

IT'S BEEN WAITING FOR THEM

# THE DEVOURING LIGHT



KAT ELLIS

## *Praise for Devouring Light*

“A great twist on classic haunted house tales, with wonderfully drawn characters and a sense of foreboding that remains long after the final page.

A dark, twisted delight.”

—VINCENT RALPH, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Secrets Never Die*

“Exquisitely creepy. Kat Ellis delivers another beguiling feast that drew me in like a drowning—intensely and all at once. *The Haunting of Hill House* by way of *The Shining*, *The Devouring Light* is claustrophobic, insidious, and utterly brilliant; readers won’t escape these pages easily ... but, then, why would they want to?”

—DAWN KURTAGICH, award-winning author of *The Madness* and *The Thorns*

“A masterful blend of body horror and haunted-house mystery that is also a savagely funny dissection of fame and its attendant cost. I loved every leech-infested page.”

—JOSH WINNING, author of *Heads Will Roll*

“A master class in YA horror: compelling characters, edge-of-your-seat twists, and some truly horrifying moments. This book will give you nightmares and leave you wanting more.”

—KATHRYN FOXFIELD, author of *Getting Away with Murder*

“*The Devouring Light* is a dark and twisted descent into madness. I loved it.”

—CYNTHIA MURPHY, author of *Keep Your Friends Close*

“A stomach-turning take on haunted houses and what the pursuit of fame does to you—and your soul—*The Devouring Light* is as brutal and bloody as its leech-infested waters.”



—LOGAN-ASHLEY KISNER, author of *Old Wounds*

“Chilling, claustrophobic, and intensely atmospheric. Kat Ellis has delivered another heart-pounding and twisty tale that had me racing to the finish.”

—AMY MCCAWE, author of *They Own the Night*

“Unlike anything I’ve read before! *The Devouring Light* is clever, compelling, utterly original, and perfectly terrifying!”

—KATYA DE BECERRA, Aurealis Award-winning author of *They Watch from Below*

“Utterly terrifying, skin-crawling horror so intriguing that I couldn’t put it down!”

—JOSIE JAFFREY, author of the QuickSilver trilogy

“A rock ’n’ roll fever dream from hell! This fast-paced and tightly crafted novel will keep you guessing till the very dark and satisfying end.”

—ANN DÁVILA CARDINAL, author of *You’ve Awoken Her* and *Breakup from Hell*

“*The Devouring Light* will creep over you like fog and feed off your nightmares like a leech in your eye socket. You’ll be holding your breath (and wanting to shower) with each turn of the page.”

—GEORGIA BOWERS, author of *Mark of the Wicked*

“*The Devouring Light* is everything I want in horror. I tried to read slowly because I didn’t want it to end, but it carried me along at a rock ’n’ roll pace.”

—ALISON AMES, author of *The Devourer*

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HARPER FIRE





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*To David, who was the best stepfather I could have asked for. And to Ian, as  
always, with all my love.*

*Sorry about the leeches.*

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# Contents

[Cover](#)  
[Praise for Devouring Light](#)  
[Title Page](#)  
[Copyright](#)  
[Note to Readers](#)  
[Dedication](#)  
[Chapter One Day One](#)  
[Chapter Two](#)  
[Chapter Three](#)  
[Chapter Four](#)  
[Chapter Five](#)  
[Chapter Six](#)  
[Chapter Seven](#)  
[Chapter Eight](#)  
[Chapter Nine](#)  
[Chapter Ten](#)  
[Chapter Eleven](#)  
[Chapter Twelve](#)  
[Chapter Thirteen](#)  
[Chapter Fourteen](#)  
[Chapter Fifteen](#)  
[Chapter Sixteen](#)  
[Chapter Seventeen Day Two](#)  
[Chapter Eighteen](#)  
[Chapter Nineteen](#)  
[Chapter Twenty](#)  
[Chapter Twenty-One](#)  
[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)  
[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)  
[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)  
[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Six](#)  
[Chapter Twenty-Seven](#)  
[Chapter Twenty-Eight Day Three](#)  
[Chapter Twenty-Nine](#)  
[Chapter Thirty](#)  
[Chapter Thirty-One](#)  
[Chapter Thirty-Two](#)  
[Chapter Thirty-Three](#)  
[Chapter Thirty-Four](#)  
[Chapter Thirty-Five](#)  
[Chapter Thirty-Six](#)  
[Chapter Thirty-Seven Day Four](#)  
[Acknowledgments](#)  
[Keep Reading](#)  
[About the Publisher](#)

[\*OceanofPDF.com\*](#)



## CONTENT WARNINGS

*The Devouring Light* is a horror story, intended to scare and unsettle its readers ... but not to leave any lasting trauma. If any of the following are likely to cause you distress, please think carefully before you read:

- abduction
- blood
- body horror
- bus crash
- death / dead bodies (shown on page)
- death of an animal (off page, mentioned briefly)
- dismemberment
- drowning
- injuries
- leech bites
- narcotic addiction
- parental neglect (passing mention)
- sickness
- stalking
- violence

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***From a Kurt County Police Department interview with Tristan “ Trip” Filmore Prescott, suspect in the case of Barton “Shark Bart” Ewing, a YouTuber known for his on-camera parkour and explorations of purportedly dangerous locations, missing and presumed dead.***

**Officers Present:** Lieutenants Amanda Rodriguez and Gavin Stoppard  
**Date:** March 23, 2019

**AR:** Okay, in your ownwords, tell us what happened the night Barton Ewing died.

**TFP:** [Clears throat.] Oh, right. I mean, we don't *know* that he died—

**AR:** Just tell us what happened the night of March sixteenth.

**TFP:** Okay. Okay, yeah. Well, we went to look for the Warren place.

**GS:** The Warren place?

**TFP:** Yeah, the Light. That's the house where all those people died, like, fifteen years ago. [Coughs.] Hey, could I get some water or something?

**AR:** There's water right in front of you, Trip. [TFP is heard gulping water.] Trip, you seem nervous. Why is that?

**TFP:** [Pause.] Look, I don't get questioned by the cops everyday, okay?

**GS:** We're only gathering the facts, Trip. When you're ready, please tell us exactly what happened—from the beginning.

**TFP:** Okay. From the top, I get it. So I guess I should explain why we were there. See, this place—the Light—is kind of an urban legend: A bunch of celebrities got invited to a New Year's party with this washed-up actress in an old house in the middle of nowhere. For whatever reason, five of them went. But then New Year's Day rolled around and none of them showed up back home, and nobody heard from them ever again, not even the hostess herself.

Some people say it was just a hoax, like maybe all the guests really went to live it up in Mexico or whatever. But I swear, it was real. It happened. I know, because I found the place.

**AR:** How did you find it?

**TFP:** From the party invitation. I found it in the attic at home—it was in an old memory box of my mom's, but I guess she decided to skip the party. Anyway, the invite was from Magdalena Warren, the actress who hosted the party, you know? But instead of an address, it had a set of coordinates. I wanted to prove it was real, show it to all our followers. Fine, to *Bart's* followers.

When I got there, I found an old tree with a couple holes drilled in the trunk, like maybe there'd been a sign there once. The roads around there were barely even roads, more like rough tracks with swamp water on every side. I figured the Light had to be somewhere near there, but like maybe somewhere you needed a boat to get to. There was no phone signal down there, so I went back to my car and called Bart. He said he'd come down with his boat—he has this inflatable thing he uses sometimes for his videos ... *used* for his videos. It was getting real dark by the time Bart arrived. That's the point where I started recording, so you'll see everything that happened from then on in my footage.

**AR:** I'd still like to hear it in your own words. [Pause, during which a rhythmic knocking can be heard.] That's quite the restless leg you have there, Trip.

**TFP:** What? Oh. [K knocking stops.]

**GS:** Please continue in your own time, Trip.

**TFP:** Oh, right. So we set out in the boat to take a look around. We only had the flashlights on our phones, which wasn't ideal, and this weird mist came out of nowhere. And then we saw something in the distance.

**GS:** The house?

**TFP:** Nah, man. A path. Raised like a foot above water level, and I could only see it because it was made from some kind of white stones. I was feeling kinda spooked by this point, but we took the boat in closer to the path to check it out. For a second, everything seemed fine—just a gravel path between some witchy-looking trees.

But then we saw a light somewhere farther out into the swamp, like this path was taking us right to it. I thought it was a ghost light or something. I wanted to turn back right then, but Bart still wanted to check it out. Then I saw something seriously weird: the path was moving.

I grabbed Bart's sleeve to try to stop him from getting out of the boat, but he lost his balance and fell into the water. It can't have been deep, like maybe a couple feet, but Bart went down and didn't come back up. I shone my phone light over the side of the boat where he fell in, but the water was *dark*, like oil or tar or something. All I could see was that glow in the distance, and it seemed to be getting brighter, the dark ness around it almost solid, you know? I got this feeling like it was watching me.

I'm not proud of myself, but I was scared out of my mind, so I quit recording and ran. Or rowed my ass out of there, I mean. [Long pause.]

**AR:** Then what happened?

**TFP:** What happened? I crapped my pants is what happened.

**AR:** But once you'd left the boat in the swamp, what came next? Did you drive straight home? Call anyone?



TFP: Oh, right. I called you guys once I had a signal. I guess it was only then that I really thought about what I'd seen out in the swamp. It was the Light. We found it. Or maybe it found us.

AR: And that's exactly how you remember it? Moving pathways and lights shining in the middle of a swamp?

TFP: I swear, that's what happened. It's all on my phone. See for yourself.

GS: You're aware we searched that whole area with helicopters as well as land crews? They didn't find any canyon or swamp or any trace of Barton Ewing. Are you sure you wouldn't like to change any part of your statement?

TFP: Look, I'm telling the truth. We *found* something—something big. And I didn't mean to leave Bart out there. I only wanted to find the Light. I didn't kill Shark Bart. You have to believe me!

**POLICE NOTES:**

***Footage from the suspect's recovered cell phone does partly support this account of how Barton "Shark Bart" Ewing came to be missing, presumed dead. But as there is no further footage, it is impossible to corroborate the rest of Prescott's version of events.***

It should be noted that no swamp or gravel path could be found anywhere within an extended aerial search radius, nor could any of the other land marks listed by Prescott.

With regard to a potential motive for Prescott to have caused harm to Ewing, private messages exchanged between the two show that Prescott was frustrated at not being allowed to appear on camera in Ewing's Shark Bart videos, something Prescott felt would boost his own YouTube channel's viewing figures and number of followers.

In conclusion, it is not possible to bring murder/manslaughter charges against Prescott at this point; however, we may pursue charges of reckless endangerment and obstruction.



## CHAPTER ONE

### DAY ONE

*Hell don't want your good intentions  
That road runs slick with my blood  
All these demons in my mentions  
Suck it up, suck it up*  
—From “Light My Way” by Haden Romero

“Can you please stop praying while I’m driving? I’m not *that* bad.”

Kizi, my best friend, looks up from where she’s been muttering into her chest in the passenger seat. “I’ll stop praying when you stop driving like we’re running from the feds.”

“Are you volunteering to take over?”

Kizi checks her hair—dyed a vivid turquoise for the festival this weekend—in the little visor mirror, acting like I haven’t spoken. Kizi *can* drive but always manages to finagle her butt into the passenger seat. When I turn my narrowed eyes back to the road, I find I’m straddling two lanes.

*Oops.* I course-correct as a station wagon blares its horn at us. I offer the driver a cheery bird, then notice Kizi gripping the door handle like she’s thinking about diving out.

“Have you updated the band’s socials yet? We should let the fans know we’re coming,” I say. It’s a distraction tactic, and Kizi knows that. It still

works. She can only angst about one thing at a time, and I know she'd rather focus on Phantomic's upcoming show.

"*You could stand to be more like Kizi.*" I hear Mom's voice echo through my head in that half-encouraging, half-chastising tone that's pretty much the only tone she uses with me now. "*That girl has drive. Grit. That's way more important than talent in this business, you know. She's going to make something of herself or die trying.*"

Mom's not wrong. I've never met anyone more driven than Kizi. But I don't get angsty about performing the way she does. Instead, I'm wired like I'm hooked up to a car battery. I can't wait to get out there in front of a crowd again.

"I'll post something now," she says, still sounding kinda peeved about my perfectly safe driving. "Here, I'll take a road-trip selfie."

From the corner of my eye, I see her double-checking her flawless appearance in the mirror. Kizi's wearing a wide-brimmed black sun hat and white-framed sunglasses—a signature look she calls "beach funeral."

"Okay, on three," she says. "One, two—"

The car immediately starts to judder, and a new warning light appears on the dash. I wonder if it's a *No selfies while driving* alert or something, but my car predates selfies by a few decades; it's a blue 1968 Lincoln Continental—the kind with a killer front grille and suicide doors in the back. A classic, in other words. Or a piece of crap, according to my dad. Sure, the hood doesn't match the rest of the car and the tail-pipe rattles whenever I turn a corner, but it's *mine*.

"Should we be worried about that?" Kizi asks, tapping a sharply pointed fingernail—painted turquoise to match her hair—against the flashing warning light. "It looks like something we should definitely be worried about. Remind me why you didn't borrow your aunt's car?"

"It'll be fine in a sec," I say, aiming to sound more confident than I feel.

Switching cars with Aunt Selena wasn't exactly an option, anyway.

"I don't understand why you want to do this," Aunt Selena said as I was leaving. "I mean, will it make you happy? Look at your parents—they've been chasing this fame nonsense their entire lives, and it's taken over everything. And have you forgotten what happened on *Little Stars*?"

Four years ago I got kicked off *Little Stars USA* a week before the finals. In ten seconds on the air during the live televised semifinals, I managed to make an ass of myself in front of the entire country, wreck my chances of



getting a record deal, and hammer home the final nail in the coffin of my parents' marriage.

*Never let it be said I'm half-assed about ruining my life. Whole-assed or nothing, baby.*

Aunt Selena's right about one thing, though: She doesn't understand why I want this. She doesn't get what I feel like when I perform onstage. The rush I get when I write something new that just *clicks* and I know there'll be people out there who'll hear my song and it'll *click* for them too, and that's when it kicks in, that *feeling*. It fills my whole body, makes me feel like a giant. It's hard to explain, but there's nothing else like it.

In any case, this won't be like it was on *Little Stars*. I'm seventeen now, not thirteen. And Kizi won't let me do anything too life-destroying this time, so Aunt Selena should trust her if not me.

"Can you smell burning?" Kizi says.

"Burning?" I glance back to the road just in time to see a giant face on the side of a tour bus pulling up on our left. A face that sends my heart sinking through the car chassis and cartwheeling down the freeway.

It belongs to Deacon Rex. Yup. *The Deacon Rex*.

*What the hell is he doing here?*

Scratch that—I know what he's doing here. He's performing at Rock-o'-Lantern, same as we are, except in a much better slot. Top billing, in fact. Still, I was hoping I'd get through this weekend without actually seeing the asswad's face.

Deacon's practically translucent in the picture, his skin almost the same icy white as his over-bleached hair. His eyes are an electric shade of blue—photoshopped, obviously. The tiny flying birds tattooed under his left eye weren't there the last time he and I crossed paths, though.

His band's name, Rex Mori, sits alongside his enormous head.

If I got asked about him in an interview, I'd say that I haven't really thought about Deacon Rex since I left *Little Stars USA* but that I wish him all the best. But the truth is I wish him an eternity of pus-filled zits and pubic lice. Fair, I

think, seeing as he's the reason I got kicked off the show.

Now Rex Mori is headlining at Rock-o'-Lantern to kick off their new album tour, while Phantomic is so far down the festival program, they could call it the Antarctica slot.

“Oh my God, I can’t believe we’re this close to Deacon fricking Rex,” Kizi says, voice soft and breathy like she’s just witnessed a miracle. She must catch my very-much-not-impressed face, because she rolls her eyes and says, “Sure, he’s the devil or whatever. But still ... he’s *Deacon Rex*.”

“I’m aware of that,” I tell her evenly. Because I’m totally fine about seeing him. Cool, cool, cool. Not imagining punching him in his smug face. And not even for a second thinking that I could just turn the car around and go right back to Aunt Selena’s, where it’s safe, and live out my boring, boring nonexistence in Ratsack, Oregon.

*Ugh.* Yes, I could leave and avoid Deacon Rex, but the thought of giving up my music, my one big dream, makes me break out in a cold sweat.

“Haden?”

I watch the hulking tour bus sail away into the distance. Deacon’s probably having some wild party in there, not giving a crap about anyone but himself. Like always.

“Haden!”

My gaze snaps to Kizi. There are now curls of smoke snaking up around her legs. “Oh ... that’s not good.”

“*Not good?*” Kizi squeaks. “The car is on fire!”

“I’m pulling over,” I say through gritted teeth, clammy hands slipping a little despite my bone-shattering grip on the steering wheel. Panic wells in my chest, clawing at the insides of my ribs like a trapped animal, but it’s that old familiar sentiment the panic brings with it that hits me hardest:

*I can’t believe I’m screwing everything up again.*

The engine chugs out a death rattle just as I turn into a miraculously placed service plaza. Kizi has the door thrown open before the wheels even stop turning, waving her arms and coughing like she’s about to die. The car judders one last time, then falls silent.

“Well, what are we supposed to do now?” Kizi says, leaning back in through the open door after some of the smoke has aired out.

I try to think past the still-thundering pulse in my ears. “I’ll call Aunt Selena.”

“What’s she going to do over the phone?”

“Well, hopefully she can talk me through how to fix it.”

“Fine.” Kizi sighs loudly. “I’m going to get snacks. I feel like my blood sugar is dangerously low.”

She’s turning to leave when I call after her, “Goodbye forever?”

Kizi stops, the corners of her mouth twitching up. “Goodbye forever, jackass.”

A truck parps its horn as she sashays across its path between the gas pumps, heading for the low sprawling building beyond the tiny gas station. The sign above the grimy glass doors invites shoppers to *Enjoy the Delights of Cindy’s Mini-Mall!*

*It’s okay, I tell myself. I can fix this. Kizi’s annoyed, but only like a level two on the pissed scale.*

I know this because when she’s really mad, there’s no way *Goodbye forever* will get even a smile-twitch out of her. She yelled it at me once as she was storming out after we had a huge argument about a cover song she wanted to do, and I found it so hilariously dramatic I couldn’t stop laughing. Then she started laughing too, and it was like our fight never even happened. Now it’s kind of become our check-in: *We cool?*

*Yeah, we’re cool.*

I finally unpeel my grip from the steering wheel, leaving faint indentations in the leather.

*We can still get to the festival in time for our sound check.... I just need a plan.*

Aunt Selena’s phone rings twice before I’m sent to voicemail. I guess she can’t talk right now. *Great.* I leave her a message, trying to sound breezy as I describe in as few details as possible the situation with the car and how we need to get it back on the road to get to our show at Rock-o’-Lantern. After I hang up, I drag my fingers through my barely there pixie hair—Kizi’s handiwork, seeing as she refused to let me buzz it all off—and try not to freak out.

I mean, *technically* our show isn’t for two more days, at eleven on Sunday morning. But we’ve been given only thirty minutes this afternoon to do a sound check and a bite-size stage rehearsal, so if we miss that, we’ll really be winging it on Sunday. And Kizi will absolutely blame me if anything goes wrong.

*Anything else.*

My gaze wanders across the parking lot to the mini-mall Kizi disappeared into. That’s when I catch sight of something truly horrific.

“You have got to be kidding me,” I spit.

Deacon Rex’s giant brooding face stares back at me from the side of his idling tour bus.





## CHAPTER TWO

Something makes a snapping sound in my hand. It's my phone case; I'm still clutching it.

I release my death grip on the phone and shove it into one of my many pockets.

*Is Deacon sitting on that bus, watching me through one of the tinted windows, snickering to himself about the state of my car?*

I feel exposed, suddenly, under Deacon Rex's hateful gaze. Head high and eyes front, I stride across the lot, past the gas pumps, and follow Kizi into Cindy's Mini-Mall.

The door squeals as it opens, like I'm walking into a haunted house at a fairground instead of a mini-mall next to a freeway. Inside, it's even more grim than I imagined from the nicotine-colored exterior: buzzing strip lights give the cracked linoleum flooring the appearance of diseased skin, while the storefronts facing out onto the foyer are mostly empty and dark.

Only two places in the mall appear to be open for business. One is a diner called Cindy's, and the other is a convenience store that hasn't even bothered to name itself; someone has simply put a neon *Beer* sign up in the window next to a yellowed sheet of paper with the word *News* handwritten in bubble letters.

I spot Kizi inside Beer-News and head over. She's crouching low to scrutinize every candy bar and doesn't turn around as I approach, but there's no way she can miss the echo of my boots on the linoleum.

“Couldn’t get through to Aunt Selena so I left a voicemail,” I tell the back of her head.

“Uh-huh,” Kizi says without looking up. “So I guess we just hitchhike with the next serial-killer type we see passing through?”

“I guess so,” I deadpan. There are a great many things I love about Kizi, but I can’t deal with her weird jokes right now. “Or I could try getting us an Uber.”

“Fine,” she says. “I’ll meet you outside.”

I backtrack out of Beer-News and check my phone for messages. There’s no reply from Aunt Selena yet. *Damn.*

Someone plows right into me, almost knocking the phone from my hand. “Hey—”

“Sorry, sweetheart, no selfies right now, okay?”

“What ...” I trail off as my eyes meet a pair the color of dusty denim.

It’s him. Deacon Rex. Still talking with a strong London accent like he’s playing the lead in *Oliver!* even though he’s lived in the United States since he was ten.

Deacon grins, seeming to mistake my horrified expression for something like awe.

“Oh, go on, then. I hate to disappoint a fan.” He leans in so our faces are side by side.

“What are you doing? Get off me!”

A guy I hadn’t noticed before looks up from his phone and strides over. He reminds me of a bull—all muscles up top, no neck to speak of, and legs that are skinny by comparison, like he’s never heard of a squat. I assume he’s Deacon’s bodyguard or roadie or something.

“What’s going on here, D? This kid bothering you?”

*Kid?* I’m the same age as Deacon, who I’m guessing is technically this guy’s boss. And the *bothering* is coming very much from his direction, not mine.

“It’s okay, Marv, only a misunderstanding,” Deacon says, turning to me again with the same serious expression as the one on the side of his tour bus. “I should’ve asked before invading your space, shouldn’t I? Forgive me?”

“I ...”

My stupid brain won’t give me anything more useful than that one word. It’s barely even a word, just a letter. The sound of an internal malfunction.



Deacon winks. “Cheers, love. Catch you later.”

And with that, he strides toward the main entrance.

*Crap.* How could I freeze up like that? I never freeze up.

*Well, guess what, kiddo.* Dad’s voice is low and sharp as a knife in my head. *You found yet another way to screw up.*

I’ve been imagining confronting Deacon Rex for the past four years—four years, two months, five days—and not only did I miss that opportunity, but *he doesn’t even remember who I am.*

“I’m Haden Romero!”

My voice rings out around the dead space at the center of the mini-mall. Deacon’s deep in conversation with his muscle-bound buddy and doesn’t look back as he heads out through the swinging glass door. In the window booth of the diner, a guy in coveralls glances up from his newspaper at my shout, gives me a hesitant thumbs-up, then goes back to reading.

“I need to pee,” I tell no one, and follow a sign directing me to a grungy-looking door.

The restroom is unisex and has those blue-tinged lights that make it look like a morgue. I choose a stall and lean back against the door. I don’t actually need to pee, but I *do* need a minute to get my head together. My stomach roils in warning—something it hasn’t done in a while. I try to tell myself it’s just leftover stress from the whole car-on-fire situation, but that’s a lie. It’s seeing *him* again. Seeing him and feeling like a total loser because he’s got everything I’ve ever wanted while I can’t seem to stop screwing up.

And with that thought comes the unwanted memory of Li’l Deke—Deacon Rex, now that his voice has broken—watching me, eyes glittering in delight, as I was dragged offstage during our live TV show.

I lurch forward over the toilet and just let it all out.



### CHAPTER THREE

My life was hell after *Little Stars*. Hell. The paparazzi were everywhere. Mom kept up her *It'll pass, you'll see!* facade for a while, but I don't think Dad ever got over his utter disappointment in me. He started coming home less and less and never quite looked me in the eye when he was there. It was like he thought my failure would rub off on him somehow. Nobody in the industry wanted to know about me after that. I was too *difficult*. Too *emotional* to work with. I was written off at the age of thirteen.

When I'm done throwing up, I wipe my mouth on the back of my hand and wait. Gradually, my breathing evens out.

*What am I doing?*

I can't let Deacon throw me off my game like this. Not again. Not when I'm about to break out—for real this time.

*I'm Haden Romero, damn it. Soon, that's going to be a name the whole world knows—and not just because I swore at Deacon fucking Rex on TV.*

With a firm nod, I'm about to leave the stall when I hear someone coming into the restroom, huffing like they just ran a marathon. I press my eye to the crack between the door and the frame. The person appears to be a white guy in his mid-twenties—lanky, blond, and pretty haggard-looking, like if Dylan Sprouse had spent a year chained in a basement with no access to bathing facilities.

His eyes are *dark-dark*, blue or maybe gray, but totally absent of light. Like a black hole—just *empty*. It's a strange thought to have, and I don't

know where it came from, but it feels true.

On the floor at his feet sits an enormous red suitcase. It's a hard-shell case, and it must be heavy for him to be breathing like that.

He turns abruptly. I hold my breath while he peers at the toilet stalls one by one, his gaze so sharp, I instinctively shrink back before it reaches me. But as I lean carefully against the side of the stall, I realize there's something familiar about the guy, and it's not only the Sprouse-ness. My mind races, trying to place him. There's an image of him in my head—a little younger, maybe? A little cleaner? But I can't figure out where I know him from. It's definitely not from school.

A dull thud echoes through the restroom, followed by a muttered curse. By the time I've edged back to the crack in the door, he's kneeling next to his luggage, which seems to have tipped onto its side on the tiled floor.

I wait quietly, watching. There's something off about this guy, and my internal alarm bells are definitely ringing.

He gets back to his feet and leans heavily against one of the sinks, staring at his own reflection.

"Sugar wishes she could make it, but she asked me to come instead " He shakes his head, clears his throat, then smiles in a way that sends a creep-line running all the way down my spine. "Sugar wanted to introduce us, but she got called away *Damn it!*" He smacks his palm against the counter and drops his head, still muttering to himself. "Come on, don't screw this up now. The GPS is taken care of. Getting on the bus is the last step."

Okay, I'm officially ready to get the hell out of here. Now that he's braced against the sinks, he's not really blocking the exit. But just as I'm about to throw open the door and dash out, he raises his head and talks to his own drawn reflection again, like he's trying to cement his resolve.

"I only need to bring Rex to the light. That's all. This one last thing and it's done."

*Rex?*

The fact that Deacon Rex is here, in a service plaza in the middle of nowhere, can't be a coincidence. What does *bring Rex to the light* mean?

*Whatever it means, it doesn't sound good.*

I can't shake the feeling that I need to get out of here without this guy realizing I've heard whatever he's—

In my pocket, my phone starts blaring out Phantomic's new demo track. I snatch my phone out, meaning to reject the call, but my trembling fingers

accidentally hit Accept.

“Haden, where the hell—”

I stride from the stall with only the quickest glance at the creep with the suitcase. He’s still at the far end of the restroom, but he’s watching me, standing so still it’s like the clock stopped.

“You.”

He’s recognized me. Usually I’m okay with being recognized—not that it happens often, honestly. But this feels like a hand seizing my heart and squeezing.

“You’re Haden Romero ”

The guy breathes my name like he’s weighing up a prospect, and I don’t want to be alone with him when he figures out what he wants to do about it.

Vaguely, I realize Kizi’s still cussing me out through the phone.

“Hey, I’m on my way back from the *restroom*,” I tell her, voice high and overloud. Kizi stops mid-rant. The guy takes a step in my direction, a new glint in his eyes that I definitely don’t like. I hurry away from him, heart pounding so hard that I have to strain to hear his footsteps behind me. “Are you ready to leave? Like, *right now*?”

There’s a pause before Kizi answers—long enough for me to reach the restroom door and *pull*, only to find a mop handle wedged against it.

“I’m on my way,” Kizi says, clear and deliberate. Whatever she heard in my voice has clued her in to the fact that there’s something up.

“No, meet me outside. I’ll be out in one sec,” I say quickly, my phone now pressed between my ear and shoulder as I try to unwedge the mop.

*Why won’t this thing budge? It’s like it’s cemented into the damn doorframe!*

Behind me I hear his clipped footsteps heading closer. My spine goes rigid. I tug frantically at the mop, changing the angle, expecting at any second to be grabbed.

*Just need to get the damn door open—*

The mop jerks loose and flies from my hand. There’s a sharp grunt from the guy at my back, but I’m not about to stop and ask if he’s okay. I throw open the door and sprint out of there.



## CHAPTER FOUR

I'm halfway to the mini-mall exit before I realize there's no sign of Kizi. I thought she'd be on her way to meet me outside.

*Where is she?*

She must've already been waiting by the car when we spoke. I rush toward the main door leading out to the parking lot. When I get outside, I see the Lincoln still sitting there, but no Kizi.

"Kizi!" I yell, turning in a full circle. Still no sign of her. But no sign of the restroom creep either. Hopefully he won't follow me outside in broad daylight, but creeps don't always play by vampire rules.

I'm hitting Redial when I spot Deacon Rex leaning against the side of his tour bus. And however low my opinion of him may be, I kinda have to warn him about what I heard in the restroom.

He's wearing a pair of mirrored aviator sunglasses and signing an autograph for a kid who can't be more than ten. The boy is happily skipping back to his mom when I reach Deacon.

"Hey, I know you don't remember me, but we were on ..." I begin, then try again. "That doesn't even matter. Look, I overheard some weirdo in the restroom talking about hijacking your bus or something, okay? I thought I'd better let you know about it. So this is me letting you know. Bye."

I'm about to turn away when my phone starts to play our new track again, and Kizi's face appears on the screen. I fumble to answer but the

ringing stops before I can swipe. When I look up, Deacon is squinting at me over his sunglasses. Then his gaze travels past me.

“Would this hijacker you mentioned be the person currently sprinting toward us with a can of ... I want to say insect repellent?” he says, sounding maddeningly unfazed.

I turn, expecting to see the guy from the restroom, but instead find Kizi running over to us, one hand holding her hat on her head as her blue hair whips around her and the other gripping what does indeed look like a can of bug spray. She jerks to a stop a few feet away.

“Is everything okay?” she says. “I, ah, thought there was a ... situation?”

She looks from me to Deacon and back again and I can tell it’s physically paining her not to say something to the effect of *Oh my God, it’s theeeee Deacon Rex!* But we don’t have time for Kizi to cycle through all the stages of wow.

“He has a stalker,” I explain. “I overheard some shady guy in the restroom talking about him in a really creepy way.”

“What did he look like?” Deacon asks, still seeming to take it all in stride. “I should let Marv know who to watch out for.”

“He was blond. White. Kinda dirty. But it was more about how he was acting than what he looked like ” I trail off when I see the amused and confused looks I’m getting from Deacon and Kizi, respectively. “I’m telling you, he was being super-weird! Like talking to himself about needing to get on the bus so he could ‘bring Rex to the light,’ whatever the hell that means. And he blocked the door with a mop.” Damn it, I’m not explaining this well. “Look, I wouldn’t have come running out here to tell you if I didn’t think it was something to worry about!”

“This is so bloody typical.” Deacon takes off his shades and starts cleaning them on his too-tight T-shirt. “We were only supposed to stop for a quick photo op with the chair of my fan club. First she’s a no-show, and now there’s some weirdo out to bundle me in his boot.” It’s only now that I realize he looks like he’s already spent a week in a stranger’s trunk. There are dark circles under his eyes, and his expression is pinched with exhaustion. What is it with everyone around this place? “Honestly, I don’t have the energy to deal with this.” Deacon puts the sunglasses back on like that somehow closes the matter. “Thanks for the heads-up. I’d better shoot off while the coast’s clear.”

He saunters to the open door of the bus. I make out the hulking shape of Marv leaning over from the driver's seat, no doubt wondering who's *bothering* Deacon now. But then Deacon stops and turns back to us.

"Will you two be all right out here? I mean, if the guy *is* dangerous, you probably shouldn't hang around."

"Our car broke down," Kizi says quickly, all signs of being awestruck brushed aside now that she's had a moment to reset her Kizi-ness. "We're supposed to be headed to Rock-o'-Lantern like you, but it looks like we're stranded."

I throw her a *shut up* glare, but Kizi is pointedly not looking at me.

"I guess we'll hang out here waiting for an Uber and *hope* the guy doesn't try to murder us after we came to warn you," she continues. Kizi twists a lock of her blue hair around her finger, somehow looking nonchalant and fearful at the same time. I wonder when she practiced *that* look in the mirror. "That's a big bus you have there. Must be room for, what, twenty, thirty people inside?"

"Kizi," I say, voice *low-low*, "you're not seriously—"

"It would really suck to miss our sound check," she adds, cutting right across my objections.

Deacon chuckles, and now I want to kill both of them. "Why don't you two get a lift with us?" he offers, right on cue. "Like you said, there's plenty of room. And I suppose I do owe you for the warning."

*That's not all you owe me for.*

"Thanks. You're a lifesaver. I've put all our stuff right there for your roadie to load for us," Kizi tells him, indicating a neat stack of bags and instruments I hadn't noticed before. *Our* bags and instruments. She doesn't wait for a response before turning to climb the steps onto the bus. I scrub my hands through my hair, no doubt leaving it sticking out in wild tufts.

She's right. We need to get on this bus or we'll miss our sound check. And I can't be the reason we lose our shot. Doesn't make it suck any less that it's Deacon fricking Rex coming to our rescue right now.

I'm partway through a calm-breathing exercise when I spot something moving near the mini-mall entrance, and all the air in my chest turns solid. It's the guy from the restroom. We lock eyes for a second—long enough for me to catch the way he's staring at me.

*Hungrily.*



Then he ducks back through the filth-glazed doors and disappears from view.

My pulse *whoomp-whoomp-whoomps* behind my eardrums, and my feet feel itchy with the need to move—my fight-or-flight response kicking in.

“Fine,” I say, even though I’m the only one still standing on the asphalt. “Let’s get the hell out of here.”

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## CHAPTER FIVE

*I wear a grin and bear teeth  
Smile a mile wide and venom underneath  
You never knew, never saw the color of my rage  
Till you put that paw through the bars of my cage*  
—From “Cellmates” by Haden Romero

Tinted windows cast a muted light over the inside of the tour bus. There are black leather sofas lining both sides of the narrow space that I guess is the equivalent of a living room, and a plasma TV hangs on the wall between this area and whatever lies beyond.

Deacon slumps onto one of the leather sofas next to a guy with red hair who’s holding a game controller. He blinks up at me and Kizi like we woke him from hibernation.

This is Shane Eriksen, the bassist in Deacon’s band—information I’ve absorbed while trying not very successfully to ignore Deacon Rex’s entire existence.

Shane has a single gold hoop earring and the type of freckly white skin that doesn’t so much blush as bruise red when he’s embarrassed. Or in the presence of a hot girl like Kizi, as he is now. This guy looks like a heart-eyes emoji with a neck rash.

“I’m Kizi K-O,” Kizi says, giving her stage name.

She runs her hand absently over her charm bracelet and the collection of charms I know she secretly feels are her armor. In addition to Jesus, which her mom gave her, there are a moon and a blue wave-shaped crystal that represent her two older sisters and a devil's trident I got her as a joke. For her dad, Kizi has a miniature om symbol, and a cherry blossom for her Japanese grandmother, who gave her the bracelet. At the center of them all is the crystal star that Kizi bought for herself.

"I'm the lead singer with Phantomic," she adds grandly. Kizi's facing both guys on the sofa, but I notice her focus is squarely on Deacon. I practically pull a muscle rolling my eyes. "But maybe you already knew that?"

There's an expectant pause, but it's obvious Shane has no idea what she's talking about.

My mouth still tastes like vom, so I pop the last stick of gum from a pack in my pocket while I wait for Kizi to finish selling her soul.

"Shane," the guy slumped next to Deacon replies with a half-assed wave. Kizi cocks her head to one side like she's thinking, and I bite back a smirk. *Of course* she'd pretend not to know who he is. She did the same thing the first time I met her, and Kizi knew damn well I was that bratty kid who'd had a meltdown on live TV. I walked into the school music room—I'd gotten in the habit of spending lunchtime there so I could avoid the whispers and stares of the kids in the cafeteria—and saw Kizi and Cairo setting up to rehearse. They were arguing, of course, and watching them, I couldn't help wondering with a small twinge of jealousy if they were together. (They weren't; I learned pretty quick that Kizi's so straight, she makes a spirit level look crooked.)

I'd forgotten the door had a tendency to slam shut, and when it did, they both turned and glared at me, and for an awful, silent second I waited for the sneers and snarky comments I was sure were coming. But when Kizi spoke, it was with the faintest hint of a smile.

"Who the hell are you?" she said. And I could tell she knew but that she also believed that whatever she and Cairo had going on was way more important than me and my BS. I think if I hadn't already caught the superhot girl on drums—Cairo—checking me out, I might've fallen in love with Kizi right then.

(Drummers, though, am I right? Show me a girl with amazing drumming skills and well-defined delts, and I'll show you a Haden Romero who can't

form a coherent sentence.)

Maybe it sounds strange that I was grateful Kizi acted like she didn't know me, but in those few words, she was letting *me* decide how I defined myself, and I hadn't been allowed to do that since *Little Stars*. Somehow that made me more determined to be who *I* wanted to be, not who everyone had already decided I was.

Kizi's words seem to have the opposite effect on Shane, though. When he speaks, it's like he's not sure who he is or if he's even on the right bus.

"I'm, uh, Rex Mori's bassist?"

"Oh, of *course*," Kizi says with the tiniest of indulgent smiles. "*Love* what you guys do. I'll definitely catch your set tonight if I can fit it into my schedule. Oh, and this is Haden. She does all the background stuff in the band."

*Background stuff. Sure, that's what I do. Thanks, Kiz. It's not like I write all the music and lyrics, play all the instrumentals, produce the samples and beats, and mix everything while singing backing vocals live onstage.*

I take a deep breath and remind myself that it doesn't matter. I'm not trying to impress anyone here, especially not Deacon Rex. I do wonder if he'll finally realize who I am after hearing my name, but there's not even a flicker of recognition.

*Typical.*

Deacon glances up and smirks when he finds me watching him. "By the way, I think our drummer's having a nap—"

"Or a dump," Shane cuts in with a finger gun, then blushes violently again when Deacon side-eyes him.

"So if you two want to hang out in the other bunk room, that's fine. Or you can chill with us here. Anyway, make yourselves at home. But please, no posting any photos of us or the bus on social media." Deacon looks pointedly at Kizi, who puts away her phone just as she was about to take a snapshot of him and his guitar.

"Hey, speaking of photos," Shane says, turning slightly toward Deacon even though his eyes are still on Kizi, "how'd it go with Sugar? Didn't she want to come over and say hi?"

Deacon scowls. "Sugar didn't turn up."

"Sugar Patel, a no-show? No way."

"Excuse me, ladies."

The voice at my back has me whirling around with my fists raised like I'm about to go full Rocky Balboa. Marv looks down at my hands and grunts.

"Had a little too much caffeine?"

"One too many weirdos," I mutter, letting my hands fall when Marv shifts past me into the driver's seat.

The entire bus vibrates as Marv starts the engine. It's like being in the bowels of some enormous purring beast. There's a hiss as the bus door closes, followed by an electronic *ping* from the direction of the driver's seat.

"Damn it. Hatch is stuck again." Marv hauls himself up and back over to the stairs.

As he disappears outside, I peer through the front window at Cindy's Mini-Mall and the spot where I saw the restroom creeper a few minutes ago. There's no sign of him. Still, now that we're actually on the bus, I just want to get out of here. I don't want to think about weirdos and their creepy mirror mantras or their plans for my former *Little Stars* rival. Thankfully Marv is only gone a minute before he's back behind the wheel. Whatever alert pinged is now silent, apparently satisfied.

Marv eases the bus out of the lot and onto the freeway. "Buckle up!" he yells, grin visible in the rearview mirror.

"Our ETA is one hour and seven minutes."

That's almost an hour sooner than I thought. But then, Marv doesn't have to make allowances for creaky old cars that break down at the worst moment.

*Maybe Kizi did the right thing getting us a ride*, I grudgingly admit as I slide down onto the sofa next to her. My peace doesn't last long.

"You don't think I remember you, do you, Romero?" Deacon's watching me, a sly smile on his face. "But you don't tend to forget someone who calls you an asshole in front of four million people on live TV."

"*Actually*, Mary Poppins," I say, trying desperately to look nonchalant, "I called you an *asshole*. And you deserved—"

"Don't start a fight while they can still kick us off the bus,"

Kizi hisses behind her hand. I ignore her. "You made me—"

"*What the hell are they doing here?*"

My head whips around. A figure appears in the doorway leading to the back of the bus, and I find myself face-to-face with someone I never

imagined I'd see *here*.  
“Cairo?”

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## CHAPTER SIX

“Oh. My. God.” Kizi’s eyes couldn’t be any wider as she looks from me to our ex-bandmate—who also happens to be my *ex ex*. Cairo’s a tall, hazel-eyed Black girl with arms that still give me a little shiver when I look at them. She really does have beautifully defined delts.

I open my mouth to say ... I dunno, *something*. Just talk to her. Yell at her, maybe. We left things so messy, I can’t decide whether I want to kiss her or curse at her. So I just sit there gawking.

Cairo rounds on Deacon, and the cocky grin falls from his face. “What is this? Why the hell are they on our bus?”

He sets aside his guitar like he’s worried she might wrap it around his head. “Their car broke down, Cai. I couldn’t just leave them at the side of the road, could I?”

She glares at him, but only for a moment before her face turns stony—her walls slamming into place, just like I remember.

“Fine,” she says evenly. “Whatever.” Then she turns right around and storms into the back again. I watch the door, eyes stinging, like if I stare at it hard enough, she might reappear.

*Damn it.* I thought I was over this—over *her*.

“What’s Cairo doing here with you?” I aim the question at Deacon.

“Uh, she’s our new drummer. Hasn’t officially been announced yet. Swayzee, the last one, left the band right after we finished making the new album. Then we found Cairo. She was a perfect fit.” Deacon shrugs.



I'd actually heard about Swayzee quitting the band—everyone was talking about it online last month, speculating about whether Rex Mori would have to cancel their sold-out tour.

I feel a grudging spark of excitement for Cairo. Playing with Rex Mori is a way bigger break than she'd ever get with Phantomic. From the look on Kizi's face, she agrees—and is not quite as pleased for Cairo as I am. But she always gets a little defensive when it comes to Cairo. I don't think Kizi's forgiven her for trying to get me to quit Phantomic and form a new band with her. But it's not like I was ever going to bail on my best friend. If she'd known me better, Cairo would've realized that. But I guess what Kizi says is true: we were never really right for each other.

Kizi would never ask me to choose. Which is why I'll always choose her.

