

WHAT IF EVERYTHING WE REMEMBER NEVER ACTUALLY HAPPENED?



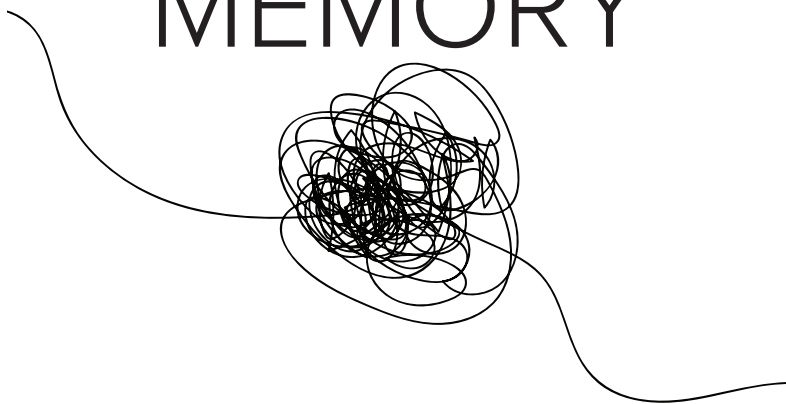
THE  
MECHANICS  
OF  
MEMORY

A N O V E L

AUDREY LEE

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AUDREY LEE



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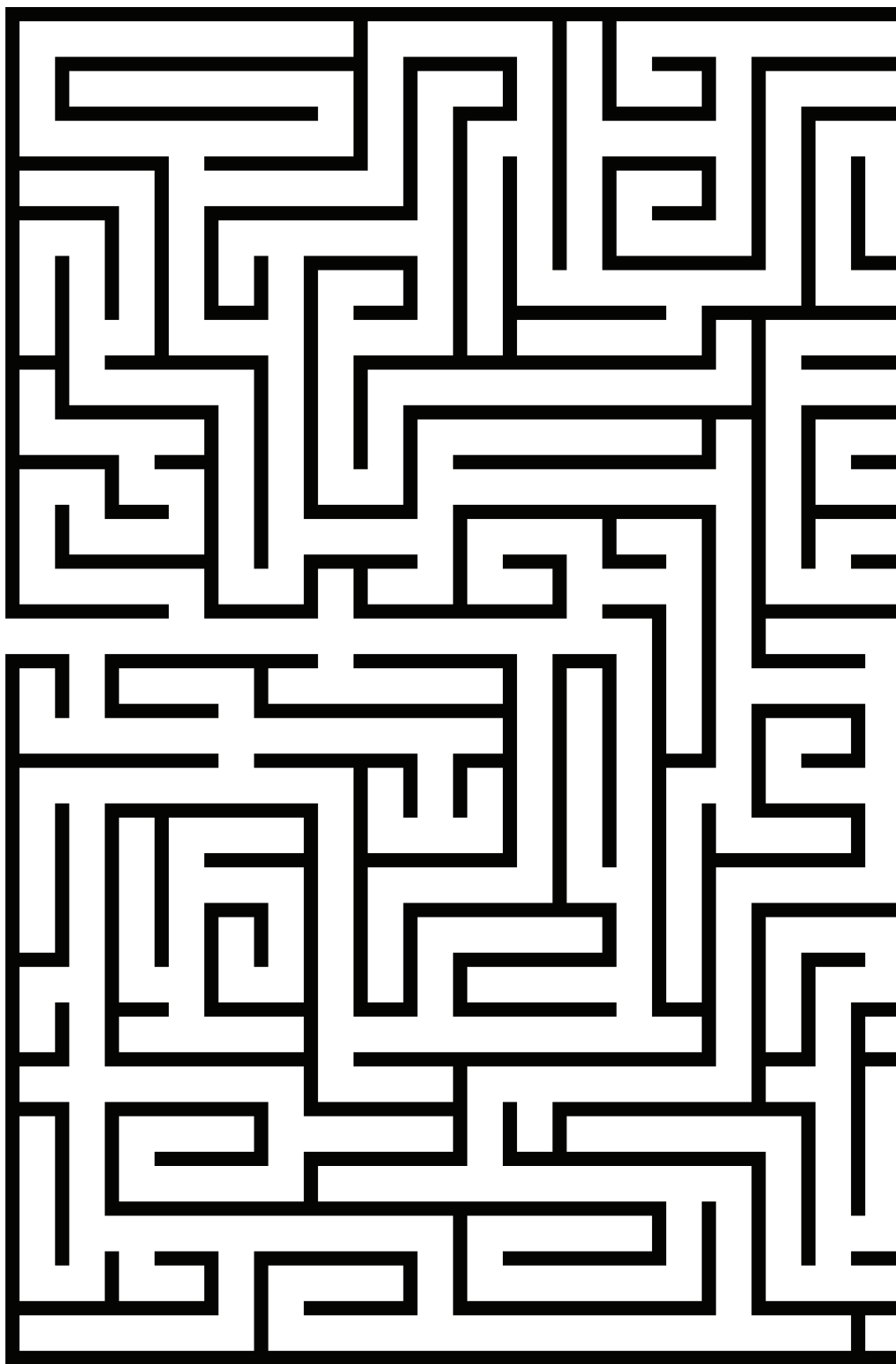
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TO SAM AND REBECA

