deals?” Paige asked, steeling herself against the nauseating tidal wave of her fear. Her hands, still pressed to Mateo’s wounds, began to shake.

“Summer Hayes is dead,” Summer said. “But what’s death in a place this nice?”

As Summer inhaled, some of Mateo’s blood seeped into the foamy gymnasium floor. The lights went brighter and the air grew heavy and a faint hum crescendoed in Paige’s ear. Summer looked more alive, too, as though power came to life within her. She shook some of the dripping water from her coils of hair and sighed in relief.

“It feels so nice to be seen.”

Shaking, Paige said, “What do I have to pay to save him?”

“How much would you pay to save someone who wanted to leave you to rot?” Summer beamed. “Name your price.”

Weakly, Mateo’s hand curled into Paige’s. His skin was unfathomably cold, his eyes half lidded and dull with exhaustion. With the little strength he had left, he shook his head. A single tear bloomed from his eye, mingling with the blood splashed over his cheeks. “I wouldn’t have . . .” he whispered. “She doesn’t know us. I’m not like them. I wouldn’t have . . .”

There was a faint snag in his breath, and then Mateo’s body shifted in her arms. Paige clung to him, but she couldn’t look at his face. She couldn’t see the light leave him while she was right beside him. She was supposed to bring him back home.

Summer stood, dripping water on the gymnasium floor from her fingertips. She looked mournfully at Mateo, and then her gaze snapped to KJ. With a sickly sweet smile, she said, “Does that feel familiar?”

All at once, the power flickered out, leaving them in absolute darkness. By the time the lights groaned back to life, the redhead was gone and only a puddle remained in her wake. The gymnasium was empty, silence broken only by the ragged gasp of Paige’s own breath. They’d seen the face behind their torment now.

And Mateo was dead.

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Twenty-three

Within moments, Mateo's body was moving again.

Not with life, but with the same sickly, rag-doll violence that moved Caleb in the freezer. As if on cue, the exposed bits of Mateo's skin stuck hard to the floor of the gymnasium before bubbling and soaking into the mat.

Paige had been too stunned to look away when the Kaleidoscope consumed Caleb, but she couldn't stomach watching Mateo. She turned away only to find KJ staring at the scene, blank faced. Even though she'd been here infinitely longer than the rest of them, Paige imagined this was KJ's first time watching death actually happen. Paige's fingers skimmed over her wrist, but KJ didn't move.

Caleb gone. Mateo gone. Paige couldn't lose KJ, too.

She grabbed KJ's wrist, trying in vain to yank her to her feet.

"He's gone," Paige rasped. "We have to go."

KJ jerked away from Paige's grip. Her eyes were trained on Mateo, and her expression warped from horror to confusion. Numbly, she said, "Does that feel familiar?"

Summer Hayes's final words confused Paige, too, but they would ponder them once they were out of the gym. She darted to the nearest door, opening it to unveil another impossibly long hall on the other side. "KJ . . . *please*."

When KJ's eyes met Paige's, there was something unbearably vulnerable in them. A willowy sadness that seemed to live entirely separately from what happened to Mateo. There was something KJ knew.

But finally, she stood and followed.

They stumbled into the hallway and, after only a few moments of sprinting, found a door with a neon-red cross hanging above it. Even if the Kaleidoscope had a tendency to lie to them, Paige took a chance. She elbowed the door open to reveal, for once, exactly what she hoped for. The infirmary was bare-bones, but it would have to do.

They collapsed inside without a word. The weight of it all caught up to Paige in a hot gasp—Mateo was *dead*. It was one thing to lose Caleb, but Mateo was the closest thing she'd ever had to family once her mother was gone. For years, his was the first face she would see as she ambled out of her room in the morning. He was the one she'd leaned on in the year after the drowning, when everything else from home seemed impossible to reach.

She was less without him. She was less now.

Paige was vaguely aware of the white lights flicking on, of KJ's hands ghosting over her arms, her neck, her face. She pushed Paige up onto the single-cushion exam table. Paige hardly registered the crinkle of paper under her thighs. Cold, wet cloth swiped over her brow before Paige finally came back to herself. For someone who was nearly catatonic moments ago, KJ was full of energy now.

Does that feel familiar?

"Wait," Paige said, prying KJ's hands away.

When she held KJ at arm's length, the strangeness was even clearer. Mateo's blood formed cloudy stains of rust all over Paige's arms and legs, but KJ was spotless. In fact, since the beginning, the carnage never really seemed to touch KJ. In a way, KJ looked a little livelier now than she had before. Almost refreshed. As Mateo's blood soaked into the mat, Summer had looked more awake, too.

Like a dam bursting, Tess's questions came crashing back over Paige. KJ's breath was short and panicked. She was caught, though Paige wasn't sure what the crime was.

"What did she mean?" Paige whispered. "What felt familiar?"

"I don't know what she meant," KJ said.

Paige clutched her chest. "You do. You've known something was wrong from the second your mom started asking questions. And I didn't want to make it worse, but . . ."

Even though KJ stubbornly looked at the floor to avoid eye contact, Paige searched her face. There was another piece of this sliding into place. A pattern emerging from the chaos she'd been determined not to see until now.

"Why would that feel familiar to you?"

KJ closed her eyes.

"Why doesn't it ever try to kill you? If there's something you haven't told me, or if there's something you're scared of, I need you to make me

understand.”

“I don’t remember what happened.”

Panic made Paige’s hands shake. She tore away from KJ and looked her over. What was she missing? How could the last person in the world she cared about still not trust her? What was so awful that KJ couldn’t say it out loud, even at the end of the line?

“Tell me what you do remember,” Paige whispered. “I’ve only been here a minute compared to you, and I’ve almost died twice. Caleb and Mateo are already gone. Why is it letting you live?”

Above them, the lights flickered again.

“Why don’t you need to sleep? Or eat?” Paige continued, breath short. She sounded like Tess. Maybe KJ would run from her again and maybe this was all she would ever get out of the girl who used to be her best friend. Paige had bared everything already, but KJ kept her secrets caged somewhere deep inside her. “Mateo made so many deals he bled to death. Why didn’t you have to make any?”

Paige needed to *reach* KJ. She took her wrist and held it fast.

To her surprise, KJ didn’t pull from her grip. She didn’t fight at all. Instead, she drew Paige’s hand to her mouth, and pressed the soft warmth of her lips to Paige’s knuckles. The tenderness of it rendered her momentarily speechless.

“I don’t remember, but it feels . . .” KJ whispered, shivering, against Paige’s skin. “She was right. It felt familiar.”

Despite her confusion, Paige softened. She brushed a stray bit of KJ’s hair away with her free hand, and she tried to draw out the real girl underneath the fear. The one who came here alone to slay someone else’s demons, who’d already saved Paige a thousand times, who was braver than anyone else she had ever met.

“Did you make a different kind of deal with it?” Paige asked.

KJ shook her head.

“Then talk to me,” Paige said. “There’s . . . there’s nothing you can say that will make me leave you. I won’t leave you again. My mom is gone, the boys are gone. You’re the only one I have left, and I can’t lose you again. I *won’t*.”

A few days inside the Kaleidoscope had a funny way of blotting out the last year of her real life. Running through the endless halls with KJ made it easy to forget that, before this, she’d finally gotten the life she used to

dream about. She'd moved away from Miami and left all the deadweight behind her. She'd attended all her classes and worn nice sweaters and decorated her dorm room. She'd made friends with lovely, smiling people who read the same books as her and laughed at her jokes and, when she lay in bed at night, all she'd wanted was to tell KJ about it. She'd landed exactly where she'd dreamed of landing, and it was hollow the whole way through. It was supposed to be a year spent growing away from KJ, and she'd spent it holding her breath, waiting for the day they could come back together.

"The only thing that matters," KJ said finally, "is getting you out."

Paige raised a brow. "Getting *us* out?"

"I don't think I'm leaving."

"Why not?"

"Because I didn't make any deals, but . . ." KJ's shoulders sank. "When I first got here, I saw that girl. Summer. She was always popping up around me, offering me stuff. Food and water. A way to talk to my mom. She even offered a way out."

"But it would cost you?" Paige asked.

"I never gave her anything," KJ protested. "I remembered what my mom used to say. About always coming out with less. I knew the original seniors gave this thing what it wanted and it didn't save them, so I was gonna find a different way out."

Paige nodded, trying to understand where KJ was going with this. She finally drew away from Paige's knuckles and, when she looked up, she was crying. Bitterly and quietly, she was coming apart. Paige felt equal parts need to wipe away her tears and ice-cold dread at what KJ was going to confess.

"Every time I saw her, I would run the other way. But without the blood, there was nothing to eat. No water. I was too scared to sleep because I thought she'd find me, so I'd slap myself awake and keep walking. When she stopped showing up, I thought I was getting closer to a way out. I wanted out so bad."

KJ's voice was heavy with tears now. Paige supposed, deep down, she already understood what was happening here. She'd felt the same burning thirst and ravenous hunger, the same desperate crawl toward the light. But KJ had been here for the equivalent of years. No one could last that long with nothing, not even KJ.

“What happened?” Paige asked.

“I walked and walked,” KJ said. “I stopped feeling hungry after a while. Or thirsty. I stopped feeling pretty much anything. I wasn’t scared anymore, so I could sleep whenever I needed to. And it was like . . . it was like everything around me started to come apart. Like I could only see things through a foggy mirror. I thought I was awake while I walked, but I think at some point I just . . . fell asleep. My dreams were everywhere. I don’t think I ever really woke up from them. I’d dream about stuff we used to do after school, then I’d walk down a hallway and my room was there. Sometimes it was empty, sometimes my mom was there. Usually, I’d see you.”

Paige flushed.

“When we found that room with your mom’s memory, it reminded me,” KJ whispered. “It stayed like that for so long I couldn’t tell if I’d been here for days or years. I started to forget what was real. The resort . . . it wasn’t like it is right now. It was all hazy. I couldn’t even remember most of my life, but I wanted it back so bad. It was like me and the resort were turning into the same thing, and there was less of me than when I started. I was almost completely gone, I think. Then I felt you.”

The moment they’d come face-to-face, KJ in the closet, holding a baseball bat, felt much clearer now. The confusion in her eyes and the fear in her grip were tangible.

“I was so weak, but I remember saying the same thing over and over. *Let me go back to her. Let me see her again.* Then I opened my eyes, and I felt like myself again. And you were here.”

“But how—”

“I thought you were another dream. You were already in so many of them. But when you said you only came here to find me . . .” KJ shuddered. “I knew it was really you. I hoped I was really me, too, because then maybe all those years I walked were one long nightmare. I wanted us to have a second chance.”

“We have one,” Paige tried. “We have a second chance, right?”

“We don’t,” KJ spat. “Because my mom was right. To stay alive here, you have to give it blood. And I never did. Even when I was starving, I thought I could find a way out without making any trades.”

“And you’re still here,” Paige insisted, denying what she knew was coming with all the strength she had left.

“Why can I sense the energy here?” KJ asked. “Why do I know how to

get around? Why do the rooms move when I want them to?”

“I don’t know.”

“Why has it only tried to kill you guys? Why doesn’t it bother me anymore? Why hasn’t anything here tried to kill me this whole time?”

“KJ—” Paige protested.

“Because I’m part of this place now,” KJ said with finality. “I didn’t give it any blood, but in the end, it didn’t matter. I bet there were lots of people here who never bled, but they didn’t get out, either.”

Paige closed her eyes. She knew it was coming, but she couldn’t stomach it. She couldn’t do this alone.

“The reason nothing tries to kill me anymore,” KJ said, “is because I’m already dead.”

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Casey wakes to the sound of screaming. The jagged edges of a girl's voice rip through her daze, muffled by distance but still close. Too close.

She jolts upright and finds herself in another hallway partially submerged in water. Tess kneels next to her, refastening Jason's bindings with his face pressed to the wall. Her gaze leaves Jason's wrists for a nanosecond to meet Casey's eyes, and with only a dash of relief, she sighs. "You're awake."

"What happened?" Casey hisses, clutching at the fabric of her nearly ruined shirt. "The screaming . . ."

Tess finishes securing the wire with a hearty tug. "You got weird like an hour ago. Stopped responding to me. The screaming . . . I don't know."

Casey follows Tess's gaze to the end of the hallway and finds a door with a chunky metal push bar and only a narrow slot of glass for a window. Pink shimmers in the reflection, fluid as water. She doesn't need to hear the screeching again to know that the source is on the other side. The last thing she remembers is leaving the kitchen, the wall of water urging them forward. When she peers down, she finds that blood seeps from her feet out through the fabric of her sneakers and she feels that her lips have gone chapped and dry. Her shoulders, back, and neck all ache from the cold and the exhaustion.

"Is this the end?" she asks.

"There *is* no end," Jason snaps, checking his shoulder against Tess in frustration. "I'm pretty sure this is it forever."

In the hallway behind them, the water blocks their path. It soundlessly submerges the space in a floor-to-ceiling flood. Like outside the kitchen, the water is stopped by an invisible wall. Casey imagines that the moment they keep moving, the space they inhabit now will be underwater, too. No options, no going back. The door—and the screaming—is the only way. The resort has made sure of it.

"I don't know why it's leading us *toward* the screaming," Tess says, gathering Jason against her torso. "But I've got my shield."

“What happened to keeping me alive?” Jason snarls.

“I think we said the *resort’s* keeping you alive, remember?” Tess taunts. “Let’s see how hard it’ll work to keep that going.”

Tess grips Jason by the bindings and marches him forward. They wade through the final stretch of hallway with held breath, and that tickling sensation crawls over the back of Casey’s neck again. Something watching them, something waiting to see what happens next. *Something hungry.*

She runs her fingers along the walls as they continue and fights the feeling that this isn’t real. The scream wasn’t real and the flickering lights aren’t real and this is all some elaborate dream she can’t wake up from. From the moment she washed ashore after seeing the beast face-to-face, the reality of this world seemed to fray.

When they finally reach the end of the infinite hallway, Tess pushes open the door and reveals the source of the screaming.

The room on the other side of the door contains a vibrant pink pool surrounded by deep-blue tile that dances with light. Between the exhaustion and the dark, it takes Casey a moment to understand the mass of bodies on the other side of the water. Three of them—two tangled up in a mess of fists and knees, snarling while the third stands a few feet away to supervise. Tess goes still before throwing her arm across the doorway as if to hold Casey and Jason behind her.

A flash of red hair in the fray. Casey’s heart stops.

“It’s Summer,” Casey hisses.

Tess’s arm doesn’t move.

Another scream erupts from the writhing mass, and this time Casey recognizes it. The body tangled around Summer, pinning her to the tile floor, is Claudia Ramirez. A long gash sweeps across Claudia’s dark cheek, spilling sticky blood down to her jaw. With a grunt, Claudia presses her knee to the back of Summer’s neck before prying something from her grip.

“Got it!” Claudia cries triumphantly, holding the small silver object in the light. It’s the triangular silver head of a paring knife that catches the glow. From behind her, Saul lunges forward and takes it from her, pocketing it quickly before stepping back out of harm’s way.

“*Tess*,” Casey hisses, shoving against Tess’s arm. “They’re going to kill her. We have to get to her and—”

Tess shakes her head. Her dark gaze flits from Saul to Claudia and back again before she numbly whispers, “It’s a trap.”

“What?”

“We can’t help her either way,” Tess mumbles, wide-eyed. “But we can . . . if we go back, there’s still a chance for us to—”

Her thought dies mid-sentence when she turns to find that the wall of water has caught up with them again. Just like the rest of their journey from the kitchen, there is no going back. The only way is forward, and a quick glance across the pool tells Casey this is the end of the line. There are no other doors. They’ve landed exactly where they were supposed to.

She hadn’t expected the Kaleidoscope to invite others to the room at the end of the world.

Across the water, Saul and Claudia are too fixated on Summer to notice three people entering the room. And Summer, with her cheek smashed to the tile, doesn’t see anything at all. Her yellow sundress is soiled with blood and grime, and there is a fat, purple knot protruding from the side of her knee. The angle of it is strange, and all Casey can see is Summer going over the railing all over again. She might be alive, but she’s hurting. She’s breaking.

The wet smack of Claudia smashing Summer’s cheek back to the floor echoes. She twists the paring knife around in her palm and raises it over Summer’s spine with a hard inhale.

Casey bites the inside of her cheek. Even if she’s bleeding and starving and dizzy, the only thing she can think of is Summer. In the split second of silence, she pushes past Tess and runs.