"I need to freshen up before we get to Rock-o'-Lantern." Kizi grabs her bag and slinks off through the same door Cairo just slammed.

Shane goes back to playing his video game with a sigh, leaving me with a bemused-looking Deacon. But I'd rather dry-swallow Deacon's fancy guitar than make small talk with him for the next hour.

*Try to chill, I tell myself. We're back on the road to Rock-o'-Lantern, finally. And that creepy restroom guy is miles away by now, probably still whispering to himself in the mirror. Get through the next hour and everything will be fine.*

I take out my phone and shoot Dad a text.

On my way to Rock-o'-Lantern! Hope you catch the live stream of our set on Sunday  
xoxo

The text turns to *Read* almost instantly—Dad's never without his phone—but the little dancing reply dots don't appear.

*Please, Dad, I will him silently. Just this one time, let me know I got it right. That you're proud of me again.*

I give it a minute, but still nothing. Swallowing down the cold weight of his rejection, I slide from my seat to go speak to Marv, wobbling a little while I find my bus legs.

"Did you report that guy I saw back at the service area?" I ask.

Marv nods, briefly ironing out the creases at the back of his bald head. "Don't worry. I've let the festival security team know about it. There's no way he'll get anywhere near you or Deacon."

“Good,” I say, stifling the million follow-up questions I want to ask. I’m gonna have to trust Marv and the festival security. Because that creep definitely recognized me, and I don’t want to be looking over my shoulder the entire weekend.

“Hey, which route are you taking?” I ask, hoping to take my mind off the situation, at least until we get to the festival—and to avoid going back to the seating area. “Ours had us on the road for another two hours.”

Marv blinks. “Oh, I programmed the bus’s GPS this morning. Maybe it found a quicker route while we were parked up at the service area.”

I’m about to tell him I don’t think that’s how a navigation system generally works, but Deacon butts in.

“So you and Cairo, huh? I hear that was quite the train wreck.”

“Really? *I* hear it was none of your business,” I say mildly.

There’s no way Cai would talk about what happened between us—the band stuff *or* the relationship stuff. Cairo is the kind of person who keeps her private life all-caps PRIVATE. “Cai told me you let Kizi make crappy decisions for your band.” I feel like he must be fishing, but he’s hitting a little too close to the mark. I glance over my shoulder and eye the door Kizi went through. She still hasn’t come back from “freshening up,” which makes me wonder if she’s back there arguing with Cairo. That was all the two of them seemed to do in the weeks before Cairo left.

“But that doesn’t sound like the Haden I know,” Deacon continues with a frown—a look someone less informed might mistake for concern. “You never used to let anyone push you around.”

And just like that, my blood turns molten. “The Haden you *know*? You don’t know me, Deacon. We were on the same stupid TV show for like a minute *four years ago*.”

“Hey, come on. We were friends—”

“Friends?” My voice jumps two octaves. “A friend wouldn’t do what you did to me!”

He has the nerve to look confused. “What *I* did to *you*?”

“Yes! You—”

“You two are making it really hard to focus on my game,” Shane calls over, sounding almost panicked. Deacon huffs out a breath and picks up his guitar again, concentrating much more intently on his strings. Shane tosses me a controller. “Here. Shoot the green things. And try not to lose this

campaign for me or I'll be forced to make a sexist comment about girls and video games."

"If you do, I'll be forced to find out if this controller can be used as a ball gag," I tell him, and start shooting the green things.

"There's no way this is the right road!" Deacon snaps.

I look up from where Shane and I have just beaten an entire platoon of red fuzzy creatures and are currently performing a slightly obscene victory dance. I didn't even notice Kizi coming back from the restroom, but she's up front with Deacon and Marv, arguing with them both. I set my controller aside and join them.

"Marv," Deacon continues, squinting at the GPS display, "there's something wrong with this satnav, I'm telling you."

The bus still vibrates with the hum of the engine, but we don't seem to be moving anymore. I was so caught up in the game, I didn't even notice we'd stopped.

"Rock-o'-Lantern is supposed to be in the middle of nowhere, though, right?" Kizi says hopefully. "Like, that's a thing? Fields and fields full of people camping and different stages spread out everywhere ... I feel like there should be signposts, though. I mean, there's no way it's at the bottom of a *canyon*."

Through the front window of the bus, I see the shadows have grown long around us. But it's obvious why we've stopped: the road we're on is nothing more than a dirt track with trees leaning over us at improbable angles and a sheer drop into tangled greenery on one side.

*What the hell?* This is definitely not the way to Rock-o'-Lantern.

"Where are we?" I ask, voice tight.

"God knows." Deacon jabs a finger at the GPS display. "It *seems* like the satnav has a signal one minute, then it's gone. We've been driving in circles for the past half hour."

A knot of panic tries to climb its way up the inside of my rib cage.

*We're going to miss our sound check, then something will go wrong during the show, and it'll be my fault—again.*

"Have you tried using the GPS on your phones?" I suggest, and Kizi huffs out an annoyed breath.

"Of *course* we tried that. But we're way out in the middle of nowhere, and apparently our phones have even less of a signal than the damn bus

GPS.” My stomach drops even further when she adds, “We’re supposed to be at our sound check in like ten minutes.”

“What? There’s no way ...” I look at my phone and am horrified to see she’s right—about the time *and* the signal.

“They’ll rearrange it for you,” Deacon says, finally looking up from the unresponsive navigation display. “I’ll have a word with the organizer.”

I bite back a Deacon-shaped curse at his sheer arrogance. “I’ll walk down the road a little, see if I can get a signal,”

I say, not really considering whether it’s a good plan or not. I just need a minute by myself to try to calm down.

“No, I’ll go.” Shane appears beside me and doesn’t wait for a reply before bounding down the bus steps and hitting the door release. “I feel like taking an outdoor piss anyway.”

Then he’s gone, only the fading sound of his footsteps giving an indication which way he went.

I still feel like there’s a clamp around my lungs, though.

*Need some air ...*

I’ve taken one step toward the door when the bus lurches. Kizi screams, Marv curses, and I stand there with a death grip on what I belatedly realize is Marv’s shoulder.

“What was that?” I say once it seems like the lurching is over. Through the front window I see Shane sprinting back along the road toward us, hastily fastening his pants.

“It must’ve been an earthquake,” Kizi says breathlessly.

“I dunno, it felt more like a blown tire to me,” Marv says. I have the impression he’s trying to sound calm for our benefit. “Whatever it was, I’d better try to move the bus. I don’t want to find out what’s at the bottom of this drop.”

“Yeah, let’s pick up Shane and get out of here,” Deacon agrees. His face has lost all its meager color, making him exactly as pale as his picture on the side of the bus.

I feel a hand on my arm, the bite of pointy nails telling me it’s Kizi.

“Are you okay?” I ask her.

“Yeah.” Her expression says otherwise.

As Shane closes the distance between himself and the bus, he begins shouting something. “What’s he saying?”

There's no time for anyone to answer my question, as the dirt road rises up in front of the bus. Shane is thrown off his feet, the ground rolling right at us in a wave. It's like some huge serpent woke up and is tunneling its way toward us at high speed.

"Oh my God—" The bus lurches again and I bite my tongue, instantly tasting panic-sour blood. This time, the lurching doesn't stop. The bus tilts sickeningly, dragging me along the floor. I cling desperately to the arm of a bolted-down sofa as we tip slowly, inevitably, until all I see through the smoked-glass windows is *down* and *dark* and *Oh God, no, we're all going to die*.

Screams fill the bus. Kizi claws my arm as she tries to grab on to me. I reach back but lose my grip on the sofa and get thrown across the bus, and then I'm in a tangle with Deacon as metal twists and screams, and we all twist and scream... .

The bus rolls over onto its roof and I slam against it, hitting my shoulder on the hard cover of the bus's strip lighting. Pain blossoms at the point of contact and spreads like ink in water. I have one crystal-clear thought:

*I wish that had knocked me out so I wouldn't have to feel what's coming.*

Then we're rolling faster than I can keep up with. The walls, the floor, the ceiling—they all fly at me, a tornado of stray limbs and debris, glass shards taking quick, hard bites of my skin, and shadows and screaming and absolute destruction.

Then, finally, silence.



*I recognize this dream.*

*I'm in the middle of a crowd, trying desperately to get to the stage, but the throng around me presses in tighter and tighter. I'm so small next to them. Big, hulking bodies crush mine until I can't see the lights above me anymore. And I'm shrinking, sinking into the floor, their feet stomping me down like old bubble gum.*

*This is usually when I bolt awake, panting and sweating, my heart trying to beat its way out of me.*

*But this time, as I'm being buried alive beneath the wall of flesh, I hear a voice. It whispers in my ear, somehow louder than the roaring crowd pressing in on all sides.*

*"Come to the light," it says.*

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

When I peel my eyelids apart, I see a world of shadows. An eerie light flickers occasionally, casting the chaos around me into weak relief. There's no daylight filtering in from outside the bus, so I guess it must be night.

But how can it be dark out? I can't have been lying here for hours, can I? "Kiz?"

My voice sounds muffled, like my head's underwater.

The bus has crumpled in on itself. What I can see of the windshield is now a lethal cluster of shards pointing inward. It seems like the bus is propped on its driver's-side wheels, which means I can't see much out of the side windows—or the holes where the side windows *used* to be—except what might be mud.

There's no sign of anyone else.

"Kizi? Where are you? Are you okay?"

My voice is still a croak, but I think my hearing's returning to normal. I go still at a grinding, staticky sound. It's coming from whatever's emitting that wavering light ... a phone, I realize. A corner of its screen flickers a few feet away. Slowly, feeling like I'm being beaten with each movement, I drag myself through the broken remains of the tour bus toward the phone. My knees sink into something wet as I reach it. There's dark liquid seeping into the bus—about three inches of it where I am now. The phone is in it, with only that one flickering corner of the cracked screen visible. I pick it up.



“Please welcome ... I said please ... Haden Romero! ...  
Romero to the stage ... Haden?”

The voice, filtering in like someone speaking through a long tunnel, is now joined by what sounds like a crowd, all chanting my name. My heart races, one question thundering in my head: *What the hell is this?*

The sound cuts out abruptly. But the light of the cracked screen keeps flickering, so maybe the call is still connected—if it even is a call.

Maybe Deacon was watching an old episode of *Little Stars USA* before the bus went over. Except I’m sure he was using his phone to try to check our route, so that doesn’t make sense. None of this makes any sense.

“Hello?” I say into the phone. “*Hello?* This is Haden Romero, there’s been an accident. Is someone there? Can you help us?”

“Help us?” the crowd repeats.

“Yes, I—”

“Help us, help us, help us, help us, help us, help us, help us—”

I drop the phone like it scalded me, and the voices stop. When I retrieve it, the screen is no longer flickering; it’s entirely black.

Cursing, I slide the dead device into my pocket and head to what used to be the front of the bus.

“Marv?”

No response.

It finally occurs to me to check for my own phone. I find it in one of my many pants pockets—a dry one, thankfully, as the crappy older model I use isn’t waterproof. There are no messages on the screen; hardly surprising, seeing as there’s no signal.

I use it as a flashlight to look around me. The space is barely recognizable as a bus. One of the sofas must’ve come loose from where it was bolted to the wall and now sits upside down with deep gouges torn through the leather. A mini fridge that I think was next to it has spilled its guts, leaving a trail of broken bottles and spoiled food soaking up the water that’s still leaking slowly into the bus. By some miracle, the TV is still attached to the partly buckled divider wall, but it’s now just a black frame with exposed wiring and circuit boards.

How could anyone survive this? How did *I* ?

*Maybe I’m dead and just haven’t realized it yet.*

I pause, dread hollowing out a space behind my ribs.

*Focus, Haden. Just find the others and get out.*

I turn in a full circle, my phone's light revealing even more carnage. Shards of glass glitter almost prettily among it.

*Wait—there!*

Something's protruding from underneath what might be a twisted ceiling panel.

A hand.

I reach for it, my own hand shaking, then flinch away at the awful coldness of the blood coating its skin.

*His skin.*

I wrench the panel up. My eyes meet blank, unflinching blue ones.

"Oh, Marv ..."

I know instinctively that he's dead, but I check for a pulse anyway. The skin at his throat is as cold as his outstretched fingers. I snatch back my hand with a whimper.

The two bunk rooms look the same as the front section. I can't see Cairo anywhere, though. At least that means there's a chance she's okay. The relief that spills through me makes me want to weep, but I can't. I don't think I'll be able to stop if I do.

*I need to get out of here.*

I hesitate, not wanting to leave Marv just lying there, but there's no way I can move him on my own. I grab a sheet from one of the wrecked bedrooms, and I'm laying it gently over his face when I hear a voice. It's faint, coming from behind me—beneath the twisted mess of the collapsed roof where Marv sat looking at the GPS the last time I saw him alive. The tinny, distorted voice tells me:

"You have now reached your destination."

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## CHAPTER EIGHT

Each movement I make is torturous and slow, my entire body screaming at me to lie down and wait for the pain to go away. But after stumbling a few times, I finally haul myself up and out of one of the busted side windows.

Losing my balance, I slide down the side of the bus and tumble straight over the edge. I land on my ass in something lukewarm and wet. Water, but not just water. Something ... soupier. Is this a swamp? Or a bog? Or a marsh? What even is the difference?

I get to my feet, trying not to retch at the squelching, sucking sound my hands make as I pull them free. My soaked pants chill instantly in the cooler air. They cling to me, making me shiver. It smells like eggs out here. *Sulfur*, my seventh-grade chem teacher's voice tells me. But there's a reek like rotting vegetation under it—the kind of smell that murmurs of death and decay.

Faint silvery moonlight drifts down through the trees, making them seem jagged and alien. Wisps of fog are draped through the branches like Halloween streamers, and, from the hazy quality of the landscape beyond, it looks like it's getting thicker. The bus has rolled some way from the edge of the canyon, and I see the steep incline rising like a dark monolith beyond the trees. I turn in a circle, looking for the far side of it, and realize it looks the same in every direction—as if this isn't a canyon at all but a deep hole in the ground.

This can't be happening. Can't be real.

"Kizi!" I yell. There's no answer—not even an echo. It's like my voice is being smothered, as though the fog is clinging to it. Absorbing it.

The tour bus rests at an angle, a beached metallic beast. The door to the baggage compartment hangs open in a look of surprise. Above it, where Deacon Rex's face used to be, only one unnaturally blue eye remains. The rest of the banner's probably strewn in slivers across the side of the canyon. I hope that's not the case for Deacon himself. Despite the many times I've wished Deacon Rex dead over the years, I really hope he isn't.

"Kizi?" I call again, a definite tremor in my voice. "Cairo?

Deacon? *Shane?*"

I hear nothing. No, not nothing, exactly; faint noises reach out from the night. The snap of a twig breaking. Insects clicking and humming in the branches hanging low overhead. There's a *slosh* of movement in the murky water, then another, and for a second I feel a presence coming toward me. Then it stops.

"Kizi? Hello? Is someone there?"

My heart pounds out a drumroll, yet nobody appears. I wait, but the noise doesn't come again. That sense doesn't leave, though. It's like someone's watching me, waiting to see what I'll do next.

Hands shaking, I pull my phone from the pocket of my cargo pants and press the button to wake it, but nothing happens. Then I notice the soupy water dripping from its case. It was in my pocket when I landed butt-first in the swamp just now.

I scream a curse into the mist.

*I don't want to die here.*

*I don't want to die.*

I need to find Kizi and the others. I set off in what seems to be the most likely direction to find them: back the way we came.

Twice, I almost lose a boot wading through the dark, shallow sludge to reach the other side of the bus. What's more disturbing than that is that the mist seems to be getting thicker, and I can't find *any* solid ground nearby. The trees twist up from the water around me like the tentacles of some ancient sea creature reaching to snatch an unsuspecting bird from the sky.

I shudder at the mental image. *Not helpful, brain.*

On the far side of the bus, I see the reason it's tilted at an angle and why the corner above the driver's side is caved in: There's an enormous boulder, twice as tall as I am, propping up the wreckage. It's probably what finally brought it to a stop. Beyond that, though, the landscape is a murky void. I can't even see the sides of the canyon now.

A voice whispers my name. I jerk in the direction I think it came from and almost end up on my ass in the swamp again.

"Hello? Who's there?"

A low moan answers me from the shadows beneath the bus. I want to cry in relief. "Deacon!"

I've heard him wailing on enough tracks to recognize his voice. Wading as quickly as I can through the soup, I hurry to where Deacon lies, half on top of a red hard-shell suitcase, his legs submerged in dark water. A couple feet away is the first dry ground I've seen so far. It looks like the edge of a gravel path. I only pray it'll lead us out of this hell-swamp.

"Deacon?" I'm so glad to see him alive that I almost forget to hate him. "Deacon, what's wrong?"

*What's wrong?* I pinch my mouth shut like that'll retract the stupid question.

Deacon's always pale, but even in the gloom, I can see he's turned a shade paler. He looks genuinely sick, his brow glistening with sweat.

He groans between clenched teeth. "My leg ..."

I move closer, each footstep making that obscene sucking sound. "I can't see," I say. "We need to get you onto dry land. Can you stand?"

"Can't move," Deacon grits out. "Hurts too much."

I rake my hands through my short hair. It feels matted, and I don't even want to think about what's in it. "I can't carry you by myself, and I don't know what happened to the others." *Except for Marv.* The image of his dead, hollow eyes flashes through my head, and I remember the awful, clammy feel of his skin. No, now isn't the time to tell Deacon about Marv.

"Okay," I say, more to myself than to Deacon, "new plan: I'll use the suitcase to drag you out. You hold on, okay?"

The case's handle is covered in swamp filth, but it's undamaged. Slowly, I pull on it. At first there's movement; the case, and Deacon along with it, slides a few inches up onto dry ground. I brace myself and heave again, but—nothing. It's like trying to uproot a redwood.

“The case must be snagged on something,” I practically snarl, still pulling as hard as I can. My arms quake in protest.

“It’s the quicksand,” Deacon murmurs.

“What?” I tug again on the handle and feel a slight, *slight* give.

“Dragging me down. Bit my leg while I was trying to get free.”

Another couple inches. “Quicksand bit your leg?” I’m just trying to keep Deacon talking, because there’s no way we’re going anywhere if he passes out.

The case snags again, jolting my shoulder. I hiss in pain.

Then it begins to slide back into the water.

“No!” Ignoring the searing lance across my shoulder joint, I dig in my heels, determined not to lose a tug-of-war with a damned swamp. “Deacon, please, you need to—”

He rolls off the suitcase and starts to claw his way out of the water. Without his weight on it, I fall backward, and the case spills open onto the gravel.

A girl tumbles out of it right next to me, her head lolling in my direction. She’s slender, South Asian, I think, with her hair in a long braid. Her brown eyes are flat pools, their depths now beyond anyone’s reach.

I scream. And keep screaming until I think my lungs will collapse.

“Romero? What’s wrong with you?” Deacon finally drags himself onto the gravel and turns from me to the dead girl. “Oh, hell ... no wonder she missed the photo op. That’s Sugar Patel.”



## CHAPTER NINE

“If you stay still,” I tell Deacon, “this will hurt a lot less.” I try to sound calm so he won’t notice the way my hands are shaking.

Deacon continues squirming while I feel carefully around his shinbone and down to the ankle joint, then move his foot to see if anything is actually broken. All the while, I keep my eyes firmly fixed on what’s in front of me and not the dead body lying just a few feet away.

“*Ahh!* What is *wrong* with you? I’ve told you it’s broken, and you’re wringing my ankle like a bloody dishcloth!”

“It doesn’t feel broken. I think it’s sprained Oh God.”

“*Oh God?* What does *Oh God* mean?”

My mouth fills with a sour taste as I stare at the leech attached to Deacon’s shin. It must’ve gotten in through one of the many artful tears in his jeans. The leech is a weird off-white color, about the length of my middle finger. It writhes, pulsing as it feasts on Deacon’s blood.

“Don’t look,” I warn him. I take a deep, shaky breath as I prepare to remove it the way Aunt Selena showed me.

“Don’t look at *what*? What do you—” Deacon screams as

I flick the creature away into the swamp, accidentally jostling his leg in the process. “I see now why Cairo dumped you—you’re the devil! Literal Satan!”

“Says the guy I found hugging a suitcase with a dead girl in it,” I snap, and immediately wish I hadn’t. I glance over to where she still lies, though I can’t see her face now; I propped up the suitcase between us and her as a kind of makeshift privacy screen.

Only her legs are still visible. She’s wearing yellow leggings and white Converse with little hand-drawn smiling sunflowers on the sides. Sugar Patel doesn’t look like someone I’d usually picture as one of Deacon Rex’s fans, let alone the chair of his fan club; she also doesn’t look like someone who should be lying dead in a swamp.

“It wasn’t *my* suitcase!” Deacon yells. “I swear I’ve never seen it before in my life.”

I’m about to ask how that’s possible when it was on his tour bus, then stop. “I think *I*’ve seen it before—that creepy guy had one like it.”

“What creepy guy?”

“The one I told you about back at the service area.” Thinking about him brings a new wave of dread washing through me. “He had a suitcase with him. I think it was this one.”

“But ... how would it have gotten on the bus?” Deacon asks. “And how did Sugar end up inside it? *Dead?*”

“He must’ve stashed the bag in the luggage compartment.” My eyes go wide. “Wait, I think I remember him saying something about a GPS. Do you think he might’ve messed with the one on the tour bus while you were parked there?”

“Damn it, Romero.” Deacon squeezes his eyes shut. “You couldn’t have mentioned this sooner? As in, *before* we ended up crashing into a swamp?”

His words hit me right in the gut.

“You think this is *my* fault? I told you there was someone creeping around, and you didn’t take me seriously! Why didn’t you call the police? Or check in with whoever arranged for Sugar to be there when she didn’t show up?”

“Marv let the festival security team know about the man you saw. And I didn’t really think Sugar not turning up was a big deal. Sometimes people just let you down.” Deacon’s gaze slides in the dead girl’s direction, his mouth pressed into a grim line. “I certainly didn’t think she was dead and stashed in a bloody suitcase.”

I pace across the narrow gravel path but turn right back around when Sugar’s vacant eyes come into view. “Hang on. That creep from the



restroom said something like ‘getting on the bus shouldn’t be a problem.’” I look over at the bus’s hulking form. “Do you think he was in there too, hiding among the bags and equipment?”

*Is he still in there?*

Deacon’s eyes widen but he says nothing.

“I’m going to take a look,” I tell him, keeping my voice low even though anyone hiding inside would’ve heard us yelling at each other by now.

“You can’t leave me here!” Deacon whisper-yells back. “So come with me.”

“I can’t—my leg’s broken!”

*Deep breath.*

“Wait here, then. I’ll be right back.”

“That’s exactly what a character in a horror film would say right before the baddie kills them.”

I ignore that.

It’s impossible to sneak up to the open door of the baggage compartment with my boots squelching through the shallows of the swamp and Deacon now wailing at me to not leave him to die alone, so I don’t even try. Still, my heart pounds so hard I wonder if it might break a rib.

I wish I had a weapon. A knife or even a good, sturdy stone. But there’s nothing. One of these skinny tree branches would do no more than give him a light scratch if I swung it at him.

I take a deep breath and peer in.

The angle of the bus allows the reedy moonlight to trickle through the open hatch, showing me a broken jumble of suitcases and instruments and equipment. My own stuff ’s strewn around with the rest, but I can’t care about it right now. I check every visible inch of the space, then back away with a relieved sigh. There’s nobody in there, alive or otherwise.

*Maybe he didn’t actually get on the bus—maybe when Marv went back out to check the hatch, the guy got scared and ran off.*

I mean, it *might*’ve happened that way.

*I really, really hope it happened that way.*

“Deacon, do you know where the first aid kit is?” There’s a beat before he yells back, “What first aid kit?”

“The one on the bus,” I say between gritted teeth.

“Oh. No idea, sorry.”

The jolt to my body as I drop back down into the former living area of the bus knocks me sick. It takes a few seconds before I can breathe again. My eyes dart of their own accord to the spot where I know Marv lies covered by a sheet, but he's only a shadowy outline in the gloom. I pull the phone I found out of my pocket and try to wake it, but this time there's no response.

Deacon has finally gone quiet, and when I get back to the gravel path, I almost trip over him in the shadows.

"Oi! Watch the leg!"

"Couldn't find anything useful on the bus," I tell him. "Why are you still lying there? You must be freezing."

Wading through the swamp distracted me from the dropping temperature, but now I feel the cold whisper of the mist at the nape of my neck. It sends a shiver trilling through me.

"What am I supposed to be doing, cartwheels?"

"*Deacon.*" I so don't need this right now. "You'll die of hypothermia if you stay there," I say. He's already shivering, though he's trying not to let me see. "You can either get up and help me find the others, or I'll leave you here to keep Sugar company."

Okay, that last part was a little harsh, but he's being an ass. And we're *both* stuck in this nightmare, not just him. I rub my temples, fighting back tears. If Kizi were here, she'd give me a hug that I'd pretend not to need, and I'd stop feeling like I was in this on my own. She's not here, though. I don't even know if she's alive.

"Look, Deacon, can you just try not to be so ... *you*? At least until we find the others?"

Deacon gives an irritated-sounding sigh, then says, "I need my pills."

"What pills?"

"Painkillers. They're in my bag."

I gape at him, incredulous. "Which is where, exactly? Because if you think I'm climbing back inside that bus and crawling around looking for—"

"It's not on the bus," he says, slow-blinking as though *I'm* the one being unreasonable. "My bag's hanging from that branch over there. I threw it out of the way when the swamp started sucking me down."

"You ... saved your bag before saving yourself?" He doesn't answer.

*And why does he have painkillers with him?* I wonder, watching how he eyes the bag swinging from the bowed branch a few feet above my head.

It takes me a couple of attempts to get it down; my body is not at all happy about being forced to jump. The bag finally drops onto the gravel at my feet, spilling some of its contents. I try not to look as I sweep everything back inside, but I can't help pausing when I pick up a bunch of keys and see the key ring they're attached to. The picture is one of those cheesy costume photos, and a younger version of Deacon and his family are dressed as cowboys in a saloon in the sepia shot.

I remember Deacon's mom from *Little Stars USA*; we all had to have at least one parent or guardian with us while we were on set. She was a quiet red-haired woman, always sitting in a corner reading some dry-sounding self-help book while we rehearsed and learned choreography and got our hair and makeup done. I remember looking at Deacon's quiet mom and thinking: *I wish my parents were like that.*

His dad must've been there at some point too, because he's vaguely familiar—a tall, sticklike man with dark blond hair like Deacon's natural color and the same Roman nose.

The girl in the shot brings an automatic smile to my face: Sam, Deacon's sister. She's ten years older than him, darkhaired, and she has Down syndrome. Sam was taller than Deacon in the photo, though he must've outgrown her by now. She has a sweet, round face and is grinning at something off camera.

Sam was always in the audience whenever Deacon performed, sitting in the front row and cheering. Is Sam at Rock-o'-Lantern now, waiting for him to come onstage? I hate the idea of her worrying about him, even if she'd be right to worry in this case. But then I remember reading that she and their parents moved back to the United Kingdom a year or so ago—there was a ton of speculation online about Deacon filing to get legally emancipated because he wanted to focus on his career in the United States.

I feel a brief, *brief* flash of sympathy for Deacon. It can be tough sometimes being so far away from the people closest to you.

*Is anyone out there worried about him yet?*

*Or about me?*

I wonder if Dad's responded to my last text. He'll know something's up if I don't reply right away. Maybe he'll be the one to raise the alarm. Come running to the rescue, the way he used to whenever I needed him back when I was still his "little star." Back before I messed everything up, and those words started to mean something bad.

Deacon has managed to prop himself into a seated position when I hand him the bag. I try to give him a reassuring smile, but he eyes me warily.

“What?” he says.

“Nothing. Your pills should be in there,” I tell him as he starts riffling through the contents of the bag. “Oh, and I grabbed this phone from the bus too. Is it yours? It was flickering when I woke up, but it seems dead now. Maybe if you reboot it, it’ll work?”

Deacon barely glances up; he takes the phone and goes back to searching for his painkillers. As soon as he has the small bottle in his hand, he opens it, snatches a couple of pills out, and tosses them back. I wince.

“Don’t you want some water to take those with?”

“I don’t need it. But sure, I’ll take some water,” Deacon says flatly. “Got any?”

No. I’m starting to get used to the smell of the swamp now, but I’d really prefer not to have to drink from it. God knows how sick it could make us. Even the rainwater out here is probably full of nasty bacteria that’ll turn you inside out. Again, I feel panic rising in me. *We’re stuck here without any clean water.*

“Do you remember if there was any water on the bus?” I ask, looking back at it with a grimace. The only bottles I remember seeing lying around in all the debris were smashed to hell, but I wasn’t really looking for water at the time.

“I’m sure there were a few bottles of Saratoga left.”

“Saratoga?”

“Mineral water,” Deacon clarifies. “It’s in these lovely blue glass bottles if you fancy popping back to the bus to take a look.”

“Blue glass bottles?” I repeat, unable to keep the exasperation from my voice this time. *The broken glass I saw—that was the remains of our fricking water supply.* “Who the hell takes glass bottles of water on a goddamn bus?”

Deacon looks insulted. “I prefer the way it tastes.”

No water. Okay, then.

“Are you ready to go look for the others?” I say, brushing futilely at my filth-encrusted pants. I should probably check myself for leeches too, although my cargo pants and boots wouldn’t give easy access to the bloodsuckers.

“If you help me, I’ll give walking a try,” Deacon says grudgingly. “But I’m sticking to this gravel path. There’s no way I’m going back into that leech-infested cesspool.” He shudders, then looks speculative. “Though I doubt any that sink their teeth into me now will be around for long after those pills I took hit my bloodstream. They are, in the words of my, er, *doctor*, ‘strong enough to make a hamburger feel like it’s still out grazing in a field.’”

I stop midway through offering him a hand up. “Wait, did you just take something that’ll knock you on your ass? Because I’m not carrying you, buddy. Not just *can’t*, but *won’t*. Understand?”

Deacon makes a *pssht* sound. “I’ll be fine. Now stop faffing around and help me up. I thought you wanted to go and find the others.”

I’m not proud of the noise that comes from me then—it’s something between a snarl and a growl. Deacon snickers, grabs my hand, and hauls himself up. Once on his feet—or, rather, *foot*—he throws an arm around my shoulders.

“What the hell are you doing?” I try to wriggle out from under his arm, but it’s not easy with Deacon leaning heavily on me.

“Can’t put my weight on a broken leg, can I?”

“You can if you don’t want a broken arm to go with it.”

The jerk laughs at me. “Come on, Romero. You can’t hate me that much. Everyone loves Deacon Rex.”

Something about his tone cuts off any barbed reply I might’ve given him. There’s something hollow to it, like even he doesn’t believe what he’s saying. I shrug him off and reach for the empty suitcase currently acting as a screen next to Sugar’s body. Trying not to look at the poor dead girl, I yank the extending handle out of the case. With the two ends of the upside-down U on the ground, it reaches almost to my ribs. It should work.

“Here,” I say, passing it to a confused-looking Deacon, “use this as a crutch.”

I head off along the gravel path without waiting for him to respond.



## CHAPTER TEN

“I can’t go on,” Deacon complains for the hundredth time. So far, the only positive to having him with me has been that his constant noise keeps me from dwelling on all the seething sounds of the swamp and that persistent feeling that something is watching us.

But it would be impossible for someone to see us here. The fog seems to get thicker the farther we travel, like a shroud slowly folding around us.

*How the hell will anyone even find us in this?*

“Oh God, I can feel the bones grinding together! I think I’m going to be sick!”

“Deacon,” I snap. “What exactly do you want me to do, huh?”

He huffs. “Well, you could try being nicer, for a start.”

I ball my fist and press it to the aching bruise I can feel above my right eye so I won’t hit him. *Nicer?* Does he not get that we’re in a life-and-death situation right now? Doesn’t he *care*?

We’ve kept to the gravel path, partly because its pale surface is about the only thing I can see clearly in this weak-ass light, but mostly because Deacon became hysterical the last time I suggested cutting through the shallower areas of the swamp, yelling about leeches and gators.

I peer through the mist, but all I see beyond it is black, fathomless water; a mirage of darkness. It’s hard to make out if we’re even still heading toward the edge of the canyon.

The gravel path twists like a python between the trees. We've been calling out for the others as we follow it, but there's no trace of them so far. I hope it's a good sign, that it means they were able to get out of this place and find help, though my gut tells me that's a reach. The farther we walk, the less likely it feels that we'll find anyone—dead or alive. When we first set out, we saw the occasional piece of bus debris floating in the swamp, but there hasn't been anything in a while.

"I think we're going the wrong way," I admit. Deacon halts his near-constant muttering.

"Define *wrong way*."

"The opposite direction from where the bus rolled down. I think this path curved around and is now taking us deeper into the swamp."

When I look back, he's slumped on the ground, elbow resting on one knee while he peers into the mist. Draped in shadows from the overhanging trees with only the hazy moonlight to silver his features, Deacon looks like a cemetery statue.

"How do you reckon this path even got here?" he says. "Who made it?"

"I don't think anyone *made* it. It's a long, twisty bank of stones, probably left when the tide comes and goes."

"These stones don't look natural to me. I mean, the way they almost glow ... it's weird, right? Anyway, why would the tide affect a swamp this far from the coast?" Deacon asks.

"I don't know. I'm not a swamp expert, okay?"

He doesn't answer for once. Then I notice his shoulders making sharp little movements and realize he's crying.

"Hey, Deacon ..."

He throws his head back, howling. He's not crying. The jerk's *laughing*.

"Seriously?" I snap, hands on my hips.

It takes Deacon a moment to gather himself enough to speak.

"Sorry, I know it's not funny." He doubles over, laughing his ass off again. I fight a strong urge to leave him there and find my own way out of this canyon. Eventually, he calms down. "Wow. Sorry about that. I was just thinking about how I'm probably the last person on earth you'd want to be stranded in a deadly swamp with."

Well, he's not wrong. But despite myself, I am glad I'm not totally alone. "Can we get back to searching for the others? I'm really worried about them."

Deacon starts to get up, then cries out and falls back onto the gravel. “Is the bone sticking out through my skin? It feels like the bone is sticking out through my skin!” He studies the leg stretched out in front of him as though it holds all the answers to life’s mysteries. I feel another surge of annoyance, followed swiftly by guilt. I walked away from the crash with only a few bumps, and although I’m pretty sure his leg isn’t broken, I’m no doctor. If he were anyone else, and I weren’t stressed out about the threat of death hanging over us, I’d be all sympathy.

*I really should cut him some slack. Like, an inch of slack.*

“There’s definitely no bone sticking out through your skin,” I tell him firmly. “Surely it doesn’t hurt *that* much after the fistful of painkillers you took?”

He shoots me a glare that says I have no idea what I’m talking about, then looks away.

“I think the path is moving,” he says.

I turn to see what he’s staring at, but it’s all shadows and mist. “What do you mean, *moving*?”

Deacon points into the swirling mist up ahead. “When we were walking that way a minute ago, it wound around to the left of that weird clump of trees. Now it veers off to the right. Do you see?”

I try to remember if I noticed it heading a particular way while we were walking. It twists around a cluster of trees that seems separate from all the others. I barely glanced at them as we passed. They’re tall, jagged, and almost unnaturally black in this bitter light. These trees look like they’ve never sprouted a leaf, were born dead. As I stare at them, the branches shift a little in the breeze, making a whispering sound that sends chills over my sweat-slicked skin.

“There’s no way a path can just *move*,” I say, distracted.

The trees are totally motionless now, but I still hear that faint whisper. “Even if the tide were coming in, it wouldn’t shift it that quickly—and the path would disappear, not move.”

Deacon gapes in horror. “*Disappear*?”

“Look, it’s probably the mist making things look like they’re moving around. We’re both tired and beat up. Let’s focus on finding the others and getting out of here, okay?”

“Do you really think we’re going to find them?” Deacon says, voice unusually subdued. “We’ve been calling for them ever since we left the bus.



If they were anywhere nearby, they'd have heard us, wouldn't they?"

"Yeah, but—"

"So they're either too far away for us to stumble across them in a dark swamp, or ..."

I really wish he hadn't added that *or*. I don't want to fall back into thoughts of Kizi or Cairo being dead. As for Shane, I hope he didn't get swept down into this canyon with us and that by some miracle he's on his way to get help. "Maybe we should go back to the bus. At least we'll have shelter there."

"Shelter? As in, spend the night in the swamp? I don't think you understand how bad ..."

But I'm not listening to Deacon now. The whispering has grown louder, more distinct. Definitely not the rustle of some brittle branches. I hush Deacon, and for once he actually shuts up.

"Kizi! Cairo! Shane!" We wait, but there's no answering yell—just that same low murmur of voices.

"Hang on," Deacon says. "I think it's coming from my bag."

He riffles through the bag and pulls out the phone I gave him earlier. The screen remains dark and cracked, but the sound is definitely coming from it, like a call on speaker.

I grab the phone from him. "Hello? Hello! Is someone there?"

The voice continues as though I haven't spoken.

"He seems happy when he's singing ... makes me so proud ... never want him to stop singing ... so proud ... so proud ... so proud ..."

"Who is that?" I say, but I think I know. Deacon reaches for the phone and I hand it over.

"Sam?" he says urgently. "Sam, is that you? Can you hear me?"

There's no answer. The screen is dark. If it was Deacon's sister on the phone, she's gone now.

A shiver rattles through me that has nothing to do with the mist curling its claws around us. The cracked phone in his hand is now totally silent.

"I heard something strange while I was on the bus too," I say quietly. "Couldn't tell if it was a recording or ..." Or what? That crowd chanting *Help us* right after I said those words made it seem like it was echoing me—mocking me, even—but that's ...

"I'll try calling emergency services again," Deacon says. "It wouldn't connect before, but maybe now ..." He taps his thumb on the dead screen,

but somehow I know it's not going to work. Both times—back on the bus and just now with the voice that sounded like Sam—there was something about the way the voices spoke, the tone so flat, almost like actors reading from a script, waiting for Deacon and me to deliver our lines.

*It doesn't make sense.*

"I can't get it to work," Deacon says, confirming what I already suspected. "What are you looking at?"

I'm peering in the direction of the allegedly moving path. Up ahead, there's a glimmer of light. Only a speck, but it's enough to cut through the mist from some distance away, glinting between the sawtooth trees.

"There's something over there," I say, hardly daring to hope. "Maybe it's the others."

*Please let it be them.*

But the light is too still to be held by someone moving. Something about it has the hairs at my nape standing on end. "I'm going to check it out," I tell Deacon. "You wait here—it'll be faster."

"No," Deacon says sharply.

"I won't be long." I'm already striding away.

"Romero." Something about the way he says my name stops me.

"Please. I'll keep up."

And even though this is Deacon Rex, the guy I swore I wouldn't piss on if he were on fire, I guess that when it comes to crunch time, I'm as tough as a fricking marshmallow.

"Fine."

We haven't gone far before Deacon's eyes narrow and he peers into the darkness and mist.

"It's a house," he says softly. I squint, trying to see what he sees, but all I can make out is the same strange glimmer as before.

"Why would there be a house out in the middle of a swamp?"

Deacon shrugs. "Only one way to find out."



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

The light is getting brighter. Ahead of us, the path no longer twists and winds its circuitous route but instead seems to be leading us straight forward. Fog presses in but doesn't cover the path. It makes the raised line of gravel seem narrower somehow, like a tunnel.

Every nerve ending in my body is telling me to get the hell out of here, but I can't. Between the steep sides of the canyon, the wrecked bus, and our missing friends, we're stuck here for now. Finding shelter has to be our top priority—and it looks like we might have found it.

The path definitely seems to be leading us to the house. Because it *is* a house—or at least some kind of large building. As we close in, I see the lean angles of pitched roofs and wooden sidings, and I think there's even a turret at one end. Very Gothic, very ... *grand*. And it's big—only two floors, but the place is wide. I count eight tall windows across the front of the building on the lower level, each of them shuttered tight against the mist.

This place doesn't exactly look welcoming.

"All right, mate," Deacon slurs at my side. "I like your beard."

"Excuse me?"

"Not you, *him*." He points into the fog, giggling like he's drunk.

*Damn those pills!* "There's nobody there."

"Is too. Lots of 'em. You just can't see 'em."

"Shut up, Deacon. You're high."

In spite of myself, I hurry toward the house, dragging him with me. A tumble of steps leads up to the front entrance, and above that is some sort of sign—like for an inn, maybe. It isn't lit, though, so I can't tell for sure. In fact, the whole place is in darkness—all except for one window high above the front door, its wavering yellow glow shining out over the swamp. But one light is all we need, even one as faint as this. If there's a light on, that means someone's home, or at least nearby. And they must have a phone or a radio or some way to get out of this canyon. Then we can find Kizi and the others and get back to civilization.

*Back on the road to Rock-o'-Lantern.*

"They're telling us not to go in," Deacon mutters near my ear, making me flinch. My eyes scan the fog, but whatever he's hearing is for his ears alone. I really wish he'd stop freaking me out with his drugged-up hallucinations.

We're close enough now that when I look up, moonlight shines from the edges of the lettering above the front door. It *is* a sign. Not the kind you'd expect to find on a cozy country inn, but dull metal letters making up two words: *The Light*.

I let out a strangled laugh; those faint words from my dream after the crash now echo like an omen.

*Come to the light.*

*Come to ... the Light?*

It's a strange name for an inn or whatever this place is or used to be, especially considering it stands mostly in darkness and is as silent as a tomb.

*Just that one light shining out into the swamp, like a beacon.*

*Or a trap.*

But where else can we go? Even if this place is abandoned, with no phone we can use, it may still have some supplies we need. Food. Water. Also, I grudgingly admit, Deacon needs somewhere to rest. For the past little while, his words have been getting more and more slurred, and I don't think it's entirely because of the pills he took.

Despite all the shuttered windows, the door beneath the sign is wide open, almost beckoning us in. I could've sworn it was closed when we started up the steps. I pause in the doorway and knock on the doorjamb, though my knuckles barely muster a sound from the heavy wood. There's no response, and I can't see much beyond the threshold.

Deacon and I don't even need to separate to fit through the entrance. That's lucky because I don't think he could actually walk without my help right now.

"Hello?" I look around as I step inside.

"*Hello?*"

I jump at the unexpected reply, but it's only my own voice circling back around—a serpent eating its own tail. "Is anyone here?"

"... *anyone here?*"

As I take in our surroundings, I can't help but think this place must have been grand when it was built. We're standing in a very large and once-fancy entrance hall with an ornate chandelier hanging from a dubious-looking chain. It buzzes quietly, a sound I instinctively know is electricity coursing through old wiring. But it still sends a prickling feeling over my skin like a swarm of beetles skittering over me. A broad staircase covered in tattered wine-colored carpet leads up to a galleried mezzanine; sections of the dark wooden handrail are missing where heavy chunks of ceiling plaster have fallen and taken them out.

The upper floor circles the crystal chandelier like a rapt audience. The hanging light is close enough to leap onto it from the gallery and swing like a trapeze artist. I can practically hear Kizi hissing at me to not even think about it.