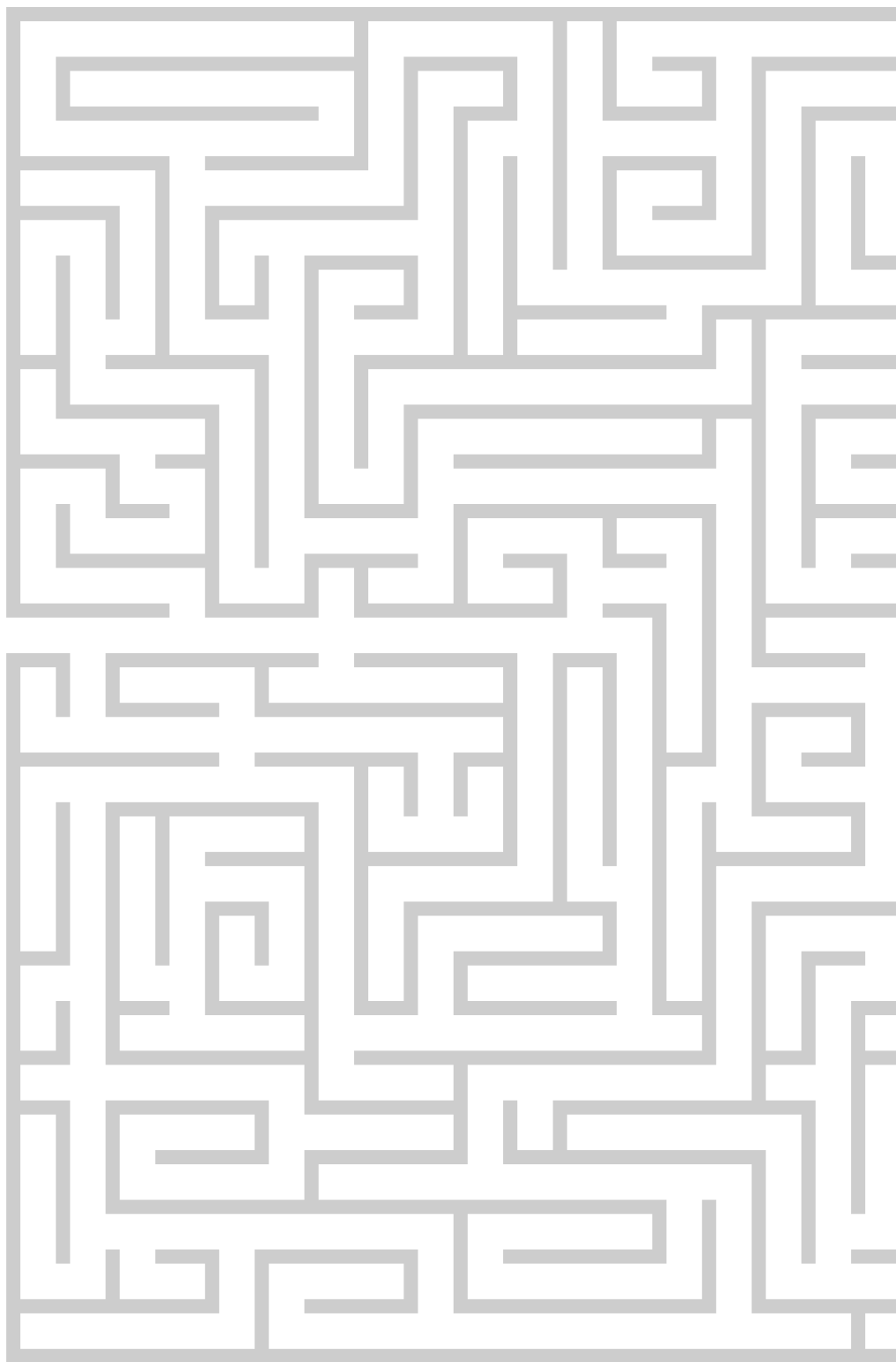
*Who despite knowing all my stories  
still manage to love me unconditionally.*





I do believe you think what now you speak,  
But what we do determine, oft we break.  
Purpose is but the slave to memory.

—William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*





ONE  
YEAR  
AGO

## NEVER FORGET



“COME WITH ME,” Luke said. “Before it all disappears.” He leaned across the kitchen counter and pushed at the lid of her laptop.

Hope swiveled in the turquoise kitchen stool, feet hooked in the rungs. Luke moved through the sliding glass door and onto the tiny patch of uneven concrete in the backyard, black Nikon hanging from a worn leather strap off his right shoulder. Hope watched as he pointed the camera at the sunset, then turned to aim the lens into the house.

“Don’t.” Hope covered her face with a laugh. “Yuck.”

“Then get over here.” He waved at her. “It’s magnificent.”

Hope slid off the stool, grabbing two lowballs and a bottle of single malt from the counter.

The desert sunset was spectacular. Shimmering sheets of fuchsia and amethyst were splashed across the scarlet sky, palm trees and rough mountain peaks silhouetted against it. And above their outline,

a moon so luminous it may well have been dipped in gold, hung lower than seemed possible.

Without meaning to, Hope reached out to touch the moon.

“Didn’t I tell you?” he said.

She smiled. “You did.”

Luke snapped more photos, from every conceivable angle and with every possible lens attachment. He paced the length of the yard, barefoot, camera case knocking against his hip.

“So antsy,” Hope said, depositing glasses on the end table and climbing onto the lounger.

“Stay just like that,” he said. He pointed the Nikon at her, shutter clicking like gunfire.

“You could simply enjoy the sunset, you know,” Hope said. “We could enjoy it together.”

Luke set the camera on the table and reached for the bottle. The Macallan sounded a hollow pop of anticipation as it opened.

Hope swung her legs over his as he handed her a glass and settled in. Her toenails were painted dark blue this week, fresh from a pedicure with Charlotte this morning. Luke didn’t care for her nail polish choices, especially when she went blue. Corpse toes, he called them.

“Tomorrow you’ll be a big TV star. Are you nervous?”

Luke sipped his scotch. “Maybe.”

“Is it because Natasha Chan is the host?” Hope asked. “And your thing for Asian ladies?”

“So now I have a thing?” Luke laughed, his hand trailing through her long hair. “You were supposed to be meek and submissive. I was grossly misled.”

“At least I’m good at math,” she said. “I’ll try to work on the meek part.”

“Good luck,” Luke said. “And it’s not because of Natasha Chan, it’s because I don’t want to make a fool of myself in front of all six viewers.”

“I’m sure you’ll have at least seven,” Hope said, laughing. “Plus, you’re brilliant and amazing. And a published author. It’s very sexy.”

“Nerdy science books don’t count as sexy,” he said. “And you forgot devilishly handsome.”

“I’ll never forget.” She closed her eyes, focused on the feel of his fingers. “Don’t ask her to say something in Chinese, though. Total turnoff.”

“Damn, that was my opener,” Luke said, tracing her earlobe with his thumb. “After the ribbon cutting at the new facility today, Jack hinted this could mean a big promotion.”

Hope opened her eyes. “Are you sure that’s what you want?”

Luke shrugged. “It’s the next logical step.”

“I know.” Hope sipped slowly. “Just—be careful what you wish for.”

Luke pulled her close and Hope breathed him in, fingernails tapping on the glass. They made a tinkling sound, like bells.

“Let’s run away instead,” she said, picking a leaf from his hair. “Scrap it all and establish a new land. Become rulers of our own destiny.”

“Is this before or after we become dealers in Vegas?” Luke’s mouth twitched. “Or start an ostrich farm? Or open a kabob restaurant called Shish for Brains?”

“It has to be mutually exclusive?” Hope laughed.

“Where should we start this new land?” Luke took her hand, pressing his lips against her palm. “Also, we’re going to need something catchier than New Land.”

Hope closed her eyes. “The Bahamas, of course.”

“Of course. And how will we pay the bills?”

“We won’t need money,” Hope insisted, “because we’ll be in charge of the New Land. To be renamed later. But if you must, we can open a waffle stand.”

“I do make a damn fine waffle,” Luke said.

“We’ll call it the Waffle Brothel.” Hope twined her legs together like a pretzel. She trailed a finger up his arm, just to the elbow, then back again.

“Horrendous,” he murmured. “You’re making it hard for me to concentrate.”

“We could live in a lighthouse.” Hope stilled her finger on his wrist. “And have kangaroos.”

“You’re like a kindergartener on an acid trip sometimes,” Luke said. “Kangaroos aren’t even native to the Bahamas.”

