A SAM and COLBY STORY

PARADISE ISLAND
SAM GOLBACH AND COLBY BROCK
with GABY TRIANA
A PERMUTED PRESS BOOK

Paradise Island:

A Sam and Colby Story
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About the Authors
For you guys, our amazing supporters.

Thank you for sticking by our side through everything and coming along with us on all our crazy adventures.

We love each and every one of you, and we wouldn’t be able to publish our first book without you.

Let’s continue to explore the world together.

Now I know we say this about a lot of the content we put out, but get ready to enjoy the weirdest, scariest, and most insane story we’ve ever told, based on a real vacation we had in May 2019.
“Hawaii can be heaven. And it can be hell.”

—Jeff Goldblum
Four best friends—Check.
One, unforgettable week in Kauai—Check.
Sun, surf, mountains, hula girls in bikinis—Check. Let’s do this.

As the plane made its final approach into Lihue Airport, Sam Golbach stared out the window. Azure waves hugged the towering emerald peaks and sandy white beaches of Hawaii’s fourth-largest island. Like a crystal blue embrace, he thought. He couldn’t wait to get this vacation started. Even though they loved being ghost hunters and entertaining millions on YouTube, they’d been abandoned, stranded, cursed, haunted, and yes, even arrested for trespassing (thanks, Florida!).

A well-deserved break was what they needed.

For years now, Sam’s best friend, Colby Brock, and two other best friends from Kansas—Alex Lorei and Nate Hardy—had gotten together every summer for an annual friends’ trip. Chilling, sightseeing, hiking, catching up, and enjoying whatever the destination had to offer. Already, they’d been to Texas, Yellowstone, and New Orleans, where ghosts were known to party ’til dawn. But they hadn’t come to Kauai for ghosts. Not this time.

Colby stretched his neck across Sam’s space. “Isn’t it awesome?” He peered out the window. “Told you it would be.”

Colby had been to Kauai as a kid with his family. So, even though they’d almost chosen Vegas as this year’s destination, fate had led them back to the islands. None of the other guys had ever been to Hawaii, and Colby was 100 percent positive they’d love it. So far, he was right.

They bustled through the airport with their bags, heading to the rental car facility, a charged excitement buzzing through Sam’s veins.
“Do we know where we’re renting our snorkeling gear?” Nate asked.

“Reserved.” Sam led them to the down escalator.

“Tours of the Waimea Canyon?”

“Booked.”

“What about a waterfall hike?” Nate asked.

Since Nate had to leave early in a few days for his sister’s graduation, Sam knew his FOMO was starting to bubble up. “Confirmed. Don’t worry, we won’t have any fun without you.”

On the escalator opposite them, four gorgeous Hawaiian girls in their early twenties smiled their way. Nate raised an eyebrow at him. “You sure about that?”

“Well, too much fun without you,” Colby interjected, smiling back at the girls.

When they arrived at the car rental center, they watched a beat-up Toyota pull up. “Is this supposed to look like this?” Sam asked the employee holding a clipboard.

“All our cars have dents,” the woman replied.

“No offense, but can we have a nicer one? I paid for a nicer one.”

“This is the nicer one,” she said. “Cars get dinged here a lot, especially the closer you get to the North Shore. We had a flood two years ago, pretty much destroyed the roads.” She handed him the keys. “Be careful.”

“Will do.” Sam took the keys and slid into the driver’s seat.

The woman waved. “Enjoy your vacation, gentlemen. Aloha!”

Sam gave her a thumbs-up. He’d heard about the flood she mentioned but didn’t know about the damaged roads to the north. Good thing they’d be staying on the eastern side of the island.
“What are we waiting for? Let’s see Kauai, baby!” Colby climbed into the passenger seat, as two older men standing on the curb shot him unamused looks. Colby tended to have this effect on people.

“Quiet down, troublemaker,” Sam laughed.

“Yeah, Colby—gosh.” Nate slapped him over the head from the back seat.

“Ah, shut up, both of you.” Colby opened up Maps and hit GO on their destination.

*Begin route…to…145 Hibiscus Street, Siri said.*

“Begin route…to…Colby’s ass,” Nate echoed.

The roads looked normal, as far as Sam could tell. He wondered if there just hadn’t been any good cars left and the rental car lady didn’t want to admit it. Two hours later, they arrived in the southern town of Koloa, turning into a side street under light rain. Heading down the narrow trail, they finally arrived at a two-story cottage nestled deep in the trees.

“There it is.” Sam smiled and pointed at their temporary home.

“Whoa…” Nate and Alex both murmured.

The Airbnb was quaint and cozy yellow with bright green shutters that matched the lush vegetation. Flowers in every color of the rainbow surrounded them, and palm trees stretched into blue skies beginning to clear from the rain.

Sam cut the engine. They all stepped out, pulling out phones to take photos. “Guys, how many bars do you have?” Nate asked.

“I only have two,” Alex said.

“I have one,” Colby replied.

“I don’t care how many bars I have.” Sam stared at the little picturesque house in the jungle. This. This was why he worked hard. “I didn’t come to Kauai for the internet.”
“Okay, Dad. I was just asking,” Nate mumbled.

They climbed the steps to the front door on the second floor. The cabana sat on stilts, elevating the house in case of flood. Sam located the lock box and pressed the code he’d been given by the Airbnb hostess. The door popped open, and he took in his job well-done with a deep sense of satisfaction.

“Nice work, my friend.” Nate patted Sam on the back.

“Impressive,” Alex said, and for one quiet moment, they all stood there, soaking in the welcoming energy of the place.

“I get the master bedroom.” Nate took off for the stairs.

“I don’t think so.” Sam chased him, pushing past. “You guys can share the pull-out couch.”

“Fine, take the master. I get downstairs to myself to work on my writing. All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy.” Making an insane, creepy face, Nate was reciting Jack Nicholson’s famous line from The Shining. Since they’d recently investigated The Stanley Hotel (where the famous horror film was shot), the movie was still fresh on their minds.

“More like all play and zero work this time, brother,” Sam said, shaking his head. At LAX airport and throughout the flight, Nate had plugged away on his iPad, writing short stories for his college writing class. Sure, Sam was all about hard work, but he hoped Nate would disconnect long enough to enjoy the trip, too.

“I’m not sharing no pull-out couch. Fight to the death for the master bed!” Colby hopped up the stairs, slamming into Sam, when they stopped short outside the master bedroom and stared inside.

Wooden beams supported tall ceilings, floor-to-ceiling windows welcomed in plenty of light, a bed frame looked like it’d been carved out of mahogany, and a fluffy blue-and-white rug reminiscent of an ocean wave spread across the hardwood floor. Plants sprouted from every corner, except one, where a small bar sat with four shot glasses and a bottle of whiskey on the counter.
“You guys can have your lame beds and couches,” Alex muttered, heading to the hammock on the balcony. He climbed in and threw his hands behind his head. “I know where I’m sleeping.”

“I got that just for you, since I knew you’d be sleeping alone,” Sam joked.

“Come share with me?” Alex blew him a kiss.

Sam shot him the middle finger.

Hawaiian breezes sifted through the house, providing all the air they needed. With natural sunlight in every room, there was something energetically light about the cabana.

“You nailed it, bro,” Colby told Sam. “This place is amazing.”

Sam patted himself on the back, too. He did the research, booked the places, and organized the trips, so it was nice for his friends to appreciate it. “Thanks for suggesting we come to Kauai. This is going to be so much fun.”

“Aww, you have no idea,” Colby replied.

“All right, guys, let’s get going,” Sam said, stepping onto the balcony and over-swinging Alex’s hammock to make him dizzy. “We didn’t come for the Airbnb; we came to see the island. Let’s go for a drive.”

Alex closed his eyes, crossed his ankles, and feigned sleep. “I say we hang out here the rest of the day and hit the beach tomorrow.”

Nate poked a finger through the hammock. “No, man, they’re right, let’s go out. We can hang out later when there’s nothing to do.”

“And there is seriously nothing to do here at night,” Colby said. “No bars, only restaurants that close early. This is our chill spot for nighttime. Daytime in Hawaii is always out.”

“Exactly. Mother Nature awaits. Ready? One…two…” Sam took one end of the hammock, Colby took the other, and on the count of three, they spilled six-foot Alex onto his feet.
“You guys never like my ideas.” Alex moped with mock sadness.

Sam clamped his shoulder. “Maybe one day we’ll listen to you. Come on.”

They may not always agree, and they’d had plenty of ups and downs over the years, but these guys were brothers—end of story. No matter who came and went from their lives, through marching band, through the Vine days, through breakups, and now their ghost hunter phase, these were the guys that Sam could always count on since day 1. This trip was as much a celebration of that friendship as anything else.

They were heading back for the stairs when Sam got an idea. He ducked into the master bedroom, poured four shots of whiskey, and handed them out. “Yo, guys, here, take one…” He waited until everyone had gathered around him with their shots. “I just wanted to say thanks for being here. It means a lot to me.”

“Thanks for making it happen,” Alex replied, lifting his glass.

“May we have the most amazing time.” Colby raised his shot above his head. “To friendship.”

“Hear, hear. To friendship.” Nate said, as Alex and Sam echoed him, and together they raised and clinked all four glasses. “And to Kauai.”

“To Kauai.” They sank back their shots of whiskey. Sam shivered at the pungent, sweet taste and thought about how moments like these were few and far between. He wouldn’t have wanted it any other way.

Music blared from the car speakers, and the guys were geared up with excitement. Colby stuck half his body out the car sunroof, arms in the air, hollering at the late afternoon sky, tank top rippling like a flag in hurricane winds.

“Yeah, baby…paradise! Wooo!” he yelled.
Sam shook his head, but still laughed. That was one way Colby was different from him—a little wilder, a little more random, a little more impulsive than Sam was. Still, he admired him for it, though it could sometimes get them noticed in public.

Driving to the beach, Sam could see where Kauai had gotten its nickname, the “Garden Isle.” Every inch of the land was covered with something lush or green or colorful or watery. Vibrant hibiscus, massive banyan trees, neon birds-of-paradise, rushing waterfalls, and orchids—lots of wild orchids sprouting off the trees in white, purple, yellow, and pink.

“Check out those flowers.” Sam pointed at blossoms hanging off the branches.

“As blue as Colby’s sexy hair,” Nate said in a girly voice.

“As soft and delicate as Nate’s ego,” Colby replied.

In the back seat, Alex snorted a laugh.

For the sunset, they ended up at Poipu Beach, where Sam had never felt such wonder before. As the giant ball of burning gas sank below the horizon, he fell quiet. And at peace. Here they were, four guys on the edge of a rock in the middle of the ocean, on a planet three spots from the sun, one of billions in this galaxy alone. Who were they but tiny multicellular beings caught up in a random formula? Was there some universal force out there binding them all together?

It was a lot for a twenty-two-year-old to soak in, but Sam loved a good existential crisis. He couldn’t help but wonder what it all meant, now that he dealt with paranormal stuff all the time.

Behind him, Alex and Colby played a game of who could peg the other with the most coconuts. They yelled aloud in pain when one of them got hit in the knee, or the balls, or got their knuckles smacked with the hard shells. Nate kept score. It was Alex—3, Colby—2. When Colby finally tied and pulled ahead 4-3, though, Alex threw a Solo cup of water at him, bonking him in the head.

“Someone’s a sore loser.” Colby looked down at his soaked tank top.
Behind them, from a cluster of palm trees, a figure loomed.

Sam narrowed his eyes in the darkness and realized an old man in a baseball cap stood watching them. Goose bumps broke out on his arms. Colby and Alex threw the cup (now full of sand) back and forth at each other a few times, until the old man finally emerged from the shadows.

“Hey!” He glared at them, bony finger trembling. “Pick up that cup and throw it in the trash.” Even from a distance, Sam could see the man shook with rage.

Immediately, Alex picked up the cup. “Sorry about that, sir.”

“You should be.” The man waved them away, mumbling under his breath.

*What the…? Sam looked at Colby, who looked at Nate and Alex.*

“Maybe we should get going, guys,” Colby said. “It’s getting dark. We’ve got hiking tomorrow anyway.”

“Yep, time to go.” Sam double-checked the sand to make sure they weren’t leaving any other trash that might upset the elderly keepers of the island.

“Get off his lawn,” Nate muttered.

“He’s a normal old man, guys,” Alex defended. “You can’t blame him.”

“For being old? Or for being salty?” Colby asked.

“Both,” Alex said.

On the drive back to the cabana, nightfall consumed the island. It was amazing how pitch black it got, nothing like L.A., which glowed with electric haziness even at three in the morning. For the longest time, they were the only car on the highway.

After a few miles blasting the playlist Alex had curated specially for this trip, Sam noticed headlights about a half mile behind him.
They crept closer, illuminating Sam’s blue eyes in the rearview mirror. “Is that car going to pass me?”

Alex checked. “I think he wants you to move faster.”

“He can go around.” Sam stuck his hand out the window and waved the driver to move past. There were two lanes, after all. No need to ride his ass. But the car didn’t go around. Sam slowed.

“What are you doing?” Colby asked.

“Driving annoyingly slow, so he can pass me.”

“He’s not. He’s tailing you on purpose.”

Just then, the driver’s high beams flashed. “Seriously? What is this guy’s problem?” Sam clenched his fists on the steering wheel.

“Is it a cop?” Colby asked.

“Ugh, we didn’t even do anything,” Alex replied.

“Guys, it’s possible he just wants to tell us something,” Nate said. “Let’s not overreact.”

“Maybe he wants to kill us,” Colby said.

“Dude, why would you even say that?” Sam pulled onto the grassy side of the road.

The car pulled up behind him. A short figure stepped out and ambled toward the driver’s side window. Even from a few feet away, Sam could see the telltale baseball cap—it was the old man from the beach.

“Does this guy have a personal vendetta against us?” Sam lowered his window. “Hey there, sir, have we done something to upset you?”

The man held a small video camera aimed at them. “I’m watching your every move. You better behave. We don’t like hooligans around here. You shouldn’t be here if you want to act that way.”
What way? Aside from throwing coconuts and playing music in the car, they’d hardly done anything disruptive at all.

“Yo, we didn’t do anything.” Colby flipped up a palm.

Sam shook his head at him. No point defending themselves against a man who was clearly set in his ways. Better to give him what he wanted. “Sorry. We’ll be good. We’re just happy to be here. On your island. Thank you for warning us.”

This appeased the old man nicely, and he backed off, literally, taking rearward steps while still filming, all the way to his car.

“Thank you for warning us?” Nate snarked.

“What?” Sam glanced in the rearview mirror. “It worked, didn’t it?”

Colby rested his head on the headrest. “This didn’t happen last time I was here.”

“Last time, you were eleven. Let’s just get back. I don’t want to cause trouble on our first day.” Sam raised his window and put the car into drive. He had to admit he felt a little rattled. Wherever they went, they seemed to attract negative attention from older types who thought, just because they were having fun, that they were hooligans. If only strangers knew they were good, hardworking guys—businessmen and entertainers who’d rather play stupid games in their apartments than get drunk at a bar.

Unfortunately, people saw what they wanted to see, and Sam knew this better than anybody. Still, he couldn’t help but wonder if maybe they should’ve gone to Vegas instead where rowdiness wasn’t just acceptable, it was expected. Too late—here they were, and here they’d remain for the next six days.

“Welcome to paradise,” Colby muttered.

Sam raised his eyebrows. “Welcome to hell.”
Colby Brock adored Kauai. He loved the island so much that when he was eleven, he vowed to himself he’d come back one day. And now he had, for another week just to be with her, introduce her to his friends, and get to know her better. Kauai was the closest he’d get to having a girlfriend. For now, anyway.

Kauai was paradise. No, it wasn’t a party town, but Colby and Sam were never much the partying type anyway. Sure, they loved going to L.A. bars as much as the next guy, but that got old after a while. Kauai gave him something entirely unique, something he couldn’t experience back home. In L.A., life was all about you. Highlighting you, promoting you, billboards with your face on them splashed on a wall for all to see.

In Kauai, nothing was about you.

In Kauai, Colby felt like he was a part of something exponentially bigger. Connected to nature. A tiny part of this infinite universe. This was why he’d insisted they spend their next day hiking different trails, searching for the perfect waterfall, because it wasn’t until they were on those vine-laced paths, underneath a canopy of trees, discovering hidden coves and jumping into green lagoons that he felt like he truly belonged somewhere. If he could, he would move to Kauai in a heartbeat.

The thing was, Colby’s transition from high school graduate to YouTube ghost hunter hadn’t come easy. His parents hadn’t been happy about his move to Los Angeles with Sam. They’d told him the same stuff all concerned parents told their kids:

*Artists have a hard time making money.*

*College is a more sensible path.*

*Only a lucky few ever make it big in Hollywood.*

But he’d proved them wrong.
To the unscrutinizing eye watching their videos, he and Sam looked like two clowns doing anything for a laugh. What few people realized was how hard they worked their asses off. They’d learned business tips that couldn’t be taught in college, could only be experienced firsthand, and look at them now—affording this trip for their friends, winning Teen Choice Awards, going international.

Kauai made him feel like he’d done something right.

For the next three days, he, Sam, Nate, and Alex enjoyed the beaches and hikes, visited the canyon, danced with hula dancers, and saw incredible sights. Life was a mysterious gift from some universal force out there. At night, they played drinking games back at the cabana and chatted about what came next in life. Nate was working on poems and novel ideas, being the writer that he was. Alex was in college, working on a finance major, about to take on a summer internship, still figuring out his path. They were all headed somewhere. But the best part was, nobody judged anybody else.

Colby was super proud of his friends.

The next day, after they’d managed to get their sore limbs out of bed, they headed back to Poipu Beach to chill on the sand and watch a women’s volleyball tournament. Colby cheered on the Hanalei team, but he also cheered on the Princeville team, because not only were these girls amazing athletes, they also gave him some of the best sights on the island.

Damn. Colby admired their athleticism through his sunglasses.

“What about the North Shore?” Nate was on his phone, reading Top 10 list after Top 10 list of things to do in Kauai. He wasn’t watching the game, either because his girlfriend kept texting to see how things were going or because he really wanted to maximize his time before he had to leave in thirty-six hours.

“The North Shore was cut off after the flood,” Colby reminded him.

“Yeah, but there’s still ways to get there,” Nate said.

“Hiking fifteen miles on expert-level trails is not something I think
we’re prepared to do,” Alex said.

Colby knew Alex’s mission on this trip was simply to relax. After changing colleges a couple of times, Alex was all too happy to go nowhere for a few days, so Colby agreed with this one.

“Oh, and every website I’ve read said only locals are allowed to the North Shore,” Sam added, applying his fiftieth layer of sunscreen today.

Nate continued reading travel articles, hell-bent on getting to the North Shore somehow. Yes, the craggy shoreline peaks of the Na Pali Coast were glorious, but they were also elusive and currently cut off from the rest of the island, thanks to the shitty roads. Colby hadn’t been able to see them last time he was in Kauai either. It only gave him more reason to come back again one day.

“Hello, boys…” Nate said with renewed interest.

“What?” Colby looked at him oddly.

“I just got a text. And…an excellent, marvelous idea.” Nate’s eyes widened in that wild way whenever he felt passionate about something crazy.

“Which is?” Sam’s eyebrows rose.

“You guys remember Trey? Trey Weiss?”

“No.” Colby watched one of his favorite Hanalei players score on a serve. He cheered for her and hoped she’d look at him, but the girl was intensely focused. Good for her. The truth was, he knew exactly who Nate was talking about, and Colby would rather forget him.

“From that party we went to, when we visited you guys two years ago? He was a cousin of Donny’s?” Nate was talking about his college roommate back in Utah, a shy, quiet guy with a shy, quiet family.

“You could be describing any L.A. party, Nate,” Colby said.

“Literally any party,” Sam added.
“Okay, remember he was sort of tall, brown hair, kinda quiet?”

“Again, no,” Colby lied. He had better things to spend his energy on than remembering Trey Weiss, who’d tried to make him feel stupid that night.

“All right, well, Donny is telling me that he thinks Trey lives here in Kauai. He’s finding out. Maybe his cousin can tell us how to get to the North Shore.”

“Go ahead, text him,” Colby said with a shrug. Texting the dude was fine. He just didn’t want Nate to change anything about their trip or acquire any unexpected fifth wheels, especially Trey.

Nate’s thumbs tapped furiously. A minute later, he looked up. “Yo, he does. He lives in Kauai. I’m going to connect with him. Maybe he can give us insider tips for hiking to the Na Pali Coast.”

“Knock yourself out, bro.” Colby hoped he didn’t sound too dismissive, but he wasn’t going out of his way to visit a guy he barely knew, in case Nate was thinking about it. See, Nate loved talking to people. He believed in “the more, the merrier,” but Colby really wanted to keep this trip private. Just the four of them.

After Colby’s favorite Princeville player fell during a block and got a mouth full of sand, Nate looked up again, excitement spilling out of his face. “Guys…”

Here we go again…

“He does. He lives in Kauai. Not only that, but he lives on the North Shore.”

“What!” Sam looked at Nate. “For real?”

“Yes. I’m texting him right now. He’s asking if we want to go visit tomorrow.”

What were the chances? This goofball of a guy Colby never cared to talk to again lived near the forbidden mountain range? He didn’t care. He wasn’t deviating from his plans. Nope.
“We’re snorkeling tomorrow,” Colby blurted quickly. “And I don’t want to miss swimming with turtles.”

Sam cocked his head at Colby. He always knew what Colby was thinking after years of friendship and supporting him. Colby wasn’t trying to be difficult; he just didn’t want Nate calling the shots.

“Yeah, we’re snorkeling tomorrow,” Sam echoed. “Give Trey our regards. Tell him thanks, we appreciate it. We’ll visit next time.”

Nate quieted a minute while Alex gave a thumbs-up at the final decision. Nate texted Trey, as Colby gave Sam an appreciative glance. Thanks for that. Nate looked up. “He insists we have to come. He lives where few residents are ever allowed to go.”

“So?” Colby shot him a look. “I mean, that’s cool.”

“It’s a highly exclusive area. He’s living in a house right on the beach down from the Na Pali Coast, and we’d be remiss not to go.”

“Remiss…” Colby raised an eyebrow.

“Remiss means we’d be in the wrong.”

“Bruh, I know what remiss means!” Colby barked.

“Sorry.”

“Just thinking is all.” Nate and his poetic, fancy-pants words.

“So, what do I tell him?” Nate waited.

Colby checked Sam’s and Alex’s faces for impressions. Seemed like they were undecided. “Personally, I don’t want to visit anyone during my vacation, especially someone we barely know. If it was a close friend of ours, maybe,” Colby said.

“Well, we have met him before. Also, it’s our vacation too, so…” Nate replied.

Colby cocked his head, tongue tucked into his cheek. “Dude, to be honest, I don’t remember who the fuck you’re talking about.” The
truth was he did, but after that party, Colby had written Trey off as an idiot. “Sam, what do you think?”

Sam sighed. “We already have our snorkeling equipment rented out and everything, and anyway, don’t we need a local escort to the North Shore?”

“Trey says they’ll come get us,” Nate read from the texts. “They’ll meet us in Hanalei at the convoy meeting place—it’s the only way we can get across, in a group of cars—and escort us all the way to their house. He says most Kauai residents aren’t allowed there. Seriously, it sounds like this is a great opportunity.”

Colby chewed his top lip.

“How far is Hanalei from here?” Alex asked.

Sam tried searching his phone but couldn’t connect.

“I think it’s two hours,” Nate replied.

“I don’t know, bro…” Colby said. The rest of their trip—three days—was already mapped out. The snorkeling dive, a helicopter tour, another hike through the eastern side of the Na Pali-Kona Forest Reserve…

“I’ll just tell him we can’t.” Nate gave up and shrugged.

Probably for the best. Colby felt bad for saying no, but it was quite a hike to the other side. It’d take an entire day between traveling to Hanalei then waiting for the convoy, then the slow drive through the areas damaged by floods. It would mess up their whole schedule.

“Sorry, dude.” Colby gave Nate a sincere, apologetic look.

“No worries.” Nate texted Trey, as they watched the end of the volleyball match. When the game was over, they requested photos with the players and took selfies with the ones who recognized them from their channel. Colby tried to stay in good spirits for the next hour, but Nate was still on his phone, which irked him.
Normally, it wouldn’t, but dude, come on, they were in Hawaii. Was he really going to spend the last day and a half of his trip before leaving to his sister’s graduation texting some random acquaintance?

As it turned out, the Princeville volleyball team was headed to a local luau for sunset drinks and dinner, and they invited the boys to come along. Sam and Nate might’ve had girls back home, but Colby (and he was sure Alex, too) was excited to hang with a dozen gorgeous ladies. Like Hannah, the raven-haired hottie who got seated next to Colby at a long, family-style table. Hannah was finishing her law degree and then hoping to practice law in Honolulu in a couple of years. A smart, athletic goddess? Nice.

Just as mai tais and blue Hawaiis began arriving at the table, Nate finally looked up from his phone and gave them each a long, serious look. “Okay, please don’t kill me, but…”

“Here, Nate.” Colby pushed a mai tai across the table at him. “Have a drink. I’m reticent to hear what you have to say next. Reticent means ‘hesitant.’” Colby sipped from his own drink.

Nate smirked. “Trey has been texting me a couple hours now.”

“Really? We couldn’t tell,” Alex murmured.

Nate ignored him. “He says he lives at the Belle Estate, that if we ask anyone from Kauai about the Belle Estate, they’d know it. Apparently, it’s famous.”

“Famous or not, it’s still too far,” Colby said. Turning to Hannah, he asked, “Do you know the Belle Estate?”

“Belle Estate…Belle Estate…the old witch’s house?” she asked.

Whoa. Colby stared at Hannah. Where had that come from?

“I’m kidding. That’s what some people call it.” Hannah smiled and sipped her drink quietly.

Nate added, “Trey insists the house is a sanctuary paradise, and we’d be absolutely stupid to miss out on a personal invitation to see
“I’d be absolutely stupid to miss this.” Colby gestured to the gaggle of hot volleyball players surrounding him. Hannah slyly grinned at him from behind the rim of her blue drink. “Hey, Nate, does a witch live there?” Colby asked. “Ask Trey.”

Suddenly, as if Trey had heard the question from miles away, Nate’s phone came alive with a FaceTime call. Seriously? This guy is relentless.

Nate answered the call. “Treyyy, what’s up, brother?”

The guy on the screen looked familiar. He didn’t say a word, only awkwardly smiled at Nate before flipping his screen around. He wanted everyone to witness his surroundings, as if words could not express the timeless beauty. In the background were trees bathed in the colors of sunset, a waterfall trickling over rocks, and a natural pool. A twinge of jealousy shot through Colby.


“Wow, that’s beautiful,” Nate said. “Is that your house?”

Trey flipped the screen around again and nodded. “Nate…friends of Nate…you can snorkel anywhere.” When Trey spoke, his deep, rich voice felt out of character for his age. “But only the best of people end up here at Belle Estate in the North Shore. Are you sure you want to reject this once-in-a-lifetime invitation to paradise?”

Colby felt his nerves harden. “I guess we’re not the best of people then,” he said, his jaw set.

Suddenly, he remembered the details of their conversation the night of the party. Trey had tried telling Colby that working one’s way through college and making something out of oneself was the only way to be successful, that people like him and Sam who’d made money off a YouTube channel weren’t using their full potential.

Or some shit.
Colby had let it go. Everyone had an opinion on them, but now it was getting personal. Had Trey Weiss reached success and bought himself a house in Kauai? After their brief conversation, that would’ve been the ultimate slap to Colby’s face. Even then, he might’ve considered visiting the guy had he been nicer about it, but Trey was getting judgy. And Colby hated judgy people more than anything.

Nate aimed his screen at Colby, who leaned into Hannah. “Besides, there’s different kinds of opportunities. Know what I’m sayin’?” Colby raised his eyebrows.

Trey was unfazed by the gorgeous woman. “Suit yourself, but I had to warn you about what you were missing.”

Warn us? Colby smirked. Nate switched the call to private, while Colby pretended not to care. He wasn’t going to let Trey Weiss ruin his vacation. Suddenly, he felt a tap on his shoulder. Sam’s face hovered next to his. “Hey, so, I know we already had everything set, but…why don’t we just go?”

“Bro, that guy’s a dick. I remember him,” Colby replied. He hated to let dicky people win.

“I know, I get it. But it’s true that it’s a unique opportunity. And if he really lives next to the Na Pali Coast, then you win. We win. We get to see the most beautiful part of the island that nobody ever gets to see. What’s so bad about that?”

Sam made sense, as usual, but Colby still felt annoyed. It wasn’t that he couldn’t go with the flow—he was so about going with the flow—it was the way it was happening. Almost by force.

Nate covered the phone with his hand. “Trey says he’ll take us snorkeling on the North Shore right by the Na Pali mountain range. He’ll pay for new equipment and the rental we’ll lose.”

Ugh—the guy had money to burn, too.

Colby was losing this battle.

Sam whispered, “It’ll get Trey off our backs. Otherwise, he’s going
to keep texting Nate for the rest of the trip. Plus, it’ll make Nate happy, and you like making people happy, right? Also, it’ll be fun. We get to see the northwest part of the island, snorkel in a beautiful spot, then, boom, we come back. Cool?”

Colby took a deep breath, letting it out slowly.

If Sam said everything would be all right, then everything would be all right. His best friend had never steered him wrong. Even Alex nodded his silent approval across the table, and Alex only wanted to swing in his hammock for the rest of the trip. Colby didn’t want to be that guy—the one stubborn friend.

He was in Kauai, and sometimes Kauai chose your destiny for you. He’d surrender to the new plans, to what this beautiful land seemed to want for him. He believed in signs, in the universe throwing curveballs. He believed in rising to the occasion and taking chances. He believed in...

*Now or never.*

“Fine,” he mumbled, adding a smile to show he was okay with the decision. “Let’s go see Trey Weiss on the mysterious side of the island. But this better be good,” Colby said. “And there better be turtles.”
At the crack of dawn, Sam’s alarm chimed. For a minute, he forgot where he was. But then, streams of pale light filtered into the room, illuminating the koa wood floors and vibrant, tropical interior of their temporary home, and he remembered.

Yeah, baby, heaven.

He bolted up in bed. He knew, if they were going to make the day trip to the North Shore to visit Nate’s friend, he’d have to be the one to get all these lazy asses moving. No time to waste. He slinked around the cabana, collecting dried beach towels and tossing them at everyone’s faces.

“Time to get up, mofos. Paradise awaits!”

Colby groaned. “Let us sleep, you little bitch.”

“You can sleep in the car. The convoy leaves between 9:30 and 11:00 AM. Everyone meet outside in twenty minutes!” he ordered. The more doors he slammed, the more lights he turned on, the more the others stirred, grumbled, and rose to their feet.

By the time the sun shone in full swing, they were on the road, Colby driving this time. On any trip, Sam and Colby were pretty good about sharing responsibilities, but Sam was glad when Colby slid into the driver’s seat, because he wanted to enjoy the Kauai sights from the passenger side.

It was as beautiful a morning as ever.

From near Koloa, they began their counterclockwise half-circle trip around the island to the farthest point tourists were allowed to go, Hanalei Bay, two and a half hours away. As the rental car lady had told them, a bad flood two years prior had rendered roads to the northwest part of the island inoperable. Only residents were allowed through the construction, and even they weren’t allowed unless it was in a convoy.
Sam had no idea what to expect, which made him a little nervous.

He’d understood Colby’s concerns yesterday when Nate kept suggesting this side trip to visit Trey. As the guy who planned every detail, made the calls, sent the emails, Sam understood the value of sticking to a plan. Colby was more “go with the flow,” but sometimes, for unknown reasons, they switched personalities. This time Colby was more Sam, and Sam was more Colby. Sometimes, you had to trust your gut, let the universe take control, make room for surprises.

“Guys,” Nate said from the back seat, halfway to Hanalei. “I know Trey’s a little weird, but he’s sweet to invite us there. Let’s not forget to thank him when we see him.”

Sam smirked. Sweet? He remembered the guy as wishy-washy, trying to act bigger than he was. At the time, Sam had felt sorry for him. “Of course we’re going to thank him. We’re not savages.”

Colby gave Sam a side-glance. What have we gotten ourselves into?

“I’m just saying.” Nate went back to working on his iPad for his class assignment. “Glad I brought this. I have so much work to finish.”

By the time they arrived at the scuba and snorkeling shop, it was midmorning. Beachgoers were out in full force, toting their surfboards and snapping their flip-flopped feet across the road. Sam was glad he’d gotten everybody up when he had.

Colby pulled into the parking lot and shut the engine off, and they all stumbled out of the car into the scuba shop, yawning, stretching, and waking up for the second time.

The doorbell tinkled. “Can I help you gentlemen out?” the shop employee, an older Hawaiian woman, asked, pen pressed to a notepad.

“Hi, a friend of ours rented snorkeling equipment for the four of us. Trey Weiss is his name?” Sam pressed his palms against the counter
and waited while the woman thumbed through an index card box.

*Guess they do things old-school around here.*

Colby, partially hidden from the shopkeeper behind a rack of swimwear, plucked a pink-and-yellow bikini off the rack and threw it over his chest while pursing his full lips. Alex handed him a metal hydro-flask, and Nate ringed a scrunchie around Colby’s wrist. The look was complete—Colby was now a VSCO girl.

Sam bit his lip to keep from laughing, especially when the shopkeeper looked up to catch sight of what Colby was up to. Colby immediately put everything back where it belonged and acted like nothing had happened.

“So, I have masks, snorkels, and fins for four people. Is that right?”

“Yes. For one adult and three children,” Sam joked, looking over his shoulder at his infantile friends. He would never change a thing.

The shop employee gave him a blank stare.

He shrugged. “I’m kidding. My friends are adults. Mostly. When they feel like it, I mean,” he mumbled. Behind him, Nate and Colby held down laughter. Alex cringed with secondhand embarrassment.

The woman snapped her fingers at a teen kid in the back of the shop who put down his Nintendo Switch long enough to fetch the snorkeling equipment and drop it on the counter in one big salty, rubbery heap.

“It needs to be back by six-thirty,” she said. “That’s when we close.”

“No problem,” Sam said, tapping the counter. “Wait, how long is it from here to the Na Pali Coast? So we can make sure to plan the time right?”

The woman narrowed her dark eyes at him. “You’re going to the Na Pali Coast?”

“Yes,” Sam said, as a sinking feeling came over him. Were they not allowed to go? But Trey said he would take them. All of a sudden,
he wasn’t sure. “A friend of ours lives there,” he explained.

“A friend of yours…” She lowered her brow at him. “Lives there, you said?”

“Yes.” Sam shrugged. He summoned Nate for help. Were they not supposed to let the locals know they were headed to that side of the island? Maybe he shouldn’t have mentioned that part.

Nate scooped in alongside Sam. “Hi, I’m Nate.”

The woman stared.

“She doesn’t care who you are,” Colby murmured from next to the fishing hat rack.

“So, this snorkeling trip…” Nate explained. “It’s just for one day. We’re coming back. I mean, of course we’re coming back.” He fumbled with his verbal eloquence faster than this woman could shoot them down with her laser stare. “We’re giving you back your equipment. What I mean is—”

“Which part of the Na Pali Coast?” she demanded.

“Um…” Nate exchanged confused looks with Sam. “We’re not exactly sure? Our friend is going to meet us here in a few minutes. He’s the one driving us over there. He lives in that area and knows all the details. We don’t…we don’t know anything.”

Sam chuckled nervously. “Well, we know things. We just don’t know this thing.”

“Right.” Nate laughed. “What he said.”

Great, Sam and Nate were managing to make themselves sound and look even more idiotic. More customers entered the store and waited while the woman continued to fire off questions.

“Only twenty people have been allowed that far on the roads this year alone. It’s May,” she said in her deadpan, stoic voice. “That’s four people a month. Who is this friend of yours?”

“We don’t know him,” Sam said, then realized that sounded worse. “I mean, we know him, just not that well.”

“The friend of a roommate,” the woman repeated, clearly not buying a single word they were selling.

Sam wished this encounter with the snorkeling shop lady would die in a fiery car crash already.

“Yep.” Nate nodded.

Finally, after a stare-down that lasted a few seconds but felt like forever, she shook her head with a sigh. “Just be careful.”

“What, uh...what do you mean?” Sam asked politely.

The woman glanced behind the counter at a man standing in the back, sorting fins on a rack, overhearing the conversation. They communicated unspoken volumes. She glanced at Sam again. “People are a little different over there.”

Colby coughed a laugh. “You can say that again.”

Sam had to bite his tongue to keep from busting a gasket. This lady, the guy in the back, and the kid were all a little “different” themselves. He snapped his fingers. “Got it. Thanks for the advice. We really appreciate it.” He signed the notepad where she pointed to and handed over the equipment to the boys. They fumbled out of the shop in a single file.

Outside, Sam sucked in the fresh tropical air. “What the hell was that all about?”

“I don’t know, but does any of this feel Scooby-Doo-ish to anyone?” Colby asked, getting into the driver’s seat.

“Scooby-rooby-roo!” Alex blurted loudly.

Sam had to agree. It did feel a little weird that the locals were first
after them, and now warning them. Maybe they were jealous they hadn’t been allowed access to that part of the island since the flood? Maybe seeing the house where Trey Weiss lived really was a unique opportunity, after all.

Sam opened the windows and put on music, and they waited. A long time. Possibly an hour. Or two. Maybe forever. The playlist was great, the view of the ocean waves across the street amazing, and the babes on Hanalei Bay were another-level beautiful, which made him suddenly miss Katrina back home. He sent her another photo of a beautiful beach, adding a row of hearts.

After an hour, Nate’s friend was still nowhere in sight.

“Dude, where is this guy?” Colby huffed, flipping his seat from reclined back to vertical position. “We’ve been sitting in this parking lot for, like, two hours.”

“It’s been an hour,” Sam tried adding perspective to the situation.

“Two hours, an hour…what difference does it make? We’re burning daylight. We could’ve been snorkeling already back in Poipu.”

Sam agreed they were wasting time sitting around waiting for this Trey guy to show up, but as the glue of this group, he had to keep it together. “I’m sure he’ll be here any moment.” Sam cracked his knuckles.

Nate confirmed. “Okay, he’s texting. He’s on his way with G.”

“Who’s G?” Colby asked.

“Goliath. Ganondorf…” Alex mumbled, thumbing through his phone.

“So, about that…” Nate said. “Guys, know that Trey has a, shall we say, interesting situation. Try not to say anything rude when you see them.”

“Is she his girlfriend?” Sam guessed. “Maybe he writes G for girlfriend.”
“Grindelwald, Greta Thunberg…” Alex offered.

“Hey. Don’t make fun of Greta,” Sam snapped. “She is my personal hero.” He said it mostly to make Colby crack a smile, but Colby stared straight ahead, fists clenched on the steering wheel.

“Gibby VonGibbel,” Alex continued.

Nate snorted. “Gibby VonGibbel!”

“Gibby VonGibbel!” Sam broke into laughter, rocking back. Nate, Alex, and he laughed so hard, he lost his breath for a moment. He wasn’t sure if Alex’s G names were actually funny or if he was just pent-up with frustration.

“Guys, would you stop?” Colby blurted. They bit back their laughter, as Colby blew out a frustrated breath. “Sorry. I’m just mad, bro. This guy insisted we visit him, yet he’s the one taking super long.”

“So true,” Sam sighed.

“Okay, he’s here. Look for a Porsche minivan.” Nate craned his neck out the window.

Sam sat up and scanned the road. A white minivan was turning into the parking lot heading toward them. In the driver’s seat was a guy about their age, though it was hard to tell from the windshield glare, and in the passenger seat was an older woman with floofy, long blond hair.

The minivan pulled up on the passenger side, as Sam and the boys stepped out of their car into the parking space between them.

“Heyyyy, my friend!” Nate greeted Trey with a warm hug, as though he’d known him all his life. Trey was tall, a lot taller than most of them, maybe about the same as Alex.

Sam’s memory shot back an image from the party where they’d met, his messy hair, his out-of-style shirt…

“You remember Sam, Colby, and Alex, right?” Nate asked.
Yes, it was definitely the same guy, except for one thing—now he dressed in old-man slacks, loafers, a swanky Aloha print shirt. Add beach blond hair, a mustache, and gold rings on his finger, and it was almost like looking at a faded photo of his grandfather from the seventies. What was up with that?

“Hey, man. Nice to see you again.” Sam gave Trey a polite hug.

Colby opted for a quick handshake and zero exchange of words.

Finally, from around the van, stepped his passenger, a much older woman. Great-looking for her age, if he was allowed to think that—nice body, pretty face, big smile, young in spirit with her boho-style shirt and flowy skirt. She looked like a woman who’d been a knockout when she was younger. Not that she wasn’t a knockout now, just in an old-lady way.

Was she Trey’s mom or grandmom?

“Guys, this is Georgia,” Trey introduced her, as she came up to each of them with a big, open-armed hug and a studious stare into each of their eyes. Hers were an alarming shade of turquoise, luminous and clear, if a bit creepy. Sam had to force himself to look away.

“Finally! I get to meet Trey’s friends,” she cried with glee. Georgia’s hair and clothes had a floral scent that made Sam think she spent a lot of time in the outdoors. “We so appreciate you boys cancelling your plans to come visit us. There’s so much to show you. Let’s not waste any more time. We’re burning daylight!”

Colby smirked at Sam. See? Burning daylight.

Together, the men all threw their snorkeling gear and bags into the minivan trunk, then Colby and Sam piled into the back two rows of the van while Nate and Alex took the middle row behind Trey and Georgia.

Sam sat watching their behavior, trying to piece the clues together. Could Georgia be a friend? Family member? Or was she...he caught Trey and Georgia exchanging a loving glance. Sam’s eyes went wide. Was she with Trey, as in a couple? This is what Nate was
talking about.

As they pulled out of the parking lot, Sam told himself it didn’t matter. Why should it? Love was love. But he was still curious.

Georgia put on soft ukulele music, as Trey silently pulled the van into line with other cars waiting off the side of the road. “It’s going to be forty-five minutes from here,” she explained. “Not a long distance, but the convoy tends to drive really slow.”

Georgia then launched into casual questions about their trip—when had they arrived, what they’d done so far, if they’d managed to get any authentic Hawaiian food, not that touristy stuff—followed by five minutes of answers to stuff nobody asked. She told them about the flood, damaged roads, how nice it was to see people again, how it had rained yesterday, how isolation in their paradise estate had become their new normal. She couldn’t wait to host them at the Belle Estate, and on, and on…

Nate handled most of the conversation. Nate was chatty and great at talking to adults of all ages. Meanwhile, in the back seat, Colby leaned into Sam. “Do you think we’ll get back in time to drop the gear off?”

Sam nodded. “Should be fine.”

Colby cast him a doubtful look.

They settled into their seats and watched the lush scenery go by. With each passing mile, they saw fewer and fewer people. And with each moment they traveled closer to the North Shore, Sam felt like he was traveling back in time, leaving civilization, and entering a whole new world.
Colby wished he could enjoy the journey, but the truth was, he felt like he was getting farther and farther away from their plans. Their good plans. The ones that included snorkeling in a great spot he’d found on TripAdvisor. He’d looked at so many photos of the place, he felt empty not seeing it live in person.

Instead, he was stuck in the back of an old Porsche van, listening to some lady who wouldn’t stop talking about random, boring stuff; Trey, who, even though he was their age, dressed like he’d stepped out of a vintage stag film; and Nate, who kept egging Georgia on with his endless questions.

They should’ve been exploring, just the four of them, feeling free to yell if they so chose, being their goofy selves. Instead, Colby felt like he’d been taken prisoner by his parents for a visit to Grandma’s house. Now he’d be made to eat dry cookies and look at old photos while being on his best behavior with Trey’s grandmother.