God, I wish she were here. I need her here to tell me in her classic deadpan Kizi style that it's perfectly normal to find a creepy old house in the middle of a swamp. That there are definitely no ax murderers hanging around this place, and that this isn't absolutely, 100 percent guaranteed to turn into a real-life horror movie within the next ten minutes.

*Kizi, where are you? Did I miss you lying somewhere near the bus? Did we leave you out there alone?*

In the center of the entrance hall is a sculpture. It's at least twelve feet high and maybe eight across, and it looks like an enormous Fabergé egg. The stone-like surface is etched with patterns that are hard to define—vague shapes that could be limbs or faces, but when you pick them out individually, the dimensions are wrong, almost melted. Maybe the sculptor wanted to capture something once beautiful that had been set on fire.

Despite how sweaty I am from carrying Deacon, a chill creeps down my back. This place looks like it might have been some high-end manor house,

but those days are long gone. And judging by the dust and grime covering every surface, it doesn't look like anyone's set foot in this place in years.

*Then why is there a light on?*

"Put me down, you rascal," Deacon mutters, gesturing vaguely to the wall next to the open door. There's a long, carved wooden bench there, almost medieval-looking. I set him down on it, and Deacon lets out a long groan.

"How is it even possible that there's electricity?" I say, thinking out loud. "There *must* be someone here."

I yell again into the expansive space but get nothing back aside from my own question.

When I glance down, Deacon's slumped on the bench with his head dipping toward his chest.

"Deacon?" He grunts without looking up. "How are you doing?"

*"Slootly perfect."*

I'm tempted to shake him, to keep him awake so I'm not on my own, but I know he needs to rest. On the bright side, he's no longer complaining. That should make me feel a little better, yet somehow it doesn't.

"I'll take a look around, see if there's a phone or anything else that might be useful. Yell if you need me."

Deacon's head lolls, and within seconds he's snoring loud enough to rattle the windows.

*He wasn't kidding about those pills being strong.*

The small bottle is peeking out from the top of his messenger bag. The word *hydromorphone* catches my attention. So does the name *Marvin Jacobs*—who the pills were prescribed to, according to the label. I don't know much about drugs, legal or otherwise, but I'm sure I remember Aunt Selena talking about someone who came into her dental practice and tried to force her to write a script for hydromorphone. Something-morphone, anyway. The type of drug you'd only be given after you had surgery or broke a bone.

Why does Deacon have these? It's not like he knew he was going to sprain his ankle.

Seeing him slumped in a heap as he is, I'm struck by how little I actually know about Deacon. I barely knew the thirteen-year-old Li'l Deke version of him, really, but this more grown-up incarnation ... I don't know him at all.

I'm sliding the pill bottle back into Deacon's bag when the knocking starts.

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## CHAPTER TWELVE

Five slow raps, like someone knocking on a door. I don't think it's coming from outside, though. The sound seems to echo from upstairs.

Deacon hasn't moved, totally knocked out from the pills.

I head for the staircase, picking my way past chunks of fallen plaster and what must be decades of dust. Every creak of a loose board, every crunch of debris beneath my boots, makes me jump. I tread gingerly as I climb, scared I'll fall right through the steps. When I reach the top of the stairs, the light shining from the dusty chandelier seems brighter than it was before. That's odd. I mean, it's odd that there's electricity in this old building at all, even if I am deeply grateful for it.

Around the horseshoe-shaped space, there are several shadowy doors with discreet lettering on them. Or room numbers, maybe. I guess this place really is an inn of some kind—or used to be. Still stepping quietly on instinct, I approach the doors nearest to me and see that what's on them isn't numbers but names.

Covey is written in raised bronze lettering, like a miniature version of the sign above the front door. The next has *Mullaney* in the same style. Neither door seems to be the source of the knocking, but I'm getting closer. I creep toward the sound, my pulse ratcheting up with every step.

Could the others from the bus have found their way here and gotten stuck somewhere? If it's Kizi or Shane, though, why didn't they answer when I



called out earlier?

The knocking comes again. This time I *feel* the sound, like a hand tapping on my shoulder. But I can pinpoint it now—it's coming from a room at the front of the building, a little farther along the galleried mezzanine. The door there stands open a crack, but there's no light inside beyond the glow of the chandelier bleeding across the threshold.

*Is someone there?*

That's what I try to say, but I can make only an insect-like clicking in the back of my throat. I work some saliva into my desert-dry mouth and try again, with more success this time. I jump as my voice circles back around the space, the same way it did downstairs.

I need to get a grip. Whatever the knocking is, it's not some swamp-dwelling serial killer waiting for random teenagers to show up. Except ...

Except there might be one person who beat us here and is trying to lure me off on my own: the creep from the restroom.

*Oh God ...*

No, it can't be. Can it?

I worry my lip, trying to rationalize. I can either go look or head back downstairs and drag an unconscious Deacon into the swamp again. Those are my options.

My options suck.

I edge closer, trying not to step on any creaky floorboards or crunchy debris as I pass the lettered wooden doors.

*Brev, Arkansas, Knight, Starling ...*

Are these the names of people who live—*lived*—here?

Finally, I reach the open door. Dust motes whirl in the air in front of me, disappearing where the light dies at the threshold. I lean forward to peer inside the room and my elbow catches on something. I almost trip as I jerk away. But it's not the creep I was imagining grabbing my arm; on a plinth just outside the door is an old-fashioned bust of a very pretty woman with a big 1980s-style perm. A chunk is missing from the side of her head where something heavy must've knocked it, and the rough edge of it is caught on my sleeve. Gingerly, I remove it and turn back to the door.

The name on this one is *Warren*. It's the only door so far that's open. Only partway; enough for me to picture a clawed hand reaching out from the darkness to drag me inside.

I swallow thickly and force myself to lean in closer. Holding my breath, I listen for signs of movement inside. There's nothing at first. Then, when I've finally convinced myself the sound was just my own terrified heartbeat, I hear it again: *thud, thud, thud*.

It's definitely coming from inside that room. Hand trembling, I barely touch my fingertips to the brass knob before the door swings all the way open. Inside, it's pitch-black.

"Hello? Is someone in here?"

No answer. No knocking now either.

I feel around the wall next to me until I find a light switch; I hit it, and a lamp covered by a cobwebbed shade flickers to life.

The room is what you might expect to see in any kitschy hotel in a black-and-white movie. A four-poster bed dominates the space, with a dressing table and mirror set next to it. An archway provides a glimpse of a small seating area off the main bedroom, and there are two closed doors that I'm guessing lead to a closet and a bathroom, respectively. The thick burgundy carpet under my feet is the same as the one on the staircase, though it's in much better condition. Now that I see this cleaner version, it reminds me of the etched surface of the sculpture downstairs, the way it swirls into shapes that almost make sense but don't quite. I take an involuntary step back, suddenly not wanting to touch it.

Opposite me is a large picture window covered by gauzy curtains.

And there, standing next to the window, is another person. I freeze.

It's a woman, I think. I feel like she's watching me, but she's not. The figure faces the window, looking out at ... well, at nothing. I know from her black cocktail dress and long blond ringlets that it's obviously not any of the others from the bus.

She stands with one arm out, like she might be reaching to open the window.

"Who's there?" I say. My voice doesn't echo in here like it did in the vast space of the entrance hall; it just sounds weak and thready. The woman doesn't move. "Are you Ms. Warren?" I'm guessing, remembering the name on the door. "Excuse me. I didn't mean to just walk in on you, but my friends and I could really use your ..."

She's standing in an odd way, unmoving. *Completely* unmoving. Not even the slightest twitch or indication that she's breathing. Ignoring a bone-deep sense that I should back the hell out of the room and slam the door on

whatever this is, I take a few unsteady steps forward. Still, there's no reaction from the woman at the window. No sign at all that she's heard me or is even alive.

Something crunches under my foot as I pass the end of the bed, and I hiss out a startled curse. It's a hair comb, a few tines short after its encounter with my boot. Heart lodged firmly in my gullet, I step over it, trying to make my footsteps strong and sure, like I could kick someone's ass if I had to.

"My name's Haden Romero. A group of us were in an accident—" I reach the woman's side and see her face. Or where her face *ought* to be.

The front of her head is completely smooth and featureless. With a screech, I stumble backward. My legs buckle and I land on the carpet, feeling the flex of rotten floorboards beneath me.

The woman rocks gently, her outstretched hand rapping softly on the window.

*Thud, thud, thud, thud, thud . . .*

That's the knocking sound I heard.

My breath whooshes from me in a laugh tinged with hysteria. I see what she—*it*—is now: a mannequin.

*Not a faceless monster knocking to lure lost musicians to its lair.*

I'm so relieved, I let my head fall back onto the musty carpet, sending the mannequin into a fresh round of rocking.

I drag myself to my feet, take hold of its arm, and move the mannequin so it's standing on a firmer spot. A walking cane that must've been leaning against it tumbles to the carpet with a thump, making me almost choke on my tongue for the thousandth time today. I stoop to pick it up.

The cane has a bronze snake's head as a topper, dull and tarnished by age and neglect. There's a good weight to it; it fits smoothly in my hand. I feel a little better now that I have a makeshift weapon, even if I've seen no sign of anyone here apart from Deacon and me.

"Don't mind if I borrow this, do you, petal?" I say to the mannequin in my best imitation of Deacon's accent, which is admittedly bad.

Hearing no objection, I look around the room to see if there's anything else I can use. But, unless you count makeup and clothing that must be at least thirty years out of date, there's nothing. A glass on the bedside table might once have held water, but its contents have long since dried to a white residue. I open the door to the en suite bathroom. There's a claw-foot tub

with a silk robe draped over the edge as though someone tossed it there a second ago. The room is tiled white with hints of black and tarnished gold in the fittings. It would go perfectly in some 1950s sanatorium for rich white women.

I turn on the faucet, not really expecting anything good to happen, but after the surprise of this place having electricity, I'm not going to assume anything. A deep-throated sound rumbles from somewhere beneath my feet, and the faucet sputters a couple times before finally spitting out a stream of thick brown sludge. In it, there are dozens of milky dots around the size of my pinkie nail—and they're *squirming*.

Maggots.

“Jesus!”

Trying not to retch, I cover my mouth with my sleeve and wrench the faucet off.

*How would maggots get in the pipes?*

I can only stand here, back to the wall, watching the disgusting things writhe in that filth water. Then another spurt of brown liquid sputters out of the faucet. I gag and rush from the bathroom, slamming the door behind me.

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I'm halfway down the staircase when the front door begins to rattle. Heart leaping between panic and hope, I race down the rest of the stairs, pass Deacon—who is somehow still sleeping—and cross to the door.

*Kizi?*

The rattling changes to the pounding of fists, staying my hand as I'm about to open the door.

I raise the snake-headed cane as I turn the handle. As soon as I do, the door flies open, knocking me on my ass. I hold up the cane to block my unknown attacker, but I find Cairo quickly shutting the door.

"Where's the key?" She gasps, her shoulder pressed hard to the wood.

"Cai?"

*"The key!"*

"I—I don't think there is a key. It was open when we got here, and I didn't lock it."

"Neither did I," Deacon says from behind me, finally awake.

Cairo makes a frustrated sound in her throat and runs over to the bench Deacon's sitting on. He barely has time to stumble off it before she's dragging the long, heavy piece of furniture and wedging it against the closed front door.

"Glad to see you're not dead, mate," Deacon tells her, his usual lazy grin looking a little pinched. But at least he sounds more lucid now. "What's going on?"

Cairo seems to look at us for the first time, taking in Deacon leaning heavily against the wall and me on the ground, still brandishing my stupid snake cane. It clatters to the floor as she hauls me up and throws her arms around me. At first, I'm not sure how to react, but then I return the hug. The sulfur scent of the swamp clings faintly to her skin, but under it, she smells warm and familiar and distinctly Cairo.

"You're okay," she says, like she can hardly believe it. "Are *you*?"

I step back, looking her over. Her gray hoodie is a mess of red smears, and there's a thick coat of blood down one side of her face. The injury must be somewhere on her scalp, because I can't see a wound. Cairo sways, eyes glassy, like she's in shock.

"What were you running from?" Deacon says at the same time I ask, "Where are Kizi and Shane?"

"There's a man out there." Cairo looks from Deacon to me and back again. "We can't let him in."

With that, Cairo crumples to the floor.

"Can't see a damn thing," Deacon says. He's peering through a gap in the shuttered window facing the front steps. "Do you think there's really a man out there? You know, I thought I saw someone out in the fog, and I put it down to the pills, but if Cai saw someone too ..."

Cairo's head is in my lap, and I jump when she gasps in a huge breath and bolts upright.

"Are you okay?" I ask. She looks around, wide-eyed. "How long was I out?"

"Only a few seconds," I tell her. "Right before you passed out, you said something about a man. Did someone follow you? Were you attacked?"

Cairo reaches up, touches the drying blood on her face.

She pulls her hand away, blinking in surprise. "This isn't my blood," she says.

My stomach drops through the floor. "Kizi's?"

Cairo looks from me to Deacon. "No. Wait, she's not here with *you*? What about Shane and Marv?"

*Marv.*

Shit. I haven't told Deacon about finding Marv dead. Now there's no choice.

“I don’t know where Kizi or Shane are—they weren’t on the bus when I woke up, and there was no sign of them near where we crashed. Marv ... didn’t make it.”

I watch Deacon to see how he reacts to that news and to the fact I was too chicken to tell him before.

“I knew he was dead,” he says, catching my eye. “It was pretty obvious when you didn’t call out for him while we were looking for the others.”

I grimace guiltily. “I’m sorry, I—”

“It wouldn’t have changed anything,” he says quietly. “Poor Marv, though. He was a good man. His family will be gutted.” He turns to Cairo, frowning in what looks like concern. “There was someone else on the bus when it crashed, Cai... . God, I’m so sorry. Sugar must’ve snuck on board while we were at the service area. I suppose it was meant to be a surprise.”

Deacon looks away, picking at an imaginary hangnail. “She’s ...” Cairo’s voice trails off.

“Yeah.”

I’m trying to figure out why Deacon’s making it sound like Sugar *voluntarily* ended up in that suitcase, so I don’t immediately take in Cairo’s reaction until a choked sound pulls my focus in her direction. Her fist is pressed to her mouth, nostrils flaring like she’s struggling to breathe. Then Cairo inhales shakily and leans her head back against the wall, arms draped over her bent knees.

“Did you ... You knew her, then?” I ask weakly. I mean, *obviously* Cairo knew her. “Were you friends?”

Cairo takes a long time to answer, and when she does, all she says is “Something like that.”

I feel a twinge of jealousy, but I shove it waaaay back down inside me. Now isn’t the time. We’re stuck in this horrifying situation with two people dead—that we know of. Besides, Cairo and I aren’t together anymore. I have no right to be jealous of anyone she was “something like” friends with.

“What about your phone?” I say, trying to focus on something useful. “Have you tried calling anyone? My phone’s fried, and Deacon’s isn’t working right either.”

“I didn’t have mine when I came around after the crash,” Cairo says dully. “The whole thing’s kinda muddled in my head. All I remember is

getting tossed around the bunk room like a rag doll, then suddenly I was outside, sliding down into the canyon. I landed on a bear.”

“You landed on a bear?” I repeat, sure I misheard. I squint at that patch of blood on her face, wondering if she actually did suffer a head injury.

“What was left of one. Had to have been four hundred pounds when it was alive.” She looks contemplative for a second. “I guess it actually cushioned my landing. Might even have saved my life. But it was all chewed up, like something had taken a few good chunks out of it.”

“What the hell could take chunks out of a bear?” Deacon wonders. Neither of us answers.

“But what about the man you saw out there?” I press.

“Who was he? What happened?”

“It must’ve been a couple hours later when I saw him,” Cairo says. “It was dark, and the mist was making it even harder to see. I followed a path that seemed to appear out of nowhere and spotted something floating on the water. I wasn’t sure what it was at first, but I finally caught a glimpse of a man in a rowboat. He was tracking me across the swamp.”

“Did he say anything?” Deacon asks, and I find myself leaning in to hear Cairo’s answer.

“Not a word. I called out to him but he never answered, just kept following me at a distance. A few times I lost sight of him in the mist, but I knew he was always there, watching and following.”

“What did he look like?” I ask, thinking of the guy from the service area.

“I don’t know. I can’t even say for sure it was a guy.” Cairo laughs, the sound hollow. “When I saw this place, I sprinted to get here before he could catch up. All the downstairs windows are shuttered, and it looks like the ones upstairs have iron bars covering them. Did you notice that? Anyway, I figured I’d be safer barricaded in here than out there with him.”

“It’s got to be that man from the service area,” Deacon mutters, echoing my thought from a minute ago. “It’d be a *bit* of a coincidence for us to run into two nutjobs in one day, even if this day has been pretty unique on the catastrophe front.”

“Could it be a local?” I ask doubtfully. “Someone living out here?”

“You think there’s a whole village down in this canyon?” Cairo shakes her head. “To be honest, I’m starting to wonder if I really saw anyone at all.



I didn't get a clear look, and the mist was so thick Maybe it was the adrenaline making me see shapes in the fog."

*Shapes in the fog* My eyes drift to the massive sculpture across the entrance hall. For a moment, its pattern seems to swirl gently, rippling like water in a stream. Deacon's voice drags my focus back.

"I thought I saw someone out there too," he says. "A man with a beard. And a woman with a little kid. I thought they were ghosts. I saw a ghost once, you know, back in London. It was in the dressing room of this little theater right before a gig—"

"He took some painkillers," I tell Cairo, and she raises her eyebrows in understanding. The gnawing knot beneath my ribs doesn't loosen any, though.

"We need to go look for Kizi and Shane," I say, and I'm surprised when I'm met by silence. "What? Why are you both looking at me like that?"

"I want to find them as much as you do," Cairo says. "But there's no way I'm going back out there in the dark with bears and who knows what else roaming around. Besides, we're all exhausted and beat up. What we need to do is secure all the doors to this place—just in case—and get some rest."

I rake my fingers over my scalp, wincing as I find some tender spots. "We can't leave them out there all night."

Cairo holds my gaze, lips pursed. Deacon looks like he's working on a difficult math problem. But neither of them jumps up to come help me find our friends.

"Fine, I'll go by myself." I take hold of the bench to pull it away from the door, but Cairo catches my wrist.

"Hade," she says, and it's the softness of her tone that makes me pause. "I know you want to find Kizi—we all do. But you're gonna get lost or hurt out there if you go now. The fog is so bad, I could barely see my own hand in front of my face. How are you going to find her without a flashlight? And you look fit to collapse as it is."

I open my mouth to argue, but I've got nothing.

"Wait until first light," Cairo continues. "A few hours.

Then we'll go find them together."

I want to argue, but she's right. There's no way to search if I can't see. I just have to hope that if Kizi's out there, she'll see the light shining from the window and find her way here like we did.

“Do either of you have anything to drink, by the way?” Cairo says. “I could really use some water.”

“Here.” Deacon reaches into his messenger bag and, to my surprise, pulls out a bottle of orange-colored juice. He takes a mouthful and passes it to Cairo. He catches me glaring. “What?”

“You said you didn’t have anything to drink!”

“When?”

“Earlier, when you were taking your pills.”

Deacon frowns, then a look of understanding spreads over his face. “What I *said* was that I didn’t need any water to take the pills with. You never asked if I had anything to drink.”

“You asked if *I* had any water, though. That implied you didn’t have any of your own.”

“I *didn’t* have any water. This is mango and guarana juice.”

“And it didn’t occur to you to mention ... I give up.”

Despite my bone-weariness, I stomp to the other side of the room so I’m not within striking distance of him. I practically carried Deacon the whole way here, and not once did he wonder if I might be thirsty?

*Asshole.*

Cairo lowers the now half-empty bottle. “Want some?”

I take it from her and force myself to sip just a little before putting the cap back on. “We should make that juice last.” *In case we’re stuck in this canyon for more than a few hours.* I leave that part unspoken. Cairo winces guiltily anyway, but she always could almost read my mind.

“What about you, D?” she says. “How come Haden was running around this creepy old house by herself while you took a nap? You hurt or something?”

“Only my leg.” Deacon gestures to his obviously unbroken leg, then spots the cane lying on the floor. “Is that a cane with a snake’s head on it?”

“I found it upstairs,” I mutter, then shoot my own guilty grimace in Cairo’s direction. “Sorry I almost attacked you with it. I brought it down for Deacon to use.”

The jerk grins. “A present? For me? How delightful.”

“Whatever.” Crouching next to him, I pull up the cuff of his jeans to check his ankle. It looks red and swollen, but nothing some rest won’t take care of, I hope. But when I see the nickel-size mark higher up his leg

through one of the artful rips in the denim, I want to back away and throw up simultaneously. It's right where I found the leech chowing down earlier. "Uh, have you noticed there's white stuff coming out of your leg?"

Deacon's eyes go wide. "*White stuff?*"

"It must be infected," I say, forcing myself to peer more closely. But the milky substance doesn't look like pus.

Deacon reaches down and touches the wound. "Oh Jesus."

He pulls back his hand and I see the white substance is now poking out of the wound. It's solid; definitely not pus.

"That's bone. I told you it was broken," Deacon says with a bleak laugh.

All three of us stare at the white bone shard in mute horror. Then it moves.

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## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“What is that? Get it out! *Get it out of me!*”

Although every cell in my body is screeching at me to run the hell away, I put one hand on Deacon’s leg above the wound to keep him still.

“I think it’s another leech,” I try to say calmly. “Don’t freak out. I’ll get it off you.” *Out of you*, I amend silently. Because it’s burrowed way under his skin. I’ve never seen a leech do that before—not that I’ve had tons of experience with leeches. I swipe my sleeve across my sweaty forehead.

“*Romero!*”

Deacon’s obvious terror kicks me out of my momentary brain-freeze. “Don’t look,” I tell him. He tilts his head back and throws an arm over his face.

Swallowing hard, I reach out my hand. Then I stop. The leech, or whatever the hell this thing is, has gone rigid and is now sliding out of the cut of its own accord. I fight not to retch.

Finally, it drops to the tile floor. It doesn’t make the wet slap I expected; it lands with a *click*, like a dropped pencil.

“What the hell ...” I sense Cairo leaning over my shoulder for a closer look.

“Do you have any hand sanitizer in your magic bag?” I say to Deacon.

“Would aloe vera lip balm work?” he asks. I’m spared having to answer that by Cairo.

“We need to make sure that sucker’s dead,” she says. I glance down at the leech still lying on the floor.

“I’m pretty sure it’s—”

Her boot slams down next to me. Deacon curses, and I force my fingers to unclench from where I just dug my nails into his thigh.

“What is that?” Cairo says. She’s lifted her boot to reveal what looks like a smashed stick of chalk. “The worm ... leech ... it turned into ...”

Cairo’s not the most talkative person in any room, but it’s rare for something to render her speechless.

I get up from where I’ve been crouched. “Where’d it go?” She points to a patch of dust on the floor.

“I meant the leech,” I clarify. “That is the leech.”

We stare at each other. “That’s a chunk of plaster from the ceiling, Cai.”

“It’s the damn leech,” she snaps. “I never took my eyes off the disgusting thing. It ... changed.”

I look down at what is plainly not a squished leech and back up at her. Then I turn in a circle, looking for the actual remains. I know it landed somewhere over here, but I don’t see it.

*Did it slither away?*

*Oh God ... is it on me?*

Ignoring Cairo’s annoyed sigh, I check every exposed inch of my skin, but there’s no sign of the creature.

“Hade,” Cairo says, “I swear, this is the leech ... thing ... whatever was in Deacon’s leg. When I stomped on it, it crumbled under my boot.”

“But how ...” I can’t even finish. There are too many *hows* right now, and the throbbing in my head is making it difficult to think straight.

“What is going on around here?” Deacon groans.

“Keep that leg elevated,” I tell him, because I have no clue how to answer his question. “Cai, we need to find something to clean the wound.”

“Sure.” Her eyes remain locked on that smear of dust on the floor.

Deacon reaches for his messenger bag and takes out the little pill bottle I saw earlier. He shakes a couple into his palm and swallows them without even a grimace.

“Why do you have those?” I ask him. Maybe it’s none of my business, but I figure after I carried his ass across a swamp, he can at least tell me what he’s doing with prescription painkillers.

There's no obvious change in Deacon's expression, but for a split second he looks younger. I see him as he was four years ago on *Little Stars USA*—before the bleached-white hair and tattoos; before his features took on a hard edge that I somehow always assumed was part of his new Rex Mori stage persona and not really *him*.

"I broke my wrist in a skiing accident a few months ago,"

he says at last. "Playing my guitar seems to aggravate it. Sometimes I need painkillers so I can get through a show. Or through the aftermath of a bus crash, apparently."

I remember hearing about the skiing accident on the news, but it was way more than a few months ago; more like a year and a half. The accident and subsequent cancellation of his solo tour is what most people see as Deacon's come-to-Jesus moment—the one that made him decide he no longer wanted to churn out manufactured pop songs. That's when he formed his industrial-rock band, Rex Mori.

"Do you need them?" I ask. He narrows his eyes. "I mean, will you be okay without them if we're stuck here a few days?"

A thick silence falls over all three of us as my words sink in.

"I'm sure we won't be here long," Deacon says. He winks, his grin seeming forced. "But thanks for your concern, Romero."

"I'm concerned about *all* of us." I turn to Cairo. "I think we should search this place for anything useful. We need medical supplies. And water, food, all that. I'll check upstairs, you check this floor. Sound good?"

"Yeah. And I'll make sure any outside doors down here are locked."

"I suppose I'm on guard duty, then, am I?" Deacon says, faux offended.

"What else are you going to do with a broken leg?" With that, I head up the stairs, my limbs feeling like lead pipes, and set off to explore deeper into the Light.

I check the Warren suite again in case I missed anything useful the first time. I didn't. But it hits me how creepy it is that so many belongings are still here, as though whoever lived in this place just stepped out for a moment and will be right back, screaming at me to get out of her room before she calls the cops. I'd welcome having the police called on me right now. A nice police chopper swooping in to airlift me out of this hell-hole sounds A-OK.

*Maybe Rex Mori not showing up at Rock-o'-Lantern will be enough to get them to send out a search party?*

Maybe. But the dread knot growing inside me says probably not.

After running through my checklist—medical supplies, water, food, phone—and finding none of the above, I move on to the next suite. This one has *Starling* on the door, and it also looks like it belonged to a woman, judging by the clothes and toiletries left behind. Nothing useful, though. The one after belonged to someone very messy named Knight. This person liked *loud* colors, going by the wardrobe choices. Her belongings yield a few useful items: a full bottle of vodka, which I can use to sterilize Deacon's leg; a pack of museum-worthy sanitary pads—again, for Deacon's leg; and a canvas tote that I can use to carry everything.

I'm turning to leave with my haul when I spot a square card sitting on the nightstand. It's a note, yellowed with age and dotted with mold spots:

*My dearest Faith,*

*Won't you come to the Light this New Year? I'm hosting a gathering of a few like-minded people, and I think it will be a ripe opportunity for you to make some life-altering connections. Do say you'll come—if your filming schedule allows, of course.*

*I'm asking all my guests to arrive promptly at the coordinates below at 8:00 p.m. on December 28. I look forward to welcoming you then.*

*Yours,*

*Magdalena ... Warren*

Wait. Faith ... Knight?

Holy crap, I *know* her. Or I don't *know* her, exactly, but I know who she is. My mom's low-key obsessed with her and has been my whole life. I grew up hearing about how Faith Knight snaked her way into a role my mom auditioned for. It was in a TV movie called *Kelly's Camp of Champs*, and Faith played the eponymous Kelly while my mom got relegated to the nonspeaking part of "shy flautist."

I must've seen that movie a dozen times, usually with my mom's constant narration about how awful Faith was as the lead. But it was actually a really fun, if slightly cheesy, movie. Mom always said Faith "lost her nerve" after a couple of her movies tanked, and she quit acting altogether.

"There were rumors flying around that she became a recluse, living out in the middle of nowhere. People can do strange things when they feel like their dreams are out of reach," Mom told me one time, tipping her

wineglass toward the TV screen and spilling her drink on my pajama pants. She didn't seem to notice. "I guess it can drive you to do things you never imagined yourself doing—crazy things. And that's why your dad and I will never give up. We'll catch our big breaks one day, sweetie. You'll see." She turned her most dazzling smile on me, the one she normally reserved for headshots and auditions, then shooed me off to bed.

And now I'm in Faith Knight's room. I mean, I guess this could be some other Faith Knight, but somehow I don't think so—especially with the invitation talking about filming. Mom would absolutely lose her mind if she could see me here, in Faith's bedroom. She'd probably be more amazed about this than about me surviving a bus wreck and getting stranded in a swamp. That kind of grit doesn't count for much with her unless you live to star in the movie about it afterward.

But how weird is it that Faith Knight stayed here, in this creaky old place? *Why* would she come here?

I drag my eyes away from the note. I have more important things to worry about for now, like my shopping list: water, food, phone. Still, I keep hold of the invitation. There is a series of numbers at the bottom that I guess are map coordinates. If we manage to find a working phone or a radio in this place, these will be useful.

I put the card in one of my pockets, put the strap of the tote bag holding the pads and the vodka over my shoulder, then leave the suite to continue searching the upper floor.

The hallways twist and turn deeper into the heart of the Light, going farther than I'd have thought possible judging from the outside of the building. I take a right, a left, another left, then a right again. Every turn looks the same; it's like I'm in a maze of mirrors instead of a real building. Hurrying beneath the buzzing overhead lights, I feel deeply claustrophobic.

*This house shouldn't exist.* It's not the first time I've had this thought, but now it comes with a bone-deep certainty that, bus crash or not, none of us should be here.

But there's nowhere else we can go.

My airway constricts in panic. I put one hand on the wall to steady myself but quickly snatch it back. The walls are papered with odd-textured red and off-white stripes like a circus tent, and the paper feels furry—the kind of tired, worn velvet you'd find inside a flea market music box. I almost



expect to hear tinkling music, but there's barely a sound beyond my own breathing and the faint hum of the old electrical wiring. I can't hear any noise from Cairo or Deacon elsewhere in the Light. It feels like I'm totally alone.

I force myself to keep moving. The dark columns of seemingly endless doors drift past me, the only real indication that I'm getting anywhere. There are no windows here, but the doors all have names on them—Covey, Johnson, Breckinridge, Ewing, Monroe, Jones, Staedtler, Manson ... How many people stayed in this place or lived here? Surely not all these rooms were once occupied? I duck my head inside each one to check. Most of them are furnished with nothing but cobwebs and damp spots.

This house is run down to hell and obviously hasn't been lived in for years. Yet it still feels like I'm intruding on something—like I've walked in on a stranger's funeral.

A faint rustling up ahead makes me freeze. "Hello?"

I listen at the next door I come to, but the sound isn't coming from inside. I try the next one. And the next. And the—

There. I turn the door handle and almost fall through as it opens.

Thin moonlight trickles in through a tiny window high on the wall facing me. It shows me a room that's small and boxy, with a narrow bed against one wall and a dresser opposite. There are pale patches scattered across the floor between me and the bed, like someone threw a deck of cards into the air and let them fall.

Something moves over by the bed. I don't see the movement, but I hear it. A rustling, shuffling sound, like a curtain billowing in a breeze or a cat stretching on a comforter. And breathing, maybe?

*Please let it be a cat.*

When my eyes adjust, I think I see a shadow in the corner.

A person?

"Hello?" My voice sounds small, absorbed by the dark. The shadow doesn't answer. It doesn't move either. "Please, I—"

Then I see it: just a slight movement, like a predator cocking its head, interest piqued.

Something is watching me.



## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The shadow darts backward and flies up the wall, lizard-quick, in a way no human could. I stumble, and my spine hits the doorframe.

*What the hell is that?*

I feel around until I find a light switch, but unlike in the other rooms I've explored so far, this one doesn't work. I try it a few times but stop when I realize the clicking sound is covering whatever else I heard in the room. Now it's still, silent.

My fingers grip the doorjamb.

"Hello? Is someone in—"

A dark mass rushes at my face. I throw up my hands and scream, but whatever it is keeps coming. It swarms wildly around my head, in my hair. I swat at it with a strangled cry, but as I do, I feel something forcing its way into my mouth, trying to choke me.

It's in my mouth. In my *mouth*.

I stagger backward and tumble onto the hallway floor. I spit, keep spitting, and after a few moments, the mass scatters enough that I can see what it is. What *they* are.

Moths. Just moths.

Heart thundering, I wipe my tongue on my sleeve—regretting it when I taste swamp—then seal my lips firmly. I mustn't scream or throw up. Not now.

My breath comes hard through my nose, dust making me want to sneeze, but there's no way I'm opening my mouth again until I'm far, far away from here. Maybe not even then. The moths flutter up to the ceiling in the hall and make dizzying circles around the lights before settling against the flaking plaster. There are hundreds of them—big, thick-bodied moths, all a milky bone-white.

I shudder, reliving the feeling of having one of them crawling in my mouth as I put my head in my hands and try to calm my breathing.

Then footsteps thunder down the hallway toward me. I barely have time to look up before a hand lands on my shoulder.

“What is it? What happened?” Cairo's eyes are wide with worry as I look at her, shock stealing my voice. Finally, I point up to the ceiling.

The moths are gone. There's no sign of them at all, only a murky stain in the vague shape of a shamrock.

“I ... There were moths—a big swarm of them. I thought I saw a person at first, but it was a nest of the damn things. They all came rushing at me.” I dust myself off and get up warily, like the swarm might suddenly reappear and attack again. “I don't know where they all went, though. Jesus, this place has me freaking out.”

“Yeah, I totally get that. And I'm glad you're okay.” Cairo's gaze travels past me and I turn to find Deacon hobbling over to us, leaning heavily on his cane. I'm amazed the sound of me screaming actually dragged him up here.

“Everything all right?”

“Yes,” I say before Cairo can jump in and tell him I got scared by a swarm of moths. “Leg feeling better, then?”

“I'll survive. Look, you don't think there are any more of those things inside me, do you? I keep thinking I see my skin moving, but that's my mind playing tricks on me, right?” He laughs, voice breaking an octave higher than usual.

“No way there's anything else hiding in that skinny leg,” Cairo says, nudging his shoulder with hers. I don't know how she can sound so calm. “Now quit your whining and help us search this place, seeing as you're up here.”

Her brusque teasing seems to shake loose the tension in Deacon's shoulders. He leans back against the wall, arms crossed, still holding the cane.

“Haven’t you two found anything yet? You’ve been gone ages.”

Fighting the urge to snap at him, I stoop to pick up the tote bag I dropped. Luckily the vodka bottle didn’t smash when it fell on the threadbare carpet; maybe inch-thick layers of dust have a use after all.

I toss Deacon the vodka and sanitary pads.

“Now, that’s what I call a party,” he says, one eyebrow arched.

“Just put those on your leg, okay? If you can walk all the way upstairs without me to lean on, you can apply your own field dressing.”

“Not a bad haul,” Cairo says. “I searched all the rooms downstairs that weren’t locked. I didn’t find a ton, but there’s water.”

“There is?” I say, heart leaping at this one glimmer of hope. “Yeah, seems like the tap water is okay. Smelled and tasted fine, anyway. And it looked clear.”

“Cai ...” My stomach turns over at the memory of those disgusting maggots in the Warren suite. “You really shouldn’t have drunk the water here. Especially not without boiling it or something. It’s been sitting in the pipes for God knows how many years. It could be poisonous for all we know.”

She shrugs. “I let it run a good while before trying it. And I’m fine.”

I still feel ill thinking about that brown maggot water. But I guess now’s not the time to tell her about that.

“I take it neither of you found a phone?” Deacon says. “No. But I did find this.” I pull the invitation from my pocket and pass it to him absently, my eyes snagged on one of those dropped cards lying on the floor right at the threshold of the moth room. The light from the corridor shows that it isn’t a playing card at all, but a Polaroid. I pick it up. Cairo leans in so she can see it too.

The photograph is of a party, it looks like. Six people—two of them next to a piano, one pouring a drink from an old-fashioned drinks cabinet, and three more talking in a cluster in front of a fireplace beneath the head of an enormous stag. The people are all in fancy evening wear—cocktail dresses and suits with black bow ties. It’s like a scene from a movie or some long-ago era, though it’s a color photo, so it can’t be, like, a *century* old.

One of the people is definitely Faith Knight. She’s wearing a sleek black dress and laughing at something the man next to her is saying.

I look closer and another figure catches my eye: a blond woman standing in the group of three, looking directly at the camera. She’s stunning,

wearing a pink sheath dress that skims her curves and holding a glass of champagne. In her other hand is a snake-headed cane—the same cane Deacon’s currently twirling like a cheerleader’s baton.

This woman must be Magdalena Warren. She looks exactly like the bust I saw outside her room, though thankfully without the chunk of her head missing.

She’s the only one in the photo who seems aware that a picture is being taken, and she doesn’t exactly look pleased about it.

Was she an actress, like Faith Knight? A movie director?

Something else?

I glance up from the photo to find Deacon studying the invitation I handed over. His face has turned bloodless, the inked birds beneath his eye looking like they’re trying to fly away.

“I think I know what this place is,” Deacon tells us. “And it’s not good.”

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## CLASSIFIED

***Video footage recovered from the camcorder of Conrad Mullaney, director of several low-budget horror movies from the 1980s and 1990s. Mullaney was one of the guests of Magdalena Warren at the notorious Party at the Light that took place around New Year's Eve 2005. He has not been seen or heard from since.***

***Mullaney sits in a leather chair with an unmade bed visible behind him. He is wearing a gray suit with a black shirt under it, though both look wrinkled. From the angle, it appears he is in his designated guest bedroom at the house known as the Light, a place reportedly owned by the actress Magdalena Warren, though there are no official records of sale or evidence of any property by that name existing.***

MULLANEY [TO CAMERA]: Well, that was the journey from hell. It was like trying to crack the Da Vinci Code just finding this place, and then I had to leave the new Benz on a goddamn dirt track and cram all my stuff into a paddleboat and cross a lake to get here. I swear, if there's a mark on that car when I get back to it, old friend or not, Magdalena's cutting me a check. Hell, can I even call her an old friend when we haven't seen each other in ... jeez, is it really ten years? The old girl's had some nice work done, though. Last time I saw Magda, she was wearing that ridiculous Baby Jane wig, and her face had more wrinkles than my nutsack in a New York blizzard. Now ... Well, she still carries that cane around with her, though she obviously doesn't need it. But I tell you, she looks better now than she did when we first met. I ought to get the name of her plastic surgeon for my wife, heh. Not that Eleanor listens to a damn word I say. She's jetting off to Mexico with the girls for New Year's, she tells me, like I don't know she's with her goddamn tennis instructor. [CM leans out of frame to light a cigarette.]

But I guess there are worse places than this to spend the holiday. I'm actually surprised Magda can afford a lakeside manor, though. I mean, she hasn't worked a paid gig in years, and I didn't hear about any mysterious windfalls. Still, I'm not complaining; this place is real nice. [Nods appreciatively, then flinches as a woman's voice is heard yelling indistinctly outside the room. Mullaney closes his eyes and sighs dramatically.]

If I'd known that little diva Faith Knight was going to be here, though, I definitely wouldn't have come. Honestly, the girl thinks the world owes her a starring role. I tried telling her she'd have to do a damn sight better than one mediocre blow job to make me overlook her glaring lack of talent, but would she listen? [Scoffs.] Although perhaps I should've kept that little nugget until the end of this party, eh? After all, there's plenty of time for mediocre blow jobs before then. [Snorts with laughter.] Actually, it's quite the odd bunch Magda invited here. I've been trying to figure out what the connection is. [He begins counting off on his fingers, still holding his cigarette.] There's Magda and me, obviously. As we've worked together on movies in the past, that makes sense. And if Nikolai

Brev had shown up, he'd have been another from our circle. Even Faith being here makes a kind of sense, though I can't stand the girl. But then there's the romance writer, who doesn't seem to know any of the others and has no interest in doing much aside from reading by the fire and scribbling in her notebook. And she brought a kid along, for God's sake. Who does that? Then we have the girl who says she's a singer, though I've never heard of her. And last we have Jimmy—now, there's someone I never thought I'd see again, not after all that charity-embezzlement hoo-ha... . Yes, Jimmy's definitely an outlier here. What's a country music singer doing at this party besides irritating the hell out of me with that guitar of his? He's worse than the damn kid. And he doesn't seem to know anyone else either—not even Magda. Actually, none of the others, except me and Faith, seem to know Magda. It's odd, I tell you. [He takes a deep pull on his cigarette and grabs an ashtray from somewhere off-screen to stub it out. He looks down at the ashtray, frowns, and looks up at the camera again.] I don't like it.

*There is a break in the footage. When it resumes, the setting has changed. The camera pans to show a lavish parlor with all the known guests scattered around the room. One sits playing the piano in a suit much like Mullaney's but with a white Stetson on his head—this is country singer Jimmy Arkansas, age fifty-eight, Native American, originally from Nebraska. A forty-three-year-old white woman in a gray twinset sits next to the fire with a glass of scotch rocks in her hand. That hand shakes visibly as she takes a sip. This is Belinda Covey, author of over twenty historical romance novels. At the other end of the room on a green velvet couch are two more guests: Brooke Starling, a twenty-three-year-old Black singer-songwriter from Boston who wears a collarless red silk blouse over white culottes, and Faith Knight, star of Kelly's Camp of Champs, a thirty-year-old white actress from New York. She wears a black sheath cocktail dress and is smoking a cigarette. Mullaney's voice can be heard, but he doesn't appear in the video.*

MULLANEY: Say hey, everyone. Oh—here's our hostess at last!

*Magdalena Warren walks in through the double doors. She initially smiles at Mullaney, but the smile drops when she sees the camera. Her voice is smooth and low when she speaks.*

WARREN: Conrad, dear, don't be gauche. Everyone here is having a good time, and nobody wants a good time caught on camera.

*There is a cut marking the passage of several hours between Mullaney's recordings. When the video picks up again, he is in his room, which is dark except for where a bedside lamp casts a circle of yellow light over the spot where Mullaney sits. His suit jacket has been removed and he has a glass of whiskey in his hand.*

MULLANEY: That settles it. I'm getting out of here first thing tomorrow. All that cockamamie nonsense Magda came out with over dinner ...

[Shakes head.] Something doesn't smell right. I don't know what Magda's gotten herself mixed up in, but I want no part of it.

***Video ends.***

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## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“I didn’t think this place actually existed—it’s like an urban legend,” Deacon says, sinking down onto the hallway carpet with the invitation still clutched in his hands like he can’t quite believe it’s real. “Franz—a music producer I worked with a couple of years ago—told me he knew a singer who got invited to a secret New Year’s party being thrown by this Hollywood has-been, and I’m *sure* her name was Magdalena Warren. Franz said after the holidays passed, neither she nor any of her guests were ever heard from again. Some thought Magdalena had lured them all there so she could massacre everyone as some big screw-you to Hollywood... . To be honest, I thought Franz was pulling my leg because he knows I’m a sucker for a good ghost story. But unless this is the most elaborate prank in history, this invitation is too much of a coincidence.” His tone is wry, but I don’t miss the way he swallows thickly before adding, “We have ourselves a real-life house of horrors.”