“Kangaroos are evolutionarily perfect,” Hope said. “They have built-in pockets. It’s genius.”

Luke smiled. “Then we’ll import them. And build a kangaroo sanctuary on the beach. So we can see them from the lighthouse.”

He lay back and Hope matched her gaze with his, to the endless universe spread above. The red had all but disappeared, and the moon glowed even brighter in the darkening sky. A scattering of stars emerged, blinking at them like jewels.

“Given your exhaustive attention to detail, it sounds like a solid Plan B.” He placed a hand on her thigh, a lazy, casual gesture Hope felt far beneath the layers of her skin. “I’m in.”

“Promise?” Her voice held the barest tremor, almost imperceptible. Imperceptible to anyone but Luke.

He held his face level with hers. Sometimes they shared these glances, moments of razor-edged intimacy. Moments when they were the only souls of consequence, raw and infinite, a singularity. Moments when Hope wanted nothing more than to be swallowed whole, by Luke and by whatever lay within.

Hope broke the connection, bottom lip in her teeth. Then a grin appeared, and she held her pinky in front of his face. “Promise?” she asked again.

Luke burst out laughing. “A pinky promise? You really are five.” But he hooked his pinky into hers, and with his other hand, pulled

her on top of him. "I'm sold," he said into her hair. "Waffles in the Bahamas it is."

Hope closed her eyes as she kissed him. Maybe they could.



HOPE'S PHONE VIBRATED on the nightstand, rattling the jewelry she'd dropped there a few hours before. She typed a hurried response and activated her phone's flashlight, leaving the bed and padding quietly to the bedroom door. As her hand touched the doorknob, Luke's voice cut across the silence.

"Sucker." He was propped up on one elbow, face sleepy and amused. "You know she only calls because of the French fries."

Hope smiled, moving back to his side of the bed. "I don't mind," she said, placing her palm on his bare chest. "She'll have her license soon. And then college. There isn't much time left."

Luke's face softened. "You want me to go too?" He yawned, mouth open wide like a bear.

"No way." Hope touched his cheek. "You'll ruin girl time."

At the door, she paused to tap a small white picture frame mounted above the light switch, twice. For luck.

"She has you wrapped around her finger, you know," Luke called.

"I know." Hope blew him a kiss. "So does her dad."



"SHE DOESN'T GET me *at all*," Charlotte said, popping a piece of gum in her mouth. "If I tell her anything, she uses it against me. I have *no* privacy." She let out a long, theatrical sigh, punctuated with maximum adolescent exasperation.

"It's a scary world out there." Hope glanced in the rearview mirror and changed lanes. "All parents want to protect their kids."

“You don’t know my mom. And I don’t need protection.” Charlotte cranked the air-conditioning and tapped her blue fingernails on the dash. “Were your parents like that? Nosy?”

“We didn’t exactly have open lines of communication.” Hope turned down the air. “If it wasn’t about getting into Harvard or becoming a lawyer, it wasn’t discussed.”

“So you were a big disappointment,” Charlotte said.

“You have no idea,” Hope said.

“Can you help me with my essay on *Hamlet*?” Charlotte asked. “It’s due Tuesday.”

“Of course,” Hope said, pulling into the parking lot of the Burger Shack. It was the only place open all night, thus the de facto home to anyone within a twenty-mile radius who was hungry or high, or both. Charlotte called it the Stoner Shack, but even so, she couldn’t deny their chili cheese fries were transcendental.

Years ago it had been a kitschy fifties diner, but today the only remnants of the former Shake, Rattle, and Roll were the defunct jukeboxes welded to the tables.

They stepped from the car, Hope locking it with a beep and a flash of headlights. Charlotte led the way across the pavement, walking in a wide circle to avoid a kid throwing up in the bushes.

“I wish she was more like you,” Charlotte said, holding the Stoner Shack door open for Hope. “Relaxed.”

“I’m far from relaxed,” Hope said. “I have the luxury of not being your parent. I just get to be your friend.”

“Aww,” Charlotte held her right hand out, fingers and thumb curled into half a heart. Hope matched it with her left.



THEIR PLASTIC CUPS were nearly empty, though the silver tumbler on the sticky laminate table held more Oreo shake. The plate between

Hope and Charlotte contained only a few soggy fries, a generous pile of chili and cheese, and a puddle of ketchup.

“Straight out of the fryer,” Charlotte said, returning to the booth. She set a fresh basket of fries between them, spots of grease soaking through the paper lining.

“Perfect timing,” Hope said. She ran a fry in a zigzag through the chili and ketchup.

“Oh no, now you’re doing it too?” Charlotte said.

Hope tilted her head. “Doing what?”

“Making patterns with your food, like Dad.” Charlotte made a face. “Is that a two?”

Hope studied the paper plate. “I never realized I did that.”

“You guys already share one brain. And the looks . . .” Charlotte mimed gagging. “You act like you’re my age. Cringe.”

A gaggle of boys entered, calling loudly to each other and jockeying for position at the counter. One was the kid formerly puking by the entrance, but he looked recovered. Another peeled off from the clump, pausing by Hope and Charlotte on his walk to commandeer a booth.

“What’s up, Charlie?” he said shyly.

Charlotte’s cheeks reddened, and she tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. “Hey.”

“I thought you’d be at Brody’s tonight.” He shoved his hands into his pockets. The kids around here usually had two distinct auras—money or no money—but Hope couldn’t tell with this one. He didn’t have an air of entitlement, but he didn’t seem like a townie either.

Charlotte crumpled her napkin into a ball. “I had to study. We can’t all be gifted like you.”

“I can help you tomorrow.” The boy glanced over his shoulder at the crowd filling their sodas. “I mean, if you want. If you’re not busy.”

Charlotte flipped her hair. “I’m not busy.”

Hope pulled on her straw noisily.

“I’ll hit you up tomorrow.” The boy backed away with a wave.



“What happened to Adam?” Hope asked.

Charlotte tapped her nails on the table. “He turned out to be a dick.”

Hope made a noncommittal noise.

“Don’t be all, ‘hmmm, that’s interesting,’” Charlotte said. “I know you guys hated him.”

Hope tried to keep a straight face. Luke wasn’t even able to say his name most days, referring to Adam only as “that arrogant little prick.”

“But you were both right.” Charlotte put her chin in her hands. “Did you ever date an asshole?”

Hope nodded. “Almost married one.”

Charlotte perked up, looking intrigued, but Hope tilted her head toward the boy. “So, is he a prospect?”

“He’s smart. He’s different than the boys at my school.” She grinned. “But don’t tell my dad. He’ll get totally triggered.”