She only makes it halfway around the pool before the others notice her.

“*Saul!*” Claudia cries.

But Saul is already moving. He reaches Casey in an instant, taking her shoulders in his sure grip to back her to the nearest wall. Even with his breath hot and frantic on her face, his expression remains perfectly calm. The pink light behind him makes the shadows of his face dark and unreadable. “Okay, now. Where did you come from?”

Casey shoves against him, but it’s no good.

Just beyond his shoulders, though, Casey sees Claudia pause in confusion. Summer isn’t dead yet; it isn’t too late.

As the confusion mounts into chaos, Jason slams his foot to the back of Tess’s knee, bringing her to the ground. Before she can reach her own knife at her belt, Jason’s heel comes down on her hand. He drops to a seat on her back, shins braced against her shoulders.

But then he stops. He doesn't hurt her.

There's still time to save both of them.

The moment Tess cries out in pain, both Claudia's and Saul's eyes snap to her. There's a wildness in Claudia's expression as she realizes that in the span of a few seconds, they've been outnumbered.

"What is going on?" Claudia cries.

Saul's eyes lock on Casey again, and he secures her more firmly against the wall. "Is this some kind of ambush? How did you all find us?"

"We didn't *find* you," Casey spits. "There was nowhere else to go."

Summer struggles against Claudia. When she speaks, her voice comes out muffled, sound squished by the tile. "That's what I *told* you! I didn't even know you were here!"

"Bullshit," Claudia says, panting for air. Her dark eyes skip from Summer to Casey to Tess, all of them held captive in one way or another. "No, these three were all friends. They're . . . they came here to kill us. We have to—"

"I'm not with them!" Jason cries, attempting to scrape his wire bindings against the knife in Tess's belt. "They kidnapped me! I'm on your side!"

Saul's breath comes out in a single aggravated huff. "All I know is the Kaleidoscope led us here. It wants us to be safe, so it led us somewhere with no doors. Why would it lead you here, too?"

"The rest of the place is flooded," Tess calls out, wriggling against Jason's weight. "I don't know why we're here, either. And if someone doesn't get him off me in about five seconds, I'll—"

Before she can finish her sentence, Jason's bindings snap against Tess's knife, and he flings his arms out to catch his fall. Tess scrambles from under him, snatching her knife before scuttling to the nearest corner of the room on her hands and knees. The panting, fearful speed of her breath is audible even from across the water.

"Okay, okay, let's all calm down," Saul says. In a surprisingly gentle gesture, he releases Casey's shoulders and steps back. "Let me think about this. Maybe it wanted us to share our shelter with the others?"

"What?"

Claudia doesn't follow the rest of the room's example by releasing Summer. Instead, she lowers her knife to the skin of Summer's back. The shaking of her hands is barely visible in the dim light, but Casey doesn't miss it. She doesn't miss the hissing of her strained breath. Just like

everyone else the Kaleidoscope has turned into a killer, she's scared out of her mind.

"It's protected us so far," Saul says. "Maybe it's sending us allies?"

"We don't *have* any allies," Claudia hisses. "Everyone else was trying to kill us. We can't take any chances."

There's something about the tone of Claudia's voice. Momentarily, Casey is transported back to the hall of mirrors. To Claudia weeping beside a mound of her own carnage and Saul's silken voice telling her it wasn't her fault. Compared to the other strange scenes from the past, the vision of Saul and Claudia had seemed random, but now she understands. Maybe the Kaleidoscope showed her so she could survive this moment. Maybe it knew, even then, that she would find herself on the other end of their killing spree by the end of this.

Fingers twitching at her sides, Casey looks past Saul to Claudia. If she can just find the tender flesh hiding beneath Claudia's armor of panic, maybe they can turn this around. "I saw it, too."

Claudia's gaze darts to her, questioning.

"The Kaleidoscope showed me," Casey continues, breath quivering. The knife in Claudia's hand is unbelievably sharp, still pointed at Summer's back, and Casey feels it like it's pressed to her, too. "It showed me that you guys have been defending yourselves the whole time. You've been . . . you've been attacked way more than the rest of us. I saw."

Across the pool room, Tess shifts forward into the light. Her face morphs from raw fear to confusion. Whatever she thinks of this, she keeps it to herself.

"Wait," Saul says, pinching the bridge of his nose. "What do you mean *it showed you*?"

Casey's fingers ghost over the neck of her shirt. The cotton catches on the tender edges of her chest wound and she tries to remember it clearly. Walking and walking, then swimming and swimming, then drowning. "After I lost Summer and Jason, I was in this hall of mirrors. I saw so many things I didn't understand, but I saw you, too. Both of you. You were . . . I saw what you had to do, Claudia. But it wasn't your fault. I know it wasn't."

Saul goes stiff.

"There was no one there," Claudia says, voice echoing from the tile walls on all sides. "I looked. Saul, you said—"

“—no one would find out,” Casey says quickly. “But I’ve seen the thing that controls this place. And I think it was there with you. It’s been here with us the whole time, everywhere we went.”

There is only held breath and the dripping of water against tile. Either they all think she’s lost her mind, or they understand it in the primal way she does. Beyond the ping-pong nature of the conversation, flinging from paranoia-drenched accusation to accusation, there’s something they have in common. Saul and Claudia think the resort has been guiding them, and maybe it has. Maybe it speaks to them the same way it spoke to Casey in the hall of mirrored memories, or to Tess through her small miracles, or to Jason through its floods. It’s been following her all night, eating away at her mind, but maybe she isn’t the only one. Maybe they’ve all been feeling its bite since the beginning.

Quietly, Claudia draws her knife away from Summer’s back.

Summer’s gasp for air is audible. She scrambles to her feet and puts as much distance between herself and Claudia as possible. Just like Tess, she settles on the far side of the pool. In a strange turn of events, with the two of them crouched in the shadows, it’s like Tess and Summer are a unified force against the rest of the room. Maybe a never-ending night of murder and blood was all they needed to finally reunite. Casey wishes, briefly, she had the stamina left to appreciate it.

“So in this scenario,” Saul says, attempting to remain measured, “we think that the Kaleidoscope wants us to work together?”

“You said it yourself,” Casey says. “You said it’s been keeping you safe. I think it was keeping me safe, too. It wanted me to understand you. And it . . . it was keeping Jason safe, too. Maybe it’s been protecting all of us at the same time.”

“But why?” Jason asks. He paces toward her, massaging the angry purple welts on his wrists. “Because it likes us best?”

“Because we’ve fed it the most,” Saul says, surprisingly confident. Back in school, he was an impressive speaker, but the way he slides into control of the pool room is like watching a masterpiece painted before her eyes. The fear drains from his dark eyes, and his lips even curl into a near smile. “Think about it. When Claudia and I have had to . . . the few times we’ve been forced to take a life, we were rewarded with peace. At least, that’s what it felt like.”

Casey’s gaze finds Tess still cowering in the corner of the room. She’s

gone unsettlingly quiet, but this should all sound familiar to her. It's all the same, isn't it? Claudia's murders, Tess's blood trades . . .

She pulls down the neck of her shirt, exposing the gaping wound at her sternum. "I think I fed it, too."

Saul inspects the wound and whistles. "Sure looks like it."

"This is all great," Claudia snaps, flicking the paring knife toward Casey. She wipes the sheen of sweat from her brow in irritation. "But what does that have to do with locking us in a room together? What are we supposed to do now?"

"Maybe it's protecting us until it's all over?" Jason suggests. "Like in a bunker."

"So we're just supposed to wait here until everyone else is dead?" Claudia asks. "What if it's just starving us?"

Saul strokes the point of his chin in thought. "No. It must think there's something here we can do to survive."

Survive. But that was never the point. Casey scans the uninterrupted tile walls and the warm glow of the water. It isn't a bunker, it's a cage. An idyllic and uncanny cage, bloodless but not free. The point of this can't be to wait out everyone left alive. The Kaleidoscope can't be here forever. When did that become the goal? It's as though they've all forgotten that there was a better life before the Kaleidoscope, and that life might still exist somewhere outside its endless walls. And Casey can hardly blame them.

She hardly remembers a thing about herself except the violence and the fear.

"We don't want to just survive here, right?" Casey says finally. "We want to get out."

Everyone in the pool room goes quiet.

Across the water, Tess finally pulls herself to her feet, and a revelation dawns on Casey. They don't have to guess why the Kaleidoscope brought them here, and they don't have to guess what it wants from them. The rest of them are interpreting vague signs and memories, but there is someone in this room who has asked and received more from the Kaleidoscope than anyone else.

"We can ask it why we're here," Casey says, pointing to Tess. "She can talk to it."

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Twenty-four

“We have to find your mom,” Paige managed. “She might know a different way. Maybe this happened to someone before, and—”

Usually, Paige defaulted to a practical, action-oriented robot during an emergency. But staring at KJ, color drained and breathless and on the brink of tears, the only thing she really wanted was to worm her way through the story to find the reasons it wasn’t true. The surefire way they could undo it. KJ wasn’t dead because she was here and she was alive, because Paige could touch her if she wanted to, and she would feel warm skin. Because KJ wasn’t like Mateo and Caleb, and this place hadn’t violently swallowed her the same way. Underneath the pale logic of all this, KJ couldn’t be dead because Paige needed her. She couldn’t be dead because Paige had just gotten her back, because there was so much more time they needed. There were so many things she’d already lost; it couldn’t have KJ, too.

KJ was hers.

“There’s nothing she can do,” KJ insisted, gathering herself.

“You don’t know that,” Paige breathed, voice going froggy. “You don’t know every single thing that happened here the first time.”

“Neither does she,” KJ spat.

Paige’s eyes widened.

“That’s the whole thing.” KJ’s cheeks were red with frustration and shame. “My mom isn’t some kind of secret guide to getting out. I don’t think she even knows how she did it the first time. The resort, it . . . we’re all food to it. My mom, too.”

“But the blood—”

“—doesn’t even work the way it did when she was here. She thinks she had some kind of mutual relationship with it, but she never did. It was in control of her the whole time. It gets to make the rules.”

Paige knew it was true the moment the words were out. Tess’s vague answers about the resort’s inner workings, her quick descent into paranoia,

the fear in her eyes. Tess couldn't help them because the Kaleidoscope had more of her than anyone else. Once she was inside, she was more a weapon than a solution, and not a weapon pointed at their real enemy. There was only one part that didn't make sense.

"But she came here to save you."

KJ shook her head. "She came because it's been calling for her to come back the whole time. My blood made it strong enough to call the rest of you. Caleb's blood made it strong enough to call my mom. Every time it eats, it gets stronger."

Paige heard a faint dripping somewhere behind them, like distant plumbing. She closed her eyes and wrapped her arms around KJ's shoulders, fastening them together in the quiet. She hated Tess for still taking priority, even now. And she hated this place for snuffing out the life of someone who only ever wanted to save the people she loved. She hated the other survivors for hiding this from them for so long. More than anything, Paige hated herself. If she'd been here to talk KJ out of it, or if they'd maintained their friendship and stayed in touch, she could have convinced KJ to never come here. She'd spent years talking KJ out of setting foot in the Kaleidoscope; why couldn't she have lasted another year?

If she was even half the friend she pretended to be, KJ would be alive.

"Okay . . ." Paige trailed off. "Okay, then we'll save her, too. We'll just . . . we'll find a way to get you out first."

Against Paige's shoulder, KJ scoffed. "Get me out of being dead?"

"There has to be a way," Paige said. "Everything else here is impossible. Why can't we do something impossible, too? Maybe if we took some of my life and—"

"No."

"—if there was a way we could make a trade," Paige tried. "Your mom said they traded their way out."

"How well did that work for Mateo?" KJ asked. "Did you hear what I just said? The Kaleidoscope can do whatever it wants. It won't help us."

"But if it's hungry enough."

"The Kaleidoscope isn't letting us out for all the blood in the world. It's taken everyone else. You're not offering yourself up, too."

"What else do we do?"

Paige's voice was smaller than she meant it to be. Despite the various drownings and near-death experiences she'd endured so far, she'd been able

to hide the way she was breaking. She'd managed to keep her head, figuratively, above water. But KJ's death wasn't something she could accept. The crushing fear of it made her chin quiver, made her throat tight, made her skin hot and cold all at once. Her mother, Caleb, Mateo, and now KJ.

Maybe there was no one in this world who was safe to love.

KJ tightened their embrace and expelled a long breath. "We find *you* a way out. Whatever it takes."

"KJ . . ."

"And once you're out, you take a match and you burn this place to the ground."

"What if it's the whole island?" Paige asked.

"Then you'll make Caleb's dad sink it." KJ pulled away, fixing her dark eyes on Paige. A fire burned in her eyes that Paige hadn't seen since before all of this. It was ironic, she thought, that the desperate need to live only seemed to come back to KJ once she realized she was dead. She took Paige's shoulders in her grip. "Whatever it takes to make sure no one ever comes here again."

On instinct, Paige's fingers brushed the curve of KJ's cheek before running the length of her raven hair. KJ leaned into the touch and closed her eyes, brow furrowed and lips quivering like it stung. Tangled together in the absolute quiet, a strange warmth bloomed like algae in the murky waters of Paige's heart. In another world where they were back home, this might have been something different. If this wasn't the end of the line, and if getting out of the resort didn't inevitably mean they would never see each other again, this closeness might have been something more than a goodbye.

In a world that wasn't already ruined, Paige imagined that KJ might have closed the space between them and kissed her.

Before the feeling could take root, there was a crash from somewhere outside the infirmary. Something meeting the walls hard enough to shake the useless clock affixed over the door. It sounded again, closer, like someone being thrashed against the walls. It occurred to Paige that, if the resort's attention wasn't on the two of them, it had to be elsewhere. And now that Mateo was gone, there was only one other person living inside these walls.

Tess.

Before Paige could part her lips to speak, the infirmary door burst open,

slamming against the nearest wall with enough force for the handle to puncture it. On the other side, wild-eyed and dripping with water, was Tess. She didn’t speak, simply panting for air with her arm braced against the wall.

Then she slid a knife from her belt and pointed it at KJ.

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Twenty-five

“Mom,” KJ said cautiously, backing up to the exam bed. Her hand found Paige’s knee and squeezed it in fear. “Can you please put the knife down?”

Tess’s only response was a murky laugh. She adjusted her grip on the knife, but she didn’t lower it. The deep exhaustion from the bowling alley had burned away. Whatever horrors she’d seen in the neon labyrinth since then had morphed her into something electric and alive. Paige wondered if this was the version of Tess who survived the Kaleidoscope the first time.

No wonder the other survivors were afraid of her.

“I told you to leave it to me,” Tess said. “But you fell right back into the trap.”

It took Paige too long to understand that Tess was talking to her.

“You *attacked* me,” Paige said.

“Because I’ve done this all before, and I know how this goes,” Tess said, flicking her knife in KJ’s direction. “When I said this place’s favorite hobby is making trades, I was wrong. Its favorite hobby is *lying*.”

She wasn’t wrong—their last conversation with Mateo was proof enough of that. Of course the resort lied to them. It was a hungry predator, and it was willing to do anything to keep prey trapped under its foot. Paige just wasn’t sure what KJ had to do with that.

“Ms. Collins, we need to stick together,” Paige tried. She raised her hands from the bed. Bits of Mateo’s blood were still crusted to her fingers. “Mateo’s gone now. We’re the only ones left.”

Tess sighed, bowing her head in what looked like genuine grief. It was surprising, considering how much animosity she’d held for him only hours ago. But that was the same as the resort, wasn’t it? Grudges held against him for the things his parents had done, paid for in his blood.

“Another one lured in,” Tess said mournfully. She fixed her gaze on KJ again. “Did you *feel* it when he left, too?”

KJ’s eyes widened.

“You know, it almost got me,” Tess mused. “You’re so much like my real daughter, I was almost convinced. I almost stopped wondering about all those little things that don’t make sense. I almost thought Casey was still here.”

“Casey?” Paige asked numbly.

Tess laughed under her breath. “Yeah, when I tried to feed it, I got a vision of your mom and I really thought it was her. I thought I’d been seeing her everywhere. Little flickers. Little glimpses. But remember what I told you? It puts the things you love on a line and casts.”

Paige went still. All the warped reflections, the voices, the little signs of her mother still fluttering around this place. Before she came here, Paige would have called ghosts just as fake as everything else KJ and Tess believed about the Kaleidoscope, but she had long since accepted that impossible things were possible in this strange half reality. If her mother *was* still here, if she could help them . . .