“We don’t know that anything sinister happened here.” Even as I say it, I’m thinking about the abandoned belongings in the rooms I just searched, lingering like a fingerprint of a past crime. “The host—Magdalena Warren—I’m pretty sure this is her in the photo. She’s the one in the pink dress. And I recognize an actress called Faith Knight too. My mom was in a movie with her years ago.” All three of us look up and down the corridor as though the party guests from that photo might suddenly appear.

I shiver, remembering how I went through their things like a grave robber and the creepy mannequin in Magdalena's room wearing her clothes and wig, *tap-tapping* on the window.

"We need to get out of this place," I say, voice a choked whisper.

"Why?" Cairo says. "I mean, obviously we do, but not because of some weird party that happened here years ago. They're all long gone by now. We've taken a look around, and I haven't seen any sign of someone still living here, have you?"

No.

Even so, my skin crawls, as though the dank air inside this house holds the whispered memories of a horrifying event.

"Maybe not living," Deacon says darkly. "But I'd put good money on there being ghosts here."

Cairo holds up her hands. "Don't be talking about any of that ghost shit with me. I can't deal with that on top of everything else."

"What about the man you saw outside, Cai?" I say, trying to divert the conversation before we end up totally freaking each other out. "Maybe he lives here—"

"Except I'm really not sure there *was* anyone out there,"

she says. "I was scared out of my mind and probably imagined seeing someone following me. If he was real, don't you think he'd be storming in here and demanding to know what we're doing in his house? Or at least hammering on the doors, seeing as I barricaded them all?"

I take a deep breath and wipe some of the dust from my filthy clothes. "Yeah, I guess. I mean, it's a party invitation and a grainy old Polaroid. It doesn't prove anything bad happened here."

I glance from Deacon to Cairo and neither argues. I half hoped they would so I'd know I wasn't alone in feeling so spooked by this place. So ... suffocated. But I can tell they're both wiped. I must look like I've been dragged backward out of hell too. I sure feel like it.

"Okay, then. So we stick to the plan: Rest for a couple hours, then leave as soon as it's light." They both nod, seeming relieved at the prospect of sleep. "I hate that Kizi and Shane are stuck out there in the dark, though. Hopefully they at least found each other."

Neither Cairo nor Deacon answers, but they don't have to.

I can read the doubt written all over their faces.

“Uh, so ... there are a few rooms on this floor that look at least a little less grim than the others,” I say, not wanting to linger on what it means that Kizi hasn’t shown up yet. “Enough to take one each.”

“Couldn’t we all go in one room? Drag a few mattresses together so nobody’s alone? I don’t like the idea of us splitting up again while we’re here,” Deacon says. Cairo and I exchange the briefest glance, but ... yeah, no. It would feel too weird sharing a room with Cairo, even though it wouldn’t be the first time. And there’s no way I’m being roomies with Deacon Rex.

“I’ll be fine on my own,” I say quickly. “You two share if you want to, but as long as we take rooms next to each other, we’ll be able to hear if anything happens.”

“Yeah, the way this guy snores?” Cairo snorts. “I’m not sleeping in the same room as *that*.”

“Hey!” Deacon protests.

“I’ll go get us some water from the kitchen downstairs.”

“Cai, I really don’t think—”

But she’s already striding off before I can voice my warning about the water. I go to follow, but my gaze snags on something I’m sure wasn’t there before: footprints. They mark the carpet dust up ahead—past the doorway to the moth room. I feel like a hand has settled around my throat and is squeezing, *squeezing* the air out of me.

There’s no way those marks were there a few minutes ago.

I’d have noticed, right? And I can’t see how those steady, evenly spaced footprints could belong to Deacon or Cairo, because they came from the other direction.

“Deacon.” I point to the tracks on the floor. “There’s someone else here. Someone who walked right by the room I was just in.”

Didn’t they see me standing inside the door? Didn’t they notice the door was open? Or is that why they kept walking?

“Could you have taken a few more steps than you realized?” Deacon says. “Or maybe they’re Cairo’s footprints—she always paces when she’s anxious.”

He’s right about that last part, which is kind of surprising. I don’t think of Deacon Rex as a person who’d notice someone else’s quirks.

“But the tracks don’t double back this way—they head off in that direction then ... stop.”

“You know what I think?” Deacon says. “Ghosts.”

*Ghosts? Seriously?* I’m not going to argue with him about the existence of the supernatural. It’s ridiculous, and I’m way too tired. But as my gaze lingers on the footprints, a tiny glimmer of hope hits me.

“Maybe it’s Kizi or Shane—maybe they found their way here before we did.”

“And they’re—what? Hiding from us?” Okay, he may have a point there. “Look, we know people probably died here, right? So I reckon this place is a bit haunted, that’s all.”

“A *bit* haunted?” I repeat.

Deacon shrugs. “Maybe. I’m less bothered by the idea of a few spirits knocking about the place than I am about the leeches, bears, and possible stalkers out in that swamp, so I’m off to curl up in some murder victim’s bed and hope I wake to the sound of a search-and-rescue boat. ’Night, Romero.”

“Good night,” I mutter, only vaguely aware of him hobbling back toward the mezzanine rooms.

*Haunted, my ass.*

I stare at the trail of footprints a second longer, then decide to follow them.

The trail ends before the next turn in the hall. That doesn’t necessarily mean whoever made them stopped walking, though, so I don’t either. I continue all the way to the corner, half expecting someone to be hiding in the shadows there, waiting to pounce.

*Because ax murderers are well known for pouncing,* I tell myself, grateful for a second that Kizi’s not here to roll her eyes at me for being a jackass and investigating alone. Then I immediately feel awful for being glad she’s not here.

*Hurry up and get to the Light already.* I send the mental command out into the swamp, hoping it’ll manifest wherever she is, like a note on a fogged mirror.

There are a few doors ahead of me, and I waver between searching them for whoever made those footprints or running back the other way and finding somewhere to hole up and sleep. But the sick churning in my gut tells me there’s no way I’ll be able to rest until I know these rooms are empty.

The next door has the unlikely sounding name *Arkansas* on it. I try the handle, half expecting it to be locked, but it's not. I flip on the light and jerk back as a bright beam hits my eyes. Shielding my face, I see it's coming from a lamp knocked onto its side so the bulb shines right at the door.

This suite has been trashed.

*Something bad happened here.*

I bite my lip, debating whether to cross the threshold. From the doorway, I take in the half-torn-down curtains, the swirling wrought iron covering the outside of the window, and the dense fog beyond it. Clothes and other personal belongings lie in kicked piles all over the floor. There's a four-poster bed like in some of the other suites, but on this one, the covers are all messed up, like the room's occupant just woke from a nightmare. There's a gross-looking stain on the bedsheets. It's massive, covering the bed from pillow to foot in a thick brown stripe.

*No way I'm going in there.*

I back away but pause when I spot something propped against the dressing table: an acoustic guitar. A custom Gibson Hummingbird, to be precise, with a sleek black body and a bloodred pickguard and fretboard. I can't stop myself. Gingerly, I cross the room and pick it up. I blow the dust away and run my fingers along its neck, making a low appreciative noise.

*Nobody would ditch a guitar like this.*

I glance back at the bed and that long gross stain. Oh God ...

*Whoever was staying in this room died in that bed.*

*Died and lay there long enough to liquefy.*

My mind fully rebels at the thought. I put down the guitar, back all the way out into the hall, and shut the door with a snap. Not even the lure of that beautiful guitar can tempt me back inside.

The next room belonged to someone named Brev. The name sounds vaguely familiar, but I can't place it.

Brev's room is spartan. The bed is made up, but there's no sign anyone ever slept here. There are no personal belongings like in the other rooms. No bags or toiletries. Nothing useful. And no sign of anyone hiding in here, clutching a pair of dusty shoes.

I move on to a suite with *Mullaney* on the door. The comforter on the bed is all mussed, like someone slept there, but there are no suspicious stains like in the Arkansas suite, thank God. I spot something dangling from the high frame of the four-poster bed, and for a heart-stopping moment I think

it's a snake. But it's not—it's just a belt the last occupant must've tossed up there.

A silver ashtray on the nightstand overflows with cigarette butts. There's a chunky dark wood dresser wearing a fur coat of dust with a comb and an empty bottle of Gold Tier cologne on it, which I've never heard of. The bottle's top has been left off, so maybe it evaporated. I look up, imagining tiny particles of Gold Tier swirling around on the air currents I disturbed by opening the door. Then I notice the blooms of mold mottling the ceiling. It looks like the inside of a smoker's lung.

Decay. Dust. Death. This place reeks of them all.

There's nothing useful in here either, no telephone or medical supplies, but on a small desk by the window, I find a prehistoric video camera. I press the power button, but of course nothing happens. A power cord sits nearby, so I find an outlet and, without any real hope of a result, plug it in. Again, nothing happens.

I press the power button a couple more times to make sure, but there's not even a flicker on the tiny flip-out screen. I set it back down.

As I leave the suite, I can't help feeling like I'm missing something. But aside from this room having a balcony rather than a window, there's nothing remarkable about it. Still, a sense of warning prickles in the back of my mind. A growing certainty, like a whisper in my ear:

*This entire place is a festering death trap. And we're all stuck here.*

There are no more doors over here, so I go back the way I came, but I'm surprised to find myself heading toward the mezzanine. I guess I must've taken a wrong turn somewhere without realizing. I'm about to pass the powdery tracks outside the moth room again when I look up and see the door to that room is closed.

*Wasn't it open before?*

My breath catches as I stand outside, listening, trying to remember if I closed it. But I'm not sure. Honestly, I'm not sure about anything right now, and I have zero interest in reopening that door and getting another mouthful of moth dust.

I turn and head onto the mezzanine. As I step from the gloom into the brighter glow from the chandelier hanging over the entrance hall, I toss a quick glance over my shoulder, suddenly certain I'll catch someone following me.

There's nobody there.





*It begins as it always does.*

*The crowd surges around me, blocking my view of the stage, crushing me with their bodies. I push against them but it's like fighting the ocean, and I'm sucked down into the darkness beneath the teeming mass.*

*Again, though, the dream veers from its usual path.*

*"Haden," a voice whispers. "I can bring you to the light."*

*And this time, despite the weight of writhing flesh trying to drive me down into the ground, a cool hand takes mine and pulls me to my feet. But I don't stop there—now I'm weightless, the unseen hand pulling me up above the crowd so I hover there, the stage lights beckoning me in the distance.*

*"Come," the voice breathes next to my ear. "Let me show you how it can be."*





## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

### DAY TWO

I wake with a jolt, not sure where I am. Then everything clicks into place: the crash, the swamp, and the creepy old house where I'm currently stranded.

My heart thuds like a rock in an empty bucket. That's how I feel—empty. Drained.

It's still dark, so I can't have been asleep long. I lay awake for a long time after closing the door to Faith Knight's room, but I guess I must've drifted off eventually, my head all tangled up in weird dreams again.

I'm sprawled on the chaise longue, which smelled marginally less musty than the bed, with my ratty sweater bunched up as a pillow. I ease myself up to sitting, moving slowly so I won't choke to death on the dust.

Deacon chose the Brev suite and Cairo's in a twin with Covey on the door. I didn't want to take the Warren room, with its freaky mannequin and maggoty tap water, or any of the rooms with those chalky footprints creeping past the door, so I ended up in here. The fact that Mom would hate the idea of me sleeping in Faith Knight's suite also gave me a tiny spark of joy that I so desperately needed.

Everything is still and quiet now. *Too* quiet for a falling-down house in the middle of a swamp.

I picture Kizi out there wandering like a wraith in the dense fog and thinking I've left her behind. Or that we're all dead and she's truly alone.

Kizi hates being alone. I guess it's because she grew up with two sisters, so her house was never quiet.

Aunt Selena's home is kind of the opposite—it's like a library full of nature books and dental-medicine journals—and the last year I spent with Mom in LA, I basically lived on my own. Mom was always off auditioning for whatever low-budget picture she thought would be her big break or partying while she “networked.” I've learned to fill silence with music, even if it's only in my head. The music isn't coming easily now, though.

That's when it really hits me: I might never see any of them—Mom, Dad, Aunt Selena—again.

*I might actually die out here.*

I press my lips tight against the urge to sob.

A rattle sounds somewhere nearby, dragging me from my bleak thoughts. I think it came from outside my room. A chill passes through me as I imagine some night creature—a bear?—prowling the halls. Or maybe it's that creepy guy from the service area testing the door locks, trying to find a way in.

The sound comes again. This time I see a faint billowing of the curtain; it's only the wind sneaking in through the old weathered window frame, shaking the glass pane against the wooden carcass. No moth swarms. No bears. No creepy guys.

I wriggle to try to get comfortable on the chaise but stop when I hear someone outside my door. Soft footsteps, so clear I absolutely expect a knock to follow. But it doesn't. And there are no more footsteps, so I know whoever it is has paused outside this room.

Beneath the door, the glow of the entrance hall's chandelier still shines, hopefully acting as a beacon to Kizi and Shane.

*Is that shadow someone's feet?*

I listen, holding my breath. Maybe it's Deacon or Cairo seeing if I'm still awake, but there's a prickling feeling at the back of my scalp telling me to be still—to play dead.

I never was very good at that.

“Cai?” I call out. “Deacon, is that you?”

There's no answer. But that same itchy-scalp sensation tells me there's definitely someone out there. And when I listen closely, I'm sure I hear breathing, like someone's pressed up against the keyhole, looking in.

Then a shadow passes over the glowing strip of light underneath the door.

I roll off the chaise longue; savage aches and bruises all over my body make me heavy-footed as I cross the room and fling open the door.

The hallway's empty.

I check both ways. There's nobody out here. The chandelier still shines from its position almost level with the mezzanine, casting narrow shadows behind the gallery railings.

Did the person duck into one of the adjoining suites? I step into the hall to take a closer look and notice the footprints. There's a row of them leading up to this suite from the direction of the main staircase. They stop at my door, turn to face it, then ... nothing.

*What the hell?*

There's no sign of them going back the way they came or sneaking off in the other direction. It's as though something plucked the person from above, like an arcade grabber machine. Instinctively, I look up. There's only the cracked, mold-mottled ceiling overhead and a vent in the wall above my door, but it's the size of a paperback novel, so it's hardly a convenient escape route.

The footprints look like they're made in chalk or dust, like the ones outside the moth room. As if the soles of the person's shoes were thickly coated in the stuff, leaving it behind like shed skin.

I take another step along the mezzanine and yelp when a piece of fallen plaster crunches painfully under my socked foot. My voice echoes around the large open space, sounding distorted and unfamiliar.

*There's nobody else here, I remind myself. We checked. And there are no ghosts—especially not ones that molt chalky residue.*

I should try to get some more sleep before we all head out to search for Kizi and Shane. But as I'm turning to do that, I look down at the massive egg-like shape of the sculpture in the entrance hall. And blink.

A faint blue light makes the sculpture appear to be glowing from below. Those weird, intricate etchings on its surface stand out starkly, the patterns a patchwork of limbs and faces, twisted and deformed, covering the entire outer shell. There's something horrifying about it—I feel like I'm looking at an open war grave.

Then the blue light goes out. Only the glow from the chandelier overhead remains.

I lean against the balustrade overlooking the entrance hall below but flinch away when something spidery brushes over my knuckles. It's only a

cobweb, trailing down from the ceiling like a streamer.

My throat, already parched, clicks when I try to swallow.

Where was that blue light coming from?

*Maybe I should wake Cairo and Deacon. I don't want to deal with this on my own.*

But what if it's nothing? If I wake the others for no reason, I'll look like an ass.

I grab my boots and make my way down the grand staircase to the entrance hall. If anyone's listening, the crunching of dirt and debris under my soles will give me away, but nothing comes rushing at me from the shadows.

Finally, the sculpture looms over me. From down here, it almost seems to meet the chandelier hanging from the high ceiling. I feel a sudden wave of vertigo, like the sculpture is keeling over to crush me.

I stumble a little and catch myself on the waist-high pedestal the sculpture rests on.

The pedestal is made from some kind of stone, so I expected to feel a hard, cold surface. Instead, it's almost as warm as my palm, and it's solid but slightly yielding, like how I imagine a newly dead corpse would feel. I yank back my hand. Then that eerie blue-tinged light appears again.

Now I see where the light is coming from: a cell phone. It's sitting in a recess beneath the sculpture like it was knocked or tossed under there. I picture reaching for it and having the colossal weight of the sculpture crush my hand, but now that my vertigo has eased, this giant egg doesn't look like it's about to topple over anytime soon.

Still, I reach in and snatch the phone quickly. I recognize it right away. It's *mine*. Did I drop it down here earlier? I guess I must have. And my heart leaps when I see it's now lighting up despite its brief dip in the swamp. There's a ton of missed calls, voicemails, and messages, most of them from Aunt Selena and Bob, our band manager.

**SELENA:** Tried calling but can't get through—is everything OK? I got your message about your car. Let me know if you need anything.

**SELENA:** Also let me know that you're OK.

**BOB:** Call me. Harriet at ROL said you didn't show for sound check.

**BOB:** Where are you? Call me ASAP & I'll see if I can rearrange the slot.

**SELENA:** Bob called, he says you weren't at your sound check earlier. I'm getting worried, please call.

**BOB:** Are you even at ROL? Nobody has seen you there. What's happening? Let me know ASAP.

**SELENA:** I'm really worried. Please call me. I've contacted highway patrol along the route you said you were taking. Did you go a different way? Your mom is waiting by the phone to hear from you too.

Despite my relief at finally finding a signal, guilt floods through me. I've been telling myself Aunt Selena won't even realize I'm missing yet, but of course she has. Unlike Dad, apparently. Still, if we manage to make it out of here in the morning, Aunt Selena won't have been worried too long.

*Maybe Kizi and I will even make our show.*

I look around at the decaying entrance hall, and my optimism flatlines. This place has been standing empty for years—decades, probably. I doubt anyone else in the world knows it exists. How will anyone find us out here?

But at least I know people are looking for us. Aunt Selena is on the case, and hopefully Shane or Kizi made it back to civilization and alerted the authorities, so maybe we really are moments away from being rescued.

I try to hold on to the hope, but it feels flimsy. Somehow, rescue doesn't seem even remotely likely.

I call 911. It doesn't ring, but I hear a click as the call connects.

"Hello?" I say. No answer. "This is Haden Romero. I need help. There was an accident on the road to the Rock-o'-Lantern festival, and now I'm stuck at a house in a canyon—it's called the Light. There are five of us. Me, Deacon Rex, and Cairo Martin are at the house, and two others are out in the swamp, I think. They're Kizi Kennedy-Oshima and Shane Eriksen, although Shane might not be in the canyon at all. We need help urgently. Please, can you—"

"Haden Romero," a girl's voice says through the phone, breaking into my verbal stream.

"Yes, I'm Haden Romero, and I'm here with—"

"Haden Romero, Haden Romero, Haden Romero, Haden Romero, Haden Romero ..."

I hold the phone away from my ear. "Who's that?"

"Shit!" I almost drop the phone as I whirl and find Deacon standing right behind me. The glow from the chandelier above us makes him look ghostly.

"Don't creep up on me like that!"

“Sorry. I heard a noise and thought maybe Shane or Kizi had turned up.”

Oh. “No, not yet,” I tell him. “I just found my phone. Seems like it’s trying to work, but there’s definitely something wrong with it. I called emergency services but I think I got put through to someone else.” I hold up the phone, which is still repeating my name over and over.

“What the hell?” Deacon says, taking a step back as though the phone might jump out of my hand and attack him.

But as I hear my name—*Haden Romero, Haden Romero, Haden Romero*—something new strikes me. Something strange.

“Wait—it’s me,” I say, frowning. “That’s my voice.”

“What?” Deacon takes the phone from my hand and listens. His eyebrows shoot up. “Oh, you’re right, that is you. But I still don’t get it.”

*That makes two of us.*

“It’s replaying what I said a minute ago. Part of it, anyway,” I tell him. “It must be a glitch or something. But I’m surprised it’s working at all after it got soaked with swamp water.”

Deacon presses the End Call button.

“Hey! What if we can’t—”

“It’s wasting the battery,” he says evenly. “I don’t have a phone charger. Do you?”

“No.” I had one in my travel bag on the bus, but I guess that doesn’t really help.

Deacon hands the phone back. “Try calling 911 again. Would you like the coordinates from that party invitation to give them?”

He pulls the now-crumpled party invite from his jeans pocket and passes it to me. It feels weird to be grateful to Deacon Rex, but he’s apparently thinking more clearly than I am. I make the call. Again, it doesn’t ring, only clicks as the call connects.

I’m about to rattle through the same information again but stop short when a familiar voice begins speaking on the other end of the line.

“Hello? Hello! Is anyone there? Hello? Hello!”

“Kizi!” I yell in surprise. “Kizi, where are you? Are you all right?”

“Hello? Hello! Is anyone there? Hello? Hello!” she says again.

My stomach twists. “Kizi, can you hear me?” She repeats what she just said, then falls silent. “Kizi? Please, say you can hear me!”

“I’m lost,” she says, and that knot in my guts untwists a little. But there’s something not quite right about her tone. “It’s so dark, and I’m all alone.”

“I’ll come find you,” I tell her. “Can you describe where you are? Look around for a white gravel path or a light from a house—that’s where we are.”

When I look down at the phone screen, I realize the call has disconnected.

“Guys?”

Deacon and I both jump this time. Cairo stands at the top of the stairs in her bloodstained gray hoodie.

“Hey, that was—” I break off, seeing that Cairo’s swaying. “I think something’s wrong with me ”

She clutches her stomach, sinks to her knees, and throws up. I hurry up the stairs. By the time I reach her, she’s done retching and has rolled onto her back on the dirt-littered landing. Sweat runs down her face.

“Cairo?” Deacon pushes past me to kneel by her side. “What’s going on?”

Her expression is pained. “My stomach feels like it’s full of burning rocks. I either caught a bug out in the swamp or—”

“Or it was something you ate or drank,” I finish. “I’m guessing it wasn’t the juice, if Deacon and I feel okay.” I look at him and he shrugs in confirmation. “It must’ve been the water.”

Cairo sighs, and I can tell she feels like hot garbage right now. Damn, this is bad. “It tasted fine, though. I thought only stagnant water can make you sick.”

Aunt Selena has told me plenty of ways water can make you sick if the source isn’t clean. Clearly, there’s something wrong with the tap water here, and that means very bad things for all three of us.

“I’ll help you back to bed,” I say, offering Cairo my hand. She takes it; her skin is hot and clammy when I pull her up.

Once Deacon and I get her back to her room, I close the door and turn to him.

“Screw waiting for daybreak, I’m heading back to the bus,” I whisper. “There must be *some* water or food there we can use, and I’ll get my phone charger. And Kizi’s out there—maybe I can find her and Shane on the way. And I’ll keep trying the cops. Hopefully I’ll get a signal.” Deacon’s frown deepens with each word. “I’m not asking you to come with me. You should

stay here and keep an eye on Cairo. She's going to be even more dehydrated after throwing up. Just don't let her drink any more water."

"I don't think you leaving now is a good idea," Deacon says, keeping his voice low too. "It's still not light out."

"You heard Kizi on the phone—something's not right with her. She might be hurt," I hiss. "Waiting around for help to arrive isn't going to work. We need to find Kizi and Shane, and we need drinkable water."

Deacon looks at the closed door to Cairo's room, then at the small, high window in the entrance hall showing a dirt-obscured view of the night world outside the Light.

"Please at least wait until the sun comes up," he says at last. "If you get lost out there, we're all dead."

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**CLASSIFIED**

***Video footage recovered from the camcorder of Conrad Mullaney, director of several low-budget horror movies from the 1980s and 1990s.***

***Mullaney is dressed in a beige suit with a cream silk shirt and tie. He sits in the same chair as before with the bed visible behind him, but this time a suitcase sits on top of the bed. He addresses the camera.***

MULLANEY: Lakeside manor, my ass! I don't know what I was looking at last night, but this place is no top-drawer vacation home; it's a run-down piece of crap in the middle of a swamp! I took a look around some of the other rooms and it seems like Magda only bothered to decorate the handful she showed us when we got here. Everywhere else ... it's a slum.

Looks like that romance writer, Belinda ... I want to say Cubby? Covey? Any way, she seems to have had the same idea as me, because she left before breakfast. Had a boat sent for her, Magda said, though how on earth she arranged that I've no idea. I only wish the woman had let me know she was leaving so I could have made a break for it at the same time. Now Magda will have to give me a ride in her little boat.

***Video cuts.***

***Later, time-stamped the same day, Mullaney appears on camera looking thunderous.***

MULLANEY: Now I'm stuck here. There's a problem with the phones, Magda's boat engine won't start, and there's some big storm on the way, apparently, so it doesn't look like I'll be getting out of here today. And there's no cleaning staff, so this place is already starting to look and smell like a damn sewer. Who throws a party with no cleaning staff? We're basically stranded here, and before too long we'll all be drowning in our own filth.

***Video ends.***

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## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

I'm too antsy to rest after hearing Kizi's voice on the phone and then Cairo getting sick, so I spend the next hour rechecking all the rooms I explored a few hours ago. Although I try to keep track of my route through the Light, the corridors seem to stretch and shift around me until I've completely lost my bearings. The whole time, I feel eyes on me.

*I'm just overtired*, I tell myself, but I don't believe it. Not entirely.

Eventually, I end up outside the door to my room again.

The dusty footprints are now smudged and vague.

I peer at the marks. They *are* footprints, I'm sure of it. "Aw, are you waiting outside my door for an autograph, Romero?"

I curse at the sound of Deacon's voice. He's a couple doors down, leaning against the doorframe, watching me with his arms loosely crossed.

Deacon is no longer wearing his ripped jeans and leather jacket. He's dressed in loose tan corduroy pants and a mustard turtleneck beneath a rust-red blazer. The snake-headed cane weirdly completes the ensemble.

"You look like you slipped and fell into a 1970s Bond villain," I tell him.

Deacon raises an eyebrow. "Would you like me to tell you what you look like *you* slipped and fell into?"

I ignore that. I'll have to find something else to wear soon or risk permanently damaging my sense of smell, but I can't face it yet. "Doesn't it bother you, wearing a dead man's clothes?"

"It's not like I peeled them off his corpse." Deacon laughs dryly.

I almost ask whether a dead body would have stopped him, then decide I don't want to know the answer to that. "Found any drinkable water yet?"

"While I was sleeping? No." His haughty expression fades when he looks over at the high entrance hall window. "I still think it's a bad idea, you going out there on your own."

"You offering to come with me?" I know there's no way he will.

"I just don't think it's worth the risk when you'll find, *at most*, a bottle or two of water left on the bus. How long will that last between three of us?"

"Fine, maybe the water is a long shot. But isn't finding our friends worth the risk?"

"I suppose that depends on whether you believe they're still alive."

Deacon turns to go back inside his room. Then he stops abruptly.

"Have you seen this?" he says. "Seen what?"

"The name on my door's changed."

"What?"

But I can already see what he means. Before, the raised brass letters on his door spelled out *Brev*, but now they spell *Rex*.

"The others have changed too," Deacon calls as he checks along the mezzanine hallway. He's right: *Covey* has now been replaced with *Martin*—Cairo's last name—and mine no longer reads *Knight* but *Romero*.

"Okay, that's creepy as hell." I eye him narrowly.

Deacon snorts. "*I* didn't do it. And I can't really see Cairo doing it either, can you?"

He's right about that part. Chugging toxic water aside, Cai's generally sensible, way too sensible to do something like this, even as a joke. Deacon, I'm not so sure about.

*It had to be one of us. How would a total stranger know our last names? Cairo doesn't even use a last name professionally.*

"If you're messing with me ..." I trail off, remembering the footsteps I heard outside my door last night.

That must've been someone fooling around with the letters, switching them like magnets on a fridge.

*Wait—didn't Deacon appear downstairs right after that? I think, side-eyeing him. He could easily have been sneaking around. Maybe this is his way of convincing me this place is haunted.*

"It wasn't me," he insists.

“Well, I’ve searched this place twice now, and there’s no sign of anyone else here.”

“And that makes me your prime suspect? For all I know, it was *you*.”

“Look, I haven’t got time for this. I’m going to do something that’s actually helpful.” *And get out of this creepy house.*

I turn and stomp downstairs, remembering to tread carefully only when a board creaks ominously under my boot.

Before I head out, I try to call 911 again. Then I try Kizi ... Aunt Selena ... Dad ... Bob ... *anyone*. Try texting them too.

UNABLE TO SEND. RETRY?

I check my battery, and my heart plummets. Three percent.

I take a last deep breath before the stench of the swamp assaults me, then step outside the Light.

The gravel path leading from the front door of the Light could almost be a sweeping driveway, though the idea of there being a drivable road through this swamp at any point seems impossible. And that’s not because the path’s all wild and overgrown—the gravel itself is weirdly pristine. There are no weeds growing out of it, no fallen tree branches tumbled across the path, and no tangled greenery crowding in from the sides. It curves away from the front steps of the house, bends back on itself to snake between two trees, then tapers off into thinner shoots before disappearing into the mist. From above, it probably looks like a nest of enormous serpents slithering out from the Light in all directions.

It must be only a little past dawn, as the gray light is just a shade brighter than the darkness that brought us here. The mist still hangs low, though it’s not as thick as it was last night.

The sides of the canyon in the distance are a vague dark blur. The world seems very small and ghostly. I shiver as the mist curls around me like phantom fingers. It makes the air damp and unpleasant to breathe, like it’s coming straight from the mouth of some ancient beast. It leaves a festering, sulfurous tang at the back of my tongue.

“Hang on!” Deacon crunches down the path after me. He’s still using his cane. It’s probably a part of his *brand* now. “What are you doing out here?” He flinches at my sharp tone. I know I shouldn’t take my stress and lack of sleep out on him, but it’s so convenient.

“I’m coming with you, at least some of the way. I talked with Cairo and she agrees it makes sense. She also said that if there’s someone sneaking around the place spying on us and putting our names on the doors, she’s better equipped to handle it than I am, even when she’s sick. I thought that was a little unfair, but I suppose I am a pacifist.”

“I think it’s pronounced *dickhead*,” I tell him.

“Rude. Anyway, Cai will be fine for an hour or so. And if you find Kizi or Shane out here and they’re in no shape to walk, I can help you carry them back to the Light.”

“You couldn’t even carry your own ass back there last night.”

Deacon grins. “I told Cai you’d be thrilled to have my company, and look—you *are*.”

“Whatever.”

We set off along the path, the crunch of gravel and the faint squawks and chitters of some swampish creatures clamoring around us in a constant, nerve-shredding thrum. Finally, it becomes too much for me.

“Kizi!” I yell, making Deacon jump. “Shane!”

“We’re not even out of sight of the house yet,” Deacon points out. “Do you really think they’d have come this far and then not bothered checking out the random creepy building?”

“My guess is that Kizi’s somewhere nearby,” I say, ignoring him. “I don’t know what happened with the crossed connection on my phone earlier, but I figure if hers somehow connected to mine, she must be close, right?”

Deacon purses his lips before answering. “Phone signals don’t work that way. They need a cell tower to bounce off.”

I guess I kind of knew that. “How do you explain the connection, then?”

“Paranormal feedback loop,” Deacon says, like that’s perfectly logical. “I think the ghosts are trying to keep us here.”

“Ghosts again? *Seriously?*”

He stops suddenly. We’ve reached a point where the path splits into four narrower gravel trails. The mist here hangs so heavy, it’s hard to see which one leads in the direction of the bus.

“Do you remember which path we took to get here last night?” Deacon says. I don’t. “You’d think we’d have left some kind of tracks, wouldn’t you?”

He’s right. Especially considering I had to drag Deacon most of the way. But there are no signs anyone has walked these paths in years.

I close my eyes and turn around so I'm facing the Light again. When I open them, I try to visualize where the lit window was in the dark. Hmm. The angle isn't quite right. I move until it seems like it's in the right spot, then point to the path behind me.

"We came from this direction."

Deacon looks skeptical but says nothing. The delightful silence lasts approximately thirty seconds.

"Last night's show at Rock-o'-Lantern was supposed to help launch the new album," he says. I don't mention that I already knew that or that I don't care. "It was going to be Cairo's first time performing a big gig with us. Everything was going smoothly and then ... *this*." Deacon makes an expansive gesture with his arms, sweeping his cane out over the swamp. "Makes you think."

"Makes you think *what*?"

"About all the things you put off because you assume there'll be time to get them done later." He shrugs. "I didn't call my sister this week because I was planning to fly to the UK tomorrow—or *today*, I suppose—to surprise her with a quick visit. What if I never get the chance now? And I was also planning to ask Cairo to stay on with the band permanently, though after this, God only knows if she'll want to—that's if we make it out of here, of course." He smiles ruefully. "I was going to say it as I hopped off the bus at the airport, like it was no big deal: *Hey, fancy joining Rex Mori permanently? Let me know when you've had a think. See you in four days!* And then scarpering before she could say anything. She'd probably bang her fist on the window as I ran away but while *laughing*—you know what I mean?"

"You really played that whole thing out in your head, huh?" I deadpan.

He shrugs. "I've been thinking a lot, that's all. And maybe facing the devastating reality that I might actually die out here just reminded me how badly I used to crave the whole rock-star-lifestyle thing. I used to love it so *much* ... in the beginning, anyway. I really wish I could go back to feeling that way. I wouldn't let it go this time. Wouldn't waste it, you know?"

I do know. But I'm not interested in getting into a deep-and-meaningful with Deacon, so I say nothing.

"So ... do you think we're going to die out here?" He doesn't sound cheerful exactly, but there's something kind of upbeat about his tone that has me side-eyeing him hard.

“No.”

“Good,” Deacon says, as though mine was the deciding vote. “I’d hate to die somewhere miserable like this. I’ve always thought I’d quite like to die looking out to sea. Preferably on a warm, sunny beach, with a mojito in my hand and a horde of adoring fans to mourn me. How about you?”

“You’re a tool,” I tell him, meaning it with my whole heart. But inside, I feel a weird kind of ... I dunno, *dread* isn’t the right word. But like Deacon needs to quit talking like we’re not going to get out of here, because he’s putting that stuff out into the universe, and as Mr. Kennedy-Oshima often says, *The universe is always listening*.

Like it was four years ago, when I confided in Deacon and he stabbed me right between the shoulder blades. Turns out the universe hates me.

“Why the hell did you do it?” The words are out before I have time to think better of it.

“Do what?” Deacon says.

“Screw me over.” He continues to look at me blankly. “On *Little Stars*.”

“How on earth did I screw *you* over?” Deacon seems genuinely outraged, though I can’t imagine why. “You’re the one who called me an asshole live on the telly.”

“Because you *were* an asshole! I told you before we went out onstage that I was having major anxiety about forgetting my lyrics after they switched our song at the last minute. And after I *trusted* you with that, what did you do? You intentionally made me mess up the words, live onstage, in front of millions of viewers.”

“That isn’t what happened,” Deacon says. His voice is coming from behind me, and I realize that he’s stopped walking. “It’s exactly what happened and exactly why I called you an asshole,” I toss back over my shoulder, then start walking again.

“Hey! Wait! You can’t throw something like that at me and storm off!”

“Watch me.”

“Haden, I did *not* get you kicked off the show. You *know* what made you mess up your words, and it wasn’t me.” I whirl on him. “What are you talking about?”

“In the dressing room ... Your dad?” He raises his eyebrows like that will somehow jog my memory.

“What about my dad?”

Deacon spreads his arms, incredulous, still clutching that damn cane like he's Willy Wonka. "We were about to go onstage—this was right after we talked about you being nervous, and I told you that trick my mother taught me for when the nerves kick in, remember?"

"The ghost train." I sigh. Deacon's mom was a voice coach.

He'd told me about some stupid visualization technique she'd taught him for getting rid of preshow nerves: basically, you picture a ghost train rushing at you, and when it passes through you, it carries all your nerves away with it in one big hit.

I'd tried it. Didn't work.

"The ghost train. Exactly," he says. "I was trying to *help* you."

"By humming the theme song to the Thomas the Tank Engine show in my ear right as we went onstage?"

"Exactly," he repeats.

"And it didn't occur to you that that goddamn tune would be the *only* thing in my head while I was trying to remember our song lyrics?"

Deacon opens his mouth, then closes it. "Ah."

This is pointless. I wish I'd never brought it up. I mean, it's not like Deacon's going to feel bad about what he did; that would require a level of self-awareness he's not capable of. "But what did you mean about my dad?"

"Oh, that ..." He makes a half circle in the gravel with the end of his cane, sweeping it back and forth as though he's trying to create a safety barrier. "Do you remember we went to your dressing room to get your lyric sheet, and when you opened the door he was in there with the makeup artist?"

"So?"

"As in *with* her."

"What?"

"You seriously don't remember?"

I'm about to spit out a *no* when something comes loose in my memory of that day. "I do remember going to my dressing room ... but when I opened the door, you yanked it shut again all pissy-like and said we'd go over the lyrics together instead."

"Replace *pissy* with *mortified*, and you're getting there."

Deacon nods slowly like he's waiting for me to come up with the solution to some tricky math equation.



“I didn’t see my dad in there.”

“Really? Well, I bloody did. Scarred my thirteen-year-old mind, I can tell you. But I thought you didn’t say anything about it because you were embarrassed.”

I don’t respond. My natural instinct is to deny anything Deacon Rex says, but this time I’m not sure I can.

I know Dad cheated on Mom. Not just one time, but a lot. And even that felt like it was somehow my fault—like if I hadn’t screwed up my shot on *Little Stars*, they would’ve been so happy, it would’ve fixed everything. Even at thirteen, I had some sense that my parents’ dreams of stardom for themselves weren’t ever going to become a reality, so I needed to make the dream happen for all three of us. And each time I failed, it fractured our family more.

That’s how it felt, anyway. I’d hear them arguing late at night when they thought I was asleep, about the cheating and how miserable they both were, and that damn show always came up, like it was the root of it all.

So what Deacon’s saying isn’t beyond the realm of possibility. Maybe he did see my dad with the makeup artist, but I honestly never saw Dad in my dressing room that day. *That* I’d definitely remember.

“You thought that was why I forgot my words and cursed at you?”

Deacon shrugs. “I actually thought the swearing was aimed more at him than me, to tell the truth.”

“Well, it wasn’t. And it’s still your fault I got kicked off the show.”

“Yeeeeeesss ...”

The way he says it tells me he’s holding something back. “What?” I snap.

“Well, the thing is, I had nothing to do with it. The producers were all set to bring you back—after you made a heartfelt apology, of course. I mean, you were already a big ratings hit with your whole metal-rock-girl thing going on. Your on-screen swearathon fed into that persona, didn’t it? The bookies were calling you the dark horse of the competition. Unfortunately, one of the producers happened to be married to the makeup artist your dad was knobbing in the dressing room, so when that came out ... well, it threw a bit of a spanner in the works. The producers used your outburst as an excuse to get you both off the set.”

My brain feels like it’s going to explode.

*There’s no way Dad did that.*

I correct myself: *There’s no way Dad did that and didn’t tell me.*

I correct myself again: *There's no way Dad screwed around, got me kicked off the show, then let me believe it was all my fault.*

*Is there?*

These last years of us drifting further and further apart, of him finding reasons to walk out anytime I entered a room, of him never quite looking me in the eye ... Was all that *his* fault? Not mine?

"Are you all right, Romero?" Deacon says. "Just shut up and walk, okay?"

He lasts maybe two minutes before he has to open his mouth again. "If it makes you feel any better, winning *Little Stars* didn't exactly turn out to be all I thought it would."

"Do you want me to feel sorry for you?" I say, but there's no real snap to it now. My thoughts are still tangled up in my dad. I'm running over all the conversations we had in the months after I got kicked off the show. All his long sighs, like he was so disappointed in me. And his whispered arguments with Mom that I assumed were about me, but ... maybe they weren't?

"It was like a feeding frenzy with the media. They followed me everywhere, hounded my family, my friends, my teachers, even my old babysitter," Deacon continues. "I couldn't go back to school because they were worried about security. We had to move house *twice* after getting weird notes, and once someone tried to break in while we were sleeping."

I put a pin in my Dad-retrospective. Deacon's experience with all the paparazzi bullshit after *Little Stars* sounds weirdly similar to mine, though maybe, possibly, worse?

"At least you had a record deal to make up for it."

Deacon laughs. "Sure. I got to release an album of songs I *hated*, then had my debut album slammed by every respectable music reviewer across the world. *Then* I had to fight for almost a year in court to be allowed to write my own songs."

"Okay, so it wasn't everything you dreamed of. But you got to make music—I didn't. Nobody wanted to know me after the show."

My argument sounds whiny even to my ears, but Deacon goes on like he hasn't heard me.

"My sister had it worse than anyone. Sam was working at a garden center—she absolutely *loved* that job—and had to quit because the press kept turning up there, pestering her. That was when my parents decided to move us all back to the UK ... except I refused to go." His voice has grown

quieter now; it's tinged with what sounds like regret. "I've hardly seen them in over two years."

*Oh.*

"Do you wish you'd gone with them?" I ask.

"No." His answer comes right away, as though this is something he's asked himself many times. "I couldn't sacrifice my music career, not even for them. And if I could do it all over again, I wouldn't give up winning *Little Stars*. Doesn't mean I don't feel like an arse about it, though."

"Well, I did tell you that you were an asshole," I helpfully point out.

He looks at me, eyes narrowed in contemplation. "Would you have done anything different if you were me?"

"I dunno," I say. But that's not really true. I do know. I would've done exactly the same as Deacon, and I have a horrible feeling he knows that.

"This time around, I'll do it right," he says. "Keep my family out of it."

"If the ghosts let us out of here, you mean?" I tease.

Deacon doesn't respond—but that's probably because he's now crouched down, peering at his phone.

"What are you doing? Do you have a message?"

"Nope. Still no signal. But look at this gravel—it's so weird." Now I see what he's doing; Deacon is aiming the flash-light on his phone at the path.

"It's not like proper gravel," he continues. "Wherever the light hits it, the stones seem to slither closer."

"You're seriously wasting your phone's battery checking out gravel?"

He ignores me. "It must be synthetic. Do you think whoever built this place could've had it flown in to try and make a road across the swamp?"

*Really?*

"Kizi!" I yell for the thousandth time, because I can't deal with his gravel talk right now. "Kizi! Where are you?"

There's no response except for the faint swampy noises around us—bugs and breezes and creaky old trees. I let out a sigh from the depths of my soul.

"Hey, she'll be all right." Deacon nudges me with his shoulder. "I can't imagine Kizi K-O letting herself die in a swamp, can you?"

I grunt. He's actually dead right about that. Kizi has way too much still unchecked on her stardom bucket list to allow herself to die. But she's lost out here and has been all night. Kizi isn't indestructible, no matter how much I'd love to believe she is.

“Come on,” I say. “We have a long way to go, and it seems to be getting darker. I wonder if there’s a storm rolling in.”