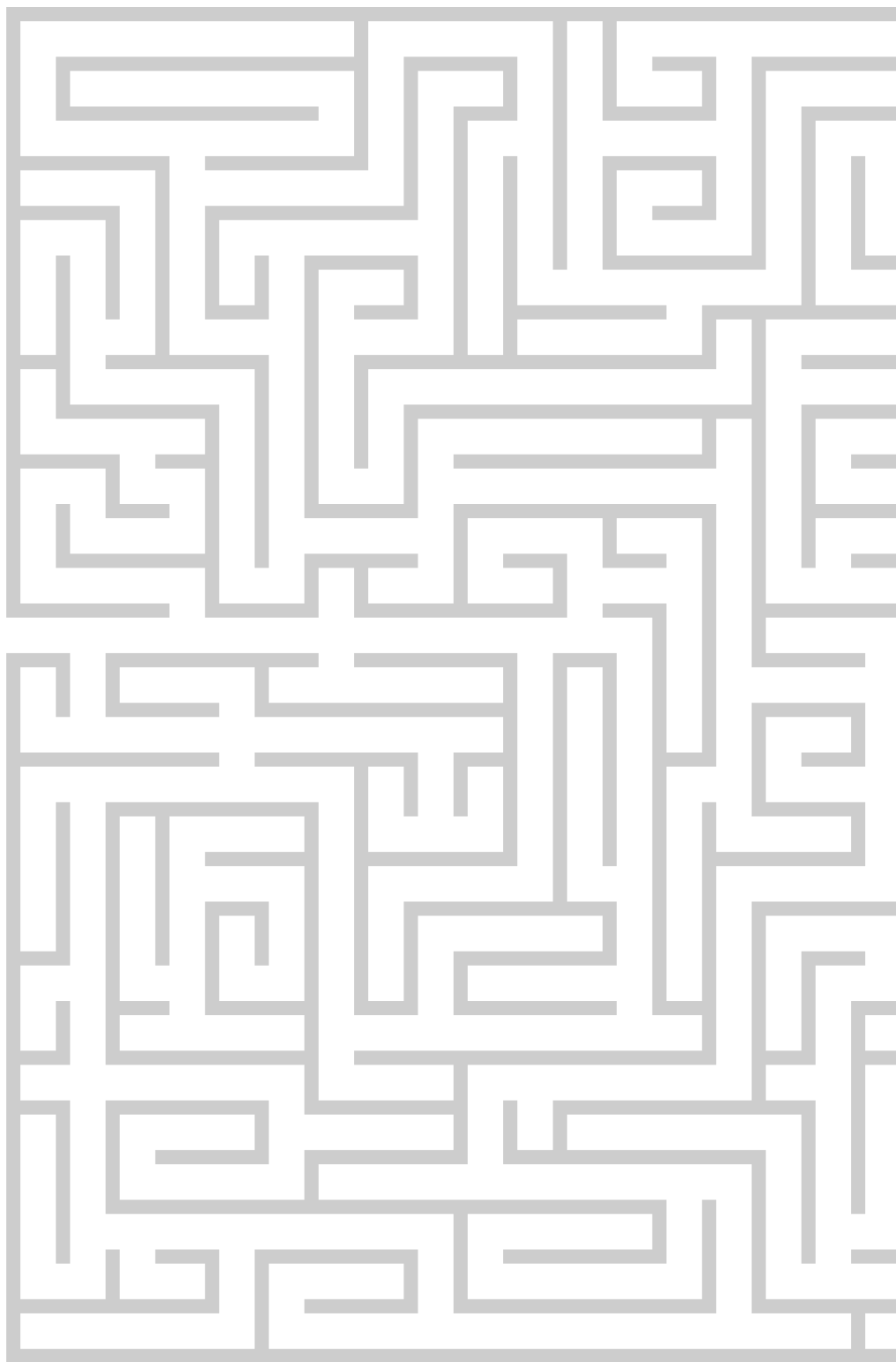
“Look Charlie, you’re the most important person in the world to him,” Hope said. “Which means no one will ever be good enough for you. But it also makes you lucky to be so loved.”

“I know.” Charlotte rolled her eyes. Again. “I’m just tired of the Adams of the world.”

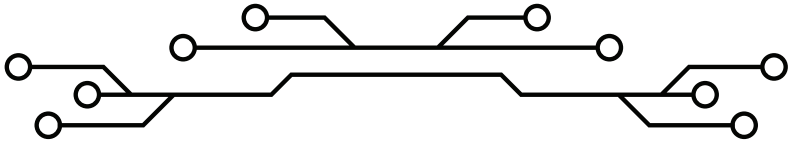
“Me too,” Hope said. “But there are good guys out there too. They just aren’t as easy to spot. Trust me: the good ones are worth it.”

“And that’s my dad? One of the good ones?” Charlotte wrinkled her nose, still too cool for feelings, though her eyes looked wistful.

Hope smiled. “I’m certain of it.”



TODAY



# 1

DON'T LOOK BACK



HOPE

*The Wilder Sanctuary*  
*Rancho Mirage, California*

“AND HOW ARE the nightmares?”  
“Fine.” Hope shifted, pushing stringy hair from her face with her palms. “I haven’t had any this week.”  
“None at all?”

Hope shook her head slowly, face impassive.

“That’s important progress.” Dr. Stark looked impressed with his own abilities, as if he’d performed a special magic trick to protect Hope from herself. Perhaps in a way he had.

Dr. Stark jotted notes on his tablet with a pointy gray stylus. “Are you sleeping any better?”

“A little. An hour or two at a time.” It was a lie. She hadn’t slept at all.

Hope focused on the San Jacinto Mountains outside the picture window, framed by the endless blue of the summer sky. Desert sky. It was hard to think about darkness right now, with so much light around her. “Does that mean I’m getting better?”

“As we’ve discussed, it’s important you get concentrated stretches of sleep.” Dr. Stark flipped his tablet to expose the keyboard, typing with a renewed purpose. “It will help you make progress in the Labyrinth.”

The word *Labyrinth* filled Hope with a viscous dread. She knew she’d visited it dozens of times since arriving at Wilder, though never remembered what had happened there. “I told you I’m never going back.”

“You did,” Dr. Stark said. “But as *I* said, it’s important to try and push through. It helps you confront what you’re avoiding.”

“I’m not avoiding anything,” Hope said. Another lie.

“I’m increasing your temazepam to thirty milligrams,” Dr. Stark said. “And tomorrow evening I’d like you to spend some time in ViCTR using the Erleben device. Say, forty-five minutes?”

Hope glanced at the ceiling. She wanted a cigarette in the worst way.

“Great,” he said. “Check in with the pharmacy after our session.”

Stark was doing the casual Friday thing that day, though Hope remained uncertain if it was, in fact, Friday. He resembled a prep school student, with his shiny polo shirt and immaculately pressed chinos. The polo looked brand new, still creased in the sleeves and too white, almost blinding. Hope couldn’t picture Dr. Stark performing the tasks of mere mortals: changing the toilet paper, taking out the garbage, shopping for polo shirts. Maybe his wife did all that. Maybe she bought five polo shirts in different colors from Neiman Marcus, hanging them in an orderly row, next to his dry-cleaned Italian suits in clear plastic bags.