“It’ll really trick you, but I know it’s just trying to punish me.” She pressed the heel of her hand to her brow. “It’s trying to make me think you’re here, but you’re not. Because you couldn’t live here . . . survive here . . . without doing the kinds of things I had to . . .”

She gagged into her elbow.

“I’m real, Mom,” KJ pleaded. “The reason I can stay here without making trades—”

“I don’t want to hear it,” Tess snapped.

“—is because I’m not alive anymore.”

For a second, this gave Tess pause. There was a slight lift to her brow, a slight widening of her eyes. Her grip on the knife shook. But as quickly as she faltered, she hardened again. “It will say anything to hurt me.”

“She’s telling the truth!” Paige cried.

Tess pressed the heel of her hand to her brow. “I know I deserve this. I know it’s making a joke out of me. Everyone always did. But we have to . . . I have to see through it. We have to get out, and she’s keeping us here.”

She?

KJ chanced a step toward her mother, arms still raised in surrender. Her shoulders sank, and she made herself small again. Paige wondered if Tess still saw KJ as a child when she looked at her or if she only saw a monster. The shadows of Tess’s mind were deadly, and the Kaleidoscope brought them to life in a way Paige had never seen back home.

“Mom,” KJ whispered. “I love you. Please don’t—”

Like clockwork, the quiet of their negotiation was drowned out by the growl of the resort. Tess reached for KJ, but she didn’t pull her into an embrace. Instead, she threw KJ toward the door and lunged at her with the knife.

With a clean swipe, a wound opened up across KJ’s stomach. Her eyes went wide with shock, but there was no blood. The wound, a neat slice that spread nearly hip to hip, stitched itself back together in absolute silence.

Relief and horror mixed in the waters of Paige’s mind. It was confirmation, however flimsy, that KJ couldn’t be killed.

It was confirmation that she was already dead.

“It’s not real,” Tess whispered, eyes fixed on the healing wound. “You’re not real. It’s all a trap.”

KJ ducked, narrowly missing her mother’s next swing, and the knife plunged into the door. She leapt forward, grabbing Tess by the waist and tackling her to the linoleum floor. They grappled there, a mess of limbs and fists as KJ fought to keep Tess at bay. And Paige just watched, heart racing, because this had to be a nightmare. Everything KJ sacrificed was to keep Tess alive; this couldn’t be how their story ended.

As the roaring continued, it filled Paige’s skull to the brim. She watched as KJ pushed Tess away over and over, only for Tess to lunge for her again. She wasn’t in control of herself, and just like always, KJ was the victim. Tess couldn’t see through the illusion of the resort. Even after surviving it once before, she couldn’t understand that the whole world wasn’t out to attack her. She couldn’t separate the people she loved—even the person she loved the very most—from her enemies.

“KJ came here to *save* you,” Paige cried.

“Why . . . ?” Tess groaned between attempts to shove her daughter away. “Why . . . would you . . . *do* that?”

“Because I love you,” KJ cried again, straining to keep her mother’s arms pinned to the floor.

“Why?”

At that, KJ’s frantic expression turned to confusion.

It was a question Paige had asked herself a thousand times over the years. No matter how much KJ loved Tess, her mother was never any better to her. She never made it any easier. Tess Collins had spent her whole life waiting to die, hoping to atone for her sins while ignoring the daughter she

was supposed to protect, and KJ loved her anyway. It wasn't fair, and Paige hated Tess for it. She *hated* her for it. The louder the growl sounded, reverberating from every wall of the Kaleidoscope at once, the more she remembered every tearful night in KJ's room, every week without groceries, every nightmare Tess had branded into KJ's mind. Every seething memory flowed into an unending wave of pure, unadulterated anger.

Here at the end, Paige couldn't let Tess ruin everything again. Her gaze slid to the knife stuck in the door.

The roar of the resort grew louder, and Tess and KJ's fight spilled into the hallway. KJ pinned her mother down before Tess bit her in the arm and flipped her onto her back. She moved to wrap her hands around KJ's throat. The panic was practically tearing Tess apart. There was so little of her left, and if she didn't stop, they would never make it out. The resort's attention seared on them now, and there was nowhere else to look.

The knife was in Paige's hand. This was what it needed from her.

Before she could understand the thoughts for what they were, the fear clouded everything else.

She lunged into the hallway, knife slick in her grip, and she shoved it into the meat of Tess's back.

Immediately, Tess stiffened.

KJ looked up at her mother, realization washing over her slowly. As the roaring subsided, the realization came over Paige, too. Wine-red blood pooled around the knife wound, staining Tess's shirt black in its wake. She had stabbed Tess.

She had *stabbed* Tess.

Tess crumpled, falling off KJ with a groan.

"Mom?" KJ cried. "No, no, no . . ."

Paige was going to be sick.

Tess looked at KJ with an expression Paige had never seen before. She looked at once sorry and proud, moving to tuck a little of KJ's hair behind her ear before her eyes fluttered shut and a dribble of blood crept over her bottom lip.

The resort roared to life again, the brightness of the lights surging to a painful white. A different kind of roar erupted from everywhere at once, followed by a surge of water from around the nearest corner. Within seconds, the hallway flooded. It crashed over Tess, lifting her limp body farther down the hallway while it flushed KJ back into the infirmary.

In a collapsing, creaking mess of wall and beams and light, the hallway shifted. It groaned open painfully, sucking Tess and the water into a dark fissure at its very end. It released a great belching sound from its depths as it gulped the water and stray furniture down. As the water drained, an opening appeared at the far end of the hall. Another way forward.

Maybe KJ would never forgive her. She would never forgive herself.

But if any of this was going to be worth it, they had to run. Paige took KJ's hand and she ran into the hallway with nothing but escape burning in her mind. Away from the infirmary and the dark opening and Tess's bleeding body drifting somewhere far away. Everything was coming down, but until there was nowhere left to run, she had to try to live.

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“It’s not like a phone call,” Tess says, sitting up on her knees. “I don’t even know if it’ll offer us a way out. I’ve been asking for snacks and favors, not a separation.”

The rest of them stand around her, in proximity but not too close. Not within striking range. Claudia’s arms are folded over her chest with the paring knife securely in her grip, and Saul stands beside her, his arm draped over her shoulder. Jason stands alone, shoulder to the tile wall, chewing the inside of his cheek with anxiety. Summer stands only a few feet from Casey, but the distance burns. Her fists clench and unclench at her sides and she’s lopsided from the clear break in her knee. Her frantic gaze is locked on Tess.

“Why would it only talk to you?” Saul asks, tightening his grip on Claudia. “We’ve offered it enough blood to warrant a conversation.”

Tess shrugs. “I wasn’t really offering it other people’s blood.”

Delicately, Tess peels away what’s left of her jacket, exposing a gnarled gash chiseled deep into the meat of her inner arm. Both Saul and Claudia recoil at the sight, but Casey is sure she’s seen it before. Was it healed already? Time feels so blurry, she has a hard time telling which memories go in which order.

She’s lost in thought until the moment Tess plunges the knife into her own arm. Blood spills to the floor in a steady drip, and Tess inhales through the pain. A miserable stretch of silence passes as Tess kneels there, eyes rolled back in her head, blood dripping down her bony arm. In the time they wait, Casey finds Summer and takes her hand.

Summer stiffens. But when she allows herself a fraction of a second to meet Casey’s eyes, she smiles. It’s a relieved, exhausted smile. One that says, on the other side of this, there’s a world where they might be okay again. Somehow, at the end of the world, she still has both of them. It feels like unfathomably good luck.

But even now, surrounded by the other survivors, there’s something slithering and insidious about the air in the room. The pink water shimmers,

rippling light on every face, obscuring the true shape of their expressions. If this works, it means they might break free of this hell. Casey would give all the blood she has and then some to breathe real air again. She would give it all for a chance to see the people she loves on the outside.

When Tess's eyes finally slide back to normal, she gasps and falls back against the wall. Once she's slumped all the way to the floor, huddled next to the small puddle of her own blood, she goes oddly quiet.

Casey holds her breath until her lungs squeeze. Sweat dampens the hair at the back of her neck. The seconds before Tess finally speaks pass like years.

"We can get out," Tess says numbly.

This time, Claudia's scream is joyful. She throws her arms around Saul's neck and he lifts her off her feet, spinning her around. Even Jason, wedged awkwardly behind them, covers his mouth in surprise. It's too good to be true; it seems impossible that the resort would lead them here just to let them out, but maybe Saul was right. Maybe it's been protecting them all along. Maybe the Kaleidoscope chose everyone in this room to live.

Beside her, Summer's reaction is more somber. She seems to come to the same silent conclusion as Casey: If it were that easy, Tess would be celebrating, too. Casey meets Summer's eyes and it feels obvious. They can get out, but there's a price.

"We don't have enough," Tess clarifies, eyes trained on the pink water. There's a strange, sad quirk to her brow, like she's reading the ending of a story she's read a thousand times only to find that, this time, it ends in tragedy. "It'll let us out for more blood. We have to give it more before we can go."

The brief spark of joy in the room is snuffed out.

It's Saul who breaks the silence. "Okay. How *much* more?"

"Are you serious?" Casey snaps. "You immediately want to give it what it wants?"

"Sure I do!" Saul booms, releasing Claudia. He points to each of them one by one, a glint of fear shining in his dark eyes, as he says, "If it needs, what, a few ounces from each of us? We wouldn't do that to go home?"

"I'm with Saul," Jason chimes in.

"It doesn't work like that," Tess hisses, washing the blood from her hands in the pool. "I don't know how much it wants. But I know that getting all six of us out costs a lot more than what we have."

There’s a strangeness to the way she emphasizes *six of us*. It hadn’t occurred to Casey that they might not get out with all six of them. But one at a time, each of their expressions changes. There’s a possibility someone stays here while the others get out. There’s a reality where someone gets left behind.

“Are you suggesting we leave someone?” Claudia says, voicing the question surfacing in each of their minds.

Tess looks into the water, expression blank. “I’m not suggesting anything.”

“Then what?” Saul asks. “Should we each start bleeding and see if it works?”

From beside Casey, Summer stirs. There’s an odd pinch in her expression, and her gaze is stuck on Tess. She leans away from her hurt leg, and Casey notices the other ways she’s been hurt all at once. Black bruises creep from under the shoulder of her dress; one of her hands is gnarled, fingers swollen and clenched in pain. Under her breath, she mutters, “How do we know she isn’t lying?”

“What?” Casey asks, tuning out the noise of the others arguing. She catches Summer’s eye. “You mean Tess?”

Summer nods.

“Why?”

“She could be trying to get us all to kill each other,” Summer breathes. She swallows and even that seems to hurt her. “Next she’ll say we can’t kill her. Because she’s the one it talks to. She just . . . she just wants to kill one of us.”

“Excuse me?”

This is Tess now, and her glare is fixed on Summer. Behind the hard, cold set of her shoulders, Casey sees a little of the girl she found in the freezer with Jade and Kendra. The one burdened with a bloodlust she didn’t want. Around her, Saul, Claudia, and Jason go quiet, inching away from the blast zone. Casey tastes iron in her throat, but she needs to find a way to be brave. This isn’t the place for Tess and Summer to have their long-overdue fight.

“Why would it bring all six of us here if it didn’t want to let us all out?” Summer asks, speaking more to the others than Tess. “What would the resort say if you were the one we left behind? Would it still let us out, or does it insist that you get to leave?”

Tess is taken aback.

“I didn’t even say we’re leaving someone behind,” Tess snaps. “Don’t make me into the bad guy just because you’re upset.”

“Why would I trust you?” Summer laughs incredulously. She leans too hard on her bad leg and winces in pain. “You’ve . . . you’ve been trying to get rid of me since we got here. Since before that, too.”

“Oh, come on.”

It’s only then that Casey hears it. A soft rumbling groan from under the water, reverberating through the tiles.

Just like when Tess had Jason pinned under the water, it sees the violence brewing in them and it growls in anticipation. It pushes them, eager and hungry. It wants them to fight like this. It wants Summer and Tess to finally tear each other’s throats out, to take all the quiet rage they’ve collected for years and make it real. Blood is only the material part; the true meat that it pulls apart in its teeth is the pain. Like a blood-hungry shark, it noses its way into their depths and finds the love, eating it away until there’s nothing left. Until they can only remember the things they hate about each other most, and every other light has gone out.

One life to save five, and everyone left will remember what it cost for the rest of their lives.

“Wait,” Casey mutters. “Wait, this is what it wants. This is what it’s been trying to make us—”

“If leaving someone behind would allow everyone else to get out, then I think that’s something we *have* to consider,” Saul says, ever the diplomat. “We’ve all killed already. Let’s face it, if one of us needs to stay, we probably deserve it, right?”

“I’m not staying here,” Summer says, teetering backward. As the subtle groan from the pool intensifies, she rams herself into Claudia with all the strength she has, using the momentary surprise to snatch her paring knife back. Her breath goes wild with fear and she stumbles back, swinging the knife from person to person. “I’ve waited so long to get away from all of you. You can’t . . . you can’t ruin my life now. It should be her.”

Her blade points at Tess.

Tess rises to her feet, fist tightening around her own knife. Her jaw is stiff with anger, but there is a glimmer of sorrow in her eyes.

The roaring intensifies, and before it can worm its way into her, Casey claps her hands over her ears and sinks to her knees. The beast is egging

them on, jittery with delight. It's thrilled by the violence, by the chance for blood. It watches them and it sees dinner with a show. As the noise reaches a fever pitch, the lights go blindingly white before violently sputtering to darkness.

Without light or sound, Casey is lost again. She finds herself tucked a world away from the Kaleidoscope devolving into chaos around her. She finds herself miles below it, watching from far away. A feeling, for the thousandth time in this nightmare, that she's done this before.

When she opens her eyes, the dark comes and goes in flashes. One moment, she sees Jason scrunched against the nearest wall, cowering with his head tucked under his arms. She sees Claudia with her eyes closed and her teeth gritted together all wound up in Saul's arms. And she sees Tess and Summer facing each other with weapons raised.

The groan echoes from every tile in the room, and for the first time, Casey is sure she can see it seeping into them all.

"If it's not you, then it's one of us," Tess says, cold and slick as a knife. "We gotta cut the deadweight."

Finally, Summer snaps.

She lunges through the space between them, eyes wild with fury. She's off-balance as she does it, knee buckling from under her, forcing her knife to just miss the muscle of Tess's thigh.

Two lives flash before Casey at once. There is a world where she takes Summer's side. Where they make it out together, and Summer finally leaves Miami behind. Where she writes all of her sadness into poems and puts them into the world and someone finally understands her for who she is. After everything she's been through, it's what Summer deserves. This can't be the way her life ends.

And there's Tess, unpredictable as a wildfire. Spontaneous and reckless and kind and cruel and selfish and generous and so full of pain it spills over her edges.

There's a third world where she remains here, cowering on the tile floor, letting the fear soak her through. A world where she does nothing, just like she's always done nothing.

That's exactly what the Kaleidoscope wants.

In the dark, Casey stumbles to her feet and feels for either of them. Summer is her lungs and Tess is her heart; she can't go back to the real world without both of them. After everything they've been through, all the

shapes their friendship has taken, all the miles of hallways they crossed to get here, this can't be how it ends.

Casey's hand finds purchase on someone's shoulder and she squeezes. "It's me, I—"

Before she can finish, something impacts her stomach.

In the dizzying moments afterward, she almost laughs. But when the wind returns to her lungs, it's followed by a fire ripping through her gut. Something warm seeps into the soiled fabric of her shirt.

The pool lights flicker on just long enough for Casey to understand that it's Summer standing in front of her, eyes wide with horror. It takes Casey another aching second to follow the long line of Summer's arm to the place it meets her fist, still firmly gripping the paring knife.

The paring knife that is plunged inches into Casey's stomach.

She only meets Summer's eyes for a moment, and she tries to understand. But before Summer can say a word, Tess appears at her side, face contorted in horrified rage. She grabs Summer by the shirt and hurls her toward the pool with a cry.

As Casey's eyes flutter shut and she begins to crumple, she watches Summer's skull crack against the side of the pool before she slips soundlessly into the water.