Colby leaned his head against the window. At least the scenery was nice. He kept telling himself to appreciate nature, be grateful for his life. Not everybody got to visit Hawaii, and now he’d been twice. Be glad they’d be seeing the Na Pali Coast. But after the snorkel shop lady told them that only twenty visitors had been allowed on this part of the island the whole year, he doubted they’d be seeing the coastline with its rocky peaks overlooking the Pacific like Trey had promised. More than likely, he’d just said that to get them to come.

“So, how did you two meet?” Nate asked Georgia and Trey. At least he was handling the talking part, whereas strangers had to earn Colby’s trust first before he could handle a conversation.

Meet? Colby sat up, craning his ear to hear better. He’d assumed Georgia was a family member of Trey’s, but now he was curious to hear the answer.

“Oh, now, that’s a funny story.” Georgia threw her head back and
laughed. “Well, it goes like this… A couple years ago, I was on a cruise ship with my girlfriends. We booked the cruise after I had an odd dream telling me I should get out of Kauai for a while, go do something new.”

Colby swapped glances with Sam. It’s Kooky Lady Story Hour!

“So, we did. We took a friends’ cruise together. It left from San Diego and went to Cabo San Lucas, Puerto Vallarta, and Mazatlán. It was November 11, the third night of the cruise. There we were, in the disco, dancing, having a fabulous time…” She gave them a knowing look over her shoulder from the passenger seat. “Drinking wine…”

She said it in the way older ladies sometimes did whenever they discussed alcohol or weed use, as if there were something super-secretly naughty about it. Colby imagined a bunch of fifty-year-old friends all getting drunk together. It was funny and weird to imagine at the same time.

“So, while dancing, my eye caught this handsome guy…” Georgia gestured to Trey in the driver’s seat, quietly nodding with the oddest smile on his face in the rearview mirror.

Colby froze. So…they were a couple?

“And his eye caught mine. And wouldn’t you know it? As he approached me to talk to me, one of my friends who was dancing, bumped into him by accident, which in turn made him bump into me, and then my red wine went flying all over my white dress. Not his button-down linen shirt. No—my dress!” She laughed. “It was just a comedy of errors, at that point, really.”

Colby tried to imagine the scene. He pictured Trey wearing a button-down linen shirt about to hit on a lady who seemed older than his mom. It was laughable and totally in line with the guy who’d tried to teach him a life lesson back in L.A. but really had no clue.

“Oh, my goodness! He felt so terrible!” Georgia laughed.
Colby waited for Trey to chime in and agree it’d been an uncomfortable moment for him, but he remained quiet. Nate, Alex, and Sam all chuckled politely, but Colby could only stare at Georgia openmouthed. Did people really meet like that, by bumping into each other and spilling wine as a conversation icebreaker? He felt like he was listening to the plot of an old romance movie, the kind his parents watched on Sunday afternoons.

“So, then…” Georgia continued with a blush.

The more she talked, the more Colby got the sense that she was maybe even older than fifty. Maybe sixty. Maybe grandma-age.

“He wouldn’t stop apologizing and offered to pay for dry cleaning. I said no worries, it was just an old dress, nothing to cry over. He insisted, said that he was an off-duty waiter who’d taken a side job on the ship to make a little extra money to pay for college. It just so happened it was his night off, and he was relaxing in the disco.”

Even her repeated use of the word “disco” irritated Colby. It was a club, lady—a club. But more importantly, Trey had been working on a cruise ship? The guy who’d tried to make him feel like crap for being a YouTuber?

Pfft, Colby laughed to himself.

“He was worried he’d get fired for spilling a drink on me. When I heard that, I, of course, went looking for a cruise ship officer, so I could explain what happened, tell them it was just an accident, so Trey wouldn’t get in trouble. He thanked me—profusely, I might add—and the rest is history.”

She winked at Trey, whose gaze turned immediately back on the road.

When she said “thanked me profusely,” all Colby could do was imagine the two of them stripped naked in bed, a thought he quickly wished he could shutter. And not with the flimsy white shutters of island cabanas but with steel-grade hurricane shutters, the kind that didn’t let in any light, wind, or icky thoughts.
But the sparkle in Georgia’s eye was going nowhere. “We ended up spending the entire rest of the cruise together. A few months later, after we said goodbye, I contacted him, inviting him to come see my estate here on the island, and he’s been living with me ever since! It’s been two years!”

Holy shit. So it was true. Trey was living with an older woman. The estate wasn’t his own. He wasn’t a self-made billionaire. Something about that made Colby feel vindicated. But dating Georgia? Sure, older women could be attractive, but Trey had to be what—twenty-one, twenty-two? At least a forty-year difference existed between them. Why would Trey commit to life on a remote part of Kauai with a much older woman, isolated from people his age?

Even Sam was looking at Colby in the back seat like all of this was rather odd.

As if to make clear that she was no longer married, Georgia added, “My late husband used to write movie scripts. Well, not as his profession—he was in real estate—but for fun, as a hobby. I shouldn’t say that either. He wanted to get them produced into movies. He loved films, actors, the whole Hollywood vibe. After he died, I was left with all these unfinished scripts, so Trey has been helping me finish them, one by one. Pretty amazing, huh?”

Wait.

So Trey, Nate’s cousin’s roommate’s former best friend’s babysitter’s Instacart shopper’s Lyft driver was also a writer? Not once during the L.A. party had Trey mentioned this. He’d talked endlessly about his girlfriend who’d broken up with him, how he’d messed things up with her, the college vs. real world education thing, but not once had the guy ever mentioned a love of writing.

Then again, anyone and everyone who’d ever lived in L.A. for two seconds had written or attempted writing a script before.

“He has to pay his dues somehow,” Georgia laughed, softly punching Trey in the shoulder. Alex laughed, Nate laughed, Sam laughed, and even Colby threw a fake laugh in there just to be polite, but all of them in the back two rows looked at each other
like what the fuck is happening?

Georgia pointed out suspicious road workers who stared at them as they drove by. “See? You couldn’t see any of that road before. It was completely covered in trees…”

Colby shuddered at the mistrustful glares from the highway repairmen. He shifted his focus to Trey instead, driving in silence, adding nothing to Georgia’s stories, completely overshadowed by his woman’s dialogue, whereas that night, at the party, he hadn’t stopped giving Colby unsolicited advice. Where was his voice now? What was he thinking?

Colby had to know and resolved to ask him later if they were ever alone.

After forty minutes, he felt like he was venturing further and further into Jurassic Park. Giant palm fronds the size of prehistoric flowers jutted off the sides of the roads, the street got narrower, the terrain bumpier, and up ahead, he could see the landscape getting more and more mountainous.

Where was this super-famous Belle Estate?

On the side of a mountain? On the beach?

He was sure they’d end up at a half-dilapidated old house that had maybe once been significant for two seconds in the past. Colby checked his cell phone signal. One bar. When he tried to Google Belle Estate in Kauai, the little wheel spun and spun. Disconcerting, but at the same time—liberating. The idea of leaving social media and digital connection behind appealed to him, but there was something also oddly terrifying about it. Would they spend the day being forced to listen to ukulele music and Georgia’s stories about how she and Trey became a couple?

Colby let out a slow breath.

It just didn’t matter. He didn’t want to feel trapped, forced, or resentful of Trey anymore. He tried to appreciate his surroundings. The flowers, the blue skies, the vibrant neon green foliage, the fact
that he was in Kauai with his friends. So what if they’d broken some plans? Maybe the new ones would be just as fun. Maybe this would be the most Georgia would take of their time, and the rest of the day, they’d spend hiking the famous coastline.

*Go with the flow, Colby reminded himself.*

He sat back and gave Sam an easygoing smile. They passed by a helicopter landing area (reminding Colby that they had a reservation for one in two days), a private beach, and a trail leading into the mountains. Maybe, if they were lucky, they’d run into a hidden waterfall, unlike the crowded ones they’d seen the last two days.

“Just down that road, down yonder, there used to be a hippie camp in the 1970s,” Georgia narrated more information. “I’ll tell you guys about that one later. But for now…” She widened her arms, one of them extending out the window, as the van came to a stop outside a tall, black metal gate. “Welcome home!”

They’d arrived.

Colby sat up and took in the details.

They could’ve been at the gate to a rebellion base nestled deep in the jungle, with all the trees and bushes on either side of the van and only the wrought-iron gate in front of them. As the gates swung open, Trey drove through them slowly down a long, bumpy path flanked by hundreds of white and purple orchids. Briefly, Colby thought of his mother, who loved orchids. She would die of happiness if she saw this.

When the bushes cleared, Colby could see the house in the distance slowly roll into view. It was old, but modern style architecture, from the seventies or eighties but still beautiful with an A-frame roof, dark wood paneling, rock siding, tall glass walls and windows, and lots and lots of lush greenery. His first thought was “in harmony with nature.” Hibiscus surrounded the entire property in the most random patterns of growth. No straight lines, no clipped, trimmed landscaping, just nature in all her glory, overgrowing wild abandon.
Gorgeous.

Everything about the property was wild, including a mini waterfall that dripped down a formation of rocks into a stream that disappeared somewhere behind the house. Trey pulled around the circular driveway featuring a tall, stone water fountain in the center beside a metal grate—Colby had no idea what it was for—and parked in front of the house set against the cobalt sky.

“We have a garage, but we want you to see it from here,” Trey spoke for the first time since their road trip began. He unlocked the sliding side doors of the van, as everyone bowed their heads and stepped out.

“Whoa…” Sam and Nate said at the same time.

They weren’t wrong.

The first thing to hit Colby were the scents—salty ocean mixed with the cleanest air he’d ever smelled, even cleaner than the east side of the island. Everything had a floral, minty scent. Crisp and clear. No people, no cars, no car exhaust, no BBQ smells, nothing that indicated civilization on this side of paradise. Nothing but flowery scents, the dry smell of baked sand, mountains, sweet, misty waterfalls, and South Pacific breezes. Plus, he could hear huge waves crashing in the not-too-far distance.

It was so peaceful, so surreal, like they’d entered the portal to a new, vivid planet. All six of them stood there admiring the house and surroundings. Even Georgia and Trey, as though seeing it for the first time, marveled at their home. His resentment melting away, Colby felt a dreamlike lull fall over him, like a magic spell. Without even going inside, he already knew the Belle Estate was truly the most incredible place he’d ever seen in his life—hands down.

Nothing compared.

And suddenly, he forgave the change in plans.

Because this—this was true paradise.
Sam’s jaw hit the floor like a grand piano falling from a hundred-story balcony.

The Belle Estate was the most beautiful house he’d ever seen. Well worth the trouble and side trip. And if the outside architecture and surroundings weren’t incredible enough, the inside was even more amazing. As the boys and their hosts all crowded into the foyer, dark wooden beams supported vaulted ceilings, glass outer walls reflected the kaleidoscope of flora and fauna from the outside world, and a stone hearth and chimney rose into the apex of the tallest peak.

*Come in, relax, forget your troubles, the house seemed to say, and Sam had to admit the house really did seem to invite them in. It even had a pineapple-y scent. And Trey got to live here for free? Lucky fucker.*

“You have a really gorgeous home,” Sam said, admiring the myriad artifacts all over the walls. Every surface displayed expensive paintings, African carvings, framed photos, sculpted art, bronze Buddhas, colorful tapestries, handmade musical instruments, and crudely made folk art.

“Why, thank you!” Georgia’s smile beamed brightly.

Her voice drawled with a tinge of a Southern accent that made Sam wonder if she was born in Hawaii or moved here from the South, kind of like how he and Colby had moved to L.A. from Kansas. She did a little twirl with her arms extended. “Mi casa es su casa. I’ll let Trey show you boys around while I prepare some refreshments.”

“Thank you. That would be very nice,” Colby said.

“Yes, thank you,” Nate and Alex added.

After she whirled away, Sam quietly mocked Colby’s politeness. It was always funny to hear him talk formally, considering how laid-back they were with each other. “That would be very nice,” he
imitated Colby.

“Shut it,” Colby mumbled.

The boys wandered around the museum-like home, examining every little detail but touching nothing. A lot of the items looked rare and expensive to replace should they break anything, if replaceable at all. Photos of Georgia with Trey were on almost every shelf. Sam kept a lookout for older ones of Georgia with her late husband, but all the pics were recent with Trey.

“This is the living room.” Trey led them into a sunken area padded with a light beige carpet. On the leather sectional was a Gucci bag, opened with all the contents pouring out—lipstick, prayer beads, tissues, hand sanitizer, pill bottle, even a long ladies’ wallet covered in stars and moons…there for any thief to take. Not that they would ever.

Shoes were piled into corners, and desks were covered with notebooks, pens, highlighters, staplers, and cookbooks. As beautiful as the house was, it wasn’t magazine-cover-shoot ready. It definitely had a lived-in look with stuff everywhere, bordering on hoarding.

Sam stopped in front of a wall with more framed photos of Georgia with different people, all of them familiar. “Is that…?” He narrowed his eyes.

“Yep, Barack Obama,” Trey replied.

“What?” Colby zoomed in to take a closer look. “Seriously? Here, in this house?”

“Yes, they’ve all visited. Laird Hamilton, Sylvester Stallone, Vin Diesel, Lucille Ball, several presidents, including Obama, Bush, Bush Senior, Clinton.”

“Duuude…” Sam marveled.

When he looked closer, he realized Colby was right. Each photo depicting Georgia with a celebrity had been taken in the very same house they were standing in. It made Sam want to ask Trey who was Georgia really, this woman he’d never heard of before? What
made her such an influencer? But he thought it’d be impolite to pry.

As they crossed into a parlor with Trey leading the way, all four guys turned to give each other silent looks of Holy shit! and Can you believe this place? Quietly, Nate pointed out a masquerade-type mask covered with glued feathers and sequins, the kind you’d see in a Mardi Gras parade, covering a large bronze Buddha bust sitting atop a low mahogany cabinet.

“Symbolic much?” Nate whispered. There was something irreverent about the sight of that party mask covering a sacred religious figure, Sam thought, but kept it to himself.

Alex pointed out a series of paintings in a hallway all with the number 1 in different patterns—1, 1111, 11:11. Van Gogh–style swirls of vivid color surrounded the 1s, and some 1s were embedded deep within the background, making Sam stare at them for so long, he felt like he was being sucked into the painting.

“Bro, come on,” Colby snapped him out of it, tugging on his arm.

Sam blinked. Trey led them into the dining room. The long, fancy table itself was covered in stacks of wilted old paper, most of them yellowing at the edges. Some stacks were thrown askew, revealing lines and lines of text and dialogue all typed in Courier font of the old days. They could’ve been typed with an actual typewriter, they seemed so old.

“Are these the screenplays you guys work on?” he asked Trey.

Trey stared at the screenplays a moment, then began scooping some of them up, “Ah. Yes…” As if suddenly realizing how messy the room was, he tidied them into stacks on the china cabinet’s extended buffet tray. “Sorry, there was a lot to clean up before picking you all up.”

“No worries, man,” Alex said. “Don’t clean on our account.”

“Yeah, it’s not like your house isn’t allowed to look normal,” Colby added.

“Let me show you upstairs,” Trey said, hanging back against the
wall this time to let them pass on the way to the stairs, instead of leading the way. He gave them each a wide, plastered-on kind of smile that weirded Sam out. Between the smile, the mustache, and the robotic movements, Sam wondered if Trey even knew how out of touch with modernity he seemed.

“Do you have any questions?” Trey asked in the stairwell, sounding like a tour guide.

“Actually, yeah, if you don’t mind,” Sam said once he’d reached the landing. Four hallways stretched out in different directions like the spokes of a bicycle wheel, or the center hub of Disneyland. “What’s with all the photos of famous people? Is Georgia famous or something? I didn’t want to ask her within earshot.”

Trey threw his head back in an all-knowing, amused way, minus a smile. “Yes, yes, she and Clint met a lot of people over the years because of their connection with Burt Ryder, who used to own this land.”

Burt Ryder? Clint…Clint who?

Sam’s confused face cued Trey to explain further. “Of course you don’t know Burt Ryder. He lived well before your time, a famous, award-winning actor from the fifties and sixties. He died suddenly in 1979, and when he did, he left Georgia and Clint this land, since he used to be good friends with them.”

“Clint being…”

“Oh, sorry. Georgia’s late husband. He died in the nineties. He was a big name around these parts of Kauai.”

“Famous for?” Sam asked, thinking about how many different types of fame there were—movie stars, political figures, idiots in the news for being idiots, big music business stars, social media influencers, spoiled kids of famous parents, and his favorite, self-made YouTube stars.

“Not famous in the celebrity sense, though he was well-known on the mainland because of Ryder Camp,” Trey explained. “More
because of his deep history with the land. I’ll tell you about that in a bit. First, come this way.” He was back to leading them down the hallway.

Sam couldn’t decide which part of the house he loved more, the downstairs or the tunneled hallways of the second floor, which gave the impression there’d be secret passageways lurking in any given corner. The floors were wood but in square, hand-laid patterns, instead of planks. Most of the doors were closed, but at the end of one long hallway, a set of big double doors yawned wide open.

Trey stepped into the room and held out his arms. “And here’s where the magic happens, boys,” he said with the stupidest grin on his face.

Of course it was the master bedroom with a huge bed, a custom-made design even bigger than a California king, the sheets all mussed up and pillows tossed, as though there’d been a baby oil wrestling match in it that morning.

Well, that confirmed it—Trey and Georgia were in a sexual relationship.

Sam felt weird staring at the bed and all the mental imagery that came with it, so he forced his eyes in other directions, like the mirrored walls, mirrored closet doors, and mirrored window frames. Not much better, Sam thought. So turn-of-the-century, so creepy, and very, very awkward.

The moment Trey turned his face, Colby looked at Sam, like, What the fuck is wrong with this guy?

“And that’s our view.” Trey showcased the outside world through the wide swaths of glass windows. “Isn’t it grand?”

Grand? What was Trey, seventy years old?

But yeah, in all honesty, it was pretty grand. From the doorway, glowing in the morning sun, Sam could see a plantation of coconut palms, lush undergrowth, and thin, trickling waterfalls surrounding a pool deck complete with rock formations. Just beyond looked like
a natural preserve with the great blue Pacific as a postcard backdrop. The mansion didn’t sit directly on sand but rather fifty yards from the beach, so anyone wanting to reach the shore had to take a short hike through a mini forest.

“I can’t believe you live here, man,” Nate said, crossing his arms. “And to think we’re staying on the other side of the island, while you’re here, and we almost didn’t see each other.”

“I know.” Trey nodded. “You almost missed it. Like I said on the phone, only the best come here.”

Sam glanced at Colby. He knew how much he’d hated it when Trey said that on FaceTime yesterday, giving off vibes of exclusivity that bordered on stuck-up. Plus, Sam knew that Colby hadn’t liked Trey after the time they hung with him at the party, though he never explained why, only that the guy needed “a good dose of self-identity.”

Georgia appeared down the hall, brandishing a teak tray with an inlaid design, topped with four tall glasses of lemonade. Sam wouldn’t bet money on it, but he was pretty sure she’d changed into a different, flowing hippie-style dress. “Here you go, gentlemen. Aloha, welcome to the Belle Estate.”

They each took a glass and downed big sips. To Sam, it was probably the best lemonade he’d ever drunk in his life, like the mint juleps his mom’s friends made back in Kansas but with a hint of pineapple, a welcome refreshment after no breakfast or anything to drink since they left the Airbnb early this morning.

“What’s this?” Alex asked in the hall, a few feet from the master bedroom. He stood staring into one of the many bookshelves lining the walls.

Sam peered at a large coffee table–style book called Ryder Camp with a black-and-white image of a young man sporting a beard and a young woman with a flower in her hair on the cover.

Georgia’s super-light blue-green eyes lit up joyfully. “Ah…good eye! That’s the place I was going to tell you about,” she said in her
melodious voice. “A real-life hippie commune.”

“Listen to this. This is quite fascinating,” Trey chimed in.

Georgia smiled enchantingly at her, uh...boyfriend. “So, back in the sixties and seventies, this land was owned by my good friend, Burt Ryder, who also happened to be the brother of Elizabeth Ryder, his equally famous movie star twin sister?” Georgia paused for signs of recognition, but Sam had never heard of her, and apparently, neither had Colby, Alex, or Nate.

“They were icons of their time,” Trey added with a serious demeanor. “You should look them up.”

Sam suppressed the urge to roll his eyes.

“Yes, they were, baby. So, anyway, just down the beach from where we’re standing right now”—Georgia reached for the book and opened it up to show them—“used to be a camp that belonged to Burt, and he let his friends live there for free. For ten years, they lived in tree houses, made campfires, sang songs, had their own little church, surfed all day long. Some got married and had babies…”

“Some smoked weed all day long,” Trey added.

“Oh, honey, not some—everyone.” Georgia laughed. As she flipped through the book, Sam caught many images of naked people, free and letting it all hang out. “They lived in harmony with the land, the way that it should be. Or so it was in the seventies.”

“You’re talking about hippies, right?” Nate asked. “People who lived in peace, man?” Nate did the famous “peace” sign, holding up two fingers.

“Yes, hippies, but it goes much deeper than that,” Georgia explained. “They didn’t support the war our country was engaged in at the time, and they were looking for an ‘alternative’ way of life different from the career-house-money-kids way most people lived. A different definition of success. It was truly a fascinating time in American history.”

“Look it up. Google ‘hippies’ and ‘Berkeley’ and ‘Kauai tree house camp,’” Trey said.

_Thanks, bro, we know how to search something on the internet, Sam wanted to say, but he bit his tongue. To Sam, it sounded like hippies were avoiding responsibility, hiding from authorities out here in paradise, but hey, he was no one to judge._

Georgia sipped her lemonade. “Sure, drugs were involved, but there were no rules, yet order was somehow maintained. Only a couple traumatic things happened in those nine years, but bad things happen in any community, right?”


Georgia shrugged. “Hey, but it worked. The photos in this book are rare, compiled recently by the photojournalist who came forward with them. For years, they were considered lost. Anyway, it’s worth a look, whenever you have time.” Georgia flashed her big, toothy grin and hurriedly put the book back on the shelf, cover facing out like it was a priceless addition to her oddball collection.

Ryder Camp sounded fascinating in a history-lesson kind of way, but they were only here for a day, and the ocean was calling their name. Still, Sam figured it’d be a cool thing to research when they got home, especially if “traumatic things” were involved. Maybe they could do a video about it.

As the last in the group to walk out, Sam cast another glance at the book, flipping one more time to the naked people within its pages. Haunting, hollow gazes stared back at Sam from the tree houses and crystal sands. Snippets of innocence frozen in time. One woman looked oddly familiar—a young, gorgeous brunette in the nude, flowers dripping from her long hair, emerging from the ocean like a goddess from the sea.
“Colby!”

Colby thought he heard the walls calling his name.

“Colby! Psst!”

They were very insistent, these walls.

“Dumbass!”

Colby turned around to find Sam waving him over to the bookcase by Georgia’s bedroom, as the rest of the tour group headed downstairs. Sam was pretty excited about something he’d found. Colby tiptoed over, keeping watch over his shoulder. “What’s up?”

“Who does this look like to you?” Sam’s fingers held the Ryder Camp book splayed open to a full-page, black-and-white image of a beautiful, nude woman who couldn’t have been more than their own age now.

“Kat?”

“Bro!” Sam punched him in the left pec.

Colby snorted a laugh.

“Look at her face. Look familiar?”

Sam was being serious, so he gazed harder at the woman’s apple cheeks, glowing bronzed tan, long beautiful hair, and curvy figure. Her body was perfect in every way. But yes, haunting, familiar eyes smiled back at him.

“Doesn’t it look like Georgia?” Sam whispered.

“Bro, it does! You think that’s her?” Colby asked.

Sam slapped the book closed and set it back on the shelf. “She
must’ve been one of the hippies she was talking about that lived in the tree house camp. That makes sense, right? If she was in her twenties in the seventies, then she’d be…” Sam paused to calculate.

But Colby was more worried about being caught upstairs without supervision than calculating Georgia’s age. Not that Georgia or Trey had prohibited them from being alone, but the bedroom part of a house was always the most private. “Let’s go. We’ll think about it on the way.”

As they descended the stairs quickly, hoping to catch up with the others before Georgia or Trey realized they were missing, Sam slowed down in the stairwell and paused to examine another interesting piece. He pointed to silver-framed photo on the wall, nestled among many others. This one was also black-and-white and showed the same woman on the beach as in the Ryder Camp book, but dressed in a long gown, holding a baby, standing next to…

“Is that…?” Colby stammered, staring at a shirtless man who looked identical to Trey Weiss. Same sandy blond hair, same height, frame and build, same mustache…even his shit-eating grin was the same.

“Dude, that’s what I’m saying!” Sam gripped his forearm hard. “How can Trey be in this old pic from long ago? Georgia looks too young for it to be him.”

Their whispers on the stairs had caught their hostess’s attention. Georgia shuffled back to the bottom of the steps to peer upward into the stairwell. She caught them staring at the old photo. “Ah, you found Clint.” Her big smile faded just a little. “That’s my late husband. He passed away in 1998.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” Colby said. “We were just saying how much—”

Sam elbowed him.

“How happy you looked,” Colby amended his statement.

“Thank you, sweetheart. Seems like another lifetime ago. It’s okay—I have Trey now. Come down, I’m making lunch,” she said, and traipsed off, leaving them alone again.
Colby looked at Sam. “Bro, what in the actual fuck?” he whispered. “Did she really fall for Trey because Trey looks like her dead husband?”

Sam pushed Colby to hurry up and catch up with the party. “Makes sense, in a way. Maybe that’s her type. I don’t know.”

“Wouldn’t Trey be insulted by that?” Colby shook his head. “I know I would.”

“Guess not. To each his own,” Sam whispered. “Who are we to judge?”

“I guess.”

The whole thing reeked of weird. Colby wasn’t trying to be ageist or anything, but what was a guy like Trey, who had his whole life ahead of him, doing with an elderly partner like Georgia? Sure, the house was an exquisite place to live, and living responsibility-free was nice, but what about girls their own age? What about getting married one day or having kids? What about his ex-girlfriend and life back on the mainland? Or about the college path he’d touted as the most successful in the world? Didn’t Trey want those things anymore?

Colby knew he wanted some of those things for himself. So far, nobody had come along to unlock his heart, but one day, someone would, whenever he was ready. And he’d want that special someone to be with him a whole lifetime, not just during their elderly years. But like Sam said, who was he to judge?

Trying to keep an open mind, Colby led Sam past a row of lit pillar candles in the living room giving off strong scents, as if jasmine and eucalyptus and sandalwood and cedarwood were all being burned at once. Colby sneezed.

They met up with the rest of the group in an open-style kitchen with center island. The midday light poured in through the large bay windows, giving the house an airy, magical feel. He spotted their bags piled by the sliding door that faced the backyard of the property.
“So, I was thinking... Why don’t you boys take a dip in the pool outside while I get lunch ready? You must be starving,” Georgia said, pulling out plates, silverware, a chopping knife, and other kitchen tools. She whirled around like a dervish, preparing and enjoying her role as hostess. “Trey?”

“Yup.” He snapped to attention, as if that were his cue to do his job as host.

*What a perfectly trained man, Colby laughed inside.*

“Sounds great,” Nate answered on everyone’s behalf. “Is the snorkeling nearby, too?”

As amazing as the house had been so far, Colby yearned for the ocean, vegetation-covered mountains, and crystalline white sands, not more black-and-white photos of naked people from long ago, and if he had to choose between seeing their backyard and seeing the Na Pali Coast, he wanted to get this lunch over with as soon as possible.

“Snorkeling is within walking distance from our beach, but it’d be faster if we drive there. Less than five minutes away,” Trey answered. “But first, our lagoon. Come see. Bring your bags.” He led them through a massive sliding glass door into the hot, sunny outdoor paradise they’d seen from the master bedroom. Fluffy trees, hibiscus-filled bushes, and orchids grew wildly everywhere. Even pineapples sprouted from low plants all over the property.

“Dude, pineapples?” Sam remarked.

“I know, right?” Colby took a selfie with the native fruit.

Speaking of naked people, they stopped on the brick pathway in front of a marble statue of another naked female figure, also with long flowing hair, but with smaller breasts, scales for legs, and a tucked-in curl of fish tail. The mermaid looked like Georgia sitting on a concrete rock hidden among the plants, watching their every move from her marble-cut eyes.

Trey pointed to the statue. “That’s Amethyst, Amy for short.”
Colby thought it was weird they’d named the mermaid, but then again, it wasn’t that weird compared to some of the other things they’d seen so far at Belle Estate.

“Amethyst is Georgia’s daughter,” Trey explained.

“Georgia’s daughter is a mermaid?” Sam asked with that wide, blue-eyed madman gaze of his.

Colby couldn’t contain his laughter. “Bruh, really?”

Nate and Alex laughed, too, bursting at the seams with giddiness.

“She may as well have been,” Trey answered as seriously as a mortician. “She was born on Kauai’s shore, lived most of her life on the beach before she left home to start her own adventures. Georgia and Clint had this statue of her commissioned when she was sixteen. Amy always loved mermaids.”

The guys stopped their giggling.

*Wait… The statue was of a naked sixteen-year-old girl?*

Colby gulped. That wasn’t weird—at all. Guess Georgia’s family was totally comfortable with nudity, even that of their own daughter. Must be the Kauai way, he thought. Awkwardly, he stared off in the direction they’d headed before they stopped to discuss Amethyst, the naked teenage mermaid.

“Can we go see the lagoon now?” Colby wanted to put distance between himself and the statue before he started imagining her as a real live person.

“Yes,” Sam said. “Let’s see it, shall we?”

“Agreed. Onward to the lagoon.” Nate doled them each a weirded-out glance behind Trey’s back.

Alex just smiled, hands in pockets, amused by the whole situation like he was their much older, more mature dad. Trey led them farther into the jungle, as Colby tried to keep his focus, but he had to do it—he glanced back at the mermaid one more time and gazed
at her mysterious aura.

Amethyst’s eyes seemed to watch him, as he walked away.

_Creepy. Colby shuddered._

As Hawaiian steel guitar and ukulele harmonies played from hidden speakers on the property, the sun blazed overhead, and ocean breezes poured forth. The guys were finally having a little fun. They jumped into the expansive, amoeba-shaped lagoon, splashed around a set of small oases in the center, and showed off their cannonballs and other diving tomfoolery.

Colby was particularly fond of a high rock he kept climbing and jumping off that made him feel like he was king of Kauai. He had to admit this backyard was pretty dope and wished it were his. From the highest point of the rock, he could even see over the treetops at the blue ocean just beyond.

Nate, hopping around the perimeter of the lagoon, looking for a new, different obstacle from which to jump, scaled a small tree and hung suspended from a somewhat thick branch like he was Tarzan, King of the Dumbasses. Swinging back and forth to catch momentum, he catapulted himself into the air, aiming for the lagoon, but the tree branch snapped, and he fell hard onto the earth.

“Ow!” He lay on the ground, gripping his butt, wincing while Colby, Sam, and Alex roared with laughter, asking him if he was all right at the same time.

“Damn, nobody got that on video,” Sam laughed.

“I would never let you post that,” Nate said. He was half-laughing, half-crying, so he couldn’t have hurt himself too badly. Once Colby saw he was mostly fine, he laughed until his stomach hurt. It felt good after being so stressed.

Trey, who’d been sitting on a lounge chair reading, looked up from his book like a cop from a patrol car at a frat party. He lowered his sunglasses solemnly at Nate. “That was my favorite tree,” he said.
Colby bit his lip before he could say anything disrespectful.

“I’m…man, I’m so sorry.” Nate struggled to his feet, lifted the broken branch, and tried to reattach it before dropping it on the ground again.

“Bro, you sure you’re all right?” Alex jumped out of the water to help Nate.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” Nate replied, rubbing his butt.

“But the tree isn’t,” Trey again said in his stoic, robotic, way. “The tree is now broken.”

They all looked at him without a word. Colby could’ve cut the tension with a chainsaw.

“It was just a branch,” Nate mumbled. “Like I said, I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, but it was his favorite tree branch,” Colby snarled, his glare meeting Trey’s. What the hell? Couldn’t Trey see that a human was hurt? Who cared about the freakin’ tree!

Shaking his head, Trey went back to reading, and Colby went back to jumping off a high rock, and the guys worked up an appetite so huge, Colby could’ve plucked the pineapples off their plants and eaten them right then and there, prickly skins and all. Still irked about the way Trey had reacted to Nate breaking the tree branch, Colby kept staring at Trey reading his leather-bound hardcover like he was a librarian or a cigar-smoking grandfather watching over them.

He needed to get something off his chest.

Colby swam up to the lagoon’s edge and lay against a rock to catch his breath. “Yo, be honest…” He looked at Trey. “Don’t you want to party with kids our age sometimes?”

Over the edge of his book, Trey replied, “Party? I have everything I need here. This place is paradise. Don’t you see?” He gestured to the world around him.
“Yeah, I see. It’s beautiful. I’m talking about the company you’re with. Don’t you want to hang with people more like you?”

To his credit, Trey actually thought about it a few moments. “I know you mean the heathens with whom we fraternized in Los Angeles, Colby, but Georgia fills my needs in every single way possible,” he said, staring in an unsettling way. “Why would I want to leave?”

Colby tried to read Trey’s expression like one of Georgia’s expensive paintings. Was he really that fulfilled? How was that even possible? He’d only just begun life and already was trapped in an oddly one-sided (or so it seemed) relationship. Part of him felt like maybe Trey was stuck in a situation and couldn’t voice it. Like someone who’d made a mistake and was now living with it.

But what about his cousins, friends, his family, and girlfriend he’d mentioned a few years back? “Yeah, but what do you do every day?” Colby probed. “Don’t you get bored up here? You have to, at some point. I mean, the house is great, but it’s just you and Georgia…all the time. Right?”

Trey removed his sunglasses, cleaned them with the edge of his shirt. “Actually, Colby, we’re busy every day. I’ll show you our calendar later, if you want to see it.”

If you don’t believe me, Colby understood.

“Nah, it’s okay. I’m just curious. You don’t have to answer any questions. Just making conversation. You know, not judging.” Colby smiled. Of course that was a jab to the one and only other time they’d ever met, but hey, he deserved it. A little bit of grief was the last thing he could give Trey for being insensitive when Nate fell.

“I see. Well, to answer your question—no. I will always stay on this island. This is paradise. Anyone with half a brain can see that.” Before Colby could ask how this lifestyle jibed with the perfect life he’d talked about in L.A., Trey stood and walked off with his book tucked under his arm. “Going to check on lunch.”

Colby thought about retorting to the “half a brain” comment, but let
it go. After all, he’d been the nosy one to pry into Trey’s life. He slipped back into the lagoon. They’d been legitimately good questions, he thought, same questions on all their minds. He’d often thought of moving to Hawaii one day, too, but with friends, family, people who understood what it was like being a twenty-two-year-old guy. And as nice and well-meaning as Georgia was, Colby doubted she understood what someone their age needed.

As he watched Trey disappear through the jungle back to the main house, Colby got a sinking feeling. Sam, Nate, and Alex, now chilling under the shade of a palm tree, looked at him funny. Alex laughed nervously. “Guys, is it me, or has this whole afternoon felt like a horror movie to you?”

“Yeah,” Colby muttered. “And this is the part where we die.”
Sam laughed, a little confused. “Why do you say that?”

“Because, dude. That guy is off his rocker.” Colby pointed in the general direction of the path through which Trey had disappeared back to the house.

“He’s what?” Sam slipped into the water to wade closer to Colby.


“I know what it means. I just didn’t hear him!” Sam scoffed.

“Sorry. There I go again, using my big boy words,” Nate muttered.

“And it’s annoying. Just because we’re not in college doesn’t mean we’re idiots.” He loved Nate to the death, but the guy needed to stop assuming they were uneducated buffoons all because they didn’t study poetry or literature or whatever the fuck Nate was studying.

“I just… You know what? I’m’a shut up now.” Nate dunked himself in the water and came up for air a moment later. “So, what makes you say we’re going to die, Colby?”

Colby perched himself on the center oasis’s edge. “A moment ago, while you guys were here talking, I decided to try and make conversation. I asked him what it was like living here all alone with Georgia, if he ever got lonely or wanted friends his age.”

“And?” Sam prodded.

“And he showed Colby his sex doll!” Alex blurted loudly enough for anyone within two miles earshot to hear.

“Bro, sshh!” Colby laughed, as they all burst into suppressed snorts of laughter. Once the giggles died down, Colby widened his eyes and stared ahead like a zombie. “And he looked at me with this
serious face and said, ‘I will always stay on this island. This island is paradise.’ Like a brainwashed person does in a movie. You guys know what I’m talking about.”

Sam laughed at Colby’s impression. “I think he’s just a little different.”

Colby gawked. “Sam... There’s no way a guy our age like him could be happy living in isolation. A few months maybe. But going on two years?”

“What are you saying?” Alex asked. “That he’s here against his will?”

“Maybe not against his will, but maybe he’s losing touch with who he is. I talked to that guy at that party. I know what he wanted from life.”

“Yesterday, you said you didn’t know who the fuck Trey was,” Nate pointed out, “and that’s why you didn’t want to come here.”

“What I said was that we barely knew him.” Colby felt seen by the omniscient gaze of Nate.

Nate scoffed. “Same thing, Colby. Now you’re saying you know him. Look, even if you did know him inside-out, a man’s allowed to change his mind. Besides, his cousin Donny did say Trey was always kind of a blank slate. He’d act like whoever he was around. You know, not having a personality of your own.”

“That’s what I’m saying, bro,” Colby said. “And now that he’s with this lady, he’s kind of acting like her. Don’t you agree? Maybe the reason he asked us to come visit is because he’s going a little crazy in isolation. If you ask me, I think he needs young people, mainlanders like us. Look how he’s dressed like an old guy.”

Nate ran his hands through his wet hair. “I agree he’s strange, but I think he’s perfectly happy. Trey’s always been an old soul. Some people are like that. I’m betting Georgia makes him feel special, and that’s all there is to it.”

“Just leave the dude alone.” Alex, with his infinite mature wisdom.
Sam nodded. He mostly agreed with Nate and Alex, but listening to Colby, he also agreed there was definitely something odd about Trey, something he couldn’t quite put his finger on. Maybe that was the investigator in him thinking.

Literally a second later, who should come bounding back into the lagoon area than the boy-boomer himself? He’d changed out of his other outfit and now wore dark blue slacks, a blue and green Hawaiian shirt, and a gleaming gold chunky bracelet on his wrist. With his hair slicked back and his barbershop pedostache, Trey Weiss was serving up serious old-school retro.

“Speaking of, here he comes,” Colby mumbled.

Nate waved at Trey. “What’s up? We love the lagoon. This is great!”

Trey plastered on a smile. “Wonderful to hear. Well, Georgia is ready with the lunch buffet, so now would be a good time to towel off and get dressed. Can I get you boys anything to drink? A beer, some wine, or a cocktail? The cellar is full of fun.”


Colby gave him a knowing look. Okay, boomer, he mouthed.

“Actually, a beer sounds great. Thanks, Trey,” Sam replied. The others asked for beers as well. He was curious to see what kind he’d produce for them. If it was the piss water kind his granddad drank, he’d switch to lemonade or water.

One by one, they scampered out of the pool, reaching for towels, and the second Sam swiped his skin with the beach towel, he felt his shoulders and face tingling with sunburn. Having the lightest skin of them all, he was usually careful to apply maximum sunscreen, but it looked like it’d all washed off in the lagoon.

They headed off to the house, passing by the mermaid statue that was actually Georgia’s nude sixteen-year-old daughter forever depicted in stone. Had his parents ever done that to him, he’d have murdered them, no question about it.

The inside of the house felt cool and refreshing to his burned skin.
Sam was dying for that beer. Luckily, what Trey handed him was a Hawaiian brand in a dark, cold bottle, which tasted amazing on his parched tongue after the outside heat. Once his eyes focused to the interior lighting, he caught sight of the spread that awaited them on the kitchen island.

A sign in the center of the table read: Welcome Nate and Friends.

“Hope you’re hungry!” Georgia exclaimed proudly, fixing the positions of the green rolled-up napkins and silverware. She pressed her hot pink manicured hands together at her chest and beamed at her hard work. Even she, Sam now realized, had changed into a different outfit, a sort of shapeless shift in bright colors that reminded him of some meditation guru, especially with the turquoise stones dangling from each ear.

“Holy crap,” Colby murmured.

“I made the sign,” Trey said proudly.

Nate and friends? Okay… Sam wasn’t sure what was more odd, the fact that Trey made a sign to welcome them to lunch or that he suddenly couldn’t remember anybody’s name except for Nate’s after he’d partied with them in L.A.

All over the countertop were small, colorful plates in different intricate designs, each holding something unique and delicious-looking. Foods like Indian spice curry, fruit cakes, hummus platters, sliced watermelon, olives, pita bread chips, butternut squash soup, spinach and feta quiche, and tons of other delights, all marked with little folded notecards specifying what each dish was.

“I didn’t know what allergies you might have,” Georgia explained. “So I wrote everything down, so you wouldn’t have to ask. If you’re still not sure, I’m happy to answer your questions!”

Sam had to admit, she’d really gone out of her way. His friends’ moms back home might’ve served up hot dogs with potato chips or burgers with Cheez-Its, but this display was worthy of a celebrity’s mansion in Kauai.
“Wow, this is amazing. Thank you so much, Missus…uh…” Sam caught his friends all giving him looks like he was about to embarrass himself.

“Georgia,” she finished for him. “Didn’t I already tell you to call me that?” She perched her fist on her hip and pursed her lips before letting out a loud, melodious laugh.

“Right. Thanks, Georgia.” Sam grabbed a beautifully patterned ceramic plate. “You didn’t have to go through all this trouble just for us.”

Sam was also used to paper or plastic plates and disposable paper napkins whenever they had a party, unless it was Christmas or Easter, so for a casual non-event like this, the presentation made him feel special. Maybe that was Georgia’s specialty, he thought, and the reason why Trey seemed so happy here.

“Nonsense. We rarely get visitors. This is a tremendous pleasure for us!” She handed them each a cloth napkin roll. “A long time ago, Clint and I used to host parties all the time. We loved entertaining, but I stopped after a while. Since the flood, of course, no one comes through here anymore.”

They scarfed down the food and beer, as they all stood around the island, not knowing what to eat next because of how good it all looked. Sam wasn’t keen on stuff like the olives or hummus, but a BBQ pork mac-and-cheese was amazing, and so was the Indian curry. His stomach was happier than it’d been all trip.

“See our schedule?” Trey asked Colby, pointing to a copy paper printout taped to the side of the fridge.

“Oh, right.” Colby nodded, widening his eyes at Sam. “The schedule.”

Schedule?

Sam was curious to see what they were looking at and moved to the fridge as well. Clearly, it was about something Trey and Colby had talked about out by the lagoon. The printout displayed a series of
numbers and stats so complicated, he wasn’t sure what he was looking at. There was the list of times, that much was clear—8:39 AM – Wake Up; 9:01 AM – Meditate; 9:26 AM – Read Poetry; 9:36 AM – Practice Piano. Was there a piano? Sam glanced around. He hadn’t even seen one.

Who would read poetry and then practice a musical instrument ten minutes later? Why was this even on the fridge? Maybe it was a joke. Cook for Georgia was at 10:35 AM, then at 11:00 AM, it was time to “Prepare Cellar.” What the heck did that even mean? And what were all the numbers next to each, one for every day of the week—7.5, 9, 6.5, 8.8…columns and rows of numbers.

Sam was dying to know but wasn’t about to ask. People were allowed their routines and rituals without outsiders being super nosy. Besides, the schedule ended at 7:11 PM, after which point, the paper folded backwards, hidden from view on purpose, Sam felt.

That was probably for the best. He didn’t want to know what Trey and Georgia did after the sun went down. He thought about the mussed-up sheets in the bedroom again and shuddered to himself.

“Okay, I have to ask,” Colby muttered through a bite out of a mini sandwich. “Why’s this so detailed? Your schedule makes me feel like I do nothing with my life.”