Deacon looks up, but there’s nothing to be seen beyond the mist except a slate-gray sky.

We go on for several minutes before I pull up short. The path has been getting narrower for a while, but I didn’t think much of it. If the gravel was left here by the tide, it wouldn’t be laid out in a neat line anyway. Except ahead of us, there *is* no path. The way forward simply disappears into dark, viscous swamp water.

“Did we take a wrong turn? I didn’t see another fork, did you?” I say, peering through the mist around us and hoping the correct path will show itself.

“I’ve been telling you there’s something not right about this gravel.”

I cut Deacon a glare. “And?”

“Like I said before ... I think it’s *moving*.”

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## **CLASSIFIED**

***Video footage recovered from the camcorder of Conrad Mullaney, director of several low-budget horror movies from the 1980s and 1990s.***

Mullaney appears, obviously agitated.

**MULLANEY:** Strangest thing just happened. I'd woken up after having another of those dreams where I was at the Oscars watching that prick Nolan Nox win the award that should've been mine—not that that's the strange part ... but I digress. I'd just woken up and was ... Well, I'll be straight with you, I was on my way to knock on Faith's door. But before I got there, I saw something going on down in the entrance hall. Magda was there in her nightdress, standing next to that god-awful sculpture—Lord, I bet she forked out a fortune for that monstrosity too—and she seemed to be muttering to herself. “Hello,” says I, expecting her to startle or maybe to wake up if she was sleepwalking, which on reflection I think is more likely. Anyway, Magda turned slowly to face me, and for the damndest moment, she looked like she didn't even know me. No, not just that—there was something almost ... u n natural about her. And I'm not talking about all the Botox. [Mullaney laughs flatly.] It must have been a trick of the light, though. Yeah, a trick of the light.

Anyway, as we were both awake, I figured I'd suggest we get reacquainted over a nightcap. But she had the audacity to tell me, and I quote [in a soft, feminine voice]: “I'm not sure you have what I need.” [Mullaney throws up his hands, then continues in his regular voice.] Just like that. And she was gone before I could even utter a reply. [Sighs, looking annoyed.] I think we'll see who's lacking or not before the weekend's done.

***Video ends.***

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## CHAPTER NINETEEN

“Let’s backtrack,” I tell Deacon. “We must’ve taken the wrong fork where the path split back there.”

Every few steps I call out for Kizi and Shane, but there’s no answer. The trees surrounding us form dark silhouettes on all sides. I peer into the grayness, searching for some trace of them, of *her*—a scrap of fabric or a lock of Kizi’s turquoise hair snagged on a tree branch; her body floating facedown, tangled in weeds—

*Shut up, shut up, shut up!*

But there’s nothing. Only mist and swamp and the stench of long-dead things.

Deacon slows to a stop. “I don’t think we took the wrong fork, Romero. The path just isn’t the same as it was last night.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m not sure exactly,” Deacon says, frowning, “but something about the path doesn’t feel right. Like it’s not natural.”

“Yes, it’s weird. The house, the swamp, the bizarre things that keep happening to us ... This *whole situation* is beyond weird.” I throw up my arms as though to encompass the entirety of the shit show we’re starring in. “So what are we supposed to do about it?”

“I’m not sure, but ignoring it isn’t going to help us, is it?” he counters, seeming just as exasperated as I am. “Problems don’t simply go away because you refuse to acknowledge them. Trust me.”

I press the heel of my hand against my right eye socket, where the sharp ache from yesterday is brewing again. “Look, let’s just retrace our steps and see if we can go around the submerged part of the path.”

We haven’t gone far before I realize Deacon’s limp is getting worse. I actually feel kinda bad for snapping at him. I guess his revelations about *Little Stars* have forced me to hate him slightly less. Only slightly, though. It’s hard to stop hating someone when it’s become a habit.

*A habit Dad could’ve stopped at any point if he’d cared enough to tell me the truth.*

Away from the path, the clicks and screeches of unseen creatures seem a hundred times louder than before, like they’re sending out distress calls. I wonder about the bear Cairo said she saw lying torn apart near the edge of the canyon....

Could there be others roaming around this swamp? I mean, where there’s one bear, there has to be more, right?

And what the hell killed it?

The murky water seems to press in on all sides. I peer through the mist, trying to make out where the gravel path resumes, but I can’t see anything.

No, that’s not right. I see *something*. There’s a faint silhouette of a building up ahead, between the tangled trees. “Damn. I think we came right around the back of the house,” I say.

“I don’t think that’s the Light.”

The urge to argue with Deacon itches at my tongue.

“It’s too small,” he insists. “Just a shack or something. Probably some kind of outbuilding belonging to the house.”

I peer into the looming fog. As my eyes adjust, it almost seems like the mist isn’t mist at all but a teeming mass of limbs and faces. Then I blink, and they’re gone.

“There, see?” Deacon says.

I follow the line of his pointer finger. Across the black water of the swamp, there’s a squat, square building—only one story high, probably just one room.

“I’ll go check it out. Maybe Kizi or Shane found their way over there,” I say, eyeing the water between us and the shack. If Cairo really saw a man in a rowboat, and he was out fishing or hunting or something, this could be his base. Am I

about to walk in on someone with a gun?

*Maybe he has Kizi and Shane in there.*

It's hard to judge the distance to the shack, but I tell myself it's probably not a huge stretch—maybe a hundred feet. Shouldn't be a problem as long as there's nothing too terrifying lurking in the dark water.

*Like leeches? Or how about gators? Could one of those take apart a bear?*

Man, I really need to read up on swamps. Or not get stranded in one—I guess that would have been a better solution.

“You really think wading over there is a good idea?” Deacon says.

I can tell from Deacon's tone that he doesn't. And while I'm not thrilled at the idea of wading through leech-infested swamp water, one of us needs to check out that shack. I take a step forward and drop to one knee.

“Are you praying?” he asks. “I mean, I suppose it couldn't hurt—”

“I'm tucking my pants into my boots to keep out the leeches.”

“Ah. Clever.”

Sighing, I step into the water.

I expected it to have cooled overnight, but there's a lingering warmth that's almost worse than it being freezing cold. It feels too much like the ideal environment for dangerous things to live. To grow. To *teem*.

The water passes my knees within a few steps, then my waist. The feel of it pressing in around me makes my muscles tighten, primed to flee. *If it gets higher than my armpits*, I decide, *I'm turning back*.

As soon as I think it, I feel guilty. Finding Kizi is way more important than avoiding leeches or anything else I might feel a little squeamish about. There's no way I'm heading back before checking out that shack.

Thankfully, the water doesn't get any deeper, but the sulfur stink is much stronger now, practically burning the back of my throat.

*I'm definitely finding myself some nice, non-swampy dead-people clothes to wear when I get back to the Light.*

I keep expecting to see a light go on inside the building up ahead, or at least the daylight reflecting back from a window, but there's nothing. When I look up, I can't even locate the sun—the mist is a thick, gray sheet hanging over us like a death shroud. I drop my gaze to the water and realize I can't see anything beneath its surface anymore. It's like the light is being stolen each time I blink, a little at a time. It reminds me of that old adage about cooking a frog: you have to heat the pot slowly so the frog doesn't realize it's boiling.



I could be absolutely surrounded by leeches right now and I wouldn't know it until I felt the first sharp bite.

*Not helpful.*

I reach the halfway point between the shack and the gravel path where I left Deacon. Now that I'm closer, I can see a little more of the building. It's sitting on stilt legs, its base hovering a few feet above the swamp, and there's a rickety-looking set of steps leading down to the water on one side.

*Kizi and Shane might be holed up in there.*

Hope blooms in my chest, and I fight to keep it in check. I make it another ten feet before the hair at my nape bristles. Something's watching me—and I don't mean Deacon.

*I need to get out of this water. Now.*

Urging my legs to move faster against the drag of the swamp, I don't take a full breath until my hand meets the wooden railing of the steps leading down from the cabin to the water. I haul myself up onto the bottom step and quickly pull my legs up after me so nothing can jump up from the water and grab my ankles. But nothing leaps or lunges. There's only a faint ripple in the water in my wake.

*I still feel ... something.*

Dragging myself up, I scan the swamp all around the shack while my clinging clothes drip water onto the deck. Still nothing.

But there are unusual marks on the handrail, low down on the vertical wooden struts. Maybe rope marks from something tied there. A boat?

My heart, already pounding from the effort of getting over here, quickens its pace.

*The boatman?*

I lean over the railing, craning my neck to see if a boat might've come unmoored and floated under the deck. There's no sign of a boat, though. Only dark water and clinging mist.

An uneasy feeling passes over me. I peer into the surrounding grayness, half expecting to glimpse an outline of some shadowy figure in a boat watching me from a distance. But I don't see anyone.

*That doesn't mean there's no one there.*

I brush away that nagging thought. Try to, anyway.

Swirling fog creeps across the surface of the water I just waded through, and as it thins, I catch sight of Deacon waiting on the path. Without thinking about it, I wave. Deacon waves back. It's oddly reassuring. I never

thought I'd be glad to see Deacon Rex waiting for me, but having pretty much anyone watching my back is better than being out here alone. The wooden boards creak as I cross the wraparound deck.

It's just the sound of a place not used to a human presence, I tell myself. Nothing to feel creeped out about. I move carefully anyway, easing my weight down with each step in case my foot disappears through a rotten board.

There's only one window, too high up for me to look in, and a rickety door on the far side of the shack. Feeling ridiculous, I knock and wait to see if someone will answer. No one does.

I turn the handle silently. But as the door swings inward, a sharp shriek sends me stumbling back, almost pitching right over the deck railing. When nothing comes hurtling out at me, I force myself to breathe despite my heart drilling away at my ribs.

*It was only the old metal hinges.*

"Kizi? Shane? Are you in here?"

No answer. I clamp my disappointment between my teeth and hold it there while I go in.

Inside the shack is a single square room big enough to hold a narrow camp bed and not much else. Fishing poles are stacked in one corner, the cobwebs hanging from them telling me they haven't been used in years. The bed is rumpled, but it, too, could've been sitting like that for a long, long time before I walked in. In fact, there's very little in here at all to tell me the story of this place. At least, that's what I think until I spot a bag shoved into a corner next to some old bait boxes.

I cross to it, yelping when my movement sends an enormous spider skittering across the floor. Once it's disappeared into a corner far away from me, I reach down and pick up the bag. It's a canvas backpack with buckle fastenings, the kind you might find in an army surplus store.

I peer inside and almost do a little dance of delight: The bag holds a good-size pack of trail mix. There's also a rolled-up raincoat and a porn mag. *Ew.*

I'm about to toss the magazine when I notice the date on the cover. It's only a year old. Someone's been here as recently as *last year*—maybe even more recently than that.

I turn in a full circle as though I might suddenly spot a person hiding in a corner of the room. But I'm alone, and—porn mag aside—I can't tell if anyone's been here recently.

*If there is someone out here, they might be sneaking over to the house to spy on us. It would explain the footsteps, the names on the doors. Why, though, when we obviously need help?*

I can't come up with any answers that don't make me feel even sketchier about this whole situation. So I shrug the bag onto my shoulders and step out onto the deck. And stop. In the short time I was inside the shack, the sky has turned a deeper shade of gray. It's midmorning or thereabouts, but it looks like twilight.

*Definitely a storm coming.*

That, more than anything else, spurs me on. I jump from the deck into the waist-deep water and start wading back to Deacon. The mist has changed its formation so I can no longer see him clearly, but somehow I sense him there waiting for me.

I pull the straps of my stolen backpack tight so it won't drag in the water. My legs burn with the effort of trying to move quickly. I'm used to hiking, but this is something else entirely, and both my body and my brain agree that wading through swamps is a one-time-only kinda deal.

*I hope.*

The water burbles faintly, irritated by my disturbance. I flinch as a cold spray hits my face, but it's just rain. Still, my pulse pounds a tattoo beneath my skin, ticking faster and faster. Because some primal instinct tells me there's something else in the water behind me—something that's moving. And not with the ebb and flow of the swamp or with the wake I'm making—it's creating waves of its own.

I scan the rippling water. I can't see what it is. But it's coming this way, heading straight toward me. It doesn't move like any creature I'm familiar with. It's slow, heavy. And it's *big*. My heart kicks, trying to climb out of my throat.

*What is this thing?*

"Deacon! Go back to the Light now!" At least I can give him a head start.

I begin forcing my way through the swamp, shoving my weight against the unrelenting water. Each step threatens to leave a boot behind in the suctioning mud. I chance a look behind me; the creature is still there—I can see its bulky amorphous form underneath the water, changing direction to

follow me, still very much in pursuit. Choking on a whimper, I drive my legs even harder. The water finally starts to get a little shallower, and there, standing at the edge of the gravel path and wearing garlands of mist, is Deacon.

“Deacon! Run! There’s something coming after me!”

“What do you mean?” he yells back. Because of course he has to have an in-depth discussion about this when *he should be running*. “Just go!”

Even in the shallows, it’s still like shoving against a stone wall trying to get my body out of the water. Deacon stands there gaping.

“Oh my days ...”

He’s not gaping at *me*, though. His eyes are fixed on whatever is behind me.

My foot snags on something beneath the surface. I lurch forward and grab Deacon’s shirt to try to save myself. We both go down onto the gravel. With a wail unlike anything I’ve heard in my life, the creature behind me lunges and lands on my legs. It splashes its way out of the water until it’s right on top of me and Deacon. My scream is muffled against his chest, but I hear his at full volume.

“Jesus bloody Christ! Get it off me! Get it off!”

I buck—or try to. The creature’s too heavy. Then it rolls off of its own accord. I scramble all the way out of the water, snagging Deacon’s wrist on my way past, and in a feat of fear-induced strength, I drag him across the gravel until we’re both out of the creature’s reach.

“Come on!” I pull Deacon to his feet, but he seems extremely reluctant to move. “Run, damn it!”

“Hang on a minute, will you?” he snaps, and to my absolute horror, he moves closer to the creature that attacked us. I turn and see it’s still lying in the shallows, and I get my first real look at it. It’s a hideous thing, covered in mud and slime, with thick limbs and a mass of white tentacles over its face.

“What *is* that?”

Deacon drops to his knees next to it, and I notice something under the grime: on the side of its head is a very human-looking ear wearing a single gold hoop.

*Oh God.*

“Shane! Can you hear me?” Deacon’s voice quavers as he looks down at his bandmate—his friend. He reaches out but snatches his hand back when

one of those face-tentacles twitches.

Those aren't tentacles—they're leeches. And there's a swarm of them feeding hungrily on Shane's face.

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**CLASSIFIED**

***Video footage recovered from the camcorder of Conrad Mullaney, director of several low-budget horror movies from the 1980s and 1990s.***

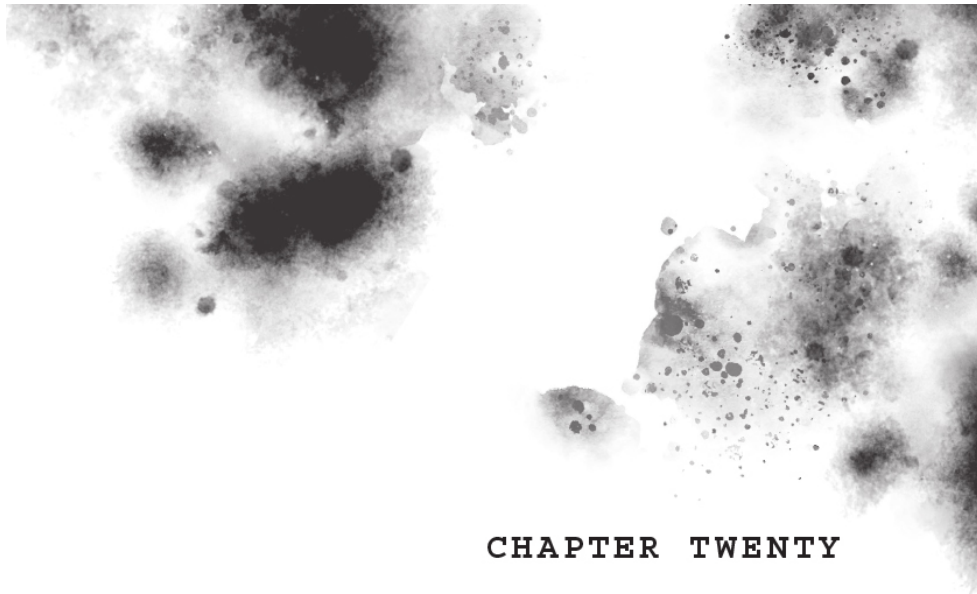
**MULLANEY:** So. Turns out Jimmy's a damn wackadoodle. Guy went out for a walk—not smart with thick fog drifting in like that, but whatever, the guy's an adult—and came running back in an hour later with a cut on his wrist, yelling about how he fell on the gravel path and—get this—the gravel started eating its way into his arm. [Shakes his head.] Seriously. Getting attacked by gravel. These people are killing me.

***Cut. Mullaney returns several hours later. It is once again dark, with the only light coming from the bedside lamp. Mullaney is smoking and appears agitated.***

**MULLANEY:** Okay, something's going on in this place, and I don't know what. I thought I was just in a bad mood after waking up from those strange dreams I've been having, but apparently it's not just me. Jimmy went nuts earlier, nailing all the window shutters closed downstairs, saying something was out to get him. Now he's taken to his room and refuses to come out. I heard that young singer—Brooke—yelling at Magda about wanting to leave, saying she can hear something in the walls. A little while later Magda told the rest of us that Brooke was gone, though she sidestepped the question when I asked her how the hell Brooke got back across the swamp with the phones out and Magda's boat engine busted. [Crushes his cigarette in the ashtray and shoves it aside.] And Jesus H. Christ, what is that smell? It's been lingering around all day... I told Magda she should've brought cleaning staff out here, but noooo, "Mother knows best," apparently. Damn stubborn woman. I can't wait for this weekend to be over so I never have to lay eyes on her again. Happy goddamn New Year.

***Video ends.***

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## CHAPTER TWENTY

Shane's unconscious when we drag him from the water. I guess that's good. I don't even know how he managed to make it across the swamp with those things all over his face. Did he wake up like that after the crash? Or did this happen later?

I try to imagine how terrifying it must have been for him, scrambling blindly, trying to find us. I barely know the guy, but I know for sure I wouldn't want to be him right now.

"What do we do?" Deacon's hands hover above Shane's face. "Oh Christ. How do we ... How do we get them off?" Deacon's hesitation isn't because he's afraid, I realize. At least, he's not afraid of removing the leeches. He's scared of doing it wrong and hurting his friend.

I take a deep breath, trying not to let panic imprison it in my chest.

The leeches are pale beneath the slick of mud and swamp filth. I expect them to be slimy and cold like Jell-O, but these aren't. They're as warm as my trembling hands and as firm as stiff fingers.

*Maybe these aren't leeches. Maybe these are something I've never heard of—a new species.*

I slide the edge of my nail between a leech's biting end and Shane's skin. That's when I realize they aren't *attached* to his skin—they're burrowing *in*, exactly like the one that was in Deacon's leg.

Nausea hits me, but I fight to keep it down. My hand shakes as I take hold of the first leech, but still, I pull it out in one swift movement and toss it into the water behind me. I hear it land with a *splosh*. Shane moans, slowly regaining consciousness. The other leeches start to twitch as though they've sensed they're about to be ripped away from their food source.

"Deacon, help me!" I make room so he can crouch next to me. "Get them out of his skin as fast as you can, but try not to squeeze them—that could make them release bacteria and cause an infection. Got it?"

"Um, yeah. I ... I can do that." Deacon's face is the color of sour cream. We get to work, each focusing on one half of Shane's face, tossing leeches over our shoulders until finally there's only one left. Deacon pulls it free, then curses.

"It bit me!" He flicks his hand and the thing comes loose; it lands on the gravel next to us. Deacon leaps up and stamps on it. Then he takes a step back. "Where'd it go?"

I can't see the leech either, but we have bigger things to worry about. Shane's face is a real mess.

"We need to get him back to the Light," Deacon says, apparently having the same thought. "The bus can wait."

I bite my lip as I peer through the mist in that direction. I still can't see the path we took yesterday. It's like the swamp swallowed it or it shifted during the night like some moving maze.

"Kizi?" I yell, cupping my hands around my mouth to try to amplify the sound. A bird flaps away in fright somewhere, but I don't see it. There's no other response. "Kizi!"

"We'll try again once we've helped Shane," Deacon says, but it sounds like a hollow offer. His focus is all on Shane now.

My best friend's still out there, though. I heard her voice on the phone a few hours ago. She *has* to be alive. I just need to look a little longer... .

I jump as thunder roars overhead. A moment later, the sky opens up. Fat, heavy drops of rain hit the gravel path like bullets, building until they reach machine-gun levels.

Shane jerks as one hits his eye, and he rolls onto his side, gagging.

"Mate, how are you feeling?" Deacon asks him. Shane looks up. One of his eyes is swollen shut where a leech tried to burrow through his eyelid. I really hope it didn't go any deeper than that.



Shane raises a shaking hand and hesitantly touches his face. "They're gone," he says, voice heavy with relief as he flops back onto the gravel again. "I kept trying to get them off, but more and more kept biting, and I couldn't keep up.... "

I nod at Deacon, accepting that for now, there's only one option. "Let's get him back to the Light."

*This is bad. This is so, so bad.*

I'm still silently freaking out as I tend to Shane's facial wounds. I try not to look too closely. Now that the leeches are gone, he's more recognizably *Shane*, but nearly every inch of his face is covered in bites and wounds. I use some of the vodka and a packet of bar soap Cairo found in one of the rooms to clean him up before wrapping his head in decades-old gauze and sanitary pads. When I'm done, Shane looks like the worst Halloween mummy to ever trick-or-treat.

I curse silently. With Deacon's hurt leg, Cai sick, Kizi still missing, and now Shane all messed up like this, how the hell are we supposed to get out?

"Don't worry, mate." I think Deacon's talking to me for a second, but he's over with Shane. "You'll still be pretty when the bandages come off."

Shane huffs out a weak laugh. I guess he doesn't believe Deacon either.

"You know, I had one of those slimy buggers *in* my leg,"

Deacon goes on. "I'm sure it ate a bit of my shinbone. Hurt like hell, anyway. Nasty little things, aren't they?"

"How do you feel? Is there much pain?" I ask Shane. He didn't complain at all when I used the vodka to clean the bites, and it must've felt like having acid poured on them. "Deacon, maybe you could give Shane one of your pills?"

He throws me a flat stare, then says, "Of course." Deacon grabs his messenger bag from under the bench and starts digging through it.

"I don't need painkillers," Shane mumbles. "I can't even feel it."

"You can't?" I glance at Deacon, but he's still occupied with his search and apparently didn't hear what Shane said.

If Shane can't feel the wounds on his face, that's got to be bad, right?

"Hey," he rasps, "I could use some water if you have any."

"I'm afraid not, mate." Deacon shifts along the bench seat to sit closer to Shane.

Outside, the rain lashes the windows, the occasional roll of thunder making it sound like this place could come crashing down around us at any second.

*Maybe that's how it ends—I survive a bus barrel-rolling into a canyon only to get crushed by a tumbledown mansion.*

I set off toward the stairs to check on Cairo. I'll need to break it to her that we still have no drinkable water, but I'm hoping the trail mix will soften the blow.

"Romero." I turn at the staccato sound of Deacon's cane echoing across the tiled entrance hall. "Did you take my pills?"

I stop with my foot on the first step of the dilapidated staircase and turn. "No. Why?"

He narrows his eyes. "Not even through some misguided attempt at ... an *intervention*?"

"Uh, *no*." Deacon continues staring at me for so long, I grow impatient. "Look, I swear I don't have your pills. Have you thought about checking the room you slept in last night before accusing me of stealing?"

I allow my annoyance to put a little stomp into my step as I continue upstairs.

"Suppose I'd better check," he says, still eyeing me suspiciously as he follows.

I pause at the top of the stairs. There's a trail of footprints emerging from the dark corridor where I found the moth room. The tracks look like the ones I saw outside my door last night, though I cleared those away with my boot. And these lead right to Cairo's suite.

"There's someone—"

My words die as a piercing scream echoes around the mezzanine.

Cairo bursts from her room, her deep brown skin tinged gray and covered in a sheen of sweat.

"I saw someone on the balcony. I thought it was the shadows playing tricks on me like with the boatman, but then they started humming I thought it was you," she says, stark eyes fixed on mine, "but I heard you arguing with Deacon out here, so ..."

Those footprints. The names on the doors. I was right—there *is* someone else here.

“They’re outside?” I say. “Aren’t the balcony doors locked?” She shrugs, then keels over, her arms wrapped around her stomach. “Oh God.” Cairo runs down the hall and rushes into one of the rooms, the door slamming behind her. I glance at Deacon. He avoids my eyes, looking as unwilling to go in

Cairo’s room as I am. I snatch the cane from him.

“I still think you’re an asshole,” I tell him. And I go in. There’s no point aiming for stealth after Cairo’s screams, so I walk in fully prepared to start swinging. The tattered gauzy curtains at the balcony doors billow as someone steps in from outside. Lightning flashes, revealing the figure like a spotlight.

The cane falls from my hands.

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## Trip's Vlog Transcript

One Year Ago

***Tristan “ Trip” Filmore Prescott is onscreen. He’s a white male in his early twenties with blond hair and gray eyes. Trip stands next to a tree; there’s wilderness all around him, and deep shadows as the sun is setting.***

PRESCOTT: Howdy, peeps, it’s your boy Trip. And guess what—I finally found the place! This is really it this time, I swear. See this tree? It’s where the coordinates Magdalena Warren sent to the Z-listers she invited to her party led to. If I’m right, these drill holes were from a sign she put up with a second set of coordinates telling them where to go from here ... but I’m getting ahead of myself, and Trip never gets ahead of himself, if you know what I’m saying, ladieeeeeees. [Winks.]

So you’re probably wondering how I got here. Well, I found out about a second set of coordinates because one of the party no-shows, horror-film director Nikolai Brev, got to this point and decided to turn around—he talked about it on a podcast a couple years ago. Anyway, I reached out to him and found out he’d made a note of the coordinates he found here, and he gave them to me. My good buddy Bart—Shark Bart, as you all knew him—well, he and I came here to search for the final destination: the house itself.

Things ... well, they didn’t go quite how Bart and I planned. Then he disappeared.

***Trip stares into the camera, then wipes his sleeve across his face as though there are tears there, though none are visible. The scene cuts. When Trip reappears, he is surrounded by swamp, but little can be seen beyond the reach of his light, as the sun has set. The camera is held in front of him, recording using a selfie-stick and a portable ring light.***

PRESCOTT: I don’t know how much of this you can see, but it’s definitely the place Bart and I came to last year. It’s the same stinking swamp, the same weird path. Look, see how it’s like a white stripe through the water?

***Trip directs the camera down to his feet. The path he’s standing on looks like it’s made of loose gravel.***

PRESCOTT: I think we’re almost there now. I mean, it’s kinda hard to tell in the dark, but the way this path twists all over the place right here is exactly how it was when I came with Bart, and I’m sure we were really close to the house that time. That was right before he, like, disappeared. I wish the cops would let me show you all the footage from that night. It sucks balls that I got it all on camera and I don’t even get to share it. But I’m gonna find this place again and figure out what the hell happened. Then you’ll see. You’ll all see.

***The footage cuts. Trip reappears with a bloody scratch marking his left cheek. There is dirt visible on his clothing and skin.***

**PRESCOTT:** Okay, so this took a turn. I can't exactly explain what happened—at least not yet—but I found the place again. I found ... Ma n, I'm not allowed to say. But there's something that happened before Bart went missing that I haven't told anyone a bout. Not even the cops. But I just spoke to ... I mean, it just happened again. And I know what I have to do now. [Grins widely.] It's all going to tur n out right, and you're gonna want to be around to see it, I swear. All will be revealed soon!

***Trip turns in a circle, the scenery behind him nothing but trees and swamp water and thick mist.***

**PRESCOTT:** Look, I gotta call it. My phone's running out of juice and—damn it! What the ... Some weird snake-bug thing bit me! I'm outta here for now. Like and subscribe.

**Posted below the video are the hashtags #Find Shark Bart and #TriplInnocent**

***Below that, several comments appear.***

**Parkour Lyfe:** That was WEAK

**Parkour Lyfe:** This loser guilty AF. Why'd I even waste time watching that?!

**UFOPrincess51:** Can't even \*spell\* innocent LMAO Parkour Lyfe: OMG you right @UFOPrincess51 EwingDngrGrl: 20 mins of my life I'll never get back.

**Jordan81387:** PATHETIC

**Skidd\_Roc:** I hate how he keeps acting like he was BFFs with Shark Bart when everyone knows Shark Bart thought he was a tool. Trip's just a fanboy who went full psycho-stalker and now trying to act the victim. #RIPSharkBart

**Parkour\_\_Lyfe:** #RIPSharkBart for real RealTrip69: Hey @Skidd\_Roc, you don't know how it was with me & Bart so STFU

**Skidd\_Roc:** Remember he tried the same thing with C-Blok, but he got shut down HARD. Didn't need some loser fanboy trying to do little kindergarten parkour when C-Blok's the real deal.

**SugarDRexFan:** Why do you guys keep putting down fans tho? I don't know what really happened with Trip and Shark Bart, but there's nothing wrong with being a fan—it shows you \*get\* the art someone's putting out into the world and admire their talent. I chair a fan club that's all about sharing and celebrating what we love. IMO people like Shark Bart appreciate their fans and wouldn't want anyone bashing them for being vocal about their fandom. #BeKind

**Parkour\_\_Lyfe:** "Art." LOLOL

**RealTrip69:** I appreciate you, Sugar!

**D7INGK1NG:** He thinks @SugarDRexFan was talking about being a fan of \*him\* LMAOOOO! Dude, read her username, she's a Deacon Rex fan! Hi-5 Sugar!

**UFOPrincess51:** DRex slaps tbh

**Skidd\_Roc:** LMAO @RealTrip69—delete your account. You're an embarrassment to the amoebas that birthed you. You got away with what you did to Shark Bart. Be grateful and crawl back into the seeeeaaaaaa

**AllTeethNoBeef:** Crawl back into the \*swamp\* LOL

**UrUsername5ux:** #OneWayTrip LOLOL

The comments continue for several pages. Trip does not engage further. He does, however, return four months later to respond directly to one of the comments.

**RealTrip69:** Hey, @SugarDRexFan—check ur DMs. Sent you a question about DRex

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

*“Kizi?”*

I rush over and throw my arms around her. She’s soaked, though her skin isn’t nearly as icy as mine. Holding on to my best friend, I realize that I believed this would never happen again; that she was gone forever, and a part of me was gone with her. I cling to Kizi until her arms come around me. She gives me a brief squeeze before easing out of my embrace, laughing.

“I’m so glad you’re here too.”

“Why were you standing out there in the rain?” I say. I feel as though my eyes are the biggest they’ve ever been, like if I blink, Kizi will disappear again.

Aside from being damp from the rain, she looks great—no bruises, cuts, or obvious leech bites on her exposed skin. She must’ve riffled through one of the closets here, as she’s now wearing a vintage early-2000s-looking black maxi dress with tiny silver stars embroidered all over it and a pair of strappy sandals. This is swamp chic, I guess. Even her eyeliner still looks good. “How did you get here? Where have you been? I was so worried!”

“Slow down, Detective.” She laughs again at my rapid-fire questioning. “I found this place last night but got turned around exploring and basically passed out in one of the upstairs rooms. When I woke up a little while ago, I

took another look around and found Cairo asleep in here. I wasn't trying to freak her out, just checking she was okay."

"I think she just panicked. She hasn't been feeling too great." I can't help staring at Kizi. I imagined so many terrible things happening to her after we got separated, so seeing her now, whole and unharmed, is like having a boulder taken off me. I want to hug her some more and jump around like a fool, but I somehow manage to restrain myself. "What happened to you after the bus rolled into the canyon?"

"It's all a bit of a blur." Kizi wanders to the dust-coated dresser and picks up the invitation I found yesterday, the one addressed to Faith Knight. I must have left it here the last time I came to check on Cairo. "We missed the party, huh? Guess we'll have to make our own."

Frustration wells up inside me, but I force it down. This is how Kizi always deals with stressful situations—she puts on her Kizi K-O front and acts like nothing's wrong.

"You're not hurt, though?" I ask.

"Nah," she says. "But I *am* starving."

My own stomach feels like it's been hollowed out like a jack-o'-lantern, but I've been trying to ignore it. After all, aside from the bag of year-old trail mix I stole from the shack, we have no food. My throat is Sahara-dry, and my lips are as cracked as a dropped mirror.

"We only have this to eat," I admit, holding up the bag. "I need to go back to the bus to see if there's anything there we can salvage."

*Especially now there are five of us.*

In spite of the grim situation, I can't help feeling a surge of gratitude. Now that Kizi is standing in front of me, I see there's no way she would be beaten by a lowly swamp.

"I tried calling you," she says softly, her eyes flitting briefly to me before dancing away again, "but something must be wrong with my phone. It wouldn't connect. I just kept hearing this weird noise on the line. I didn't know if I'd ever find you.... I've never felt so alone, Hade."

Guilt tears a path through my midsection. I should have gone to look for her as soon as I made sure Cairo and Deacon had shelter. That's what Kizi would've done if *I* were missing. "I got the call, but you couldn't hear me. We went out to look for you in the swamp, but there was—"

"It's fine. We're together now. That's what matters."



*She's right. Of course she is.*

As I think it, I feel the tension seeping from my muscles, one by one. I want to grin because *I have my best friend back*, and nothing seems quite as terrible as it did five minutes ago. I notice her pointed turquoise nails are still perfect. I almost laugh at that—it's so typical for Kizi to go through a bus wreck *and* a trek through a swamp with her manicure intact.

Beyond her, through the open balcony door, I see lightning fork in the distance, its brightness muted by the hanging mist. Kizi seems oblivious to the storm.

"Are you sure there's no food here? Did you check everywhere?"

"There's nothing. We looked. Cairo and me, I mean.

When we first got here."

"Okay." She shrugs, her relief at being here with us seeming to outweigh any worry about our crappy circumstances. I'm pretty sure I look the same way. "Sounds like you two are managing to get along, at least. That's good."

"Yeah." I run a hand through my hair. "This place is so huge—maybe we missed a stash of food somewhere? It probably wouldn't hurt to look again."

"Why don't I go check?" she says, brushing past me. She pauses when Deacon and Cairo edge in, blocking the doorway onto the mezzanine.

"You're ... here," Cairo says, blinking rapidly like she thinks Kizi might be a mirage. Kizi reaches out and lays a hand on each one's shoulder. Cairo frowns as she looks down at it, but she doesn't shrug it off. I guess this whole life-and-death thing has a silver lining.

"My God, you guys! I've been so worried about you," Kizi says. "I know this isn't how any of us saw this weekend playing out, but everything's going to be fine now that we're all together." I watch her knuckles whiten as she gives them a quick squeeze, then breezes past Cai and Deacon and out the bedroom door.

"Well, that was weird," Cairo says, staring after her. "What's *weird* after you've been in a major accident and ended up stranded in a swamp?" Even I can hear the defensiveness in my tone.

"People deal with stressful things in different ways," Deacon agrees.

Ignoring him, Cai arches a brow at me. "Could *weird* include putting our names on the doors?"

“Don’t be ridiculous,” I hiss. I push past her and out onto the mezzanine in time to see Kizi making her way down the stairs, looking around at the moldering building. But as I follow her gaze, I realize it’s not so bad after all. Sure, it’s a little dusty and could use a total overhaul of the decor, but it doesn’t feel like it’s a strong sneeze away from crumbling into the swamp.

“Can you believe this place?” Kizi’s eyes shine as she takes in the sweeping staircase, the big-ass sculpture dominating the entrance hall below, and the cobweb-draped chandelier above us. “Doesn’t it feel like a dream you had long ago and forgot about? And now it’s coming to life.”

“There’s a room up here with a creepy mannequin in it that you need to see before you fall in love with the place,” I call down. “It’s where Deacon got his cane.”

He twirls it next to me, looking pleased with himself. “What we haven’t found is a supply of drinkable water,”

Cairo says stiffly. “Or a way to contact the outside world. But there has to be a way, right? Someone must’ve realized we’re missing, and they’ll have some idea where to look. If they send out a chopper, it’s not like they could miss Rex Mori’s big-ass tour bus.”

I hadn’t noticed Kizi soundlessly slipping away, but she pauses again at the foot of the stairs. “Did you say something’s wrong with the water?”

“Oh, only that it made me sick, and if we don’t find something to drink soon, we’ll all die,” Cai answers grimly.

“We’re going to get out of here before that happens,” I say, sounding far more certain than I feel.

All three of them look at me like I’ve just announced Santa’s on his way with a team of rescue reindeer.

“Look, once Shane’s feeling better, we can make our way back to the bus and hopefully salvage some food and water from there,” I say. “Then we can climb up the side of the canyon the way we came down. When we get to a road”—*if* we do—“we’ll flag down a car and get help.”

“The road’s totally gone, though.” I jump as Shane’s voice echoes from the entrance hall below. He’s still sitting on the wooden bench, his head covered in bandages. I assumed he was asleep, but he’s peering up at me through his one good eye. “Whole thing went down in the landslide that took the bus over the edge, and me along with it. That’s how I ended up here—slid right down on my ass after it. You’re talking about climbing up the side of a canyon we *know* is unstable.”

I shake my head, unwilling to admit defeat. “But we can still—”

“I don’t remember seeing any other tire tracks on the road either,” Shane says, cutting me off. “To me, that says nobody lives anywhere near here. We’re in the middle of nowhere, basically.”

“So what are you suggesting? That we hang around here until we all die of thirst?”

Shane turns his hands over in his lap. “I’m not suggesting anything. But I don’t see how we can climb out of this canyon. Even if we could, there’s nowhere to go for help. As for the water—”

“God, *shut up*.” I brace my forearms on the mezzanine railing and let my head sink down between them.

*Get it together.*

“Sorry,” I tell Shane, looking up. He meets my gaze with a bleak stare. “This is just ...” I wave an arm, and he nods. Of course he gets it. They all get it.

“We don’t need to worry about water, though,” Kizi says as she continues toward a hallway leading deeper into the Light. “The tap water’s fine—I drank some earlier. Even took a shower.”

I gape down at her. “You did *what*?”

“I was so grubby after being outside. But I’m good now. You should all get cleaned up—it’ll make you feel a million times better, I swear. I’m going to find something to eat.”

Has Kizi really been drinking the tap water here? *Showering* in it? I shudder, picturing the brown maggoty slime sputtering from the faucet in Magdalena Warren’s suite.

“Cai got really sick after drinking it,” I tell her. “Do you feel okay?”

“I feel great. Maybe Cai picked up a bug out in the swamp. Or maybe all that ... crusty stuff made her sick.” Kizi screws up her face as she gestures to the dried blood still coating Cairo’s skin.

“I guess it could’ve been something else that made me sick,” Cairo concedes, looking uncertain.

“Exactly.” Kizi starts walking again.

“Hey, Kiz?” Cai calls after her. “You didn’t mess around with the names on the doors, did you? Change them to our names, I mean.”

I cut Cairo a glare—I mean, is this really important right now?—but Kizi answers her.

“Of course not.” Kizi gives a flat laugh. “That’s so weird.  
But maybe it’s just the house’s way of welcoming us here?”

With that, she disappears down the hall that leads to the kitchen.

“What the hell is this place, anyway?” Shane says, pulling my focus back to him. He’s on his feet now, running one hand over the ridged surface of the sculpture at the center of the entrance hall. The three of us on the mezzanine head downstairs. “It’s like something out of a horror movie.”

“Funny you should say that ” Deacon tells him about the invitation we found and shows him the photograph of the party guests. With the bandages on Shane’s face, it’s hard to tell what his reaction is, but when Deacon’s finished, Shane lets out a low whistle.

“You know, I think I’ve heard of this place too,” he says unexpectedly. “Read about it online a couple years ago. Most people believe it’s not real, that Trip Prescott made it up to lure Shark Bart out into the middle of nowhere and kill him, but I guess he wasn’t lying about everything.”

“So what happened to this Trip guy?” I ask, intrigued. Shane shrugs. “I guess he disappeared—or went quiet, anyway. I don’t think he ever did any time for murder.”

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*With a featherlight touch, the unseen hand sends me gently onto the stage. There's no mistaking the light. That roar. It hits like a wave, fills my whole body and makes me feel weightless all at once.*

*I'm onstage. The mic sits before me, my guitar next to it, waiting to be picked up. I'm consumed with wanting it—wanting this. I am where I'm supposed to be. This feeling, it's ... it's home. The place where I feel more real than anywhere else. More me.*

*I look into the crowd, and I'm able to see their faces. There's Mom, waving her arms, her smile wider than I've ever seen it. And beside her, Dad watches me, such pride shining in his eyes. There are others too. Kizi and her sisters, their parents. Aunt Selena. All of them watching me, so excited to see me here on the stage before them.*

*And my heart ...*

*My heart could burst, and I'd die happy in this moment.*

*Feeling loved. Adored.*

*Complete.*

*"This can be yours," the voice whispers, and the crowd sinks back into shadow, though I still feel them there. I drag my eyes away to search for the*

*owner of the voice, but I can't see anyone, even though I feel cool fingers laced with mine.*

*"What would you give to have this life?" the voice says. I don't reply, but I think the speaker knows my answer.*

*Anything.*

*I'd give anything.*

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

I eye the water with extreme suspicion as I put my hand in the stream from the faucet. My skin doesn't shrivel or start to blister, so that's a good sign. Maybe the water *is* safe?

I'm feeling a little weird after the dream I had; I only came upstairs to give the others a chance to rest, hardly expecting to sleep myself. I think the nap did me some good, though. My head feels clearer. But there's still a dull thud above my eye, like someone's in there banging a drum to demand water.

The tap water's not freezing cold as it runs over my fingers—in fact, it's the exact temperature of my skin. I can't figure out how this water comes from the same pipes as the brown, maggoty filth that came out of the other faucet. There isn't even a hint of discoloration here in Faith Knight's bathroom. *My* bathroom now, I guess, since the switch with the door names.

Did Kizi do that? Or Deacon, maybe? Whoever the hell it was, it's weird. But like Deacon said, we all deal with stressful situations—like surviving a bus crash and getting stranded in a swamp—differently. Maybe he did it—maybe changing the room names was his way of ... I dunno, making the place feel safer? Like we belong here? Who knows what makes sense in that guy's head.

I fill a tumbler, raise it to my face, and give the water an experimental sniff. It doesn't smell bad. I haven't worked up the courage to taste it yet, but Kizi said she's been drinking it since last night, and she's fine. It seems

like only the water in Magdalena Warren's suite is tainted, which doesn't make sense unless some small creature crawled up into her faucet and died in there.

I set the tumbler down, not quite ready to commit to drinking it. Still, I'm not going to pass up the opportunity to shower off some of the swamp filth I've accumulated since the crash, especially seeing as Kizi's disappeared to explore the Light and Shane's crashed out in the Mullaney room a couple doors down.