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They pull Summer out of the water, sliding her body across the tile to rest beside Casey. It's a feeling she's sure she's felt a thousand times: Summer's wet skin rubbery against hers, still warm even without life. If Casey doesn't look at her, she can pretend Summer isn't soaked in blood. She can pretend she's still with them even as the last tendrils of her life curl down through the water, twisting toward the drain deep below them. A knife clatters to the tile somewhere inches away, and a spray of blood dots Casey's cheeks. Even as the wound gouged into her stomach bleeds and bleeds, she can't seem to feel the pain. It's all numb, all floating away.

"Is she . . . ?" Jason starts.

Casey tilts her head a little toward Summer's body, inching over so that she can press the knuckles of their hands together. She can't be dead, she can't be dead, she *can't be dead*. This is Summer Hayes, the human beam of sunlight. The one who always packs an extra sandwich for the days Casey forgets. The one who learned to sew before she hit middle school because she wanted to embroider daisies on everything she owned. The world only feels real when they're together.

The side of Summer's head is dented from the impact of hitting the pool, and there's a bloody gash at her hairline. Her eyes are still wide open, facing the uninterrupted tile ceiling above them.

Tess's hands find Casey, turning her onto her back so she can inspect the wound. And Casey doesn't need to see it to know it's fatal—Tess's expression warps into glassy panic the moment she lays eyes on it. Her skin is sallow, either from shock or her own loss of blood. But she's alive. Unlike Summer, she still has a chance to leave.

In the space of a single breath, Casey comes to understand that she herself won't be leaving, either.

"Damn," Jason says, arms folded over his chest. "That was quick thinking."

"What?" Tess breathes. "No. No, she's . . ."

"She was going to kill the rest of us next," Saul says. When Tess's eyes

shoot to him, he clarifies, “I mean, look at what she did to Casey.”

“Tess,” Claudia cuts in, stepping around Saul. “It said we needed more blood. We gave it two whole people. How do we get out?”

“No,” Tess spits. “Case is still alive.”

“Tess,” Saul warns.

“She’s not dead.” Tess’s hand clasps Casey’s shoulder, but her glare is for the others.

Casey can hardly listen to them. Summer’s blood pools in the tile grout between them, still hot from the adrenaline that pumped through her veins in those final seconds. She didn’t mean to hurt anyone. She did it because she was scared, just like all the others. She did it in self-defense. She couldn’t see past the people in this room, to the heart of the monster. Every death is nothing but a cover-up of the nasty, rotting truth of it.

“I won’t go without her,” Casey manages through her cracked lips. “Leave me.”

“Case . . .” Tess trails off.

“If you think you can get Casey out before she bleeds to death,” Saul says, “then ignore her and do what you need to do, okay?”

Tess hesitates. She stoops to Casey’s level and places a tender hand on Summer’s damp shoulder. She isn’t crying, really, but there’s something shiny and far away about her eyes. Killing Summer was different from killing Jade or Kendra, and it’s changed something under the surface of Tess. She can’t convince herself this was in self-defense.

“For her,” Tess says. “Let’s get out of—”

Between them, the spill of blood that leaks from Summer’s temple begins to boil and soak into the floor. It fills the room with the tang of iron. The Kaleidoscope doesn’t need Tess to offer her blood anymore; it begins its next meal with Summer.

“What is that?” Claudia asks.

Casey and Tess look up from Summer’s blood to find that there’s a strange lump in the darkest corner of the pool room. It swells from beneath the tiles, moving like a child trapped under a blanket. One moment, it shrinks, then it balloons up again. It takes Casey too long to understand that it’s . . . *breathing*.

“We want out of here,” Tess calls out, fighting the quiver in her voice. “We’ve given you enough now. Let us out.”

Hands shaking, she holds the knife to her wound and spills a little to the

tile, tears leaking from the corners of her eyes. When Casey closes her eyes, she understands it. Even without blood, even without being able to speak to the beast, she understands that it isn't enough. Maybe it was never going to be enough. The hunger of the Kaleidoscope is endless, and she feels it nibbling at her edges already. It's feasted so much and grown so fast, it squeezes away everything else. It's a gentle pull in all directions. Summer's skin against hers begins to go cold.

"I don't understand," Tess whispers. "That has to be enough."

"But you said—" Claudia cries.

"How much more?" Saul asks.

Jason scoffs. "Should we vote on who to offer next?"

"That's not what I mean," Saul says, incredulous. "But we've come this far. At least *some* of us should make it out."

Casey ignores them. Focus comes harder by the second, and the only thing she can truly see is the small glint of Tess's dark gaze over her. She is sure the tears welling in Tess's eyes are hot, but as they drip onto Casey's cheeks, they're freezing.

"Use my blood," Casey croaks. "Leave me with Summer. Use me to get out."

Tess's eyes widen.

"Tess, Casey is being reasonable." Saul butts in, leaning down in a vain attempt to get Tess's attention. "I know it hurts, but we *have* to consider—"

Tess flattens her palm to the bloody tile and closes her eyes. Through her teeth, she manages, "I won't lose them both."

Tess clutches the weeping wound on the underside of her arm. She looks more tired than she did a moment ago. Her blood sizzles away as it drips on the tile, and Casey wonders how much of *Tess* is dissipating with it. Something shifts in the waters of her expression, sliding from ragged despair to a seed of hope. Casey is sure Tess is finally listening to her. She's finally agreeing to leave her behind.

Dying so the others can live won't be so bad. If she thinks of it as something heroic, some of the fear burns away. She'll be with Summer, wherever they end up. She'll know that Tess got the chance to grow because of her. Maybe Tess can do something good with her life, and she can banish the shadows that always creep in from the corners of her mind. It will all be worth it for that alone.

But instead, Tess grits her teeth and clenches Casey's wrist.

“Yes,” Tess snaps, eyes still closed. She faces the lump of tile across the room. “We’ll take it. Whatever you want, whenever you want, if you let us all out of here.”

For too long, the quivering mass is silent. It waxes and wanes and doesn’t say a word.

Then, a splashing comes from the center of the pool.

Casey strains to look up as an ornate gold mirror emerges from the dull shine of the water. It drips from every contoured edge, but instead of reflecting the pool room back at them, it reveals a clear blue sky and a tumble of white sand shifting in a warm breeze. Palms sway and, far away, the docks are littered with people. She’s seen a thousand illusions in this resort, but this she’s sure is real. It’s the outside world, shiny and warm and full of life. Just within reach, just on the other side of the glass.

“You did it,” Claudia breathes. “You *actually* did it.”

From somewhere just outside of Casey’s fading vision, she hears Jason howl in excitement.

There’s something that feels inevitable about this escape. Tess will carry her to freedom and they’ll leave Summer’s still-warm body at the water’s edge, and whatever magic keeps this place alive will continue. There is no way out that will end the evil. Tess was always going to kill Summer, and they were always going to have to leave her here. Casey would always get to live, leaving the ghosts behind, and this would always be wrong. It folds over itself again and again, and it never changes.

Casey watches Saul swim to the mirror and climb through to the other side before helping Claudia through. Jason follows them, giving only a frightened look back at the nightmare version of the resort he leaves behind. Then the three of them lie in the sand of the other world, panting in relief. But Tess waits until they’re all gone before she presses a hand to Summer’s face, closing her eyelids. “I hope it’s nice, wherever you are.”

She slips her hands under Casey’s back and, with a gentle tug, pulls her into the water.

The moment she slips under, the world becomes blurry and strange again. At once, Casey is in the ocean at night, watching two girls standing at a marina lit only by a headlight beam and the moon. A memory bobs to the surface: a boat ride at sunrise, a handful of cash passed to a nervous sailor, a wobbly trek to an abandoned building. Another life papered over hers again, coloring everything.

When Casey breaks the surface, she finds she's back on the tiled floor of the pool room, only a foot from Summer's body. Across the water, Tess climbs through the mirror.

Without her.

Tess ambles into the light and holds her arms out to soak up the sun. Beyond her, Saul and Claudia collapse into a pile, and Jason stumbles to his knees and weeps. But she isn't with them. They've forgotten her. There must be a mistake. They've left her behind.

"Wait," she mutters, struggling to sit up. "Wait, I'm still here. I'm still __"

To her left, there is the soft squelch of blood and skin shifting out of place.

Summer—apparently nowhere near as dead as she seemed —begins to move. She pushes herself to her elbows, then to her knees. Clumped bits of flesh and viscera fall from her temple, and her eyes are bloody, red streaming down her cheeks. Spurts of it fountain from the wound at her hairline, but it doesn't seem to bother her near-serene expression. Wet hair drips at her feet as she finishes standing, but her thin lips curl into a smile.

"Summer . . ." Casey begins.

Summer wrings her hair out over her shoulder. She leans over and hacks up a mouthful of water and blood, then wipes her lips on the back of her wrist.

"Did you figure it out?" Summer asks, flicking the water from her fingers. "We get to do this all again. A thousand more times."

"What is happening?"

"What's happening is that this is how we get to spend our afterlife." Summer looks almost bored by it. "I used to hope that after a million years, you might start to see through it. But I think you're just about spent. You barely know where you are."

This can't be right. The whirring in Casey's mind grinds to a halt.

"Summer—"

"Buckle up." Summer frowns sympathetically and motions to the room around them. "Only a few minutes until the show starts again. We're in the first scene."

Casey turns back to the mirror, and instead of the beach, she sees the girl again. The girl is running, hand in hand with the dark-haired girl who looks like Tess. Even if she doesn't know the girl's name, her heart squeezes.

She’s in danger.

She’s so fixated on the blond girl, she hardly notices the way the tiles begin to shake. All around them, the resort comes unglued, tiles clacking and peeling apart to reveal a blinding white light on the other side. *This is how we get to spend our afterlife.*

She has to do this again.

Casey stares hard into the mirror, tears in her eyes, and she tries to summon up the girl. Maybe this was never about getting out—maybe there was never an *out* for Casey Keller—and maybe she’s spent this whole time thinking of herself as the center of an escape that was never about her.

If she’s dead, then the girl has to live.

Even as the ground beneath her separates, and Casey begins to fall, she reaches for the girl in the mirror. Water crashes over everything, drowning her world in white, but she reaches. If they can meet in the middle, even for just a moment, even for just a few words . . .

The world goes blank and Casey lets only a few words fill her mind.

Let me go to her.

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Twenty-six

Paige ran until she couldn't anymore. She ran until she lost her grip on KJ. There was a wet *thud* to her feet hitting the soiled carpet over and over, a throaty growl to her breath, a mindless, primal focus to her escape. Her knees buckled and she tumbled to the floor with a splash, but that wasn't enough to stop the need. With a miserable whine, she rolled onto her hands and knees and kept moving. Anything to get away from the water and the blood. Away from what she'd done.

She didn't stop moving until KJ's hand caught the back of her bloodied shirt and forced her to the floor.

"I'm sorry," Paige muttered as KJ pushed her to the wall. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to . . . I—"

KJ's gaze was dark and unreadable. Her lips quivered, and her fingers shook as they dug hard into Paige's shoulders, and then she slumped over, throwing her arms around Paige's neck. If it weren't for the way KJ's shoulders trembled and the wet sound of her breath against Paige's ear, she might not know KJ was crying. Paige's hands hovered, unsure, at the perimeter of KJ's ribs. There was nothing in the world she wanted more than to hug KJ back, to spill all the fear and grief and sadness back into the only person who could understand it.

But Paige was the one who'd ruined everything. She was the one who killed the last person KJ had left.

"It wasn't your fault," KJ said.

"I let it get in my head." Paige's voice quivered. "I let it control me. I knew it was wrong, but I couldn't stop."

"It's not over," KJ whispered. The ghost of a smile danced across her lips. "She isn't gone yet. I can still feel her. We can go back for her."

"KJ."

"We can save her."

Paige understood it more than she wanted to. KJ had to believe there was

still a way for Tess to live the same way Paige had to believe there was a world where she and KJ could both escape. She had to believe that her sacrifice was worth something. Paige buried her face in KJ's neck and held her back. She understood finally just how alone she would be when this was over, whether or not she made it out of these hallways.

Finally, the crashing sounds of the resort moving began to ring from somewhere behind them. KJ sprang backward, tearing them apart. Paige's eyes darted to the source of the noise just in time to catch the first light going out at the very beginning of the hall. One by one, the rest of the lights clunked into complete darkness. It swallowed the hallway behind them, and Paige braced herself for when the shadow finally caught up with them. She closed her eyes and reached out, clasping her arms around KJ's elbow in case the resort tore them apart.

But the dark never came. When Paige looked up, she found an open doorway.

On the other side, the room was nauseatingly familiar. Dark blue tiles and pink water all over again. The same room where she'd drowned. Whatever progress they'd made in escaping was null and void. The moment they paused to breathe, the resort had them cornered again.

The only thing different about the pool room, Paige realized, was its sound. She heard a faint splashing coming from inside, gentler than the sound of swimming.

She became suddenly aware of the way her fingers still dug into KJ's arms and she released her grip. Once she was free, KJ stood and angled herself to peer inside the pool room, apparently just as confused by the noise. She crept forward a few feet and froze.

"It's her."

Paige joined KJ, stomach tight with anxiety. If she strained as far forward as possible without stepping inside the pool room, she could just make out the wet red tendrils of hair floating at the water's surface. The body in the pool began to twitch.

When she turned, the dark hallway behind them was gone. In its place, a wall of lightly rippling water urging them forward.

KJ gave her a quick nod. Hands clasped together, they entered the room.

Summer's body floated in the center of the pool, arms and legs splayed out so that she made a bloody, rippling star. Red seeped from a wound at the front of her skull like ribbons. And every few seconds, her body twitched. A

faint spark of life, less than a second each time.

At the edge of the pool, a paring knife was spattered with blood.

“What is this . . . ?” KJ asked.

Suddenly, the body in the pool jolted to life, thrashing and bleeding with such ferocity Paige thought she might pull them in with her. Water splashed out until the body sank completely under the surface. The blood quickly dyed the pool water as dark as rubies, hiding the thin slice of Summer’s sinking body.

They needed to get out of here, but whatever exit door had existed was gone from sight, and Paige was not keen to jump back into the murky red water to look for an underwater door a second time. Whatever way she looked at it, this room was a trap.

In a burst of water, Summer erupted from the pool.

Just like the last time Paige saw her here, Summer wore a soiled yellow dress and limp locks of vibrant red hair in a tousled braid. But unlike the last time, and unlike the moment Summer had visited them as Mateo died, there was a golden glow to her skin. She landed delicately across the pool from them, bare feet softly meeting the tile floor without a sound. Water dripped from her hair and fingers and the hem of her dress, pooling in the grout. But she looked incredibly, impossibly alive.

“I can *breathe* again,” Summer said, stretching her arms over her head. “Oh, I forgot how amazing it is to be alive.”

Paige’s heart leapt into her throat. She reached out, gripping KJ’s hand with a near whimper. Summer was there when Caleb had died. She was there when Mateo had died. She’d been there when Paige nearly drowned, and here she was again, hunger in her eyes. It wasn’t hard to guess what came next.

Summer’s amused gaze fell on Paige, and her lips curled into a smile that Paige might have thought was friendly if she saw it anywhere else. Her tinny voice echoed from every tile at once.

“It’s funny, it wasn’t until you two had your little brainstorming party that I realized how short life can be out there,” Summer said dreamily. “And how long it can be in here. Twenty-five years seems so long to you, but it always seemed like centuries to me. And then you put a number on it and I realized it wasn’t centuries. It was a millennium.”

It took Paige a moment too long to understand that Summer was talking about her shoddy time math. Had she been listening to them, even then? If

fifteen hours outside was a month inside, and if a month outside was four years inside, then for the ghost of a senior who died on senior night, it would have been—

". . . twelve hundred years," Paige mumbled.

Beside her, KJ tensed. Her breath came out ragged with fear. "How are you here? What do you want from us?"

"I've asked the same question a thousand times. Why am I still here when no one else lasted this long? Everyone but me seems to be a whisper of a whisper at this point," Summer said. Her casual gaze slid to Paige. "Even your mom is pretty much used up."

Overhead, the lights flickered. Paige's stomach clenched. It couldn't be her—not literally. Her mother had been dead for so long now, Paige had forgotten how to hope she would come back. But here was Summer Hayes in the flesh, twenty-five years dead and as dewy skinned and rosy as she had been the night she died.

"What . . . are you?" Paige finally asked.

Summer tapped her chin in thought. "Do you want to know what I was? Or what I am now?"