“Right?” Sam chuckled. Even though it wasn’t true. He and Colby did a lot, especially when it came to brainstorming new ideas, watching videos for inspiration, and editing. Editing took up most of the day. But they would never schedule their lives this way, down to the minute. He was surprised Trey and Georgia hadn’t included seconds.

“Everything has to be perfect,” Trey explained with total seriousness, to Sam’s surprise. He had to be kidding.

“Perfect for what?” Colby asked.

It seemed to Sam like Trey was receiving signals from Georgia who listened to him answer Colby’s question silently by the lunch buffet. Trey cracked a smile. “It’s just a game,” he explained, changing his
tone. “To see how perfect we can get, how happy we can be toward one another.”

Sam wondered if he’d heard that correctly. They practiced “being happy toward one another?” Whoa.

“We rate ourselves, me and Georgia,” Trey went on. “Yesterday, I got 8.5 as my overall score. Georgia got 10.”

He wasn’t kidding. These people actually scored their daily activities to see who could be more perfect at life? Damn. Colby had been onto something out by the lagoon. There was something unsettling about Trey and Georgia, because who did that in real life? He wondered if this was a side effect of living in isolation. Eventually, you ran out of things to do.

“How did this lunch rate?” Colby asked Trey. “In your opinion.”

“A 10, of course.” Trey smiled, then glanced at Georgia standing by the island, giving her boyfriend a seductive look, batting her eyelashes. She held up her glass of wine as a toast. For a split second, Sam saw the allure despite her age. He saw the sexy woman Trey was into instead of the elegant grandmother serving them all lunch. “Everything she does is perfect,” Trey said.

Sam wanted to vomit.

No, really, he nearly chucked.

He clutched his stomach and bit down on his tongue. His vision had darkened slightly, all of a sudden, as the food and beer hit his stomach a bit too aggressively. Sam had to clench the counter to keep from falling. The kitchen swirled around him, rocking back and forth as though they were on an ocean liner—during a Category 3 storm. No one else noticed him reeling. Everyone kept chatting about the weird schedule game their hosts used for self-amusement.

His blurred vision wavered, trying to regain control.

Could it have been the beer? He’d only had four or five sips. Maybe he’d had an allergic reaction to one of the foods, even though Sam had never had food reactions before. He hadn’t read the ingredient
signs before eating, but Sam didn’t think this was caused by a food allergy. More likely he’d gotten too much sun, was experiencing heat exhaustion. The lack of food and water wasn’t helping either.

He couldn’t refocus his vision and stood there, trying to regain balance. Behind Colby and Nate, a shadowy cloud appeared. It hovered in the air, as if looking down at them. But how could a dark cloud be inside a house? This was definitely a weird side effect of being out in the sun too long. Great, he was getting sick on their trip.

“Sam…” It was Colby coming over to him, holding him by the arm and peering into his eyes. “You okay, man? You’re super white. Here, have water.”

Sam took the water and chugged it back until the glass was empty. He appreciated the way Colby wasn’t making a big scene. He definitely didn’t want Georgia or Trey to think he’d gotten sick off their food. When he looked up and refocused, the black cloud in the kitchen was wavering, dissipating, and losing shape.

Definitely tunnel vision from dehydration.

“A toast…” Georgia held up her wine glass and waited as the boys clinked their beers with her drink. “To Nate and friends. May your day be full of fun, and your life be full of light and rewards.”

“Cheers…” Everyone toasted.

Sam drank the last drops of water and blinked a few times more, until the shadowy, swirling mass was gone.
He kept glancing at Sam. Just to make sure he wouldn’t fall over. Sam didn’t get sick very often, so when he did, it was weird to see him off-kilter. But a rosy color had returned to his cheeks, and he even managed a smile during Georgia’s toast, so he was probably okay.

Now that their stomachs were full of food and it was near 1 PM, they should probably get snorkeling, not to eat and run or anything, but they had to get moving. Colby was a little irritated that Nate’s chattiness was at an all-time high. His questions had veered back to the screenplays again.

“Do you plan on getting any of those scripts made into movies?” Nate asked Georgia and Trey, as Colby went for their bags, handing Sam, Alex, and Nate their own as a way of strongly hinting they should go.

“Well, that’s the goal, sure,” Georgia replied, leading them into the dining room where the stacks of screenplays were now stacked on the china cabinet hutch. “My husband loved films. I always wanted at least one of them to get produced by a major studio, but you know Hollywood—so fickle!”


He hadn’t meant it in a bad way, only as an end to the conversation so they could go snorkeling. But it came out sounding rude, and both Georgia and Trey turned their odd stares on him. Well, it was true. Living in Hollywood the last few years had taught Colby a lot about people, mostly how disingenuous they could be.

“It’s not all bad, though,” Colby backtracked. “Surrounding yourself with good friends is important.” He raised his eyebrows at the guys, wishing they could all make a mad dash for the van in the driveway. He was taking his cues from Sam, and Sam was looking like he needed fresh air.
“True, Colby,” Georgia nodded. “Hollywood can also teach us not to give up on our dreams. Trey and I won’t be giving up on ours when it comes to getting these scripts just right. Ain’t that so, baby?”

Trey rapped a stack of papers together on the table’s surface. “Exactly, my love. Your big dream is now my big dream,” he said, scooping her into his arms and giving her a deep kiss that made all them look away to prevent from staring.

Colby clucked his tongue in disbelief. Come on, getting these screenplays produced had been neither of their dreams. The only person it’d meant anything to was Clint, the man who’d written them. And Clint was no longer here. Who were these two living for—a ghost?

He almost felt sorry for Trey, for not having a big dream of his own, but it had been the reason Colby had brushed him off two years ago. Now it was definitely none of his business. Still, he wished he could shake sense into Trey. The boy needed a slap or two.

“Well, boys, let’s get going,” Trey finally said, grabbing the keys off a hook on the wall. He pointed to a painting next to the key hook. “Oh, and this? Hand-painted piece by Sean Connery, the guy who played James Bond 007 in the old films. Pretty groovy, huh?”

“Super groovy.” Colby rolled his eyes. “Maybe you can get him to star in one of your—I mean, Clint’s—movies.”

“Well, he’s past eighty now,” Trey tittered without even realizing Colby was being sarcastic.

So is your girlfriend. Colby’s words nearly fell out of his mouth. They tumbled back into his throat where he swallowed them with lock and key, embarrassed that he’d even thought of them. “True, true.”

All five men headed to the front door, past the row of scented candles, Mardi Gras–masked Buddha, and weird art that looked like it’d been made with elephant tusks and bent animal skeletons.

“I’ll have your rooms ready by the time you come back,” Georgia said.
Colby looked over his shoulder. “Thanks, but we’re not staying the night. We have to be back to the snorkeling shop by six-thirty.”

“Yeah, we appreciate it, though,” Sam added.

“I wouldn’t mind staying,” Alex mumbled out of the blue.

“Bro…” Colby looked at Alex. One thing was to change one day of their itinerary, but another was to change two when they only had three days left on their trip. First, they had to be back at Lihue Airport tomorrow so Nate could catch his flight for his sister’s graduation, and second, he understood Trey and Georgia were starving for company, but one day was more than enough.

“We wish we could stay, but we can’t,” Colby said.

“I see,” Georgia replied, freaky greenish eyes meeting Colby’s a second too long. Something he’d said had met with her disapproval. Colby gave her a weak smile and looked at Sam for backup.

“Anyway…” Sam clapped his hands once, defusing the tension. “Na Pali Coast, here we come!”

The drive to the state park wouldn’t take long, as Trey told them several times—about five minutes along Kuhio Highway, a road closed to visitors. But he made sure to spend that time in the van telling Colby, Sam, Nate, and Alex more about the flood two years ago, how it’d ruined their driveway, destroyed so many trees, knocked out one entrance to their wine cellar. The water level had reached their front door.

“Fifty-five inches of rain fell in a twenty-four–hour period,” he said, driving slowly down the partially damaged road toward the towering mountainside. “It set a new world record.” He opened the windows to let in the salty breezes.

The only way off the North Shore without a convoy was by helicopter, he explained. In fact, he and Georgia traveled to India for a month just to get away during the recovery efforts—it was that bad. Trey made it seem like they’d sacrificed so much when
they left temporarily.

But Colby could only imagine how it must be to have so much money, you could just move to another country for a month while your mansion and your island back home got fixed. You wouldn’t have to work. You could just wake up in the morning, no stress, tour the countryside, eat when you were hungry, shop for cool stuff in the Indian bazaars, and take photos all day.

Some might say Trey had it made.

But Colby wasn’t so sure. Yes, he and Sam had a lot in their name, too, but everything they had, they had because they’d earned it. Themselves. No handouts. Colby wasn’t even sure he could even enjoy a life provided by a wealthy sugar mama. He would always feel like he had to contribute. He credited this to his upbringing and swore he could never be like Trey. And to think Trey had tried lecturing him once about life.

“You guys were pretty lucky then,” Alex said from the back seat. “Both during and after the flood, I mean.”

“Oh, yes. You all are lucky, too. For being allowed in this area. For being on this closed road. For seeing this immeasurable beauty. In fact, by the end of the day…” Trey’s hazel eyes appeared in the rearview mirror, first at Alex, then straight at Colby. “You’ll never want to leave.”

Colby couldn’t help but stare at Sam openmouthed.

Seemed like any time Trey said something weird, all he could do was check Sam’s expression to make sure he wasn’t imagining things. He couldn’t trust Nate as Trey’s acquaintance. Nate liked everybody he met. Nor could he trust Alex, who seemed to think everything about this place was perfect. But the widening of Sam’s blue eyes told him it wasn’t just him—Trey was a nutcase.

As they neared their destination, a Jeep crept up on the road behind them, keeping its distance. Trey kept an eye on it in his rearview mirror.
“Are you sure we’re allowed on this road?” Colby checked back at the Jeep.

“Yes, we’re residents.” Trey sped up to put distance between them and the driver. When he was a good hundred yards ahead, the Jeep seemed to have lost interest and disappeared down a dirt road. He slowed and pulled into an empty parking lot, navigating his way around barricades and safety cones.

Trey parked the van near a break in the trees, and they all hopped out. Colby could tell they were near the shore because of the seagulls hovering overhead and the intense salty air. They began taking down the snorkeling equipment, applying more sunscreen, putting on swim shirts, and perching masks on their heads.

“Hey!” someone shouted from across the parking lot. Colby spotted the Jeep that had followed them a few minutes before. He saw the driver now—a tall, heavyset, pale woman wearing a scowl, storming toward them. “Hey, you can’t be here!”

“Um…neighborhood watchdog, headed this way,” Sam warned.

“Oh, that’s Katie,” Trey said, closing up the van’s hatchback. “Hi, Katie! It’s okay. These boys are with me!” He waved his arms until Katie recognized him.

“Oh.” She slowed as she approached them. From all the running and driving with the windows open, loose strands of her thin, brown hair flew all over her head, giving her a winded appearance. “Good to know. Next time, let one of us know you’re bringing guests up. You know we don’t like to see outsiders walking around by themselves.”

“These are my friends, Nate, Colby, Alex, and Sam.” Trey gestured to the group.

“Yeah, nice names, but they’re still outsiders,” she huffed, then wagged a pointed finger at him. “Be nice, you hear? You never know when you’re going to need us.”

That was an odd thing to say. It wasn’t like they were giving her a
hard time or anything. Kauai locals sure did get their panties in a twist.

Trey’s laugh felt forced. “Oh, we know, Katie, we know. All we’re doing is snorkeling, then heading back to the house for dinner. The boys are leaving in the morning.”

Why did he keep calling them “the boys”?

“We’re what?” Sam narrowed his eyes. “No, we can’t do dinner, Trey.”

“We’re not staying,” Colby insisted. He was pretty sure he’d already said this once before. “We have to be back in Hanalei by six-thirty to drop off the snorkeling gear.”

“That doesn’t give you much time,” Katie said, glancing at her phone. “You’d have to wrap things up here by four, at the very least, to get back on the road in time. Chop, chop, do your snorkeling, then skedaddle.”

“Okay, Katie,” Trey laughed, though Colby found nothing funny about the woman. “Thank you for looking out for us.”

Katie stared at Trey like she wasn’t looking out for him—she was looking out for herself and possibly other residents, as if this group of twenty-somethings was a problem. Apparently, their reputation preceded them wherever they went.

She retreated back to her Jeep, as they all grabbed their things, but kept watching them from afar for a few minutes.

“What’s so dangerous about being here without supervision?” Colby followed Trey through the cut in the bushes. “Man-eating flowers?”

Nate chuckled. “Bacteria-infested waterfalls?”

“Cloudy dark spirits,” Sam added oddly.

Colby had no idea what he meant by that. Sam had been acting strange since he felt nauseated in the kitchen.
“The locals are just protecting their land,” Alex said. “You can’t blame them.”

“I can’t, huh?” Colby cocked his head. Why did Alex always come to the rescue with his defense of anybody who antagonized them? “What are you, her lawyer?”

“Financial advisor.” He jabbed Colby in the back with a flipper. “Just go. If I don’t get into the water soon, I’m going to get a headache. I can already feel it building.”

“Me too, dude,” Nate said. “We need to relax.”

It was odd that Sam, Alex, and now Nate had all felt slightly sick this afternoon, though Sam’s headache seemed the worst of all. They probably should’ve stopped for breakfast this morning instead of rushing to Hanalei.

“Almost there,” Trey said dramatically, then he burst through the bushes and stopped short of a wide expanse of blue. “Huh? What did I tell you? What…did I tell you?” He held his arms out wide, proudly displaying the surroundings.

The second Colby’s feet hit the sand, he raised his sunglasses and took a good look around him. A swath of heaven stretched before them so exquisitely, it couldn’t have been real. It had to be a painting, a lucid dream. But it was real. They had landed in paradise. Everything else they’d seen in Kauai so far paled in comparison. Energetic, deep-blue waters and white quartz sands beckoned to them, soft-crested waves lapped against the shore, and to their left, towering, emerald peaks jutted upwards from the coastline into clear, baby-blue skies.

Not a person on the beach.

Not a single soul, but them.

The Na Pali Coast was theirs alone.

“Is that…?” Nate’s mouth gaped open.

“That is it, my friend,” Trey replied, jutting his hands in the pockets
of his slacks. “Majestic, isn’t it?” He started removing layers of clothes until he was standing in his swimsuit. The guy only got weirder with each passing moment.

Colby almost couldn’t cope with the majesty of the world around him. It was too primitive, too surreal. He half-expected his dead ancestors to walk through a set of pearly gates toward him, welcoming him to the promised land. From inside him came a deep sense of belonging, as though he’d finally come home. As though his heart had always been in Kauai.

Sam put his arm across his shoulder. “Glad we came?”

Colby nodded. “Hell, yeah. We have to take a picture.”

“Let’s do it.”

Sam gathered everyone together on the shore—the four of them—while Trey took Colby’s phone and snapped a bunch of photos. Colby beamed in every pic. The smiles emanated without effort. This was the perfect location on the perfect day with his best friends in the world. He hated to admit, Trey might’ve been right—he might never want to leave Kauai.

“Can you believe this is where Ryder Camp was?” Trey scanned their surroundings. “Right here where we’re standing. Me and Georgia love to walk here all the time. We take the long way, of course.”

Ryder Camp was hard to imagine. To Colby, it felt like they were the only five people in the world at that moment. Like the Na Pali Coast had been born of fire, earth, water, and wind purely for them. He solemnly scanned the beach, doing his best to imagine people living here long ago. Hippies from Georgia’s book, singing around a bonfire, playing volleyball, building tree houses, meditating, doing yoga on the sand…having babies.

Living.

Breathing.

Far away from the cruel world.
Suddenly, Colby felt lightheaded. He reached for a nearby gnarly tree to catch his balance. The moment his fingers curled around the smooth bark, he imagined a truck tire hanging on a rope from a sturdy branch, a little blond boy, swinging back and forth, his mother calling to him—dinner was ready. He saw the boy’s bearded, shirtless father grilling fish over the campfire, as groups of half-dressed people laughed while glowing embers rose into the twilight sky, carried away by Pacific breezes.

Just as quickly as he saw the harmonious scene, it disappeared.

Only a deeply tanned woman remained on the beach wearing a wraparound skirt, a necklace of tiny shells around her neck, and no top. She was beautiful but also concerned. And she’d seen him. She stared at Colby with insistent, seafoam eyes.

Go, she said.

“Yo, dude!”

Go…

Colby was transfixed by her beauty and frightened demeanor. Behind her, a dark cloud began taking shape on the beach, even as the evening sky in his vision was clear from clouds.

“COLBY!” Sam called from somewhere far away.

Go, the woman said again, then she clapped. And when she did, it all disappeared—the people, the bonfires, the tire swing, the grilled fish… everything. All that was left were his friends and Trey.

Sam called to him from the water’s edge, decked out in swim shirt, snorkel, mask, and flippers. His mouth looked funny with the mask distorting his face. “Colby, guess what’s here?” he shouted, pointing into the crystal blue waters. “Turtles!”
Colby should’ve been off-the-charts excited to see the green sea turtles swimming so close to the shore, the bait Sam had used to lure him to Trey’s house. Instead, he stood offshore, staring at what looked like driftwood vertically stuck into the ground. A twisted, freaky-looking tree. The more Sam called Colby, the more Colby stared at the odd-shaped wood, trapped in a moment.

Finally, Colby heard Sam and snapped out of it. He jogged over to the ocean’s edge where Sam stood in two feet of water, watching schools of little fish swimming all around, but he still didn’t seem to care about the turtles or any of the exciting ocean life surrounding them.

“Hey, man, you okay?” Sam asked, holding his mouthpiece aside. “I was calling you for a whole thirty seconds, and you couldn’t hear me.”

“I’m fine.” Colby rubbed his face. “Just tired, I think.”

“You look pale, like you’ve seen a ghost.”


Sam stared at Colby. “What?” Who said anything about leaving?

First, Colby had held fast to that twisted tree, staring at nothing, ignoring his loud calls. He didn’t care about ginormous sea turtles swimming all around either. Had he really seen a ghost? But Colby was a skeptic, like him. Had he actually seen one, he would’ve said something about it.

“Nobody’s making you leave, Colby,” Sam calmly said, with the patience of a dad to a toddler. “You’re here now. Paradise all around! See?” He threw his arms out at the surrounding magnificence, just like Trey loved to do.
Colby nodded, but his mind was elsewhere.

“Come on, get in the water. You’ll feel better. Look, there’s another turtle right there.” Sam pointed out a friendly green sea turtle swimming straight toward them. He pushed the snorkel’s mouthpiece into his mouth and dipped underneath the surface. The airy sounds of the beach and seagulls disappeared, blending into distorted, watery silence.

The turtle glided through the turquoise and gold seascape, waved a flipper as if to say hello, then disappeared into the darker depths beyond before Sam could reach out and touch it.

He broke the surface, gasping for breath. “Did you see it?”

“Yeah. That was amazing.” Colby waded into the water wearing his gear, his smile slowly returning to his face. There we go. Now the best friend he knew was coming back to life.

“Guys!” Nate called from further out in the reef. “Come this way! There’s butterflyfish. And parrotfish!”

Sam ducked his mask into the water and snorkeled toward Nate with Colby close behind. The water, which had felt cold when he’d first waded in, now felt warm and refreshing.

“Can you believe all these fish?” Nate sank his mask an inch below the water line.

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” Alex said. “This is amazing!”

Sam felt better now, knowing his friends were enjoying themselves after a rocky start to their day. He wasn’t sure why, but he felt personally responsible for his friends’ fun, as if he was to blame. As if he could control the weather and the appearances of turtles. Luckily, the marine life and sunny skies had cooperated.

“It is the most beautiful place in the world,” Trey was speaking more to himself than to them, staring blankly out at the sea cliffs. “The most beautiful island ever…”

Colby swapped glances with Sam again. Trey and his odd behavior
were one of those personality quirks they’d just have to get used to. Nate struck up conversations with every person they met, wasting their time; Alex was awkward in group settings, rarely took the lead (also couldn’t use public bathrooms); and Colby withdrew into himself every so often. When it came to friendships, you had to take the bad with the good. At least Trey had invited them here.

They spent the next couple of hours exploring. Trey had asked them to steer clear of the area near the sea cliffs, so they tried to stay mostly near the beach. As beautiful as the cliffs were, strong waves and currents could easily overpower them, so they stayed closer to the reef where they were able to snap amazing photos, though Sam knew not a single one could ever express the natural splendor.

The cove’s beauty was overwhelming and cozy at the same time, like a nostalgic dream about childhood after a night of too much partying. Comforting and safe. There was something indulgent about having the mountains and cliffs so close to them, but Sam realized what that safe feeling was—privilege. Few people could ever drop what they were doing to come fly out here. Then to drive into a forbidden part of the island and be given access to such a rare sight. It made him feel overcome with gratitude.

Trey may have sounded like an oddball saying it, but he was right—they were lucky.

It nearly made Sam forget the strange sensation he’d had back at the house, the dark cloud he thought he’d seen in the kitchen. At the time, it had felt so real, but now that Sam was fully immersed in one of the most amazing, real experiences he’d ever had, an afternoon filled with laughs, bantering, and nature’s gifts, he doubted what he’d seen. Thank God for science’s reassurance that he’d probably just had a reaction to the Pacific sun, heat, and lack of food. Without those facts, he would’ve thought the house was really...

Sam brushed away the niggling thought.

Trey kept leading them farther and farther down the coast, pointing out new areas of the reef, teaching them the differences between filefish and surgeonfish. There was so much to see, he didn’t want
to miss one moment. At one point, Sam couldn’t see their bag pile on the sand anymore. They were getting too far. What if they missed the convoy? What if they chose to stay on Ke’e Beach forever, living off the land and sea like the hippies of yesteryear?

Could he ever do it?

Could he leave L.A. for good, his career, his friends, his girlfriend, and life as he knew it for the sake of living this virtual dream? He loved the idea of not having any responsibilities, but could he? For a little while maybe, but eventually, he might get bored.

Slowly, the guys wandered back in the direction from which they’d come, but they also seemed to be getting farther at the same time. Was the beach messing with his sense of orientation? He wasn’t even sure what time it was. When the five of them were at their closest to each other in proximity, he removed his mouthpiece.

“Guys, we should start heading back soon, so we don’t miss the convoy.”

To anyone else, it sounded like he was just minding the time. The truth, however, was he was afraid of getting sucked into Hawaii’s allure.

“Aww, Daaad, I don’t wanna go,” Nate whined.

“Yeah, can’t we just live here forever?” Colby floated on his back, soaking up the rays of the sun now lowering in the west high above the horizon. Wasn’t Colby the one who hadn’t wanted to come in the first place?

“Wish we could,” Alex said. “I would stay, for sure. Buy a house here, live near the beach…”

“You can, all four of you,” Trey reminded them in that monotoned voice of his. “Stay with us. For one night. Leave in the morning.”

“Tempting, but we can’t.” Nate wiped water off his red eyes. “I have a plane to catch tomorrow. Otherwise we would. Thanks for the invite, though.”

“Yeah, thanks for this, Trey. It’s been pretty eye-opening.” Colby’s
voice was sincerely filled with gratitude.

Sam smiled. He was happy to see Colby finally appreciating this side trip and knew it would all be worth it in the end. He waded closer to shore, eyes on their bags, sad that this chapter of their vacation was about to come to an end. Enjoy it while you still can, Sam told himself, taking in the shoreline of the Na Pali Coast one more time.

And there, he saw…

The dark cloud again. Only this time it seemed to curl its tendrils and morph into a long, tall human-like shape right there on the sand. It stared at him. He didn’t know how he knew, because it didn’t have a face, but somehow, he knew. Sam shook his head to try and dislodge the vision. His stomach did a couple of somersaults. He rubbed his eyes, certain the darkness would go away, but the cloudy mass still hovered and even moved and glistened.

“Do you see it?” he asked no one in particular. He didn’t want to make a big deal, because it certainly couldn’t be real. He was having that tunnel vision again. But maybe, just maybe—

“See what?” Colby gazed in the same direction, but apparently, didn’t see what Sam saw. “Are you talking about that tree? Yeah, it’s a weird-looking tree, isn’t it? I was checking it out earlier.”

“No, not the tree. Never mind, it’s nothing.” The moment Sam discredited his vision, it dissipated, swirling into itself, like a pinwheel spinning back into a portal. Vanished. Sam’s whole body shook. He knew if they didn’t get a move on now, he’d be curious to stay and investigate. “We really do need to get going.”

Colby had caught on to the change in Sam’s demeanor. “Guys…it’s time to go. Trey? It’s been real, brother.”

As they emerged from the shallows onto the beach, dripping and sunbaked, Sam felt light-headed and utterly exhausted. They’d just snorkeled the cove for two, maybe three hours. The thought of crashing in a bed back at the Belle Estate instead of driving three
hours back to Koloa sounded super appealing. Maybe if they got up early enough, they could head out with plenty of time to get Nate to the airport.

Because the truth was, that this had been, despite the weird hallucinations, the most perfect place he’d ever visited in his life. He totally understood why Trey would never want to leave and could easily imagine himself staying—forever.

When the minivan pulled into the driveway, Georgia awaited them on the front porch. She leaped into Trey’s arms and kissed him like a soldier returning from the war. “Clint!” she cried.

Sam turned to the guys coming up the steps behind Trey. “Did she just call him Clint?” he whispered.

“Trey…” Georgia patted her boyfriend’s chest, apparently having heard Sam and feeling a little embarrassed about it. She rested her cheek on his shoulder. “Sorry, my love.”

“It’s all right,” Trey said, his arms still hooked around Georgia’s waist. He gave Sam a half glare, as if he’d offended his woman. “Sometimes that happens, since I do resemble Clint somewhat. It’s nothing to make fun of.”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean anything by it.”

Luckily, Georgia wasn’t offended, and if she was, she didn’t show it. “Well, you’ll probably want to change out of your swimming trunks and take a nice, hot shower. You can use the bathrooms upstairs. If you need clean, dry clothes, I have plenty I can find you.”

_No, thanks, Sam thought. As much as the idea of staying seemed appealing, he wasn’t going to wear Georgia’s ex-husband’s clothes like Trey obviously did. Before he knew it, he’d be sporting a mustache and inviting them to play pinochle in the parlor. Maybe have himself a cocktail or a cigar._

Colby turned his back to face the guys privately. “I don’t know about you all, but I just want to go. If y’all don’t mind. I really just
want to get back.”

“I second that,” Sam echoed. He didn’t want to risk Nate being late to his flight or missing their helicopter tour of the island tomorrow, but damn if he wasn’t going to miss this special place.

“I could use a shower, though,” Alex said, bending over to shake sand out of his hair. “You don’t really want to sit in dried saltwater all the way back to the Airbnb, do you? Four hours of itchy butt?”

“He’s right,” Nate said, looking at his phone. “We still have forty minutes before we have to get on the road. Let’s at least change so we’re not uncomfortable. Which way was the bathroom?” he asked Georgia without waiting for Sam and Colby’s input.

Sam saw Colby about to protest, but he let it go. Striking a balance over who got to call the shots was one of the tricky parts of their bro trips.

Georgia beamed, happy for the chance to hostess a little while longer. “Right up the stairs, where we were earlier today. Second door to the left.” She led them into the foyer and pointed up the stairwell. Sam noticed she had changed into another pretty dress once again. These two changed more outfits than YouTubers at Coachella.

“Do you want to go first?” Nate asked.

“I don’t want to go at all,” Colby muttered, intently checking out a piece of wall art resembling a block of concrete with rocks and shell fragments sticking out of it.

“Oh, there’s enough bathrooms for all of you up there. Just enter the guest rooms. You’ll see each one has one,” Georgia said, ushering Colby away.

They thanked her, making heavy footfalls up the stairs. Nate was right—they had a little bit of time. And actually, it would be nice to change, but they had to leave ASAP. Sam found one door ajar, peeked into the room and found towels and a white robe on the bed. The bedroom next to it had the same—clean white towels all
ready for their return with fluffy bathrobes lying on white, cozy comforters.

“Which part of ‘we’re not staying’ didn’t she understand?” Colby muttered over his shoulder. They entered the second bedroom, and Colby went into the bathroom to begin dislodging sand from his hair in front of the mirror. “It’s like they’re desperate for visitors.”

Alex and Nate entered the first bedroom, but within a moment, they discovered the two rooms were connected with a short hallway in-between. “Hey, we’re over here.” Alex waved at them. “Isn’t this room intriguing?”

“Yes, totally intriguing.” Sam felt a little disappointed that Alex seemed to like this house better than the Airbnb he’d carefully picked out. Well, of course he did—it was a mansion, but he didn’t have to make his preference so obvious. Answering Colby, he said, “Yeah. I kind of feel sorry for both of them. Don’t you?”

“Not really. They’re super pushy, which totally overshadows the niceness,” Colby said. “I don’t know, bro. I’m kind of tired, though.”

Sam flopped onto the bed. “Me, too. You shower first. I’ll just lie here and rest a second.” And possibly fall asleep while the others showered. The bed felt so soft and comfortable, a power nap would be the thing he needed.

Colby was now talking to himself in the bathroom. “I mean, we clearly said no to sleeping over like three times. Now, here we are, showering when we said we were just going to leave. This house has a way of not letting you go.”

His voice faded off. Sam agreed that Georgia had a way of making people do whatever she wanted and wondered if he would end up like Trey, robotic and amenable to serving her, if he ever stayed long enough.

“Hey, Sam?”

“Yeah?”

Colby popped his head out of the bathroom as the shower ran
behind him. “I didn’t want to talk about it before, but... back at the beach, did you get any weird vibes?”

He did see something. “Maybe. Why, did you?”

“I honestly... I don’t know. It’s been a weird day. I haven’t stopped thinking about it since it happened.”

“What did you see?” Sam asked.

“People. On the beach. Having a campfire, raising kids. One of them even told me to go. It was odd. I don’t know... I think I was just imagining hippies, since Trey and Georgia talked about them so much. Maybe my brain was just bringing them to life. Why, what did you see?”

Sam was glad they were finally talking about this, even though he really, really wanted to nap. He knew Colby couldn’t go long without sharing his experiences. He wasn’t sure he wanted to mention his, though. It would open a whole new can of worms.

“Sam?”

“Yeah?” He was drifting away, dozing in and out of sleep, especially with that pleasant scent floating around that seemed to permeate the air, plus the sound of the shower running.

“What did you see?”

If he couldn’t talk to Colby, he couldn’t talk to anybody.

Sam sighed and forced his eyes open. “A dark shape. A misty cloud, but also a person. It stared at me, not angrily but not warm or friendly either. I don’t know, Colby, I can’t really describe it. All I know is that this place feels...”

“Feels...”

He hated to say it, but for the first time it felt legit, not like a few of the hotels with reputations they’d visited, not like the Mission Inn Hotel & Spa in Riverside, California, where weird things happened but no concrete evidence of the paranormal ever came up.
This time, the location actually felt...“haunted.”
Colby watched Sam as he stared at the ceiling. A dark cloud, a dark shape… That sounded so much like their friend Corey back home. As a cloud of clean shower steam billowed around him, he hesitated to ask, because anytime Sam hesitated to discuss weird happenings, Colby knew it was something possibly, truly paranormal.

He lowered his voice to make sure Alex and Nate couldn’t hear him. “Do you think it’s the Shadow Man?”

For years, their friend, Corey Scherer, had been haunted by an ominous presence that seemed to follow him and his little brother wherever they went. It was a dark, humanoid shape that appeared whenever they gave into their fears or talked about it. The Shadow Man appeared in Corey’s dreams, as well as his waking life. It freaked out Corey so badly, he rarely ever mentioned it for fear of conjuring it to life.

“I don’t know.” Sam stared at the ceiling fan. “Corey’s not even here, so how could it be?”

“Maybe he followed us here. Maybe he got attached to us somehow.” It was all Colby could think, assuming whatever Sam had seen was even real to begin with. He definitely couldn’t be skeptical, considering he’d seen ghostly visions today himself.

“That better not be the case.”

“Do you think we should do an investigation?”

“Where, here?”

“Yeah.”

“We don’t have any equipment.”

“No, I mean in the future.”
Sam shrugged, rubbing his tired face. “Honestly? I don’t know if I ever want to come back. This house and the location are stunning, but Trey and Georgia give me eerie vibes. Kauai, yes—Belle Estate, not so much.”

“I hear you. And this house doesn’t have a reputation, that I know of, so it’s not like we could say we’re investigating a famous location,” Colby reasoned. “Although, the volleyball player I sat next to during dinner last night, Hannah, did mention a witch lived here. At first, I thought she was kidding, but now I wonder.”

“I doubt it. They probably call her that because she’s an oddball, because she lives way out here in the middle of nowhere. It’s the equivalent of the proverbial old man living in a dilapidated house at the top of a creepy hill. It’s just a story people want to believe.” Sam yawned, not nearly as interested in the topic as Colby was.

“True,” Colby said. “We’ve met her. We know she’s actually nice. A little pushy, but nice.”

“Yeah, I don’t know about her, but there’s definitely weird energy in this house,” Sam said. “We’ll ask the locals about the witch thing when we get back.”

Colby nodded. “It’d be cool to find out we spent the day in a real witch’s house.”

“We’ve been in a real witch’s house. Remember?”

“I meant…” Colby had meant an old witch’s house, like in Grimm’s fairy tales, but he didn’t want to sound prejudiced against Georgia again, especially after she and Trey had been nice enough to invite them here. “Never mind. Hopping in the shower, then we need to go.”

“We do.” Sam turned onto his side and hugged a pillow. “We absolutely do.”

Sam was acting strange. Usually, he’d be the first one to make sure everybody was on time. He was the schedule guy, the responsible one on any trip, but even he didn’t seem in a hurry to make it back
to the convoy.

Colby got it—he was exhausted, too. Hours of snorkeling after hours of traveling had left them both zapped of energy. After his shower, he felt a little more invigorated and got all his stuff ready to go. “Sam, you gonna shower?”

Sam was out cold.

Someone tapped on the connecting door to the room, and a second later, it popped open. Alex loomed there, holding a large photo frame. “Dude, wanna see something cool Nate and I found? Check this out.” Alex flipped the photo around to show Colby a somewhat faded satellite image of the island of Kauai.

“Wow. How totally amazing. An aerial photo. Guys, we really need to get on the road.” Colby said, but Nate joined them in the mini hallway to hear Alex present his findings.

“Tell that to Sam.” Alex glanced over Colby at Sam passed out on the bed, hugging a pillow. “Anyway, do you know what this is?”

“I just said, it’s a picture,” Colby replied.

“It’s more than that.” Alex raised his eyebrows. “Look at the lines.”

Colby looked harder and saw the image was, in fact, covered in drawn lines that intersected in several places, as if someone had taken to the pic with a ruler and ballpoint pen. “What do the lines mean?”

“I don’t know, but notice the shape they make?”

Colby wasn’t sure what Alex was getting at, but he was trying hard to humor him considering he went along with everything and rarely got his way. “All I see is a star over the North Shore.” Suddenly, goose bumps broke out over Colby’s arms. “Bro, what?”

“Exactly.” Excitement lit up Alex’s eyes. “It’s a fucking pentagram.”

“It means evil!” Nate practically shouted over Alex’s shoulder.
“Shh!” Both Colby and Alex quieted Nate.

“No, bro, no,” Colby said. “We’ve talked to real witches before, and they always tell us is that a pentagram does not mean evil. It just means fire, air, water, earth, and something else…spirit.” He always thought it was a pretty cool explanation that everyone should hear, so they wouldn’t go around thinking witches were all about Satan and stuff.

“Still, it’s pretty fascinating, right?” Alex was giddier than a five-year-old.

“And check this out…” Nate held up the Ryder Camp book.

Colby glanced at the door to the main hall, hoping Georgia or Trey wouldn’t suddenly decide to come in. “Dude, put that back. That goes on the shelf by their room. Don’t touch anything else.”

“Hey, she told us to check it out when we had a minute. And here in the middle of the book, which is mostly monochromatic because of the old photos…” Nate flipped to the center pages. “Monochromatic meaning—”

“I swear to God if you tell me what monochromatic means, I’m going to leave you here, in this house, all alone…with Trey.” Colby raised one eyebrow at Nate.

“Okay, okay…relax.” Nate held up a hand. “So, there’s a set of colored pages here in the middle, and look…boom—same satellite image.”

“Same satellite image,” Alex repeated with a nod.

Colby smacked his brain with both hands like his mind had been blown. “Wow, it’s the same Kauai photo in a book about Kauai. What are the chances?”

“What’s happening?” Sam mumbled in his sleep.

Colby looked at him, getting comfier against the pillow. “Go back to sleep, Velma. Scooby and Shaggy think they’ve stumbled onto something all because they see the same photo of Kauai in this
“hallway as in the Ryder Camp book.”

“That’s cool,” Sam muttered into the pillow.

“All right, Fred—or are you Daphne? What about this?” Nate pressed his fingertip into the book’s pages and read aloud. “Burt Ryder, property owner, actor, and amateur parapsychologist, chose this land on the North Shore specifically for its location in the center of the ley lines, believing it to be a prime spot for paranormal activity.”

“Look again at the photo.” Alex tapped the center of the star. “What’s that, Colby? What’s that right there?”

The center of the pentagram formed a five-sided polygon, and in the dead center of the polygon was a spot a few miles east of Ke’e Beach where they’d snorkeled today—the very area where...

“Belle Estate,” Colby muttered.

“That’s right, bruvah!” Nate laughed.

“They built the house in the center of the pentagram.” Colby couldn’t stop staring at the dense jungle area where this house currently stood. All he could hear was Hannah’s voice in his head... is that the witch’s house?

Alex nodded. “Exactly. There’s nothing built in this photo yet, but I wouldn’t be surprised if they built this house right on that very spot because of this so-called energetic field. And just like that—boom—I’ve earned my degree in Kickass Deductive Reasoning.”

“We’re standing in the middle of that star.” Colby pointed into the book. A heavy sense of dread fell over him. He thought about the vision Sam had today while standing in the kitchen, the way he’d gotten sick, and how even Colby’s visions on the beach had been so very near this spot.

Nate smacked the book closed. “The question is why would they want that? What’s so great about building a house where there’s paranormal activity? Most people would run screaming from that.”
The three of them puzzled over the question. Colby could only surmise one reason why anybody would want to build their house in an area connected to paranormal activity, and that was because they wanted the energy—they wanted the hauntings.

“Okay, and finally, there’s this,” Nate said, dipping into the guest room again and bringing back an old wooden cigar box with the island of Cuba etched onto the top.

“What did you do, raid the room while I showered?” Colby asked.

“Hell, yeah. Look.” Nate opened the box to show Colby. Inside was a mess of different things—a gold necklace and cross, random photos of Trey as a kid with what looked like his mom, siblings, dad, and one kid they recognized as Donny, Nate’s roommate, when he was younger.

Something in Colby’s heart ached. “Is this his stuff?”

“Yeah, man, his life, thrown into a cigar box. Discarded.”

“Guys, that’s sad,” Alex said.

“It is,” Colby agreed.

All day, Colby could only remember the annoying Trey, the one who’d thought he’d had life all figured out and had admonished Colby for his life choices. But now, seeing his personal belongings hidden away in a cigar box instead of proudly displayed like Georgia’s silver-framed memories all over the house made him feel sorry for the guy. His childhood, his family, even his faith, closed in an old box like it didn’t matter. Like he’d given up his whole life, all for Georgia.

“Put that back where you found it,” Colby told Nate. “We definitely have to leave.”

From the bed, Sam began stirring in his sleep, pushing and punching at the pillow. “Get away from me,” he muttered.

“Sam...”
“Get away! I won’t go with you...stop!”

“Sam!” Colby ran over and tried to grab his flailing arm. “Sam, stop. You’re dreaming.”

“Leave me alone!”

“Sam!”

Sam shoved away Colby’s hands, but the moment Colby ripped the pillow out of his grasp, Sam sat up, gasping for air, mouth open. “What happened?”

“You were dreaming,” Colby replied.

“Was Kat beating you up again?” Alex snarked.

“Bro, seriously?” Colby shot Alex a look.

Sam covered his face with the pillow. “It was the same dark cloud I told you about before.”

“What dark cloud?” Nate asked, prying the pillow away.

“Nothing. Don’t worry about it.” Colby’s heart pounded from Sam’s strange dream. “Come on, get your things. No time to shower. Sorry, Sam.”

“But we don’t have to leave for another ten minutes,” Alex said. “I bet if we keep looking at stuff, we’ll find more answers.”

“I don’t want answers,” Colby replied.

“Can’t we leave in the morning? The opportunity to stay in this house is a once in a lifetime experience.”

“Alex, feel free to stay, but we have to go,” Colby asserted. “Nate has a flight to catch tomorrow, or don’t you remember? We did our duty, we visited Trey, snorkeled the Na Pali Coast, had a great time. It’s aloha time.”

With a sad look of defeat, Alex hung the photo back in its place in
the mini hallway, while Nate put back the book, and all four began grabbing their stuff. It’d been a memorable time, and Colby felt bad telling his friends no, but he couldn’t stay in this house another minute.

As they arrived downstairs, they found Georgia whirling across the floor in her flowy dress, lighting more candles, putting music on. The front of her yellow dress looked like she’d been cooking in the kitchen with its faded stain marks. The mansion had taken on a more mystical aura now that it was evening. Through the glass walls facing the lagoon, Colby could see the sun going down in the distance, lending a tangerine glow to the white inner walls of the house.

“Ah, there you are. I’m making dinner. You should eat before your long trip back. It’s not too late.” Georgia smiled and tapped Alex’s cheek as she floated by him. “The beds in your rooms are very comfy: Pirelli, imported from Italy!”

“I’m sure they’re great,” Colby said.

“Actually, it was pretty awesome,” Sam added.

Georgia pursed her lips, mocking hurt feelings. “There’s more to the house we haven’t shown you,” she said mysteriously. “The cellar, the piano in the study, the passageways...so many interesting things our architect added for us.”

“Secret passageway?” Alex’s eyes lit up, as he raised a hand. “I’m in!”

“Alex—” Colby shook his head at him. “Thank you for everything, but we’re leaving now. Now,” Colby insisted, eyeing Nate and Alex. Sam was already halfway out the door with his bag, aimlessly wandering the driveway.

“Oh, boo, hiss,” Georgia played like she was hurt, but Colby did sense real disappointment, and sure, under normal circumstances, he would’ve liked to see what else the house had to offer. But not today. Trey came out of the kitchen with his wallet and the minivan’s keys. “Take our guests home safely, baby, and be sure to
drive carefully on the way back.”

“I will, sweetheart,” Trey replied, curling Georgia into his embrace and giving her another deep kiss that made Colby feel like he was in a bizarre old movie.

“Bye, thank you so much for your hospitality!” Nate said, as they all made their way through the foyer into the driveway.

Outside, Colby felt like he could breathe again. The salty ocean air and the puffs of mist spraying off the property’s small waterfall onto his skin helped to awaken him from what felt like a day-long trance. He tripped over a short grassy knoll by the water fountain, stubbing his toe.

“Watch the grate. You guys really are missing so many cool things we never got to show you,” Trey said, opening the van doors. “You’ll have to come back.”

Don’t hold your breath, Colby thought. “We definitely will!” he said instead. Once settled inside the van, he sat back and let out a huge breath. He and Sam looked at each other without a word.

Nate climbed into the passenger seat, while Alex staggered into the back, as Trey slipped in the key and turned on the Porsche van. Its usually deep, rumbling engine whined and sputtered a few times. Colby closed his eyes and hoped for the best.

What would happen if the van didn’t start? If they got stuck here? He couldn’t imagine having to sleep at the Belle Estate after the day they’d just had. After Sam’s nap nightmare, his black cloud vision, Colby’s own hallucinations on the beach, and the weird information Alex and Nate discovered inside the house, he couldn’t get away from the Belle Estate fast enough.

“Hold on, boys. Give me a minute.” Trey slipped out of the car and headed to the back where the engine was on the Porsche.