“Is there anything else you want to tell me?” Dr. Stark asked, still typing, fingers thin and bare.

“Are you married?”

“Divorced,” he said. “More thoughts about last year, perhaps?”

“Nothing else,” Hope said. She glanced outside again. “Have there been any messages for me?”

“I’m sorry.” Stark shook his head. “But I promise to let you know if there ever are.”

An artificial chime reverberated through the room’s speakers, and Dr. Stark smiled. “We’ll pick up again next week.”

Hope wiped her hands on her pants and rose, heading for the shiny glass door.

“Hope,” Dr. Stark said.

She paused, hand on the doorknob.

“Be well.”

“Be well, Dr. Stark.”



HOPE LURKED IN the corridor outside the pharmacy door. Everyone here called it the Roofie Room. Dr. Stark discouraged the nickname, though she’d heard him use it when he didn’t think anyone was listening.

She leaned against a wall under a framed print. *I Choose to Make the Rest of My Life the Best of My Life*, the typeface commanded. Wilder was overrun with these platitude posters—inspirational phrases printed on backdrops of pink orchids, mountain scenes at sunrise, soft-focus tree branches with dappled green leaves. The one on Hope’s bedroom wall depicted a wooden plank bridge disappearing into the horizon. *Don’t Look Back. You’re Not Going That Way.* Graphically speaking, it was a minor improvement over the poster she remembered from seventh-grade English class, the one of a ginger kitten with huge eyes, suspended in a tree by its claws. *Hang in There!* in bubble-gum-pink balloon letters.

The hallway loomed empty and silent, like all of Wilder. Staff believed in maintaining a serene, nurturing environment at all times, right down to the soothing smells pumped through the ducts. That day, the scent was a pungent eucalyptus.

Like any pharmacy, the Roofie Room had a high white counter serving as a barricade to a wall of shelves, each one boasting orderly containers of unlabeled amber bottles and plastic baggies full of pills. Willy Wonka's Pharmaceutical Factory.

Dr. Emerson appeared from behind the shelves, smiling when she noticed Hope skulking under another poster: *Healing Begins with a Single Step*. "How can I help you?"

"Dr. Stark changed one of my prescriptions." Hope approached the doctor and craned her neck to see above the counter.

"He doubled your dosage." Dr. Emerson moved her mouse, perfectly arched eyebrows knitting together. "To the maximum recommended."

Hope shrugged. "I'm having trouble sleeping."

Dr. Emerson removed a nonexistent piece of lint from her white coat. She smoothed her already perfect blond hair, pulled back from her face into a tight, sleek ponytail. Then the doctor launched into her spiel about the side effects and the short-term nature of the meds, how Hope shouldn't do anything like operating heavy machinery or driving. How she should tell someone if she developed hyperaggressive tendencies or suicidal thoughts. Dr. Emerson sounded like the placid voice-over in a drug commercial. Erections may last more than twenty-four hours. Death may occur.

Hope smothered a snicker.

Dr. Emerson didn't appear to appreciate being interrupted during her enumeration of drug interactions and contraindications. She resumed typing with bright pink fingernails and pursed lips. "You'll have it tonight."

Another chime sounded.

"Will you please give this to Spencer?" From her coat pocket, Dr. Emerson produced a box of chalk and handed it to Hope. "Also, tell him to come see me. I have a delivery from his mother." Dr. Emerson tapped a manila envelope near her mouse.

“Do you want me to take that too?” Hope extended her hand.

“Absolutely not.” Dr. Emerson pulled the envelope away, as if Hope’s hand were a poisonous viper. Obviously chalk was the outer limit of what Hope could be trusted to courier.

“Have any messages come for me?” Hope asked.

Dr. Emerson made a show of clicking around her computer, though Hope already knew the answer. It was the same answer she’d received every week since she got to Wilder.

“I’m sorry, nothing today,” Dr. Emerson said. “Enjoy your dinner, Hope. Be well.”

As Hope turned to go, she heard Dr. Emerson repeat her name. Her tone was expectant, like a teacher whose class hadn’t responded with the proper good morning: fake cheer tinged with annoyance, an undertone of challenge.

Hope paused. “Be well, Dr. Emerson.”



THE FOOD WAS, as always, a gourmet affair. All meals at Wilder were perfectly prepared and stunningly plated, served on bone china at a table with a view. This place had a Michelin star under its belt, at least according to their website. Everything passing the residents’ lips was clean: nothing processed, no GMOs, all fresh and organic and assembled expertly by in-house chefs. Farm to nuthouse.

When Hope first arrived, she would have gladly slit someone’s throat for a corn dog and a Newcastle. After a month, the urge had mostly subsided. She now ate her whole grains and her sustainable wild salmon in balsamic reduction with little fuss. Unfortunately, there still wasn’t enough diazepam in the world to make a bed of braised kale pass for a corn dog.

Quinn placed a plate of shrimp on the table, chimichurri sauce sloshing over the side and forming green puddles on the wood. He



lowered himself into the seat next to Hope and ran his napkin along the rim of the dish. “What I wouldn’t give for a good Malbec to wash this down,” he said. “A 2004.”

Hope raised an eyebrow. “Good luck.”

Quinn speared his shrimp, cutting off the tails with deft fingers like a chef at Benihana. He carefully placed each tail, pointy side out, fanned along the edge of his plate. “Did you see the new recruit?”

A few tables away sat a man, much younger than they were, late twenties or early thirties maybe. He was tall and thin, with sandy-blond hair and a face that somehow seemed honest. He stared out the window with a vacant expression behind his tortoiseshell glasses, fork suspended in hand over his untouched salad.

“His name’s Carter,” Quinn said. There were no last names at Wilder unless you were a doctor. Then there were no first names. “Silicon Valley startup guy. High-functioning depression, anger and aggression issues, panic attacks.” Quinn held thumb and forefinger close together. “And a touch of PTSD, of course.”

“How do you know shit like that?” Hope asked, squeezing a lemon into her infused water and taking a drink. Cucumber. The worst.

“I know all kinds of shit,” Quinn smirked.

Hope didn’t usually pay much attention to the revolving door of Wilder Weirdos, and even less to Quinn’s inventory of afflictions. But that night Hope couldn’t help but stare at Carter. He seemed familiar somehow, though unlike the many celebrities surrounding them.

“I feel like I’ve seen him before,” Hope said.

“Did you ever play that game Magic Words?” Quinn asked. “He invented it when he was a kid. It was all over the news for a few months.”

“Maybe that’s it.” Hope continued to stare, trying to remember. But the more she focused, the harder it became.

“I think he’s pretty too,” Quinn said. “Let’s go find out if he’s single. Be, you know, a supportive network of healing.” He cupped

his hand over his mouth. “We should bring him into the fold before someone else does.”