I feel like a brand-new human when I step out of the shower ten minutes later. A brand-new, slightly battered human. I comb my hair with my fingers while my skin airdries, making a face at my gross clothes. They're still wet from when I waded through the swamp earlier, so I toss them in the shower and turn it back on, hoping the rinse will at least remove some of the smell.

I guess it's time to go hunting for some dusty old dead-people clothes. Or maybe not; my eyes snag on something hanging on the back of the bathroom door. I think it's a robe at first, but when I look closer, I see it's a deep blue jumpsuit.

Was that always there? I didn't notice it when I came in, but I was so tired I could've walked past a ten-foot Easter Bunny and not noticed. It saves me having to poke around the corpse closet, anyway.

I sense someone at the bathroom door and yell, "I'll be out in a minute." There's no answer, so I grab the jumpsuit and quickly put it on. It doesn't smell musty at all, and the fit isn't too bad.

Whoever's out there doesn't step away from the door, though—I can still hear a faint rustle of movement.

"What is it? If you need to use a bathroom, go in one of the others—there are like a hundred in this place!"

So much for privacy.

Still, the person doesn't leave.

Annoyed now, I fling open the bathroom door. "What's the ru—"

There's no one there. Nerves set to snap, I step out into the bedroom. There's no sign of any of the others. The balcony doors are closed, and there's no one peering in through the gauzy curtains. But I still hear something ... *breathing*.

"Kiz? Are you in here?"

No answer. And I have a feeling this isn't Kizi screwing around. But who else would be messing with me like this? My scalp prickles.



The dark wood closet is empty aside from a few hangers holding Faith Knight's clothes. I whirl back to the bed, where an age-spotted sheet drapes down over the sides, concealing the space underneath. It's the only place anyone can possibly be hiding. Braced to run or fight if I have to, I crouch down on all fours and whip it aside, my free hand clenched in a fist because I'm sure as hell going to punch anyone who was hiding under there while I showered.

The space beneath the bed is empty.

I let the skirt fall back into place, rock back into a crouch, and stay there, not moving. The breathing sound still comes, soft and even.

"Who's in here?" I call out.

I stand and make a slow circle around the room, listening.

It seems louder by the open bathroom door.

*Is someone hiding in there? Was someone there the whole time I showered?*

I honestly can't imagine any of the others creeping on me in the shower, not even as some screwed-up joke. But who else could it be?

The strange footprints I saw earlier flash through my mind. They didn't look like someone had made them simply by walking through the dust that covers every room in this place like dead skin. It was like the person's feet had been coated in chalk.

I kinda figured it was Kizi, seeing as she admitted to wandering around the place when she first got here, but what if it wasn't?

*What if there's someone else here?*

The thought hits me again, just like it did last night when I thought I heard breathing at my door. And I can definitely hear someone in the bathroom now. Maybe it's that Bart guy Shane was talking about? He disappeared here a couple years ago, so it's possible, right?

*Or ...*

A startling new worry occurs to me.

*Could one of those people from the party still be here, years later?* There were plenty of guests, and not all of them were accounted for. In fact, I don't think *any* of them were accounted for.

I freeze when I notice the bathroom door slowly swinging closed. As it does, it reveals a dark shape reflected in the mirror above the sink. The glass is still hazy from my hot shower, but there's definitely someone standing behind the bathroom door.

My mouth goes dry, my heart hammering a reckoning beat. Every sore muscle in my body pulls tight with anticipation as the door slowly, slowly closes.

I pick up an empty vase from the dressing table and, knuckles white, I approach the bathroom.

*Three, two, one ...*

The door makes a loud *crack* when I kick it open, then another when the brass handle hits the wall tiles on the other side. I stride in and swing the vase in a tight circle as I check every corner.

Nothing. There's no one in here. All that's behind the door is a long, dark mold patch climbing up the wall.

Releasing a trembling laugh, I set down the vase next to the sink. I'm turning to leave the bathroom when something touches my shoulder.

I shriek right in Deacon's face.

"What's wrong?" he asks, wincing from the doorway. "Damn it! I—" I hold a finger to my lips. The breathing sound is still there. "Do you hear that?" I whisper.

He listens. "No, but I think you might've burst my eardrums."

*Someone breathing*, I mouth. He listens again but then shrugs a no.

I know I'm not imagining it. There's someone *in here*.

That's when I notice the vent high up on the wall inside the shower stall. It's the kind of thing used to let out steam where there are no windows. This one is only a little wider in diameter than my hand, and black with dust and mold. I point to it, and Deacon steps into the bathroom. I hate that I feel better with him in here, but I really do.

Quietly, I climb back into the shower stall. It's definitely coming from in here. I gesture for Deacon to give me a boost up. He looks at me like I'm crazy but does it anyway. It's only when I feel him shake with the effort of holding me that I remember his injured leg. I hop down.

"What was it?" he whispers. "Did you see something?"

"No. Listen—the sound stopped."

And it has. We both stand completely still. It isn't there anymore.

"Someone's in this house with us," I say, stating the obvious. But I'm surprised when Deacon looks skeptical. "What? You don't agree? There were those strange, chalky footprints—"

"That pipe is far too narrow for someone to be hiding inside it," he says. "I wonder if the vent connects to one of the other bathrooms, and it was

Cairo or Shane or Kizi you could hear?”

I mean, it’s possible. It definitely makes more sense than someone hiding inside a wall. But it doesn’t explain the footprints I saw.

“Or maybe it’s the ghosts again,” Deacon says. I can’t tell if he’s kidding, so I ignore him and decide to change the subject rather than listen to any more of his ridiculous theories.

“How’s Shane doing?”

“Still asleep.” Deacon’s eyes linger on the vent. “He didn’t even wake up when you made all that racket.”

“That’s probably good. He needs rest after what happened.”

Deacon nods. “Those leeches are nasty. I wouldn’t want one attaching itself to my face.” He must catch me giving him a little side-eye because he continues, “*Not* because it would mar this work of art, petal, though that would be a damn shame. But those leeches really did a number on Shane, didn’t they? I’m wondering if maybe they have some kind of toxin in them—something they spew out that numbs the injury. Shane got a big dose of it, but I guess I didn’t, because my leg really does hurt.”

“I don’t see how it still hurts after you took all those painkillers.” I don’t mean to sound accusatory, but apparently I do, because Deacon’s face immediately closes off.

“And I don’t see how you’re a bloody doctor all of a sudden to be telling me whether I’m in pain or not,” Deacon snaps. He turns and leaves me in the bathroom, slamming the door behind him.

I give the vent one last long look, then follow him.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

*Hush, li'l dreamer  
Don't you fight  
Don't move, don't breathe  
Just watch; don't you see  
That good li'l dreamers  
Come to the light*

—From “Li'l Dreamer” by Haden Romero

When Kizi reappears later, it's with ramen noodles she found in a cabinet in the kitchen. I don't know how the hell Cairo and I missed the stash while we were searching. Kizi even figured out a way to boil water and cook them, which makes me feel a little better about our water supply.

The noodles must be way past their expiration date, but I'm not about to argue when I'm hungry enough to eat the bowl they came in. I'm pretty sure Deacon was on the verge of suggesting we draw lots to decide who'd get eaten first.

The five of us huddle in the entrance hall, sitting on old armchairs and sofa cushions we dragged in from wherever we could find them to form a rough circle in the large space. The storm still rages outside, rain beating on the windows like a horde of zombies. It's not the most comfortable spot in the house, but we all seem to want to stay close to the door—ready to get the hell out of here as soon as possible.

The sculpture casts a shadow over us. Looking at it, I can't imagine why anyone would buy something so big and so ugly. How would they even get it here? Now that I really think about it, I wonder why anyone would build this place at all.

Is it possible there wasn't always a swamp here? That might explain it—and explain why this place was eventually abandoned. Although that weird-ass New Year's murder party would be a pretty good reason for checking out of here too.

Did *all* the party guests die? My worries from before come swooping back. I've mostly been avoiding thinking about the people who last stayed here, but if what Deacon heard was true, none of them were ever seen again. So they must've died, right? Seems super-unlikely a bunch of celebrities would make a pact to disappear and live out their days in obscurity.

*Unless they're still here...*

A creak from the mezzanine has my gaze darting toward the sound, a forkful of ramen halfway to my mouth, but there's nothing up there to see. Just an old house making old-house noises.

Whether it's Deacon's ghosts or party guests who really outstayed their welcome or simply the wood creaking in the wind—I just want to get away from this damn canyon.

*I'd give anything to be at Rock-o'-Lantern right now, stepping out on that stage...*

Thirst finally forces me to drink the tap water. Even after my shower, my lips are so dry, I could strike a match on them. Cairo gives me a grim smile of solidarity as I eye the glass warily.

"I've been drinking it all morning and I'm feeling okay," she tells me. "Way better than before, actually."

"Don't you think we should at least boil it, now that Kizi found a way to do that?" I ask.

Cai shrugs. "You can if you want. But Kizi said she's been drinking it right from the tap and she's fine. Wish I'd known that before I made us all go thirsty."

"It wasn't your fault," I tell her. "Really. And I'm glad you're okay."

She laughs, but there's an edge to it. "Not as glad as you were to see Kizi safe and well, though, right?"

"Heyyy," I say, a little thrown, "that's not fair."

Cai's always direct—it's something I like about her, usually, but that was kind of a low blow.

"Are you saying you *don't* always put Kizi first, even when it's not what's best for you?" One eyebrow raised, Cai looks over at Kizi and then back to me. "You know, ever since we broke up, I've wanted to ask ..."

Her voice trails off, and even though I probably don't want to know what she was about to say, I go ahead and pull on that thread anyway. "Wanted to ask me what?"

"Why you wouldn't come with me when I left the band.

Like, weren't you even tempted?"

I sigh, wishing I'd kept my damn mouth shut. "You want to get into this *now*?"

"Why not? What else are we gonna do? Chase Deacon's ghosts or whatever the hell else is lurking around here? Come on, if D's right with all his doom talk, this could be our last chance to get everything out in the open."

Her tone is flippant now, but something tells me that underneath it, Cai's scared we might actually die here. I mean, we're *all* scared, but it's rare for Cairo to show fear. Maybe having this conversation is what she needs to distract herself—even if it feels like it's gonna get messy.

"I talked to Kizi earlier," she says, her fingers drumming rhythmically against the arm of her chair, "hashed out a few things. She suggested you and I should do the same Clear the air."

*Kizi suggested this?*

I'm frowning when Cai finally meets my gaze, and the look in her eyes makes my breath catch. Her walls are all the way down for once.

"So what was the real reason?" she says. "I just need to know, because you were pretty damn important to me, Hade. How come you always chose Kizi over me?"

"Jesus." What a question. It's not one with an easy answer, but I guess I have to try. I owe that to her. "Look, I know you thought I was secretly in love with her or something, but it wasn't like that, I swear." Cai just listens, waiting for me to go on. "Okay, do you remember that time not long after I moved to Ratsack, when Kizi's grandmother was visiting from Kyoto and she taught us all to crochet?" I begin quietly, making sure nobody can overhear—especially not Kizi.

"I remember," Cai says, looking confused. "Why?"

“That was my first-ever sleepover. First time I ever hung out with a grandparent, and it didn’t matter that she wasn’t mine. You know what it’s like at Kizi’s place—all chaos all the time, and everyone’s included. And I was just ... there.”

Cairo’s brow furrows; she’s still not seeing where I’m going with this.

“I get to be normal with her, Cai. Like I don’t always have to be *on*, performing, and she still likes me. Likes *me*—Haden—not just Haden Romero, musician and former reality-TV contestant. She makes me feel ... like a real person, I guess.”

“And I don’t?” Cai looks almost offended. I can’t help but snort out a laugh.

“The first time we kissed, you said, ‘Wow, I can’t believe I just made out with Haden freaking Romero.’”

She squirms a little. “Yeah, I guess I did say that. But that doesn’t mean I didn’t like you for you.”

Her use of past tense hits me like an elbow to the rib cage, but I let it go.

“It just felt like you were always super-aware of all that *Little Stars* stuff”—I pick at the frayed edge of my sleeve—“and I’d already had so many people ditch me when my novelty wore off. Kizi has never made me feel like that was going to happen.”

*I couldn’t take that risk with you. I didn’t know if you’d stay.*

But these thoughts remain unspoken. As hard as it is to admit, I’m realizing that I did this a lot during our relationship—kept things locked up that maybe I shouldn’t have.

“I never meant for it to seem like I didn’t care, Cai,” I tell her softly. “Or like it wasn’t hard to watch you go. I’m sorry if that’s how it felt.”

Cai’s jaw clenches, but only for a moment. She seems to deflate back in her chair. “I just wish you would’ve at least heard me out about the new band idea. You didn’t even let me explain why I wanted to try something else.”

“It seemed pretty obvious after watching you and Kizi butt heads for months,” I tell her dryly. “You thought Phantomic was going nowhere.” I don’t quite hide the pinch of hurt in my voice at that last part.

Something like regret simmers behind Cai’s hazel eyes. “I wasn’t ever trying to hurt you, Hade. Or Kizi. But you both made it seem like I was stabbing you in the back when all I wanted was to give music my best shot.

And that really sucked, you know? I mean, isn't that what we *all* want—what brought us together in the first place?"

I don't answer. Can't, really, because she's right.

"And for what it's worth," she continues, "I asked you to come with me because I wanted us *both* to have a real chance at breaking out, and I don't think that's ever gonna happen for you while you're just a background player in the Kizi show."

"It's not like that," I insist. "Kizi and I *both* make decisions when it comes to the band. And I know I made the right call staying in Phantomic."

*Why does that taste like a lie?*

"Okay, then," Cai says, and in that moment I see that her walls are firmly back in place. Her lips curve into a wry smirk. "Man, I hate all this touchy-feely shit, don't you?"

I huff in agreement, then nudge her knee with mine. "We're okay, though, yeah?"

Cai nods slowly before nudging me back. "Yeah, Haden. We're good."

I notice Deacon's still picking at his ramen across the entrance hall. I'm not sure where Kizi's disappeared to. Shane's struggling to eat with those bandages in the way, so I go over to help.

"I'm gonna take these off now, let the wounds air out for a while," I tell him. But I flinch when I remove the first layer and the bandage tears a small patch of skin off with it. "Damn! Sorry."

Shane's eye was swollen and red earlier, but now it looks almost sunken in his head. The skin around the leech bite has turned greenish yellow. He needs a hospital, and fast.

Shane peers at me through his one open eye. "It's okay," he says. "It doesn't hurt."

I clean him up and redress the wounds with the few supplies there are left. Then I turn to Deacon, who has been studiously avoiding looking at Shane while he finishes eating.

"Let me see your leg."

He opens his mouth like he's going to be a smart-ass, but my expression makes him think better of it. Deacon rolls up his pant leg. It's a little scabby where the bite is healing, but it doesn't look too bad.

"How does it feel?" I ask, trying to be gentle as I prod the skin around it. He still jerks away like I just attached an electrode to him.



“Careful, Doc,” he says. “I might start to think you have a grudge against me or something.”

That statement would’ve been true twenty-four hours ago. But after his revelation about my dad and the *Little Stars* producers, I’m not sure what I really have to hate Deacon for. There’s a buttload of things I have to yell at my *dad* about, but Deacon? Not so much, I guess.

I look up and find him smirking.

“You’re starting to warm up to me, aren’t you? Go on, admit it.” At my incredulous expression, he holds up his hands. “Oh, I know you don’t like me *like that*—you being gay was literally the first thing you told me when we met in the auditions.” I’m not sure that’s true, though it might be. I came out to my parents when I was twelve, and to the world shortly after. “But we were friends once, and I think we will be again. My natural charisma is undeniable.”

I laugh. “Talk to me when your natural charisma gets us out of this swamp.”

“Agreed. Survive first, friends after.” Deacon holds out his hand. Rolling my eyes, I shake it. As Deacon tugs down his pant leg, I notice Shane’s now gazing vacantly ahead, totally spaced out.

“We really need to get out of here,” I whisper to Deacon. “Shane’s not looking too hot. He needs to see a real doctor, and soon.”

Deacon gives Shane an assessing look. “Do you really think he’d be able to wade for miles across the swamp, scale the side of the canyon, then hike all the way to the nearest inhabited place?”

Shane has barely touched his food. He slumps back in a nest of dust-covered pillows like he’s ready to sleep again. I fight the urge to try to keep him awake, yell that we need to get out of here *now*, but Deacon’s right—Shane’s in no shape to leave, especially with the rain still driving hard outside. I doubt any of us could see one foot ahead in this weather, let alone make it back to civilization.

*But the storm can’t last forever*, I tell myself. Even if it feels like it will.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Trapped in the Light with the wind howling outside, I try to pluck a tune from the guitar that appeared in my room a little while ago. I guess one of the others—Cairo, maybe, as some kind of peace offering?—retrieved it from the Arkansas suite and left it for me, so I brought it down to the entrance hall to test out the acoustics. Unfortunately the strings are in no shape to cooperate. Deacon watches me quietly.

I set the guitar aside as Shane wakes with a snort. He sits upright in his pillow nest and groans.

“You in pain, pal?” Deacon asks. I wonder if he’s going to volunteer to share his meds with Shane—if he managed to find them. I actually haven’t seen Deacon take any pills since just after we arrived at the Light, so maybe he does only use them when he needs to.

Shane cuts off my speculation with a bleak laugh. “Just remembering that we’re trapped in this hellhole and wishing I’d stayed asleep.”

“Why don’t you go rest upstairs? You might be more comfortable in an actual bed,” I say reluctantly. I don’t want him to settle in for a full night. *Another night in this place.* But I can’t act like I’m more concerned about getting out of here than about making sure Shane’s okay, even if a little part of me is. “Here, let me help you up.”

Shane falls into bed in the Mullaney suite like he’s been waiting years for it. As I’m turning to leave, I spot a very faint light coming from the desk by

the window.

Mullaney's video camera still sits where I left it, plugged in, the light coming from the miniature flip-out screen. The word *Playback* is flashing on it. Shane's already snoring, so I pull up a chair and sit back to watch.

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**CLASSIFIED**

***Video footage recovered from the camcorder of Conrad Mullaney, director of several low-budget horror movies from the 1980s and 1990s.***

Mullaney holds the camera out in front of him as he stands next to his bedroom door. When he speaks, it's in a whisper.

MULLANEY: There—you hear that? It sounds like someone's breathing right outside my room. I've heard footsteps running too, but every time I open the door to yell, there's nobody there. Listen. [Mullaney pauses, but whatever he hears is not audible on the recording.] I thought it was the kid, but Magda told us that writer woman and her child left already, so who the hell keeps running past my door? The footsteps are too quiet for a man, and I haven't seen Jimmy in ages. It can't be Magda with that cane either—though now that I think about it, was she even using her cane earlier? [Sighs deeply.] These dreams are getting more and more intense too. I wake up feeling more tired than when I went to sleep, and I think it's making me see things. [Mullaney moves away from the door, takes his usual spot on the chair by the window, and lights a cigarette.] Maybe it's Faith running past my door, trying to make me think I'm losing my mind.... I don't know. She's young, but she's too old for that bullshit. Any way, I'm going to bed. Tomorrow's New Year's Eve, which means we can all get the hell out of here the next day. [Mullaney picks up a glass of whiskey from off camera and raises it.] Cheers to that.

***End of footage from that day.***

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Holy crap. This is one of the people who was at the party—one of the people who disappeared.

And he heard someone breathing at his door too.

*There is someone else here. Maybe someone who was at the party.* The thought rings through my head like a warning bell, but it's almost drowned out by the sound of the rain redoubling its assault on the old windows.

How could someone be here without any of us seeing them, though? It doesn't make any sense. Either way, we can't leave yet—not with Shane injured and this storm.

We're trapped here.

The realization lands like an anvil on my chest.

*I could go alone. Or with Kizi and Cai, if they feel up to it.*

As though voicing an objection, thunder roars outside, sounding like it's right over the house. I shudder, feeling a sharp prickle travel from my scalp to my toenails.

Something isn't right here. And I can't tell if it's someone messing with us or something I can't explain. I hate this—the *not knowing*—most of all.

I reach for the video camera again, wondering if Conrad

Mullaney will be able to give me some answers. I'm about to press Play when Shane groans loudly across the room. I don't move, unsure whether

he's awake or dreaming. Then he sits bolt upright and starts clawing at his bandaged face.

"Shane?"

He lets out a sound halfway between a scream and a growl and tears the bandages away. Then he starts clawing again—this time at his bare flesh.

I'm up and across the room in a second. "Shane, stop it! You'll hurt yourself. Please—"

I try to pull his hands from his face but he's stronger than I expected, and he shoves me away. My boot tangles in the bed skirt, and I fall back and hit my head on the wall. The impact makes my vision swim.

"I don't want it!" Shane bellows. "Please, I want to go home!"

He hurtles past me, accidentally banging my shin. At first I think he's headed for the video camera, but he crashes past the small desk, rattling everything on it, and kicks open the balcony doors.

"Wait!" I yell, not sure if he's able to see where he's going. But he must feel the lash of the rain outside, must smell the sulfurous wave that hits me as soon as the doors open. He doesn't slow down, though, not until he reaches the railing. Then he turns, and I feel my stomach threaten to evacuate its contents all over again.

His face is a mass of pus-filled blisters, weeping yellow streaked with blood where he's raked at them with his nails. The lid of Shane's bad eye droops lower than the other one, as though his face is melting.

"They're inside me," he says, so low I think I've misheard. "I feel them moving..."

I edge toward him, palms up. "Shane, come back in. You need to rest and let your face heal. Then we'll *all* get out of here together."

He turns his back on me, leaning forward with his hands on the railing. Something about that sets off a warning in my brain. I creep toward him until I'm almost close enough to reach out and grab him.

"Have to get out!" Shane yells, voice shaking with some dark emotion. "*Get out! Please, let me go!*"

In profile, it seems like the flesh of his face is writhing, like there's something wriggling beneath the skin.

*Oh my God is one of those leeches still inside him?*

My hands fly up to cover my mouth so I won't scream. He climbs up onto the narrow railing.

"Shane, don't!"

The bedroom door crashes open behind me, but I don't look away from Shane, from his wild eye and wriggling flesh. "Come back inside," I plead. "You'll feel better in a few hours, I promise."

Shane stands silhouetted against the stormy sky. For a moment he seems uncertain, like maybe I'm getting through to him. Then he lets out a scream that's painful to hear and pounds the heel of his hand against his temple.

"No! I can't! I—"

The sudden tension in his body signals what he's going to do. I lunge to grab him, but I'm too far away. Too late.

He jumps.

Rain bounces from my head as I lean over the railing, certain I'll see Shane lying broken on the ground below. But he isn't—I can just barely make him out through the downpour, staggering across the gravel toward the swamp.

"Where the hell is he going?" Cairo asks from next to me. Deacon stands on her other side, his face slack with shock.

I don't answer. Instead, I turn and run back inside the Light, hurry downstairs, and go out the front door into the deluge. My head pounds in rhythm with my footsteps from bashing it on the wall, making it seem as though the gravel is pulsing in front of my eyes.

"Shane!" I yell as I round the corner of the building. But there's no sign of him, just a gray wall of rain all around me that merges seamlessly into the swamp. I look up to find Deacon still leaning against the balcony railing on the upper floor, tracking Shane's path with wide, scared eyes.

"He went that way," Deacon calls down, pointing. I hold my hand up to shield my eyes from the downpour, which seems to be growing heavier by the second.

*There.*

Shane's wading into a murky pool. The water is up to his chest, slowing him enough that I have some hope of catching up before I lose sight of him again. He waves his arms, swatting away the low tree branches that snatch at his hair and clothes. I hear him yell something, but his words are lost to the rain.

"Shane! Come back, please!"

If anything, my voice makes him fight harder to put distance between us.

*What the hell is he doing?*

I reach the edge of the water. He's maybe fifty feet from me now.

“Shane, you’re sick. You need to be inside!” But Shane doesn’t seem to hear me. He struggles forward, flailing his arms as though he’s being attacked from above.

There is no part of me that wants to put myself anywhere near those leeches after seeing what they did to Shane, but I don’t have a choice, not unless I want to see him disappear into the swamp, delirious. I quickly tuck the ends of my jumpsuit into my boots like I did last time and wade after him.

It almost feels warm around my calves after the cold lash of the rain. I push on, using my arms to gain momentum. Shane is still ahead of me, fighting to get away. His red hair looks dark plastered against the back of his head.

Shane’s next step takes him into a deeper part of the swamp, and he disappears up to his neck. I wince, calculating the area of skin that’s exposed beneath the water.

“Come back, damn it!” I snap. “Or do you want those things to eat you alive?”

He takes another step, and this one pulls him even deeper. Shane gives a burbled shriek as the water passes his chin. Then he stops moving.

This is my chance.

Pushing with every shard of strength in me, I close the gap between us to twenty feet. Fifteen. Ten. Shane throws his head back, letting the deluge wash over his blistered face. He isn’t waving his arms now.

I’m six feet away from him when I feel it—the change in the water. It’s like hitting a loose sandbank, only more gloopy. It tries to seize hold of my boots, but I use my arms to help pull myself back to where the water no longer grips me.

*What is that?*

From somewhere in the deeper recesses of my brain comes an answer I don’t want to think about:

*Quicksand.*

I spent my early childhood convinced I was in constant danger of getting sucked down into quicksand, until I moved to live with Aunt Selena, and she patiently explained that it isn’t nearly as dangerous as people believe. Not unless it’s underwater.

*Because if it takes hold of you there and you can’t get out, you’ll drown.*



I see what's happening to Shane now. The way he's holding his head back, fighting for air. His stillness.

*Classic signs of drowning.*

"Hold on!" I scream, not sure if he can hear me with the water splashing around his ears. "I'm coming!"

Resisting every instinct telling me to go back, to get out of the water, I reach for Shane's hand. I see a flash of pale skin beneath the surface, but I can't get close enough to grab it without wading into the sucking quagmire myself. If I do that, we'll both be stuck.

I look around, searching for a branch that's low and sturdy enough for me to hold on to, but there's nothing within reach. I make another wild attempt to catch hold of his sleeve. I miss.

"Shane! Give me your hand!"

His head has sunk even lower. His chin juts up toward the sky, mouth opening and closing like he's struggling for words, but I know he isn't trying to speak—only to breathe. To survive.

I lunge for him again, panic making my movements jerky, but he's too far away, too deep in the water, and sinking more with each passing second.

"Shane! Haden!"

Cairo's voice pierces the storm before violent splashing announces that she's hurrying to get to us. I turn, and my eyes lock with hers for one desperate moment before I look back to where I last saw Shane. There's no sign of him at all now.

He's gone.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

I sit huddled in a blanket, the heat of the fire in the hearth next to me barely registering. We're in a room that's familiar, though I don't have the mental energy to question why. My bare toes knead the thick fur of a sheepskin rug. It's a comforting sensation, so I keep doing it.

"How could he be ... I don't understand." Deacon's been repeating some variation of this ever since Cairo and I stumbled back into the Light, swamp water trailing behind us. Now he paces the length of the room. Cairo sits on a dusty green sofa opposite me, her elbows braced on her knees, her head in her hands, crying quietly.

I'm not sure who made the fire, but I'm glad someone did. I can't seem to stop shaking. I let the blanket fall from one shoulder and hold my hand out in front of the flames, watching them dance between my fingers.

"Was he definitely ... I mean, are you sure he ..."

"Shane's dead," Cairo tells Deacon, voice thick with tears.

She doesn't look up. "There was nothing more we could do to help him without ending up dead ourselves."

"Sorry. I wasn't suggesting it was your fault. It's just so hard to believe he's gone." Deacon slumps down onto a bench in front of a grand piano. He leans back against the closed lid that conceals the keys, his legs stretched out in front of him. "Maybe we're all dead," he adds quietly, and my head jerks up.

"What?"

He shrugs. “Maybe we all died on that bus and we’re stuck here in some kind of purgatory.”

“Don’t say that, D,” Cai says, but there’s no force behind it, almost as if part of her agrees with him. Her gaze shifts restlessly around the room as though she’s examining every shadowy corner for something waiting for its chance to pick us off, one by one. “You can’t be talking about ghosts and purgatory and all that shit—it feels like you’re inviting it in.” We fall silent. Maybe for ten minutes, or maybe for an hour. I think the fire might’ve lulled me into a trance for a while, taken me someplace where I didn’t have to think.

But the spell breaks with a snap as the door opens and Kizi walks in.

“I found some more food,” she announces brightly. “Who’s hungry?” Cairo raises her head. “Where the hell have you been?”

“I went to check on our supplies.” Kizi gestures to an old-fashioned hostess trolley she’s wheeled in. “And to make sure we don’t starve. Why, what’s wrong?”

“Shane’s dead,” I tell her. I meant for it to derail the argument I sense brewing, but it comes out hard and accusatory. “Sorry,” I say, as though that will soften it. I don’t want Kizi to be upset with me. I can’t handle that right now.

“Oh my God, what happened?” she asks. “He got stuck in the swamp and drowned.”

I feel myself curling inward, like I can hide from the memory of it. Shane’s death truly was the worst thing I’ve ever seen—worse than seeing Marv’s dead body. Worse than finding Sugar dead inside a suitcase, even. And it isn’t because I knew Shane better than the others—I didn’t, not really. It’s because I know in my gut I could’ve saved him if I’d only acted faster. Tried harder. I know there must be some scenario in which I tackled it differently and Shane is still alive.

“Where were you really?” Cairo asks Kizi. “You’ve been gone for hours, and this place isn’t *that* big.”

Kizi frowns. “I took a nap upstairs. Why?”

Cairo throws up her hands. “I don’t know. But you’re setting my teeth on edge being *nice* all the time.”

“I’m just trying to make things easier,” Kizi says reasonably, “and maybe focus on what’s important to all of us.”

“Oh, and what’s that? You don’t think Shane was important?”

“Stop it,” I say, quiet but firm. “One of us just died, so let’s stop all this petty bullshit, okay?”

A discordant sound fills the room, and I whip my head around to find Deacon with his fingers pressed to the piano keys. He takes his hand away and tries again an octave lower, with a similarly awful result.

“Needs a tune-up,” he says, then closes the lid. He swings around to face us all. “I hate to bring this up now, because we definitely have bigger problems, but I seem to be in a bit of a pickle. I’ve searched everywhere, and I still can’t find my pills. Judging by the fact that I feel like absolute hell, I’d say I’m heading into the early stages of withdrawal.”

We’re all quiet, trying to process this and what it means. There’s only one thing I can think of that’ll do us any good right now.

“We need to get out of here before it gets any worse.”

Deacon smiles grimly, and for the first time I notice how dark the circles under his eyes are, how pinched and hollow his cheeks have become. I’d thought he was just in the same beaten, half-starved state as the rest of us, but I see now that he’s going through something worse.

“Right, let’s make a plan, eh?” he says. “This rain will have to let up sooner or later, and I vote we get ready to leave here the moment it does.”

“Agreed.” I don’t even need to think about it. I want to get as far away from this place as possible, as fast as we can. The sooner we leave, the sooner I can start to pretend the last two days never happened—because I’m pretty sure that’s the only way I’ll be able to move past the things I’ve witnessed.

“Yes, but we need a better plan than ‘Let’s leave,’” Cairo says. “Last time you two set off to find the bus, you hit a dead end and had to come back here.”

*Because we found Shane*, I add silently. But: “There’s the boathouse. I didn’t see a boat near it, but maybe it came unmoored. It might not have gone far.”

“So we find it and paddle our way out of here? What about the fog? We won’t have any way to navigate,” Cairo points out.

“It was only a thought.” I go back to looking at the fire. “It’s safe here,” Kizi says softly. “We should sit tight and wait for someone to come.”

“Except nobody’s coming.” Deacon’s voice is as bleak as his expression, and it sends a chill running over me.

“Why do you keep saying stuff like that?” Cairo snaps. “Seriously, D, it’s not helping.”

“I’d be delighted to be proved wrong, petal.” Deacon shrugs and picks up the guitar I left leaning against the piano. He plucks out a few notes, seeming to struggle to find a tune. His fingers shake so badly, I can see it across the room. Finally, he gives up and carefully sets the guitar back down.

I look around at the others. Neither Kizi nor Cairo seems to have any further ideas about how to get out of here.

“Let’s sleep on it and see how things look in the morning,” I say, even though my gut tells me that staying here any longer is a mistake. But if the others don’t agree to leave tomorrow, I know what I have to do.

I’ll go find help on my own.

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*I'm onstage. Where I'm supposed to be. Guitar in my hands, the mic inches from my lips. The lights bless my skin. Beyond their reach, the crowd chants my name. My voice rises above the noise, the vibrations of my song filling the entire stadium, so powerful it's almost tangible. A massive thing made of color and light.*

*But when I play the final notes, all sound fades away to nothing. The crowd is muted, distant. The loss is like a fist plunged deep in my chest. It steals my breath.*

*A hand takes mine, and I look over, expecting to see Kizi or one of my parents come to help me, but it's not any of them. It's someone else—someone I can't see clearly.*

*The stage lights blink out, one by one. I can't see anything now. Can't tell if the hand in mine is still there or if it's the ghost of a feeling, but the hollowness in me is real. It wants to consume me, turn me inside out.*

*It's so dark. I want the light back.*

*"What would you give to have it back?" the voice says. Anything. I'd give anything.*

*“Tell me. Tell me how much you want it.” More than anything.*

*I think the words but can't bring myself to say them. Fear pricks at my skin, turning my palm clammy against the coolness of the stranger's hand.*

*“Who are you?” I ask, but there's no answer.*

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

The fire has died down to embers by the time I wake up. I thought my dreams would be full of dark water and reaching hands, screams choked and gasping, but that dream was almost worse.

I want that feeling back—that wave filling me up as I stand onstage and know I’m exactly where I’m supposed to be. Not the darkness, the hollowness that came after.

Shivering slightly under my blanket, I inhale a lungful of dusty old rug and sneeze.

Only Kizi and I bunked down in the parlor for the night. I couldn’t drag myself away from the fire, and she seemed to sense that I needed her to stay with me.

It’s still dark, the parlor strange and unnerving without the blazing fire to make its shadows friendly. But the ember light is enough for me to see that the couch where Kizi curled up to sleep is now empty.

“Kizi?” I whisper, expecting to hear an answer from some other part of the room. But there’s no response. I listen, holding my breath so I might hear hers. Nothing.

I gather the blanket around me and pad over to the door in my socked feet. I turn the handle, and it swings open with a creak.

“Kizi?” I whisper again, a little louder this time. My voice runs along the hallway on nimble feet, unnaturally loud in the otherwise silent house.



Outside, the answering roar of the wind billows through the canyon, but that's all. The rain seems to have stopped, at least for now, thank God.

After shoving my feet into my unlaced boots so I won't stand on any sharp debris, I step out into the hallway. When I look down at the dusty floor, I see those odd footprints again. They mark a trail along the cleanish stripe Cairo and I accidentally left down the center of the hallway while we were dripping swamp water.

I try a nearby light switch, but this one doesn't appear to be working. I drop into a crouch, wishing I had a flashlight or something with me. That's when I remember the thick pillar candles on the mantel above the fire. I duck back into the parlor and light one in the embers of the fire.

In the hallway once again, I take a closer look at the footprints. They seem to approach the parlor door and face it, then retreat toward the entrance hall. One of us must've made them. There are five—no, *four* of us here. If a stranger was creeping around listening at doors and leaving dusty footprints behind, we'd have found them by now, right? We've searched this place a bunch of times and not seen any sign of someone else here, except for those damn footprints.

So it's one of us. That's the only explanation I can come up with.

*Unless Deacon's right about there being something supernatural going on here.*

Shaking away the thought, I reach out and rub the dust between my finger and thumb—except this isn't dust. Not exactly. It feels slightly gritty—more like sand than normal house dust. Sand or ... ash? We haven't built a fire anywhere else but the parlor. So where would ash come from?

Shielding my candle, I get up. A faint glow trails around the corner up ahead. It must be coming from the entrance hall and the ever-shining chandelier. The footprints lead that way, so I follow.

The doorways I pass look different by candlelight, just that little bit more surreal as the flickering light casts eerie shadows like oil slicks against the wood. Is Deacon right—are there actually ghosts in this place? If all those people really died here, then maybe there are.

*The sound of choked breathing, head thrown back to look up to the sky, begging for air ...*

Will Shane haunt the Light? That's not a thought I want to dwell on right now, walking alone down a gloomy hallway.

I can already feel the dizzying haze of shock returning to my thoughts, trying to snare me like a bluebottle on flypaper.

*I don't believe in ghosts.*

*I don't.*

As I pass yet another doorway, I wonder if I should check these rooms to see if Kizi is in any of them. But the footprints' call is louder right now. Kizi probably just went to use the bathroom.

The hallway spills out into the entrance hall, and I blink at the sudden brightness, then set my lit candle aside for the way back. I track the footprints as they go past the enormous sculpture and veer off into one corner. There's an old coat stand next to a velvet-curtained window, but I don't see anyone there or any indication of where the footprints go. I'm heading over to take a closer look when I hear something by the sculpture.

Breathing.

*Not again ...*

I whip around and this time I catch a figure disappearing around the far side of the pedestal.

"Kizi?" I move closer, but the sound of the footsteps seems to mirror my own, keeping whoever's there out of my sight. "Come on, this isn't—"

I lunge sideways, trying to catch her out, but there's no sign of anyone.

"This isn't funny!"

Something darts in my peripheral vision, too quick to track before it's gone. My breath comes fast and shallow as I peer into the shadowy corners of the hall.

*Where is she?*

I hear running footsteps above me on the mezzanine and look up in time to see a shadow disappearing into the hallway that leads deeper into the Light.

*Is that Kizi? The person I glimpsed didn't really look like her.*

I hurry upstairs, completely forgetting about the candle until I find myself running down a dark corridor. I stop and feel around for a light switch and—*there*. The overhead lights buzz to life, stretching out the hallway in front of me. But I don't see whoever ran this way. There's nothing except a trail of dusty footprints marking the worn carpet. I listen, but the house is silent now except for the distant groan of the wind outside.

Whoever's leaving these footprints everywhere is either one of us or some stranger creeping around while we sleep. And I'm so, so tired of being scared all the time. I'm going to find out what's going on, one way or another.

I follow the trail, keeping my steps swift and silent. As I approach a turn in the hallway, I press myself flat to the wall and peer around the corner like a cop in some daytime TV show. The footprints continue, but there's no sign of whoever made them. The trail goes on past another turn; each light switch I hit reveals seemingly unending footprints. They start to blur in front of my tired eyes like road markings on a long, empty stretch of highway.

Then they stop.

I must've been following them in a daze, because it jolts me when the prints suddenly disappear halfway down a corridor. And as I look at the door where they end, I realize it's the one I found when I first searched this place—the moth room.

*Could this be where Kizi spent the night after she first found the Light?*

With a sinking feeling, I wonder if the footprints really are hers. Maybe she hit her head during the crash and it's making her do weird things and then forget about them. . . .

Or maybe it's not her at all, and there's something much scarier going on here.

Reaching for the door handle, I instinctively seal my lips, remembering the awful feel of those things swarming around my face. I turn the handle and throw open the door before I can talk myself out of it.

A linen closet faces me. There are floor-to-ceiling shelves stacked with towels and bedsheets, and the closet itself is so small, I can see all the way in using the light from the hallway. There's no one hiding in here.

*This can't be right.*

I was so sure this was the moth room. I step back out and look up, searching for that shamrock-shaped stain on the hallway ceiling. It's there.

And so are the footprints—*on the ceiling*.

It feels like someone reached inside my chest and squeezed.

Those footprints can't be real. They *can't* be.

I trace their path along the flaking plaster. They're harder to see, fainter against the off-white paint, but definitely there. They run away down the hallway before disappearing at the next turn.

*What the hell is going on?*

Rushing to the corner, I don't tear my eyes from the tracks above me. But at the turn, they vanish again. I search the carpet in case the footprints resume there, but aside from regular-looking boot marks I probably left in the dust the last time I searched up here, there's nothing.

I hold my breath and listen. I'm not sure what I expect to hear—maybe something breathing nearby or footsteps running away—but again I'm met with silence. This deep into the Light, I can't even hear the wind buffeting the building. But that phantom hand still grips my heart, not letting it beat. I feel like if I don't run, I'll die.

So I run. I somehow remember to grab the lit candle as I pass back through the entrance hall. It flickers in my hand as I hurry along the downstairs hallway leading to the parlor.

*The footprints, the breathing ... Whoever I heard in the bathroom upstairs, maybe that wasn't one of the others from our group I was hearing through the vents, like Deacon said.*

Then who? Some missing YouTuber? Or the ghost of an aging celebrity who disappeared decades ago?

Or someone ... *something* ... else?

Striped-red-and-off-white wallpaper flashes past me on both sides. It's like stumbling through the bloody rib cage of some enormous serpent.

I only take a full breath when I reach the open parlor door. Did I leave it open? I can't remember. I duck my head inside and almost drop the candle.

Kizi lies on the sofa, back turned to me, her breathing coming deep and even. Her turquoise hair glistens in the reflected light.

I slide down onto the piano bench, a fist pressed to my mouth to keep from whimpering. What the hell is going on around here? Did I somehow miss her lying there before? Or did she come back and fall asleep in the few minutes I was gone?

I approach her slowly, brandishing the candle in front of me. Hand trembling, I reach out and touch the turquoise strands of her hair, and she blinks awake, squinting against the light.

"What are you doing?"

"I ..." I let my hand fall. "Where were you just now? I woke up and you were gone."

"Went to use the bathroom," she mumbles, sounding half asleep. "Sorry if I woke you. 'Night."

Kizi rolls over so her face is to the back of the couch. “Kiz, I saw something... . There were footprints upstairs—*on the ceiling.*”

“You must’ve been dreaming,” she mutters.

“I wasn’t. There’s someone else here. I think they’re watching us.”

But her even breathing tells me she’s fallen asleep, leaving me standing here with too many questions and a sinking sense of dread clogging my chest.

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## Trip's Vlog Transcript

*Tristan “ Trip” Filmore Prescott appears on-screen. He is drawn, much thinner than in his last video from ten months earlier, and is sitting in his bedroom (a gray-walled room with a twin bed and a Suicide Squad poster in the background, as seen in several other videos posted by Trip).*

**PRESCOTT:** Yeah, so it's been a while, but thanks for sticking around all ... like, four of you, I guess. I wanted to wait until I had something important to say, and now I do.

I'm about to do something huge, and if it pays off like I hope it will, this channel's about to *blow*. *Up*. So don't go any where—this is going to be the big one! Trip out, comrades. Like and subscribe.

***Beneath the video, there are only two comments.***

**BartLyfe1:** This is sad. You're not famous and you never will be because you're a PARASITE. Move on, loser.

**RealTrip69:** You'll see, @BartLyfe1

***There are no further posts from Trip Prescott.***

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

### DAY THREE

When I return to the parlor after showering the next morning, Cairo and Kizi are huddled together in front of the shuttered window. Thin shafts of gray daylight bleed between the cracks, and my heart drops when I realize it's raining again. It hammers against the outer shutters. Deacon sits at the piano, his fingers ghosting over the keys, keeping rhythm with the storm. I wonder what song it is, but Kizi and Cairo are too distracting for me to figure it out.