Sam leaned his head against the headrest and stared at the leathery ceiling. Colby turned halfway around to watch. Trey lifted the hood, blocking Colby’s view through the window, but he could hear
Trey and Nate talking.

“It’s old,” Trey explained. “We’ve been meaning to take it in, but they’re so strict about who can drive on the roads around here.”

“Yeah, I noticed,” Nate was saying. “It’s a miracle you guys get anywhere with residents like that woman who hounded you today. Does that happen a lot?”

“All the time.” Trey tinkered with something in the engine. “They’re just trying to protect the neighborhood.”

*Protect it from what? Colby wondered. It’s the residents who are odd.*

While the guys worked to get the engine going, Colby’s nerves buzzed. What would happen if they couldn’t get the car started? Would they have to stay the night in this weird-ass house? He hoped that wouldn’t be the case.

He stared out the back windshield at the grand Belle Estate, committing it to memory one last time, when Georgia stepped onto the porch—barefoot, maxi dress swinging back and forth, long, golden hair draped over her shoulder. She waved at him, handkerchief in hand, a strange, dreamlike quality exuding from her.

*Like a New Age hippie, Colby thought, then shuddered. Like a witch.*
As the minivan’s engine rumbled to life, Sam sighed and silently thanked the universe. That was too damn close.

Trey and Nate slid into the front seats. The van finally pulled out of the driveway, just as the twilight sky was deepening to a dark purple. Sam thought he might fall asleep again, he was so physically and emotionally drained. He took one last look at Kauai’s famed Belle Estate through the back windshield.

*Goodbye, house. You were the weirdest house I’ve ever visited.*

Then, he looked at Colby, who appeared just as relieved as he did, and leaned his head against the window. Finally, they were leaving.

They reached Hanalei before the scuba shop closed and managed to see the glowing orange sun descending toward the waves. Saying goodbye to Trey in the parking lot felt like cutting a cord that had been strangling Sam’s neck. Visiting the North Shore had been a bizarre and unsettling experience, to say the least, but when they got home after vacation was over, he was going to suggest to Colby that they make a video about it.


How could one house be so peaceful, idyllic, and strange at the same time? Sam had never experienced so many disturbing occurrences in one day like that. Whenever they did séances at famously haunted spots, he usually felt like they deserved whatever happened to them, just for messing with the spirit world. Like when all five candles flickered at the Millennium Biltmore Hotel in L.A. But today, all his experiences had come without provocation.

Sam watched as Trey accepted Nate’s handshake before pulling him
in for an awkward hug that lingered on a few seconds too long. Nate allowed it.

“I do miss spending time with people my age,” Trey said. There was something in his voice that sounded real, for once. Like actual sadness and regrets, not the monotone notes of a robot. “Truly, it was a pleasure having you here.”

Nate remained in Trey’s clutches, helplessly looking over Trey’s shoulder at Colby, Alex, and Sam. Finally, he relaxed in the hug and patted Trey’s back. “No, man, thank you for inviting us. This was really fun.”

Damn. Colby was right—Trey was lonely. He missed life with friends his age, even wished he could come back to L.A. with them. It certainly seemed that way. Finally, after several long seconds, Trey pulled away from Nate, and for a split second, Sam thought he saw a glistening in Trey’s eyes.

“We’ll stay in touch!” Nate called, as Trey slowly walked back into the van and drove out of the parking lot. For a moment, it seemed the guy would change his mind and turn back, as the van sat at the stop sign with the brakes on. Finally, he turned onto the road and disappeared toward the setting sun.

Colby let go a huge sigh and turned to assess the snorkeling gear heaped on the ground. “You guys start the car. I’ll return the stuff inside.”

“I’ll go with you.” Sam helped him pick up the gear, as Nate and Alex climbed into the car, started the engine, and collapsed.

At 6:28 PM, the bell on the scuba shop door chimed. Sam and Colby entered, carrying four sets of damp snorkeling equipment. “Just in time,” Colby said, getting in line behind two other people.

“Only because you hurried us the hell out of there. I could’ve slept through the night.” Sam’s exhaustion at the Belle Estate had been so fierce, he’d felt as though the bed had grown tentacles and pulled him under. Until Colby had woken him from the nightmare.
“What were you dreaming about anyway?” Colby asked.

“Dude.” He shook his head. “That was messed up. I dreamed I was there in bed, while you guys stood there talking about…whatever you were talking about…when the same dark shape I told you about came into the room.”

“The Shadow Man?”

“I don’t know if it’s the Shadow Man,” Sam said. “But it floated in, this gray mist, and wanted me to follow it.”

“Follow it where?”

Sam shrugged. “It showed me these hallways, like coming from different directions, and a subterranean labyrinth. I didn’t really study it, because in the dream I kept pulling away from it. I could see the guest bedroom and kept trying to get back to it. I wondered why you guys couldn’t see the thing, standing so close to it as you were.”

“We weren’t aware of it,” Colby said.

“I know. It was happening in my dream.”

Colby stepped closer to the counter, as the shop employee counted the number of items they were returning. “Dude, we were looking at this satellite image while you were sleeping. I’ll tell you about it in the car,” he whispered.

There was a lot they couldn’t talk about after having left the mansion, because of Trey being in the van with them, but Sam was sure they’d quickly unleash their worries on their drive back.

Finally, they reached the counter where a different woman, older with a weathered look, smiled at them. “Howzit. Returning?”

“Yes. Here’s the receipt.” Colby handed her the ticket stub.

She verified the equipment. “Did you have a nice time?”

“Yeah, real nice,” Sam answered, feeling guilty that this woman was
working when she could be enjoying time off, like them.

“Where did you dive? Hanalei Bay?” The wrinkles around her eyes gave her the maternal aura of a sweet grandmother.

“No, we actually went to…” Sam hesitated. The last time he’d told the shopkeeper they were going to the Na Pali Coast, they got an inquisition. But this lady seemed friendlier. “Ke’e Beach?”

Her forehead crinkled with interest. “Oh? I thought it was closed.”

“It is, but we know the locals. They invited us up.”

The old woman’s expression dampened, giving course to a faraway expression. “I lost my grandnephew ’round those parts last year. He went surfing right before the rains began and the flood hit,” she explained wistfully, then went back to checking her rental book. “He never returned.”

“Oh, man. I’m so sorry.” Sam’s heart ached at the thought of losing a family member like that. He’d never experienced any treacherous weather phenomena other than the occasional tornado here or there.

“They should keep the beaches closed,” she said.

“They are. We just had special permission, I guess. How old was your nephew?”

“Pauahi was…nineteen? Twenty? Yes, twenty,” she replied, pivoting to throw the masks onto the counter, where the same man as earlier in the day received them and rinsed them off inside a big plastic tub. For all Sam knew, the man had been working since the moment they arrived this morning until now while he and his friends had been swimming at the North Shore without a care. The way many people labored more than he did was not lost on Sam.

“We’re so sorry to hear that,” Colby said.

“Thank you. Pauahi loved to surf. The more dangerous the locale, the better. I hope he’s happily surfing in the afterlife,” the woman said sadly. “You boys have a good night. Aloha.”
“Mahalo. Aloha,” Sam replied and turned to leave.

Returning to the car, he slipped into the driver’s seat. Colby climbed in, and they both sat staring across the road at the pink skies over Hanalei Bay. The melancholy fog surrounding them was almost palpable.

“Everything okay?” Nate clapped a hand on his shoulder from the back seat.

Sam blinked. “Colby and I just heard about a kid who disappeared in the North Shore. He went surfing before the storm and never returned. I feel sad for his family.” He thought about it a moment more, how your life could change in an instant, nature could claim you, and you’d be done with this world. On to the next.

He put the car in reverse.

“Wow. Seems like the residents have had it pretty hard in the year since the flood,” Nate said, checking the left-hand side of the traffic. “You’re clear. It’s no wonder Trey and Georgia came across a little desperate for visitors.”

“A little?” Colby’s eyes flared. “It was scary how desperate they were, not gonna lie.”

“Yeah. And did you see the way he hugged me before he left?” Nate asked.

“Yes, dude, I felt bad for the guy,” Sam said. “He seemed like he wanted to come with us. When he paused at the stop sign, I wondered if maybe he didn’t want to drive back home, or to Georgia, rather. I felt like he wanted to hang with us longer.”

Colby held on to the window frame, his hair whipping in the wind. “After seeing his things stuffed into a box in the guest room, I wouldn’t blame him. That was pretty sad.”

“It was,” Nate said.

“What box?” Sam looked at him.
“Oh. Dude, you were sleeping. We found things from his old life just stuffed into a little box like none of it mattered. It made me flip a switch, like now I actually feel guilty that we’re leaving him behind. That hug he gave Nate almost seemed like a cry for help.”

Colby’s assessment lingered in the air for a minute.

“I’m sure he’s fine,” Nate broke the silence.

“Yeah, they’re just an odd pair,” Sam agreed.

“Though it does seem like he’s only around for Georgia’s needs,” Colby said. “Fixing her screenplays, making her breakfast, doing her bidding… Do you think he’s sticking around in the hopes she’ll put him in her will or something?”

“I was thinking the same,” Sam said. “Sugar mama.”

“You guys think so?” Nate asked. “What if they’re just happy together? I mean, it’s hard for us to conceive of it, but it’s a possibility.”

Sam took in the gorgeous, blending hues of the darkening sky, as they headed east back to Koloa, thinking about Trey and Georgia’s relationship dynamic. “Maybe. All I know is I feel massively relieved that we’re out of there.”

“Bro, you’re not kidding.” Colby rested his head on his fist.

Nate laughed to himself. “By the end, I was starting to feel uncomfortable. You with the weird dream, Georgia inviting us to dinner, then to the wine cellar…”

“I know, right? What was that all about?” Sam said. “Didn’t you get the sense that underneath all that nature, art, and architecture, something was not quite right?”

“Like the Mardi Gras mask over the Buddha head?” Nate scoffed. “I keep thinking about that. Man, all I can say is that that was an experience.” He sat back, the glow of his phone lighting up his face in the back seat.
“It was,” Colby muttered.

“It was.” Sam waited for Alex to chime in. He’d been quiet for so long, Sam wondered if he was upset that they hadn’t stayed overnight at the Belle Estate. “Alex?”

“Alex is out,” Nate said.

Sam nodded and kept his eyes focused on the road, as the boys fell into silence. Masquerade mask over the Buddha, Sam thought. That was the perfect example of the Belle Estate—well-meaning, beautiful, mystical. But underneath it all, a persistent energy of desperation pervaded. Good thing they were gone.

Like a beacon in the dark, the Airbnb welcomed them home. Walking in, Sam could feel right away the difference between the two houses they’d been inside today. The cabana’s energy felt positive, comforting. He threw their fast-food garbage into the trash and keys on the countertop. Then, his ass on the couch.

“That was a day,” he sighed. Colby, Nate, and Alex lumbered in and shut the door, while Sam messaged Katrina to let her know they were back in one piece, adding a few hearts in case she was mad for not texting her all day. He felt too tired to conduct any fun games or make videos of them goofing off inside the cabana.

Nate rummaged through Colby’s bag.

“What are you looking for?” Sam asked.

“His butt plug.” Alex threw himself onto a lounge chair. “He misses it.”

They broke into lighthearted laughter, a good feeling after being on edge all day. Sam had missed Alex’s random one-liners during the drive and was glad to see him in a better mood. He’d been the most reluctant to leave the Belle Estate. For a minute there, Sam had actually been concerned he might want to stay.

“ Seriously, though, have you guys seen my bag?” Nate asked.
“Which one?”

“The small one I keep inside Colby’s, so the two are together. Less stuff to carry. It has my iPad,” Nate explained, searching through Sam’s bag as well.

“The one you’ve been doing all your writing assignments on?” Alex asked.

“Yes. I can’t fail my writing class. As it is, I secured special permission from the professor to make up the work, just so I could come on the trip. Can you guys help me find it?”

Lying on the floor, Colby picked up a flip-flop and threw it up in the air, catching it and throwing it up again each time. “Dude, why would you bring your iPad on a snorkeling trip?”

“I brought it to do work in the car. I’m sorry I have school.” Nate rummaged through the bags dumped by the front door.

Sam didn’t care for Nate’s insinuation that he had more to worry about, all because he took classes. “Bro…” Sam heaved himself off the couch and started checking every bag for Nate’s small bag. They better find it, or this could be a problem.

“Where’s my phone?” Alex was suddenly up on his feet as well, checking his pockets and the edges of the chair cushion.

“Are you serious?” Sam gaped at him.

“Yes, I’m serious.”

“You’ve gotta be kidding me.” Colby jumped to his feet, flipping cushions on each couch and chair. “Both of you left something?”

“I think it’s still in the van,” Alex said, slapping his pockets.

“What? How can you leave your phone? Your phone is literally attached to you at all times!” Colby’s voice grew louder.

“I haven’t been checking my phone all day, Colby. The point of today was literally to forget about our phones and enjoy the beach,”
Alex retorted. “Hold on, I remember having it before we left. I used it to Google ley lines when we showed you the book.”

“Then it’s either in the guest room still or in the van or in the car.” Colby paced in circles and double-checked places he’d already checked.

“Let me check the car.” Alex headed outside, as the rest of them followed and searched the rental car inside-out for both Nate’s bag containing his iPad and Alex’s phone. They looked under the seats, in the trunk, in the door pockets, even on the gravel driveway, in case they’d dropped the items on the ground when they arrived.

Nothing turned up. Sam suppressed the urge to show how upset he was. How hard was it to check all your most important stuff before you left on a car trip? “Nate, text Trey, ask him if they’ve seen Alex’s phone or your bag. We might have to go back and get it.”

“We can’t,” Colby said. “The convoy is closed for the rest of the day.”

“Then we’ll have to get it tomorrow,” Sam said.

Colby fumed. “We don’t have to. Neither the phone nor the iPad is indispensable. Indispensable,” he said, turning to Nate, “means so important that we have to drive three hours to get it.”

“You know what? Come on, Colby. It’s my graduation on the line versus a few hours on a beautiful drive. It’s not the end of the world, bro.” Nate shook his head.

“Whoa, guys,” Sam jumped in between them. They never argued like this, and it worried him. Clearly, the long day had gotten to them. “Enough. This isn’t helping.”

Nate rubbed his temples. “All right, look. I don’t need it for my flight. I’ll just need it when I get home. Maybe Trey can ship it if he finds it.”

“Fine. We’ll wait to hear what he says. Let’s go back inside,” Colby said.
“I still need my phone, though,” Alex murmured. “It has all my flight info.”

Colby crossed his arms. “We all have the same boarding pass codes on our phones. You don’t technically need it. Maybe Trey can ship it to you the same way he can ship Nate his iPad.”

“You’re really doing anything to avoid going back to that house, aren’t you?” Alex glanced at Colby once before pacing in circles around the car.

“Huh? And you’re really doing anything to make sure we go back,” Colby muttered under his breath. He kicked at the gravel, sending some pebbles flying.

“Colby…” Sam said.

Out of the darkness appeared a short, young woman walking her little dog in the middle of the street. She directed a glare at them. “Um, quiet, please. This is a residential street.”

“This is how much I care.” Colby flipped her the middle finger, but thankfully, the woman, wearing AirPods, didn’t see or hear him.

Sam hated to see his friends like this.

“We should’ve double-checked everything before we left,” Alex said.

“Okay, but we didn’t,” Sam replied. “It’s been a tiring day.”

“If we hadn’t left in such a hurry…” Nate balked.

Colby looked at him. “The convoy’s time window is nobody’s fault, Nate.”

“I know, Colby. I’m just stressed, okay?”

“Sorry, bro,” Colby replied with a sigh.

“Is Trey texting back?” Sam asked.
“No,” Nate said. “Remember, their signal there sucked.”

“All right, listen, it’ll turn up eventually,” he said. What a weird day. “Look, I think maybe we’re just tired and not thinking straight. They’ll probably find it and drive our way to bring it back. It’s not like they have anything else to do, and they’re super hospitable.”

“I don’t know…they do have cooking at 9:08, piano playing at 10:08, scriptwriting at 11:08…” Colby mocked. “And they have to break their best-average record on how happy they can make each other. Don’t forget that. It’s not like they have a helicopter tour scheduled for tomorrow.” Colby disappeared into the house.

That’s right. They had a tour of the island tomorrow that they couldn’t miss. “Let’s all go inside and chill,” Sam suggested. “There’s nothing more we can do for tonight anyway, except keep texting Trey.”

Nate and Alex slumped into the house without protest. Sam was glad that, at the very least, they hadn’t blown up at each other too badly. Yes, it was a messed-up situation that needed solving, but it wasn’t the end of the world. It wasn’t like they’d lost a friend surfing off the Na Pali Coast or had to work all day in a snorkel shop while privileged kids got to travel. This was a first-world problem, and they’d solve it, like they solved everything.

But it’d have to be tomorrow. For tonight, they were screwed.
Lihue Airport. Nate gave Colby Trey’s contact information. “In case you need it. You may hear from him before I do.” He fired off texts containing phone, address, even email. “Keep trying. He’ll probably reply while I’m in flight.”

“What if he doesn’t find your iPad?” Alex asked.

Nate shrugged with frustration. “I’ll have to start all over. A week of work for nothing. Hopefully, he’ll bring it out to you. Thanks for bringing me along on your trip.” He jumped toward Sam for a hug.

“We had a great time, brother. Safe flight.”

“Thanks, I did, too.” Nate moved back to Alex for a hug. “My snorkeling partner, enjoy the rest of your stay.” He patted Alex, then to Colby, lowered his head. “Sorry things got tense last night.”

“No worries. Sorry I sort of yelled at you.” Colby had been feeling down about the way he’d handled last night’s crisis and wished they didn’t have to end Nate’s part of the trip on such a damper.

Today was their helicopter tour, which would’ve been a nice way to bond with Nate again. Instead, they dropped him off at the airport four hours early so they could make their helicopter ride. Colby watched Nate head toward a Starbucks down the outer terminal instead of to security. Without his iPad, he couldn’t even get work done for school and would probably just sit there drinking lattes until his flight was called.

Colby felt a bit guilty being as excited as he was for this adventure. When they arrived at the airfield, he was surprised to see that they’d be riding in an open-door four-seater and that the flight would take approximately ninety minutes. Their pilot and tour guide, Manuel, was a tall, well-built local with gray hair and leathery, dark skin.

After greeting them and taking roll call, he handed them each a pair
of noise-cancelling headphones. “Here you go. They have built-in microphones, so we’ll be able to communicate. Anybody here get airsick?”

“Nope.” Colby looked at Sam and Alex. Thumbs-up for everybody.

“Then we’re good to go. Seat belts and video cameras on,” Manuel said, climbing into the pilot’s seat, checking all his buttons and gauges.

Colby’s insides shivered with glee. He was sad Nate couldn’t be here for this, but they couldn’t book a tour any earlier. He’d always wanted to ride in a helicopter and was surprised by how comfortable the seats were.

“We’ll be traveling the island clockwise,” Manuel explained. “You’ll get a bird’s eye view of the Na Pali Coast, Waimea Canyon, Hanapepe Valley, and the like. Where you boys from?”


“L.A., huh? I lived there once. Tried to make it out there as an actor. I look like one, no?” He gave them the sharp angle of his jawline, along with a sparkling smile. Colby laughed. He liked goodhearted dad types. “Never succeeded, though. Guess I was too good at flying. You boys actors? You have that actor look.”

“Sort of,” Sam answered. “We have a YouTube Channel where we do videos about ghost investigations, but in a silly way, with our friends.”

“Ah, the YouTube,” Manuel said, turning on the rotary blades of the helicopter. “You got a few followers?”

“Yeah, a few,” Sam chuckled. “We’ve been able to do this as our main job for a few years, which is amazing.”

“That is very impressive. I knew you had that aura about you. I said to myself, ‘These boys are good-looking ladykillers. They probably do well out in L.A.’”

Colby laughed into his microphone and looked out the open side.
He knew Manuel was probably just looking for a good tip, but he was grateful they’d gotten a nice pilot and not a boring one.

“Okay, all strapped in? This is my first unsupervised flight. What do you call this flight control handle thingy again?” Manuel seemed uncertain with the controls.

Colby nearly leapt from his side of the helicopter. “Wait, for real?”

“Colby, he’s kidding,” Alex laughed.

Manuel chuckled. “Gets them every time. All right, let’s go.”

He activated something that emanated a high-pitched whine from the back of the copter. Colby watched as Manuel threw a turbine starter switch, waited for the indicator to light up, then a loud roar filled the cabin, giving them all a startle. Flying in a helicopter was far from peaceful. Outside the cabin, the landing pad began to flicker with the rapid spinning shadows of the rotor blades.

Manuel spoke to the control tower. “CE-RAP Tower, helicopter 1071GT, request traffic for tour departing Kauai.”

“1071GT, skies clear for takeoff, closest traffic outbound United 1412, 7K Level 5, contact local ATC on frequency 124.7.” The controller spoke to Manuel, and Manuel responded then switched his radio to a new frequency. He twisted the throttle to full, then lifted on the collective, hard. Colby knew what he was doing because he’d watched plenty of helicopter tour videos the night before to settle his brain after searching for the lost devices.

“And away, we go.” Manuel lurched the aircraft upward, shoving them into their seats, as the landing pad dropped away.

“Dude, this is so cool.” Colby could barely contain his smile, not that he had any reason to. His stomach did a few flips, as he got used to the sensation of flight.

Manuel pointed out the northwest part of Waimea Canyon, where the T. rex in Jurassic Park breaks through the gate, Hanapepe Valley, Manawaiopuna Falls, the Puu Ka Ele Reservoir, and the Valley Plantation House, featured as the Visitor Center in the
When they reached the Na Pali Coast twenty minutes later, Colby’s heart beat in time with the rotary blades. You could never be prepared to see its inconceivable jewel-toned beauty, those sharp, jagged peaks reaching for the bright blue sky, that fuzzy, deep-emerald dusting on all the mountain faces. Yesterday, they’d seen the northern edge of the Na Pali coastline from Ke’e Beach, but here they were flying, gliding past it from 16,000 feet in the air, a completely different perspective.

“Damn, that’s beautiful,” Colby uttered.

Sam snapped photos, but Colby just took in the moment, that awe-inspiring sense of now, the present, something that photos couldn’t give him later. He couldn’t help but feel somewhat insignificant, a tiny speck of carbon that nobody could see from a mile off the ground, an atom floating in the Earth’s atmosphere.

“Looks different than yesterday, doesn’t it?” Sam said.

“Different. But just as gorgeous,” Colby replied.

“You were here yesterday?” Manuel asked.

Apparently, Sam forgot that everyone could hear what he was saying, thanks to the communication headphones.

Colby decided to take this one. “Yeah, we stayed at that big estate in the middle of the mountains, on the North Shore, the one you can see right after Ke’e Beach,” Colby explained.

“Ah, yes? That area west of Hanalei is forbidden because of the flood, so it’s unique that you got to experience that,” Manuel told them, flying closer to the shoreline. “For years, the state’s been trying to buy all that land back, like they did with Ryder Camp. Do you know about Ryder Camp?”

“A little,” Colby said. “We heard it was where a group of hippies lived.”

“Ten years,” Manuel said. “But then the state came, told them they
were buying back the property, and were met with resistance. So they burned the tree houses to the ground. But that woman, the one who lives there...she always declines to sell her land for some reason."

Colby looked at Sam and Alex. Manuel seemed to have some good dirt on the Belle Estate. “Do you know the lady who lives there?”

“Personally, I do not. But I know folks who knew workmen who went there for renovations who never made it back.”

“For real?” Colby’s jaw dropped.

Manuel laughed that robust, good-natured jokester laugh of his. “I don’t know if it's true. That's what they tell me. Makes for a good story, huh?”

“Yeah, for sure,” Colby said. Manuel sounded like Hannah, the volleyball player, who also couldn’t confirm or deny the truth about Georgia.

“So, you got to meet Georgia Belle Rollins,” the pilot laughed. “The residents here call her a witch. I don’t know if that’s true either.” He shook his head like the idea of a witch living on an isolated part of Kauai was hilariously far-fetched but entirely plausible. “The people of this island...they can be a little suspicious of anybody.”

“We’ve seen that,” Colby said.

“It’s in our blood to be cautious of outsiders, and to many, she’s still an outsider, even though she’s lived here forty-fifty years. We consider outsiders anyone born outside the islands. Anyone non-native.”

“That makes sense, I guess,” Sam said.

“My neighbors’ son, Kalani, he disappeared around here one day.” He pointed to the shoreline where the waves rippled and broke with their white crests. “And all anyone can talk about is how he’s rumored to be trapped in the Belle Estate.” Manuel laughed and shook his head.
Colby and Sam looked at each other.

The pilot waved his hand around. Colby preferred if he’d keep it on the controls. “Again, it’s just stuff people say. I knew that kid well. He was dying to leave Hawaii to get away from his overbearing folks. I bet you he’s living it up in L.A.!” Manuel chuckled.

“We can tell you there was no one living there, except our friend, Trey.” And now that Manuel was telling them about people rumored to disappear at Belle Estate, he wondered if Trey could be one of them. Although Trey seemed to be there willingly.

“She didn’t invite you to the basement, did she?” he laughed again.

This time, Colby, Sam, and Alex all let their mouths drop open so hard, they could’ve knocked the helicopter off balance. “Not a basement but a wine cellar. Why do you ask?” Sam sounded a little nervous.

“No reason. I’m messing with you big-time,” Manuel laughed. “I’m sure she’s a perfectly nice woman. Remember, we island folks love to joke with you tourists. Fun for us, entertaining and memorable for you. Makes you come back and take my tour again, right?”

Colby remembered most of the island folk he’d met so far—the car rental lady, the old man who’d followed them in the car, the snorkel shop family, the road workers who’d given them dirty looks just for being tourists, even that lady, Katie, at the beach. The island folk needed to stop being so cautious of everything and let people enjoy Kauai.

Manuel flew them past Ke’e Beach. There it was—Belle Estate, just down the road. Say hi to Georgia and Trey…hello! Colby gave them a silent wave. “What about you? You’re island folk. What do you say?”

The old pilot waved the question away. “Nah, there’s nothing going on down there. People just gotta create drama, you know? Here on Kauai, we have our urban legends, just like any place you visit.”

“We get it.” Colby actually did understand. It was the same at
places they’d researched and shot for their video series. Over time, the legends and myths of the locale overtook the truth—life was more entertaining that way. He was relieved there was no truth to it.

They circled Wainiha, Hanalei Bay, Kilauea, all the way back to Koloa until the tour was complete. When they landed, Colby was surprised to find that Trey had not once texted them back during that whole ninety minutes. Manuel shut off the engine, and the guys gathered round the helicopter for photos.

“Well, enjoy the rest of your vacation,” the pilot said, even getting in a selfie with the three of them for one of the photos. “Good luck with the YouTube and hope to see you in the movies one day!” He handed Colby his business card and told him to tell all his famous Hollywood friends to look him up whenever they were in Kauai. “Don’t forget to give us five stars on TripAdvisor. Again, my name is Manuel, if you enjoyed your tour, and if you didn’t, my name is Juan.”

They laughed and made sure to give the man a little extra tip, not only for having a fun, great attitude, but for keeping them alive the whole time.

Just as they were getting in the car, ready to drive back to the Airbnb for a break before heading out for the rest of the afternoon, Trey finally texted. Colby scanned the lines before reading them aloud. “He says he’ll meet us at the convoy meeting place at five.” He checked the time. “That’s three hours from now.”

“Did he find my phone?” Alex asked. “Or Nate’s iPad?”

“Why would he meet us unless he found them?” Sam reasoned, but Colby thought it was a legitimate question. “Let’s just go. It takes three hours to get there. It’s a gorgeous day anyway. We get this over with, then we have a great rest of the day, or night, by that time.”

“Fine,” Colby said. He wasn’t happy about going back, but shit happens, and you just had to deal with it.
Nobody worried this time about whether or not they should waste part of their day dealing with Trey again. Colby knew it was important to Alex to get his phone containing all his essential stuff, and Nate would be worried sick if he couldn’t finish his classwork. Colby wanted nothing more for Nate than to see him graduate on time and with the highest GPA possible. Trey just better be on time and not make them wait an hour, like he had yesterday.

When they arrived three hours later at the convoy meeting place across from the snorkel shop, Trey was there waiting. Same old man slacks, different Aloha shirt, same mustache as though he’d traveled back in time. But, lo and behold…no phone or iPad. “Sorry, I couldn’t find it.”

“What?” Colby stammered. “Bro, we drove three hours to meet you.”

“Two and a half, actually,” Alex said from the back seat. “No traffic.”

Colby gave him a flatlined stare. He wished Alex would stop interrupting to fix the score, or defend the crazies. Ever since they’d arrived in Kauai, he’d been sticking up for the other guy. Facing Trey again outside their cars, he continued, “Bro, why would you ask us to meet you, if you didn’t have our missing stuff?”

“Thought I’d take you back to the house so you can check for yourself, since I wasn’t able to find your technological devices. It’s not that far,” Trey said. “Only thirty minutes.”

Thirty more minutes after they’d already spent a good chunk of their day going out of their way to recover missing items felt like forever.

“Colby, can I talk to you a second?” Sam stepped back and hovered near the trunk of the car, while Alex stayed with Trey, telling him all about the helicopter ride.

Colby could already tell he was going to have sensible things to say in order to keep the peace, when all he wanted to do was punch the guy for making them come out here. He felt trapped.
“We don’t need to go to the house,” Colby asserted. “We should ask him to put the stuff in a box and ship it Nate and Alex. We go back to Poipu Beach for dinner. Boom, we’re done.”

“Colby, we’re already here. It really won’t take that long, and it’ll give Alex and Nate peace of mind. Come on, dude.”

“Dude, I’m all about giving our friends peace of mind and going with the flow, but I feel like that guy played us again, just so we’d come back to his house. All because he doesn’t have friends or whatever.”

“Maybe he did,” Sam said in a lower tone.

“What?”

“I said, maybe he did. Colby, I think there’s something going on with this guy. Call me crazy, but I think there’s more he’s not telling us. I didn’t want to say it yesterday in the car with Nate and Alex, but I’m thinking maybe you’re right. Maybe he is brainwashed, especially after the stuff our pilot told us.”

“So you agree with me then that the dude has lost his marbles,” Colby stammered. “I knew it.”

“Yeah. But I know if you or I were trapped in a similar situation, I’d want someone to come back and rescue me. Wouldn’t you?” Sam raised an eyebrow. “Wouldn’t you want someone to pick up on your subtle cries for help? This is Trey’s way of sending out a Bat-signal.”

“Wouldn’t he just tell us he’s in trouble now that Georgia’s not with him?”

“He might not think he is. He might not know how to get out of his situation. We have to give him the benefit of the doubt.”

“Okay, I get that, but do we need to go back to the house? We could invite him out to drinks here in Hanalei Bay, talk to him, get him to open up and tell us what’s going on.”

Although Colby was done hearing what Trey had to say during the party that night, he wasn’t one to ignore a change of heart. He was
all about giving people second chances, especially if they were sincere about needing one.

“He probably wants friends to stay over, hang out at his house and have dinner, or whatever. I don’t know. The point being, let’s just go. Once more. We look for the iPad and phone ourselves—that way, we can say we really searched. If after an hour we don’t find them, we come back. We didn’t have concrete plans for the rest of the day anyway.”

Colby sighed. “And if Trey really is in trouble, we can find out. We help him. We don’t leave him stranded on Kauai.”

“Our conscience can be at peace,” Sam agreed.

“Fine.”

“Fine. Let’s do it.” Sam offered his hand, and Colby clasped with him.

They walked back to Trey and Alex, informing them they’d go check the house themselves. “But if we don’t find it, we’re coming right back. We’re not staying overnight, so make sure Georgia gets that,” Colby told Trey.

“Understood,” Trey replied.

All Colby wanted to do was the right thing, even if it meant facing the island’s rumored “witch” again. Georgia hadn’t been that bad. She hadn’t even been a little bad. It was the ghosts and Sam’s Shadow Man he was worried about.
“How’s everything on the mainland?”

Across the middle seat on the way back to the Belle Estate, Sam swapped glances with Colby. Over the years, they’d perfected this silent communication of who should answer people’s questions first. Probably a lot like twins did.

He was about to reply when Trey added, “Sometimes I miss it.”

Sam looked knowingly at Colby.

“It’s great, man. You’re missing a lot of dope stuff,” Colby replied. “You can drive anywhere, see anyone, have parties, hang out with friends. Not that Hawaii doesn’t have its pros and cons, too. Just saying.”

“True,” Sam said. “I think of Hawaii more as a vacation destination than a place to live.” He was hoping to give Trey some perspective and gauge his responses, not trying to change his mind about where he wanted to live or anything.

“Well, I’m not sure about that. For me, Hawaii has everything any person would ever want,” Trey said convincingly. “But I do miss my family back in Utah.”

“You must be missing friends, for sure,” Sam said, then cautiously added, “your twenties is a time you’ll never get back.”

Trey seemed to grip the steering wheel a little more tightly, keeping his gaze firmly on the road. They were silent for a while, and Sam began to wonder if he’d pissed him off. “I don’t have that many friends back home, if I’m being honest. That’s why living here hasn’t been as hard for me as you might think. I think about my ex-girlfriend sometimes, though. I hope she’s doing okay.”

“You told me about her once. Why don’t you reach out?” Colby asked. “To your family and your ex?”
“I check on my parents every so often. Tamela? Nah, she doesn’t want to hear from me.” Trey pressed a button, and ukulele music came on, drowning them out.

“Hey, you never know. She might be wondering how you’re doing,” Colby spoke over the music.

Sam got the sense that Trey had thought about calling his ex many times but decided it was for the best if he kept his distance. Maybe he thought that ship had sailed without a chance of ever returning home. “You know you can change your situation, right?” Sam added a little more, as Colby nodded. “At any time.”

“What do you mean?” Trey’s eyes flitted in the rearview mirror.

“What I mean is, if you’re not happy…” Sam tossed the idea out there. Just in case he needed to hear it from someone else. “It’s not like you’re stuck here. You can leave at any time.” The more he spoke, the more Sam wondered if his words were even true. Trey couldn’t have been trapped here against his will, could he? He was free to drive, free to leave the house...

“I’m perfectly happy,” Trey assured them, cutting the personal talk short, as though he’d said too much. “Not sure why you fellows seem to think I’m not.”

“We don’t think that.” Sam tried to keep the exaggeration out of his voice.

“Not at all,” Colby added.

“Of course you’re totally happy,” Alex scoffed while staring out the window. “Who wouldn’t be?”

Sam stared at Alex, perplexed. Was he not picking up the underlining tone of their message to Trey? They weren’t encouraging the guy’s odd lifestyle—they were strongly suggesting his relationship with Georgia needed reconsideration. If Sam didn’t know any better, he would’ve thought Alex was becoming another Trey.

They arrived at the estate, where Georgia ran into the driveway
barefoot with turquoise painted toenails, wearing another boho-style maxi dress, this one all white with turquoise crocheted trim. Her accessories matched her weird but stunning eyes. She wore a string of colored seed pods around her neck and a stack of bracelets that gave her a drifter vibe.

“You’re back!” she cried, hopping over the fountain drain, up to Sam, Colby, and Alex, giving them each a warm hug. Sam was getting used to her friendliness and wished he could tell all the locals that they had it wrong about her, but her hug lasted a couple seconds too long.

“Heyyy…” Sam said, gently pushing Trey’s womanfriend off him.

“Come on in, I’m making shrimp étouffée!” She ran up the front porch steps and pulled on the door handle to let them in.

Sam had to give her credit. Georgia knew how to welcome guests into the house. It was no wonder US presidents had visited her. Lit candles everywhere, of course, this time giving off a slightly burnt hay weedy smell, and the ukulele music was on again at full volume, like they were hosting a full-out luau with a hundred guests or more.

“Let’s retrace our steps,” he said, standing in the foyer, not knowing where to even begin. There were so many objects on every wall, in every corner, finding their missing devices might be a little like finding Waldo. “Let’s start with the rooms upstairs, then the kitchen, then the lagoon out back.”

“Got it,” they agreed.

“Would you boys like a glass of wine? Or beer?” Georgia stuck her head out of the kitchen. “I have thirty different kinds. You know me.” She giggled.

“Uh, no, thank you.” Considering he’d nearly blacked out yesterday after drinking one of her beers, he’d do well to keep away. Colby declined her offer as well, but Alex had to go and accept. Sam sighed.
“Sure, I’ll take one,” as though they were here for a dinner party.

“Dude,” Sam whispered. “Remember the plan. We look for your phone and the iPad. If nothing turns up, we leave ASAP.”

“Hey, I know the plan,” Alex retorted in a weirdly rebellious way. “Doesn’t mean I can’t have a beer while looking.” He shrugged and began searching every corner of the foyer. “Can we go upstairs?” he asked aloud.

“Of course, my good man,” Trey said, leaning against the fireplace. “Take your time.”

Sam still felt put off by the tone in Alex’s response. He imagined it couldn’t be easy having to deal with him and Colby calling the shots all the time. Maybe they should make space for Alex’s wishes sometimes, so he wouldn’t feel resentful.

He let Alex lead the way upstairs, past the Georgia-Clint-Amethyst photos in the hallway, past a peculiar lamp Sam hadn’t seen before. He swore, he could walk through an area of the house a hundred different times and find a hundred unique new artifacts each time. That was the thing about Belle Estate. The lamp was a work of art, made of bendy driftwood, twisted around a center pole and tucked into a shallow balcony overlooking the center atrium of the house. It reminded Sam of the tree Colby had been staring at on the beach.

They checked the rooms, bathrooms, beds, even under the beds, and shelves where Alex had said he and Nate found items related to Ryder Camp, ley lines, and Trey’s old memories in a box. The phone was nowhere. Neither was the iPad. Had they lost them at the beach? No way could they go there this late.

“Let’s check the kitchen, then the lagoon,” Colby suggested.

They headed back toward the stairs. Right as they reached the end of the hallway, though, Sam felt an unsettling sensation overcome him, like the air itself were weighing down, pressing him into the floors, making it hard for him to take steps. His vision turned dark at the corners, like it had last time he got tunnel vision in the house, and he held onto the wall for support.
“Shit…”

Colby, already making his way down the steps after Alex, heard him and rushed back up, but all Sam could focus on was a shadowy form taking shape behind Colby. “Brother, you okay?”

Sam stared at the dark mass looming over Colby’s head. “Do you see it?”

“See what?”

“Colby, right there…” Sam pointed and blinked in order to clear his vision, and when he did, the shape successfully dissipated. Unfortunately, his hand slipped from the edge of the wall into the open balcony space, and he had to jut out a hand and grab onto the bendy driftwood lamp to keep from losing his balance. A surge of power seemed to flow through his hands into his body, but it wasn’t from the electricity. It was something else entirely.

“Bro, here…” Colby stretched out his arm for Sam to grab. “You’re scaring me.”

Sam let go of the lamp and stared at his hands. “It was there. I swear it was there.” Sam looked up, pointed to the heights of the stairwell, feeling the inexplicable lack of energy again, like the atmosphere itself was trying to wear him down. He bent over to catch his breath.

“Dude, this house gives me the fucking creeps,” Colby said, helping Sam out of the balcony toward the stairs again. “That’s why I didn’t want to come back.”

“But that’s why we had to,” Sam muttered, out of breath. “If it’d been you who got left behind here, I’d come back for you. Negative energy, or not.”

“But it wasn’t me. It’s Trey, and Trey loves it here. You heard him.”

“Maybe he has to say that.”

“What do you mean?”
“Maybe he’s forced to, like he has no choice.”

“Of course he has a choice, Sam. We were alone in the car with him. You heard him. Look, let’s just finish looking for Alex’s damn phone and the iPad and get the fuck out of here already. We tried. It didn’t work.”

“Agreed.”

Downstairs, they caught up with Alex entering the dining room, drink in hand, casually strolling the house like he was at a London museum. “Where were you guys?”

“Upstairs, searching one more room.” Sam’s eyes darted around to make sure the dark shape wasn’t following them. Too bad they weren’t filming a video. The shadow would’ve made for some creepy-ass footage that fans would’ve gone crazy for, but as luck had it, the really weird stuff always happened off camera.

He slid his fingers along the stacks of scripts on the table, more to ground himself and touch solid, real items than anything else. As he did, Trey began collecting the remaining stacks and putting them away inside the dining hutch. “I’m sorry you couldn’t find your devices, but we’d be happy to mail them back if they turn up. Do you boys like your dinner rolls toasted or untoasted?”

“Huh?” Sam stared at him. How many times did they have to refuse their kind offers? “Trey, we’re not staying.”

Colby pulled Sam aside. “See what I mean? That’s not normal. Normal people don’t ignore when you say you can’t stay for dinner. Ugh, and you know what’s going to suck?” He let go of Sam, continuing his search along the counter connecting the dining room with the kitchen. “Is Nate having to rewrite all his work for the class he’s taking. Hopefully he saved it on a cloud.”

“Bro, don’t even say ‘cloud’ right now.” Sam watched as Colby picked up a script and began flipping through it, but suddenly, Trey snuck up behind him and snatched the stack of paper out of his hands.
“Those…aren’t ready to be read yet. Apologies.”

From the kitchen, Georgia watched closely, spoon in hand, silently communicating with Trey. Even through his anxiety over the energies in the house, or maybe because of them, Sam could tell that something unspoken was happening between them.

“That’s enough in this room,” Trey announced, whisking them away. “Did you want to check the lagoon?”

Sam wasn’t sure he wanted to venture farther into the property. He seemed to remember both Nate and Alex having their devices after the swim, so there’d be no point. “Actually, I think it’s time for us to leave. We have a…thing to get to. Right, guys?”

Colby nodded fervently. “Yeah, a thing, back in Koloa. A dinner thing with the volleyball team. Thanks for bringing us back to check your house. It was beautiful, as always.”

“Trey, maybe you want to come with us?” Colby raised his eyebrows, emitting a brotherly message. “A guy’s night out? To the dinner thing? I’m sure Georgia wouldn’t mind, right?”

Out of this house? Out of Kauai? Just say the word, and we’ll save you.

Sam tried getting Colby’s attention to tell him his idea wasn’t going to work, not with Georgia a few feet away, listening in, giving Trey the evil girlfriend eye. Right on cue, Georgia replied for Trey, “And ignore the delicious dinner I’m making for my Clint—I mean, Trey? Don’t be silly.” She laughed. “You may as well lure him off to mainland fast food. Trey loves my shrimp étouffée, don’t you, baby?”

“Best shrimp I’ve ever had, sweet thing. Better than N’awlins,” he replied, pulling the minivan keys from his pocket. “Well, then, we best get going. Save me a plate for when I return.”

“Oh, that is too bad. I was so looking forward to getting compliments on my cooking. I’ll keep it warm for you, honey.” She gave Trey a seductive look that soured Sam’s stomach.

He waved at Georgia for the last time. “Thanks again for having us.
Sorry we interrupted your dinner plans.”

“I’m only sorry you didn’t get to stay longer.” She pouted, chewed on her bottom lip a bit before sipping her glass of wine. There was an edge to her voice, the sweetness having leaked out of it.

Sam got the hell out of there. Without looking into dark corners, either. If he never saw that shadow shape again, it’d be too soon. He blasted past the candles so fast, his displaced air made them flicker madly, nearly blowing them out.

Colby followed, but Alex lingered in the foyer, saying a long goodbye to Georgia, who’d followed them out. He was being his usual, polite self, except leveled up, because he loved the Belle Estate so goddamned much, he couldn’t stop singing its praises.

“Alex,” Sam said as nicely as he could. He didn’t want Alex to think back on his vacation and remember how militantly bossy Sam had been.

Alex gave Georgia a hug. “Gotta go. I do hope to visit you again one day. This is an absolutely amazing home you have.”

“Oh, I’m sure you will, honey. Belle Estate always lures people back. Just ask Obama.” She smiled that bright, big smile of hers and waved, her flowing sleeves undulating as she did.