When Paige didn't respond, Summer slouched a little. Her expression sobered—through the ripples of pink light dancing across her cheeks, there was a seriousness that darkened her face. In one moment, she had looked like a seventeen-year-old girl, like someone Paige might have met at freshman orientation, like someone she might have known as a friend in another world. But in the space between blinks, Summer's face had transformed into something unfathomably old. She was warped and misshapen, inhuman in the details. She struck fear like a lance into Paige's heart, but there was nowhere to run from her. If this was a trap after all, Summer had won. They were at her mercy.

"A long time ago, I was a girl who was gutted and left to die by her best friends in the world," Summer said with a sigh. "I was bled out to buy everyone's tickets to freedom. While they all scrambled their way back to real lives, I lay here and bled alone."

Beneath the sound of lapping water, there was a ceramic scraping noise from across the pool. It took Paige a moment to notice the nearly imperceptible movement of the tiles under Summer's feet. They swelled, creating a small mound where Summer stood. KJ seemed to notice it, too, and she scrambled back a step.

“Oh, this?” Summer chimed, gesturing to the tile. “Don’t be scared. It doesn’t bite unless it’s really hungry, and it *just* ate.”

KJ tensed.

It didn’t take a genius to understand that Summer meant Tess.

“What is it?” Paige demanded. “Why is it killing everyone?”

“Killing everyone?” Summer asked sadly. “It’s not killing. It’s eating. There’s a difference. Would you say you’re killing a cow every time you eat a burger?”

At her feet, the mound of tile began to shift, slinking along the rim of the pool like a hand under a carpet. It began to circle Summer impatiently, only pausing when Summer crouched to her knees and ran her hand over it almost *lovingly*.

Dreamily, she said, “It doesn’t know how it got here, either. It was born in the darkest part of the water, buried under the waves miles from the sun.” The lump of tile shuddered almost affectionately, like a dog sitting obediently at Summer’s feet. “It was alone back then, and it was so hungry it wanted to die. The only blood in its world came from the fish that scraped the bottom of the world. It feasted and feasted, but it never got any less hungry. Over time, it grew until its mouth could just break the surface of the water, and then it tasted sunlight and fresh air, and it ate the birds and fish, but it was still so *hungry*.”

Paige fought back a wave of nausea.

“When the ship floated into its waters, it just couldn’t help itself. It was starving.” Summer smiled at the tile creature lovingly. “After the feast, it got much bigger. Much stronger. It could reach out even further to draw its food to shore, but it was still only scraps. A family here, a flock of seagulls there. It just got hungrier and hungrier. And then the builders came.”

Paige looked down to find her fingers all tangled with KJ’s, whose grip was crushingly tight. She’d spent her whole life listening to stories about the Kaleidoscope, but it was only ever myth and rumor. It was strange to hear it so plainly. It was wrong in a bone-deep way.

“When they started building the resort, it knew it needed to wait a little longer. It knew they were building its trap for it, so it stayed hungry. It staved off pain with the memory of the feast of sailors, and it knew, if it waited for every room of this resort to be full of blood, it would eat enough to stay happy for years.”

The tile creature seemed to swell, and there was a gurgle in the pipes

overhead. Paige's eyes went hot with tears as she sucked in a breath. Tess and KJ had already described this thing as a beast a hundred times, but she truly understood it now. They weren't metaphorically in the creature's mouth; they were literally being digested.

"That was a mistake, though," Summer said sadly, stroking the tile creature tenderly. "It had so much fun on senior night gorging itself and keeping us trapped inside. But it ate so many of us and let so few of us go, it scared everyone else in the world away. No more visitors. Even though it didn't eat the people who came to investigate, even though it waited patiently and it starved alone, even though it behaved itself and promised it would never eat like that again, the resort never reopened and nothing bigger than scraps ever came. The blood it gulped down on senior night couldn't last forever, and it didn't know if it would ever eat enough to feel satisfied again. The lights started to dim. . . ."

There was a theatrical cadence to the way Summer spoke, like she'd practiced this monologue all twelve hundred years she'd been lost in this place. Like she'd been dying to tell *someone*. Even if Summer's story was vague and timeless, Paige knew what part came next. There was one more notable time this island had eaten; in fact, the papers had considered it all one long massacre.

Numbly, Paige said, "And then my mom came."

"Have you heard this one before?" Summer asked sweetly.

With a gentle palm, Summer pressed the tile creature flat. She cocked her head to the side, dragging bits of wet hair over the now-even floor. Tracing a line of grout with her fingertip, she said, "She hardly had enough blood to count as a snack, but the day she got here changed my world forever."

This time, Paige wasn't sure she could fight back the vomit. Again, the ceiling lights flickered. Only for a moment, and barely enough to see, but it stopped Paige's breath in her throat. Did the lights always flicker when someone mentioned her mother?

KJ's grip squeezed tight and her jaw set with sudden anger.

"Why is this happening now?" she snarled.

"Because I wanted it to." Summer's voice was flat and quick. With the tile creature gone—at least, gone from view—she climbed to her feet and stared emotionlessly across the water at them. "Because when Casey got here, her memories of the outside world started leaking in all over the place,

and I saw what my friends had done on the outside. They'd forgotten about all of us. They just pretended it never happened and moved on with their lives."

Because this isn't your memory. It's hers. The marina and the minivan . . . if what Summer was saying meant that the ghosts trapped in the Kaleidoscope's maw bled their memories into its shape, that meant the never-ending, lonely halls were colored the way her mother saw the world. All of this was at least partially through Casey Keller's eyes. She wasn't just in the flickering lights. She was everywhere.

"I don't know why it let me stay over the others," Summer said, fists clenched at her sides. "All the other seniors started to fade away, but not me. Maybe it's because when my friends all left me to die, it felt bad for me. Maybe it's because we were the same kind of lonely. But the more I wished I could drag them all back here so it could eat them, too, the more we . . ."

Summer's gaze went distant. The tile around her began to vibrate, blurring the other side of the pool in a haze of deep blue. The resort seemed to respond to her emotions, changing with each swing of her mood. Summer wasn't just the ghost of a girl trapped in a resort-shaped nightmare anymore. She was the heart of the resort itself. Paige recognized the feeling now: the hot, metallic tension of looking at Summer dead-on. It was the same fear she'd felt each time the resort's attention slid to her. Even if they were different, the cocktail of their anger and hunger and sadness made them one and the same.

"You wanted to kill us as revenge against our parents," Paige said, fighting to keep her voice steady. "Why not just do it the minute we got here?"

To her surprise, Summer seemed to consider this. "What a strange thing to ask. Here I felt like I pushed the boys too early. They were gone before their parents even knew they were missing. I hoped Saul, Claudia, and Jason would come after them, but I don't think they will now."

A cold realization washed over Paige as Summer finished her story. There was no reason for her to share any of this if she planned to let them out. If Summer was the heart of the Kaleidoscope now, and if she had forced them into this room so she could tell them a sob story about her plot to kill them all, then this was the end. Over her shoulder, deep in the flooded hallway, a wall sconce began to flicker to life.

Summer's gaze fell on KJ and she feigned a frown that almost looked genuine. "I wish it could've been different. I wish it could have kept you alive a little longer. But look at all the people who came for you. Doesn't that feel good?"

There was a sickly sweet condescension dripping from her voice. KJ's nose scrunched in disgust, but maybe there was an undercurrent of truth to it. Maybe Summer's anger at the survivors only deepened when she saw the search parties looking for KJ.

"What happens when we're all dead?" KJ hissed. "No one else will ever come here again. One day this place is going to starve."

"Maybe," Summer conceded casually. "When you're in here, it doesn't matter. If it takes a hundred years to finally starve, that's thousands to us. Maybe you fade away, or maybe you live forever. Maybe it swallows you quick like your friends, or maybe you live together for longer than you can even imagine."

In a strange, misshapen way, Paige understood what she meant. Like a reality seen through a fun house mirror, she could just make out a life in the warped reflection Summer showed her. An eternity in this place as an afterlife, years with KJ that she'd never dreamed she could have. A chance to inhabit the same space as her mother again, even if it was just for a while. If the Kaleidoscope was an inevitability—if she would have always ended up here, no matter what—there was a part of Paige that wondered why she'd fought it off in the first place.

In her haze, she almost missed the way the pink water began to swell over the lip of the pool.

"It's flooding," KJ gasped, kicking the water from her sneakers.

Summer watched them with a heavy-lidded gaze, impatient and tired. Maybe after an eternity spent waiting for her revenge, she just wanted it to be over.

Paige glanced over her shoulder again. At the end of the waterlogged hallway, the wall sconce still flickered. Maybe it was nothing but an illusion, but there was still a choice. There was still a way to claw for survival.

She met KJ's eyes, tightened her grip, and nodded. With a deep breath, they turned toward the wall of water and dove in.

The flooded hallway was murky and warm. Paige wiped the water from her eyes and locked her gaze on KJ through the stinging. She nodded

toward the flickering light, and in unison, they began kicking their way deeper into the hall.

She'd long since made peace with the idea of never seeing the sky again. She'd even come to understand that maybe she was always going to die in this place, atoning for sins she didn't commit. But she didn't want to die like this, with KJ's hand slipping out of hers, with a thousand more things she wanted to say.

With a hearty kick, KJ wrapped her arm around Paige's waist, and Paige immediately clung to her. Surely the Kaleidoscope still had full control in the depth of this flooded hallway, but if they were quick enough—if they took enough risks it didn't expect—maybe they could stall the inevitable.

KJ reached the end of the flooded hallway and pressed her palm to the wall in one violent motion. Bubbles of distress spilled from her lips. Paige felt the scorching pressure of holding her breath and tucked her face into KJ's arm.

If this was how she died, at least she wasn't alone.

Then KJ hit the wall one more time and a soft *ding* sounded in the quiet. The wall slid open, and they fell into a dry room.

As the doors closed, Paige realized they hadn't just landed in a room—it was an elevator. They met the fuzz of green carpet that lined the floor and the lights along the ceiling flickered on. The tiny metal box whirred to life. Paige scrambled to her feet, trying to slip her fingers between the elevator doors to pry them open, but they wouldn't budge.

"You said the elevators are dangerous," Paige said without looking at KJ. "Where do they go?"

KJ, still gasping for air on the elevator floor, closed her eyes. "I don't know. I don't remember. But it was . . . it was somewhere I didn't like."

Paige's lips drew into a flat line. They'd jumped from one nightmare into another. Just like for Churro a thousand years ago, it seemed that safety was always one jump away, but somehow always out of reach.

At last, the elevator slid to a halt, pausing with the doors still sealed shut. Paige met KJ's worried stare, and she held her breath. When the doors finally slid open, they revealed the neon glow of a food court. And sitting at the nearest table, like she'd been waiting for them all along, was Casey Keller.

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Twenty-seven

She sat at a sandy-beige cafeteria table, the glow of pink neon lights making the world around her a little dreamier than the rest of the resort. Pale fog rolled into the wide-open space from every door and window in sight, obscuring the dark corners of the room while dousing the light in a gossamer haze. There were countless strange things about the room the elevator had brought them to: Empty storefronts and dark windows implied it might be a mall, but the floor was littered with TVs and recliners, pool tables and pinball machines, desk chairs and school lockers. Instead of one thing, the room was an amalgamation of every nightmare the Kaleidoscope had dreamed up for them, meshed together like the room itself was a dream.

Just like the strange blend of the space itself, the ghost of Casey Keller wasn't just one thing.

In one moment, Paige recognized her as the mother who drove her to the marina over a decade ago, with wispy bits of hair falling from her ponytail and worry lines etched deep into the skin around her eyes. But when Casey turned to face Paige and KJ, she was young again. The pain washed from her and the glow of youth radiated in the fog around her and she was the Casey Keller from all the stories come back to life.

A shifting, changing thing. Casey was all of herself at once—a soul that existed without time.

Her expression morphed from blank confusion to relief. When she smiled, Paige wondered if she'd ever seen it in person. She stood, and in a soft, achingly familiar voice, Casey said, "*Paige.*"

Paige's body moved on autopilot, ignoring the warning bells that this might be an illusion or a trap. She stumbled away from KJ, toward her mother, and collapsed into her. Her body was heavy with exhaustion and fear, but Casey took the weight of it in her arms with ease. She smelled like she had the last time they saw each other. When had she forgotten the scent of orange and vanilla swirling from the lost fabric of her mother's shirts?

Illusion or not, this version of Casey was real. It was real to her.

“I don’t understand,” Paige whispered.

“This must be what happens in between,” Casey mumbled distantly. She pressed her fingers through Paige’s hair. “It’s less foggy. It feels so much more . . .”

With a gasp, she held Paige at arm’s length.

“Why are you here?”

“I . . .” Paige started with no clear idea of what to actually say. “How are *you* here? You’re . . . I thought you were . . .”

Casey’s eyes shut softly, and she exhaled through her teeth. “The Kaleidoscope holds on to us. The ones who die. I think. I couldn’t remember before, but I think I remember now. Have I been here a long time?”

Casey drew her hand away from Paige’s shoulder to massage the skin of her forehead, breathing painfully again through her teeth. She was old and young, tired and electric, a ghost and alive all at once. The different parts of her seemed to war with each other, drawing her in a thousand directions. She was difficult to look at, but Paige couldn’t drag her eyes away. She’d killed all of the naive parts of herself that used to believe she might see her mother again in the flesh. She’d forced herself to grow up the moment she knew she was alone, but here in this dream, only inches apart, she was a child again.

She needed her mother.

“I don’t think I have long,” Casey whispered. “It’s going to start again. Senior night. I can feel it coming back, and once I’m there, I won’t be able to . . . I don’t think I’ll be myself.”

“Is my mom here?”

This was KJ, cautiously approaching them. It occurred to Paige that, when she was little, KJ and Casey would have interacted constantly. Their little families were so intertwined, they were practically one unit. But now they were both ghosts, both half there, both together and lifetimes apart. Paige couldn’t fathom a world where she couldn’t have either of them.

The Kaleidoscope had so many lives in its jaws. It had gnawed away the edges of every single person she loved.

Casey eyed KJ. “You look just like her. It’s . . . it’s like I’m talking to Tess.”

KJ’s expression darkened.

“She’s still alive,” Casey said finally. “You feel that too, don’t you?”

KJ’s hand came to her chest as if quieting the beat of her heart. Did her heart beat even though she was gone? Paige fought the urge to reach out and touch her, to feel for a pulse under the warm skin of her throat.

“This never should have happened,” Casey said to KJ. “I’m so sorry you’re here, too. This is everything I was trying to . . . I don’t know if I thought it would keep you kids safe forever, but I thought it would at least give you time to get away from here. I thought you’d get to grow up.”

“How did it bring us here?” Paige asked.

Casey considered. Without guilt or sadness, she said, “It’s my fault.”

With an exhausted sigh, she began explaining it to them. All the sordid details of the exchange: Tess’s plea to the Kaleidoscope, Casey’s life restored for a price, a debt hanging over the head of every survivor the moment they broke free. Despite the quaver in her voice, Casey described it all without pause. But there was a sadness that weighed heavy in her timeless eyes as she spoke. Even if this was hundreds of years ago in her mind, the guilt sliced through like it was fresh. Like it was still happening.

“There wasn’t enough blood,” Casey said finally. “When I was alive, it was all I could think about. If they’d used my blood to get out . . . if they hadn’t tried to pull me out, too, maybe there would’ve been enough.”

Paige glanced over her shoulder at KJ, stomach twisting with anxiety. “How can we get away from Summer? She’s been following us. She . . . she killed Caleb and Mateo. She was about to kill me, too.”

Casey’s gaze lowered to the floor. “It really is all my fault.”

The longer Paige watched Casey speak, the stranger it felt. She was as immaterial as the changing walls around them, but it was as though Paige had heard Casey’s voice her whole life. She could almost imagine what their world might have looked like if they’d had longer: dinners at the TV and late-night help with school projects, family trips with Tess and KJ, beachy weekends and a peace that was more than just a distraction.

Blinking through the color-soaked fog, Paige choked out, “Can we . . . can we get you out of here?”

“Oh.” Casey turned and the teenager in her faded, making room for the mother Paige knew. She tilted her head just a little to the left, and she put on a sad smile. “I don’t think there’s enough of me left to leave.”

It wasn’t fair. How could the Kaleidoscope do this to Paige over and over? How could it give her a mother and take her away, give her friends

and take them away, give her a home and take it away? For the first time, she truly understood the resort—or the creature beneath its glossy facade—the way Tess saw it. She felt the tug and release of hope and grief. The brief seeds of joy that took root in her every time she thought there was someone she might be able to save, followed by the cruel heel of the Kaleidoscope suffocating them without a thought.

