In an astounding twist of fate, Joey Graceffa has inherited a magnificent estate that only exists in the year 1920. He invites ten guests, all close friends of his, to attend a dinner party on its grounds.

But little do they know the dark secrets hidden within the house...

This is a dinner party to die for. No one is safe.

A novelization of the YouTube Red show *Escape the Night with Joey Graceffa.*
Okay, okay, before I begin, I better lay some ground rules. This is a novelization of *Escape the Night*, a YouTube Red show. If you haven't watched the show yet, I recommend you do so, though you can still read this fic if you haven't seen it. Everything that happens in the show (deaths, dialogue, etc.) happens in this story as well. I will occasionally patch up a plot hole, or fill in a missing scene with my own headcanons, but mostly, this fic will stick very closely to the original story. With all that said, please sit back, relax, and enjoy *Escape the Night: A Novelization!*
The House

Chapter Summary

Our story begins the same way the show did: within Joey's dreams. Things get creepier from there.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It starts, as both possibilities and nightmares tend to do, in dreams.

He's running—from what he doesn't know—through rain-drenched fields, soaked to the skin, scared out of his mind yet strangely excited at the same time. He pauses to catch his breath, and he sees it.

The house. His house. Built without hands, trapped within time, beautiful and deadly all at once.

There are graves everywhere, all strangely familiar, bearing names too blurred for Joey to make out. He clutches for a weapon, but only finds mud and tears. The house lingers on the horizon, taunting him. Baiting him.

Thunder booms in his ears. He's trapped against a tree, and a figure approaches—a hooded figure draped in black, with a rusted hook for a hand. It (he? she?) draws ever closer, savoring his terror, ready to use that hook to run him through.

If he could get past this creature...if he could get to the house...or maybe he ought to run from it, as fast as his legs can carry him...

Every dream ends the same way: the house flickers, then disappears, and Joey wakes up in a cold sweat, clutching a pillow and/or his boyfriend and trying to process the images dancing through his head.

By the fifteenth dream, he knows it's gotten out of hand.

Careful not to wake Daniel, Joey drags himself out of bed and lumbers to the bathroom. Once there, he stares into the mirror, glaring at himself through bloodshot eyes. "Snap out of it," he growls at his reflection, his voice an octave lower than usual. "There is no house. You aren't a...a...a freakin' Gatsby or something, okay?" He takes a few deep breaths before continuing. "You're Joey Graceffa, and you're in 2016, and you've got a home and a family and a life, not to mention six million subscribers who are probably going to notice if you keep going around looking like you haven't had a good night's sleep in years. That house does not exist and no one is coming for you."

But despite his best efforts, the dreams persist for another week, until Joey receives the letter that changes his life.

"Wait, what?" Joey can't believe what he's reading. "I inherited what now?"

"A house," explains the stranger on his doorstep (Arthur, he said his name was), watching Joey and
Daniel read the letter he's delivered with a small smirk on his face. "An illustrious estate that only exists in the 1920s."

"Only exists in the..." Daniel frowns. "But that doesn't make any sense!"

Arthur continues as though he didn't hear. "Originally owned by your late cousin twice removed, but upon his death he left it to you, mainly because he hated all of his other relatives."

Joey can't help but snort at that. "Wow. Bitter much?"

"You have weird relatives," Daniel agrees. "Have you even met this guy?"

"No."

"Doesn't matter." Arthur seems almost annoyed with the pair of them. "It's yours now, and that's all that matters."

And then Joey remembers: the house, the house, built without hands, trapped within time...

"I'll take it."

Living in the 1920s takes some getting used to. No technology works in Joey's new mansion, so he has to keep going back and forth from the house to his old place in order to make videos. (Thank God for his time-traveling car. There's a sentence he never thought he'd say.) Daniel stays with him, of course, but he takes longer to adjust, spending the first week convinced he's living in "some sort of weird dream or something."

Which, in a way, he is.

Arthur is there, as the head of staff. There is also a maid named Sarah and a groundskeeper named Marvin, but Joey doesn't know them too well. Mostly, he just stays out of their way.

Joey thought the dreams would stop now that the house is his. But they continue. They keep him up at night, vivid and frightening, hissing in his ear, "this house was not meant to be enjoyed by only you...invite others...bring your friends to me..."

After a full three weeks without sleep, Joey gives in.

He selects his guests—ten wonderful people, all of them close friends of his. Yeah, Daniel can't make it because he's out of town that weekend, and yeah, Colleen's filming her Netflix show, so she can't come either.