*What the hell did she mean by that?*

From the moment they slipped back inside the van, Sam prayed that the vehicle would start without issues. And when it did, he practically gave Trey orders on where to turn and how fast to drive. The excuse was that they had to arrive in time to dinner in Koloa, but the truth was, Sam couldn’t take another moment with his robotic ass.

“We can’t go past this point.” Trey pulled onto the side of the road near the convoy spot. “We have to wait for the rest of the cars.”

“I think we’re the only car in the convoy tonight, brother,” Sam replied, looking out at the roads and seeing no one else. It was getting dark fast. “So, let’s just go.”
Trey shrugged and pulled onto the highway. “Suit yourself.”

Colby leaned forward in the back seat. “Don’t forget, if you find Nate’s iPad or Alex’s phone, please pack it nicely in a box and ship it off as soon as you have a chance.”

“Will do, though I’m sure Nate will come back for it himself,” Trey said.

“What? No, man, you don’t understand,” Sam said. “Nate already left on his flight this afternoon. He won’t be coming back. That’s literally the whole reason why we came to look for his tablet ourselves.”

“They always come back.” Trey stared stoically into the distance, his knuckles white, as he gripped the steering wheel. “And you will, too.”

What…the actual fuck was this guy talking about?

Nobody spoke. Not about the island, how perfect life was, not about life back in L.A., nothing. No ukulele music played either. All semblance of hospitality, completely dead. Even Alex wasn’t defending Trey. Sam’s chest pounded, as the tires rolled along the highway. They just better get to Hanalei in one piece, because Trey was acting stranger and stranger with every passing second. He could almost hear a bomb ticking inside the dude’s head.

Suddenly, Sam felt the car slowing, the tires grinding loudly on the asphalt. Or was that the engine? Trey pulled over onto the side of the road, but Sam couldn’t see any workers or barricades, the usual reason for having to slow down.

“What’s going on?” He leaned forward between the front seats.

“Don’t you hear that sound?” Trey spat. He put the car in park and stepped out, slamming the door with a jerk.

“What the…” Sam opened the side door and hopped out. As the sun slowly descended, he could see they were the only car on the road for miles and miles. “Did we bust a tire? Is it the engine?”
Trey pulled out his phone and pressed it to his ear. “I think the transmission is blown. I’m calling a tow truck.”

“Great.” Colby hopped out of the van, paced the gravel edge of the road, then kicked the back right tire, muttering under his breath.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you.” Trey glared at him.

“Yeah? What if I feel like it?” Colby grunted. Sam could sense a Colby emo-ruption coming on. He knew the last twenty-four hours had affected them deeply, but if they were going to get home safely, they’d have to keep calm and stick together.

“Colby, it’s cool,” Sam said quietly. “Let’s just see what happens.”

As Trey talked to a service center rep on the phone, Sam prayed there’d be a solution tonight. With the convoy window to end in a few minutes, however, and not a single soul traveling on this beaten road, he doubted they’d get to Hanalei, but he wasn’t ready to admit it.

Trey tapped off his phone and sighed. “They could dispatch a tow truck, but it’ll likely take two to three hours,” he explained. “We can wait, or we can walk two miles back to the house. It’ll take thirty minutes.”

Colby chewed on his nails. “What about walking to Hanalei?” he asked, but Sam knew it was too far.

“You want to walk thirty-some-odd miles?” Trey reached into the car and took the keys from the ignition. “Be my guest. I’m walking back before it turns pitch black out here. New moon,” Trey mumbled. “Rest of you coming?”

Sam threw his head back. “Fucking great.”

Trey gave him a dirty look. “It is fucking great. That’s what you don’t get. We wouldn’t be in this position if you truly saw how fortunate you are to be invited to stay at our estate.”

“Our estate?” Colby scoffed. “Bro, it’s her estate. You’re just—”
“Colby,” Sam kept his voice low and calm. “Don’t.”

Colby sucked in a breath and let it out slowly. Just by reading Sam’s face, he seemed to understand that getting on Trey’s shit side was not a good idea. Especially if they had no choice but to return to the Belle Estate tonight, where shadows loomed, and creepy art stared at you from every corner of the mansion. Images of Trey wielding an axe like Nate imitating Jack from The Shining riddled Sam’s mind, as they trudged back the two miles.

What would happen now?

Would they be forced to drink Georgia’s cocktails and eat her shrimp étouffée? Would they have to participate in her uber-regimented activities from the schedule on the side of the fridge? If so, what time was “Lose your shit,” or “Punch Trey in the dick?” Because that was how Sam felt right now.

Colby was right—the mansion would never be Trey’s home. Not with Georgia running the show, calling him “Clint” every two seconds. But the guy had zero clue he was being used and apparently didn’t care. No, the Belle Estate was all about Georgia Belle Rollins and nobody else.

And when they finally reached the iron gate out of breath, trudging up the driveway to find the old lady herself dancing on the porch, laughing and raising her wine glass to the moonless sky, as though she just knew they’d be back any moment, Sam spotted the dark shadow lingering behind her and finally understood what it was like to be Trey—caught, trapped, and screwed.
Two hours.

That was how long they’d have to wait for the tow truck to arrive. Colby convinced himself he could last two hours sitting at Georgia’s dinner table, eating the meal she made (which was pretty damn good) if he just focused on the positive. On the cool architecture, the cozy ambience of the log crackling in the fireplace, expensive tapestries, Hawaiian steel guitar music playing from some hidden source, and strange but interesting artifacts all over the house.

It wasn’t what they could see about the house that felt unnerving, it was what they couldn’t. The feeling of somebody watching them, even now while having casual dinner, unsettled him. Was this house haunted, or was the last day’s stress getting to him?

Colby polished off his plate, downed two different desserts, one with strawberries and another with chocolate and peanut butter, both made by Georgia. Witch or no witch, Georgia could cook, and thankfully the food wasn’t made from children who’d gotten lost in the woods. And if it was, well, then, children were delicious.

Soon, the questions came, the usual ones people asked after they’d gained enough confidence to ask. How did YouTube work? How did they make money from that? Were their online personas true to their real personalities, or were they acting? Georgia’s curiosity about their careers had been piqued, and as well-fed, trapped guests, they had no choice but to answer.

Colby wiped his mouth with a cloth napkin. “That’s the real us. For the most part. We’re goofy, weird, nerdy, but that’s what our followers love about us, that we’re genuine with them.”

Georgia nodded with interest. “I love that,” she said. “What they see is what they get.”

“Exactly.” Colby looked at Sam to let him know it was his turn to deal with Georgia.
Sam picked up the cue and nodded. Their duo interview, which they’d been perfecting for the last year, was flawless. “But there’s a lot of work involved, too,” Sam added. “We spend hours a day editing our videos, answering fan messages, stuff the public might take for granted.”

Georgia polished off what had to be her fourth glass of wine. Any moment now, she’d be levitating. “I see. And has living in L.A. given you boys the chance to network? Meet any Hollywood directors? Because I can see that being the next, natural step—making movies.”

“Not yet, but we’re getting there, a little bit at a time,” Sam replied, checking the time on his phone. Only forty-five minutes had gone by.

“Have you met Francis Ford Coppola or Jordan Peele?” Her eyebrows raised.

Colby’s ears perked up. Jordan Peele’s Get Out was one of his favorite horror movies of all time. The slow-burning dread, the social commentary... “No, we wish.”

“Oh, well they’re personal friends of mine. Somewhere there’s a photo of me in this very house with both of them,” Georgia said proudly. “I’ll see if I can find it for you.”

*Whoa, what? She knew Jordan Peele personally? And Francis Ford Coppola was a big name, too. Maybe coming back to the Belle Estate a third time had been written in the stars, a sign from the universe trying to hook them up with more success. Maybe they should give Georgia more of a chance, since she had so many connections. Always look at the silver lining, right?*

“That’s so dope. You should get them to produce one of your screenplays,” Colby pointed out the obvious, glancing at the mile-high stack of scripts Trey had created on the hutch, giving them the space for dinner.

“It doesn’t work that way,” Trey replied sourly. “You don’t just call your director friends and ask them to direct your script. You still
have to provide a clean, well-written screenplay. That’s what I’m here for.”

“Oh. My bad,” Colby threw Trey back attitude. I thought you were here because you’re a chump.

For a minute, everyone sat around without talking, half-basking in the food coma and half awkwardly not knowing what to say. It was when Georgia, ever the hostess, came up with new questions to ask Alex this time about what he was studying in college that Colby started to feel a little off. The room felt wobbly, not vertigo where the room spun, but more like there were two of everybody at the table.

Two Sams stared at him oddly.

Two Alexes talked about the financial degrees they were seeking and how much time it would take them to complete. Colby sat in a stupor, watching as the previously empty seats now had people sitting in them. Where had they come from?

One looked like Georgia’s late husband Clint, who threw his head back with laughter at everything Georgia said. Another man sitting in a chair that Colby could swear had been empty a moment before wore a scraggly beard and a flower-printed shirt. He lifted a teacup to his lips and scowled at Colby over the rim. A woman with long, brown hair dotted with little flowers and wrinkled, skinny arms checked Colby out, too, as though he didn’t belong there, as though he didn’t quite fit in with the rest of them.

Her steel blue eyes bore holes into him.

Suddenly, Colby was hit with a feeling he hadn’t had since high school, that he wasn’t one of them. He didn’t quite fit with the band kids, and he didn’t quite fit with the cool kids either. He wasn’t a hippie, and he wasn’t a well-known real estate mogul, like Clint Rollins. He was a drifter, moving in and out of the crowds, doing things his own way. Everywhere he went, people weren’t sure what to expect from him. They were cautious, intimidated.

Even now at this table, nobody knew what to make of his brooding
looks and heavily ringed fingers. Colby blinked to try and make the ghosts go away. They did, to his relief, fading into the ether, vanishing before his very eyes. Maybe he shouldn’t have accepted the beer. Last thing he needed was more specters, especially after Sam saw that shadow man again.

“Right, Colby?” Sam gaped at him.

Colby blinked twice, trying to focus. “Sorry, what?” He felt oddly out of his own body, like watching dinner unfold from behind a dreamy sheet of glass.

Sam was watching him carefully. “I was saying how college is great for some, but it isn’t for everybody. How most do just fine without it.”

“Oh, yeah, yeah…what Sam said.” Colby held onto the edge of the table. The dizzying feeling was back, and so were two of the ghosts, the two hippies that were Georgia and Clint’s guests. Was he watching a dinner scene from long ago, or were the ghosts here and now? Where was his EMF detector when he needed it?

The man with the scruffy beard pivoted his face straight at him. Half his cheek skin was falling right off, decomposing, chunks landing right on Georgia’s clean dinner linens, bloody flesh oozing through the fabric.

*Leave, man, the dude cried. Get the hell out!*

Startled, Colby jumped back in his seat, his knees knocking the underside of the table, making a pitcher of water jump. Sam and Alex stared at him, slack-jawed. He instinctively reached out to steady the pitcher, but knocked a glass of water onto its side. The puddle spread out over the table.

“Fuck. I’m…I’m so sorry.” Colby stood, as everyone jumped to their feet to help. He pressed his napkin into the spill and even tried using the hem of his T-shirt.

“No, dear. That’s perfectly all right. It’s only water!” Georgia cheerily left to the kitchen, presumably to get a towel, while Sam
and Alex just stared at Colby.

“Bro?” Sam cocked his head.

“Yeah,” he lied. He definitely wasn’t all right. Even if the ghosts had dissolved again, he was still left with the startling image of that man’s decomposed face. But Trey remained at the table, studying him suspiciously, and something told Colby not to tell the truth about what he’d seen. Let Trey wonder.

After helping Georgia blot out the mess, Colby didn’t want to sit at the dinner table any longer. He began picking up dishes and carrying them to the kitchen, just to keep moving and prevent the ghosts from showing up again. He didn’t want to be in this dining room, or this house, if he was honest.

“Oh, honey, leave it,” Georgia told Colby, gripping his forearm. The coldness of her touch shocked Colby. He thought she’d be warm, like her demeanor, but her gemstone eyes blew an icy breeze through his soul.

He pulled out of her grip.

“Put it there in the sink. It’ll give me something to do later.” She whisked by the schedule on the fridge and paused to read it. “Oh, my, is it really nearly 8:58? I’m going to go upstairs to get ready for bed, but you boys stay down here and chat until the tow truck arrives. Take your shoes off. Get comfy.” She twiddled her fingers and left, taking the chill with her.

Colby rubbed his tired eyeballs and wandered around the house aimlessly, thinking about his time here. All the weirdness, the van breaking down, ghosts on the beach, and now ghosts in the house? Couldn’t they see he was trying to leave, but circumstances kept preventing him? The experience was worth at least two, three videos when they got home to L.A. Maybe a book. Maybe a full-length feature film.

Wandering into a corner of the living room, he felt the presence of people following him, not unlike the sensation of paranoia he’d once felt while smoking weed. Needless to say, he didn’t like that
one particular side effect. Alex, Trey, and Sam had gathered in front of a painting, so Colby joined them, so he wouldn’t be alone. Still, Colby kept glancing over his shoulder, expecting the ghosts to follow him. He couldn’t see them, but the skin on his arms prickled into goosebumps nonetheless.

“What’s with all the elevens?” Sam pointed to the painting featuring lots of 1s. “I’ve noticed them on different pieces of art.”

Trey shoved a hand into the neatly pressed pair of pants he’d changed into when they’d gotten back from walking the two miles. “Georgia loves the time 11:11. She sees them as symbolic numbers.”

“Symbolic how?” Alex asked.

Whereas he’d been excited to show off his house yesterday, today Trey seemed irked at having to give explanations. “In numerology,” he sighed, “the numbers 1-1-1-1 add up to four. Four corners, four walls, representing the square, stability, builders, doers, successful people.” He led them around the living room, pointing out more pieces all with the numbers 11:11 on them. “People like Martin Luther King Jr., who had a vision then worked to make that vision a reality. People who manifest their dreams.”

Colby held his breath. Every time he’d ever heard about people manifesting their dreams, they were into the Instagram witchy culture aesthetic. Maybe Georgia was a witch, but not in the fairytale or Salem sense—more like in the metaphysical sense. He thought back to all the outfits she’d worn, the boho hippie dresses, the Buddha bust, and such.

On a side table sat a crude ceramic bowl resembling a half skull, what seemed to be African animal art, holding keys, paper clips, and lost buttons. Colby picked it up to examine it.

“She feels that you, Sam and Colby, are 11:11 folks, too,” Trey explained. “That’s why she likes having you around. She vibes with your energy.”

“Does she now?” Colby looked underneath the bowl, saw a sticker that said Handmade—1990, then set it back on the table. Next to it
was a vase filled with peacock feathers. Next to that was another stack of screenplays. “So, tell me, dude, what are Clint’s scripts about? I never knew you were into writing. Our friend Nate’s a writer, too.”

“Different things,” Trey said, checking his old-school grandpa watch. “I would show them to you, but…”

“Clint, honey, you comin’ up?” Georgia’s voice floated down the stairwell. “You wouldn’t want to get another 8.5 today, would you?” Her laugh sounded flute-y and cackly, and it resurrected Colby’s goosebumps.

“Be right there,” Trey called upstairs. “Time to shower with Georgia.” He winked.

Colby glanced at Sam again, that unspoken knowing look. Trey had taken a shower when they got back, even changed into fresh old guy’s clothes. “You don’t have to go,” Colby quietly reminded him. “This schedule thing. You don’t have to do it every time. You live here, too. You have a say.”

Trey paused to study his face, as he considered Colby’s advice. “Oh, yes, I must,” he said, staring at Colby so hard, he thought maybe he could see through him. “Every minute is of the essence. Perfection, Colby, is key.”

Colby recoiled like a snake that’d been threatened with a stick. “But it isn’t, Trey. Nobody’s perfect. No life is perfect. Not you, not Georgia. Aiming for perfection only makes you appreciate life less, not more. Real life is messy, bro.”

“So philosophical.” Trey smiled sadly and then tapped the wall, as though his time to discuss it was up. “You gentlemen look around. Enjoy the art. I’ll be back soon.” He disappeared up the stairs, leaving them to their own devices in the middle of this great, big, unnerving mansion.

Colby sidled up to his friends. “Every minute is of the essence? Perfection is key? Guys, what the ever-loving fuck is going on?”
He saw it now—all of it. The weirdness, the empty quality of Trey’s mechanical gaze, the way he did Georgia’s bidding like a forlorn puppy on a leash, the schedule. Why would every minute be of essence out here isolated on an island with nothing else to do? There was no place more relaxing in all the world. There was no place to be.

“He’s bought into the whole perfection thing,” Sam replied. “And he seems scared to contradict Georgia in any way. Did you see how he jumped when she snapped her fingers, told him to come upstairs?” He kept his voice low and an eye on the stairs to make sure Trey wasn’t listening in.

“That is some crazy shit,” Colby whispered.

Alex shook his head. “Guys, you’re making a bigger deal than it is. He’s just in love with her, that’s all. You would do anything for your girls, too.”

“Pfft, not me. And not like that,” Colby said. “If I had a girlfriend, you can bet we’d be more equal in how we treat each other. Georgia’s got Trey wrapped around her little finger. He’s completely whipped.”

“Nah.” Alex waved them off and picked up a large photo of a celebrity whose name Sam couldn’t remember but he’d seen in a lot of old films. Together, the celeb and a younger Georgia smiled out from a frame that looked like real animal bones. “You would act the same.” Alex put down the frame and picked up the Mardi Gras mask, trying it on in the mirror.

“Bro, take that off. You might get haunted,” Sam reached for the mask.

“Seriously?” Alex pushed his hand away. “You’ve been awfully bossy lately, Sam.”
“Yeah, I’m truly sorry about that, but you’ve been acting different, too. I think it’s this house that’s trying to turn us against each other.”

“Right, like a house can have a personality,” Alex scoffed.

Sam knew a thing or two about buildings having personalities, something that Alex wouldn’t understand, but he didn’t want to discuss it now. “Just take off the mask. Please. Trey’s touched everything in this house, including Georgia, and look how he turned out.”

“Dude, you’re overthinking this so hard.” Alex humored him and removed the mask, crouching to stare the infamous Buddha in the eye. “Is this thing bronze or painted?”

Alex’s comment lingered in Sam’s mind. Yes, from one angle, it might’ve seemed like they were overanalyzing Georgia and Trey as a couple, but from another… “It’s more than how he responds to her,” Sam tried to explain. “It’s also the crazed look in his eyes, like he’s amenable on the outside, dead on the inside.”

“Like he himself is wearing a mask.” Colby kept examining a bowl he found interesting. They could be here for days studying all these odd objects reflecting on Georgia’s obsessions—the 11s, the African-inspired art, the animal bones…

“You were the first to notice his vacant stare yesterday by the lagoon,” Sam said.

“Hell, yeah, brother, I’m observant that way.”

Sam chewed the inside of his lip. He sighed. “We can’t leave him here.”

“We don’t have a choice,” Colby said. “We can’t make the guy do something he doesn’t want to do, and getting back to the Airbnb is our number one priority.”

“But he’s not going to flat-out tell us something is wrong,” Sam argued. “We have to dig deeper, talk to him again.”
Colby put down a ukulele made out of dark wood. “We have to get the fuck out of here is what we have to do. I’m done talking to the guy.” The mini guitar resonated with a pleasant stringy sound.

Alex picked up the stone Buddha head and flipped it upside-down, wincing when his eyes landed on something. Sam moved in to see better. On the bottom was one of those office labels for sticking on file folders. Sam had seen them on quite a few of these pieces. “Clint II, India, 2018,” Alex read aloud the handwriting on the label.

Sam couldn’t believe it. “Bro, see? She doesn’t even call him Trey. He’s not even Clint. He’s Clint II. Can you imagine if someone referred to you by the name of the guy she used to bang?”

“He was her husband. It’s understandable,” Alex defended. “She’s allowed to slip every now and then.” He flipped other objects over—a painting of a naked woman in repose, her hand draped over her belly. “Clint II, South of France, 2018,” Alex read.

“Dude…I don’t like it. This reeks of emotional abuse,” Sam whispered. He was sure of it now. “Georgia didn’t fall in love with Trey on a cruise ship. She lured Trey, who looks like her late husband, brought him to live here with her, and turned him into her late husband.”

“Now he thinks and acts like Trey,” Colby said. “I think I saw this on Doctor Who once.”

Alex laughed. “And how exactly did she do that? Magic spells? Essential oils? Moon rituals?” He threw himself onto a sofa and put his feet up on the ottoman. “God, I love this house. Look at those ceiling beams!”

“Yeah, and the flying buttresses, and the gargoyles,” Colby added sarcastically. “And the ghosts.”

“Ghosts?” Alex tilted up his chin.

_Don’t talk about it, Sam tried telling Colby._

“Look, several people have called her a witch. And didn’t Trey say it
was a new moon?” Colby said.

“That has to mean something.” Sam took out his phone, intent on reading about the symbolism of moon phases in witchcraft. Also, the meaning of 11:11 while he was at it, but the connection was terrible, same as everywhere else on the island.

“Witches aren’t real,” Alex mumbled, eyes closed, enjoying the Hawaiian music and candle scents wafting through the house. “It’s just a term the Church called women in the old days when they didn’t want to believe in God. They made them out to be evil opposers, to get them to concede.”

“Alex, real witches do exist. We’ve met a few,” Sam said. “They worship nature, the seasons and cycles, and all that. They don’t have warts or green skin, but they manifest shit. Isn’t that what Trey said? She’s into manifestation?”

“You know what exists? Love. Love exists. And it’s blind to conditions. That’s what’s got you guys fucked up. You can’t handle their age difference.”

Sam wanted to argue. He could so definitely handle a major age difference, even a forty-year one, if that’s all this was. But Trey was in trouble. The signs were there. He knew it. “We’ll talk to him again when he comes down.”

“We already did,” Colby said.

“One last time. I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if we didn’t at least try.” Sam paced the living room like a rat trapped in an escape room. Colby could be right. Trey might not tell them his true feelings straight out. There had to be another way.

He wandered into the dining room, stopping at the hutch containing the stacked screenplays. He paused to stare at them. Because of Nate and other writers, Sam knew that stories were often imbued with the authors’ thoughts and fears. During his senior year, his English teacher, Ms. Holland, explained how looking deeper into an author’s novels could give insights into that writer’s life at any given time.
Sam picked up a screenplay, feeling the weight of the words.

The loglines containing the one-sentence descriptions about the films were underneath the titles. COMMUNE CAMP, he read: Hippies living in a mountainside treehouse community to escape the modern world are haunted by an ancient demonic presence.

*So cheesy, Sam laughed to himself.*

He read the next one. A cult searches for new members to help appease a dark angel who promises them fame and fortune in exchange for reincarnation. DEMON MAN was the movie title. My god, each one was worse than the next, like cheap horror movies from the depths of Prime Video hell.

Sam heard something skitter behind him.

He spun, thinking he’d been caught red-handed reading Clint’s scripts, but nobody was there to scold him. Still, he sensed footsteps. Remembering the darkness he’d seen upstairs earlier, he slowly set the scripts down and began backing out of the room, absurdly feeling as though the dining room didn’t want him there.

He’d felt this way another place, too—the Queen Mary.

Suddenly, he sensed something blocking him from leaving, even though nothing was there. He couldn’t say what it was. An energy, something invisible and intangible that had been watching him, now wanted him out. He couldn’t know that, but he felt it in his solar plexus that whatever it was, it was intelligent. It had a will, and it didn’t care for him snooping through the rooms and screenplays, but it didn’t want him to leave either. In fact, he felt like it wanted him to stay.

Sam pushed his back against a wall, pinning the wooden frame of one of the myriad paintings in the house, whether from fear or something holding him there, he wasn’t sure. His heart pounded against his ribs, and sweat beaded on his upper lip. Behind him, in the stairwell, someone was coming downstairs. Trey, from the sound of the lumbering footsteps. Georgia always sounded like bird feathers scraping the wooden stairs.
Trey entered the living room, where Colby and Alex began talking to him, asking questions about the artwork.

“Sure. I’m your own personal museum curator. See anything you like?” Trey’s voice had chilled. He sounded menacing, as though he’d grown tired of seeing them around. The clink of glass and ice told Sam he was probably pouring one of his “cocktails” from the decanter set in the living room.

The energy around Sam grew darker, more insistent. He gasped for breath. Was he being choked? Why couldn’t he breathe? It could be a panic attack, which he’d had on the super haunted Queen Mary when...when things hadn’t gone so well.

“Hey, man, can I talk to you a second?” Colby asked Trey in the other room.

“Every second is of the essence,” Trey laughed, the sound of ice punctuating his sarcasm.

Sam felt like a fish out of water, widening his mouth, swallowing gulps of air. Around him, the energy oppressed his whole body. The dark gray mist was back. This was, by far, the strongest experience he’d had anywhere, of all his investigations and years of searching for spirits. The proof he’d always wanted, except he couldn’t take a photo, show an EMF reading, use the dowsing rods, nothing.

All he could do was stand paralyzed against the wall.

“I was thinking about what you said before you went upstairs,” Colby was saying. Their voices seemed to be coming from the foyer now. “Why does everything have to be so perfect? The schedule, the clothes, the hospitality? I know we didn’t get off to a good start in L.A., but I’m just worried about you, man.”

“We got off to a fine start, Colby. You just refused to listen to truth, same way you refuse now. To answer your question, Georgia says we should strive to better ourselves. That’s why we’re on Earth, to improve with each lifetime.”

Reincarnation. Sam couldn’t think any more of it, what with a wall
of energy blocking his path and all. He stared at the dining table in distress, imagining the dinner parties of Belle Estate past. The who’s who, the important people who’d visited this house. Only the best of people come here, Trey had said the other day. How many had entered this house over the years? Had they all left?

“Forget what Georgia says,” Colby told Trey.

“Georgia is wise, Colby.”

“Georgia is Georgia. And you’re you. If you have everything you need here on this island, like you told me yesterday, why are you so desperate for us to be here? Don’t you see you’re giving off trapped vibes, bro?”

Trey laughed. “I’m getting tired of this.” Sam could imagine him stepping away from Colby, deeper into the living room.

“Yeah, us, too. When is that tow truck coming anyway?” Colby asked.

“They called, said the morning at their earliest convenience.”

“Morning?” Colby stammered. “So we’re stuck here until morning?”

Sam’s hopes were crushed, much like his back against the wall. They couldn’t leave tonight. They had no choice but to stay overnight in this eerie-ass mansion with a will of its own. He tried to move. If he could just free himself, he could slip unseen into the next room and join the conversation as though nothing ever happened.

“It would seem so, yes.” Trey was quiet for a moment. “Where’s your friend?”

“Sam? I don’t know. I think he went for a walk. He’s kind of overwhelmed, like me, not gonna lie.” Colby scoffed and both went silent.

Sam tried pushing forward, certain the paralysis he felt was more in his mind than anything else. Beads of sweat on his forehead began trickling down his face. He had to master mind over matter, but
that was a little hard to do when he felt like he’d drunk ten beers. The dining room chairs doubled before his very eyes, and his vision went foggy. The headache was back, the sensation that he had to hold on to the walls to keep from falling.

“I think living in isolation is messing with you,” he could hear Colby saying.

“And I think you’re overstepping your boundaries, young man,” Trey snapped.

“Young man? Bro, you’re the same age as me! What the fuck?”

Sam could hear Alex quietly merging into the conversation in hushed and neutral tones, telling them both to get off each other’s backs.

“You don’t understand, none of you,” Trey clearly ignored the plea to keep peace. The more peeved he grew, the stronger Sam felt the shadowy shape surrounding him pinning him against the wall. This was real—it felt real.

“What don’t we get, Trey? Explain it to us,” Colby said.

“If I follow all the instructions to a tee…” Trey began.

“Yeah? What’ll happen?” Colby egged him on.

“I will be rewarded.”

Sam concentrated on taking a deep breath. If he could suck in a lungful of air, he could then focus on the next step—moving his limbs.

“Rewarded? With what?”

Suddenly, the surrounding energy took on a pungent smell, one so violent, Sam’s stomach quivered and threatened to release its contents, but just as quickly, the dark miasma released him. The whole mass got sucked into the atmosphere, as though a giant vacuum cleaner had come along and sucked it away. Sam’s hands flew to his throat. He fell to his knees and gasped for breath, as
slowly, the oxygen reentered his lungs and bloodstream. Tears trickled from his eyes, but he was too drained to wipe them.

This dude was brainwashed. Totally insane.

At the risk of losing what little battery life he had left, Colby pulled out his phone and immediately scrolled through his camera roll, going as far back as two years ago to that party when he sat with Trey by the pool, and the guy had tried sounding like he had all the answers to life, but clearly, didn’t know shit. Back then, Trey was around twenty, in college, still acting like a dick, but at least on his own terms.

“What are you doing?” Trey watched him.

“I’m going to show you what you were up to before you came here.”

“Why would I care? That was a long time ago.”

“Colby, stop,” Alex spoke from the couch. “It’s not your business.”

Colby ignored him. If Alex wasn’t going to help, then he could just lie there like a slug and stay out of it. He found the photos of that hot August night and the birthday party a million of their closest friends had attended. “Remember this?” Colby flipped the phone around to him.

Trey studied the photos. “Ah, yes, the gathering of mindless flock. My life had no meaning then.” He gingerly gripped his whiskey glass and tipped the contents into his mouth.

“Your life has no meaning now, man,” Colby said.

They locked gazes a few seconds.

Colby took advantage of the silence. “I don’t know what fame and riches you’re talking about, but you have better chances of finding
them in L.A., or anywhere, than you do out here in this prison by the sea.”

“This prison by the sea is my home.”

“Bruh, Utah is your home. Let’s be real. Living on this side of the island, nobody knows you exist. Do your parents know where you’re living?”

“The less my parents know about my life, the better. In the end, I didn’t follow the path they wanted me to be on...college, a full-time job, a 401(k). I think you would know something about that, Colby.” Trey’s half-masted eyelids taunted him.

“Yes, and don’t you feel stupid now? After you tried drilling it into my head that night that your way was the only right way? My point exactly.”

“The only thing I feel is sorry for you.” Trey slammed down his glass.

“Maybe, but at least nobody’s got me stuck under their thumb. Is this really the life you want to live? What happened to your big plans? Your degree? Networking, meeting people? All those goals you said I lacked.”

Trey stared at the fireplace. “I was floating in nothingness. Now I work on screenplays, bring happiness to a woman who takes good care of me, and life gets more and more magical with every passing minute.”

“I mean, if by magical, you mean claustrophobic, okay.” Colby found a photo of the young, sloppier-looking Trey in a sweaty shirt and ripped jeans, with messy hair. Yeah, he was goofy-looking, but at least his life was his. And ahead of him. “Remember him?” He flipped his phone around again.

Trey’s gaze latched onto the portal into the past. “A child. No ambition, no clear idea of what he was doing. Is that what you want for me?”

“Maybe you didn’t have a ton of ambition, but at least it was your
own. You worked on a cruise ship to get through college. There was something you were working toward. Now your actions are either following in Clint’s footsteps, or…” Colby’s eyes gestured to the stairwell leading to the woman upstairs. He didn’t want to insult Georgia in case she could hear him.

“Where is your friend?” Trey ignored him, looking for Sam.

“I told you I don’t know. Bathroom? Shrimp doesn’t sit well with him.”

Colby knew Trey was ignoring the intervention, but he also knew resistance to change was normal. He’d spent the majority of his YouTube career trying to help out their supporters—now it was time to help Trey. If it didn’t work, so be it. After this trip, he’d likely never see Trey again.

“Look,” he tried in a softer voice. “I know it’s not my place, but when we left yesterday, we were worried about you. Especially after the way you hugged Nate when you dropped us off in Hanalei. You seemed desperate, like you needed to get out of your situation. Like you needed a friend. Maybe we’re wrong to think so. But that’s part of why we agreed to come back to look for our things…to help you.”

Trey watched him for what felt like a long time.

Colby thought he saw the beginnings of tears in his eyes, a watery layer of his hazel irises. A dam was about to break, secrets about to spill, but Trey only sniffed and returned to his drink. “Well, I don’t need help,” he said smugly, tapping his glass again before pouring more whiskey in. “I’m happy here. Sorry I don’t fit your profile of the helpless person you imagined me to be.”

A dimmer switch slowly turned off inside Colby’s heart. He was willing to help anyone who needed a hand, but douchiness rubbed him the wrong way. He was done. “Hey, I tried.” Colby turned and headed off to find Sam.

But Trey wasn’t done. “Tomorrow is a new moon, and on the new moon, new life begins,” he said, strolling across a Persian-looking
rug, lovingly touching a row of statuettes made to resemble the moai of Easter Island. He paused in front of a photo of him and Georgia, arms around each other. “I found her on a new moon, you know. I came to live here on a new moon, and now we’ll move into our next phase on the new moon.”

“What phase is that?” Alex asked the same question on Colby’s mind. What was next for Georgia and Trey—or Clint II, rather?

Trey only smiled, as Georgia appeared, floating down the stairs in a dark dress that hugged her breasts so tightly, she looked matronly and sexy at the same time. The gown swept the floor with its black lengths. Her hair had been blow-dried and curled in long waves that cascaded over her shoulders. She wore full makeup that made her seem years younger. Colby could see how a guy Trey’s age with no access to the outside world might be utterly taken by Georgia Belle Rollins. There was never any doubt she was beautiful.

“The new moon is a time of renewal,” she said, spinning up to Trey. “New projects, new chapters, new cycles. It’s a gift, an opportunity to start all over. And a new life is definitely on the horizon for us, baby.” She wrapped her arms around Trey’s torso and leaned up for a kiss.

Alex watched from the sofa as though Trey and Georgia were his parents, still in love after thirty years. Colby scoffed. He took off in search of Sam, entering the dining room where he’d last seen him disappear to. Somehow, he had to get out of this house of madness.

“Sam?” He peeked in. When he didn’t answer, Colby took out his phone, about to text and ask where he was, when he heard a tapping sound on the sliding glass door by the kitchen.

Sam stood outside, looking traumatized and bent out of shape.

Colby flew to the glass, slid the unlocked door aside, and stepped out into the dark and breezy outdoors of the coast. The salty fresh air cleared his head and felt clean in his lungs. “What are you doing out here?”

Sam bent at the waist. “That thing…it attacked me.”
“The Shadow Man?” He glided to Sam’s side.

“It’s a man; I’m ninety-nine percent sure it’s the spirit of a man. It just feels that way.”

“There’s a Shadow Man here. I can’t believe it,” Colby said in awe.

“Except I don’t feel like it’s Corey’s ghost,” Sam breathed. “This is someone or something else entirely. Let’s call it a Dark Man, so we don’t confuse the two.”

“What did it do? This Dark Man?”

“It pinned me. I couldn’t breathe or move. We have to get out of here, Colby. We can walk down the highway or meet the tow truck people along the way. I don’t care.”

Colby whistled through his teeth. “Bad news. They’re not coming until morning.”

“What? Fuck!” Sam crouched and covered his head. Whatever happened to him, it’d affected him badly. “What about…the helicopter guy?”

“What about him?”

“We kept his card. Let’s call him. Maybe he can come pick us up.”

“I don’t think it works that way, Sam. It’s late. The whole island shuts down at this time. You know that. Bro, I hate to say it, but we’re stuck here for the time being.”

Sam shot up and pulled Colby by the shirt toward him. There was madness in his eyes that shocked even Colby. “I don’t care if that’s how it works. I’m telling you, this place is haunted. More than any other place we’ve been. Do you understand me?”

In his eyes, Colby saw the same alarmed desolation as he’d felt when he’d seen the hippies’ faces in the dining room. They needed to escape this place. Were they the only ones experiencing these energies? What about Alex, who seemed impervious to the house’s enticement?
Their hearts had led them here to try and help Trey, but the
decision had been a stupid one. “Yes, I hear you. Okay, let's try
calling him, but hurry. Trey keeps asking where you are, and
Georgia’s come back downstairs. I tried talking to Trey, but he's a
lost cause.”

While Sam searched his wallet for the business card of Manuel, the
helicopter pilot, Colby moved farther into the darkness, away from
the glowing lights of the house, in case they should spot them
lurking in the backyard.

“Here it is.” Sam called the number on the card.

From the shadows of the lagoon’s surrounding wilderness, Colby
made out the face of the mermaid statue hiding in the bushes. She
almost seemed to emerge, as if slowly swimming toward them. But
it was the heady scent of the flowers dripping from the bushes that
gave off a powerful scent and made Colby feel as if his surroundings
were floating, as if the island itself were trying to intoxicate him.

Amethyst, Georgia’s mermaid daughter, stared at him from the
gloom. But that was ridiculous. She was just a statue. She’d simply
been carved to look like she was staring.

“He won’t pick up. Voicemail is full.” Sam hung up and took a big,
deep breath. “All right, let’s go back inside and deal with this before
they find us out here.”

But Colby couldn’t pull his gaze away from the mermaid. She was
gorgeous, seductive, and sad all at the same time, keeping watch
over the backyard. It made Colby wonder where Amethyst was
these days, how she felt about this likeness of her here in the
garden. The mermaid watched knowingly, alive and listening, as if
she knew of their hopes to escape, her features fashioned from
conscious glittering seafoam instead of cold, hard stone.

“Colby…” Sam beckoned. “You coming?”

Colby felt compelled to touch the statue’s base, press his fingertips
against the sculpted scales. “Yeah.” He ripped his mesmerized stare
away from the intricate details of her fish tail imbued with flecks of
broken shell and followed Sam toward the house. “Maybe we can say we’re going to sleep but then we escape to the beach.”

Sam pulled Colby into the bushes. “And then what? It’s at least five miles. Spend the night there? Get caught for trespassing again?”

“Brother, I’d rather spend it on the beach than in this house.”

“We’ll end up arrested,” Sam shook his head. “I ain’t getting in trouble again.”

Colby shrugged. “I’ll take getting arrested again over sleeping the night in this place. Would you prefer that or running into the Belle Estate’s Dark Man again?”

Sam didn’t answer. They were both thinking that this entity now had a name—the Dark Man. Deciding whether to go or stay was definitely a catch-22, or a catch-11:11, in the Belle Estate’s case.

“Fine, we’ll spend the night. But we stay together. All the freaky things seem to happen when we’re alone. I don’t go anywhere without you. You don’t go anywhere without me. Got it?”

“Yeah, bro. Let’s get through this.” Colby clasped hands with Sam.

They walked out of the bushes toward the back door, where they slipped into the kitchen and trudged into the living room like they’d been there all along. “Whoo!” Colby sighed.

“There you are!” Though she wore a polite smile, Georgia’s expression was full of genuine concern over their whereabouts. “You boys exploring?”

“Nah, just wandering the garden. It’s so beautiful out,” Sam said. “I can’t get over what a gorgeous house it is.”

From his position by a painting, Trey stood sucking his teeth, eyeing Sam suspiciously. Unfortunately, now he knew the truth about how Colby saw his lady friend, and things were weird between them.

“Indeed it is,” Georgia replied. “And it’s like that every night of the year. Why don’t you boys come with me? Your rooms are ready.
There’s spare clothes in each one, in case you need them, fresh linens, and oh, yes, chocolates on the pillows.” Georgia gave off her signature melodic laugh that morphed into humming toward the stairway.

Without a word, Trey took a seat on a comfy reading chair opposite the couch with another round of whiskey and a leather-bound book in hand. Alex stood and followed them through the living room toward the stairs. As Georgia led them up, Colby saw Sam quickly dip back into the dining room while Trey wasn’t watching and swipe a few screenplays, sticking them under his shirt.

Colby had no clue what he planned on doing with those, if he wanted reading material for the night or what, but whatever the reason, he trusted Sam had a plan. Good, because they would need one.
Georgia opened the door to the guest room and stood back to let them in. “Here you go, gentlemen. One of you can sleep in the adjoining room. The connecting hall is right there. Let me know if you need anything else. Oops, forgot clean towels. Be right back.” Whenever Georgia wheeled off somewhere, the hem of her long dress swished over the floor, giving her the appearance of a dancing ballroom ghost at the Haunted Mansion in Disneyland.

Appropriate. Sam closed the door.

“I don’t know. If she’s not back by 11:11 on the dot, I’m marking down her score.” Colby flopped on the same bed in the same spot where Sam had had his nightmare and reached for a chocolate square.

Sam dumped the scripts next to him and covered them with two decorative cushions on either side of a pineapple. He held the fruit up, the wheels in his head working overtime.

“Pineapples are a sign of hospitality,” Alex said, entering the connecting hallway to his room. “She’s Southern, remember?”

“Oh.” Sam put the pineapple on the nightstand.

She’d also lit candles, of course, with that crossed scent of flowers and burning hay. Cedarwood? The pillars decorated every dresser, shelf, and nightstand. Sam wondered if it was some native Hawaiian custom they didn’t know about, like the pineapple on the bed. She’d even placed them in the windows facing the south part of the house. With the curtains open, they might be able to see the famous mountain peaks if it hadn’t been so dark outside.

On a corner table was a glass decanter of amber liquid with four crystal glasses sitting on a round mirrored plate, similar to the downstairs bar. Sam pulled on the bottle stopper and took a whiff. Whiskey. He put the stopper back. “Is she trying to welcome us or seduce us?”
Colby took a bed cushion and hugged it. “Who knows? Maybe she’s got a four-guy fetish she’s hoping to fulfill.”

“Ew, with Trey? No thanks.” Sam peeked into the bathroom, wishing he could take a relaxing shower but definitely didn’t want to change into any of Trey’s, or worse—Clint’s—clothes.

“Guys,” Alex was back. “It’s more likely she’s just trying to be a good hostess. Give the woman a break. You guys going to sleep in here?”

“Yeah, we’ll take this one,” Sam said, thinking that sleep would probably elude him tonight. He didn’t want to think about the possibility of nodding off, letting down his guard, only to be woken up in the middle of the night with a massive dark shadow hovering over him, trying to choke him.

Colby rocked upwards onto his feet and circled the room, blowing out candles. “I hate these.” He opened the shutters covering the panes, then pushed them up to let in the sweet Pacific breezes. “That’s more like it.”

“Let’s close them back up when we go to sleep, though, and turn on that guy.” Sam pointed to the AC unit between the window and floor.

“Yeah, for sure. I just want to get this stink out of here.”

Most of the old buildings in Kauai didn’t have AC. Most residents liked to keep the windows and sliders open all day, relying on ceiling fans to cool them at night, but Sam was used to sleeping with cold, nonhumid air, and if he didn’t have it, he definitely wouldn’t be sleeping.

“Why’d you steal the scripts?” Colby sat on the bed and started flipping through the pages.

Sam shrugged and sat cross-legged. “I want to study them. See if I can find out what makes those two tick. If we’re going to be stuck here tonight, I may as well make good use of my time. Did you bring a charger?”
“No, bro,” Colby replied. “And I don’t want to ask Trey ’cause the dude hates me enough right now as it is. I have two percent.”

“Then reading, it is.” Sam handed him a script and then created a fort wall of cushions and pillows for when Georgia made it back with the towels, so she wouldn’t see the stolen intellectual property.

With a huge outbreath, Sam began to read. He was still on edge, flighty and worried that the Dark Man might come for him, but if he did, Colby would be here to help him fight it.

Every so often, as he and Colby read through pages, Alex would pop back into the room, carrying more found items from his guest room—a nude statuette carved out of what looked like ivory, a macramé planter hanging from a long, blanched animal bone, or some other crazy psychedelic painting straight out of the seventies.

“Guys, the stuff in this house is insane.” Alex walked up to the bed, holding up a framed poster of a group of people. “There’s something new every day. You’ll never see the same thing twice for five or more years.”

“Wait, let me see that?” Sam leaned in close to look. The photo featured the Ryder Camp hippies. He recognized their sun-kissed skin and worry-free hairstyles. In the center front row were two familiar faces—the Trey look-alike, Clint, with his arm around the nude woman from the other photo, the one who looked like a young Georgia. “Did she ever confirm if she was one of the hippies?”