"But you," Casey said, tucking the knuckle of her pointer finger under Paige's chin. She lifted Paige's face level with hers and there was something impossibly alive in her eyes. "You're still breathing. If we can figure out a way to get you out, we can—"

"What about KJ?" Paige asked. "How can she leave?"

Casey looked past Paige and sighed. "I think the only chance we have is to destroy this place. I . . . I don't know what happens after that."

"How?" KJ asked.

"That's the question I never figured out the answer to," Casey said. "We all spent so long trying to kill or run away from each other, we didn't realize that we'd been facing the wrong way until it was too late. The resort . . . it's so good at hiding. But anything that's alive has a heart."

Maybe she didn't mean it literally, but something about the word *heart* struck Paige as odd. When Summer came to them, the creature seemed to hang on her every word. It called to the people who had hurt her, luring them back into its jaws. It allowed her to move between life and death, taunting Caleb and Mateo from beyond the grave. The reason Summer Hayes remembered every single day of this place when all the other ghosts were long gone was the same reason the place seemed to follow the ebb and flow of her anger.

"It's Summer," Paige spat.

Her mother blinked at her. "No. Summer is trapped here, just like us."

"Maybe at first," Paige said. "But she convinced Caleb and Mateo to die. She was angry at all of you. Even if she doesn't understand, she's the one in charge now."

Her mother met her gaze, and it was still dizzyingly surreal. Paige fought the urge to reach out and prod the skin of her mother's face, just to test how *real* this illusion was. If she was still alive, who would her mother be now? Would she still work in reception at a little law firm downtown, would she have been the one to fly Paige to her new school, would Paige know the shape of her laugh?

With a cough, her mother straightened. “The Kaleidoscope thrives on making everyone inside so scared of each other they forget what’s really keeping them here. Whatever it’s done to Summer, she’s . . . she isn’t a monster. She’s been here so much longer than anyone else. Let me try to stop her.”

“What do we do?” Paige asked.

“Stay alive,” her mother whispered. “I don’t know if there’s a way out, but if there is, find it. KJ will help you, right?”

Paige glanced over her shoulder in time to see KJ solemnly nod.

“What about my mom?” KJ asked, her voice betraying only a glimmer of her desperation. “She isn’t dead yet. Can you . . . is there any way to—”

Casey’s gaze fell. “Your mom . . . the resort taught her to see traps everywhere. She doesn’t trust the things she sees. I don’t know if I can reach her.”

Almost too quietly to hear, KJ said, “Please.”

“I will help her,” Casey said. “That’s all I can promise.”

The fog was thicker now than it had been when they began speaking. The lights were both hazier and brighter all at once, too painful to look at head-on. In fact, it was hard to look anywhere other than at her mother. When Paige touched the skin of her own neck, it was cold. Her lungs were almost too tight to allow her to breathe, and with a jolt, Paige recognized where they were. There was a reason KJ had been too afraid to come here.

This was the place between alive and dead. This was where the Kaleidoscope held its ghosts. This place was death, and she didn’t belong here.

Her mother seemed to realize the same thing. Her gaze stretched into the space beyond Paige and, with a mechanical hum, something slid into place. A soft *ding* punched through the quiet as the elevator opened.

They hadn’t had enough time. There was still so much she needed to ask her mother. She could spend a thousand years roaming the hallways of the Kaleidoscope, interrogating Casey about all the darkest contours of her life, and it wouldn’t be enough time. Maybe that’s what her life would be if they couldn’t find a way out. Maybe she would die in these halls and her body would rot in the real world, but she would spend whatever time the resort had left with her mother. With KJ.

Instead of any of the practical questions, though, Paige’s mind drifted to a dark night at a marina, KJ’s hand in hers, their eyes turned to a blinking

pink light that only Paige could see. She found herself under the black waves again, spotting a slice of silvery-blond hair in the water.

"Was it really you in the water?" Paige asked. "The night I almost died?"

"I never understood what it meant," Casey said softly, a warm smile spreading over her increasingly pale lips. "I had been here so long, I forgot everything about my life outside. I didn't understand who you were. I only knew this place was reaching for you. It was so hungry for you both. And I didn't know who you were, but I needed to save you."

"How?"

"All my life, all I did was watch. I didn't speak up when I should have, and I didn't fight for things that were important to me. I didn't defend my friends when they needed me. But when I saw you in the water . . ."

Casey reached across the space between them, snatching Paige's hand in hers. For a fraction of a second, there was a warmth to the place their skin met.

"I loved you, even without knowing who you were," Casey said. "Saving you made me brave. It was the only time I did it right."

In an instant, the longing she'd staved off for years caught up with Paige, and she collapsed into her mother again. She stayed there, even as the warmth faded and the reality that Casey Keller was nothing more than a ghost set in. It wasn't enough time, but it was time she'd never thought she might have. Less than what she needed, but a trade that gave her something precious anyway.

"Okay, Paigey," her mother whispered, shifting her face slightly toward KJ. Against her shoulder, Paige felt her mother's head give a small nod.

In a quick motion, Casey stepped away, pushing Paige back to KJ, who took her by the arms. She hauled Paige backward into the now-open elevator. As the fog swallowed the room and her mother, Paige could just make out the last words on her lips. *Stay alive.*

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She finds Tess floating.

Through a dozen flooded hallways, past waterlogged dressers and unlit sconces, through empty corridors and blood-soaked carpets, Casey finds her way to the place where Tess finally comes to rest. The water is calm, unlike the torrents that threatened the girls. It merely spins Tess in a slow, aching circle. Her arms and legs are splayed and unmoving, but she isn't dead. Not yet.

When Casey ghosts into the room—a normal bedroom, like any other, with Mylar goody bags floating in the corner and tubes of lip gloss swirling around a detached chair cushion—the lights flicker. Tess's head moves, just a little, in Casey's direction. Her eyes widen but she doesn't move, which Casey suspects is because she can't. Here at the end, with blood running hot through the resort's veins, the layer between life and death is thinned. Here at the end, they can finally meet again.

"Case . . ." Tess groans, black hair floating around her skull like a crown. "If the girls were real, I guess you're probably real, too, huh?"

"I think I am," Casey says. "I told you when you found me before."

Immediately, Tess's mouth quivers. "They were our girls. And I attacked them. All these years later, and I still couldn't stop it from getting in my head. I could've killed them."

Casey submerges herself in the water, too, and finds it as warm as the ocean outside. Under the surface, a cloud of blood oozes from a wound in Tess's back. It's deep, the seepage spilling from her fast. Casey's seen enough death to know the end is coming. Before she faces Summer, she'll need to take care of this. She made a promise to KJ. After all these years, Tess's run from her past has come to a gasping finish.

"You remember that time the three of us ran away?" Tess croaks, water lapping over her throat. "I think it was back in middle school. You, me, and Summer all got Rollerblades for Christmas."

For once, the memory comes back to her easily. Between the resort's loops of terror, everything she's been missing begins to inch back:

memories of Paige, of the other survivors, of the years when she and Tess and Summer were all still friends and there was nothing complicated to it.

“We were almost to 195 when your mom found us,” Casey says, smiling, and the magic of truly remembering gives the image of it a soft, golden glow in her mind. Ignoring the ache in her feet, wind whipping over water on both sides of the bridge, the sun beating down through their plastic helmets. Running away with no destination in mind, just a dream of being somewhere else. Somewhere far away, but always together.

“I don’t remember why we even did it.” Tess chuckles. “But what if we’d pulled it off? What if we never came here at all?”

“Maybe it would have been better,” Casey says quietly, brushing a little of Tess’s wet hair from her face. Water ripples around her as she flinches from the touch. “But that’s a different life. That’s not you.”

“We never would’ve unloaded all this on the kids.” Tess spits water from her mouth, and her voice begins to waver with the effort of breathing. “I mean, they’d probably never exist in the first place.”

“You can still help them,” Casey says, as soft as she can manage. “You know how.”

Tess’s gurgled breathing is slower. She must know it’s coming quickly now, with pink lights shining in her dull eyes. Blood weeps from the wound in her back, twisting down deeper into the water. It’s strange—from a certain angle, she almost looks the same as Summer did in those final moments. She paints the water in rust, but above the surface, she is lovely and soft and tired.

“I know. Case . . .” Tess manages. “How . . . bad is it?”

Casey isn’t sure if she means the wound or the part that comes after. It’s difficult to remember now—either it has been a decade or it’s been centuries—but she tries. When she first returned, she knew there was a chance she would never leave again. The Kaleidoscope led her through a labyrinth of her worst sins. People she hadn’t saved, violence she’d let happen in front of her, a friend killed in her stead, and a life lived on stolen time. She hoped then that death would be a reprieve: a sweet, dark nothing to spirit her away from a never-ending cycle of torment.

But in death, she found herself floating back into that dark ocean beyond the island with pale headlights beaming over the water. The girl—her daughter—was there with her, and she was young and grown all at once. She was all the versions Casey would never get to see, and she was

unbelievably beautiful.

“It’ll be easy,” Casey says, wading closer to Tess. “It was the easiest part for me.”

“I’m sorry I wasn’t there,” Tess says. A tear rolls down her temple and into the still water. “I should’ve been there with you. You shouldn’t have done this alone.”

“I wasn’t alone.” Casey reaches across the space between them, wiping a tear from Tess’s cheek. “You won’t be alone, either. Let’s do it together.”

Tess turns to look at her, and what’s left of Casey’s heart aches. Time has whittled the joy from Tess’s face. Her wit, the amusement that danced behind her eyes, the slight tilt to her smile, all lost to the guilt. Even years after senior night, there’s a fear etched into Tess that nothing has been able to sand out. There are a thousand other lives Tess might have lived that wouldn’t end with her here, floating in the waters of the Kaleidoscope, only a breath from sinking.

But in a strange way, it’s like she’s come home.

Tess blinks out another tear. “Will she live?”

“I don’t know,” Casey says. “She’s been here a long time, and this place is so hungry. I don’t think there’s enough left to—”

With surprising force, Tess reaches out and takes Casey by the wrist. The place where life meets death burns, but Tess doesn’t let go. Her voice is heavy with tears when she says, “Show me how to save her.”

With a solemn nod, Casey takes Tess in her arms and holds her tight. Slowly, she sinks down into the water, and Tess doesn’t fight it. Her blood streams down all around her, wings of ruby flanking her on either side, but she doesn’t breathe. She knows already—the only power in this place is blood. The only power in this place is pain.

For years, she’s run from the pain, but when Casey wraps Tess up in her arms, she only feels warmth. As the resort opens its mouth wide to eat its fill, Casey lets the joy of their reunion fill up the seconds Tess has left. It’s only light and lost time and one final embrace before Tess parts her lips and lets the water in. Like a story repeating, the beast feasts again, and the light of the resort glows brighter and brighter.

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Twenty-eight

Just as quickly as it began, it was over.

The elevator doors closed into place with a resolute *ding*, and they were plummeting. Paige's back met the mirrored wall and, numbly, she slid to the floor. Just like KJ, just like the Kaleidoscope itself, her mother was alive and dead all at once. And just like her mother, there was a very real chance that Paige would haunt this place for the rest of time. No one—not Tess or Summer or Casey—knew the actual way to leave this resort. Her blood would power this labyrinth of halls and doors until there was nothing left of her. Until the last light went out and the Kaleidoscope burned out of existence.

The idea of it made her unbearably, impossibly afraid.

KJ joined her on the floor without a word. They shivered there, silence interrupted only by the whirring descent of the elevator. Maybe it would drop them off somewhere new when it reached its destination, or maybe it would take them right back to Summer. As if on autopilot, Paige scooted over and folded herself into KJ's arms, tucking her head against her friend's shoulder. Underneath KJ's false skin and false bones, there was a beating heart. Whatever strange magic allowed her to be here with Paige, more alive than any of the other ghosts in this place—for once, Paige wasn't going to question it.

Or maybe she'd never been good at questioning things with KJ. Maybe she'd long since accepted that everything about KJ had a strange kind of magic, even before they came here. It was a magic she wasn't ready to let go of.

"How do we get out?" she asked.

"*We* don't," KJ said. Her breath fanned over Paige's cheek. She was too alive to be dead. "You heard your mom."

"There could still be a way."

KJ shook her head. Her grip on Paige tightened, but her expression was

stony. “I don’t want to think about that anymore. Please.”

Years in this place had smashed the hope out of KJ. She’d accepted her role as a sacrifice long before Paige and the others came looking for her. For all their lives, KJ had been the one with the fierce, unshakable need to keep trying. To solve problems that seemed impossible. To consider things that couldn’t exist. But this time, KJ was the one who couldn’t see the light still flickering at the end of the tunnel. For the first time in her life, it was Paige who could. “I know I talked a big game about how fancy my life was going to be once I got out of Miami,” Paige said, trailing her fingertips through the fuzzy carpet of the elevator floor. “I know it seemed like I didn’t need you because I never looked back. But I can’t go home without you.”

KJ breathed out a sigh. “Yes, you can.”

“No, I can’t.”

KJ’s fingers hooked under Paige’s chin, drawing her face up so that their eyes could meet. Tears welled in KJ’s dark stare, but for once, she didn’t look away. “You can. I’ve seen you do it. The minute you left, your life was like . . . it was everything you ever told me you wanted.”

Like it was decades ago, Paige remembered the Instagram page on KJ’s laptop. Even from afar, KJ was watching her. From a lonely bedroom, alone with only Tess for company, Paige’s life would seem so perfect. On paper, it had been a dream while KJ’s life was a nightmare. No wonder KJ thought she could disappear without anyone noticing.

“At first, I wished you would change your mind,” KJ said. “I wished you would say you were sorry, and we could go back to being the way we were. But you were becoming the person you always wanted to be. If I . . . if I loved you as much as I thought I did, why would I try to ruin that? You were right. I was deadweight.”

Paige fought the burning in her cheeks. Something about the way KJ said *love* now felt deeper than the way they used to say it to each other. Thornier and more dangerous, but true in a way that made her dizzy.

“But it was a *lie*,” Paige hissed.

KJ’s breath caught. On the surface, almost nothing about her face changed in the electric quiet. But Paige had spent her whole life examining the fine angles of KJ’s face for even the most microscopic changes. Rare twitches of joy, quirked brow and scrunched nose and stiffened jaw. The way her face slackened now was something new: a revelation, maybe. All

the stony exterior was melted, and a raw, bleeding version of KJ faced her.

Paige closed her eyes and kept talking, because if she would be dead in an hour, KJ had to know the love never stopped in the first place.

“I was just trying to convince myself so it wouldn’t hurt so bad. But the whole time, I just wished I was doing things with you,” Paige admitted, pressing her face to KJ’s shoulder to stifle her burning embarrassment. “I only came back here because I wanted us to be together again. I didn’t think it was possible to have you and a life. Now I can’t have either.”

The only sound that permeated the elevator was the quiet whisper of the machinery as they descended. Paige focused on the whirring under her bare, shaking legs to avoid thinking about what face KJ was making now.

Finally, KJ’s fingers ghosted through Paige’s hair tenderly. “If I could go back, I would give all of this up when you asked me to.”

“I know,” Paige breathed. “I wish we could go back and do everything different.”

“Can I be selfish?” KJ asked, voice shaking.

Before Paige had a chance to understand what it meant, KJ leaned over, gathered Paige up in her arms, and soft as summer rain, she kissed her. Paige’s back pressed into the wall of the elevator as KJ’s fingers tangled further in her hair, and even if KJ was only half alive, her mouth was warm and her breath was sweet and her kiss was just as dizzying as Paige had always imagined. The quiet intensity of her spilled out now, frantically drawing Paige closer.

It was cruel, Paige thought, that she could imagine another lifetime of this.

Paige cupped her hands around KJ’s jaw and deepened the kiss. She wasn’t sure how much time they had left, and she wasn’t sure if they’d ever get to do this again, so she kissed KJ like it was the first and the last time. She kissed her with the force of all the times she’d wanted to before.

Finally, when the elevator reached its destination and settled with a soft chime, they drew apart.

The doors slid open to reveal the lobby of the Kaleidoscope again, dimly glowing in its familiar neat lines and vibrant colors. Walking into this same room, picking her way across broken glass and mold, keeping her eye on both Caleb and Mateo at once . . . it seemed like a lifetime ago. One thing was very different about the Kaleidoscope’s lobby this time, though. A rosy velvet love seat was planted in the center of the lobby’s pristine linoleum

floor, and sitting on it with her legs draped over the arm was Summer.