In a different life, in her life before Wilder, Hope never would have befriended Quinn. He would have run in an entirely different social strata, too beautiful and polished and wealthy for the likes of her. But here at Wilder, the serfs dined alongside the barons, and Quinn had sought her out and forced a friendship after mere hours, when she still wore the same expression Carter wore now.

“Jesus, we’re not in a gang. He doesn’t need to be jumped in.” Hope turned from Carter and pushed zucchini around on her plate, a little yellow boat sailing through the quinoa sea. “Go over there and introduce yourself if you want to get in his pants.”

“Has anyone ever told you that you’re a giant buzzkill?” Quinn leaned back in his chair, tilting it at an alarming angle. He wore the standard Wilder Weirdo uniform: elastic cotton pants, a grey short-sleeved T-shirt, white sneakers without laces. Yet only Quinn could manage to make it look stylish. “In your old life, did you ever enjoy pushing the envelope a little?”

“Sorry,” Hope said. “I’ve never been a risk taker.”



AFTER DINNER, HOPE knocked on Spencer’s door. Thanks to Quinn, everyone called him Spooky Spencer, and these days mostly just Spooky. He was the youngest of the residents, thin and slight, a curtain of jet black hair usually hiding his pale face. He didn’t speak when he first arrived two months ago, then only a few words, croaked out when spoken to. Spooky spent all his free time with his D&D magazines, hand-drawn maps, graph paper, and pencils spread out in front of him, murmuring about campaigns and hit points and initiatives.

Shortly after arriving, Spooky started drawing on the wall in his bedroom with a stub of a purple crayon he’d nicked from the Creative

Connections Room (surprisingly, a clever pejorative had yet to be assigned). Spooky drew a crescent moon in the top right corner of his wall, like that bald kid in the children's books. No one could figure out how he climbed so high to reach, knowing he'd also have some kind of hell to pay for defacing the property. He'd probably be sentenced to three days of mandatory restorative yoga, or a week writing lines in the Zen Garden. *Every day is a gift.*

Surprisingly, Dr. Stark was delighted when he discovered the purple moon. He thought giving Spooky an outlet for his expression might help him connect with people. So Stark submitted a work order and had one wall of Spooky's room painted with chalkboard paint. He even gave Spooky all the chalk he wanted. Now an elaborate white forest spread across half the ebony surface: bare, eight-foot aspen with sinister cuts in their bark, vines and thorns and brambles winding from floor to ceiling. A path began in the bottom left corner, splintering into several directions as creepy, nondescript animal eyes stared from hidden spots in the trees. Spooky called it the Shade.

Hope knocked again. She examined the box of chalk from Dr. Emerson, its bright green and yellow markings anachronistic against the muted tones of Wilder. The box reminded Hope of her father, who often returned from business trips with a box of crayons for her. It was always the big box of sixty-four, the one with the useless sharpener built in. Impractical purchases were rare in her family, and new crayons were a commodity. Hope would drop to the floor and dump the box onto the ground, smelling the wax and grouping the crayons by color, blunted tips lined up perfectly like a rainbow fence. They always seemed so full of promise.

After the third knock, Hope entered. Spooky was at his desk, watching the door.

"I didn't see you at dinner," Hope said, holding up the chalk. "But Dr. Emerson sent this for you. And she said to tell you there's a message from your mom."

His voice was too soft to hear. Maybe it was *thank you*. Or maybe it was *fuck you*. One could never tell with Spooky.

Hope set the chalk on his nightstand and looked at the Shade. Spooky's chair creaked as he rose to stand nearer.

"Where does that go?" she asked, kneeling. She placed a bitten-down fingernail on the fork in the path, smudging it a little.

"Mirror Gate," he said, inclining his head right. "And this goes to Hollow of the Moon." He licked his pinky finger and wiped away the smudge.

"What happens there?" She moved closer to the path.

Spooky retrieved a stub of chalk from his desk to touch up the part she'd smudged. "It's where the souls are collected and cleansed." He added more detail to a birch tree along the road to Mirror Gate.

She wasn't sure she had a soul anymore, but if she did, Hope wasn't certain she wanted it cleansed. So much for connecting with people.



BACK IN HER room, Hope reached far under her mattress for her notebook and pens. Her room was searched daily, including the spot under her bed and the corners of her closet. No expectation of privacy existed for anyone at Wilder, yet she still felt a compulsion to stash her few things away. It was also why she chose to write in code.

It wasn't an elaborate, beautiful mind kind of code. For Luke's last birthday, Hope bought secret decoder rings from a bookshop selling quirky trinkets. Two silver rings with the alphabet running around the bottom half, the top half spinning to reveal a number in a tiny window. Luke had laughed when he opened it, getting it instantly, slipping it on his finger and turning it around and around. For a time, they sent coded messages to each other, quickly discovering it took twice as long to write a note and ten times longer to decode it. Luke had even created a spreadsheet to make it faster. Eventually that exercise, along with so

many rituals and routines and secret languages preceding it, was abandoned. Yet in that brief stint, Hope had memorized the twenty-six pairs, and still repeated them in her head when she couldn't sleep.

Now the coded numbers came quickly and fluidly, like a native tongue. Sometimes she caught herself thinking in the code too, rather than words: 1-26,18-4-23, 17-6-4-14.

It wouldn't take a cryptographer to crack; it was the simplest of substitution ciphers. A third grader could do it. But she also figured no one cared enough to invest the time.

That night, Hope opened to a new page and recounted her day in simple, unpoetic prose. When writing in numbers, it was much easier to do it this way. No commentary, no feelings or emotions, just a list of the day. *Dr. S. + 30 mg t. Yellow zucchini. The Labyrinth.* She never revisited her writing, knowing that if she did, it would be unsettling to have forgotten.

She checked the time and flipped to the end of the notebook, to a different section. It was here she tried to recount her life before Wilder, where she tried to parse out her last year, where she wrote about Luke.

Hope wrote what she could, a paltry few lines. There simply wasn't much to call forth from her lost year. Hope's old life had revolved around empirical facts, a habit that was still deeply ingrained. But she had little certainty these days, and even less stock in her memories. As a result, this journal section had seen little progress over time.

The chime rang, presenting her with a few minutes before her meds arrived, preceding a night which would soon become thick and foggy. This was her most lucid time of the day, and in thirty minutes it would all fade into the ether. She glanced at the door out of habit even though she knew at least ninety seconds remained, then closed the notebook and stowed it safely under the mattress.

A tech, Jonah, shuffled his bulky frame into the room. Hope accepted the fluted paper cup holding two pills—one oblong and white,

one pale pink with a line through the middle, both small and both mighty. She knocked them back in one gulp, without water.

Hope opened her mouth and lifted her tongue, but Jonah never inspected. He didn't get paid enough to give a shit. He merely bobbed his dark head, wished her well, and extinguished her overhead light.

Soon the heaviness began to drag her into the abyss. Hope avoided sleep whenever possible but knew a fight against those fifteen additional milligrams would ultimately be futile. She felt her limbs go numb and braced for the inevitable nightmares.