“She hasn’t outright said it,” Colby said. “But she’s gotta be. The math adds up.”

“Plus, they all look like her.” Sam peered closer. Directly behind the Trey look-alike was a dark area, a cloudy black shape that could’ve been a stain on the photo, a mistake in the film’s processing, or… “You guys see this?” He pointed to the shadowy mass. “This is the thing I’ve been seeing since yesterday.”

Alex leaned in for a look. “What thing?”
Sam forgot he hadn’t told Alex or Nate about his vision, only Colby, but at this point, it was too late to hide it. They were in this together. The Dark Man was real, not imagined, and there was no use keeping it a secret. “An inky black cloud. Colby thinks it might be the Shadow Man.”

“The one that follows Corey?” Alex asked.

“But I think it’s a completely different ghost, spirit, whatever it is. I’m not actually sure,” Sam replied. “I just feel like it’s a masculine energy. I’ve come across it a few times already.” He left out the part of how it tried to paralyze him.

“Where?” Alex peered closer. “Here? In this house?”

“See this? The shape in the photo kind of looks like it.” He stared at Trey/Clint’s smiling, sunburned cheeks, at the column of darkness looming just behind him. Accompanying him. Haunting him. Was the dark spirit Clint himself?

“See these people?” Colby slid his fingertip along the group of happy hippies posing for the shot. “I’ve been seeing them since yesterday, too. It might be this guy here, or this lady…I don’t know.” He shook his head and pushed the frame away. “Take that photo out of my face, please. It’s starting to creep me out, and that’s the last thing I need right now.”

When Alex walked off with the artifact, Colby muttered, “Tonight, one of them told me to leave.”

“When?”

“At the dinner table. Bro, are they really ghosts? Or my imagination? ’Cause I gotta say, Sam, I feel like I’m losing my mind a little bit. Being out here fucks with your sanity, am I right?”

“Yes, and if we’re affected after just two days, imagine Trey,” Sam said.

Colby’s eyes flickered. “Exactly. Something’s definitely going on. I don’t even want to say, but it feels…” He couldn’t finish his thought.
But Sam knew, because not only could Sam detect what Colby was thinking sometimes, he felt it in his soul as well. “Sinister,” he guessed.

Colby froze in thought for a minute, then silently, they went back to reading the scripts. Sam tried to focus on the paragraph he was on, but he kept thinking about that word—sinister. Were they right, and evil lived on this slice of real estate? That would mean Georgia and Trey were immersed in it all day long, 24/7.

“Do you think...?” Sam started, then began again. “Do you think doing paranormal investigations has opened us up more? Made us more susceptible to negative energy?”

“Yes, bro. I think we need a good energy cleansing after this trip. Sage, sage, everywhere.”

“For sure.”

Alex kept coming in with more stuff. This time, he brought back in the Ryder Camp book that Georgia had first shown them. “Guys, listen to this. In the nine-year period from 1969–1978, at least ten deaths occurred on Ryder Camp, an unusually high number for a population in their twenties-thirties living on a mostly fish and vegetarian or vegan diet, unexposed to air or industrial pollutants of any kind.”

Sam wondered if those were the people whose spirits Colby claimed to be seeing.

“Does it say how they died?” Colby asked.

Alex nodded. “It says that some of the tree house residents believed a dark presence was haunting their commune, while others said it was nothing more than hallucinogens from the extreme drugs they were doing.” He looked up at Sam. “And you just mentioned seeing a dark spirit. Maybe they’re one and the same.”

Sam gulped. “What else does it say?”

“It says that many of the residents called it the ‘Dark Lord’ and that it moved from person to person, depending on who it wanted to
complete a task. ‘The members of the community claimed this Dark Lord was on a quest to find people to do his bidding when others failed,’ member, Susan G., claimed in an exclusive interview in 2014,” Alex read aloud, turning the book around to show them a close-up of the shadowy smudge in the photo. Even though no face was delineated, Sam felt it was the same presence.

“That’s him. That’s the same dark man haunting this place,” he said, staring at the shape. “The beach, Belle Estate, this whole region. I’m ninety-nine percent sure he’s the one manifesting for me, too. Guys, it feels crazy talking about it. Normally I’m skeptical and wouldn’t believe in stuff without proof, but…”

He shook his head and closed his eyes.

“The proof is everywhere,” Colby finished.

Sam nodded slowly. He was tired, physical and mentally exhausted, and the residual candle scents filtering through the room had given him a shitkicker of a headache. Great, in true ghost hunter form, they’d stepped into a portal of paranormal energy when they should’ve been on a relaxing vacation. They couldn’t get away from it.

“I wonder where the remaining hippies are now,” Colby said.

Alex flipped to the back of the book, eyes scanning. “It says here that some live on the east side of Kauai, a few are in Honolulu, but most eventually moved back to the mainland after the state tore down Ryder Camp. That’s depressing. Their pristine sanctuary on the North Shore, completely dismantled, when all they wanted was to raise their families in peace.”

“Yeah, it’s sad,” Sam muttered. “Party over.”

“Hey, here we go…bingo.” Alex read, “‘Georgia Belle Rollins is the sole remaining member of the Ryder Camp community, living closest to the condemned tree houses, now turned into Ke’e Beach on state park property, than any other former member. Her husband, the late Kauai real estate mogul, Clint Rollins, died by suicide on December 5, 1997.’”
“Twenty-two years ago,” Sam said.

“Same year I was born,” Colby said.

“And me,” Alex added.

Sam had been born in 1996. It was hard for him to fathom that the woman in this house had been married for nearly forty years before they even came into this world kicking and screaming.

A low feminine voice joined theirs. “It was a difficult time for me.”

They all whirled to see Georgia standing in the open doorway, holding a stack of clean towels. She had a faraway, dreamy look in her eyes. She’d been gone a long time just to grab those, Sam thought. “But when the universe closes a window, it lets light in elsewhere,” Georgia said, setting the towels on the dresser.

It must’ve been hard for her to deal with her husband’s suicide, Sam thought. And the reason why he’d taken his life suddenly mattered to Sam. Was he not happy out here in paradise with everything in the world that the Earth could possibly give him? If Trey was a lot like Clint, did that make him susceptible to danger?

“And the same day my husband died, Trey was born. Isn’t that remarkable?” She smiled, adopting a new sunny expression.

Sam’s mouth fell open.

“With evidence like that, who doesn’t believe in reincarnation? The resemblance is uncanny, isn’t it?”

“Wait, so Trey was born the same day your husband died?” Sam asked.

“Yes, tell me that’s not meant to be.” Georgia relit one of the candles with a lighter from a drawer. Sam mentally extinguished it with his mind.

“Okay, but you know that Trey isn’t actually your husband, right?” Colby said. “It’s... it’s just a coincidence.”
At the door, Georgia paused and gave them a sultry, ominous look. “I don’t believe in coincidences. I believe in fate and love that defies the laws of physical death. My husband swore before the—before he took his life—that he’d return to take care of me. And he has. Goodnight, boys.”
In the stillness of the night, the guest room took on a different tone than it had during the day, one of freakish awe and wonder. Colby couldn’t sleep. He stared at the windows, now closed again so they could sleep with the AC on, as spindly shadows of branches scraped silently along the glass panes. They were on the edge of a natural preserve on a small island in the middle of the Pacific with no moon out. What light could possibly make those shadows?

Colby clung to the sheets, thinking of all Georgia had said. Did she really think Trey was her husband reincarnated? She must’ve meant that she believed his departed soul had sent her another person to love, like an angel to watch over her. All this talk about angels and ghosts and the Dark Man and sinister energy kept him awake.

Without their phones to help pass the time, the night dragged on. Sam had spent a few hours reading scripts and commenting every few pages how freaky the stories were, while Alex periodically wandered in to show them some new, amazing object he’d found, but Colby couldn’t focus on anything.

He kept hearing noises, bumps, and scrapes around the mansion. Sounds were bound to happen in such a large, unfamiliar house perched by the ocean, and he never did feel comfortable sleeping in someone else’s house, but all they had to do was make it through the night, and they’d be free in the morning. Just a few more hours.

Eventually they fell asleep, and Colby dreamed he was at a house, not the Belle Estate, but another mysterious home. A voice spoke to him as he wandered the outdoor gardens of the property. Though he couldn’t see her face, he knew it was a young woman telling him about ley lines and energy multiplied at the points where they intersected. She told him of other places on Earth where this same energy formed a vortex—Stonehenge, the Great Pyramids, Sedona, Arizona.

*Same goes here, she said.*
Where? Colby asked.

The center of the star.

Star? You mean the pentagram Alex showed us?

Colby needed to know, but the female presence wouldn’t answer. He didn’t want to be caught in the center of some wicked symbol, not even in a dream. After a time, he wandered into a maze, navigated through it effortlessly, but soon became increasingly frustrated when he couldn’t find the exit.

Hello? Anybody there? How do I get out of this thing?

The time is upon them! The voice was back, urgent, nervous, and whispering at the same time. You must hurry!

“Why?” He tried to climb the maze so he could see where he was within it, but he kept falling back to his feet.

“Colby…”

“Tell me why!” he demanded of the voice.

“Colby, wake up.” Someone jabbed his left arm until he opened his eyes. The digital clock on the nightstand said 3:33 AM. Where was he again?

He spotted the windows with its tree branch shadows. Georgia’s house. Still in the guest room. The voice was Sam’s. He sat up and tried to rub the dream out of his eyes. “What the hell…”

“You were dreaming, asking somebody why,” Sam’s voice sounded blurred from exhaustion.

Suddenly, a faraway scream echoed through the house, and Colby wondered for a moment if he was still dreaming. “Did you hear that?” His wide-open eyes took in the bedroom’s meager light, as if his vision could hear.

“Yes. What the? Dude, look at the time.”
“I know. Always at 3:33. What does that mean, bro?”

“I don’t know. Do we go look for it or stay here?” Sam asked.

Colby closed his eyes, mouth agape in the dark, as they listened for another scream. To know where it’d come from. Male or female. Could it be that, in their sleeping state, they’d shared the same dream? The mind was a mysterious thing, and Colby knew that fear could play a part in creating hallucinations, even shared ones called mass hysteria.

“Let’s go look.” Colby jumped out of bed without bothering to put on a shirt or shoes and tiptoed into the hallway. Sam stuck close behind him.

“We go together,” Sam said. “I don’t want to wander alone.”

At this time of night, the house became a different beast altogether. Warm ocean breezes blew through the open windows, fluttering pale curtains that looked like apparitions with gauzy arms reaching out for help. Everything took on a shadowy and disturbing pallor. The art, curious and interesting during the day, now looked twisted and evil. Handmade leather chairs sitting on runner carpets in the corners of the hallway now looked like wrinkled, bruised sheets of human skin, complete with blue and pink veins. People trapped in paintings almost seemed to move, to scream, their oily voices falling on deaf ears.

“Bruh, I don’t like this,” Colby muttered.

Sam lingered a half step behind him. “Me neither. But it’s not coming from up here. If anything, it’s downstairs. We have to go check it out.”

“Do we, though? Because that’s what they do in horror movies right before someone gets killed,” Colby blurted. “We aren’t doing this for YouTube. We don’t have to do anything crazy.”

“We do if someone needs our help,” Sam assured him.

Damn Sam for being right all the freakin’ time.
They thought they heard the scream again, but suddenly, the idea occurred to Colby that maybe there were native birds on this part of the island, creatures that chattered and cawed in the middle of the night. With the windows open, and the night being so still, it was possible the sounds were entirely natural, if alien to their ears.

But another note entered Colby’s ears, this one like groans of pain, followed by melodious and female...was it...singing? Maybe Georgia had left on a TV or radio, since they weren’t much into devices. Maybe she slept to music. There was a watery, operatic feel to the voice, though it could’ve come from miles away, it felt so distant.

“Follow me,” Colby said, holding onto the stair railing and descending the steps slowly. Sam followed him without question. At the bottom of the steps, they wandered through the foyer and living room, taking note of all the candles Georgia had left on in the night, the sculptures’ shadows bouncing, flickering, dancing on the walls, and the roaring, unattended fireplace.

Every hair on Colby’s head stood on end. He was listening with every pore on his body. The sound was distant but still there. Outside in the lagoon somewhere. Definitely not inside the house. He reached the slider and was about to pull when Sam tapped his arm.

“What if there’s an alarm?”

Colby looked at the ends and corners of the sliding glass door. Usually, little red lights indicated the presence of a wired system, but he didn’t see any, and besides, if they accidentally tripped a house alarm, they could always claim wanting to go for a walk at night and beg forgiveness.

He pulled. No alarm sounded.

The humid air of the outdoors smacked him like a vaporous, moving wall. “Maybe they leave the lagoon music on at night,” Colby said. Things were loose and casual here in Kauai. It was entirely possible they left things running at night, waterfalls and steel guitar music and all, same as the candles. Nothing to worry
But suddenly, Colby knew where the silky voice was coming from. It was the same voice from his dream. He stared into the dark jungle ahead of them, broken only by the walkway, carefully stepping onto the flagstones.

“Where you going?” Sam whispered.

Colby ventured into the gloom, knowing where he was headed without needing guidance or light. Ignoring Sam behind him, whose concern grew with each step, he searched for her unmistakable shape and face, stopping the moment he saw her practically step out of the bushes. But how could she? She had no feet and, oh yeah, wasn’t alive.

“The mermaid?” Sam quipped. “Bro, I guarantee you it wasn’t the statue. What we heard was real.”

She is real, Colby wanted to say, but he knew how that would sound, even to Sam, who’d shared this and every paranormal journey they’d ever been on up until now. Colby stared at her face, her beautiful, startling, sad features, daring her to make a sound, falling further into disappointment when she didn’t.

“Colby, let’s go back.” Sam tugged his elbow. “I don’t like it out here. I’d rather crawl back into bed, like scaredy-cats are supposed to do.”

“Just…I could’ve sworn…”

Colby reached out to run his fingertips over Amethyst’s rocky, porous scales. Was he going insane, roaming in the middle of the night, thinking a stone mermaid had called out to him? He thought of the ocean, of where she might live for real, of walking into the waves to find her.

“Colby…”

She wanted him to find her. And wading into the Pacific to be with her sounded like heaven. Yesterday he’d been thinking how he didn’t need a girlfriend or want one, and now he was considering
disappearing into the waves forever just to be with her. He had to be dreaming.

“Colby.” Sam tugged his arm, ripping Colby out of his spiritual communion with a mythical creature captured in stone.

“Fine. I’m going…” He stepped away from the siren, ripping his gaze off her and turning toward the house.

“Come on, let’s go back.” Sam led him away. Good thing, because Colby could not think straight.

The back face of the architecture looked like something off the front cover of a dark fiction novel, the type of house you should run from, except they had to go back inside. Alex was in there. So was their stuff. With mountains, ocean, and jungle all around, there were plenty of places to hide but nowhere safe.

He glanced at the mermaid over his shoulder one more time and could’ve sworn she moved her hand to beckon him back. “I’m losing my shit,” he muttered.

When they stepped off the flagstones and nearly reached the glass door, Colby paused when he heard something off to their right. He stopped, hand on the handle, and tapped Sam’s shoulder. Both of them froze. It was the moaning sound again, the one he’d heard right before the singing. Colby took off toward the house’s surrounding foliage.

“Where you going?” Sam whispered.

“It’s coming from over here.” Colby reached the bushes and noticed the texture under his bare feet had changed. In the dark, he adjusted his eyesight until a wooden frame appeared, bordering a wooden set of doors. Next to it, a disused gazebo. From the center handles, a solid, long rope lay on the ground like a snake.

“Don’t open that,” Sam said.

“We have to.” Colby knew that whatever they’d heard, it’d come from inside. Images of people trapped underground plagued Colby’s mind. Suddenly, all the helicopter pilot’s jokes made sense. There
were prisoners here. Trapped, and these doors would lead them there.

Colby pulled on the rope. The doors easily opened up, screeching on the hinges. He propped them open, his heart thrashing against his throat. A set of stairs disappeared into the dark, preventing him from seeing the bottom. But something was coming up the steps, making heavy footfalls, and Colby fought the urge to run back into the house.

“Colby…” The dread in Sam’s voice said it all.

They shouldn’t be here.

They should’ve minded their own business and crawled back under the covers, like Sam said.

Two figures lumbered up the steps, one blonde and one tall with short hair. It was only Georgia and Trey, damn it. Colby bent at the waist to catch his breath. “Look who we have here,” Georgia’s voice was cooler, more raspy at four in the morning, more attuned to the older woman she was. Without makeup, she looked more her age, the shadows under her eyes more apparent.

“Sorry, we just…we heard a noise,” Colby tried explaining with what little breath he had. All at once, he was glad the noise hadn’t been anything wicked and yet, he felt confused, because he knew he’d heard a scream—a real scream.

“We got curious and decided to see what it was,” Sam said. “Sorry, it’s in our nature.”

Colby gave him a look to be quiet. The less they said, the better. From the expressions on Georgia’s and Trey’s faces, they totally had not expected to find anyone here, and also from the looks of it, Georgia did not like to be caught off guard. Even in the darkness, her eyes seemed to glow with a light of their own.

“Well, if curiosity is going to kill the cat,” she drawled, “you may as well have a peek. Behold the wine cellar.” She held the doors wide open for them. “Go ahead.”
“You’ll love the beer and wine collection.” Trey smiled as best as an emotionless bot could smile.

Colby knew deep in his soul that he shouldn’t enter the wine cellar, but Sam had already placed a foot on the threshold. After investigating so many haunted locations, they were used to stepping inside of decrepit buildings, especially when a tour guide had made it feel safe to explore, but Georgia and Trey were no tour guides. And Colby was almost certain they were no hosts either.

“Sam.” He tugged back his arm. He didn’t want to voice the danger he felt right in front on them, so he said, “Let’s check it out in the morning. We’re inconveniencing them right now.”

“No inconvenience at all,” Georgia purred. “We’re usually up at this time checking the house, making sure locks are on, and such. Sometimes, we get caught up in a little naughtiness if the mood strikes us…” Her easygoing laugh bubbled up and spilled over.

Colby paused to think. Was that what he’d heard? The moaning? No. He knew it was an outright lie. None of the house’s locks had been on when they’d left the room. All windows were open, too. His hosts were not “checking the house” at this time of night.

“Still, we’re super tired,” he said, as Sam thankfully pulled back to where Colby stood. “You’re sweet to let us see, but we’re just going to go now.”

“Well, if you’re sure…” Georgia smiled coyly.

“Yes, we’re sure. In the morning maybe.” He smiled and waved as politely as he could, then slipped into the house, and bolted through the rooms and up the stairs with Sam behind, as quickly as their feet could take them.

It wasn’t until they were locked inside their guest room that they stopped to catch their breath. “That’s it. As soon as the sun comes up, I’m leaving. Those people are trying to trap us.”

“You think?” Sam gasped.
At that moment, Alex came wandering through the connecting door, yawning while wearing a dark red robe and slippers, looking debonair in vintage seventies style. My god, Colby thought. He looked like Trey, or Clint in several of Georgia’s framed photos. “I heard a noise. Everything okay?” he asked groggily.

“Oh, sure. Great. Fucking paradise, in fact,” Colby blurted. “Never want to leave this place, ever.” He flew to the window and opened it for gulps of fresh air.

Alex gave a sleepy laugh that turned Colby’s blood to ice. “I thoroughly understand, young man. I wouldn’t want to leave either.”
Sam’s brain swam with exhaustion, his heart thumped with adrenaline, and now here was Alex, waltzing in looking like a Trey clone in his robe and slippers, talking like an old man before disappearing back into his room.

“What the hell is happening?” Sam locked the door and panted at Colby.

Colby shook his head. “Bro, I don’t know. But I feel like I’m in a Jordan Peele movie.”

“Keep the door locked. Let’s try to sleep. In the morning, we can call for help if we need to, but we have to get out of here.”

“We lost a whole day to this fucked-up place,” Colby said, throwing himself on the bed. “I’m not going to lose another.”

“I hear you.”

They got back to bed, but nothing was the same. Sam felt like he’d slipped into the seventh dimension of the underworld. For the rest of the night, he slept restlessly, dreaming of the guest room door opening, of Georgia asking them to carry artwork into the wine cellar, then the cellar doors closing on their own, trapping them inside. He dreamed of the mermaid, fluid and real, swimming at them with alarm and warning in her amethyst eyes.

And as much as he tried to scream, he couldn’t.

Sam’s head pounded. Between the lack of sleep and raging appetite, he couldn’t see straight. Once sunlight filled the room, he and Colby slipped their shoes on, grabbed Alex from his bed, and bolted into the hallway as hurriedly as they could. The daylight had smoothed the lines of the mansion, restored its vibrant beauty, and eradicated its ghosts.
Things almost seemed normal. Sam smelled bacon cooking on the stove and felt his stomach imploding from hunger, but they couldn’t waste more time being house guests.

“What was wrong with you last night?” Sam asked Alex, as they headed down the hall, passing more leather chairs and oddball bone-framed art.

“What part?” Alex replied dreamily.

“The part where you came in dressed like Clint, talking like you were fifty years old. You don’t remember? You called Colby ‘young man?”’

Colby scoffed. “Dude, for real. I feel like I’m in some fucked-up, never-ending YouTube prank.” His voice was low and groggy. He had severe bed head and didn’t care if he fixed it.

“I don’t remember. I only remember sleeping the most comfortable, well-rested sleep I’ve ever had,” Alex said, a big smile on his doofus face.

“Regardless, we’re getting out of here this morning. Got it? Colby and I had a messed-up night,” Sam told him. There was something naïve about Alex today that he couldn’t trust, like Nate when he’d insisted they accept Trey’s invitation to visit the mansion. Like all was picture-perfect about the Belle Estate.

“But you have to agree there’s fascinating, rare things in every corner.” Alex reached out to touch an odd skeleton mask hanging in the stairwell covered in papier-mâché painted to look crackly.

“No, bro.” Sam smacked his hand away, resentful that he had to keep chastising Alex. “There’s nothing cool about a skull. You don’t know if it’s real, where it came from...now you have its energy all over your hands.”

Sam’s choice of words sounded strange even to himself. Rarely had he ever talked about inanimate things having “energy” before, but nowadays, he believed it. He believed this whole house had the power to affect them, to draw them into its hold if they stayed long
enough, and he knew he was scared of the Dark Man haunting these halls more than anything.

Alex stared at him like he’d grown an extra head. “I think all your ghost investigations are making you lose perspective.”

Sam felt struck. In all his years of knowing Alex, he couldn’t remember a time when he’d blatantly fired back this way. Thing was, he couldn’t argue. “Maybe you’re right.”

“Guys, we have to stick together. This house seems to want us to argue. We can’t let it win.” Colby moved ahead of them. His articulation hit the nail on the head, and Sam knew it.

As Alex moved ahead of him, Sam lingered, checking the hall behind him for any signs of the dark shadow entity before giving the skull on the wall an extra hard glare. Who would have a human skull in their house? “What are you looking at?” he muttered.

Downstairs, Georgia and Trey had a breakfast buffet laid out in the kitchen fit for royalty. It was no wonder famous people came here to visit. She could’ve opened a bed-and-breakfast with all this cooking. Again were the little signs: Going Away Brunch! with tent cards indicating what the foods were—French toast, strawberries with Grand Marnier whipped cream, crêpes Suzette, hickory-smoked bacon, and acai bowls.

“There you are.” The tone in Georgia’s voice was less chipper than usual. Was it possible she finally wanted them out of her hair? Had their snooping around the property last night finally made her want them to leave? “Sorry it’s a little more Southern than Hawaiian. You can take the girl out of North Florida, but not North Florida out of the girl.” She gestured to the food and then distractedly leaned into the fridge to check her schedule.

Were they cutting into foot massage time by Clint II?

Steel guitar lessons at 12? 12:01? 12:02?

“Actually, we don’t have time to stay and eat,” Sam said super politely, as though Georgia and Trey had not tried to lock them in a
cellar last night. Was nobody going to talk about that? “Tow truck should almost be here.”

“The tow truck will arrive with the convoy,” Trey said flatly. There was no joy in Clint II’s manner, no pride in showing off his paradise home, just an irritated smirk. “Another hour or so. You may as well eat what Georgia kindly prepared for you.”

Sam exchanged a guarded glance with Colby. Kindly prepared?

“Of course,” he said slowly. “Wouldn’t want to be rude or anything.”

*Or get locked in the witch’s basement.*

*Or choked against a wall by an angry spirit.*

He was starving, unfortunately, so he reluctantly picked up a small plate and moved his way around the center island picking up a couple bites of everything. His stomach rumbled with impatience.

“This all looks amazing.” Alex cheerfully dug his fork into a crêpe Suzette, whatever a crêpe Suzette was.

For a whole minute, nobody spoke, as they devoured the food like wolves.

Sam was on his fifth bacon slice when Trey held up one of the screenplays, the same one Sam had been reading last night—Diabolical Games about a demon spirit’s quest to materialize into flesh. Oddball fodder that made him shudder more than it gave him insight into Trey’s life.

“You know, in some countries, theft is punishable by death,” Trey said.

Sam’s blood rushed into his ears. “Oh…sorry,” he said with a sheepish grin. “I was just, uh, curious to read them. Hope you don’t mind.” He imagined Trey sprinting across the kitchen to hack off his hand with a blunt cleaver for his crimes, but he only smiled maliciously.
“Not at all, my friend. Not at all.” Trey threw the script onto the kitchen counter, the stack sliding across the marble, fanning out like a deck of cards and landing next to the block of knives.

Sam gulped.

Suddenly, a rattling clamor echoed through the kitchen—the ringtone of an old-fashioned phone with a loud, clanging bell. To Sam’s surprise, Georgia moved to answer an actual old-fashioned phone behind the kitchen wall inside the pantry. “Hello?”

A house phone. Sam didn’t know house phones still existed, especially ones with spiral cords in that dull green color that reminded him of a little old lady living with ten cats, a sunflower clock clucking on the wallpapered kitchen wall.

“Katie…yes, we’re all right. Screaming? No, not that I know of. Oh, right…” She laughed forcefully and leaned against the wall, pressing a hand to her eyes. Even perfect Georgia seemed off her game this morning. “No, no… You know wild green parrots, how they wake everybody up at dawn.”

Sam looked at Colby, who shook his head silently.


“Thanks so much for checking in. Yes, thanks all the same,” Georgia said, nodding and chirping with this Katie person. “Bye-bye now. Say hello to Tom for me.”

*Katie, Katie…*

Was that the Karen from the beach who’d told them to be nice? The neighborhood watch dog? Sam wanted to run over there, grab the phone, and tell Katie the Karen they needed a ride out of the North Shore, especially since she’d said they should be nice to her because they might need her one day.

But Georgia said her goodbyes and hung up. “That was Katie,” she told Trey, and Sam detected an unspoken message cross between them.
“So, tell me… Your fridge game over there.” Colby pointed across the kitchen with a slice of French toast dangling off his fork. “You play that at 3:33 in the morning, too?”

Sam nearly choked on his bite, but secretly admitted he wanted to know why Georgia and Trey were awake in the middle of the night, in the wine cellar, no less.

“Well, it’s like we told you…” Georgia began.

Trey cut in with his own whack explanation. “As the new moon draws closer, the window closes, you see…”

“Clint,” Georgia sharply scolded with wide, sleep-deprived eyes. Trey recoiled like an injured puppy. “I mean, it’s nothing. We always check the house at that time.”

“For what?” Colby asked, but was met with silence. “If everything’s so perfect…what is there to check? Or is that like an OCD thing? Do you wash your hands at 4:44?”

Georgia interjected. “He’s tired and rambling. He doesn’t want to tell you that sometimes we get romantic in the middle of the night.” She laughed and waved a hand away. “Don’t make me spell it out for you.”

“In the cellar?” Colby wouldn’t let it go.

“Colby,” Sam murmured.

“No, Sam, I want to know. Trey, what are you guys doing in the cellar, like deep under the ground? And what’s with the new moon? We’ve heard you talk about that a few times already. What happens on the new moon, Trey? Tell us.”

“Colby…” Alex admonished this time.

Sam wanted answers as well. “Yeah, what happens on the new moon, Trey?”

Alex put down his plate indignantly and glared daggers at them.
“Guys…that’s enough. You’re treating our hosts with disrespect.”

“Are we?” Colby gaped. “Whose side are you on, brother?”

Georgia threw her hands out. “Enough. Boys, boys…” She laughed nervously. “The new moon is tomorrow at 11:11 PM for the first time in twenty-four years. I’m a big fanatic of New Age spirituality, as I’m sure you’ve guessed by my décor, and of numerology and astrology and all that stuff I’m sure you don’t believe in. But that’s the way we live out here in nature. I guess you could say I’m just an old hippie to still believe in all that Age of Aquarius baloney, but it works for us. Doesn’t it, baby?”

“Yes, dear,” Trey said, still glaring at them.

Sam felt the heat of Trey’s stare melt away what civility he had left.

“Now, please…have breakfast, or I’ll be forced to eat it myself!” She patted her stomach and huffed away nervously, but Sam wasn’t falling for her don’t-let-a-woman-of-a-certain-age-eat-the-crepes-by-herself bit.

Sam didn’t care anymore—about the time, the moon phases, this house, or giving Georgia a proper goodbye. Setting down his plate, he left the kitchen with Colby following close behind. Alex could stay and be Georgia and Trey’s adopted stepchild for all he cared, but he and Colby were vacating this creepy-ass mansion with its creepy-ass art and creepy-ass owners.

“Let’s head to the car.” Trey picked the keys out of the half-skull ceramic bowl. “The truck can meet us there.”

“Sounds good to me.” Leaving this haunted, isolated house inhabited by crazy motherfuckers sounded like a plan to Sam.

He rushed past the set of three leather paintings below the grand mirror, but backed up a step into Colby’s gait when his eyes caught something he hadn’t noticed before. A network of thin blue and pink lines spread out under the leather, as if an old-school roadmap had been covered in gift tissue then sealed with acrylic. Up close, Sam could see the animal skin was like quilted patchwork,
reminding him of crude buffalo drawings, stitches, and art from Yellowstone National Park, something western-style.

Creepy.

Of course it was.

Everything in this freakin’ house was creepy. Smoothing the choppy texture of the painting with the tip of his finger, Sam quickly remembered he shouldn’t touch the items, shuddered, then walked through the foyer into the outdoors, taking a desperate lungful of North Shore air with him.
Phones were officially—black screen, circle of death, completely useless—dead.

And while hiking two miles to the minivan hadn’t been Colby’s idea of vacation, at least they were out of the mansion. He could breathe again. Cloud cover and light rain were keeping the heat index down, but humidity was up just the same. They would need serious showers when they finally got back to the Airbnb and a good scrubbing with ten thousand sage sticks.

After forty minutes, they reached the van, still dead on the side of the road. For another hour, they waited near it for the tow truck to arrive. Trey didn’t have much to say, and it was better if they stayed out of each other’s hair that way. Even Sam and Alex didn’t talk much, just swatted away gnats every few seconds.

Colby stared down the lonely road, waiting for the first of the convoy cars to start passing through. The energy felt stagnant, as though nobody would ever come to save them. He swore, if the tow truck didn’t appear this morning, he would lose his shit. This trip would never make their Top 3, despite his hope that it would have.

Finally, the cars began passing in single file, and Colby stood to await the tow truck. When a bulky pickup with the lightbar, boom, and towing fork finally appeared at the top of the hill, he rubbed his hands together, filled with renewed hope. A silent yellow light flashed, as the truck slowed down. It was done. Their ordeal was over.

“There he is,” Colby muttered with relief.

Two somber men stepped out and paced toward them, pulling down the brims of their baseball hats. “Aloha.” They nodded. “Still won’t start?”

“No, sir,” Trey replied.
“All right, let’s see what we got.”

One man worked on trying to start the van while the other checked under the hood and gave him directions for when to turn over the engine. Sam, Colby, and Alex stood off to the side watching and waiting. After about a five-minute diagnosis, the driver of the tow truck exchanged a few words with Trey that Colby couldn’t hear and then walked back to the tow truck. The hook to fasten the van to the tow truck began lowering.

“Wait, so he’s taking it?” Sam asked.

Trey nodded. “They have to. It’s dead.”

“What about us? Do we go with them?” Colby asked.

“We walk back,” Trey replied.

Panic shot into Colby’s chest. “WHAT? We just walked two miles!”

“Now we walk two more,” Trey answered, as he watched the other man put the car in neutral to prepare it for movement.

Colby looked at Sam in disbelief. He swiveled on Trey. “And this is your only car? Aren’t you people rich?” He felt himself skittering near the edge of insanity.

“We don’t need more than one car. I’m sorry cars get ruined quickly here, especially in the last year. It’s not our fault. Blame the floods.”

*Blame the floods. Colby scoffed. He would do more than blame the floods. He’d blame Nate, first and foremost, for bringing up the suggestion to visit Trey in the first place, and the dude wasn’t even here to join in the fun. Since he’d left, the bastard hadn’t even checked in on them, but Colby tried to keep calm and remember that Nate couldn’t have known any of this would happen.*

“We have everything we need,” Trey added in that fake calmness. Colby knew better. The man festered with disappointment in himself just under the surface.

Sam stepped toward the tow truck driver. “Sir? Can we bum a ride
off you? We’re not from around here. All we need is to get to our rental car in Hanalei, so we can get back to Koloa. This isn’t our van.”

“If you’re not the customer, I can’t provide a ride. Either way, we only have room for one person.” He pointed to the back seat of the cab filled with boxes.

“We’ll squeeze into one seat,” Sam said. “We’ll hang off the back. Please? We can pay you extra. Not an issue.”

Good, Sam was working the problem-solving angle, but Colby could see from the men’s expressions, they weren’t about to comply. The driver finished lifting the tow truck and locked it in place. “No can do. That’s a liability, and I’ve come too far with my business to let one stupid mistake ruin it.”

Sam groaned. “So, what are we supposed to do? What if we had a flight tonight and no way of getting back to the airport? Who would help us then?”

The man shrugged. “Beats me. I don’t even know why you’re here if you’re not a resident. Nobody’s supposed to visit this part of the island. Only locals allowed in the convoy.”

“Dude…” Sam looked at Colby.

Colby pressed his hands to the back of his head to stop the spread of heat rising up his neck into his flushed cheeks. Sam walked up to him and called Alex into the conference circle. “What if I go with them?”

“Just you? Then you get the car and come back for us?” Colby said, feeling hope illuminate his chest.

“But then what?” Alex said. “You wouldn’t be able to come back until the evening convoy anyway. This one will end by the time you get to the car.”

Shit, that was true. Colby blew out a breath. “We’ll be dead by then.”
“Stop.” Sam eyed him.

“This is bullshit,” Colby murmured. He closed his eyes and slowly counted to ten, but he couldn’t help himself. Pent-up rage made its way up his chest, and he screamed into side-of-the-road bushes.

Trey threw his hands up and waited for them to join him for the walk back.

“Colby, don’t,” Sam said. “There’s no point. When we get back to the house, we’ll call the police, tell them we tried to leave the area, but were thwarted by unhelpful locals and a healthy side of evil. We’ll ask them to come get us.”

“So we go back to the house?” Alex asked hopefully.

“Either that or walk the twenty miles to Hanalei. That’ll take all day.”

Colby couldn’t believe what he was hearing. The Belle Estate was a trap they couldn’t escape, a county fair funhouse like the one he used to visit in Kansas as a kid, with mirrors and glass all around, and no sign of an exit. He felt like the girl in Happy Death Day, waking every morning from a nightmarish dream, only to find out she was back where she started.

“THIS IS BULLSHIT!” Once he felt lighter, he calmed down and declared, “Let’s walk to Hanalei. It’s better than nothing.”

“It’s not the distance; it’s the roadwork,” Trey said, overhearing him. “You won’t be allowed through. You’ll be asked to wait, or you’ll have to hike through alternate paths. You’re not prepared with water, food, or any of the necessities for hiking the natural reserve.”

“Do you know the hiking trails?” Colby asked him. “You live around here. Life is perfect, you know all there is to know. Can’t you show us the way there?”

“I could, but then I’d be the one stuck on the other side.”

“So? Rent a hotel room in Hanalei. Wait a few days until your van
is fixed. Take one for the team. It’s the least you could do after we came back for you, to see if you were okay, after the way you acted with Nate when we left you the first time.”

“Guys,” Alex cut in. “Why are you going to such lengths when we could wait out the inconvenience safely at their house? I know it’s not what we’d planned, but we have to make the best of a crappy situation, and it’s not like it’s a shithole.”

Sam pulled him aside, away from Trey’s ears. “A crappy situation? Alex, do you even know what happened to us last night? No, you don’t because you’ve been so caught up in the lie. Just trust us—your friends—not this weirdo. We’re not in a crappy situation, we’re in a fucked-up one. There’s a difference.”

“Look…” Alex held out a hand to stop Sam. Colby and Sam drew close to him. “All this time, I’ve barely opened my mouth. It’s not my trip. You invited me, and I’m grateful just to be here. But I have to say something. What you see”—he gestured to the island around them—“is what people pay the big bucks for. The dream, the prize. Some people never get to come. Others save their hard-earned money for the chance to see this island. Yeah, Georgia and Trey are a little strange, no doubt. But they’ve been hospitable, and honestly, I’d love to spend the rest of our trip there. Hell, I would even love to live here, whereas you guys are acting like it’s a curse.”

“It is a curse!” Colby stage-whispered.

“Yeah,” Trey said from his eight-foot distance. “Don’t be ungrateful like Georgia’s daughter, Amy. Look what happened to her.” He laughed and walked off.

What the? What does that mean?

Colby faced Alex. He couldn’t give Trey his energy. “Bro, look. I hear what you’re saying, but there’s more going on that you don’t realize. Sam and I have been haunted from the moment we arrived at that house. Just…trust us.” He noticed the tow truck leaving, too. “Right now, we have to decide. We’re about to be left here to fend for ourselves.”
“I say we go back,” Sam said. “We use their phone to call the cops, then fuck it, we spend the night on the beach. Take Georgia’s sandwiches with us. We’ll camp. We don’t have to stay in the house.”

“Fine, let’s go. I’m burning alive out here.”

Colby took off in Trey’s direction. The clouds had cleared, and the sun was now in full afternoon force, burning his head and cheeks. It should’ve been no more than an hour’s walk, but the hike seemed to take forever. Nobody spoke. Nobody had the energy. But the tension was at an all-time high, and they could officially say their vacation was pretty much ruined.

In the recesses of Colby’s mind, he could hear Georgia cackling. There was no one here to blame. Two days ago, they’d collectively decided to veer from their schedule—first to appease Nate and the second time to help their friends find their stuff. But the messed-up part was how they’d come back to help Trey, all for nothing. Never again would he try to help another brother who didn’t want to help himself. Colby considered his lesson learned.

Had they missed the side street to the mansion, or were they now walking in circles? Colby could’ve sworn they’d seen the same sign pointing to the mountains like three times now.

“This is so beautiful,” Alex said, cheerily grinning at the landscape. “I’m in awe of these surroundings. My parents won’t mind if I stay. They’ll be happy for me.”

Something clicked in Colby.

He grabbed Alex by the sleeve, knocking him off his balance, and looked him dead in the eye. “Do you even hear yourself? Bro, you know I love you. I wouldn’t say this if I didn’t care about you, but something’s wrong with you. I hear it in your voice. I saw it last night when you were sleepwalking. That house has gotten to you.”

“Colby,” Alex laughed. “That’s crazy talk. Come on…”

“Bro, I’m serious. If you don’t snap out of it, you’re going to end up
just like…” He pointed to Trey.

“Hey, man, are we almost there?” Sam asked Trey, out of breath.

“Just about,” Trey called back.

Good, because Colby was literally dying of thirst. He couldn’t wait to crack open one of Georgia’s beers, her homemade lemonade, whatever. He’d take anything at this point. Even collapsing in one of her guest room beds sounded good, he didn’t care how haunted her house was. Pillows were pillows. But he knew that was his exhaustion talking, his brain bartering with reason, and the more they walked, the more he felt the land calling to him.

The ocean, the beaches, the majestic Na Pali range.

Alex had one thing right. This place was beautiful. Hadn’t he been the one who had wanted to come back to Kauai to show off this land to his friends? Who cared that they weren’t experiencing it the way they’d scheduled it? Sometimes going off the grid was necessary.

He swiped the sweat from his brow and tried to focus his vision on the road ahead, but the heat rose in waves, creating illusions of water. Or were they on a dirt path now? Yes, they were, off the beaten path where the foliage grew thicker, the palm trees shorter, giving them more shade, the land cooler. They were nearing water. Water was good. Water was their friend.

Colby felt the top of his sizzling, baked head. Not good.

Trey broke through a grove of trees and announced, “We’re here.”

Colby stepped between two bushes and his eyes fell upon the most beautiful waterfall he’d ever seen. Suddenly, he could barely remember what they’d been arguing about an hour before. The tall, shimmering cascade crashing into a turquoise pool of glistening diamonds in the sun was all that mattered. In the first three of their “planned” hikes, they hadn’t seen anything so beautiful.

Now, they’d just stumbled into heaven.
But they weren’t alone. Colby could barely make out the silhouettes of people, men and women diving, swimming, laughing joyously, blissfully living out the rest of their days in paradise. The hippies smiled and called out to him. How did they get here? Were they here all along? Was this a secret oasis of some kind?

Colby didn’t know. Nor did he care. He smiled at the glorious water. At paradise. Blue lagoon, flowers, and pure exhilaration all beckoned him to join them. And he happily complied. Because he adored Kauai.
Sam had gone hiking plenty. He knew outdoor, blazing-sun exhaustion. Real hiking suggested fun, discovery like no other. Today was different. Today, his head spun from the lack of solutions, from the way he felt like they’d been walking in circles the last several hours. It reminded him of movies where some lost soul randomly plodded through the desert, gasping in search of water.

They should’ve run into Georgia’s house at any moment. In fact, Sam was pretty sure they were close, because he recognized a copse of palm trees that seemed to form a face. But then bam—out of nowhere…waterfall. Just a waterfall. Because Kauai was in charge of you, not you in charge of Kauai.

Water had appeared suddenly, simply presented itself in the most fascinating way possible—tall, majestic, flowing into the bluest lagoon he’d ever seen, surrounded by massive boulders, bouncy orchids, palm trees, and bright orange birds-of-paradise, all shifting in the breeze like a living painting.

“Sam, take a pic, hurry,” Colby said after a minute of gasping for breath.

“My phone’s dead.” So was Colby’s, and Alex’s had never been found.

“Take it in, fellas. Nature is to be enjoyed in the present moment,” Trey said. “No photo can reproduce its beauty, and no—”

“Trey, can you just…” Sam was in no mood for the man’s bullshit at the present time. “Be quiet?” He smiled.

Trey faced the surprise oasis. “Thought you boys would appreciate a hidden gem of mine and Georgia’s after all that walking.” Suddenly, he unzipped his pants, scaring Sam out of his wits, slid them off, and plucked off his shirt. In just his shorts, Trey began climbing the boulders, expertly jumping from one platform to another,
disappearing behind one set of mini falls on the way to the biggest, most magnificent one.

Clearly, he knew his way around.

Sam marveled at the sight. Every time they ran into an obstacle on this trip, Kauai was there to remind them that it was all small stuff. Nothing was more important than beauty in the world, and natural splendor was the reason they’d come. To be fair, the most stunning sights they’d seen had been because of Trey.

“Let’s go in,” Colby said dreamily, a departure from the way he’d been acting up until a moment ago. “They’re inviting us in.”

“Who’s inviting us?” Did he mean Trey and Georgia, or was Colby seeing ghosts again? Sam waved a hand in front of Colby’s face. “Hey, what about hiking? What about getting back to the house so we can call for help?”

“We can do that after we swim,” Alex said, stripping down to his skivvies and jumping into the lagoon.

“When in Kauai,” Colby shrugged, doing the same, jumping cannonball style into the crystal-clear waters with a howl.