"What's going on?" I say, sensing something bad must've happened for them to be whispering together like they were a moment ago. But Cai just shrugs. "Not much," she says, then frowns. "Are you okay? You look kinda freaked out."

"I had a weird night," I admit. "Last night while Kizi was asleep, I heard someone running around and went to follow them, but I didn't see who it was. They left footprints on the ceiling."

Cairo blinks. "For real?" She looks at Kizi. "Did you see them?"

"First I'm hearing about it," Kizi says, and for some reason that bugs me.

"I told you last night. I didn't just imagine it," I snap.

"I wasn't suggesting you did," Kizi says slowly, looking at me like I'm acting weird. Hell, maybe I am.

"Well, I need to see this shit." Cairo hurries out of the parlor, leaving an old painting of a gnarled tree in a cemetery swinging on its nail on the wall.

“Yeah, me too.” Deacon slips out after her.

I cross to where Kizi stands peering through a narrow gap between the shutters covering the window. In addition to the rain, the mist hangs over the swamp like a bad omen.

“You don’t want to go see the weird ceiling footprints?” I ask her.

“Nah, I believe you. I just don’t think it’s anything to worry about, that’s all.”

“For real?” I turn that over in my head, trying to make it make sense. Kizi has always been someone to downplay things when they get tough, but she’s not usually so ... I dunno, *deliberately oblivious*?

She shrugs. “I mean, there are bigger things going on than some marks appearing on a ceiling.”

“Well, yeah,” I answer slowly. “But how is all of this not freaking you out? I feel like I’m ten seconds away from losing it.”

“I ...” Kizi trails off as she looks at me, and her face softens at whatever she sees in my expression. “We’ll be okay, Hade. Everything’s going to work out, I can feel it. Trust me, okay?”

My gaze snags on where Kizi’s fidgeting with her bracelet, tapping her nails against each of the charms in turn. It’s a habit she falls into whenever she’s nervous and trying not to show it, and that reassures me way more than what she’s saying. I decide to drop it.

“What were you and Cairo talking about just now?” I say. “Just talking things out, I guess. All the band stuff.” Kizi cocks her head to one side, looking thoughtful. “You know, we only butt heads because we both want the same thing.”

“You do?” Confusion laces my voice, because one thing that always seemed to be true about them was that they wanted the exact *opposite* things. Different songs for the band. Different arrangements. Different promo ideas. And I was always in the middle.

“Of course,” Kizi says. “All four of us want the same thing, don’t we?”

“You mean to get out of here?”

“Obviously.”

Something in the way she says this makes me feel as if I’ve missed a step somewhere. Kizi turns away from the window and its gloomy non-landscape.



“I’m going to go see if there’s anything else to eat,” she says. “I’m starving.”

After Kizi leaves, I lean into the gap in the shutters covering the large parlor window and peer out. With the fog getting thicker and the steady pour of rain, I really can’t see much.

Then something glints in the swirling mist. A light. There, gone. There, gone.

“What is that?” I murmur, leaning even closer.

It seems to be coming from one spot out in the swamp, but it’s flashing on and off as though it’s sweeping side to side.

*Search party.*

The realization hits like a firework parade in my veins. My texts got through! Someone somewhere realized where we are.

I run out into the hallway.

“Kizi! Cai! Deacon! The cops are outside! Come on!”

I don’t wait for the others; the fear of literally missing the boat makes it impossible to do anything but sprint out the front door. The rain lashes against my skin when I step outside. I shield my eyes so I’m not completely blinded by it.

“*Help!*” I yell as loud as I can, waving my arms in case whoever’s out there with a flashlight can see me through the fog. I circle around the house so I’m outside the parlor window where I first saw the searchlight, still shouting. I pause, listening for a response. A roll of thunder comes instead, a bright flicker of lightning on its heels. It’s impossible to hear anything above the storm.

The search party can’t have moved on already, can they? I was outside less than twenty seconds after seeing the flashlight.

“*Heeeeeelp!*”

There’s still no reply. But there’s the light; it flickers again out in the swamp. I can’t tell how far away it is or what’s making it—I only know I can’t let that light disappear and leave us behind.

I’ve taken two steps when my foot lands in tepid water. I look down, and I think my eyes are messing with me: The gravel path that sweeps all the way around the Light has narrowed, so now the swamp nudges up to within a few feet of the building.

“Give me a freaking break,” I mutter. The rain—it’s made the water level rise. Or is it high tide?

My short hair is plastered against my scalp by the time I find a fork in the path that looks like it might head in the right direction. I take it, stopping briefly to scuff an arrow into the gravel with my shoe. Up ahead the light flickers again, and I mutter a prayer of thanks.

“Wait up! I’m trying to reach you! Please, wait!”

Racing as fast as I dare with my boots disappearing into the hovering mist, I almost miss the faint prickly shape up ahead. I think it’s a tree that looks familiar I snort bitterly.

*All the trees around here look like that.*

The path begins to dip in and out of the swamp like the back of a prehistoric monster, and I leap over the parts where it disappears, hoping I won’t misjudge and land in it up to my neck.

The tree looms closer and I slow down, looking for the searchlight. It was right there, next to it. Now it’s gone.

“Hey! Where did you go? I’m still—”

That’s when I see him.

There’s a guy standing in front of the tree, but he’s hard to make out against the trunk behind him. Not that he seems to be trying to hide, exactly. But a hard, heavy lump forms in my stomach as I realize it’s not the police out searching for us. I don’t know who this is, but he’s no cop.

The guy is facing the tree with his back to me, like he’s in the middle of a countdown for hide-and-seek. All I see is the back of his head, his red hair dark as blood with the rain drenching it.

*Shane?*

My mouth drops open. It’s impossible, but he’s *right there*. It’s him. Somehow—God knows how—he made it out of the quicksand. He’s alive.

“Shane!”

He doesn’t answer. Doesn’t move either. Just stands there, peeing or counting or taking a real close look at that tree trunk. The tree itself looks like it’s standing on a small island, barely keeping its head above the high water, but then I spot the telltale white line streaking across the dark pool next to it—there’s a gravel trail leading to it.

Shane still hasn’t moved. Maybe he can’t hear me.

*Or maybe it’s not actually Shane.*

And where did the searchlight go? I can’t see any trace of it now.

I call out again as I get closer, but there's still no reaction. It's setting my teeth on edge. Even a stranger would look up at the sound of someone yelling, right? The path I'm on drops almost entirely into the water between me and the island, but I'd only need to get the bottoms of my soles wet to reach it. I'm maybe twenty feet away from the guy now. He must hear my boots crunching across the gravel toward him.

"Are you okay?" I call out, shielding my eyes to see better.

I'm fifteen feet away. Ten. "Shane ... is that you, buddy?"

I stop, waiting. His front is pressed tight against the tree, forehead leaning on the rough trunk. But I spot the gold hoop earring in his ear—it *is* Shane. Either him or someone with an identical piercing.

*Is he passed out?* I move closer, reaching out to shake him by the shoulder.

"Hey ..."

His head lolls back on his neck and I let out a scream so loud, it hurts my throat.

Shane has no face. All the flesh has been eaten away, leaving a bloody skull to grin up at me. But something white moves inside his eye socket, and for a horrified moment I think he's alive—that his lidless eyeball is turning to look at me. Then the pale thing lengthens, squirms out of the socket, and drops to the gravel.

A leech.

I scream again—a guttural, animalistic sound—and jerk back. But my hand snags on something: a rope, tied around Shane's chest. It's holding him—his *body*—upright against the tree trunk. I pull my hand loose, ignoring the burn of rope tugging at my chilled skin. Once I'm free, I drop my head and retch. There isn't enough food in me to produce more than a long string of saliva.

Who the hell did this to Shane's corpse? *How?*

And why?

I'm rising shakily to my feet when I see something moving beyond the tree. In the eddying mist, a boat drifts toward me until it banks on the coarse gravel and a man stands up in it. I know him instantly. It's the guy from the service plaza's restroom. I don't know how, but he's here. And he's brandishing a heavy-looking flashlight like he's about to swing it at my head.

"Not the one I wanted," he says gruffly, "but you'll do."



**Post from Urban Legends Unchained online forum, dated three years ago. OP was a verified forum user who appears to have no connection to the case; however, user @ Guest1354268 in the comments has been identified as Tristan “ Trip” Filmore Prescott.**

**@AvaDrawsMonsters** posted at 18:53 EDT: Here's one for all you death-cult enthusiasts and geocachers: Can you help me find Ciannait? No, I don't mean Cincinnati. This place is a legend whispered about in celebrity circles. Once every decade or so, a group of rising stars—or sometimes even just one up-and-comer—will get an invitation to a place called Ciannait, though sometimes the name changes. The invitation will come from someone recognizable, seemingly legit, so the invitee gets sucked in—not knowing that the host's already dead! These invitations have been luring people out into the middle of nowhere for literally hundreds of years. Anyone who accepts is promised the world—their wildest dreams of fame and riches will be granted to them. All they have to do is survive Ciannait. And that's where it gets sticky, because nobody ever returns. Or if they do, they never talk about it, and they die a few years later in weird and mysterious circumstances. Any of you heard of this one? Any clues on where to begin the search? My bf Nic is desperate to find it. I've heard rumors of it being in Ireland, Peru, Wales, Arizona, Scotland, New Zealand ... the list goes on. No way can this place be everywhere, so I need some help figuring out a starting point.

Comments:

**@LegendofZel:** Never heard this one, but it sounds wild!

**@Zac\_Man1113:** Where can I get an invite?!

**@Hideo3\_3:** There's a legend kinda like this one about a place called Dédalo de Luz—back in the fifteenth century, King Alfonso V of Aragon had an illegitimate son, nicknamed Ferrante, who he told to go find a lost temple called Dédalo de Luz if he wanted to prove himself worthy of being the next king. Ferrante claimed he found it on the northern shore of Ibiza in 1457, and he inherited the crown from his dad the next year. So it seemed like he was set, right? But then dude started telling people an angel had shown him where to find the temple and told him that if he brought other folks to the “place of light,” he'd be granted wealth and fame to last ten lifetimes. Then Ferrante started acting weird, like torturing his enemies and displaying their mummified corpses in a special museum and feeding others to the lampreys in his moat. Nobody else ever made it back from visiting the temple.

**@EricaMerica:** Wasn't there a story about James Dean getting an invite to a mysterious party in the middle of nowhere? Not Ciannait or Dédalo de Luz though ... can't remember what it was called, but JD said his friend went instead and never came home.

**@Zac\_Man1113:** @EricaMerica—I heard something v similar but about Elvis!!

**@TootSweetie6:** Did Amelia Earhart fly over there?!

**@LakersNotFakers:** I reckon this might be the same legend I heard about, except if you go there and survive, you come back a proper psycho like Charlie Manson or Jim Jones, starting death cults and that.

**@Zac\_Man1113:** @LakersNotFakers I think it's called Mar a Lago 😊

**@LakersNotFakers:** @Zac\_Man1113 LOL for real!! Srsly tho, I heard it's a demon called Paimon that lives there. Lures people in and makes them do butt stuff.

**@AvaDrawsMonsters:** @LakersNotFakers Paimon like from Hereditary?

**@LakersNotFakers:** @AvaDrawsMonsters LOL yeah, but Paimon goes back way before that, like Bible times.

**@YoMo9:** I think I saw this one on Sasqwatchers blog a couple years ago—they called it the Lazarus Fly, said it was some kind of demon that makes deals for money and fame and can wear a bunch of different faces.

**@EricaMerica:** You mean a crossroads demon, like the one Robert Johnson did a guitar battle with?

**@Guest1354268:** You're all close, but no cigar. It's called the Light. I know because my father went there and never came back.

**@Rztrrlblzr:** Sorry to break it to you

@Guest1354268 but your dad just looked in your crib and bounced.

**@Guest1354268:** @Rztrrlblzr HAHAAHA. Not funny. I'm serious, my mother got an invitation too but never went. Soon as I get a car I'm going to find it and put it up on my channel.

**@YoMo9:** Oh yeah? Where can we follow @Guest1354268?

**@Rztrrlblzr:** @Guest1354268 What's your dad's name?

**@Guest1354268:** Like I'd tell you losers 🤔 Can't share here yet, don't want anyone getting there before me.

**@LakersNotFakers:** I CALL BSSSSSSS

**@Rztrrlblzr:** Seconding that @LakersNotFakers!!!

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

The stalker from the service plaza is actually here, standing in front of me.

*He puts girls in suitcases.*

*Run!*

The instinct is loud—almost as loud as the pulse battering my eardrums—and I have no intention of ignoring it, but before I can move, he thrusts out a hand and grabs me by the wrist.

“Get in the boat!” he snarls, and even as I try to yank my arm free of his grip, he drags me into the little rowboat. The bow sits on the gravel, ready to be pushed back into the swamp.

*The man in the boat Cairo thought she saw—he is real.*

And now he’s taking me with him.

I can’t get free of his painful, clawlike hold. It feels like the bones in my wrist are grinding together. I kick at him—knees, shins, nuts—and scream with everything that’s in me.

My boot connects, and his grip slackens as he spits out a curse. Before I can try to land another kick, he punches me. My head snaps back and my vision checks out for a second. And the pain—man, the pain makes my knees buckle. I think for sure I’ll be sick.

I lurch forward and see the boat’s wooden bench seat flying toward my head a split second before it connects. The world goes dark again, and this time it stays dark.

*Blink.*

Nope, that didn't work. I try again. This time one of my eyelids flutters open, and the other one follows a moment later. My brain does its best to fill in the details of my current situation, but it doesn't make sense.

*I'm lying on bare floorboards. My head feels like a shattered vase. I can't move my arms or legs, and my mouth tastes like puke.*

All I can do is lie here and groan.

Then a pair of sneakers steps into my line of sight. I go rigid when I look up and find the service-area creep looming over me. He carries a short oar in one hand like he's considering swinging it at me. I try to scramble away, but my limbs won't cooperate, and I end up rolling onto my back, arms pinned uncomfortably behind me. He's tied my wrists and ankles, I realize. But I also realize where we are: in the boat shack. I see the small cot over to one side, the fishing rods covered in cobwebs in a corner.

*Why has he brought me here?* My gut clenches at every horrifying possibility.

"Who are you?" My voice comes out scratchy and small. "You don't recognize me?" When I say nothing, he sighs like I'm trying his patience. "Trip Prescott."

*Trip ...*

The YouTuber Shane was talking about. I knew I recognized this guy from somewhere other than the service area, though he looks a lot older now than when I must've seen him—either online or in the news. But I realize it doesn't matter who he is. The fact that he isn't trying to hide his identity at all says he doesn't expect me to be able to tell anyone what he's done. What he's about to do.

"Was it you who rigged the GPS on the bus? Did you bring us here?" I ask, trying to keep my voice steady.

My pulse pounds like a bass drum behind my ears as I carefully test the ties at my wrists. He hasn't done a great job—there's a little give in the binding. God, I hope it's enough.

"I remember you on that show," Trip says, ignoring my questions. He sits on the cot, arms crossed over his midsection in a way that makes me wonder if I landed a good kick to his gut. I don't remember it if I did. Then he winces and readjusts the way he's sitting, and I figure out what it is:

He's cradling his left arm, not his gut. It could be broken. Or dislocated, maybe.



*From the crash? Was he actually in the cargo hold when the bus tipped into the canyon?*

Whatever's wrong with him, it's good news for me, because not only did it make him sloppy when tying me up, but it tells me where to aim when I hurt him. And I fully intend to hurt him.

I spot something shiny lying on the cot next to him—a crowbar.

*Maybe I can grab it...*

“You’re the one who’s been creeping around the house while we sleep, aren’t you?” I ask, stalling while I try to plan my attack.

The guy huffs out a sharp laugh. “Not me, princess. I can’t get inside the Light—that’s the whole reason you’re here.”

“I don’t understand.” When he doesn’t elaborate, I try baiting him another way. “Why did you do that to Shane’s body ... to his face? Was it to lure me over?” *Am I going to end up the same way as Shane?*

Trip sneers. “You think I did that to him? Nah. It’s the worms—they like to ...” He appears to search for the right word. “Well, there ain’t no pretty way to say it: They ate his face. They’re hungry critters, and they run riot when nobody’s controlling them. And yeah, I needed to draw one of you out of the house.”

“But why?”

“Enough questions,” he barks. “Have you seen her yet? You must’ve seen something if you thought I was sneaking around the place.”

“Seen who?” I must not be reacting the way he wants, because annoyance flickers across his features. I study him, trying to work out what he could possibly want that doesn’t end with me dead.

“She hasn’t shown herself?” He leans in, peering into my eyes like he can read some concealed answer there. The smell of stale liquor and days-old body odor hits me like a right hook. “Hasn’t made you an offer?”

“What are you talking about?” Even talking hurts, I realize. I think he might’ve fractured a bone in my face.

“She’ll have to let me in if she wants you back.” Trip is muttering, and I don’t think he’s even really talking to me. “That was the ...”

He trails off as his eyes dart to the high window and go wide. But it’s only a dense gray square, the fog pressing in around the shack. It seems like the rain has stopped for now. “You want to get inside the house?” I ask, trying to make sense of his rambling. I can’t tell if he’s being deliberately

vague or if he's genuinely deranged. "If you want to get inside so bad, why don't you walk right in? The door's not locked."

"You think I haven't tried that?" Flecks of spit fly from his mouth when he speaks, and the oar in his hand jabs the air like he's trying to punch a hole in it. "Every time I get near, she sends those *things* after me. And she never leaves the house, so I need to use you to force her hand."

Leverage? Is that what I'm supposed to be? I guess that's good, because dead leverage isn't worth a damn.

"Who's *she*? You keep talking about *her*, but I don't know who you mean."

The only people still in the house who use *she* pronouns are Kizi and Cairo.

*Wait.*

Did I get it totally wrong when I heard Trip muttering about bringing "Rex" to the light back at the service area? Did he mean Rex Mori the band, not Deacon Rex specifically? Is the *she* he's been talking about actually Cairo? Is *she* the one he's stalking?

"Get back!" he yells.

I flinch away from him as he bellows the words, but he's focused on the window again. I use the distraction to tug at my wrist ties. Skin singing in pain, I drag one hand loose without a sound. The other follows much more easily.

I feel the discarded ties with my fingers and recognize the coarse strand. The asshole used my own bootlaces to tie me up. The other is still wrapped around my ankles, but I might be able to snap it with a decent kick. I stay still, arms behind me, trying not to let anything show on my face.

"She's not getting this one back until she gives me what I'm owed!"

"Who are you talking to?" I regret the question as soon as it tumbles out because it draws his focus back to me.

"Don't act like you don't see them," he growls.

"See *who*? There's nothing out there! You need help, buddy."

Trip raises the oar, but right as I'm about to bring my arms up to defend myself, he drops it and reaches out to grip my chin. He leans in until he's only inches from my face. His eyes drill into mine in a way that makes me want to squirm out of my skin.

"I don't think you're lying to me," he says, that old-liquor sourness assaulting me again. "So she's taking her time. I guess that means she wants

you alive. You must have ... potential.”

“*What are you talking about?*” I yell right in his face, and he releases his grip. I scramble backward, trying not to let him see that my wrists are unbound. Without a weapon, I’m going to need the advantage of surprise if I want to get away from this creep.

“Don’t act like I’m crazy! I hate it when people do that. I just want what she promised, what I’m *owed*. I practically gave her Bart, but that wasn’t enough. I brought others, and it *still* wasn’t enough! I should be a goddamn superstar by—” My boots connect with his chin, and his head rocks back.

I was aiming for his injured shoulder, but I guess that’ll do. Trip falls onto the cot, and I kick my feet apart once, twice, and the bootlace gives with a *snap*. I get to my feet, ignoring the swimming sensation in my head, and look for the crowbar, but Trip’s lying right on top of it.

*Get to the boat.*

A groaned curse comes from behind me as I rush to the door of the shack and throw it open.

I almost stumble back at the wall of fog facing me. It’s so dense, I can’t even see the railing that surrounds the deck, but I know it’s no more than three feet away.

Cold terror floods through me.

*How am I supposed to get across the swamp in this fog? I can’t even see the boat, let alone find my way back to the Light!*

I hear Trip struggling to his feet, and there’s no longer a choice. I run forward until my hands find the railing, then throw myself over it.

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## CHAPTER THIRTY

I drop like a cannonball. Again I'm struck by the lukewarm temperature of the water as it engulfs me. My knees hit the muddy bottom, and I push myself up to standing, immediately feeling my face and neck in case I've picked up any leeches. I don't feel any.

"Get back here!"

The fog is so dense, I can barely see Trip's silhouette leaning over the railing, hands grasping. But I can't see much else either—like where the hell he tied up the boat. My heart thunders so loud, I'm sure Trip must hear it.

As quickly as I can in the chest-high water, I wade around the stilt legs that hold up the boat shack. I keep expecting to hear the splash of Trip jumping in after me, but there's only his angry cursing and the creak of his footsteps as he moves along the wooden deck, keeping track of where I am in the water.

I reach the steps at the far side of the shack where I first saw rope marks, but the boat isn't there either.

*Where the hell is it?*

If I can find the boat, at least I won't have to worry about leeches burrowing into my skin—only about escaping from the guy who kidnapped me to use as a hostage, then finding my way back to the others.

I peer in the direction of the gravel bank where Deacon waited for me yesterday morning. It's invisible now.

How was it only yesterday? Shane was still alive. I still had hope that we'd all make it out of this swamp.

Shane dying isn't the only thing that killed that hope. It's this place, this clinging, grasping swamp and the house that seems to have grown right up out of it.

Blood pounds in my head with every movement I make, each pulse sending waves of pain spreading across my cranium. Again, I look back toward where I *think* the gravel path lies. Should I forget about the boat and try to reach it? What if it's not there?

*I don't know what to do I don't know!*

I've almost decided to make a break for the path when a hand clamps down on my shoulder. I scream, trying to pull free of Trip's clawlike grip, but his nails only dig deeper into my flesh. He's lying flat on the deck to reach me under the railing. I punch his forearm, trying to get him to release me, and when that has no effect, I sink my teeth into his hand until I taste blood.

Trip yells a curse but still doesn't let go.

I'm right next to one of the struts so I brace my foot against it and lean back with all my weight.

*How's that for leverage, asshole?*

With another yell, Trip finally lets go, then drags himself over the edge of the deck and plunges into the water next to me.

I propel myself away from the shack, knowing that as soon as he surfaces, he'll be coming after me. But when Trip does break the surface, the first thing he does is scream.

*"Aaaahhh! Don't let them bite me! No!"* He wades away from me. I lose him in the fog before hearing what can only be the sound of him clambering into the boat.

*Damn it.*

I aim for where I hope the gravel path is. The mud beneath my unlaced boots sucks at them as I push against the wall of water, glancing back every few steps in case Trip has caught up to me in his boat. Because he will, unless I can get far enough away that he can't see or hear me. Then I'll be safe. From him, at least.

*Whack!*

I shriek as the oar smacks down on the water next to me. From Trip's disappointed muttering, I figure he was aiming for my head.

“Help!” I don’t know who I’m yelling to, but I keep yelling as the boat drifts closer. No matter how hard I push through the water, he continues to gain on me, and I’m still a long way from the gravel path. Trip draws close enough that he could grab me if he reached out, but he has the oar in both hands. He raises it to take another swing.

I do the only thing I can to put distance between us—I shove the boat, *hard*. Trip stumbles, trying to keep his balance, then the boat disappears into the fog. I turn around and wade toward the path, but my legs hit something in the water, and I plunge forward.

I land on gravel. I have the oddest sensation of rising as the water falls away from my legs, and suddenly I’m on dry land. As I stagger to my feet, the fog parts ahead of me to reveal the pristine line of the gravel path. The lingering fog roils like a jostling crowd, and for a second I swear I see faces in the mist—strange, distorted faces.

“What the hell is going on?” I mutter. But Trip’s yells are coming closer again. I run, ignoring the sickening way my head spins each time I turn to check if he’s caught up. But there’s nothing back there—not even the path. After each step I take, the raised line of gravel falls away behind me, sinking into the water as though the swamp is swallowing it.

*How ...*

Finally, an oar appears through the fog. Trip follows, rising to his feet in the boat when he spots me. I expect him to leap out and try to grab me, but he doesn’t. Instead, he looks from me to the gravel to the water and back again.

He’s scared to leave his boat, I realize. Scared of the water *and* the path.

I turn and sprint, refusing to slow down even when Trip’s raging, desperate shouts trail away behind me.

Chest and legs burning with the effort of running, I almost don’t see the Light until I’m near the front steps. Then I look up, and my heart stutters. There’s someone standing in the window of Magdalena Warren’s suite. Just the mannequin, I tell myself. But as I watch, the figure moves. One slender hand presses against the glass, almost like a greeting.

I come to a dead stop, breathing hard. The hand is gone now; the mannequin is standing exactly where it ought to be.

*Did I really see that?*

Something tickles my neck and I swat at it, whirling around and expecting to find Trip behind me. But there's nobody there, only the fog closing in around me. Even the path I ran down a second ago is gone—not just invisible, but *gone*. The water reaches to within inches of where I'm standing at the bottom of the steps to the house.

*Deacon was right—the paths move. But how is that possible?*

I let my hand fall away from rubbing my neck and see wet blood staining my fingertips. Something must've grazed my nape in my struggle to escape Trip.

*Or something bit me*, I think, swallowing thickly.

Exhausted as I am, my instincts are telling me to turn and run—away from the creepy house, away from the swamp that changes like a living thing, away from the entire canyon that seemed to suck in the tour bus like a giant lamprey. It feels like it's all connected, some enormous organism I can't see because I'm so deep inside it.

*Run*, my lizard brain screams at me again. And I will—but first I need to get the others.

I take the steps two at a time and burst through the front door. I pause only to wedge the heavy wooden bench against it. That'll keep Trip out if he does decide to storm this place. “Kizi! Cairo! Deacon!” I yell, then listen for them as I cross the entrance hall. The room tilts sickeningly and I have to lean against the base of the sculpture to stay upright. But I yank back my hand when the warm stone seems to writhe under my palm. “Haden, thank God!”

Cairo appears at the mezzanine railing above me, her eyes wide as she takes in my appearance. I must look like hell.

“The man you saw in the boat—he's real,” I say, gasping. “And the swamp, the paths, this house ... You're going to tell me I'm crazy, but I think it's *alive*.”

Cairo shakes her head like she's about to argue with me, but then I notice the video camera in her hand. She holds it up.

“I believe you,” she says. “I watched the rest of Mullaney's videos, and after what I saw, I'd believe just about anything.”

**CLASSIFIED**

***Video footage recovered from the camcorder of Conrad Mullaney, director of several low-budget horror movies from the 1980s and 1990s.***

*Mullaney appears on-screen. He is visibly agitated, pacing his room with the camera held out in front of him.*

**MULLANEY:** She's lost her mind. Actually lost her mind. Talking nonsense over dinner a bout how she's becoming some super powered version of herself because of this goddamn swamp and we should all join her and welcome it in I'm out. I'm out. God knows where Jimmy or any of the others really went—I just know this place stinks and so does the garbage Magda's trying to ram down our throats. I'll have a word with Faith, see if she wants to make a break for it too, but I'm pretty sure she'll come. She looked terrified throughout the whole thing. [Nods as though to reassure himself.] Right. I'll figure out how to get out of here. It can't be that hard.

***Cut. Mullaney reappears approximately two hours later. He seems to have aged in that short time.***

**MULLANEY:** I don't know how, but Magda got to Faith. The girl was a terrified mess before, but now she's acting like Magda's word is gospel and telling me I should let it in, whatever the hell that means. And I'm starting to think Magda's done something to Jimmy. The smell is terrible outside his room, and the door's locked. Magda said the door swelled and stuck in the frame, but that's a lie. He's dead in there, I'm sure of it. Maybe Brooke and that writer woman are too. God knows about the kid. [Grimaces, then lights a cigarette and slumps down onto the edge of the bed.] What on earth is Magda thinking? I mean, she was always kind of a kook, but not like this. [Sighs.] The boat has a huge hole in it, like someone took a sledgehammer to the thing. And I barely found my way to the boathouse in this fog. Tripped into the water on the way back, and I think something bit me—there's a mark on my ankle, but I've no idea what did it. [Mullaney pans the camera down to his leg, where a quarter-size red mark is visible.] Itches like the devil. I'll see if there's anything I can put on it in one of the other rooms.

***Cut. According to the time stamp, approximately twenty minutes pass before the footage resumes. Mullaney remains off-screen as he records footage inside what appears to be Jimmy Arkansas's bedroom. It is for the most part a mirror of Mullaney's room, except this one has a guitar propped on the desk chair and belongings are scattered across the floor. There is what could be vomit on the bed next to a body that is most certainly dead. Its head—Jimmy's head, it can be assumed—now resembles a concave bowl, with the face entirely eaten away as though by acid.***



Mullaney's voice on the recording is tight and higher than usual. Several times he is heard gagging.

MULLANEY: What did she do to him? What did she do?

***Another break in the footage. When Mullaney appears this time, he's barely visible—perhaps hiding inside a closet (unconfirmed). His voice is low and terse, and he can be heard to sob at several points.***

MULLANEY: I made a break for it, tried to escape this nightmare I've landed in, but she cut me off. I know it sounds crazy, but somehow Magda made the swamp water rise up around this place so it came practically to the door. I tried to wade out but the swamp bed fell away under my feet like it was bottomless. [Pause, during which Mullaney's breath comes loud and shaky.] And I got bitten by those things, those worms. I'm sure she's controlling them too—the worms, the water, even the damn gravel. And this house—it's like it's a part of her, or she's a part of it... . I know it sounds crazy, but it's her. She's a demon—or there's a demon controlling her. Yes, that must be it. I've never believed in any of that occult nonsense before, but I've seen it with my own eyes... . She's not human. And now she's out there doing something to Faith. [Points off camera and swallows audibly.] It looked like she was using the same worms I've seen in the swamp surrounding this place. They were coming out of that sculpture like it was an enormous egg sack or something, and Magda ... she was feeding them to Faith, practically forcing them down her throat, all the while churning out that nonsense about them being a perfect match and Faith becoming the star she was always destined to be.... Maybe it's easiest if I show you. Then even if I don't make it out of here, there'll be some record to find. [Mullaney whimpers, scrubbing a hand over his face to compose himself.] Look, whoever finds this, please don't show my wife the parts where I talk about blow jobs. I was kidding, but she won't know that. And I love her, I guess.

Also, there's a kid. His name is Tristan Prescott, though it ought to be Mullaney if I'd done the right thing... . But when did I ever do the right thing? Any way, tell him I wish I'd gotten the chance to know him. I'm sure whatever he does in life, he'll make me proud. And I'm sorry for screwing his mother behind her husband's back—he was actually an okay guy for an accountant, and I'm sure he's raising Tristan better than I ever could. [Mullaney is silent and very still before he speaks again.] Jesus, am I actually doing this? Can I?

***End of footage from that day.***

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## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

“Do you think he was right?” I ask when Cairo’s finished telling me what she saw in the footage. My voice sounds weak and reedy to my ears, my fear strangling me. “Is this whole place being controlled by Magdalena Warren? Is she ... is she a demon? And that sculpture’s some kind of ... I dunno, spawning chamber?”

*She ...*

Magdalena must be the *she* Trip kept talking about in the boat shack. The one creeping around this place, leaving trails of ashy footprints.

If it is her, then she’s no longer human—if she ever was.

Cairo releases an unsteady breath. “All I know is there’s something here that scares the crap out of me, and we need to get the hell out.”

“What do you think happened to Mullaney?”

“I’m not sure,” Cairo says, holding the video camera in front of her like it’s some alien creature. “The footage just ... ends.”

*I guess whatever Mullaney wanted to catch on camera caught him instead.*

A new wave of terror seizes me at the thought. “Cai, where are Kizi and Deacon?”

“I haven’t seen either of them in a while, but Kizi was reading in the parlor the last time I saw her.”

We set off to look for them, heading to the parlor first. Without needing to say anything, Cairo and I swerve wide around the sculpture in the

entrance hall, though I stare at its twisted patterns, looking for any sign of it stirring.

*Did I really feel it move before?*

I picture it cracking open, a writhing mass of leeches pouring out onto the floor.

“Come on.” Cairo takes my hand, pulling me away. We hurry along the murky hallways until we reach the open parlor door.

“Kizi? Are you—” I stop, finding the parlor empty. A paperback novel lies open on the green sofa, its spine broken.

“Let’s try the kitchen,” Cairo says.

We both jump as a figure steps from the corner behind the grand piano. “Were you looking for me?”

“Kizi!” I exhale in relief, but her stance is kind of odd. “What were you doing?”

She gestures to the empty fireplace. “I was about to light the fire. Why? What’s wrong?”

“We need to leave.” I tell her about Trip and the boat shack, about Conrad Mullaney’s videos and Magdalena Warren. Through it all, Kizi listens, only the slightest furrow creasing her forehead. “Do you know where Deacon is? We need to grab him and get the hell out of here.”

Kizi’s eyes flick to the door like she’s heard something. “Perhaps it is time. Deacon wasn’t feeling well, so maybe he went to lie down. Why don’t the two of you look upstairs and I’ll check this floor?”

Cairo heads for the parlor door but notices I’m not following. “What is it?” she says, but I can only shake my head. Because a million little things are clicking into place.

“Kiz?” I say. She watches me steadily, waiting. It strikes me how ... *calm* she is. How calm she’s been this entire time. She doesn’t seem scared or traumatized. It’s like it doesn’t matter to her if we ever get out of this place. Kizi’s been my best friend for years, but looking at her now, I feel like I don’t know her. Like she’s *wrong*, somehow.

My throat’s tight; I cough to clear it. “Goodbye forever?”

She laughs. “What on earth do you mean? I’ll see you in a minute.”

*Wrong, wrong, wrong.*

Heart thudding a doom beat, I back out into the hallway, turn, and keep going.

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## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Cairo makes for the entrance hall, but I grab her sleeve. “Let’s search down here first,” I whisper so Kizi won’t hear from the parlor. “I have a hunch.”

*A hunch that Kizi is trying to send us the wrong way.* Even thinking that makes my gut tighten with guilt. Not enough to make me change course, though.

We set off toward the back of the house. I call Deacon’s name as we search the twisting hallways on ground level, my palms getting sweatier with every turn, my body wound tense, as if Magdalena Warren might be waiting at the next corner to leap out at us.

There are bedrooms on this floor too, doors with names of people I don’t know. Deacon isn’t in any of them.

For the first time since we arrived, I have a real Goldilocks moment—I feel like I’m poking through the house of someone who might return at any second. We’re about to turn around and head back when a dull knocking sounds. It’s exactly like what led me to the faceless mannequin in Magdalena Warren’s room.

*Oh my God ... what if that wasn’t really a mannequin?*

My breath catches as I turn to Cairo. She’s listening too, trying to locate the source of the noise.

“This way,” she says, and we backtrack a little. The knocking grows louder.

*There.*

My hand wavers uncertainly as I reach for the doorknob of an unfamiliar room. But Cairo nods, and I open it. Inside is a dining room, its long table laid with tarnished silverware on a cloth that might once have been white but now blooms with patches of mold on the yellowed fabric, like blood spatter at a crime scene. Some of the chairs are pushed away from the table, as though the diners heard us and silently rushed from the room.

“Where’s it coming from?” I whisper.

Cairo’s expression pinches into a look of concentration. “Could be outside?”

“No, I don’t think so. If anything, it sounds like it’s coming from somewhere below us.”

Cairo paces over to one of the dividing walls. “It’s here—inside the wall. Maybe water pipes?”

I join her and listen, half expecting to hear breathing again. But I don’t. The knocking continues, too rhythmic to be grouchy old water pipes.

It’s only when I’m eye to eye with the discolored green wallpaper that I notice a very faint seam between two stripes. I run my hand over it, and as I do, one side of it pushes in ever so slightly. I jerk back my hand. A square section of the wall swings outward on hinges to reveal a black space inside the wall. The knocking is now much, much louder.

Cairo and I both lean closer. In the dark recess, there’s a rope hanging down. That’s what finally clues me in to what I’m looking at.

“It’s a dumbwaiter.”

I guess it makes sense that one of those old-school food elevators would go to the dining room. But the kitchen’s on this level too—so where does it connect to?

*Maybe there was another kitchen in some other part of the house when it was built. In a basement?*

Wary in case there’s something lurking inside the black hole in the wall, I peer in. Above my head, the shaft ends in a metal ceiling. Below, the rope stretches on into darkness. I can’t see the box that’s meant to transport trays of food between floors; it might be ten feet away or a hundred.

*Maybe this leads all the way to hell.*

“Hello? Is someone down there?”

My voice echoes through the dark shaft, and the banging stops. Then it begins again, louder this time, faster—a panicked pulse pounding through

this artery in the body of the Light.

“Hello?” I yell as loud as I can. The banging doesn’t stop, but I hear a muffled voice over the top of it.

“Up!”

“Cai, that’s Deacon!”

We both grab the rope and pull. I expect it to be creaky and stiff with disuse like everything else in the Light, but it’s worse than that—it doesn’t move at all.

“It’s stuck,” I say pointlessly.

“There must be a level below this one. Do you know how to get down there?”

“No, but there’s gotta be a staircase somewhere. Come on!” We rush out of the dining room. An awful sense of dread claws its way up my throat, suffocating me, but I force it down. Try to focus.

*We have to get to Deacon. Now.*

It’s not hard to locate the basement staircase. The door is a heavy wooden slab much like all the other doors, but there’s no name on this one. Thick walls to either side show where the stairs descend to a lower level.

After we give it a few hard shoves, the door opens, revealing a set of wooden steps trailing down into darkness. There’s a rusted paint can on the top step that looks like it’s been used as a doorstop, so I wedge the door open with it and take a deep breath as I step through. The smell hits me right away, a decaying stench that makes me think of the leeches out in the swamp. I gag, feeling dirty just breathing it in. But the knocking is definitely coming from down here, and it’s much louder now, more frantic. “Deacon?” Cairo calls from right behind me.

Nothing rushes from the dark to attack us, and I can’t hear anything moving. Still, my gut tightens as I feel around for a light switch. Finally, I find one, and a light buzzes to life, illuminating the bottom of the steps. Still no noises, no sharp-toothed demons running up the stairs to meet us.

Slowly, with the knocking still echoing around us, Cairo and I make our way downstairs. But when I get halfway and the basement floor comes into view below me, I can’t force my feet to take me any farther.

“What is it?” Cairo whispers from behind me. I can’t answer. The scene is something from a horror movie. Piles of blood-smeared bones cover the floor, skulls—both animal and human—littered among them. I think of

Cairo saying she woke up after the crash on the remains of a bear that looked like it'd been torn apart.

*Torn apart—and eaten?*

The walls here are bare brick, stained and damp, crumbling in places where tree roots have wormed their way in like ingrown hairs.

My heart continues its thundering beat as I force myself to take one step closer to the nightmare. And another. And another.

The smell intensifies. Every cell in my body is charged with the need to run, but I can't. I can't. I need to see what's down here. Need to *know*.

The banging stops, and its absence makes the walls press in, that stench filling my lungs even though I try to take shallow breaths. Cairo steps past me when I stop at the bottom of the stairs. I don't think she sees the flicker of movement I've spotted in a dark corner of the basement. There—the dumbwaiter. This end of it has a glass window in the metal hatch, and a pale hand is waving from the inside.

“Deacon!” I rush over, trying not to look at what I'm stumbling on as I hurry to get to him. The hatch looks rusted and ancient, its porthole almost opaque with years of accumulated filth.

I grab the handle of the hatch and pull up. It rises a couple inches with a grating squeal, then sticks. I start to yank it up again, but as I do, grimy fingers emerge from underneath the hatch.

“Deacon?” *Is that him?* My voice is strangled with panic.

“Get me out of here!”

It's Deacon. I adjust my grip and yank upward. The hatch flies open with a shriek, and he spills out onto the basement floor. He lies there gasping like he's spent too long underwater. I kneel next to him, looking for injuries. Other than his fingers, which are scraped raw, I can't see any obvious wounds. I reach out and sweep his matted hair out of his face.

“What happened?” I ask.

Deacon looks at me finally, eyes wide and stark. He doesn't say anything, though. That's why I hear the choked sob coming from behind me. When I turn around, Cairo crushes me to her, holding my face to the crook of her neck. “Don't look,” she says, voice breaking. “Don't look.” But it's too late. I've already seen.

There's somebody hanging from a meat hook on the far side of the basement.



Somebody with long turquoise hair and a bloody stump where her left leg used to be.

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### CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

*Kizi?*

I try to swallow, but it turns into a low moan deep inside my throat.

Her hair hangs forward, covering her face, and I'm glad. I focus instead on the hand hanging nearest to me, the shiny charm bracelet still around her wrist. My eyes continue down, skimming over her torn dress to the empty, violated space where her left leg should be, and then follow the other leg all the way down to its shoe—her patent-leather Mary Jane, once white, now caked in gore.

*She took so long deciding what to wear. "You only get one chance to make an entrance, Hade."*

I reach out for the shoe with a trembling hand. When I touch the dirty leather, I hear a sharp intake of breath coming from above my head.

"Guys! She isn't dead!"

Cairo and Deacon are right next to me, but neither of them moves.

"She's alive! Help me!"

I look up and sweep aside the hang of turquoise hair, expecting ... I don't even know. But what I see are my best friend's dead, glassy eyes, her mouth open in an O of surprise.

Her skin is so cold.

*How is this possible? How is any of this possible?*

I was talking with Kizi only minutes ago, but this body—her body—has been dead a lot longer than minutes. Days, probably.

*It wasn't Kizi we were talking to.*

The gears in my head whir uselessly. Because I'm looking at my best friend and not wanting to believe this is her. It can't be. This has to be a fake. The other Kizi—the one who's very much alive—is the real one.

Cairo puts a hand on my shoulder. I shrug it off like it's somehow her fault Kizi's here. But it's not Cai's fault. It's mine.

*I should've borrowed my aunt's car. Should've said no to hitching a ride with Deacon. Should've realized sooner that the thing I've been talking to for more than a day isn't Kizi—it's something else wearing her face.*

I stare up at my best friend's corpse, salty tracks running down my cheeks. There are no other thoughts in my head now, only a wall of white noise and the *boom, boom, boom* of what must surely be my final heartbeats. They have to be, because I'm dying. I know I am. Nothing can hurt like this and not kill you.

A glob of red foam leaks from her left nostril and lands on my jaw, mingling with my tears. Still silent, still not able to breathe, I feel it roll down my skin. It leaves a cold trail of death behind it. But I can still hear breathing.

"Kizi?" I sob through my strangled windpipe. She doesn't react. Not even a muscle twitches in her bloated face.

There's no way Kizi—*my* Kizi—is alive. But despite the depth of static roaring through me, I realize there is definitely someone breathing above my head.

Deacon clears his throat. "I saw a ... a creature. It was ...