They can come.

He'll throw a party. 1920s themed. Each of his friends will have characters to play. It'll be a night of fun and friendship, and nothing will go wrong.

Right?

Chapter End Notes
Next chapter: The invitations are delivered to their ten recipients, and there's a time-traveling car involved, because why not. Also, we get a sneak peek at some of our ill-fated partygoers while they're still in 2016.
An Invitation

Chapter Summary

In which the invites are sent, we get a quick glimpse at some of the guests, and no one has any idea what the heck they're getting themselves into.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

To my esteemed friends,

I have acquired an illustrious estate through the death of a distant relative who I've never met.

I thought it only fitting that I invite you all to attend a dinner party on its grounds.

"Telegram for Mr. DeLaGhetto," announces the woman at the door, presenting a sealed vanilla envelope to a very confused Tim.

He blinks, frowns, and snatches it from her. "Am I getting sued?"

It will certainly be a night to remember. However, the estate is quite peculiar; it only exists in the year 1920.

"Only exists in the year 1920?" mutters GloZell through a mouthful of chips, staring in disbelief at her invitation. "The heck…"

To enter its grounds, you must be dressed entirely in clothing from that era. If you are carrying anything from the modern world, the house will simply never appear for you.

Matt looks up from his invitation to take a quick glance around his very modern room. His phone, his headset, his three different computers…even the backwards baseball cap on his head has no place at Joey's.

And not only your clothing, but your attitude must reflect the times. I have included your unique characteristics on the back of this invitation.
At this, Justine can't help but stop reading and take a peek at the flip side of her invitation. She reads the role written there, tucks a stray strand of blonde hair behind her ear, and smiles.

*My driver will pick you up and take you on a road that can only be driven by his mysterious time-traveling automobile.*

*Then, almost like magic, the place will appear.*

The night of the party arrives. Ten people dress their best, enter the time-traveling automobile, and leave 2016 behind.

Joey's in the bedroom, adjusting his tie and silently stressing, when Arthur enters with the strangest smile on his face. "Joey?"

"Yes?"

"They're here."

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: Time to meet our murder victims guests! Also, a quick look at 1920s fashion.
The Guests

Chapter Summary

The guests arrive. That's it. That's all that happens.

Chapter Notes

Honestly, this entire chapter is going to be nothing but descriptions of the guests, their roles, and their outfits. If you have no interest in what the characters are wearing or who they are pretending to be, feel free to skip to the next chapter, which is a good bit and has Joey in it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The first guest to arrive is Shane Dawson, who will be the Renegade for the evening. He's looking especially nice tonight in his leather jacket, grey pants, and matching tie; then again, anything's better than those oversized T-shirts he usually goes around in. And honestly, the scruff he's been sporting lately suits him, especially considering the takes-no-bull persona he seems to have been going for.

Next comes Eva Gutowski, the Journalist. She's wearing a long red coat over a white blouse and a greenish-brown skirt, and her brunette hair has been teased into a simple shoulder-length 'do. A white hat with a brown bow tied around it completes her vintage look.

A mere five minutes later, GloZell Green shows up, ready to wow the crowd as the Jazz Singer. And boy, does she look the part—she's got a snazzy blueish-black dress on, some furs draped over that, and a pair of blue gloves to top the whole thing off. Also, she's wearing a flashy headband over her usual wig, and of course a myriad of necklaces and jewels.

Oli White, the Big Game Hunter, is right on GloZell's heels. He's in a white button-down shirt and a pair of suspenders that would make him look like a lumberjack if it wasn't for the fur coat he's got on over it. As it is, he looks slightly imposing, but still clean-cut enough to avoid appearing dangerous.

After him is Justine Ezarik, the Gambler. She's letting her long blonde hair hang loose in ringlets down her shoulders, topping off the hairstyle with a pretty little headpiece on her forehead. The sparkling white dress and matching mink coat she has on practically scream glamour; she's the human equivalent of a crystal chandelier.

Andrea Brooks, the Fixer, makes her appearance shortly afterward. With her all-black ensemble (excepting, of course, the black-and-white silk coat that looks like something a sorceress would wear) and the red necklace that goes so well with her copper-colored hair, she's giving off serious coven vibes. Her simple-yet-seductive hairstyle only adds to the look, not to mention her eye shadow and dark red lipstick.