They were losing—to nature, to the influence of the island, to whatever magical spell the North Shore had woven over them. It was no wonder Trey was under its authority. Maybe Georgia was, too. Maybe whoever lived in these parts for some time would eventually fall captive to its inspiration. The hippies had to be forced away, pried out of their tree houses or be burned alive.

He was no longer in control. Maybe he’d never been. From the moment they’d landed, Kauai had called the shots. It was no wonder locals had warned them to be vigilant. Not just because of Belle Estate, but this whole corner of the island seemed to play them like puppets on strings, and each time they’d tried to get away, the North Shore had pulled them back in.

But damn if the sight wasn’t the most gorgeous Sam had ever seen. He had to admit he was having a hard time resisting. As Trey
climbed the slippery rocks, and Colby and Alex cavorted in the lagoon, swimming underneath the powerful streams of the waterfall, Sam struggled.

Should he run off to find the Belle Estate to use the phone? He knew they were close. There was a certain intangible quality in the air that told him they were near the ocean, close to Ke’e Beach and the house. The land emanated a particular scent that he’d recognize for the rest of his life. Or should he take advantage of this hidden paradise?

The waterfall’s misty spray created a dreamlike fog over the cove, putting him at ease. Maybe Alex was right, and they’d been overworking their imaginations. Not the dark shadow. The dark shadow had definitely been real, and Sam would spend the next several months talking about it on his channel, if he gathered up enough courage. But maybe Georgia and Trey were perfectly nice people, free spirits, whom Sam and Colby had severely misjudged. After all, they’d act different, too, if they lived in isolation. They might just be lonely people, enjoying what little company they got, and here Sam was, being an asshole.

Trey had been an asshole in return. Anybody would if they felt their guests hadn’t appreciated all they’d done for them, or hell, stolen their intellectual property into a bedroom to read in secret. It wasn’t their fault the flood had cut them off from civilization either. They should stop being dicks and be kind to their hosts. They should stop resisting and give into the land, the rainbow sun flares glinting off the water, the privacy of it all. They didn’t even have to share the splendor with other tourists.

They were spoiled.

Spoiled and totally entitled about it.

They’d been given the keys to heaven, and all they could do was bitch about it. Guilt swallowed Sam. He should’ve been grateful, proud of Trey, happy for him. He thought of his parents back home, working, the daily grind for a buck. What would they say if they saw him now? Saw him here, on a volcanic rock in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, not just peeking at Kauai’s secret gems, but being
called by them?

Lured.

Beckoned.

They would tell him to shut up and enjoy it. Take it in... Trey had tried telling them, and he’d simply told him to be quiet. He’d not only acted ungrateful, but also rude. Sam didn’t want to be that person anymore. Not when Mother Nature was being her goddess self, giving them gifts few others had ever received, courtesy of the universe.

“Sam, come on!” Colby shouted, ducking his head under the water.

Alex waved both his arms, insisting he join them.

Sam stripped down and hoisted himself off the rocks into the water, shouting as he dropped twenty feet. As he broke the surface, dunking into bubbly silence, the crust of resentment that had formed around his being shattered into pieces, melted away, revealing a Sam dying to feel alive. The refreshing water invigorated him. When his head came up again, the mist of the waterfall kissed him. The colors of the cove sparkled like a kaleidoscope, and the miracle of Kauai was his gift.

Once Sam had let his frustrations float away, he could see himself living here one day. Not now. Not with so much to do, videos to create, haunted cities to explore, hauntings to document, and the universe to conquer, but one day. Yes, he saw the allure. As much as it peeved him to admit.

From high on a rock, Trey waved to them. “Come check this out!”

They swam to the edges, crawling out of the lagoon onto slick rocks heated by sun and cooled by watery mists. Sam could only imagine what Trey wanted to show them, what other geological gems awaited them. Prehistoric flowers the size of his head? Dinosaurs grazing in harmony? Maybe they’d get their first glimpse at an actual living unicorn or waterfall fairies. At this point, he doubted nothing.
The higher they climbed freehanded, the more Sam found himself ticking with anticipation. It would be well worth the trouble, that much he knew. His feet were starting to burn, and he wasn’t sure they should leave their clothes, wallets, and phones down there for anybody to steal, but it didn’t matter. This cove was theirs to explore.

“Who’s gonna steal your shit?” Sam laughed. Now he was talking to himself.

“What’s that?” Colby asked.

“Nothing, I said it’d be nice to find shade. My feet are burning. Where is he taking us?”

“I don’t know, but I bet it’s going to be a gorgeous view.” Colby pulled ahead of Sam, climbing over two alternating boulders to catch up to wherever Trey was, probably on a plateau above them. Maybe it’d be one of those caves he’d heard about carved out of the mountainside. How cool would it be to say he took a nap inside one of those things?

Alex pulled ahead of him, too, as Sam fought to catch up. He wasn’t sure why he felt so out of shape, but it had been a tiring-ass day. He pressed his back against a rock to catch his breath and looked out at how far they’d climbed. About half the height of the waterfall. A little more to go. Trey probably wanted to show them the source of the water, some stream nestled high in the mountains. Now that they had dumped the crappy attitude, he’d probably show them their most prized geological secrets.

Through two rock towers, Sam could see the horizon of the Pacific. He squeezed between the rocks to look around, catch his balance, and gauge where they were. To his left was the Na Pali mountain range, and to his right was the tail end of a familiar lagoon—Belle Estate’s backyard facing the ocean. This waterfall cove Trey had taken them to was a hop, skip, and jump away from their house, part of their own play world, and he was calling them to appreciate the whole view.

*Lucky fucker to live here, Sam thought.*
Whips of hot air enveloped him. Sam felt on top of the world.

Whether Georgia was using him for her own purposes or not, did it matter? Trey got to call this land home while Sam and Colby, who’d worked their asses off, lived in apartments in a crowded city full of people all competing against each other, like starving donkeys after a carrot. Suddenly, Trey’s life choices made sense.

But after a minute, Sam’s feeling of euphoria dissolved into heaviness. The sensation of being watched came over him, and he had to press his back against the rock to keep vertigo from taking over. Not this again…

“Sam!” Colby called.

He couldn’t answer. He was trying too hard not to pass out.

Sam recognized this feeling by now and tried his best not to panic, but knew he was about to be confronted once again by the oppressive presence haunting this corner of the world. Why him? What did Sam have that seemed to attract the entity? Standing on that high rock, up against a wall, the sunlight became obscured, not by clouds but by the Dark Man, the one the hippies had called the Dark Lord.

“What do you w-want?” Sam stuttered, keeping his eyes closed.

The air felt denser with crackling energy. He made the mistake of opening his eyes, and his chest sank with fear. It was the first time the entity looked clear to him, more coalesced into human form, the charcoal shape of a man with long, dark hair and yellow orbs for eyes. Sam tried to scream, but the words caught in his throat.

_Do it now…I need them…_

_Do what now? What do you need? Sam tried asking, but he couldn’t force the words out. They only got as far as his brain, but then again, the spirit didn’t need to hear words aloud. He felt Sam’s panic, used it to make himself stronger, all the while Colby, unaware that he was stuck, called for him again._

“Sam! Where’d you go?” Colby’s voice sounded miles away in
another dimension, one where Sam operated on a different plane, alone to deal with his own nightmare.

He felt himself sinking onto the rocks, back still supported by stone, but unable to go on, as the Dark Man stepped toward him with actual legs, actual hands outstretched and reaching, wanting Sam, wanting the essence of his soul. His life. For his own resurrection.

*I said do it…*

At that moment, something struck him—blinding and powerful—over the head. As he keeled over onto his side, cheek smashing against hot rock, earthy, musty smells filling his nostrils, white light radiating through his head, pain feeling so good in comparison to what he knew the Dark Man could do to him…

…the rocks…

the waterfall…

the sights…

and ocean around him turned black…

swallowing his consciousness whole.
The scent of dank filth hit his nostrils, forcing open his eyes.

A murkily lit room swirled uneasily around him, but he couldn’t concentrate. His head pounded from pain. Not only could Colby not tell where he was, but he wasn’t sure what day it was either, what had happened, why he was here. His memory tried to kickstart itself and failed. The scents hitting him were of solid earth and humidity, cold moisture he’d felt inside of caves whenever his family had gone on vacation in Kentucky.

Then, the dripping.

It could’ve been a beautiful sound had he not abruptly realized he was underground. And if he was underground somewhere with water droplets falling from the ceiling, that meant he wasn’t in the sun anymore, by the waterfall, in Kauai.

*Kauai.*

He bolted up straight, the back of his head smashing against a metal grate. Whirling on his bottom, he spotted the bars in the murkiness. Bars like jail, a cell, a cage. “What the fuck…” he muttered.

The moment he spoke, his head hurt again. Colby winced against the sharp ache. He was on a dusty floor, and the horrible smell that had awoken him was dried urine. The edges of another shape caught his eye. His gaze followed a whimpering sound to someone slumped in the corner.

To his horror, it was a prison cell. Not the only person in it, from what little he could see. Someone lay slumped on their side. As his vision adjusted to the obscurity, so he saw stacks of papers everywhere, single sheets fallen on a filthy floor, unlit candles in varying stages of liqueescence around the odd-shaped room, broken furniture tossed into a corner, an upside-down chair in the middle of repair on a workbench.
Colby counted the walls—five.

In one dark corner, a desk lamp shone dimly, and someone sat at a counter hunched over. He moved slowly so as to not alarm them. His brain might’ve been having trouble putting the pieces together, but he knew that if he moved too quickly, the person would see him and then he wouldn’t be able to study the rest of the surroundings. Where the five walls met were five corners, all with a set of steps leading upwards toward a ground floor Colby couldn’t see.

A five-pointed star.

A pentagram.

Four of the five stairwells shone with bright light near the apex, which rose out of sight in line with the room’s ceiling but got darker the lower they sank into this strange room. The fifth one remained dark. Five entranceways into this dismal place. In the center of the room was a circle, about fifteen feet in diameter, painted in black with two sets of rings around the perimeter. Five sets that lined up perfectly with each stairwell. These sets, along with another five sets of rings closer to the middle of the circle, all had segments of rope attached with those special knots sailors use on boats to keep the rigging from flying around. Colby couldn’t remember the names of the knots, nor could he fathom what these rings were for, but it couldn’t be good.

He was in a cage, someone was passed out, possibly dead next to him, and not only that, in another cage on the opposite side were two more people slumped over. His panic morphed into a deep-seated dread that he’d done it—he’d ignored his intuition. Now he was in a dire situation because of his utter disregard for their safety.

All of a sudden, he didn’t care if anyone could hear him. He sat up, curled his fingers around the cold bars, and yelled loudly, “HELLOOOO!”

The person next to him roused and turned his head, facing Colby. Dismay splintered his chest, as he realized it was Sam, eyes closed, dirt smeared over his cheek. It came back to him—they’d been walking, yes, hiking, when they found the most beautiful waterfall.
It was literally off the charts—nobody knew about it. They’d climbed the rocks to the peak. Colby had been trying to follow Trey’s voice when he heard something fall on a lower level beneath him. When he dropped down to check if Sam was all right, he’d found him knocked out on the ground.

Colby couldn’t remember anything after that.

Now, here they were, trapped together, both in pain.

One of the two bodies in the other cage lifted their head as well. In the darkness, Colby couldn’t tell who it was, but if he and Sam were trapped here, then it had to be Alex, though the person’s skin looked way darker than Alex’s. The person sitting at the desk lamp turned to look at him but said nothing. He or she was backlit by the lamp’s halo, but it looked like a man, sitting there with one foot up on a stool, calmly examining him.

“Sam?” Colby whispered, willing himself not to break into tears. They’d have to approach this with an even head, if possible, but the situation looked grim. “Sam, wake up.”

He recalled the hippies in the lagoon, beckoning him to come join them. His visions so far had told him to go, to leave. They’d warned him. This time, they’d deliberately lured him. Why hadn’t he listened to his instincts and fled the Belle Estate when he’d had the chance? Once again, caring about another person had gotten him into trouble. Fuck Trey. He was almost certain he was responsible for this.

The person in the other cell scooted closer to the front bars, where he wrapped his hands around them and came into the light. Colby didn’t recognize the man who stared at him—brown skin, skinny, looking like he’d been there a while.

“Sam?” Colby’s voice shook, as he tried rousing his best friend again.

Sam’s eyes slowly opened. He pulled himself to a sitting position, rubbing his temple, where a thin stream of blood poured and ran down his cheek. His hair was matted with blood, and he groaned.
“Who do we have here?” the guy in the other cell chuckled, his voice sounding like cement-encrusted sandpaper.

Colby wasn’t sure if he should converse with the man, seeing that their captor was sitting right there at that desk, eerily not speaking or reacting to their state of awareness.

Realizing he wouldn’t get a response out of Colby, the man gave his own name. “I’m Kalani.” Kalani—Colby had heard that name before but couldn’t place it. “Who brought you here? The boy or the witch?”

“The witch?” Colby asked, despite his failed vow of silence.

“Did she enchant you?” Kalani rasped. “Her intentions aren’t good, but you probably know that by now. Not like my grandmother who visits me and tries to get me out of here. Or was it the boy—her lover?”

Colby wasn’t sure what he meant by his grandmother visiting him, but he knew the “boy” meant Trey. “Why are we locked up?”

“This is…this is just like the…” Sam was mumbling, but Colby couldn’t decipher what he was saying. “The script…ritual.”

“Ritual? What are you talking about, Sam?”

Kalani interjected with a fever-pitched hiss. “Yesss. It’s the new moon. That’s why we’re here. She needs us, five of us. Finally, I’ll be free! I’ll be free!”

The excitement in Kalani’s voice festered on his eardrums. Something told him they wouldn’t be free, not the kind of freedom Colby wanted from this situation. “Needs us for what?” Colby asked, not sure he wanted to know.

“For the ritual, what your friend says.”

“Sam?” Colby demanded an explanation.

Sam kept a hand pressed to his temple, trying to stop the blood from trickling. “One of their scripts, about a ritual…performed in a
hidden room under the house. It was all there, black and white. I thought it was just a story.”

“That’s the one,” Kalani said, eyes white in the darkness. His matted hair shook with excitement, as he peered at them. “Welcome to the Belle Estate basement.”

Faces haunted Colby. Faces from around the island—the helicopter pilot, the snorkel shop lady, even the old man at the beach when they first arrived—all of them had tried to warn them. They hadn’t been kooky locals; they’d been protective.

“How long have you been here?” he asked Kalani.

“I’ve lost count,” the young man answered. “A year? Two? I don’t know.”

Suddenly, Colby remembered where he’d heard Kalani’s name before. Manuel’s neighbor, the kid who’d disappeared whose parents feared he was trapped here, and who Manuel thought had fled the island. “Who’s that behind you?”

Kalani craned his neck. “Pauahi. He doesn’t speak much.”

Colby wondered if the fourth prisoner was another missing person.

“His family owns a snorkel shop in Hanalei.”

Dread settled into the pit of Colby’s stomach. “He went surfing?”

“Not sure. I only know he was here on holiday two years ago. He stopped talking soon after that.”

Two years. The poor guy had been held here for two years. Trey had lived here two years as well. Colby wondered if he was personally responsible for the kidnappings. “Sam, how do we get out of this? Where’s Alex?”

Sam couldn’t answer.

But Alex did. “I’m here, Colby.” The voice came from the guy sitting at the desk, reading. He swiveled the desk lamp to illuminate his
face, but Colby could only see half his silhouette. “I tried to stop
him, just so you know, but he threw me in here, too. The entrances
are all locked. One of them is blocked completely with fallen trees.”

Colby stared at Alex with his mouth gaping open. He wasn’t free,
but he wasn’t locked in a cell either. That was better than it looked.
“Get us out of here, Alex,” Colby said calmly. “Search for a key or
something.”

“Believe me, I’ve tried. All I found is this stuff,” he said, pointing to
tables full of candles, papers, candlestick lamps with bulbs and no
lampshades, and what looked like shriveled cuts of steak. “And this
book. Been reading it to try and figure out what’s going on.
Listen…” Alex swiveled in the stool and propped the large leather
tome in his lap. “She calls it her Book of Shadows.”

“Whose book?” Colby asked, wondering how the hell Alex could be
so chill with him and Sam locked up in a cage. Why was he sitting
there so long without speaking?

“Georgia. This is from 2017.” Alex began to read. “Clint may be
gone, taken by his own hand out by the koa tree. That’s the tree
Nate broke out by the pond,” Alex explained. “He felt inadequate
dispointing our Dark Lord, understandably, but the Dark Lord has
given me another chance to please him, and that chance is Trey.”

The Dark Lord.

He thought back to two days ago when Nate had broken the branch
of the koa tree. It seemed so long ago now. Trey had reacted so
sullenly. Nobody could’ve known the tree had special meaning, but
why would Trey be upset about it? He never even met Clint.

Alex flipped forward through the book’s pages. “Our dark angel has
promised limitless riches at the convergence of the energy lines. I
cannot disappoint him. See?” Alex pointed to the page, his voice
deep, even, unaffected. Why was he so intent on studying the damn
house’s artifacts at a time like this?

“Brother, I don’t care what she wrote. Try to get us out of here.
Something to pry the bars…anything.” Colby’s panic quickly turned
to terror. At any moment, Trey or Georgia would return to find him awake. He shuddered to think what they would do to him, Sam, and the two other men.

“The energy lines are the ley lines. Remember?” Alex asked, pointing to the five stairwells. “There’s a diagram in here. The lines cross, forming a star. Each of those entryways are located at a star’s point. This circle marks the middle.”

“That’s where we go,” Kalani said in an oddly excited way, as he rubbed his hands together in anticipation.

What? No. Colby’s heart rate sped in his ears. They wouldn’t be “going in” that circle for nothing. He’d fight them to the death before he allowed himself and Sam to be… The ropes, he thought. He could see it now. The ropes were for tying them down to the floor—the outer set for hands, the inner set for feet. Colby fought the bitter taste of bile rising in his throat.

“The circle represents the Dark Lord’s energy holding all life together…” Alex continued.

“Alex, I’m begging you, put the book down and look for something we can use to break these locks, before it’s too late.” Colby reached out and grabbed the lock with both hands, rattling it furiously, throwing all his energy into the action, which he knew was a mistake. He had to preserve himself.

But Alex kept reading, as if in a trance. “He requires the still-beating hearts of five young men…”

No, this wasn’t happening.

“Fertile young men. One representing each of the five attributes the Dark Lord has promised me in exchange for his manifestation—riches, fame, restored youth and beauty, everlasting health, and immortality.”

Me—she believed her Dark Lord had promised her, not anyone else. Only Georgia. Trey wouldn’t get shit. Not that Colby believed anyone would earn anything from a spirit. There was nothing paranormal going on here. Georgia and Trey were simply two truly
disturbed individuals who’d lost their minds out in isolation. Two individuals in it for their own personal gain.

“Alex…” Tears rose into Colby’s eyes. He hung his head, as they dripped down his face. “Dude, please…”

But Alex held the book higher, transfixed as he continued to read aloud. “Our first attempt failed. We didn’t know one of the young men wasn’t fertile. The flood ruined our second attempt. We’ve been cleaning the altar room of detritus ever since. I have since learned the secret, why I dream the numbers every night—11:11—and now we are ready…”

Colby couldn’t listen to this anymore. This didn’t mean that at 11:11 PM tonight on the new moon, they’d all be murdered, did it? But there were only four of them locked up. Did they plan to use Alex as the fifth sacrifice?

“It’s a demon.” Kalani clapped, then laughed a low, sickly cackle that made Colby break into hives. “The dark angel is not an angel—it’s a demon. And 11:11 is his number.”
His head felt like a coconut that’d been split open by a meat mallet, but Sam was cognizant enough to understand what was happening despite the bright lights swirling around his vision. They were trapped. Underneath the Belle Estate. After ignoring their instincts, giving these people the benefit of the doubt, letting their good side try and help a brother, here they were anyway.

A hard lesson, for sure. Sam would never trust anyone ever again.

If he ever got out of here, that was.

And now this prisoner in the next cell was talking about a demon controlling Georgia? Of course, the Dark Man was a demon. It was evident all along. What else would’ve manifested as an ominous cloud looming over him, pinning him to walls, and causing him to blank out atop rock formations? Sam wished he would’ve known more about demons after all the investigations they’d done, but they’d specifically stayed away from demonology. Harmless ghosts were one thing—evil entirely another.

But he should’ve known regardless. He’d let his skepticism and belief in the good in people get in the way. Now he wasn’t even sure he could trust Colby, and that scared him more than anything. Everyone looked like someone to mistrust, especially that other guy who might’ve been delirious after being locked up for so long. Not to be rude, but Kalani didn’t seem to have the best mental capacities at the moment.

“How do you know?” Sam asked him. “How do you know it’s really a demon?”

Kalani twisted his head and looked at Sam upside-down. “I’ve been here awhile now. I’ve listened to them talk. Once you’re locked up, they don’t care if you overhear them or not. You’re going to die anyway. They talk freely. Especially the last several days. They’ve been in here rehearsing for the big one.”
“The big what?” Colby cocked his head.

“Ritual.” Kalani turned back onto his side, apparently tired and using up too much of his weak energy to speak. “Good. I'll finally die. Maybe then, I'll get to be reunited with my grandmother.”

“Stop, don’t talk... don’t talk that way,” Sam said with a shudder. “You’re not going to die. And you?” He turned his attention back to Alex. “Why aren’t you in here with us?” That came out wrong. Not that he wasn’t happy for Alex, that at least one of them should be spared from this fate, but why had they excluded him?

Alex kept his chin down, still reading the Georgia’s journal. “Trey will be back soon. He will give you all the answers you need. Currently, they’re preparing for the feast. I’ve been asked to watch over you.”

“Watch over us?” So he was helping? Sam’s skin crawled with what felt like a million ants. “Feast?”

“The reaping, the ritual,” Alex explained, flipping a page. “The Dark Lord, the Dark Angel—he’s tried multiple times to reincarnate back into the world. The ley lines of this coastline intersect, create his portal. This is the very spot right here.” He stood from his stool and walked to the center of the circle, holding out his arms. “This is why Georgia and Clint built their home over it. It all came to them during dreams.”


Sam couldn’t believe what he was hearing. Was there really a Dark Man, or had the hippies only imagined him? Would the ritual actually work, or was it crazy talk? He then remembered his own encounters with the cloudy, menacing mass of dark energy—in the kitchen, in his nightmare, in the upper hallway. It had to be real.

“You sound a little too interested in this, bro,” Colby’s voice seethed with anger.

“Yeah, why aren’t you up those stairs, checking those entrances for
a way out? Or find a hammer, or a fucking rock. Break these locks, Alex.” Sam tried to stand, but the cell ceiling was low, and he fell off balance when his head spun in seventeen different directions. Whoever had hit him—probably Trey—had gotten him good.

“The Dark Lord needs to be invited in,” Alex ignored them both. He sounded as if he was reciting a line from a play. “Through blood ritual. It’s the only way to make him human again, by sacrificing the viscera already living on this plane. He needs flesh and blood to make him whole again.”

“Is that why we’re here?” Sam shuddered. He cast a glance at the circle and all the rope pieces tied to rings. “We’re going to get tied to that?”

“Don’t be afraid, boys. It’s for the greater good,” Alex said, squatting about a foot away from the cage. Something in Alex’s inexpressive eyes made Sam recoil in horror.

“Fuck your greater good. Get me out of here,” Sam demanded. Alex had been influenced, indoctrinated, more than all of them. Sam had noticed the change in his behavior for two days now.

Alex stood and stepped away. “It’s the way demons have been entering the physical plane for thousands of years. There’s powerful energy here. It’s why Burt Ryder bought this land. It’s why he ended up killing himself when he failed to bring the Dark Lord through, why the hippies killed themselves when they failed, too. Even Clint Rollins killed himself after disappointing the Dark Lord twice.” Alex shook his head sadly. “Nobody likes to disappoint the Dark Lord. They all worship him.”

Nobody spoke.

This was madness. Pure madness.

Now he understood why cults in the news and movies always ended badly.

Sam clapped once loudly. “Alex! Wake…the fuck…up! You’re under a spell! Wake up and get us out of here!” Looking to Colby, he saw
him taking off his rings and tapping them against the locks in a
feeble effort to break them. Nothing was going to get them out of
here. The locks were massive and the bars too strong and closely set
together.

Sam looked at Kalani and the other guy, Pauahi, wasted away to
nothing, the light of hope in their eyes lost. Kalani lollled to one
side, then the other, humming a song softly before laughing at some
inside joke. Where had he heard the name Pauahi before? Was he
the shopkeeper’s nephew who’d disappeared just before the storm?
It would make sense.

They had to get out of here. Sam’s time on this Earth wasn’t over
yet; neither was Colby’s, Kalani’s, or Pauahi’s. He watched Alex
stroll the basement, picking up random objects off tables—bones
and skulls and femurs and feet.

Was that…

“Human remains,” Alex said without a speck of disdain.
“Fascinating, isn’t it?”

Was that what all the stuff was, scattered around the basement
corners? Remains of dead people? Might some sad sack in the
future be holding up, examining Sam’s bones one day?

*Not if I can help it…*

“Alex…” Sam pleaded. “Bro. Why are you ignoring us?”

Alex held up a long bone up to the dim light of the desk lamp. “He
has promised us riches, fame beyond our wildest dreams…”

“Us?” Colby snapped. “Alex, they’re using you! Wake the hell up
from this spell. It’s not you talking, and since when do you care
about fame and riches? What we’ve always loved about you is how
down-to-earth you are. That just proves it’s not you talking!”

“You don’t know me, Colby.”

“No?” Colby stammered. “I don’t know the guy who’s trying to
figure life out? The guy who’s working toward a degree, with an
internship around the corner, the guy that wants a family of his own to love one day? The guy who’s quiet in public but fucking hilarious in our group? I don’t know you, you say?”

Alex closed his eyes, as if to fend off Colby’s truth attack.

Colby went on. “You’re saying everything they want you to say. Don’t you see that? You’re not you.”

Kalani sat up again, wrapped his hands around the bars. “For a while, she gave up trying to please the Dark Lord,” he said, clearly having his own dialogue in his mind. “Getting five fertile men at once wasn’t easy the older she got. She tried with a few of her daughter’s friends, but when that didn’t work, things didn’t go so well.”

“What do you mean?” Sam asked.

Kalani picked at his fingernails. “Her daughter found out what she was up to, threatened to leave, tell police what her mother was doing, what her parents had been up to for years…” Kalani laughed, then the light faded from his eyes, as he looked up at them both. “I’m sure you’ve seen her. In the garden. Watching over the property.”

“Who?” Colby demanded.

“Amethyst,” Kalani replied. “I haven’t seen the mermaid myself, but I do hear she’s beautiful. The perfect likeness of her daughter. Tell me, is she?”

Sam stared at Kalani—the madness in his eyes, the desire to see the world beyond this prison cell again. “But it’s not her. It only looks like her,” he assured him. Although now Sam wasn’t entirely sure. With the human remains scattered around this room, he wouldn’t put anything past the monsters living in this house.

“Forever encased in stone. Now she’ll always be at Belle Estate. And she’ll never tell. She’ll never tell!” The young man laughed, or cried, Sam wasn’t sure which. After a while, madness and sorrow sounded the same.
So, the mermaid statue wasn’t just a likeness of Amethyst, but she was Amethyst? “How?” Sam choked on his own throat. “How did they do that?”

“She grinds them. The bones. Using that.” Kalani pointed to a piece of machinery rusting in the dark corner of the basement. “Ground bones become cement. Cement becomes statues. She also makes bowls, pottery, mugs, lawn ornaments, you name it. She works down here. This is a studio workshop. And we’re the art.” He giggled to himself.

No. No fucking way.

“That bowl?” Kalani pointed to a rustic ceramic bowl in the corner of his cell, assumingly for going to the bathroom. “That was someone used for the previous ritual. You fail, you become art.” He laughed. “You become art! The house is filled with the dead!”

Sam thought his eyeballs would pop out of his skull from how hard he was staring, listening to this grim story. The core of his being shook, like one last fire giving warmth to a frostbitten, nearly expired body. “I…”

He couldn’t speak. It was impossible, all of it.

Yet he believed it more than he believed in the spirit world, because humans were worse. Humans were sick fuckers would do anything for what they wanted.

Sam ducked his head between his knees until a wave of nausea passed through him. It was worse, so much worse than he thought. It was one thing to please a demon spirit and kill others, but to kill your own daughter? How could she?

“After she killed Amethyst,” Kalani went on, “the Dark Lord saw what she was capable of, what she would do for him. In a dream, he told her to go out into the world. She worried she couldn’t, that she was too old, but he told her he would give her boundless energy to do the job right. Pickings on five fertile, young men are slim here, especially with locals already suspicious of her, so he instructed her to go out into the world, find men abroad, and bring them back.
That’s when she found her boy on the cruise. Her do-boy!”

Kalani laughed like this was the funniest bit of them all. Sam couldn’t exactly dispute the truth—Trey had been naïve as hell, but even after all this, he felt sorry for him.

“The moment she saw him, she believed him to be Clint, back from the dead to help her appease the Dark Lord, filled with regret at having taken his own life. That’s what happens. The Dark Lord makes you own your guilt so fully over failing him, you end your life. Suicides on this land have been pretty rampant.”

Sam couldn’t believe all that’d been going on just underneath the surface. Literally—under their noses, under the house, under the thinly veiled lie of hospitality. A trap, and they’d walked right into it. What Sam wouldn’t give to go back in time two days—hell, two hours—and decline the offer to come see paradise.

Alex looked up from the Book of Shadows. “I got it. Now that Georgia thinks Clint is back from the dead to help her complete the ritual, she set out to find five sacrifices. And here we are, current day. As a reward, anyone who helps bring the Dark Lord what he needs by 11:11 on the New Moon—tonight, by the way—will receive the bounty of his promises.”

“Bounty of his promises? Bro, are you insane?” Colby scoffed, pressing his face as far as he could between the bars. “So you’re helping them now? Nice. Great job, brother. And here we thought you were our friend. I hate to tell you, but there’s only four of us in here. You know what that means, right?”

“Plot twist,” Sam added. “They’re going to throw you in here with us after you’re done keeping watch, or whatever the hell they’ve asked you to do.”

“You’re the fifth, brother,” Colby said. “You’ll die too, get zero reward, and that’ll be the shitty conclusion to our shitty vacation. Are you sure it’s not virgins the Dark Lord needs? ’Cause you’d be perfect, bro.”

Someone was coming down one of the sets of stairs, their long
shadow lumbering. It was Trey, rasping with effort. He pushed someone ahead of him through the darkness. There was one more guy, hands tied behind his back with rope. The man hobbled into the ring, where the desk lamp’s light illuminated the side of his face.

“We have all five now. I will alert Georgia so we can begin.”

Gasping for air in the middle of the circle was Nate.
“Nate?” Colby’s mind spun with a million, out-of-control questions. First and foremost was making sure he was okay. “Nate? Brother, you all right? How’d you get here? What happened to you?”

Nate’s eyes rolled into the back of his head. Nate was not home.

Trey took his wrists and tied them to one set of ropes with little to zero resistance on Nate’s part. “Kick him!” Colby tried instructing him. “Nate, get his nuts!”

With Alex’s help, Trey tied Nate’s feet to the inner ring. Colby couldn’t believe what he was seeing. Alex had completely lost it. When the ropes were lifted, Colby saw the undersides stained dark red from previous use.

“What the hell are you doing? You want us to die? How come Nate’s back? Did he ever leave? Nate, brother, look at me…”

Nate groaned a few unintelligible sounds and then writhed before
falling back to unconsciousness.

Colby turned a glare on Alex who smartly avoided his gaze. “Nobody lives forever. It’s a lie. They’re using you. I don’t know how, but you fell under the same influence as Trey. You need to wake up, Alex. Alex, look at me.”

He thought maybe if Alex would just meet his gaze, he might snap out of it. He might remember who he was, where he came from, who his friends were. This was what happened to people without a strong sense of identity—they got easily swayed by historic hippie witches.

“The rewards are bountiful,” Alex droned, shifting to the desk.

Colby shout. “Because of you, we’re all going to die! You want that on your conscience? You’re going to have to live with that fact all your life if you don’t change course right now. You hear me? Alex, are you even listening?”

Alex stood hovering over the Book of Shadows again, reading and blocking out Colby. Through the bars, Sam threw a tiny pebble at Nate. “Actually, if we die, we die because of Nate’s niceness to people. Just saying.”

“Pfft, truth,” Colby scoffed. “Thanks for making us come, man.” Even though he knew Nate couldn’t hear him, even though he’d already forgiven Nate, who couldn’t have possibly known this was going to happen.

The basement grew quiet and cooler as the sun dropped in the world above them, the world Colby wasn’t sure he’d ever see again. With Alex studying the book with instructions to kill them, Kalani quietly muttering to himself, Pauahi out cold, and Nate muttering under his breath, Colby felt desolation slide into his bones and heart, dissolving his tissues. He chewed on his lip and urged himself not to cry.

This was the end.

How would his parents feel when they found out? Would they
blame each other? Would they say, “I told you so,” when talking about how their son left to find fame and fortune in L.A., only to meet this bitter end while on vacation? Would his disappearance remain a mystery?

What about Corey and Jake and all his friends back home? Life would go on for them after a while. Colby thought back to the amazing life he’d lived in his twenty-two years. Never did he think it’d be over this soon, but that’s how it was, wasn’t it? One day you were walking along, minding your own business. The next, you were gone. He wasn’t ready. But if he had to go, he was just super thankful to God, the universe, or whoever was in charge that he’d had such a great time while here. He’d really, truly lived life to its fullest.

Colby pressed his fist against his face to push back the tears.

“What do you think happened to him?” Sam stared at Nate. “I thought he was already back in Kansas.”

Colby sniffed. “I’m guessing he never left. We must’ve dropped him off at the airport and either he forgot something back at the Airbnb, took an Uber back to get it, at which point Trey must’ve grabbed him, or…” Colby shook his head. There were so many possibilities.

“Trey intercepted him,” Alex mumbled from his spot at the desk. “He told Nate he wanted to ask him something in person and would meet him at the airport, since his flight wasn’t for another few hours. Not that complicated, really.” He flipped a page.

Colby seethed.

No wonder Trey was late to picking them up at the convoy after the helicopter tour. He was kidnapping Nate. Where had he put him? Had he been in the van when Trey picked them up at the convoy spot? In the trunk? Hidden in the undercarriage? Could Nate’s hidden body have been the reason why the van had failed?

“Tell us the truth. Was your phone ever really missing?” Sam asked.

“Of course not. Neither was Nate’s iPad. I have both upstairs,” Alex
replied.

Colby stared at Alex with mounting rage in his heart. How dare he talk so casually? “Bro, I could live sixty more years and be just fine if I never heard your voice again.”

Alex turned, looked at Colby through a narrowed, hurt gaze. Burnt edges of their friendship lingered there. Deeply buried, but there. “Necessary ends require necessary means,” he spoke with a lifeless tone. Something told Colby not to give up on him just yet. He was under a spell, not entirely liable for their situation.

“All right, Alex.” Colby nodded. “I see you. I see you.”

The whole thing had been orchestrated. Colby had never felt so played in his life. Georgia had been planning this for a ridiculously long time. When she met Trey on her cruise, she’d found the perfect idiot, and now whatever magic she’d woven over him, she’d woven over Alex, too. For two years, she’d been training Trey, getting him to comply with her antics down to the minute, as evidenced by their detailed schedule on the fridge, making it a game to keep him motivated. Meanwhile, she was creating her own personal assassin. Colby wondered if she’d perform the slayings herself, or if she’d have Trey do them.

*Neither, he stopped himself.*

He wouldn’t be dying at anyone’s hands today. Not today, not tomorrow, not if he could help it.

Yes, he wished he would’ve been quick enough to put it all together earlier—Trey’s blank stare, the house’s macabre art and furniture, (obviously now) made of human bones and skin, the flesh paintings, the bowl in the living room (someone’s skull), all remains of good, clueless people who’d fallen for the deception, the hospitality, Georgia’s Southern charm. They’d been steeped in the energy of the dead, all of them warning Colby to leave.

Who knew how long she and Clint had been luring friends into their home, talking about the Dark Lord on moonless nights, romancing them with visions of fame and fortune, if only they’d do the Dark
Lord’s bidding? How many of those clueless, hopeful hippie friends had believed her lies and ended up in this very basement? How many failed rituals, wasted sets of five young men at a time, had they burned through?

No wonder the house was full of ghosts.

If Colby could hang onto one scrap of pride, it was this—he never fully fell for Georgia’s charades. Once here, he and Sam had spent the better part of their stay acting on their instincts, trying to make sense of the negative energy they felt, trying to get away. Once back in Koloa, they’d tried to stay away. They’d only come back because of the lost items. Then, to help Trey.

They’d almost made it.

All along, they’d known something was wrong. The Belle Estate hid horrors in a basement built beside a sea cliff. If that wasn’t hell wrapped up in heavenly packaging, he didn’t know what was. Their training about different types of energy at haunted locations over the last couple of years had prepared them for this. If they ended up in the basement today, it was only because their good faith in mankind had put them here.

In the end, kindness had been their weakness. Colby wouldn’t change anything about that.

“We should’ve left the devices,” Sam croaked, as he sank lower against the bars. “Our lives were worth everything. iPads can be replaced.”

“We were trying to help,” Colby told him.

“We were stupid.”

“We didn’t know we’d end up here, Sam. Our two sides were at war with each other—follow our instincts or help our friends. We tried to do both.”

“Colby, I had a freakin’ demon pin me to a wall.”

“Yeah, and I had ghosts telling me to leave.”
“You had neither.” A new voice spoke from the cell next door.

Colby and Sam both turned to look, but Kalani was asleep. The other kid, Pauahi, was up. He moved on his side, picking at his scabby legs. “Sorry, what?” Colby asked.

“There’s no demon. No visions,” the young man spoke, his voice creaky from disuse. “She’s been drugging you from the moment you arrived. You, your friend who’s passed out, your other friend who can’t think for himself…”

“What do you mean, drugging us?” Colby asked.

Pauahi looked at them, dark circles around black eyes warned of deep levels of hopelessness Colby hadn’t reached yet and hopefully never would. “With salvia.”

“What the hell is that?”

“A potent native plant. Weed, basically. It grows all over the property, a type of sage from the mint family. Causes hallucinations, deep feelings of euphoria, out-of-body experiences. As strong as LSD. She puts it into all the food and drinks, uses it as incense. All those candles…” He lifted a craggy finger to the unlit pillars lining every corner of the basement. “Laced with salvia. She makes them down here.”

Understanding hit Colby like a brick over his head. That minty smell throughout the house, the one that smelled like hay burning—that had been a drug?

“The hippies smoked it the whole time they lived here,” Colby whispered to Sam. “Alex read that the other day. It was the least of the drugs they did, but it’s powerful.”

“We’ve been inhaling it,” Sam said. “We’ve been drugged for days.”

“Inhaling, drinking, eating…” Colby shook his head slowly. They’d eaten so much of Georgia’s food, drunk her lemonade, her “homemade” craft beers.

“I got sick right after lunch that day,” Sam said. “Remember? After
Colby absorbed the truth of it. Of course there was no real demon. The last few years of investigating haunted places, weird shit had happened, sure, but never had there been any evidence of actual demons. Not that they still couldn’t exist, but it was more likely that Georgia was chasing dreams. Literally dreams.

Of demons.

Of riches.

Of youth.

Whatever she believed in, all exacerbated by a mind-altering substance.

“That’s more fucked-up than anything. Makes sense. She’s lived here fifty years, Sam. She breathes it in daily. She’s immersed in the stuff.”

“Wouldn’t that make her immune after a while?” Sam asked.

Pauahi chimed in. “Over time, it changes the composition of your brain.”

Colby rubbed his face. He wished he could stop breathing the air, just throw on an oxygen mask and reclaim his clear mental faculties. Even drugged, they’d managed to know something was wrong and had made careful decisions. Still, for two days, they’d all, in one form or another, been under the influence.

As much as Colby wanted to believe in the paranormal, there always seemed to be an explanation for most supernatural phenomena, something to debunk them, and in this case, it had a name—salvia. Too bad what would kill them tonight at 11:11 PM if they couldn’t think on their feet fast enough wouldn’t be the weed, hippie ghosts, or demons.
It’d be the greed. Despicable human greed.
Sam’s back hit the cell bars with a clang, his mind blown open.

As strong as LSD. Sure, they’d taken a few hits of weed here and there—who in L.A. hadn’t? But he’d never done any drugs stronger than that. Thinking back over the last few days, he was pretty sure he’d seen the stuff everywhere. In the backyard, growing all over the property, an odd-smelling plant dripping with flowers, in the candles, in the food...

Even now, Sam was sure it was in his system. He hadn’t felt whole since they’d first arrived at the Belle Estate. So, did this mean the Dark Man he’d been seeing everywhere wasn’t real? His brain had made it up? Considering Colby had experienced a totally different hallucination, it made sense that the salvia affected them each differently. Apparently, Alex had been affected the same way Trey had—by turning into a dumbass.

Though Sam knew it wasn’t his fault, it still made Alex, at this very moment, Enemy #1. If Sam and Colby wanted to get out alive, they’d have to defeat one of their best friends. Ugh. The very idea made him sick. He hated Georgia and even Clint for doing this to them, for turning them against each other, for taking their friendship trip and turning it into The Hunger Games.

An hour more went by, as Sam mulled over his options, watching Alex skulk around the dungeon, lighting candles, muttering how Trey had instructed him to do so. He even lit up a dry bundle of salvia—a smudge stick as the witches called them—and blew out the flame, letting the smoldering smoke fill the basement.

*Great. More inhalation of the stuff.*

Across from him, Colby sighed, as he looked helplessly at Sam, but Sam turned away. If he wasn’t careful, he could easily fall into despair just looking at his best friend’s downtrodden expression. Sam had always taken on his friends’ feelings as his own, especially
Colby’s, and he couldn’t afford to fall into depression.

Sam carefully focused on Alex’s methodical movements instead. When he was done walking around the room, doing Trey and Georgia’s bidding like a fool, he proceeded to climb up and down each of the four unblocked stairwells that formed the star, shaking the gated entrances that Sam couldn’t see but knew were there from the way they rattled each time Alex shook one.

“What are you doing?” Sam asked.

“Checking to see if they’re coming,” he replied. “It’s getting dark out.”

Soon it’d be sunset. After that, they only had a few hours to live. Escape, he corrected himself. Although Sam had no idea how to do that, but if he wanted to live, every thought that crossed his mind had to be about survival.

In the middle circle, Nate had opened his eyes and begun wriggling slowly, as he strained against the ropes strapping him down.

“Hey, brother. Welcome to hell,” Colby muttered. “Not that we’re blaming you or anything. Just saying.”

Sam’s heart ached for Nate. At least in this cell, Sam could move around freely. He expected Nate to scream in horror when he saw where he was, but he only spent the first few minutes of his cognizant state watching Alex do his thing. Finally, he blinked a few times and chuckled to himself.

“What’s so funny?” Sam asked.

“I am so writing a bad review of this place when I get out of here.”

“Too bad you’re not getting out anytime soon,” Alex replied.

Nate’s right cheek pressed into the dirty concrete floor away from Alex’s earshot. “Too bad you left one gateway open.” He winked at Sam, then laughed and laughed, each peal more cacophonous than the next.
Nate’s lost his shit, Sam thought.

In his body, he felt the stirrings of his bladder but refused to use the human skull bowls thrown into the cell’s corners. The fact that he even had to consider it, that he was even in this predicament, swelled inside his chest. Sam had always prided himself on his ability to stay calm, but that only meant the anger would explode one day.

He picked today.

“Hey, Alex. What do I do when I need to take a fat shard?” he asked, as a low laugh rumbled from Colby’s chest. Even as they faced death, they could still laugh.

“Go in your cell. I can’t help you.”

“Of course you can’t. But bro, really? You wouldn’t go in a bowl, and you know it. Come on, let me use a real bathroom. Where is it anyway?”