But at least Luke would be there.



# 2

## INTO THE VOID



LUKE

*Palm Springs, California*

LUKE WOKE IN a sweat, Hope's name in his mouth, heart racing. Reality came sluggishly as he registered his surroundings: living room sofa, a full moon outside the window, alone. His partially open laptop had fallen into the space between his hip and the back of the couch, muffled voices from Netflix jarring in the stillness. He retrieved the computer and set it on the coffee table.

He flopped against the cushions, attempting to hold on to details now slipping away with haste, water tumbling over pebbles. His mind was filled with a dense white forest and a dirt path, blurring the more he tried to focus. And Hope, of course. His mind was always filled with Hope. Luke retrieved his phone from the coffee table: 1:12 am. He lay in the darkness for a little longer before jabbing at the call button.

"Thank you for calling the Wilder Sanctuary. How may I support you?" The young female voice was buttery smooth, a radio DJ spinning late-night ballads. *And here's one for all you lovers out there . . .*

“I’d like to speak to Hope Nakano.” Luke cleared his throat and added, “Please.”

“It’s after hours, sir.” He could hear her typing. “May I ask your name?”

“Luke Salinger.”

The tapping ceased, with a pause and a breath before the pleasant voice continued. “I’m sorry, Dr. Salinger. Ms. Nakano has requested no outside contact.”

“Can you give her a message, then?”

“We prioritize our guests’ privacy at Wilder. I apologize, but I’m obligated to honor Ms. Nakano’s request.”

“Christ,” he muttered. How many times had she said that party line? To how many boyfriends and wives and agents and journalists? “Get me Elliot, then.” His voice was weary, straining against frustration. “He’s certainly not a guest.”

The operator’s tone remained serene. “One moment, please.”

A click, followed by a pause, followed by Enya or Brian Eno, or some other trance-inducing, brain-cell-killing artist. After five minutes, it had lulled Luke into a dreamy paralysis. He held the phone away from his ear, watching the time elapse: 7:12. He pulled at a stray thread on one of the throw pillows: 8:27. 8:31.

At 11:48, the voice returned. “Thank you for your patience, Dr. Salinger. I’m connecting you to Dr. Stark.”

“About damn time,” he said, into the void.

“Luke,” said a tired voice. “It’s one in the freaking morning. And you know damn well you can’t talk to her.”

“How is she?”

Elliot Stark sighed. “No different from last month, or the month before. As my weekly emails describe, ad nauseum. Did you really wake me up in the middle of the night for that?”

Luke suddenly couldn’t figure out why he so urgently needed to call Wilder. It felt critical, a few moments ago, when the talons of the



nightmare were still sharp on his skin. “I had a bad feeling,” he said, words trailing off at the end.

“I’m taking over her sessions,” Elliot said. “And I upped her temazepam to thirty milligrams.”

“Are you kidding?” Luke sat up. “That’s going to turn her into a zombie, with all the other shit she’s been taking.”

“She hasn’t been sleeping. She says she gets a few hours, but we know she’s lying. It’s critical she sleep. Sleep facilitates—”

“Reconsolidation,” Luke finished, feeling his chest contract. “I know. I wrote the damn protocol.”

“You also know these things take time,” Elliot said. “I’m doing the best I can, I promise.”

Luke swung his legs over the side of the sofa and rested his elbows on his knees.

“I want to see her.”

“Impossible.”

Of course Luke knew it was impossible. He’d made it that way. “Can you get a message to her, at least?”

“What’s gotten into you?” Elliot asked. “You know the rules, and you know what’s at stake.”

Luke looked at his screen, at the picture of a two-year-old Charlotte on the carousel at Disneyland. “I know,” he said.

“And even if I took your message, I wouldn’t be allowed to give it to her.”

“Allowed?” Luke said. “Doesn’t it say Stark on the fucking letterhead?”

Stark laughed, his voice brittle as eggshells. “You know Jack can remove me from the org chart as quickly as he put me on.”

“Jack doesn’t have to know,” Luke pressed. “Can you stop being his lapdog just once?”

“Careful.” Stark sounded like a parent whose toddler was testing his patience. All Wilder staff trained to be unfailingly calm, but at

this hour even Elliot could lose his cool. “We both know being on the wrong side of Jack Copeland is never a good idea.”

“Elliot,” Luke said. “One message. Please.”

His exhale rattled in Luke’s ear. “I can’t make any promises.”

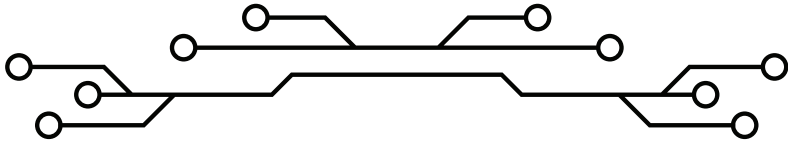
Luke closed his eyes. “Do you have a pen?”

“A pen?” Stark’s voice was a little less professional, and a little more like the Elliot he used to know. “I still have a reliable memory.”

“Not for this,” Luke said.

Muffled noises came through the phone. “Fine. I’m ready.”

Luke rattled off a long series of numbers.



# 3

## RESIGNED SURRENDER



HOPE

*The Wilder Sanctuary*  
*Rancho Mirage, California*

**S**HORTLY AFTER DAWN, Hope slid back into consciousness. She sat up in bed gingerly, unsure if the weight of her body would hold. A gauzy film filled her head, and her limbs felt alien. In her old life Hope had been an early riser, creeping out of bed hours before Luke opened his eyes. She'd sit outside on the porch, sipping coffee and watching the sky turn from indigo to gold to soft blue above the mountains.

But here at Wilder, mornings were a burden. They were too honest, too recalcitrant, too cold. Mornings here were difficult to face alone, with nothing but your own retreating dreams for companionship.

Hope switched on the monitor mounted to the wall. No actual television existed here, no Netflix or Hulu. There was no television anywhere at Wilder; Dr. Stark felt it impeded growth. Instead, the available channels were all meant to inspire calm. Sometimes movies

ran on a loop, but never anything Hope could stomach for too long. They were limited to sappy, uplifting stories regaling the triumph of the human spirit, adult versions of the after-school special.