So much for Paige's mother getting a chance to talk her down.

"You have an interesting theory," Summer called to them, chin resting against her knuckles. "That I'm the one in charge of everything happening here. The creature used to tell me it would be a relief to see everyone who lived suffering, but after waiting this long, it all feels a little . . . boring."

Paige crawled out of the elevator. The callousness of it made her sick. *Boring* was what Summer called Caleb's and Mateo's deaths. She'd surely and methodically taken away every single person Paige had ever loved, and now she was unhappy with the results. If the ghosts that lingered inside the hell of the Kaleidoscope influenced the way it looked, it was easy to believe Summer's hatred was all of its ugliest parts. The traps and tombs, the eerie emptiness and the suffocating hallways, every horrifying corner and upside-down world. It was easy to believe that Summer was the reason for every loss she'd ever known.

But she thought of her mother's eyes. *Summer is trapped here, just like us.*

The evil of the Kaleidoscope wasn't Summer's influence; it was the other way around. The girl lounging before her wasn't coloring the Kaleidoscope with hate. Instead, the creature had given her its hunger. The Kaleidoscope had changed her into this, but underneath the exhausted, jaded facade, the real Summer was still there. Somewhere in the ghost before her was a girl her mother had once loved, who'd been haunted by her mother for all of her short life. A girl who'd spent centuries alone in the stomach of her killer, who'd reached out to the people who left her behind, knowing that pulling them back meant killing them.

"Can you make this stop?" Paige asked through gritted teeth.

Behind her, KJ pulled herself to her feet and exited the elevator. It shut softly, leaving them in the lobby alone with Summer. Summer inspected them both with a perplexed frown. In the quiet, a distant, cascading roar emerged. If she were anywhere else, Paige might think it was the sound of the ocean, waves crashing one over the other at dusk.

"Maybe I could," Summer said. "Is that what you want? Do you want everything that lives in this resort to stop?"

"We're not alive," KJ spat.

"You and I are more alive than we'll ever get to be out there," Summer said. "If I somehow influenced it to . . . to *die*, that would be it for us. This

whole world would go away. Is that what you want?”

KJ’s jaw tightened. “If that’s what it takes.”

But with her palms flat to the floor and her head spinning, Paige wasn’t sure she agreed. She’d only just gotten KJ back, and she’d only just learned that the ghost of her mother, however faint it was, still existed. While the creature lived, she would never truly be safe. But while the creature lived, she wouldn’t be truly alone, either. Not yet.

“Here’s what I’m offering,” Summer said. “A door out for one.”

Paige went stiff.

“What?”

“It’s not real,” KJ said. “It can’t be.”

At that, Summer shook her head. She motioned to the expanse of wall behind her, and the floors began to quake. Paige blinked and saw that, in the nanosecond of darkness, a door had appeared. It was ornate and gold, just like the gilded mirrors scattered throughout the resort. But as it groaned open, orange light poured across the glossy floors. The dull roar clarified into tenderly crashing waves. On the other side, there was nothing but ocean as far as she could see. Warm mist tickled across the lobby, and the breeze was just as salty as it had tasted on Paige’s lips the moment before she entered the resort. Somewhere far away, the sun shone like white gold in each speck of water.

It seemed impossible that the sight of the open ocean would bring her this much joy. She almost forgot it would come with a cost.

“Why?” Paige managed, finally climbing to her feet. “Why would you let only one of us go?”

“Because that’s what I want. *Someone* has to stay here with me,” Summer said. “And because both of your moms paid what they owed in the end. It only seems fair that someone should get to leave.”

“What’s the catch?” KJ asked.

“The catch is that I don’t want this to be over. It needs to keep eating.” Summer waited for them to catch up. “Let the world come investigate what happened here. It’s been waiting for a crowd.”

“It’s our only shot,” KJ said, pivoting to grab Paige by the wrists. “Don’t you feel that? That’s *real* air. You have to go.”

“And let it keep eating?”

Under her breath, KJ said, “When you get out, you go far away. You don’t have to lead anyone back, you just have to look away. You make sure

you never come anywhere near this island again.”

Paige met her dark eyes and she felt sick. “No. I can’t leave you.”

“I’ve been gone,” KJ said. “It took the rest of the world a month to even realize I’d left. You have to be the one to escape.”

KJ led her across the lobby, past Summer’s seat, close enough to the water to smell the brine. With the gold sunlight caught in her hair, KJ was the most beautiful thing she’d ever seen. It wasn’t fair that they’d only just gotten here, and it was ending. Paige could hardly bring herself to look at the water.

She pulled her wrists out of KJ’s grip and stumbled back. “Either we both go, or . . .”

Paige wasn’t sure what to threaten. The Kaleidoscope—and Summer—had all the power. Deep down, she already knew KJ was right. This was the only chance they were going to get, and someone had to take it.

“You’ll forget me,” KJ said, taking Paige’s face between her palms. She said it like it was meant to be a comfort, drawing Paige close. “It won’t last forever.”

“It’ll be forever for you,” Paige breathed, blinking through her tears. “You’ll be in here forever. How could I be okay with that?”

“Do it for your mom.”

Paige’s lower lip quivered, but she relaxed into KJ’s palms. Over a decade ago, Casey Keller faced the Kaleidoscope to stop it from taking her daughter. She’d lived in this hell for what felt like hundreds of years, blindly hoping that her sacrifice worked, wearing away at the edges with time.

But finally, Paige understood the scale of this place. The lives it juggled inside, beyond just the ghost of her mother. Years ago, before she knew what really waited inside, Paige thought that being the one to get away from this world would make her strong. She thought it would make her better to leave them all behind. To pretend the Kaleidoscope had done nothing to color her life. But being alone wasn’t a prize. She hadn’t felt any better for leaving the people she loved. She wasn’t better than anyone else; she was only a piece of the story repeating. She thought of what Mateo said before he died. They weren’t their parents. Summer didn’t know them.

Paige didn’t want to be the only survivor.

So she turned away from the water, from the warm mist and the promise of sunlight on her skin. This time, it was going to end differently.

KJ shook her head. “No, you have to—”

Paige threw her arms around KJ’s neck and held her as the water came crashing in. She would stay here with the others, and there would be no more debts, no more hauntings, no more anything.

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As her back sinks into the plush mint-green comforter of the king-size bed, Casey Keller hardly registers where she is.

Then she remembers.

She shoots straight up. *Floral scent, running water, upbeat music.* It's the Kaleidoscope, starting all over again. When her eyes find the love seat in front of the TV, it's empty.

Casey clambers out of the bed, toes digging into the shag carpet, and stumbles to the bathroom doorway. Through the fog of shower steam, she sees Tess leaning over the counter, razor poised against her leg. When she looks up, she drops the razor and exhales. Desperately, she grabs the skin of her face.

"That's it?" she asks, rubbing her cheeks in circles. The newness of her flesh seems to surprise her, a feeling Casey is more than familiar with. "I'm actually dead?"

The frankness of it renders Casey momentarily speechless. "I think so?"

"What do we do?"

Casey scans the bedroom. Most of the details are unchanged from the billion other times she's done this—the same untouched goody bags, the same duffel full of movies, the same matching blush bathrobes hanging from the door—but the most important part is missing. "Something's weird this time. Summer isn't here."

As she says it, every light in the room glares blindingly white.

When they fade again, she finds Summer sitting on the sofa in front of the TV, hair sopping wet. Her usually perky expression has melted into confused awe. She wrings out her hair on the carpet without looking at the others.

"She stayed," Summer says numbly. "I told her she could leave and she stayed."

Casey's blood goes cold. "Summer?"

Tess rushes out of the bathroom, eyes wide. After twenty-five years, across the boundary between life and death, the three of them finally stand

in the same room again. Casey expects to feel incandescent rage seeing her. The girl who called all the children back to the resort, who helped to dismantle the sacrifice she made to keep her daughter safe. Summer, who never deserved to die, who killed so many because of it, who would probably kill her a thousand more times given the chance. But when she looks at her once best friend, all she sees is the other ghost trapped in this hell with her.

Tess, on the other hand, lets her rage come to a boil.

"What is wrong with you?" she snaps. "They're . . . they're *kids*, Summer."

"I don't know what I expected from them," Summer continues, mostly to herself. It's as though she haunts the bedroom alone. "I just . . . I thought it would be like before."

Casey chances a step forward. "Summer? What did you think would be like before?"

Finally, Summer looks up from her daze, fiery hair dripping down her shoulders and back. Her eyes are red with tears, which she wipes away with the back of her wrist.

"I told them only one of them could leave," Summer says. "They both chose to stay. Why would they do that?"

When Casey looks down at the carpet again, she finds two more visitors in their shared room: Paige and KJ lying side by side on the floor, soaked in the resort's cruel water and unconscious. KJ's skin has gone pale with death, her lips blue and limbs stiff. Paige's face is still warm and alive, though she doesn't breathe. Neither of the girls do.

Casey drops to her knees. She barely registers that the carpet under her is wet.

"No," she whispers. "No, you have to try again. You have to get her out of here. It was . . . it was the whole point, Summer."

Tess falls to her knees beside KJ's body. This close, it's astounding how much they look alike. Maybe Tess never got to live a life in the sun, but her daughter deserves to. She deserves to see the world, make new memories, be someone other than a survivor or a victim.

"How could you do this to them?" Tess hisses.

This seems to snap Summer out of her shock. "How could I? How could you two leave me here to rot?"

"If I could do it again, I wouldn't have left you." Tess presses her fists

into the wet carpet. “It was an accident. If we could’ve taken you with us, we—”

“Kendra Jade?” Summer scoffs. “You named your daughter after a couple of bullies that *you* killed?”

Tess’s jaw drops. “That isn’t fair. I wanted to honor them because I . . . because it was wrong . . .”

“You don’t think what you did to me was wrong?”

“I couldn’t even *think* about what I did to you,” Tess snaps. “It made me sick every day of my life. I was a coward then, and I’ve been a coward the whole time since. Does that make you happy? I admit it now!”

Summer’s mossy stare slides to Casey.

Casey’s knuckles sink into the carpet near Paige. She closes her eyes. When she thinks about the size of this place and its hunger, this argument feels so small. They’re falling for it again, still tripping into petty arguments instead of facing the monster head-on. Summer might have been sharpened into a weapon, Tess might be broken down to her base instincts, Casey might be wiped clean of her memories, but none of them are the resort. They have to open their eyes.

“We left you,” Casey says. “We can blame it on whatever else we want, but in the end, that’s what happened. We spent the rest of our lives outside regretting it so much we hated ourselves. But that didn’t save you, either. I did the only thing that I thought would make the world any better, and I tried to give my daughter someone to look up to. Someone who would do hard, impossible things for love. Because I didn’t do those things for you, I wanted her to be better.”

Summer watches her intently, and she is at once the dead girl in the pool and the bright, shining girl from all the years before that. Casey searches her face for the girl who was once her best friend. Somewhere inside of her, there is a girl who can hear reason.

“All those years I was trying to be better, this place was trying to find the worst parts of you,” Casey says. “The version of you I knew was the kindest person I’d ever met. She was nicer than we deserved, and she had dreams that were going to take her far away from this place. She deserved better friends than us, and the monster knows it. It wants you to hate us more than you hate it. But remember the *reason* you died.”

Beside her, Tess inhales.

Summer stares, unblinking, and she doesn’t move. The parts of her that

are merged with the Kaleidoscope are clear now. In some ways, she and the beast are the same thing. It is the hunger and she is the rage, but the Kaleidoscope never operates without both.

And then, Summer looks at the girls and she softens.

“I used to dream that one of you stayed here with me,” Summer says, tucking her hair behind her ear. She leans down on her arm, eyeing Paige and KJ with a wistful smile. “If you got to leave without me, I wanted you to pay for it. I had to live this night over and over while you got to move on.”

“Trust me,” Tess scoffs. “We were living it, too.”

“But she stayed,” Summer sighs. She points to Paige with a bitter smile. “I let them do it all over, and they did it differently.”

It takes some time to sink in. A flutter of hope beats in Casey’s chest because this is it. This is her last shot.

“Yes,” she says. “They’re different from us. And they deserve to *live*.”

Tess claps her hand over Casey’s. “Summer, please.”

Summer stands, dripping water onto the sofa and carpet. She settles before the unconscious girls and sinks to her knees without a word. Facing Casey and Tess, she completes their triangle. In another life, they might have been friends playing a party game instead of waterlogged ghosts with their lives on the line. In another life, the three of them might grow old together. But in this life, she already knows what they need to do.

“Use my blood and let them out,” Tess pleads. “You’ve seen them. You know they don’t deserve this.”

Summer shakes her head. “KJ has been here for too long . . . your blood isn’t enough.”

“How much is enough?” Casey asks. “For both of them.”

“I don’t know,” Summer sighs. “Even with the two boys, there isn’t enough. It’s been so hungry. It doesn’t want to let go of a single drop.”

“Then help us kill it,” Casey breathes. “There has to be a way.”

Summer meets her gaze. The walls expand around them, and at once, it becomes clear how small they are in the eyes of the beast. But Casey knows it well. She’s seen its squirming hunger and its ravenous need. The beast is impossibly large, but it has weaknesses.

Summer closes her eyes, squeezing Casey’s hand. She reaches over and takes Tess’s hand, too. The resort stretches thinner around them, lights flickering, then glaring, then strobing stark white, bleaching away the pink

walls.

“It will starve if it stays here. It can’t be alone anymore,” Summer says through her teeth, squeezing Casey’s hand. “It’s willing to change.”

“Change?” Casey asks.

“It can make itself small,” she says. “It wants to go with them.”

“What will happen to us?” Tess asks.

Summer’s wide green eyes fill with something Casey doesn’t recognize. She shakes her head, and that’s all there is. If the beast leaves, that’s it for them. No more ghosts trapped in its belly.

Being a ghost was one thing, but being truly dead is another. The irreversibility of it squeezes the air from Casey’s lungs. But maybe it would be a relief to move on from an eternity spent reliving the worst night of her life. When she looks at Paige and KJ, she sees a second chance. Not a perfect life, but a chance to make one. With the hope of this glowing in front of her, forever doesn’t seem so scary.

“We’ll go together,” Casey says. “When it ends, we’ll all go at the same time.”

“If you let them live,” Tess says, eyes fixed on her daughter’s pale face, “wherever we end up next, we’ll wait for each other.”

Summer’s lips quiver. Finally, the girl Casey knew emerges from under the layers of hatred. She nods, tightening her grip on Casey’s hand. Then she lets go and, sighing, presses a hand to each of the girls’ brows. Her veins begin to glow white in her arms, her neck, her face before the light that rushes through her begins passing into Paige and KJ.

Bit by bit, the blank white of the world around them transforms, sinking into a dark red sunset. The air on Casey’s skin cools as if a cloud has passed over the sun, and her limbs go heavy like sleep is seconds away. This world that held her for lifetimes begins to dim, but with the strength she has left, she reaches for both Summer and Tess.

Their hands are warm, even as the world goes cold. When the darkness swallows everything, the last thing Casey feels is Tess’s and Summer’s fingers twisting tighter in her own.

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Twenty-nine

Paige broke the surface of the water with a gasp.

Cold wind ripped across her cheeks, and salt water spilled from her throat, but she was *alive*. She was, wasn't she? This wasn't a dream, and she hadn't actually drowned in the Kaleidoscope. There was fresh air all around her and she was treading water and there was no resort—in fact, there was no *island*—in sight.

Paige fought to keep her head above the surface. Maybe a hundred yards away, she found the bobbing helm of a small boat dipping in the waves. When she narrowed her eyes, she recognized it as the boat she'd taken with Caleb and Mateo when they first came to the island. She'd watched Caleb tie it to the docks of the Kaleidoscope marina, but now it floated aimlessly in the waves alone.

She spun in the water.

Was the island *gone*?

As impossible as it seemed, that wasn't the priority. The last thing she remembered before the water overtook them was her lips meeting KJ's. She'd planned to die kissing the last person who mattered to her. If she was alive, KJ had to be alive, too. It couldn't all be for nothing. After everything she'd done to survive, she couldn't be out here alone.

"KJ!" she screamed in the pockets of air she could manage before her head dipped under the water. "KJ, where are you!"

She bobbed silently in the water, waiting, but there was only soft sunset quiet.