Then comes Matt Haag, the Professor. He's got an authentic World War I jacket on over a pair of suspenders, a white shirt, and a bow tie. It's a look that's somewhat dweeby, yet surprisingly dapper, and Matt manages to pull it off quite nicely.
Sierra Furtado is next inside, the tiara on her head signifying her role as the Heiress. Tiara aside, she's pretty much a princess in her little white dress and dainty heels, and of course she's got the white gloves to match. Her dark hair has been styled into an elegant bun, and even the way she carries herself indicates royalty.

When Lele Pons arrives, she struts through the door, holding her head high and grinning like she owns the place. As the Hustler, she's all decked out in at least four pearl necklaces, which go very nicely with the white headband holding her blonde side bun in place. She's also wearing a sleek black dress, and over that, a silver top that makes her look almost magnetic.

Finally, Timothy DeLaGhetto, the Mobster, turns up (he's a few minutes late, but no one seems to notice or care). His hair is slicked back in a man-bun, but it's his outfit that's truly eye-popping; plaid pants and a plaid jacket over a plaid vest over a white shirt. The clothes...the hair...even the sneaky little smirk on his face indicates how much the guy is channeling his inner bad boy.

Joey himself has just gotten changed into a black-and-white tux, complete with a long black blazer and a matching bow tie. As he follows Arthur downstairs to greet his guests, the Savant is sweating just a bit; after all, he's never actually thrown a party this fancy before, and he just hopes he doesn't accidentally mess everything up.

(By the end of the night, that's going to be the least of his worries.)

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: Let the party begin! Also, Matt is socially awkward, Andrea has no idea what she's doing, GloZell's just here for the cash, and Shane thinks something's off.
The Calm Before

Chapter Summary

The party begins, and everyone is allowed to have a few fleeting moments of fun and happiness before things start getting dangerous. Well, except for Shane and Eva, who have decided now would be a good time to pretend like they're Sherlock Holmes or something.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

To Justine, the entire situation is a blur of questions and hypotheticals.

Yes, she laughed at that invitation. Of course she did. Joey inheriting some kind of mansion from his old superrich dead Uncle/Cousin Moneybags—sure. Why not. She'll buy that. But "it only exists in the 1920s?" What is this, a fantasyland or something?

So she shrugged it off—he's probably just trying to set the "theme" or whatever, typical Joey—and hit the mall with her sister to buy the outfit she's currently wearing.

But now...she's here, in the freakin' 1920s, and she was just in 2016, and there was a car and a flash of light and it's all too much for her to process and omigod did I just travel through time?!?

She thinks she knows what's going on. Honest to God, she does. But she's not really sure, and it's the not-sureness that's beginning to gnaw at the back of her mind. Am I really in the 1920s? What even is this place? And what kind of people would leave Joey a house in the wrong freakin' time period?

Yeah, old Uncle Moneybags Graceffa clearly had a few screws loose, that's for sure.

Well, whatever the case, she's here now, and there's no point in stressing over the details. Not when there's partying to do, friends to chat with, and fun to be had. She's the Gambler, and goddamn it, she's gonna deal some cards, and they are gonna gamble tonight.

Matt has never had much time for parties. Between running his YouTube channel, managing his 100 Thieves competitive gaming team, and of course honing his skills in Call of Duty, he doesn't get to go out too much at all. So now that he's here at Joey Graceffa's 1920s-themed extravaganza, he intends to kick back and relax for once in his life.

Only one problem: he doesn't even know these people.

Oh, he knows some of them. He knows Justine, obviously, and he's acquainted with Timothy DeLaGhetto, and his friendship with Joey is honestly the only reason why he's here in the first place. But everyone else...they're a sea of strange faces and far-too-fancy outfits. Heck, with all of the bling and glitz everyone is wearing, his own outfit looks positively dorky by comparison.

Ah, well. No time like the present to get things done. He can do this, he can make some friends, all he's got to do is make a good first impression, strike up a conversation, and he'll be set. How hard
"Anyone have any mints? Any gum? Mints? Mints?"

Well, it's a start.

By the time Joey comes down the stairs, everyone's gotten over their initial fright and/or confusion, and now they're all standing in the foyer chatting up a storm. Lele and Sierra appear to be bonding over their equally extravagant outfits, Andrea's deep in conversation with her longtime friend Tim, Eva's talking to both Oli and Justine simultaneously, and Shane is laughing at some outlandish story GloZell is currently in the process of telling. Only Matt has yet to find someone to chat with, but even he seems to be enjoying himself.

_Time to make my entrance._

Joey takes a deep breath, turns to face his guests, and grins. "What do you guys think?"

Everybody cheers. Several people clap. GloZell blows kisses in Joey's direction.