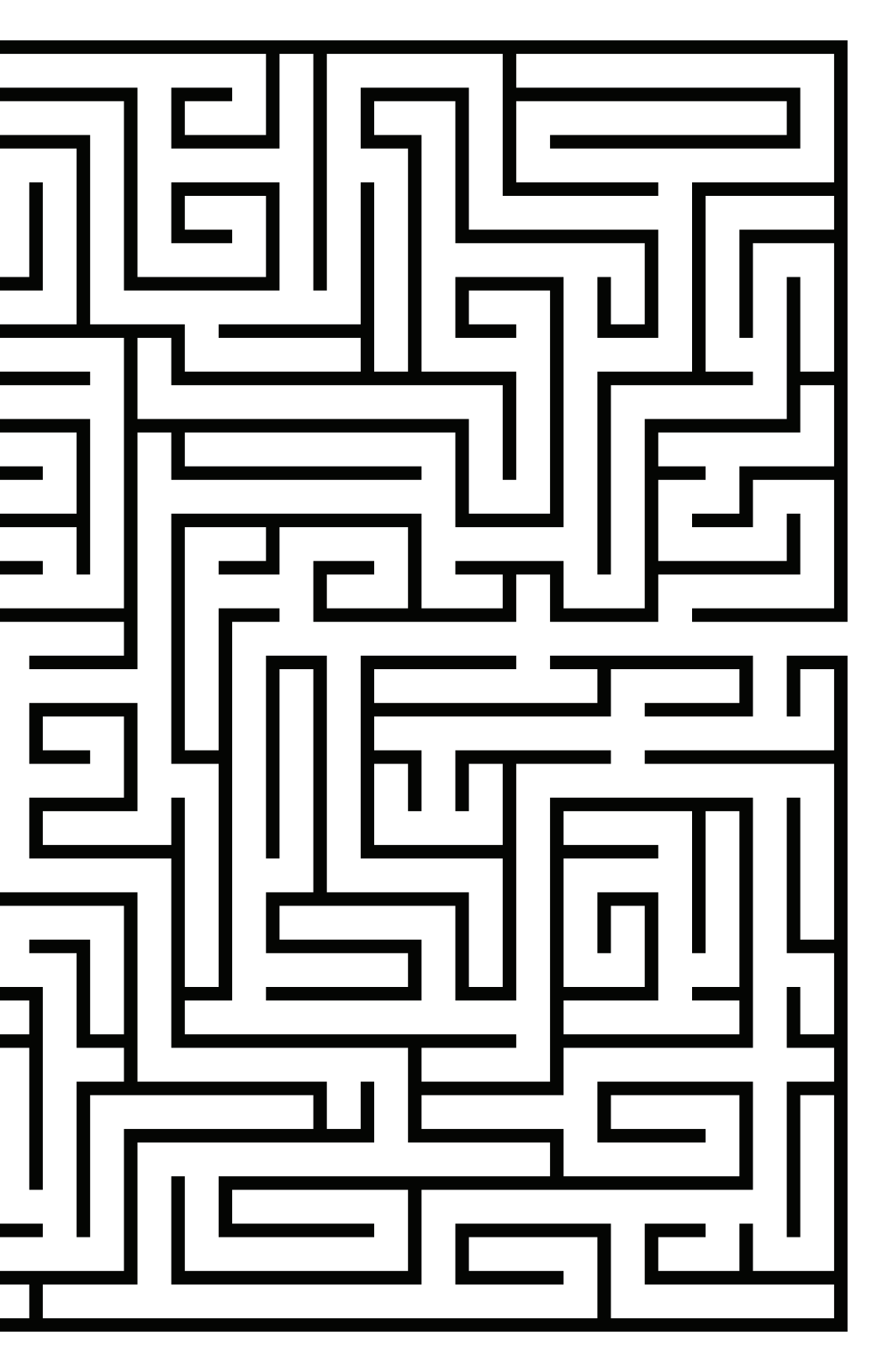
The home channel played instrumental music over a picture of the Zen Garden, like in a hotel room. *Welcome to the Wilder Sanctuary*, it said. *Supporting your Wellness Journey*. It was strange how Wilder advertised themselves to people who were already here, as if anyone watching this screen had a choice.

The next channel was a slideshow of the ubiquitous prints of motivation. Sometimes Hope watched this channel in the early-morning hours as she did now, playing a little game to try and match the posters with where they lived at Wilder. On this slide the slanted, loopy font was superimposed over a blurry window framing a blue sky, a ceramic pitcher of orange gerbera daisies on the windowsill. *Love yourself as you want to be loved*. The same poster also lived on the wall outside Dr. Emerson's office.

Hope passed the weather channel, yoga and deep breathing rituals, an offering of rain continuously falling into a brook. Not for the first time, Hope wished there were something to binge, something to pass the endless hours and let her escape into a world that wasn't her own for a while. In the early days, the languor was intrusive, almost suffocating. But months of the same had slipped Hope into a sort of muted inertia, a resigned surrender to her new life.

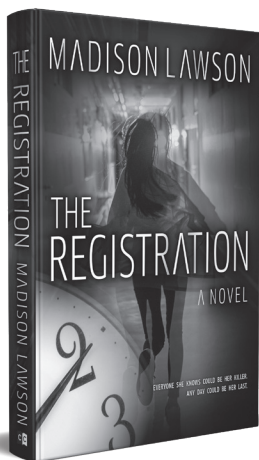
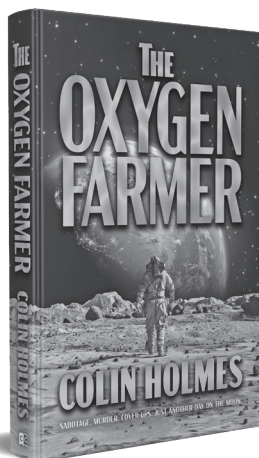
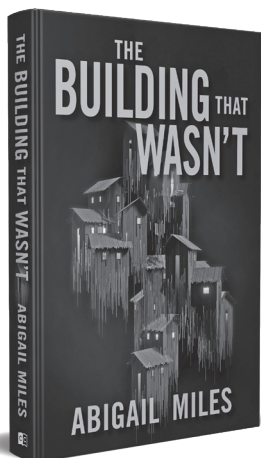
She longed for the ritual of watching television in bed with Luke from the laptop propped on his legs, head nestled in her spot just under his shoulder. The rhythm of his breathing, the safety. The feel of his hands, which would forever remain indescribable.

Hope knew she drove him crazy with her comments as they watched, though Luke always patiently paused to talk. Hope couldn't remember what they'd been watching before she came here, and wondered if Luke was still watching without her. Did she expect him to wait?



MORE SUSPENSEFUL READS FROM CAMCAT BOOKS

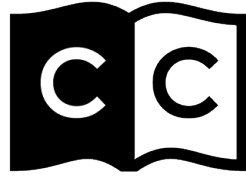
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# What if everything we remember never actually happened?

**M**EMORY IS COPELAND-STARK'S BUSINESS. Yet after months of reconsolidation treatments at their sleek new flagship facility, Hope Nakano still has no idea what happened to her lost year, or the life she was just beginning to build with Luke.

When the procedures surface fragmented memories, Hope finds herself doubting what she knows, what she's been told, and the man she thought she loved and could trust. As inconsistencies mount, her search for answers reveals a much larger secret Copeland-Stark is determined to protect.

**BUT EVERYONE HAS SECRETS, INCLUDING HOPE.**



Cover Design: Maryann Appel  
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