

UNTIL THE LAST LIGHT GOES OUT

■ ■ ■ ■ ■

COURTNEY GOULD



WEDNESDAY BOOKS
NEW YORK

This is a work of fiction. All of the names, characters, organizations, places, and events portrayed in this work are either products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously.

First published in the United States by Wednesday Books, an imprint of St. Martin's Publishing Group

EU Representative: Macmillan Publishers Ireland Ltd., 1st Floor, The Liffey Trust Centre, 117–126 Sheriff Street Upper, Dublin 1, D01 YC43

UNTIL THE LAST LIGHT GOES OUT. Copyright © 2026 by Courtney Gould. All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America. For information, address St. Martin's Publishing Group, 120 Broadway, New York, NY 10271.

www.wednesdaybooks.com

Interior art by Andreea Dumuta

The Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available upon request.

ISBN 978-1-250-42347-4 (hardcover)

ISBN 978-1-250-42348-1 (ebook)

The publisher of this book does not authorize the use or reproduction of any part of this book in any manner for the purpose of training artificial intelligence technologies or systems. The publisher of this book expressly reserves this book from the Text and Data Mining exception in accordance with Article 4(3) of the European Union Digital Single Market Directive 2019/790.

Our books may be purchased in bulk for specialty retail/wholesale, literacy, corporate/premium, educational, and subscription box use. Please contact MacmillanSpecialMarkets@macmillan.com.

First Edition: 2026

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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

PROLOGUE

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

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

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

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

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

Just not yet.

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

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

"You're sure this is the place?"

The girl considers. "I didn't know you could go swimming, too."

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

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

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

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

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

She says it distantly. A memory only half recalled.

"How do you get there?" her mother asks.

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

"I swim," the girl says.

The mother stoops and pushes wisps of hair from her daughter's face. When she looks hard into the girl's eyes, it's like looking at a childhood photo of herself. A version perfectly preserved, undamaged by that place. She takes her daughter's shoulders and

pulls her close. The shirt she wore on her last day of school is damp with sweat and humidity, and it's her bedtime, and they haven't had dinner yet. She's done *so* much of this wrong. She certainly won't be winning Mother of the Year.

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

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

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

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

"Do you go to the door?"

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

"Your friend?"

"The one who takes me inside."

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

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

"What does she say?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And I will still be hungry.

ONE

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

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

Her return to Florida was going great.

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

Look up.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I considered."

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

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

Except on maybe one.

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

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

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

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

"Where's Saul?" Paige asked, noting only one more saved seat.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jason leaned into Caleb's shoulder and sniffed before furrowing his brow. "Were you smoking?"

Sheepishly, Caleb looked at his feet.

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

Paige wasn't the only one who didn't get the memo about the dress code. At the very top corner of the bleachers, the final living survivor sat alone in a navy tank and denim shorts, inky black liner smudged at the watery edges of her eyes. In some ways, Tess Collins looked the same as always. Paige was sure her mother's best friend was wearing this exact outfit—complete with a crinkled plastic water bottle tight in her grip and a pack of cigarettes visible through the fabric of her pocket—the last time they spoke a year ago. No doubt Tess wanted a seat close to the exit so she could retreat before anyone recognized her.

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

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

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

Mateo raised a brow. "Nope."

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

Before she could ask Mateo more, the slideshow changed. Whatever photo had lingered on the screen seconds ago gave way to a grainy photo of the Ripley Memorial girls' track team with

their arms all linked together, doubled over with laughter at a joke long forgotten. In the center, being pulled two ways, was a blond girl with big brown eyes and a brightness Paige had never truly seen in the flesh. Even with her face contorted in the photo, it was uncannily like looking in a mirror. So much of her was like her mother.

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

Ghosts. Every single one.

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

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

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

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

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

In late May of 2001, Michael Dettweiler made a generous

donation to the senior class of Ripley Memorial High School in honor of his son Jason's graduation: one free night at the brand-new Resort at Kaleidoscope Key.

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

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

In the morning, when marina staff arrived at Kaleidoscope Key, no one waited at the boat ramp. They made their way to the resort's entrance around 9:00AM and found a small group of teens sitting outside. When staff entered the resort, they found the rest of the senior class still in their rooms, faces pale, eyes wide open. Dead. Like it caught them by surprise.

The surviving teens—seniors Casey Keller, Jason Dettweiler, Tess Collins, Saul Mamani, and Claudia Ramirez—quickly became the center of what would be known as the Kaleidoscope Massacre. In total, 183 seniors, 13 chaperones, and 15 members of the Kaleidoscope staff were found dead in the resort. For each victim, there was no sign of foul play, none had serious underlying health conditions,

and none had indicated that they had any reservations about senior night. While most of the world came to believe that flaws in the resort's construction must have caused the deaths, a thorough search of the building turned up nothing.

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

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

At least, that was how the story went.

TWO

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Tess—"

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

Jason grabbed Tess's finger and pushed her arm away. "Who would buy the island where two hundred kids died?"

"Why keep it?"

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

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

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

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

"One function," he huffed. "I'd like to organize one function without you ruining it."

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

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

All she managed was a weary “Oh shit.”

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

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

Finally, Tess ambled toward Paige. “You know something?”

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

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

“Oh,” Paige managed. “I . . . it’s okay.”

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

completely. Casey Keller come back to life, a ghost attending this memorial twelve years after her death.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"When do you leave?" Caleb asked.

"Tomorrow night."

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

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

Paige's eyes narrowed. "No."

"Have you seen my movies?"

"Is that what you're calling them?"

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

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

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

Paige arched a brow.

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

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

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

"Mateo already said he'd go," Caleb said quickly. "But I need you, too. It would suck with just us."

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

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

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

"I'd pay you," Caleb said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What do you mean?"

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

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

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

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

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

"Closure. Breaking out the big words."

Caleb's brow furrowed. "College made you mean."

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

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

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

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

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

THREE

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

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

Today, it meant Paige had time for espionage.

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

The first thing she noticed when her sneakers met the carpet of

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

When they were friends, they might've spent the next several hours in this room just talking. KJ would lie on her bed and toss a deflated volleyball at the ceiling, groaning about Tess's newest nightmares and the homework she was behind on, opening the latch to finally release the steaming frustration she kept inside. And Paige would pick up the pieces of her life scattered everywhere, tucking homework assignments into desk drawers and folding clothes to slip into her dresser. KJ would get embarrassed, but when they were still friends, Paige had enjoyed sorting out the stray bits of KJ's life, touching all the little things that made her real.

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

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

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

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

KJ's open laptop was adorned with sticky notes, but their

messages were nearly incoherent. For as long as Paige had known her, KJ had a way of sorting her thoughts that only she could understand.

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

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

Eager to think about something—*anything*—else, Paige clicked into KJ's search history and found what she was really looking for. A series of searches for boat rental costs and tutorials on how to maneuver them. Before that, a search for the senior photo taken the night of the massacre. Before that, a search for the name *Summer Hayes*.

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

Paige's gaze found a square photo couched at the bottom of the page: a girl lying on her side in a patch of grass, red hair draped over her shoulder. The same girl from the memorial photos. She'd

seen the name dozens of times over the years, just like every other victim's name, but paired with the photo, it was a buried memory resurfacing.

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

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

KENDRA JADE COLLINS

GENDER: F / WARD: Emergency

Baptist Health Fisherman's Community Hospital

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

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

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

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

For years, KJ had dreamed of finding her way to the Kaleidoscope in the flesh. And for years, Paige fought back every

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

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

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

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

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

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