Without the island to orient herself, she had no clue which way to go. There was land somewhere, but it wasn't visible to her when she managed to see through the lapping waves. She swam tentatively toward the boat, lungs aching, and tried not to assume the worst. Each time she burst above the water, the freshness of the air overwhelmed her. Whether she had been there for hours or days, the stale oxygen of the other world was gone now.

The wind here was real; she hadn’t realized how easy it was to tell the difference until she was out.

The Kaleidoscope was gone.

Halfway between Paige and the boat, something dark bobbed to the surface. Paige’s chest clenched. Wisps of black hair ebbed all around the body, and coated in a sheen of salt water, a patch of olive skin was just visible. A fire tore through Paige’s aching limbs, and she found herself clawing through the water. When her shoulder met KJ’s waist, she didn’t move a muscle. The body floated in the water, entirely still.

Like the story breaking down into echoes of itself, maybe this was another repetition of the lives they’d already lived. Drowning and dying, sunset and resurrection.

She wrapped her arms around KJ’s waist and kicked with a fury. Maybe trading would always leave her with less than she had when she’d started, but she would take less KJ. She would take anything left of KJ at all.

Paige reached the ladder attached to the side of the boat, and gripping it tightly, pulled herself and KJ above the water. The sunlight was red against the ocean. It was bloody and it was everywhere, rippling as Paige’s lungs caught up with her heart.

With a scream, Paige clenched the muscles of her upper arm and pulled herself up a rung of the ladder, hauling KJ up high enough to meet the boat’s edge. She heaved her up an inch at a time, until KJ was flopped over the deck and the only thing left was to push herself to safety. Numbly, Paige eased her way over the side of the boat and slid onto her knees to meet KJ.

Her head was lolled to the side, eyes shut and lips sealed. There was no rise and fall to her chest, but the warm glow of her skin looked so alive, Paige could almost picture her sitting upright, dazed, spitting up a mouthful of water like she was fine.

A year ago, she’d been submerged in this same ocean, and KJ had breathed life back into her. Without a second thought, Paige climbed over KJ’s waist, clasped her hands together, and began pumping. *Pump pump pump breathe.* She couldn’t let all the blood spilled in the Kaleidoscope be for nothing. *Pump pump pump breathe.* She couldn’t be the only one left to carry the weight of what they’d seen. *Pump pump pump breathe*. This couldn’t be the end of a story decades in the making.

With that final shove to KJ’s chest, she burst to life.

She heaved up into a seat, gagging. Seawater spilled from her lips before

she toppled back to the deck of the boat, squinting in the sunlight. And she was alive. She was alive, alive, *alive*.

Paige took KJ's face in her hands and pulled their lips together one more time. The wind off the water was cold, blowing Paige's shirt around her back, but she drew her warmth from the way KJ's lips moved against hers.

When she finally drew back, Paige dissolved into relieved laughter. KJ laughed along with her, wiping the water from her face. It seemed impossible that they could have this—that they could both be alive. But if this was an illusion the resort created for them, Paige would take it.

"I don't understand," KJ said, shielding her eyes from the sun. "How did we . . . ?"

It was only when KJ looked at her that Paige realized there was something different. The island was gone, and she'd assumed the beast that created it was gone, too. She didn't want to ask questions about where it had gone or how they afforded their escape. But when KJ met her eyes, Paige found something strange in the dark of her irises. Just under the rich brown, there was a faint glow.

It was pink.

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Thirty

THE KALEIDOSCOPE CONTINUES TO BAFFLE

DISAPPEARING ISLAND TRAGEDY LEAVES THREE MORE DEAD

MIAMI, May 25—It was a clear sunset sky on the evening of May 21, 2026, when a fishing boat heading back to shore from Long Key came across another boat idling in the water. On the deck, the fishermen found two teenage girls unconscious but alive. Nineteen-year-olds Paige Keller and Kendra Jade Collins were rushed to shore where they were treated at Baptist Health Fisherman's Community Hospital for dehydration and exposure. The girls, both children of survivors of the original Kaleidoscope Key Massacre in 2001, claimed they had been inside the abandoned resort, where their friends and family were killed.

The Resort at Kaleidoscope Key has long been a fascination of and a curse on locals. The island itself, with a storied history of violence and intrigue, has been off-limits for the twenty-five years since the original massacre. When police sailed out to investigate the girls' claims, however, they encountered the island's greatest mystery yet: It seems to have vanished completely.

In the days since the girls were recovered, scientists, geographers, and detectives have swarmed the keys to witness the anomaly for themselves. The owner of the property, Jason Dettweiler of Dettweiler Holdings LLC—also a survivor of the 2001 massacre—declined to comment.

While Collins's and Keller's statements about the fate of the others visiting the island were initially unverified, three bodies

were soon recovered from the waters of Blackwater Sound: eighteen-year-old Ripley Memorial High School senior Mateo Mamani, twenty-year-old influencer Caleb Dettweiler, and forty-three-year-old survivor of the 2001 massacre Teresa Collins.

It is unclear what the intention of the visit to the Kaleidoscope was initially, but the resort's deadly history cannot be overstated. As the investigation into the mystery continues, our community mourns the loss of three lives tightly connected to the original massacre, who seem to serve as a continuation of a tragedy that has cast shadows over Miami for decades.

Services for Dettweiler and Mamani were held last week at St. Agnes Catholic Church, and any sympathy gifts may be directed to their surviving family members: Jason Dettweiler, Saul Mamani, and Claudia Mamani. Details of Teresa Collins's services have not been shared with the paper at this time.

While the statements made by Keller and Collins eerily align with testimonies from others who survived the island, there is much left to investigate before we will fully understand the power and fate of the Kaleidoscope.

The girls were already seated at the marina when the Mamanis arrived. It always seemed to be sunset at the marina, though Paige imagined that was just a coincidence. Before, she and KJ might have sat here and looked across the water to see the island watching them back, pink light glowing against a reddening sky. But the horizon was only glittering water now, the island long gone.

Saul and Claudia climbed out of their expensive car, shuddering at the empty horizon. In the weeks since the news of what happened at the Kaleidoscope broke, Paige hadn't had a chance to speak to them the way she'd hoped to. It was strange. She thought that the couple who'd helped raise her might want to ask her questions about what happened to their son. She'd even expected them to lash out at her. But instead, when they saw her at the hospital and at the funerals in the wake of it all, they seemed *scared*.

There was a chance that had more to do with KJ than Paige, though.

"How are you holding up?" Saul asked. "I know you've both been swarmed by news people. I'm sorry we waited so long to reach out. I thought somewhere out of the public eye would feel . . . safer."

Paige eyed KJ, who stared dead ahead at Saul with an unnervingly intense glare. Focusing on one issue at a time, Paige cleared her throat. “It’s been weird. Bad. I’m so sorry about Mateo.”

Claudia gave an involuntary strangled gasp. She clutched her hand to her chest and looked away. Paige wondered if this was her way of biting back the need to blame them for Mateo’s death, or if it was the memories of her own time in the resort resurfacing. Claudia knew what it cost to make it out as much as they did.

“It takes so much,” Claudia managed.

“It trades,” KJ said, speaking at last. Her voice was low and even, so calm it sent a chill down Paige’s spine.

Saul and Claudia exchanged a glance.

Maybe it was a mistake to bring KJ here. Usually, Paige only worried about the beast rearing its head at night. For most of the day, KJ was more or less herself. She was settling into a life without her mother, making the little home she’d inherited into a place she might be able to tolerate. Someone who didn’t know KJ might not notice the difference in her, but their families had orbited each other for lifetimes. Saul and Claudia registered the strangeness of her right away.

Or maybe it was recognition of the other thing inside her.

“If you felt it pulling you in, why didn’t you ever leave the area?” Paige asked, fingers pressed to the picnic table. “You weren’t scared it would eventually get you? Or him?”

“You two may not remember this, but we did try to leave once,” Saul said. The warm wind swept through his unusually unkempt hair. The last few weeks had been hard on him. “The year after Casey passed. We’d originally thought just pretending it never happened was enough, but Casey’s death changed everything. We figured there was no point in waiting for it to pick us to die. There was a story Tess told us once, about an attempted road trip to Savannah where they got so sick they had to come back.”

Paige nodded.

“Tess said the Kaleidoscope wouldn’t let us leave, but we thought . . . well, we thought they gave up too soon. If they’d just pushed through, they might’ve made it. So we packed everything we owned.”

Somewhere deep in the murky recesses of her childhood, Paige remembered this. An early morning ride to another house, a car full of

suitcases, fear sitting heavy over everything. Years ago, they'd meant to leave town and abandon her to her fate if it meant they could save Mateo. Growing up, Paige had admired them for their logic and levelheadedness, but Saul and Claudia were just as swayed by love as everyone else. They were simply better at covering it up.

Saul touched his chest. "We wanted to fly so there would be no option to turn around, but we were only an hour into the trip when my heart bugged out. They had to ground the plane and rush me to the hospital. Claudia will tell you, I thought we would both die. Doctors said it was a heart attack, but couldn't figure out what caused it. We knew, though."

"We drove straight back to Miami," Claudia said, continuing the story. "While we were driving, we said if we couldn't run away, we'd keep Mateo out of it. You, too. For your mom, of course."

Paige said nothing, but she bristled. It was hard to believe that keeping her in the dark was the best way to keep her safe in her mother's honor. She'd spent years in disbelief, rejecting the very idea of the resort, thinking her mother's death was some unknowable mystery. Saul and Claudia knew all along that the Kaleidoscope was a thousand times more dangerous than anyone believed.

Quietly, Saul leaned across the table. He laid his palm flat to the wood, eyes wide in a plea. He was a wounded animal baring its neck, showing its vulnerability. His attention was turned toward KJ now. "I know that place can . . . change you. Whatever you had to do to get back here, I want you to know that we forgive you. We've had to forgive ourselves, too. Even if you never forget it, remember the alternative."

Paige understood the alternative too well. She had understood it when Mateo died in her arms. She understood it when she watched Caleb being digested before her eyes.

"For twenty-five years, we've been terrified of that thing." Saul drew his fingers into a contemplative steeple. "Is it really gone?"

Paige narrowed her eyes. She felt KJ's stare boring into the side of her face.

"I never stopped feeling it. Not since we first got out," Claudia said, rubbing her palm in circles over her sternum. "It sits on you. I thought if it was gone, I wouldn't feel like this anymore. But it's still there. In fact . . ." She tugged at the collar of her fine black dress shirt, letting in a gust of hot summer air. ". . . sometimes it feels even heavier."

Paige would need to get KJ away from them soon. It wasn't a good idea to dangle the Kaleidoscope's food in front of its face like a carrot. There was a reason she'd agreed to meet with the Mamanis privately.

"I actually had questions for you," Paige said, tapping her fingertips on the picnic table. "After Mateo and I left, did Tess tell you she thought we were at the resort?"

The color drained from Saul's cheeks, and Claudia's dark gaze fluttered to the table, but they both wore their guilt plain on their faces. It was one thing to leave Tess to die, but to leave their own son . . .

Wind tunneled into the space between them, but it wasn't enough to break the wrought iron tension.

Claudia reached toward KJ, expression softening to a plea. "You know how she was. I loved her. But she was . . . it was hard to believe her toward the end."

KJ met her gaze. Fury rippled through her, but she said nothing. They'd agreed long before they got here that Paige would do the talking, but that was an agreement with KJ, not the other part. It was becoming unruly, and KJ was still learning how to quiet it. It was hard to keep the beast at bay when it smelled blood in the water.

"One more question," Paige cut in. "On the night my mom went to the Kaleidoscope, she dropped me off at your house. Did she tell you where she was going?"

Again, they didn't answer. Which was all the answer she needed.

"Paige, KJ . . ." Saul said. "You've seen it now. You know how horrifying that place is. You understand why we couldn't risk going back."

That, Paige couldn't understand. Being afraid was one thing, but when Paige met KJ's eyes, she imagined she would do it all again. If the island still existed, if KJ was still stuck in its grasp, she would find herself on that boat all over again. Every drop of spilled blood and every waking nightmare was worth it to be here again.

She wondered, given the chance to reach Mateo before his blood turned to fuel, if the Mamanis would do anything differently.

Paige untucked her legs from under the picnic table and motioned for KJ to follow. Before she could deliver a gentle goodbye, though, KJ reached across the table. The pink of her eyes shone faintly in the low light, and her teeth were bared in a wild rage. She grabbed Saul by the wrist, grip tight and unyielding. This was what Paige had been afraid of.

“Don’t forget,” KJ snarled. “He only paid the toll for one of you.”

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Epilogue

Once the man and woman have frantically escaped the marina, the dark-haired girl walks to the end of the docks and looks out at the bleeding horizon. Her loose T-shirt whips at her arms, and her dark hair rolls over the breeze as it changes direction. She is beautiful, the blond girl thinks. Despite what they came here to do, she can only think of how lucky they are to be here together. How lucky they are to be alive.

She joins the dark-haired girl without a word, and they face the ocean.

“I’m sorry,” the dark-haired girl says. “I tried to keep it in, but it gets so loud.”

“I know,” the blond says.

“I didn’t mean to scare them.” The dark-haired girl runs her thumb around the lid of a plastic container in her bag. “I wanted them to be here for this. I never should have said that.”

“It wasn’t you,” the blond says quietly. “They’ll understand.”

When she thinks of the couple who raised her, she feels no anger. She wants no revenge for the years they kept her in the dark. She knows that they have convinced themselves it was right. She feels only a pang of deep sadness that this was the result of their trade in the end. Two decades of peace in exchange for their son.

Without ceremony, the dark-haired girl removes the plastic container from her bag, unscrewing its cap. She might have liked something nicer for her mother, but now that she’s alone, she does what she can manage. It’s fitting, anyway; she imagines this is the exact urn her mother would have picked for herself if she had the chance. No ceremony, no fuss.

The dark-haired girl feels many things swirling inside her, but she doesn’t feel her mother anymore. The ghosts are gone, the endless hallways inside of her now sitting empty.

She takes a handful of the ashes and releases them over the water. The relief of it—the finality of it—catches them both off guard. After a life

spent desperate to stay alive, there's a strange calm to the sureness of death.

"I still see it out there," the dark-haired girl says.

"The island?"

She shakes her head. "The light."

The blond nods, though she doesn't see it anymore. Not since they washed ashore, and not in the weeks since. She supposes the moment her mother was released, the haunting ended for her. It is only the dark-haired girl who must carry the burden of it now. It is the nature of a trade, though, and this trade allows them to stand here together. What can she do but cherish it?

Perhaps the dark-haired girl's mother was right, and trading always leaves them with less than when they started. Both girls are certainly *less* now. Half of the dark-haired girl's life is made up of the horrors that nearly killed them. One day, the hunger might eat away the rest of her. One day, the sea might call her and her monster home. One day, the finite life they traded for might come to an abrupt end.

But perhaps the other girl's mother was right, too.

For all the evil in the world, there are moments like this. The girls standing before the sea, hands linked, breathing in the quiet. A possible life stretched out ahead of them that felt impossible only weeks ago. The only thing to do in the face of it all, the blond girl thinks, is find the person she loves most and hold on.

Maybe this life will come to an end, but until the moment it's gone, she won't be alone.

And I will be with them.

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Acknowledgments

This book tried to kill me, which is fitting.

You would think on the fourth round, an author would learn how to get their story out the right way on the first try, but like the Kaleidoscope itself, the bits and pieces of this story rearranged and regrouped themselves in ways that surprised and horrified me in equal parts. Over the handful of years it took me to sort this one out, I had countless folks in my corner for support. I doubt I'll be able to name them all, but here are a few:

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To the person reading this, thank you for picking up this book. I hope that, beneath the blood and guts and tears, there is something in its heart that speaks to you. I hope—even as our world inflicts horrors upon us that we never asked for, that we are unprepared for, that are bigger than us in every conceivable way and seem like they might never end—you find a way to hold on to the people you love most.

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About the Author



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COURTNEY GOULD writes books about queer girls, ghosts and things that go bump in the night. She graduated from Pacific Lutheran University in 2016 with a bachelor’s degree in creative writing and publishing.

Courtney was born and raised in Salem, Oregon, where she continues to write love letters to haunted girls and rural, empty spaces. She is the author of *The Dead and the Dark*, *Where Echoes Die* and *What the Woods Took*.

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ALSO BY COURTNEY GOULD

What the Woods Took

Where Echoes Die

The Dead and the Dark

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