"So far, so good. "Welcome," says Joey, spreading out his arms and indicating the splendor around him, "to my new house."

"This is yours?" Justine sounds incredulous, almost as if Joey told her that he was now the owner of the Capitol Building.

Lele raises an eyebrow. "This isn't your house!"

"This is rented," Tim insists.

Joey shakes his head. "I actually have inherited this house," he continues, slightly surprised that no one seems to remember his invitation but willing to overlook it nonetheless, "from a distant cousin twice removed."

"My cousins get me nothin'," GloZell complains.

Everyone laughs.

Joey gives everyone's outfits a good once-over and _boy_, did these guys go all out tonight. He knew he could count on them to play up the whole 1920s thing—after all, they _do_ talk into cameras for a living, of course they would know how to look their best. "You all look amazing tonight in your 1920s attire."

The compliment earns Joey more cheers and several "thank yous". Eva takes the opportunity to show off her legs, which Joey has to admit do look nice. He's pretty sure he hears Tim say "rented" again, but he brushes it off as Tim being Tim.

"I want to introduce you all to my wonderful staff that actually came with the house." Joey gestures to Arthur and Sarah, who have been standing unnoticed against the wall this entire time. "Arthur, who is head of staff..."

Arthur is immediately greeted by a chorus of "his" and "hi Arthurs". He nods and bows.

"...Sarah, the maid..."
Sarah curtsies as the guests shout her name.

"...and then there's Marvin, who's the groundskeeper," Joey finishes, feeling slightly awkward considering Marvin isn't there.

"You and your staff!" teases GloZell, her tone good-natured despite the mockery.

"Dinner is almost ready," Joey lets them know, "but until then, let's get to know each other a little bit more..." A grin sneaks its way across his face. "...and have some drinks."

Of course, everyone cheers at that, and Joey's confidence crashes through the roof.

Drinks have been had, and now Tim's deep in a card game with GloZell and Justine, trying not to lose the little money he's got.

"Hit me!" shouts GloZell, clapping her hands together like an overexcited two-year-old. "Hit me, hit me, hit me!"

Justine does. "Oh!" she cries, laying her card on top of GloZell's. "Girl, blackjack!"

Tim shrugs and sticks his cigar (fake, of course—no way is he risking lung cancer for a character) in his mouth, surveying the cards on the table. Wow, he thinks to himself as he notices what Justine played. This girl is serious about her gambling right now.

Then again, that does makes sense. Justine's the Gambler, so of course she likes gambling. Duh. And GloZell's the Jazz Singer, so of course she's gonna go around acting like Ella freakin' Fitzgerald. He himself is the Mobster, which honestly isn't too far off from what he is in 2016: coming from nothing, building his own empire...killing people...

...figuratively, of course.

Anyways, he's having fun, and he can't wait to vlog about this trip when he gets home. He can see the thumbnail now: I TRAVELED THROUGH TIME?!! Pair that title with a pic of him looking like that kid from Home Alone when he freaked out, and he's good to go.

It's not like anyone will actually believe him, obviously...but they'll still click on it, and that's all that matters.

Andrea has a problem. Here she is, supposed to be playing the Fixer, and she has absolutely no idea what in the world a Fixer even is.

So now she's standing here listening to Oli go on about how he "just got back from Africa" and has apparently "been hunting for the past couple of weeks or so" (she's a vegetarian, but she'll let it slide, because his outfit's cute), and it occurs to her that all of these people are working so hard to stay in character. Oli, the Big Game Hunter, is talking of hunting and Africa; Lele, the Hustler, is eyeing everyone's jewels; Sierra, the Heiress, isn't ooohing and aaahing at all the rich people stuff around her, because why would she? And then there's Andrea, just being Andrea, and she can't shake the feeling that she's doing something wrong.

She has to play the part. She has to be the Fixer. But how can she be the Fixer when she doesn't know what that is?
"I love the dark mistress look!" Joey says to her, bringing her out of her thoughts and sending her straight into panic mode. "It's gorgeous!"

"Thank you." Get into character, get into character, dangit! "Yeah, y'know, I'm really into fashion, I really like to make things, I like to fix things, so if you have something broken I can fix it."

Is that what a Fixer is? I don't know, I don't know, I don't—

Fortunately, that seems to be enough for Joey. "Really?"

"Yeah." Andrea smiles and crosses her arms. Nailed it.

Lele's made up her mind—she has to be a part of this house. It's so big, so fancy, so...everything anyone could ever dream of. It's like a fairy godmother showed up out of nowhere and was all "Lele, I'm gonna show you what you've secretly always wanted," and yes, omigosh, just...yes.