Alex tilted his head but didn’t say no.

“Bro, come on. It’s nasty. Is that your last wish for me? That my last dump be taken inside a human skull? Give me some dignity. I paid for this trip after all. You wouldn’t be getting fame, riches, and everlasting life from the Dark Lord if it weren’t for me bringing you to his doorstep.”

“And me.” Colby lifted a hand.

“Come on, you can watch me the whole time to make sure I don’t escape, even though that’s weird.” It was all Sam could do, appeal to Alex’s sense of fastidious cleanliness, being the guy who couldn’t use a public bathroom himself. He wasn’t even sure Alex had that kind of power. For all Sam knew, only Trey or Georgia had the keys to anything important around here.

Apparently not.

Alex fished a key out of his pocket, eyed Sam carefully, then proceeded to slowly push the key into the lock and twist the handle
open. Everybody in the basement held their breaths. Colby stared slack-jawed at Sam, a silent question on his lips. Should he do anything to help? Should he run out now that the cell door was open a few inches?

Sam gave him a barely discernible shake of his head. Once he’d stepped out, Alex slammed the cell door back up, locking it quickly. He escorted Sam, grabbing him by the arm and pushing him forward. When they reached one of the five corners of the basement, Alex shoved Sam into a room the size of a closet with a smelly toilet and closed the metal door. From the shadows moving along the bottom gap, Sam knew he was guarding the only way out.

His heart pounded, blood whooshing through his veins.

Sam didn’t have to use the bathroom. In fact, he was pretty damn dehydrated to even need to go, but at least he had a few minutes to think about and concoct his next move. He was out—out of the cell—and that was a minor victory in and of itself.

In the pure darkness of the space, he could feel skitterings, insects or spiders, maybe even a small mouse, but Sam couldn’t freak out right now. He had to stay focused. He had minutes, maybe only seconds, until Trey and Georgia returned, and then it’d be too late. At least in this moment, he only had Alex to deal with, but that may have been worse. He didn’t want to hurt his friend, no matter how under the influence he was.

The door popped open a crack. “You done yet?”

“Just about,” Sam replied. Holding his breath, sitting alone with his potential energy, he muttered a prayer. If he got out of this alive, he’d appreciate life more. He’d do more things to help people. He’d be a good person. Even better, more grateful, than he was now. He’d learned a lot about kindness since his Vine days, and if given the chance, he wouldn’t waste it.

Standing, his aching head hit the closet ceiling. He breathed slowly, preparing for whatever came next. Filled with adrenaline, he slowly pushed the metal door open. “Thanks, man. I needed that so badly.”
Alex stepped aside to let him come out.

Sam nodded a thanks.

And then he smashed the metal door into Alex’s face. Once, twice, three times until Alex slumped to the ground, hands over his head. “I’m so sorry, man,” Sam said, running first to one stairwell, then to the other. “Shit, which is it?”

“That one!” Colby pointed to the third stairwell, the one Nate had mentioned was unlocked. Like an ape in a cage, Colby gripped the cell bars and jumped up and down. “Hurry up, he’s getting up!”

Sam bolted into the third stairwell, climbing the steps two, three at a time until he reached the top and burst through the loose grate into the sweet, fresh outdoors, Alex gaining behind him. Blood dripped from his temple, but there was no time to feel guilty. Sam searched for a way to lock the gate but couldn’t see how to do it without a padlock, so he grabbed a large fallen palm frond and shoved it into the stairwell to hit and distract Alex who was already near the top. Alex staggered back a bit, while Sam grabbed another palm frond and rigged it underneath the door handles.

Yes, that would hold, but not for long. He grabbed another, and another, as many as he could find around the edges of the gazebo—the gazebo…that was where one entrance was? Yes, last night when they’d heard a scream. Maybe it’d been Kalani or Pauahi. Maybe it’d really been Georgia and Trey before they’d tried to shove Sam and Colby in here last night.

The blockade was good enough. It’d hold for two minutes max.

Sam found himself on a familiar path. He could either run toward the lagoon and hide, find his way out toward shore, or bolt toward either side of the property to find his way out. But he had no time to think. Coming from the opposite side of the patio was Trey, carrying extra coils of rope. The moment he saw Sam, he dropped the rope and charged toward him.

Sam did the only thing he could—bolted into the house and locked the sliding glass door. No, he didn’t want to be back inside the
house, but it would keep Trey outside and give Sam another moment to think. Trey pounded on the slider and yelled obscenities that formed little clouds of breath on the glass. Sam then ran into the kitchen straight for the wall phone. He’d never used one before, but how difficult could it be?

He pressed 9-1-1 on the buttons and lifted the part that presses against your ear—whatever that’s called—nothing happened. Maybe he had to lift the phone first? Yes. Trey pounded on the glass. Damn ancient technology. Trey had picked up a patio chair and begun throwing it against the glass, but the chair bounced off with a resounding sharp noise that would alert Georgia in no time.

Just as Sam was about to dial again, he spotted the cluttered desk between the kitchen and garage door, and in the middle—someone’s laptop. Laptops he knew how to use. He had seconds to alert the outside world before he could attempt running out the front door, because at this point, Trey would chase after and kill him, and if Sam did one last thing, it’d be to make contact—for Colby, for Nate, and yeah, even that fucker, Alex.

His fingertip grazed along the trackpad until the screen lit up. Trey was now flitting past the windows of the dining room, and Sam knew he had figured out a better way of getting inside. Sam tried logging into his email, but his fingers shook so badly, every letter or symbol he typed turned out to be the wrong one, or lowercase when it should’ve been uppercase, or exclamation mark when it should’ve been a question mark.

“Fuck…” he muttered. “Stay calm…”

Suddenly, he thought of something else and tried pulling out his phone from his pocket, but realized he was still in his shorts. Trey would’ve taken away their phones when he knocked them out at the waterfall. So much for finding the helicopter guy’s business card like he’d hoped to. But then he realized he didn’t need it. He remembered the name of the company—Kauai Air Tours. He typed it into the Google search box, right as he heard footsteps pounding through the house.

Trey had found his way in.
“Come on…” Sam held his breath, as the search came up. He clicked on the link for Kauai Air Tours and immediately searched for the Contact page. It took a moment, because the connection was so damn slow—or maybe it just felt that way.

He could see Trey’s pissed-off glare and hear angry footsteps coming for him then disappearing around the corner. “Yeah, you’re dead now,” he was saying.

Frantically, Sam typed: “We’re at Belle…” knowing he’d appear behind him at any moment. It was as far as he could get. He’d meant to type “Belle Estate,” but suddenly, Trey was there, holding the Buddha head high over his head as it came down so fast, Sam felt the whoosh of air that preceded it.

He rolled to the side, as the head crashed into the laptop’s edge. Sam gripped it and tried to run off with it, but Trey reached out, grabbed him by the hair and smashed Sam’s head into the dining wall with a grunt. He realized just then why in cartoons, they always depicted people with stars and birds floating around their heads whenever they got hit, because he only saw fragments of light.

He might die, but his arms were still wrapped around the laptop.

Somehow, Sam managed to stand and run a few yards through the dining room, still holding the laptop, which he was beginning to feel he should let go of, if he was to run properly. But it was his only way to send a message. Do not let go, he told himself…do not.

Trey reached him again, threw his heavy body on top of Sam, and tried smashing his head one more time with the Buddha bust. Instinctively, Sam lifted one arm to block his head as the stone piece knocked him in the arm, snapping his bone with a sickening crack. He cried out, watched with one eye, as Trey lifted the stone again to render another blow, but Sam tugged at an area rug with his other hand, and pulled his dragging body along the polished wooden floor.

“No, you don’t,” Trey murmured. “I’ve come too far…waited too long…”
Sam kicked upward and managed to get his foot into Trey’s knee, nearly snapping it backwards. He flinched with a howl, as Sam got another kick into his crotch. While Trey winced in pain, Sam turned to the laptop one more time. He couldn’t see straight, couldn’t think...through murky, damaged vision, he searched for the cursor, slid his fingertip along the trackpad, until it rested over the button.

At that moment, a new presence had wrapped his neck with an electrical power cord, and as his vision paled, he saw it was Georgia, working in tandem with Trey to tie his hands and feet behind him. “Why do you have to make this so difficult?” she croaked, sounding like an entirely different person. Just as she struggled to free her computer from his grasp, wrench the device away from his bleeding fingertips, he pressed SEND on his message. And surrendered to pain.
For several hours, they sat in hopeless silence, wavering in and out of vigilance. Sam had been thrown back into the cell with a really badly broken arm and bruises around his neck. He looked barely alive. Colby was so high on salvia, he could hardly keep his eyes open—not that he wanted to. The hippie ghosts surrounded him, cried for him, offered to get him out. They even sang campfire songs to soothe his broken soul.

Colby knew they weren’t real.

Still, they seemed real, and he was grateful for their efforts, these figments of his imagination. Hallucinations. But…what if they really were spirits of the dead? Maybe the salvia opened him up psychically as much as it spurred on drug-induced visions. How else would he have imagined every detail of their faces, the strings of beads around their necks, the stickers on that one’s guitar?

_The Dark Lord is evil…_

_He will use you for his purposes…_

_You must resist…fight…_

They spoke to him, carrying on over each other, so that after a while, their voices blended as one. But Colby was tired, mentally and physically drained. He wanted to fight—he just knew there was no point. Three of them were restrained or captured, and one was under a spell, which broke his heart more than anything.

When Georgia and Trey finally opened the cell to drag him and Sam out (as Alex watched from a distance through a void of emotion), the hippie ghosts tried to grab, trip, and attack their captors. If Colby’s hands and feet hadn’t been getting tied up with rope, it might’ve even been funny to witness their wispy forms charging toward the living, screaming in their faces, trying to stop them.

_Don’t do to him what you did to us!, they screamed._
But Georgia and Trey couldn’t hear them. They tied the five of them up—Colby, Sam, Nate, Pauhi, and Kalani—their feet pointing to the center of the circle, their hands bound on the outer perimeter. Colby hated the feeling of being tied down. He’d always been claustrophobic, but at least he could still see and talk, and he’d use those abilities until his last moment. He’d annoy Georgia and Trey all he could. Fight until the end. He tried not to feel afraid of impending death. In the best-case scenario, his spirit would release from his body and rise into heaven, full of joy. In the worst case, he’d stop feeling and thinking anything at all.

Then there was that in-between state of being a ghost, trapped in the middle plane, lost and confused. Maybe that would be the worst case of all.

He watched Sam a few feet away from him, eyes half-closed from the effects of salvia but also from blinding pain. Whatever they’d done to him, they’d gotten him good. “Sam,” he said, reaching his fingers toward him.

Sam’s lips moved slightly. His eyelids fluttered.

“Sam, listen to me,” he said. “Whatever happens, I want you to know...you changed my life. Hear me?”

Sam’s eyes opened a fraction of a second and then closed again. He muttered something like hello...

“Okay, don’t talk. Just listen. The weird in me found the weird in you. I was a lost kid until I met you, and the best part of my life, hands down, has been you being my friend. What’s that?” Colby strained to hear above the sound of rain now splashing through the top grates and trickling down each of the five stairwells. Drains at the feet of each set of stairs collected the water.

Sam tried again. “Hello, copier.”

“Bro, shhh. You don’t have to say anything. I just wanted to thank you—”

“Helly, pallot,” Sam mumbled.
“Wait… You called the helicopter pilot?” He thought he detected a slight nod from Sam. Well, that was great, but they were about to die. Even if the helicopter pilot arrived soon, which he wasn’t even sure that’s what Sam had said, the guy wouldn’t know where to find them down here in the pits of despair, and Georgia was already beginning her ritual. “I love you, Sam,” he said. “I just wanted you to know that.”

Sam seemed to sigh just then, letting go of all worry and pain.

And the ritual began in awful, rehearsed perfection. It was easy to tell Georgia and Trey had been practicing their moves for years now from the way she whirled this way and that, black velvet robes sweeping along the floor, gold rope sash swinging, long blonde waves stretching down like limp, dead snakes. She lit more candles, squatted near their faces to make them sniff the smoke rising from her abalone shell, and mumbled incoherent phrases.

“There you go…it’s okay,” she cooed.

She looked and sounded like the Georgia they knew, but Colby could tell she was a different woman from the hostess who’d been upbeat and welcoming to them the last few days from the way her usually bright turquoise eyes had darkened with the extreme focus of her actions. Colby tried to get a good look at Nate to give him some final words as well, but Kalani was to his left, and Nate across from him. Lying on their backs in a circle, he couldn’t see Nate’s face.

“Love you, Nate!” Colby called out.

“I’m sorry for this, Colby. I’m so sorry!”

“Don’t be.” Colby’s eyes welled up with tears and spilled over, watery rivulets snaking down his cheeks and grazing into his ear. “Don’t be.”

Georgia stepped over Colby into the center of the circle, knelt, and began loudly. Arms out, she cried, “Guardians of the East watchtower, keepers of Air, I welcome you to this sacred space. I implore you to lend us your intelligence, ideas, and lightness of
being, in order to invoke our Dark Lord into this world and make him flesh…”

What could he do? He could heckle her just to anger her. He could distract her in order to delay her, but Colby knew too damn well their deaths had to happen at 11:11 PM, come hell or high water.

She turned her position to face a different part of the circle and held out her arms again. “Guardians of the South watchtower, keepers of Fire, I welcome you to this sacred space. I implore you to lend us your passion, your drive, and your spirit. Help us invoke our Dark Lord into this world to make him flesh…”

Colby tried to wriggle his wrists free. He twisted his hands, suffered burns while biting his lip, all to try and loosen his knots, but Trey had tied him down savagely. His left ankle felt the most loose of his four bound points, as he twisted and pulled and yanked at it without getting anywhere. Next to him, Pauahi, withered and devoid of energy since Colby knew him, was now suddenly filled with adrenaline, fighting against his restraints, wriggling his skinny wrists, as Georgia turned ninety more degrees and carried on with her incantation.

“Guardians of the West watchtower,” she cried dramatically, holding her arms to the sky, that moonless sky that would bear witness to this madness, “keepers of Water, I welcome you to this sacred space. I implore you to lend us your fluidity, emotional wisdom, and mystery. Help us invoke our Dark Lord into this world to make him flesh…”

Behind him, Trey was walking back and forth, preparing other things for the ritual on the floor. Colby could see a bronze chalice, a long dagger with a jagged edge, and the abalone shell, still smoking with smoldering salvia. Next to him, Alex blindly, robotically handed more tools to Trey, his gaze a dead blankness.

“Alex,” Colby said calmly, “you don’t have to do this. Alex, snap out of it, man. You’re on our side. Alex, you’re on our side. Do you hear me?”

“Quiet.” Trey jabbed Colby with the blunt end of the dagger. “Or
Colby resisted the urge to spit into Trey’s face. If he was going to die, he wanted it to be as quickly and mercifully as possible. Waiting for his turn with a knife parked down his throat didn’t appeal to him in the slightest. He looked at Alex. “I love you, too, man. Even though this is seriously fucked-up. But I know it’s not you. It’s not you doing this.”

With his soft words, he hoped to appeal to Alex’s memory, but Alex was just a pawn in this game. Trey was too, to be fair, and while he was doling out the benefit of the doubt, so was Georgia. Just a mentally unstable woman who believed she had a job to do, commanded all her life by what she thought was a dark spirit, a figment of her own creation. What kind of disconnect made a person turn this way? Colby swore, if he ever got out of here, he might pursue a career finding out the answer.

“Guardians of the North watchtower,” Georgia said, loudest of all, “keepers of Earth, I welcome you to this sacred space. I implore you to lend us your courage, wisdom, and strength. Help us invoke our Dark Lord into this world to make him flesh. And now we invite you, Spirit, fifth, most compassionate of all elements, to help us draw the circle.”

Pauahi, who’d been pulling and fighting this whole time, went perfectly still as Georgia moved past him, dropped his cheek to the floor, but opened his eyes again when the witch walked by.

“The time, please,” she commanded.

Alex glanced at a clock on the workbench. “10:48.”

“Oh, good, we won’t die for another twenty-three minutes,” Colby said.

“Shut up,” Trey hissed, handing Georgia the athame with the jagged edge, the knife that would be used to carve him up. A wave of nausea rose into his throat. “Stop making things difficult. It is what it is.”
“Is it?” Colby turned his cheek to watch Pauahi, to keep himself out of trouble.

Georgia then slowly moved around the perimeter of the circle, counterclockwise, holding the athame with both hands, as if painting an invisible ring. At this point, Colby could hear sniffling and knew it was Nate crying. “Spirit, we beseech you to bind and hold us together with your kind and willful energy, create a portal through which our Dark Lord will enter…”

When she said the words, Sam suddenly began twisting his face, left and right, his eyes shut tight against something he could see, though Colby couldn’t. “No, no…” he cried, struggling against the ropes.

“Is it the Dark Man?” Colby asked. “Sam, is it him? Tell him to fuck off, go find another intersection of ley lines to come through. Don’t listen to him, Sam. Sam, it’s not real…”

Georgia had almost made her complete circle when suddenly, one of Pauahi’s hands jutted through the ropes, his arm skinny enough to push, and grabbed her by the ankle. With a cry, she tripped forward, dropping her athame near Colby’s hands, and slammed into Trey, who fell backwards into Alex. Colby flicked the athame with his fingertips—it was all he could do—and the dagger went spinning on its jeweled side toward Pauahi.

As Georgia scrambled to her feet, she screamed, “Idiot!” at Trey, searching for the missing athame. Pauahi had loosened his hand completely, used the blade to cut his ankle ropes free, but Georgia had spotted him sitting up and was beginning to charge at him to retrieve her knife. As Georgia came closer, he hurried to saw the last rope off his wrist, but when she’d nearly reached him, he lifted the knife high, brought it down forcefully, and hacked off his own hand. Rolling away, he scrambled into one of the pitch-black stairwells.

“Get him!” she yelled. Trey took off. Alex tried to go too, but she pressed a hand into his chest. “You stay.”

Colby heard a loud, metallic screech and then a bang, and then Trey
growling after Pauahi. Beside Colby, a puddle of thin blood slowly oozed underneath his severed hand toward the middle of the circle.

“Did you not lock them like I asked?” Georgia hissed at Alex.

“I did, but that gate is rusted from the waterfall, Ms. Georgia. I told you that before—”

She swiped at him with the tip of the blade. “Shut up. Don’t talk to me so casually. Do your job. Is that so hard?” Her chest heaved.

“Yes, Ms. Georgia,” Alex muttered, shaking.

Trey returned, out of breath and seething. “The gate was loose. It’s rusted. He was small enough to climb out the worn corner. I’ll check the gates once more, my darling. I apologize for this idiot’s incompetence.” He glared at Alex.

“We don’t have time.” Georgia paced the floor, squatted to pick up the severed hand, and tossed it onto her desk. “We’ll have to make do. Nothing else can go wrong.” She gritted through her teeth at Trey. “Not a single thing.”

“Guess you won’t be getting a ten tonight, Trey,” Sam muttered from his half-woken state. “Probably a three. Shit, I’d even say a two.”

Colby tried hard not to laugh, though laughing as they died would’ve felt so right and been the most perfect FU to them all. Even Nate was snickering from the other side of the circle. Suddenly, they were all laughing through their tears, mocking Georgia, mocking Trey. Nobody cared. They had nothing to lose anyway. There they were—his friends, fierce and funny brothers, laughing ’til the very end.

Georgia came charging at him, athame in her hand, robes swinging wildly around her tidy feet. “Gag this one,” she ordered. “Gag them all. And use him.” She threw her chin toward Alex.

Before Alex knew what hit him, Trey was tying his wrists together, shoving him toward the fifth set of ropes, as he slowly awoke to the realization of what was happening. He floundered instead of
fighting him off, but Trey told him it was for his own good, and he’d still receive his rewards, when suddenly, Alex realized he was replacing Pauahi. “What? No.”

“Told you, bro.” Colby shook his head.

After both of Alex’s wrists had been bound, along with one of his ankles, he suddenly snapped to reality and kicked Trey’s face so hard, blood shot out of his mouth and flew across the circle.

“Yeah, get that bitch, Alex!” Colby shouted.

Georgia had already shoved one cloth gag into Sam’s mouth and was ready to silence Colby with another rag from her workbench when she noticed the fight and sailed over to help. Furious that things weren’t going as she’d rehearsed them a million times over the years, she flew into a rage, kicked Alex in the face with her heel, shoved a rag into his mouth, and sliced his neck with her athame for good measure.

Colby gasped. He stared at Alex, cringing in pain. Blood oozed in a thin line from the wound but the knife hadn’t gone all the way through his skin.

She stood, panting, looking around at the rest of them. “Anyone else want to resist?”

Horrified, Colby watched Alex’s face closely to make sure he wouldn’t pass out. The blood continued to stream, pooling into his shirt. Trey bent to unbutton and expose his chest. Though Colby and Sam were still shirtless from their waterfall swim, and Kalani had been mostly naked all this time, Alex, having re-dressed, apparently, was now just as vulnerable as the rest of them, bare to the sky, ready to be ripped open all for the Dark Lord.

He was alive, badly hurt and unresponsive but alive.

Georgia wiped her brow with the cloth gag, threw it aside, and blew out an exasperated breath. She retraced her steps, inviting Spirit to draw the circle with her again, since it had been broken. In her stress, she had forgotten to gag him or Kalani.
Colby searched his mind, his soul, for an answer.

How could he fight to the end when it seemed so hopeless? They were all tied, ready to be sacrificed. By now, it was certainly after 11 PM, which meant they only had minutes to live. He refused to go out in fear, in hate. Colby had overcome too much depression and sadness in the last few years to end that way. He’d always sworn that if he could make it through the tunnel of despair, he’d help others. But he didn’t have to wait until he was out of that tunnel. He could do it now.

Swallowing his tears, he would do what he did best—use his voice.
So dazzlingly blinding was Sam’s pain, he wavered in and out of consciousness, visions and lights dancing in the far reaches of his peripheral vision. He could hear everything going on around him—Georgia’s incantations, Alex’s weak moans, Trey doing his best to keep up with all that was asked of him. Even with pain as his filter, Sam could feel every molecule of Trey’s frustration.

The Dark Man was there, too, haunting him. Cognitively, he understood the spirit wasn’t real, but it sure as hell felt real. And he didn’t know which was worse—the physical pain they were about to feel or the very real fear of the Dark Man’s wrath, even if that wrath existed only in his mind. Sometimes, your brain was your worst enemy of all.

Sam felt the evil spirit circulating the room from person to person, screaming without words at the incompetence, hurrying and pressuring Georgia and Trey to let him through. Sam kept telling himself it was a drug-prompted hallucination, but if it looked real and felt real, who said it wasn’t?

When he did manage to open his eyes, his vision was a blur. His head was battered. His arm was numb from a compound fracture. He was broken in multiple places, but it didn’t matter. The five of them were solidly tied up, about to die anyway, only a miracle capable of saving them now.

One of the five guys had escaped; Alex had replaced him. He knew that much. He could hear Alex whispering apologies for having allowed himself to be tricked by these two whack jobs, heard his silent tears, and as much as Sam tried not to care, hearing Alex brought him to tears. He could also hear Colby pleading with Trey, who stood a couple feet behind Colby’s bound wrists.

Georgia continued her incantations. Her voice was shrill, a whole level up from the tone she’d used over the last few days. “Dark Lord, do you hear us?” She was screaming now. “We are your
servants! We have carefully laid the foundation for your renaissance…"

Sam pried open his eyes.

He spotted Colby wiggling his hands to get Trey’s attention. “Hey… Trey, listen to me. I remember the party. To be honest, I’ve always remembered it. Okay? I remember the conversation you and I had. You talked about going to college, not knowing what you wanted to do in life. You made college out to be the best decision for everyone, and yeah, I was put off by that, because clearly, I took a different route. But I remember. Trey, you listening?”

Colby was trying to delay Trey, make him remember the good days. If Sam had known those L.A. parties would’ve been “the good days,” he would’ve paid closer attention. Now here they stood in Death’s driveway.

“I even remember what you were wearing, bro. Ripped jeans and that big smiley face in the middle of your shirt. You remember?” Colby laughed. Sam admired him for trying.

Above him, Trey gave the weakest of smiles. Still, a smile was good. “My ex-girlfriend gave me that shirt. I wore it that night because I missed her. I was wallowing in the pain of our breakup.”

“And she probably missed you, too,” Colby said, running with it. “In fact, she’s probably not mad at you anymore. If I were you, I’d try and reconnect with her. All you have to do is get out of here. Get us all out, and we can take you back home with us. Come on, Trey. Georgia doesn’t give a shit about you. She’s using you.”

Georgia turned on a dime in the middle of her ritual, stared straight at Colby. “Why isn’t he gagged?”

“You forgot to…you didn’t—” Trey stammered.

“I didn’t?” she snapped. “Just gag him. Now. And stop listening to him. You were a different person then, weak with no future.”

“But is it true?” Trey asked timidly. Sam had yet to see him talk so frightfully with Georgia. What happened to the confident older-man
swagger?

“Is what true?”

“That you’re using me? That you don’t give a shit about me?”

Sam watched as Georgia took a step toward Trey, and he stepped back as if to avoid her lies and more pain. “Of course not, baby. My life changed when I met you.”

“Yeah, because she saw a weak sucker who would do her bidding,” Colby muttered and got a swift kick to his head from Georgia’s bare heel. He cried out, flinched, his eyes filled with agony. “It’s true, Trey. Don’t listen to her. A good woman will share her life with you, not make you serve her every whim. The world is filled with good ones. Let’s go find them together, you and me.”

Georgia drew back her foot, let it go hard, and kicked Colby in the ribs. A loud snap made Colby cry out and Sam brace in vicarious pain. He wished he could add a thing or two to say to take the brunt away from Colby, but the gag was tearing into his bite.

But Trey kept taking several steps back until he stumbled into the desk, struggling to put distance between himself and Georgia, who pleaded, hands toward him, “You know it’s not true. You know I love you, would die for you.”

Colby kept on, encouraged by Trey’s newfound doubt. “She thinks you’re an idiot. That’s why she picked you. Are you an idiot, Trey?”

Georgia cornered her lover, pinned him between the desk and the side wall. “Think of all we’ve been through together. Are you going to let one fool ruin everything for us? Because that’s what he’s trying to do. Here…” She yanked a long knife from the desk and handed it to him, along with a stack of wooden bowls. “It’s 11:04. Time to place the bowls by their hearts. We’re almost done.”

“It’s 11:04, Trey!” Colby bellowed, as if he knew they’d be his last words. He had to make them count. “Time to kill your girlfriend!”

From next to him, Sam heard Nate chuckle softly.
Trey wrenched the stack of bowls from the witch’s hands and resentfully circled the room, placing one on the left side of each guy, as Georgia returned, with a satisfied grin, to the center of the circle. She knelt, arms up in the air. Sam stared at his bowl, flecked with old dried blood from whoever used it before him. He tried to imagine some poor dude in the last moments before his death, helpless to help himself, much like the five of them. At once, all of them began groaning, screaming through their gags, as Trey finally shoved a gag into Colby’s and Kalani’s mouths.

“11:06…” Georgia sang with joy. “Dark Lord, as we prepare to receive thee, please bring with you the fruits of our dedication to you. Fame, riches, restored youth and beauty, everlasting health, and immortality for me, for my beloved, Clint…”

“My name is Trey,” he muttered to himself.

Sam’s eyes flitted to Trey standing near his hands. Even though it killed him to move his neck, Sam nodded up and down, as hard as he could, to encourage Trey. YES… he tried talking through his gag.

Georgia hadn’t heard him and continued on. “Dark Lord, we thank you for everything you have given us, this land, this home, this paradise by the sea. Thank you for guiding us all these years…” She held up her athame, pointed it straight to the center of the ceiling. “As the new moon brings new life, new opportunities, we prepare for a new cycle, rebirth in your name. Oh, dark angel, I draw down the moon, hold its boundless power in my hands, and prepare to make the first sacrifice.”

Why couldn’t she figure out there was no dark angel? There was only her damaged mind, like Charles Manson, and five more senseless deaths ahead of her. She would never find what she wanted in life, because true happiness wasn’t delivered by a demon spirit. True happiness came from within. Even Sam knew that, and he wasn’t a spiritual guru.

Tears dripped off the sides of Sam’s cheeks into his hair. This was really it. The end. He had so much to do still in his life. Maybe the universe had given him so much success early on because it knew his life wouldn’t last long. Oppressive gloom surrounded Sam again,
as Georgia’s prayers built upon each other, grew louder in volume, until she was screaming them at the sky.

Sam heard a whirring sound, a ringing in his ear, blood rushing faster and faster through his arteries, as his adrenaline peaked. Colby’s gaze caught his. In them, Sam could see a lifetime of good times, of goofing off, of videos made, of stories told, of secrets shared, of teamwork, of sorrys and thank-yous.

*No need to apologize, brother. I had a great life with a great friend by my side.*

The whirring grew louder, choppier, blades beating in time with his heart. It wasn’t the blood in his veins. It was a helicopter outside. Maybe I did do something right. It was hovering over the house, as Georgia screamed the last of her incantations and ended with, “As above, so below, so mote it be. Blessed be thy name. Clint, prepare for the hearts.”

“I said…my name is Trey.”
“Not Clint, not Clint II…” He balled his fists by his sides.

Georgia charged over to Trey, yanked the jagged-edged blade from his hand, scowling, “Give me that. We have two minutes to do all five. I’m tired of your incompetence.”

And, then swishing over to Kalani, she sank to her knees, held the blade with both hands over her head, and screaming, plunged down deep into his chest.

Colby shut his eyes against the sights and sounds of ribs cracking and Georgia grunting as she muscled through his body with her athame. Nothing could block the animalistic shrieks filling the basement that came from Kalani’s chest. “Oh, God.” He shuddered, hearing Nate and Sam and Alex murmuring through their gags, responding with similar repulsion.

He ventured a glance to see where she was at in the process and watched as she lifted a still-beating, deep scarlet mass of flesh toward the ceiling. “Dark Lord, I give you the first heart of a fertile young man.”

_Breathe_…

Colby sucked in air through his flaring nostrils. It would not do to have him choke on his own spew, though at this point, it’d be better to faint and disconnect from reality than witness the carnage. Trey continued to stand frozen, fists by his side. He looked like a toddler getting ready to charge at his parents for not letting him have another bowl of ice cream.

“Grrrr!” Colby screamed through his gag. Stop her! Don’t do this!

“My name is Trey,” he said again, louder this time.

*Yes, your name is Trey! Colby screamed inside his mind.*
Georgia tossed the heart into the bowl with a blunt thud, wiped her brow, and scooped to collect the blood still spurting from Kalani’s expired body. Then, she placed it on top of his chest, marking the completion of the first sacrifice. Colby couldn’t see Kalani’s expression from where he lay on the ground, but he remembered how much he’d looked forward to freedom and being with his grandmother. Maybe it was for the best.

Giving Trey a cursory glance, Georgia hissed, “Clint, Clint I, Clint II, Clint ½. I’ll call you whatever I like. Clint ½ sounds perfect, since you’ll never be half the man my husband was.”

Oh, shit.

The floodgates opened. Trey growled, launched into a beeline, charging at her, knocking her to the ground, pinning her by the shoulders, but Georgia was formidable in brute strength. Whether the Dark Lord had given her that power or she believed it in her mind, it was enough. She fought and fought him good. It might’ve been the jacked-up amounts of adrenaline coursing through her body, but either way, she heaved Trey into the air several feet, and he landed on his ass.

Colby’s hope dampened a moment.

But then, Trey stood, charging at Georgia again, slamming into her. They wrestled and pounded and kicked, until a new voice joined them in the basement, and both paused. Out-of-place voices crackled through a speakerphone, and the room fell still. Hope set alight in Colby’s heart. He craned his neck to see a familiar woman coming down the steps from the east stairwell, wherever that led to, phone in hand.

Colby recognized her—the woman who’d kept a close eye on them during their Ke’e Beach visit, the nosy neighborhood watchdog who’d called to see if everything was all right; the super pale lady who’d nearly kicked their asses just for breathing. Her clothes were soaked from the rain. Her brown hair clung to the sides of her face like runny glue. But she was beautiful just the same. Beautiful because she was there.
Katie’s gaze and perturbed face froze the moment she witnessed the horrors of the basement. Her narrowed eyes raked back and forth across the scene, settling on the dead body in the middle of the circle which surely must’ve seemed to her like something from a satanic cult film. Shakily, she muttered, “I knew it,” and then she said into the phone, “They’re in the basement.”

Georgia scrambled to her feet, dodging a full-body lunge from Trey, and spun the knife she’d used to carve up Kalani straight at Katie. The blade whirled and rotated in perfect circles toward the woman who was unable to piece together what was happening fast enough to respond. But Colby saw it coming and cringed, as the blade connected, perfectly penetrated the center of her forehead, knocking her head back.

She dropped to the ground, phone tumbling off to the side.

_Fuck! Colby’s hopes flushed down a bottomless drain._

What were the chances? The outside world had finally caught on to their whereabouts, and hope was in sight (he could hear a helicopter circling the property), but now his rescuer lay in a pool of her own blood. Georgia charged over to her, yanked the blade from the woman’s forehead, and returned to the circle to finish what she started. Tucking her tangled mane of hair into the back of her dress, she wiped her brow with her bloody sleeve.

“It’s 11:10, Trey. Let’s get this over with.”

Trey calmly stepped over to where she stood, head hung low. “I’m sorry,” he said, reaching down for her hand and tracing the lines of her palm. “I don’t know what I was thinking. I adore you, Georgia. This is our paradise, you and me, forever.” He took the knife from her hand, turned to face Colby, and stared down at him.

Colby willed himself to pass out, to clock out of the moment, die by heart attack ahead of the blade if he could. He sent out loving messages to his mom, his dad, siblings, and every person who’d ever shown him kindness in this beautiful world. Yes, it was beautiful, even with its ugly parts.
He glanced at Sam and gave him a thumbs-up.

*It’s okay. See you on the other side…*

*If there is one.*

“Clint, less than a minute, baby,” she urged.

And then, Trey whirled, lunged…not at Colby but at Georgia, ramming her across the floor as if by renewed supernatural force, grabbing her by the neck and slamming her against the iron bars of the prison cell Sam and Colby had been inside. “My name is Trey,” he growled.

He waited until she couldn’t breathe, until her face had turned as red as the hibiscus growing wildly all over her property, before slamming her head against the bars. Again. And again. A thick bubble of bloody mucous formed at her nostril, popped into a thin stream that dripped down her cherry-painted mouth, then hung off her chin, swaying back and forth with every blow Trey gave her.

When he was done, he let her drop.

She fell against the bars and slumped to the side.

Out of breath, Trey whirled to face the rest of them. “I could finish you myself and take the Dark Lord’s gifts for my own. Right now.”

“No,” Colby tried muttering. To his surprise, Trey plodded over with the little energy he had left and bent over Colby’s body. His stomach clenched, prepared for a blade to attack him, but he only shoved his bloody fingers into Colby’s mouth and pulled out the gag. Colby wasted no time talking. “Come home with us. You can get your life back. We’ll make sure you have it all, just like you had it all here.”

Trey stood, droplets of sweat flying off his body and landing on Colby’s face. “I can’t. Someone has to stay, or the demon will follow you into the world and make sure you die.”

“Dude, there’s no demon,” Colby tried telling him. He heard Sam groaning, looked at him to find him wide-eyed and shaking his
head. Don’t tell him that, he seemed to communicate. Colby looked back at Trey. “You can get away from the Dark Lord. He won’t find you in L.A. Come on, bro.”

But Trey strode over Colby, moved over to Sam and pulled his gag out, doing the same for Alex and Nate. “It’s too late. He’ll kill me now that I’ve failed him.”

“Everybody who died after failing the Dark Lord took their own life,” Alex said in a dry voice devoid of energy. “You can come with us. We’ll take care of you.”

Colby closed his eyes and sighed in relief.

Alex sounded like Alex.

“It’s too late for me,” Trey said in a voice tinged with actual emotion. “Someone has to stay.” He began cutting the ropes off their ankles first, moving in a circle, then coming back for a second round of cuts to their wrists, keeping watch over his shoulder the entire time, in case one of them might lunge at him and take him out themselves.

But Colby could never hurt him, even after everything he’d done.

Alex sat up and rubbed his wrists, then his eyes. “What happened?”

“Nothing, Alex. Just…” Colby dropped his chin to his chest. He’d never been more happy to hear Alex’s voice back to normal. He looked up at him. “I’m glad to see you, bro.”

Trey cut the last of the ropes, Nate’s wrists, and stepped back, pointing toward the northwest stairwell. “Go, before I change my mind.”

Despite everything that’d happened, Colby still wished he could help Trey. “We’ll come back for you. We’ll send help,” he said, but Trey only stood there, chest heaving, wiping his brow with the edge of the blade, painting a line of blood across his forehead.

Colby knew a chance when he saw one. He looked at Sam, Nate, and Alex, and urged them up the stairs. They ran out, one by one,
climbing the steps up into the rainy darkness, into the freedom of the outdoors, as Colby hung back to keep an eye on Trey, in case this was a trick. Water pelted him from above, washing his face.

Trey was done. He wouldn’t hurt them. Colby had a distinct feeling he might take his own life after Colby left. Or he might leave the Belle Estate and hide in the wild, be a fugitive forever. Maybe he’d come forth and talk about his experience living with the last remaining leader of a forgotten, forty-year-old cult. Whatever the case may be, Colby would at this moment, and forevermore, for giving them their lives back, consider him a friend.

He burst out of the grate, shielding his eyes from the glare of the spotlight from the helicopter. As ferns and hibiscus and all sorts of flora swayed back and forth, compressed in the whirring air of the helicopter blades, Colby oriented himself on the property. They were standing behind the statue, the mermaid statue made of material infused with Amethyst’s bones. She marked one of the five entrances into the basement, silently warning of the terrors contained within her mother’s basement, forever keeping watch, unable to tell the truth.

She’d tried to warn him, Colby felt, but he hadn’t caught on. He couldn’t have possibly imagined it. Now he’d open himself to subtle energies from the other side for the rest of his days. Maybe there was a Dark Man. Maybe there wasn’t. Maybe ghosts did exist, maybe they didn’t. In the end, though, the worst of the evil had been cast by real live people. Because humans, misguided, untethered, and susceptible to greed, were the most vile beings of them all.

One by one, they climbed the rope ladder and entered the helicopter. Colby was surprised to find Pauahi huddled in the back seat with a bloodied shirt wrapped around his wrist in a knot.

“You can thank him.” Manuel was in the pilot’s seat, yelling over the whirring blades and pointing to Pauahi in the back. “I found him on the beach. He told us where they were keeping you.”

Their tour pilot and fellow prisoner had rescued them. Fucking awesome. Colby allowed himself the smallest of smiles at Pauahi
and made a mental note to give Manuel a super-huge tip when all this was done.

“Thank you, bro,” Colby told Pauahi, who nodded weakly.

“Us?” Alex asked, settling into a seat.

“Ms. Katie and me,” Manuel said, counting how many passengers he had in tow. “I’ll have to come back for her. Our seats are completely full.”

Sam was the one to tell him. “She’s dead. So’s your neighbor’s son, Kalani. There’s no one left.”

“Kalani?” Manuel asked, then realized who Sam meant. A saddened expression fell over him, and his headphones bobbed in acceptance. He asked Colby to lift the rope ladder, then he flew forward, circling over the Belle Estate.

From the air and through the pouring rain, Colby could clearly see the five points of the star—the gazebo, the waterfall, the mermaid, one point off to the north, still covered by tree detritus caused by the flood, and the water fountain in the driveway.

Someone emerged through the water fountain grate and stood, staring up at the helicopter. It was Trey—he stood there, spattered with blood, shielding his eyes from the blinding spotlight.

“Is that Trey?” Sam asked.

“Yeah.” For a moment, Colby wondered if he’d changed his mind. He almost told Manuel to go back and get him. He seemed to want a ride off the property, just like them. A new start to a new life. Rebirth. It was the new moon, after all.

Colby stared at him, waiting for a sign. After Trey had stopped the ritual, stopped Georgia, he’d be willing to give him another chance, even if they had to fly back one last time to get him. But Trey crossed the driveway, stepped onto the porch, and stood at the front door, watching them as they left.

A knot formed in Colby’s soul. Trey was doomed to live under the
house’s spell forever. Trapped in paradise, right where he wanted. Trey Weiss gave them a peace sign, backed into the house, and closed the door.

They flew off in silence, no headphones, too shocked to give voice to anything they’d seen or heard. It would be a long, long time before they could ever heal. There were Alex’s, Pauahi’s, and Sam’s wounds, plus horrific memories that would take forever to fix, far worse damage than any flood could ever cause an island. But they’d survived this experience as friends.

They could survive more.

As Manuel flew off the northwest coast toward what Colby guessed was the nearest hospital in Hanalei, Colby took one last look at the pristine paradise of the Na Pali Coast standing in darkness, unsure he could ever see it the same way again. Sure, it was midnight, but he could still see the silhouettes of the pointy peaks jutting up against the ocean’s darkness beyond. For a second, Colby even thought he could see the hippies down on the beach, celebrating around their bonfire, dancing naked in their jubilation, singing and laughing at the witch’s defeat.

But the vision dissipated, and Colby knew it was only the salvia wearing off.

Nobody spoke. Nobody had to. The relief, sadness, and shock they’d feel for the forthcoming months would speak for themselves. There was much to do—call their families, get medical help, alert local police about the kidnappings and deaths, possibly even tell their fans about the unbelievable experience at some point. Could they? Would anyone believe them? Probably not. Being on vacation, they hadn’t filmed any of it, so there was no proof.

But it’d happened. Colby, Sam, Nate, and Alex all knew it had.

Maybe they’d come back one day prepared with all their ghost hunting equipment and cameras. Georgia was no longer alive to hurt them, so why not? Colby’s eyes shut, his head against the helicopter window. He felt a nudge on his knee, cracked an eye open, and saw Sam holding out his hand. He clasped it with his
Best friends for life.

Nate leaned forward in the seat and cracked a bloody, gap-toothed smile. “Anybody want to see the south side of the island? It’s supposed to be really beautiful. We could go tomorrow, and—”

They all glared at him. “NO.”
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—Sam and Colby
About the Authors

Sam Golbach and Colby Brock met as freshman band nerds during their high school summer band camp. After realizing that they both liked the same girl but were also both too shy to talk to her, they agreed they would help push each other to gain confidence. The two set out on what has now been a six-year journey to find self-assurance and happiness.

After changing their own lives drastically, Sam and Colby wished to teach other people the same life lessons that they had learned
through their friendship by creating content based around humor, authenticity, and exploration. It’s been the exploration, particularly around spooky and sometimes paranormal places, that has caught on like wildfire with their audience. They’ve taken millions of fans along their journeys into the lesser known, seen, and understood spaces of our planet. While their videos cover a broad range of their experiences, there are plenty of untold stories, sometimes scary and sometimes funny, around their stranger run-ins.

In their recently announced original Snapchat docuseries, Stranded with Sam and Colby (Bunim/Murray Productions), the two film from a haunted location and what starts as something fun quickly takes a terrifying turn. The show released in October 2019.
Gaby Triana is the author of the Haunted Florida paranormal horror series, YA novels Wake the Hollow, Cakespell, and Summer of Yesterday, as well as a contributing author in the upcoming Don’t Turn Out the Lights: A Tribute to Alvin Schwartz’s Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark (HarperCollins, 2020; edited by Jonathan Maberry, author of Netflix’s V Wars). Besides writing horror for adults as well as teens, Gaby has also ghostwritten fifty-plus novels for bestselling authors and won an IRA Teen Choice Award, ALA Best Paperback, and Hispanic magazine’s Good Reads Awards. She writes about ghosts, haunted places, and abandoned locations, and runs the witchy horror blog, The Witch Haunt, now a YouTube channel. Also visit her on Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, and Facebook @GabyTriana.