It was eating her."

He takes a ragged breath, something thick in his throat like he's seconds away from throwing up. I hear his words, repeat them silently in my head, but they don't make any sense. He can't be talking about Kizi. He *can't*.

"I came down here thinking there might be tools or something we could use to make a raft," Deacon continues tersely. "Then when I saw Kizi's body, and all those others ... I couldn't move. I couldn't do anything for what felt like *years*. But then I heard the basement door open. Somehow, I knew it wasn't either of you. It was something else. I crawled into the dumbwaiter to hide, hoping it wouldn't notice me, but the hatch jammed. I couldn't get out! I was stuck in there while that thing started eating. I

couldn't bear to watch, but I could *hear* ... Then, when the creature left, I was scared it was going after the two of you and I had to warn you, but I couldn't get out, I couldn't get out!" He pauses. When he speaks next, it's so low, I barely hear him. "*It had her face.*"

Breathing—there it is again.

"I think it came back," I whisper.

I stumble against Cairo or Deacon—I'm not sure which—and look up, past my dead best friend. There's a vent high up in the wall. And through the slats I see a pair of eyes, glinting in the reflected light of the bare bulb overhead.

The others tense next to me. They've seen it too.

Slowly, silently, the vent starts to open outward. A thin, milky-white arm appears and begins to push through the hole that's no bigger than a notebook. A shoulder emerges, followed by another waxy-looking hand.

*Like the leech sliding out of Deacon's leg.*

"Come on!" Deacon yells, already halfway up the stairs. Cairo pulls at my arm, and we're running, stumbling, crawling up the stairs on hands and knees. Behind us I hear something scrabbling over the pile of bones, coming in our direction.

This is it. I'm going to die. We're all going to die and get butchered like Kizi.

*No!*

I shove myself to my feet and haul Cairo up with me.

Deacon is at the top of the stairs, waiting in the doorway. "There's no key to lock it in," he says. "No key!"

Cairo reaches him first and barrels him out into the hallway with her. The creature is right behind me now—I can feel its breath on my neck, sense those long, awful fingers reaching for me. I hit the top step, grab the rusty paint can, and swing it around with all my strength.

But there's nothing there. The demon ... creature ... whatever that thing was, it's gone now. The paint can falls from my hand and rolls down the stairs—*clang, clang, clang*—all the way to the stained concrete floor below.

"Haden, come on!"

Cairo tugs me out into the hallway and doesn't let go until I'm moving, running alongside her and Deacon through the Light.



## CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

*My heart's a roaring wave  
Her skin a frozen sea  
She says goodbye forever  
It's a lie  
It has to be  
But how can something be a lie if it's poetry?*  
—From “Kismet” by Haden Romero

I want to go back to the dream I had last night. I want to close my eyes and live in it, not feel anything but the roar of a crowd lifting me up, the spotlight wrapping me in its arms. That feeling—it's intoxicating. Wanting it is the only thing keeping my heart beating. But it slips through my fingers more with each breath of stale, moldy air I inhale into my lungs, every creak of this nightmare of a house settling on its haunches. It won't let me forget what I'm running from.

Kizi is still dead.

My feet pound along the hallways, Cairo and Deacon by my side.

*Dead, dead, dead.*

“Mullaney was right,” Cairo says, panting. “There's a demon in this house. So what do we do? Perform some kind of exorcism? Bathe in holy water? Torch this place?”

“Hold on,” Deacon wheezes, pulling us to a stop at the parlor door. “A demon?”

And I remember that Deacon doesn’t know what was on Mullaney’s videos. Cairo tells him about all of it: Mullaney chronicling the party guests disappearing one by one; the demon wearing Magdalena Warren’s face. I watch as he grows unbelievably paler. He looks like he’s about to collapse.

“Those leeches ... spores ... whatever she was force-feeding Faith Knight, I think they must be some kind of parasite,” Cairo says.

*What happened to Faith Knight ... that could so easily have been my mom if she’d gotten the part Faith Knight took from her. If she’d followed the same path to fame.*

Maybe it *will* be us.

“They definitely feed on people,” I say, my stomach turning as Shane’s face appears in my mind, the flesh gone and that white leech squirming in his eye socket.

Deacon, leaning against the wall as he tries to catch his breath, stares at his injured leg.

“We got them out of you.” I try to make my voice firm and sure, but it sounds dead. From the look on Deacon’s face, he doesn’t believe me.

“I really don’t feel well,” he says.

“I’ll get you some water,” I tell him. The kitchen is only a few doors away. I rush in, then quickly check out the room in case that *thing* has crawled in through the vents and is lying in wait.

Halfway to the sink, I stop in my tracks. The dirty plates we’ve been using fill the counters, moldy food covering their surfaces. But when I look closer, it’s not *food*. I see rotting plants that look like weeds pulled right from the swamp, crushed beetles and dead flies strewn across them, and brown sludge exactly like the disgusting filth that emerged from the faucet that first night in Magdalena Warren’s room.

I recoil in horror as it dawns on me that we’ve been *eating* this.

Not wanting to believe it, I search the cabinets, the pantry, the refrigerator, but find only more of the same.

*She’s been feeding this to us.*

I groan, a heaving panic, only managing to make it to the sink right before my stomach ejects a thin stream of bile. “Haden, are you okay?” Cairo enters the kitchen, tensed as though expecting to find me grappling

with whatever demon lives in this place. Then she sees the “food” on the counters. “Oh God ...”

There have been plenty of times in the past few days that I’ve thought Kizi was acting weird, but now that I know none of it was really Kizi, I’m looking at every single interaction we had through a new lens.

*How did I not know it wasn’t her? How could I have missed it?*

And why is she—it—feeding us? Why is it keeping us here?

*Where is it now?*

“What do we do?” I say, voice hoarse. Cairo puts her arm around me.

“Come on. Let’s get out of here.”

Deacon is staggering now, and I can’t tell if it’s because he’s in withdrawal or because of what he went through in that basement, but we can’t afford to stop and let him rest any longer. That creature could be anywhere, watching us, and we wouldn’t have a clue.

“Help me get the door open,” Cai says as we reach the entrance hall, but then the shadow of the sculpture falls on us, and a fresh wave of dread passes over me.

*Get past it. Get out.*

Cairo and I drag the bench away from the door, and I go to fling it open.

The door won’t budge. The handle doesn’t even twist—it’s like someone’s holding it from the other side.

“Oh God,” I say, trying frantically to yank it open. “We’re trapped!”

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## CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

We race from room to room, checking every window, every external door, searching for one that opens. We end up back in the entrance hall, chests heaving as we eye one another, not wanting to voice what we all know by now: We're locked in, and the demon could be anywhere.

Then my gaze falls on the heavy wooden bench. "We can use this as a battering ram," I say.

Deacon tries to help but Cairo and I take most of the weight of it. My arms shake with effort as we draw it back a few feet from the door, then Cairo yells, "Now!"

The sound of the bench hitting the thick wooden door is louder than a gunshot, but the door stays shut.

"Again!" Cairo yells, and I almost stumble as she lifts the bench and pulls it back for another attempt.

This time the door splinters where the bench hits, but it still won't open. "Again!"

My arms, my back, my shoulders—they all burn under the weight of the bench, each impact sending jolts of agony through my entire body.

*I'll break before this door does*, I think, but I keep going as Cairo commands. "Wait!"

I almost cry with relief when Cairo stops hauling the bench between us, and I see there's a hole in the door, the wood around it shattered and uneven. Cairo kicks at it, making it bigger, until I'm pretty sure we can all



crawl through it, even if it's a tight fit. I stumble over and peer out. At first I can't figure out what I'm seeing—or rather, *not* seeing. There's only a blank white void—the fog obscures everything outside. I could almost believe the world no longer exists out there and all that's left is this house and me and Cairo and Deacon.

*And whatever's making that wet sucking sound behind me.*

I turn slowly, dreading what I'm about to find.

The sculpture is moving, *undulating*, its surface quivering as though it's about to burst open.

Then it does.

A stream of writhing leeches slithers from the base of the enormous egg, pooling onto the floor beneath it.

Deacon backs away from it, trips, and crab-crawls until he hits the foot of the stairs. A high, keening noise breaks its way out of his throat as he shakes his head.

Cairo has a hand thrown over her mouth, eyes round with shock. All I can do is watch, frozen, as the mass of leeches grows, swells, and forms a column in front of the sculpture. As it elongates, it starts to take shape—the outline of a head, arms, legs. Then features start to emerge as the squelching sound takes on more of a crunch, like someone chewing hard candy. Or biting through bone.

The thing taking shape in front of me is hardening, I realize. As it does, an ashy residue falls loose from its pulsating skin. Finally, hair starts to sprout; I see a vague impression of clothing covering its nakedness, and then it—*she*—looks up.

Kizi.

*Not-Kizi.*

My breath catches in my throat. I gaze at her perfect, perfect face. At her deep brown eyes watching me as closely as I'm watching her. At the faint hint of a smile at the corners of her full mouth.

It hits me like a knife blade between my ribs.

*I'm not looking at Kizi right now. Kizi is in the basement, cold and dead and half eaten.*

It's that *thing* wearing her face.

As I study it, staring so hard I feel like I should be seeing *through* the creature, that un-Kizi smile falls away to leave a blank, expressionless mask. And though the features are still Kizi's, this face is definitely a mask.

*Definitely not human.*

“You’re not leaving, are you?” Not-Kizi says. The tone is playful, but its eyes are anything but. It shivers, shaking off the dust like a dog fresh from a swim.

Those ashy footprints—this thing has been watching us the whole time we’ve been here, stealing along the hallways and peering in at our bedroom doors and through the air ducts... .

I feel sick. Suffocated.

*This can’t be real.*

“Who are you?” Cairo says. It sounds like she’s near the shuttered window of the entrance hall. I don’t dare tear my eyes from the creature to look at her. “What are you?”

“You must know me by now. After all, I know each of you so well. I know your dreams—I’ve *seen* them.”

With a dawning sense of horror, I realize it’s telling the truth. The dreams I’ve been having, those amazing dreams of a future life that made my heart feel like it would burst from my body with joy ... This is who I was talking to the whole time.

From the shocked gasps I hear from Deacon and Cairo, I guess they’ve been experiencing something similar.

“And I’ve been known by many names, but you may call me Mother, if you like.”

Not-Kizi leans against the battered door, a movement so casual I almost laugh. I don’t, though.

“What do you want?” I demand.

It waves away the question like it’s obvious. “The more important question is what do *you* want, each of you? If you were to die now, would anyone remember you for more than a day, a week? And if they did, would it be as an overlooked musician who never even got to play a stadium”—she gestures to Cairo with one pointed fingernail—“a self-destructive brat who’s too afraid to take what she really wants”—my turn for the talon—“or perhaps as a sellout whose life is so empty he can’t get through a day without something to numb the pain?” The demon pauses here, letting the barbs sink deep. And they do. I can tell I’m not the only one who wants to snap back against that biting appraisal. But I can’t; what it’s saying is true.

If I died right now, I doubt I'd even trend on social media. I'm just wasted potential wrapped in skin.

"I can fix that. All of it. I've already shown you the lives you could have—how your dreams can become reality. I can give you everything you want—*everything*. All you need to decide is what you'd give to have your dreams come true."

Its words are sugary sweet, filled with false promises.

They have to be false, right? But ...

I remember the roar of the crowd. If I could live in the dreams it showed me, live in that feeling of being onstage, being adored ... Is there anything I *wouldn't* give for that?

I'm not living in that dream right now, though. I'm standing here looking at a creature that can change its shape to mimic other people.

It says it can give me everything I've ever wanted—make me all I've ever wanted to be.

*Do I believe it?*

But it uses Kizi's face. Talks with her voice. It *ate* Kizi.

Adrenaline courses through me. The primal part of my brain knows only that I'm afraid and need to be far, far away from this ... *thing*.

"Let us go! We don't want anything you're offering!" Deacon calls from the stairs.

"Are you so sure?" the creature says, smiling slyly at him. Then its skin ripples, and before my eyes it changes, shifting to become taller, its turquoise hair shortening and turning red, a fresh scattering of dusty residue falling from it. And even though I know it wasn't really Kizi standing in front of me a moment ago, it still cuts deep when her face is gone. "You haven't enjoyed life in the spotlight for a long time, have you, Deke?" it says in Shane's voice. Seeing him—this imitation of him—brings back the unwanted image of him out in the swamp, his face mutilated.

*A squirming leech in his eye socket ...*

"Don't you want to fall in love with it again? Let it fill you, make everything matter again?" it goes on. "I can make you feel so much better. I can even fix your leg now that those nasty pills are out of your system. Wouldn't you like to feel better, Deke?" He doesn't answer, but I get the impression its words have struck a nerve.

*Is the demon right? Is Deacon so unhappy with his life?*

I remember what he told me about the rift with his family, about how he chose stardom over them, and even though he wouldn't change his decision, he still hates himself for it. Would that kill the joy of performing? Of making music?

*"Maybe we all died on that bus and we're stuck here in some kind of purgatory."*

The demon's eyes turn and bore into mine until I want to tear my gaze away, but I can't. "Wouldn't you like to be known for your talent instead of your temper, Haden? Don't you want to be able to create music, share it with the world, without worrying that you'll mess it all up? You're your own worst enemy. But I can fix that. Isn't that what you want? And all you have to do is welcome me in."

"You mean swallow your gross worms," I spit. "Why the hell would anyone do that? We've seen what they do to people! They ate Shane *from the inside*."

As though his name were a banishing incantation, suddenly Magdalena Warren stands before us. She is as beautiful as she was in the Polaroid and in Conrad Mullaney's video, but now her eyes are cold, flat disks.

"Shane wasn't a worthy vessel," it says. Its voice—Magdalena's voice—is so soft, alluring. My eyes start to close. I feel like I could bathe in that sound. Maybe then I'd forget about the things I've seen, the things that have happened to us.

*No, that's not what I want! It's a demon!*

With a snap, I open my eyes wide and find Cairo and Deacon watching the creature with half-lidded gazes. It's messing with us somehow, trying to draw us in.

"What about Kizi?" I say, my voice quavering. "Why did you have to kill her?"

The creature blinks, looking surprised.

"I didn't kill her. She was already dying when I found her," it says. "I had only moments to read her thoughts before she was gone, to learn more about all of *you* and your vast, shining potential. But if you're honest with yourself, isn't it better that she's not here? Not holding you back? She would always have been in your way, Haden. You know that, deep down. Her dying was the best thing that could've happened to you." The thing offers me a coy smile. "And I couldn't waste a free meal."

“What the hell did you just say?” My hands become fists, and suddenly I don’t care what this thing is. All I know is I’m going to tear it apart.

“How does it work? With the worms, I mean,” Cairo says quickly, like she senses I’m about to explode. The demon’s head whips in her direction, a slow *gotcha* smile spreading across its face. “Are they some kind of parasite? I assume the goal is for someone to swallow the leeches *without* being eaten alive, so how is that supposed to happen?”

“My *spores*,” the creature corrects her, “are a direct link to me; I can control how and when they feed. But if I’m not in control of them, their hunger can get out of hand.” The demon twists Magdalena’s features into a look of embarrassment, a faint blush pinking its cheeks. “That’s why you must allow me in—to take control.”

*All those bones in the basement, all the names on the doors—how many people has this creature lured here over the years? How many has it fed on? Has anyone ever escaped—ever survived if they did?*

My gaze shifts to the hole in the door at the creature’s back. The fog has drifted in, making its outline hazy. And again, exactly like when I ran from Trip earlier, I see the fog twist and form harrowing faces. They swirl together, disappear, and reform.

*The ghosts of all its past victims?*

With enough time, would that fog fill this entire house? Or does the demon keep it out—controlling the ghosts, as it seems to control the gravel pathways snaking through the swamp?

*No, not gravel—spores. Millions and millions of spores.*

This thing is *made* of them.

“Will you take my offer, Cairo? I could give you the confidence to step out of the shadows and gain the recognition your talent deserves.”

I expect Cai to give an immediate no, but to my horror she doesn’t. She chews on the corner of her lip, saying nothing.

Would she actually do this? Something in my gut tells me she would if it’d help her get what she really wanted.

*What would you give ...*

Anything.

Those whispered words from my dream snake through my thoughts, insidious and tantalizing. But *anything* doesn’t include this.

*Does it?*

“I’d need to know more before agreeing,” Cairo says slowly, scuffing a half circle on the dirty floor with the toe of her shoe. “I mean, say I was your ideal *vessel*, would that give you control over me? Would I still be myself?”

A glimmer of triumph passes over the creature’s face, there and gone in an instant. “I cannot take away your free will, Cairo. You could travel the world without ever laying eyes on me again. Our situation would simply be ... symbiotic. When you flourish and thrive, so do I. A perfect harmony.”

*It can’t leave this place.* As soon as the thought crosses my mind, it seems so obvious. That’s why it waits for people to come here. *That’s why it uses people like Trip to bring them to the swamp.*

“Symbiotic,” Cairo repeats.

“Cai?!”

I can’t believe she seems to be considering this. She knows what this thing’s spores did to Shane. Saw what it did to Kizi’s body.

Then I remember her whispering with Kizi—or what I thought was Kizi—only hours ago. How Cai said they’d made up, put the past behind them. Was that really what they were talking about, or was it something else?

How long has this toxic creature been poisoning Cai’s mind?

*It’s been poisoning me too, with those dreams...*

“Haden—move!”

My head jerks up at Deacon’s yell. He’s on the mezzanine, pointing to the busted front door behind me, and I see someone forcing their way through the gap we made. The creature hisses and whirls around as Trip Prescott emerges, something metal and sharp-looking in his hand ... a crowbar. He looks even more haggard than the last time I saw him, and his face is a mass of sores.

Not sores—leech bites.

Trip lunges past me at the demon, swinging his crowbar and driving it back toward the sculpture.

“You liar!” he shouts. “You promised you’d fix everything for me! I’ve held up my end of the bargain, now hold up yours!”

Trip grapples with the creature and they both fall to the floor in a tangle of limbs. It seems like Trip has the upper hand, but then he’s flying through the air, crowbar hitting the ground with a clatter. He slams into the wall below the mezzanine where Deacon stands, the impact producing a sickening thud. Trip collapses, winded, dazed, and probably a lot worse.

“You took ... my dad,” Trip says, wheezing. “Bart too. I gave you Deacon Rex ... and others ... and what have I got back? When will it be enough? When will I ... be enough?” The demon shifts again, growing taller, broader, its skin darkening to a deep brown as it takes another form. *Shark Bart*, I think. It crouches in front of Trip’s crumpled body.

“When are you going to get it through your head, Trip?” I only vaguely recognize Bart, and his voice is totally unfamiliar. Still, there’s no mistaking the demon’s scathing tone. “Bart knew it. The world knows it. You’ll *never* be enough, because you are *nothing*.” The demon cocks its head to one side. “Perhaps it’s time I gave you a purpose after all—as food.”

Its hands shoot forward and grasp Trip’s head.

I dart a glance at the hole in the door. The fog hasn’t dissipated, but I can’t see the ghostly faces in it right now.

*This is our chance to get out of here—while that thing is distracted.*

Cairo’s not far away, but Deacon’s still upstairs. I wave my arms to catch his attention, then point at the door, but he shakes his head no. I point again, more frantically. Across the room, the demon clamps its hand over Trip’s mouth as he thrashes beneath it. With a sickening lurch of my stomach, I realize it’s force-feeding him leeches.

But Deacon’s still shaking his head.

*He can’t get to us without passing by the demon, I realize. That’s why Cairo was questioning it before: She was distracting it to give Deacon a chance to slip by. She hasn’t been sucked in by it.*

I spot Trip’s crowbar lying on the floor at the base of the sculpture. I creep over and grab it, then edge my way to the demon. But as I near, Deacon starts making sharp, agitated faces at me.

*Come on, Deacon! Don’t waste this chance! We can still make it out of here.*

Then he holds up the broken bust from outside Magdalena Warren’s suite. He raises it above his head, and I realize what he’s about to do. I dive backward as the bust crashes down where the demon stands—or where it was standing a split second ago.

With a nerve-shredding screech, it leaps into the air and lands on the iron frame holding the chandelier in place above the sculpture. The whole thing swings wildly as the creature clings to it, glaring at Deacon. Perhaps as an instinctive response, it shifts once more, retaking Kizi’s shape and gutting me all over again.

“Oops,” Deacon says. “I think my aim’s a bit off.”

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## CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

The demon hisses, glaring at Deacon. He trembles as he holds its stare, and I don't think it's a symptom of withdrawal this time. He's as terrified as I am.

Trip lies still, either dead or knocked out cold, but in any case, we don't have to worry about him attacking us anymore. Maybe he's not as scary as a freaking demon, but I'd be glad never to see the guy again.

*Only the demon to deal with now.*

I'm maybe eight feet away from the sculpture—the spore sack. Close enough for this to work—I *hope*. I know I'll only get one shot.

*That has to be the way to kill it, right? It must be some kind of demonic vital organ to produce those god-awful leeches ... right?*

I raise the crowbar above my head and lunge for the sculpture. The creature's eyes swivel toward me, but I can't allow myself to freeze up under its gaze. I slam the crowbar as hard as I can against the side of the egg-shaped monstrosity and wait for the crash as it shatters.

But there's no crash. No shatter. Only a nick in the spore sack the size of my thumbnail after the crowbar *clangs* off its surface. That's it.

Horror beats at my chest as I swing again, as hard and fast as I can. Again. Again.

I give it everything and leave barely a ding. Laughter echoes from the chandelier above me and I look up to find the creature swinging there,

watching my futile attempts and smiling with Kizi's face. The movement sends a shower of dust raining down on me, stinging my eyes. I wipe at them with my sleeve. It just laughs harder, using my best friend's voice.

*Goodbye forever?* I asked.

*What on earth do you mean?*

She was already gone.

That's what makes me do it—makes me snap. I launch the crowbar up at the swinging chandelier, aiming for the demon's head. But it sails harmlessly past it and hits the chain holding the chandelier to the high ceiling, then drops and gets caught in the strings of crystals draped like cobwebs between the iron spokes.

*How could I miss? How could I mess up* again?

But then the creature drops too. I watch, stunned and confused, as it crumples on the still-swaying chandelier, seemingly unconscious.

For the first time since we arrived, the enormous light hanging over the entrance hall flickers out. I must've hit the power line with the crowbar—could that have knocked out the creature? Maybe even killed it?

It feels like too much to hope for. Too easy.

But even as I consider this, everything around me starts to change. The demon loses its likeness to Kizi, its turquoise hair melting back into a smooth, marble-colored scalp. Its face becomes a featureless mask, eyes disappearing. Limbs withdraw until only nubs protrude from its thick, bone-white torso, like a snake with vestigial wings. And when its mouth drops open, inside is a spiraling vortex of razorlike teeth.

"Oh, shit." The words leave me on an airless whisper.

It isn't only the creature that's changing, though. The chandelier is still covered with dusty crystals and intricate ironwork, but parts of it seem distorted, as pale and fleshy as the creature itself. From it, reaching out across the foyer and into the dark hallways leading into the house, there now stretch thin, translucent vines, like spiderwebs, binding everything together. A thick tether hangs from the creature's back, connecting it to the spore sack below.

The transformation spreads outward like a drop of blood spilled into water. First the walls seem to shiver, the moldy paper taking on a rubbery, almost elastic quality, like the skin of a squid. The surface of the floor changes, yielding slightly under my boots like moss rather than tile. And all

at once, every window I can see *stretches*, shucking off the shutters before settling back into their former shapes, each one like a mouth yawning.

*This house really is a part of it, I realize.*

*We're inside the monster.*

"Come on," I say, turning to the others. "We need to get out of—"

When I look from Cairo on the opposite side of the entrance hall to Deacon up on the gallery, I find he's no longer leaning against the railing. His arm hangs limply between the bars where he's collapsed.

"Deacon!"

I run, taking the stairs three at a time to get there as quickly as I can. Even they seem to be altering, some of them now giving beneath my boots like a damp sponge.

Cairo isn't far behind me. For a cold, hard second when we reach Deacon, I think he's dead. His face is as waxy as a corpse's, his lips completely bleached of color. Then he groans.

"Yes," he mumbles. "Anything "

"Deacon, you have to get up. Please!"

He opens his eyes and blinks at me. I take his hand and pull him to his feet.

"Lean on me," I say. "We need to move."

Cairo shifts to Deacon's other side and puts his arm around her shoulders. As we shuffle back to the stairs, I notice the chandelier is still swaying gently. From up here, I can see that the metal plate attaching it to the ceiling is loose on one side, probably pulled free when the creature landed on it. I'm turning away when the light flickers with a faint *buzz*. The creature, still draped over the ironwork, twitches.

I freeze. Another flicker, another twitch. Its skin writhes, the things inside it stirring. The transformation taking hold of our surroundings seems to waver, uncertain. It looks like the light is coming back on, and the creature is waking. It's almost as though they're ...

Connected. Everything in this place is connected—to the light.

As soon as it hits me, it seems so obvious. The light in the entrance hall has been on since before we arrived at this place—hell, the house is even *named* the Light. We never could find a switch for it either.

*That gigantic chandelier must be its brain, or maybe its consciousness.*

“Get Deacon downstairs,” I tell Cairo. “Why? What are you going to do?”

“I’ll meet you down there.” I try to give her a confident smile. “I just need to do something real quick.”

The creature twitches, the chandelier now giving off a faint but steady glow all around it. In moments it will be conscious again, I’m sure of it. And then it will come after us. There’s no choice. No time to figure out if I can actually kill it. Because I have to. There’s no plan B. And if I’m right about the light, there’s only one way to do it.

I climb up onto the railing in front of me, take a breath, and leap for the chandelier.

There’s a stomach-sinking second when I think I’ve missed it, that I’m about to come crashing down to the floor in a pile of broken parts. Then my stomach hits the iron frame of the light fixture, knocking the air out of me. I scramble to hold on. The whole thing sways sickeningly and I can only hang there, vaguely aware of Deacon and Cairo yelling below me. I can’t focus on them, though. Because the creature rolls with the motion of the chandelier, its mouth gaping toward me with all those teeth. Then its face isn’t blank anymore.

Two yellow eyes blink open. The mouth contracts as its features phase from Kizi’s to Shane’s to Bart’s, finally settling into the fine bone structure of Magdalena Warren. But when it smiles, its mouth is full of those razor-sharp teeth.

The creature lets out an inhuman shriek as I drag myself onto the chandelier frame. I snatch up the crowbar and jam the end of it as hard as I can under the iron plate holding the chandelier to the ceiling. And pull.

Nothing happens.

*No, no, no—*

I can’t screw this up! Not now!

But then one of the heavy bolts springs free and hits the ground below with a sound like a gunshot. I do it again, using both hands and all my weight to pry at the fixture. I feel the creature’s hand wrap around my calf and tighten painfully, like a boa constrictor. I don’t look down.

“Be the star you always wanted to be, Haden,” it hisses. “The star your parents can finally love.”

Another bolt comes loose.

The chandelier lurches. Relief surges through me as the grip on my leg releases, only to be replaced by what feels like sharp claws raking up my torso, grappling for my throat.

“No more of the hollow ache you feel all the time,” it whispers, and I can’t tell now if its voice is right next to me or inside my head. I yank at the crowbar again. “No more longing...”

Another bolt flies out, and this one is the clincher. The chandelier breaks away from the ceiling in a shower of plaster shards; only a single frayed wire prevents it from falling. I get one last glimpse of Deacon and Cairo standing by the front door, twin looks of horror on their faces as they understand what’s about to happen.

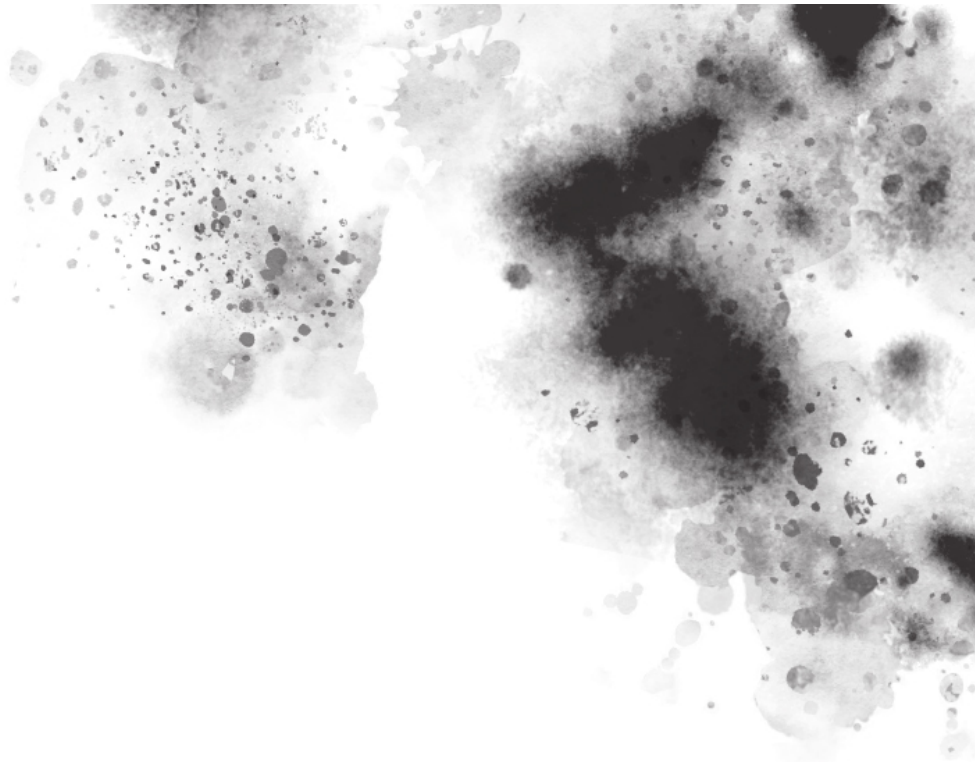
The creature grabs my chin with clawlike fingers, forcing me to look at it. It’s wearing Kizi’s face again when it speaks. “Don’t you want to finally feel *whole*?”

“I—”

Then the chandelier plummets, taking me with it. The demon clings to me, its mouth again a chasm filled with rows and rows of sharp teeth as the dome of the spore sack rushes up to meet us.

The impact feels like an explosion. I’m hurled from the iron frame of the chandelier as the enormous egg erupts in white shards, emitting a wave of milky fluid full of squirming leeches. It’s the last thing I see before I hit the ground.

Lights out.



*I'm plunged into darkness, yet I know I'm onstage. The crowd waits silently for me to play, but it's so dark I can't see my guitar or where the mic is. My heart pounds hollowly in my chest, panic rising. I'm where I'm supposed to be, but not like this. It shouldn't be like this.*

*"I can help you, Haden," the voice says. Mother's voice. But it's calming, somehow, here in the dark. "Everything you've ever wanted can be yours."*

*How?*

*"Just say yes," Mother tells me. "Let me in."*

*I frown. I don't want to say yes to Mother. Mother is bad. She's trying to ... what? Something flits at the edges of my memory, a moth dancing near a candle's flame, but it disappears before I can grasp it.*

*"Don't you want the light back?" Mother's smooth voice draws my focus back to her, though I can't see anything in this dense blackness. "Don't you yearn to hear the crowd cheering your name?"*

*Yes!*

*"Then tell me. Speak the words. The light can be yours, if you only let me in."*

*The darkness bears down on me, an echo of the trampling weight of the crowd. It's hard to breathe. Hard to think. I just know I want that feeling back. That sense of rightness I had when I stood on the stage with the music passing through me. It was incredible.*

*Divine.*

*"I want it."*

*My words are barely a gasp of air, but they're enough. I'm enough. The roar of sound fills me again; the stage lights blaze back to life. I blaze back to life.*

*"Let the light in, Haden," Mother says. So I do.*

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## CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

### DAY FOUR

I hear water. That's the first thought I have when I come around.

I'm sweating, my body is a mass of aches and scrapes, and my head feels like I've had an ice pick jammed into the back of it.

"She's awake," a familiar voice says. "How are you feeling, petal?"

I open my eyes to see dusty denim-blue ones peering back at me. Deacon sits facing me across the short length of a rowboat. Between us, Cairo works the oars while the early morning sun shines down on us. I can't remember the last time I saw the sun. The feel of its warmth on my skin is like being born again.

*We're okay! We're all ...*

Wait.

"Is this ... Am I dead?" I ask, a ball of dread forming in my gut. Because there's no way this can be real. No way we're all pleasantly floating along in a rowboat after the horrors we've been through. It's so absurd I would laugh if I weren't certain I'd cough up half a rib.

"Not dead, but I think we're all going to need some serious therapy," Deacon says.

We glide across murky water, not a wisp of fog to be seen.

Cairo rows with firm, even strokes.

"What about the demon, though? Is it still back there?"

Did I kill it?"



“You don’t need to worry about Mother anymore,” Cairo says. I should feel relieved to hear that—I know I should. But the news doesn’t sit easy, doesn’t want to stay put. Because it can’t be right. Can’t be true.

*Let the light in.*

I remember hearing her voice after I fell, but the words are hazy. My head pounds as I try to claw back the memory, but it’s no use. Only a sick feeling of wrongness shudders through me, there and gone like an eel slithering past my ankles.

My gaze snags on something bulky poking from Cairo’s jacket pocket.

“You brought the video camera? Why?”

“Don’t you think the families of all those guests deserve to know what happened to them?”

She tucks the camera deeper into her pocket and picks up the oars again.

“What if they come here looking for Mother? Or for all the others who died here?” I press. “What if they bring the demon more *food*?”

“They won’t find Mother,” Cairo says, her tone oddly flat.

“How do you know?”

I raise a hand to my neck where it’s been prickling ever since I escaped from Trip in the boathouse. It’s a scab now. Still stings, though. And my head is throbbing.

“Because Mother has ways of keeping out the ones she doesn’t want,” Deacon answers for Cairo, a hard edge to his words that doesn’t seem very *Deacon*. Though after everything that’s happened, I doubt any of us are the same as we were before. “And I get the feeling she won’t need to feed again for a long while. Besides, we don’t have to tell anyone *where* Mother is. In fact, you should probably deliver that camera anonymously, Cai, so we don’t have to explain to anyone what happened to us. Everyone will think we’re insane if we tell them what really happened here.”

“So you’re saying we should lie to everyone we know about where we’ve been for the past four days?” As soon as I’ve said it, I realize Deacon’s right. If we tell people the truth about the Light, nobody will believe us.

“That’s exactly what we should do,” Cairo says firmly. “Tell people a story they *will* believe. It’s better for us all that way.”

Deacon nods. “Then we agree: it stays between us. But how do we explain what happened to the others?”

“We say they died in the bus crash,” I say quietly. “We tell them it happened miles and miles from here. The authorities will search, but they’ll never find this place if we all say it was somewhere else. Eventually they’ll have to accept our version of what happened.”

“That will work,” Deacon says, and a faint smile tilts the corners of Cairo’s mouth. I’m not sure how, but I feel like I just got played.

I cast one final look behind us at the house, now no more than a speck across the dark water, and think of everything I’m leaving behind. It’s time to say goodbye forever—and mean it this time. I wonder if Deacon and Cairo are doing the same.

I’ve made my choice. I guess we all have. The throbbing behind my eardrums shifts gently, like something unfurling. Then it stops.

*Ahh.*

“Are you feeling better now?” Cairo asks, eyes glittering. I do. I feel so much better now.

*Hello, Haden*, a soft voice whispers in my head. It’s a wonderful voice. It makes everything perfectly clear, like flicking a switch.

“Can you hear her?” Deacon grins, and I can’t help but smile back.

*Hello, Mother.*

And with that, we turn our backs on the Light.

**Excerpt from Kurt County Police Department Evidence Form**

**Item:** *Sony Handycam DCR HC21 recovered following incident at Playa del Rey de la Luz.*

**Notes:** One camcorder, believed to have been the property of movie director Conrad Mullaney, missing since December 28, 2005, and now presumed dead. The memory card held several video files, including one that had been partly deleted on January 1, 2006. We were able to recover all the footage.

The FBI now has jurisdiction in this case and all recordings have been classified.

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**CLASSIFIED**

***Video footage recovered from the camcorder of Conrad Mullaney, director of several low-budget horror movies from the 1980s and 1990s.***

Final video transcript (recovered section):

***Magdalena Warren holds out a glass of whiskey, presumably to Mullaney, who is behind the camera. She is dressed in an elegant green cocktail gown, her skin luminous and her hair pinned up in a chignon.***

MULLANEY: So if I don't agree to this ... devil's bargain—what then?

WARREN: Then I'll be disappointed but still very well fed. Why don't you think about it while you freshen up for dinner?

MULLANEY: Or how about I leave this place and never look back? Come on, Magda—you don't really think an old coot like me is your ... what, emissary? Is that what you'd call it? Yeah, I'm not the emissary you're looking for. I'm just an old guy who makes movies.

WARREN: [Laughs.] You're a rich white man creating art in a field that loves rich white men. There are very few doors closed to you, Conrad. But whether you take my offer or not, you should know that simply leaving here without completing the process isn't an option. You'll get eaten alive—quite literally, I'm afraid. You see, in their larval state, my spores are rather tiny. [Holds her fingers around a half inch apart.] And they need mature spores to help me control them. Nevertheless, the larvae will grow, and they will feed. [Takes a sip from her cocktail glass.] My spores are already inside you, Conrad. They've been inside you since the moment you drank the water, and they're such hungry little monsters.

***Video cuts, resuming in Mullaney's bedroom. It appears at first that he is getting undressed, but he only removes his belt and attaches it to the high post of the bed frame. He looks at the camera.***

MULLANEY: I want you to know I went on my own terms. I know I can't kill that thing, that demon down there, or whatever she's put inside me. I can feel them now, in my head, moving behind my eyes, my ears ... I guess I could before, but I didn't want to admit it to myself. Couldn't face it. But I won't let her eat me alive.

***At the far side of the room, the bedroom door slowly swings open. Footage ends.***

Note: It seems Mullaney had a change of heart and deleted this footage. Either that or someone else did.

Mullaney was reported missing by his sister, Jolene Mullaney, after he didn't show up for a breakfast appointment on January 10, 2006. He was

officially declared deceased in 2013.

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## REX MORI IMPLICATED IN DEATH-CULT MASSACRE

By Dennis Grayson, Staff Writer

Following reports of sixteen dead bodies washing up on the privately owned Spanish beach Playa del Rey de la Luz, the beach's owner, Rex Mori front man Deacon Rex, and drummer Cairo Martin have been implicated in a suspected death-cult murder-suicide. According to one source, an invitation found among one of the victims' personal belongings has led the authorities to believe Rex and Martin incited the mass suicide of a number of the band's fans whom they had allegedly lured to the area under the pretext of a beachside villa party last week. Neither Rex nor Martin has been seen since. Sources also report that no villa was found at the coordinates given in the invitation, though that has yet to be confirmed. Rex's and Martin's bodies are expected to be recovered in the coming weeks as air and sea searches of the area continue.

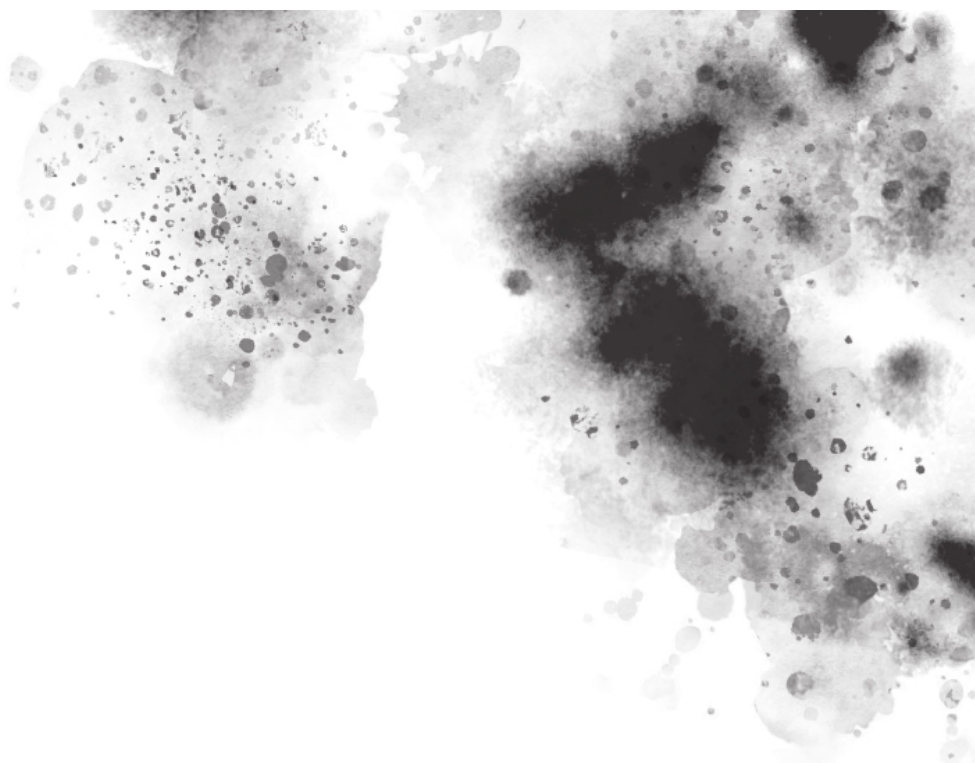
This news comes just six months after the Rex Mori tour bus infamously crashed en route to the Rock-o'-Lantern music festival, killing three passengers, including bassist Shane Eriksen.

Multiplatinum solo artist Haden Romero, a close friend of Rex and Martin, took to social media to share the following yesterday:

*Deacon, Cairo—what a loss, and so much darkness ... there are no words, but I am thankful you are now with the Light. I'll be paying tribute to you at tonight's show, my friends. #RIPDeaconRex  
#RIPCairoMartin*

Romero's cover of the Rex Mori single "We All Want More," which she sang at last night's sold-out event in New York, has already been streamed over ten million times.

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The Light is our beacon  
We shall not fight  
It remakes us when we lie down for slaughter  
Leads us all to drown in its waters  
It consumes the fire  
So we all can burn bright  
Praise the Mother  
Our beacon  
We are one with the Light

—From “We Are One” by Haden Romero

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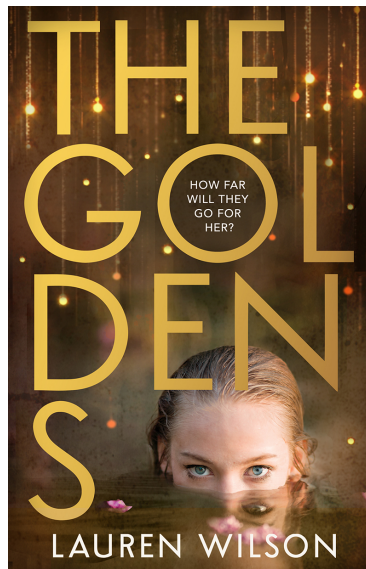
One last thank-you to my readers: you are wonderful, and I hope the leeches won't give you too many nightmares. Kudos to those of you who spot the Easter eggs!





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