"Joey, do you own this house?" she blurts out in a rush of excitement and curiosity (and yes, maybe a bit of greed too...it's a nice house, don't judge her).

Joey frowns and shifts his feet a bit. "I don't have the deed yet..."

"So you're not rich?" That doesn't make sense. Mansions are for rich people. Lele ought to know; she's never had one.

"You basically own it," chimes in Oli.

"No, no, no, it's..." Joey's fumbling his words. "It's going to happen."

Next to Lele, Sierra pipes up, an adorable little grin on her face. "He's moving."

"Tonight," says Joey, "it's supposed to happen, actually."

"Oh, really?" Now Lele's intrigued. A guy receiving a brand-new dream house and inviting all of his friends to party with him on the very same night he finally signs the deed...it's like one of those fantasy-romance novels waiting to happen.

"And once I sign it, it's officially mine," Joey explains, "but, like, I've been living here, so..." He shrugs. "It's mine."

Well, sighs Lele to herself, at least a girl can dream.

In the library, Eva's playing darts with Shane and Matt...and failing miserably, but that's besides the point. At least she's having fun with her friends, and that's all that matters, right?

Except...

She's always been far too curious for her own good, which must be why Joey decided to give her the role of the Journalist, and now that she's here in this mysterious mansion, the curiosity has only increased. She's not content just hanging out with the others and being a good little party guest—not when there's a humongous house that's practically begging to be explored. She wants to see everything, and she's not going to do that if she stays in the living room throwing darts at a dartboard.
So when Shane pulls her aside and asks, "Are we allowed to look around?" her heart is practically screaming yes, yes, yes! How Shane Dawson of all people read her mind she doesn't know, but yes, let's look around, let's see every room, touch every fancy thing, do everything this place has to offer before it's too late and we gotta go home!

But she keeps her cool, looks Shane in the eye, and smiles. "I'm down if you're down."

"Hmmm." GloZell stares at the cards before her, her mouth turned up in a determined snarl. She's been wowed by this place the moment she walked through the door, and yes, she kinda sorta might want it for herself. Just a little. But first things first: she can't lose all her money to Justine's gambling self over there, otherwise how in the heck is she even gonna afford to live here?

"Whatcha gonna do, GloZell?" Tim's voice is laced with an unspoken challenge.

GloZell responds by doing what a Jazz Singer does best: breaking into song. "Hit me one more time!" Of course, her furs choose now to fall off her shoulder, so she has to stop the song in order to put them back in place. Jesus Christ, it's hard bein' pretty. How on earth do these folks stand it?

"Hit you with my best shot!" sings Justine, slapping another card onto the table.

"Um, I'm the Jazz Singer here, sweetheart," GloZell reminds her.

Justine does that cute little flounce that makes it damn near impossible to stay mad at her. "Sorry."

GloZell smiles but doesn't let up. "I know you sing pretty, but I don't do duets." She laughs for a split second before shooting another pointed stare in Justine's direction.

Justine, to her credit, stares right back.

To be honest, GloZell was hoping that she was the only one invited by Joey. Y'know, that maybe he'd throw a just-her-and-him kind of thing, and then maybe they could live in this house together and she could be rich too, or something like that, she doesn't know. At any rate, she wasn't expecting all these other folks to be here too, and yeah, she'll admit it, she's a wee bit disappointed.

But it's fine, she decides as Tim chortles and Justine deals another round. I'll do whatever... long as I get my man...

...and my mansion.

"So would you want to live here your whole life, then?" Oli asks Joey, genuinely curious. He's as impressed with this place as anyone, obviously, and he's having loads of fun at this party and all, but living here... forever... If Oli was in Joey's position, he isn't sure if he'd be up for it.

"Yeah!" Joey replies. "Why not?"

"Alone?" Lele's got a strange, almost hungry look in her eyes, and it's making Oli a little nervous.

"Do you have a girlfriend?"

Oh, no. Oli winces, suddenly feeling sorry for Lele. Poor thing's probably going to feel like a complete idiot in the next minute or so, and he is so glad he's not in her shoes.

Joey seems a bit taken aback, but he smiles politely nonetheless. "No." He turns to Oli, Sierra, and
Andrea, grimacing slightly. "I guess she didn't watch my video."

Andrea and Sierra burst out laughing, and even Lele bursts into a grin. Glad that no one got embarrassed or offended after all, Oli smiles too.

As Shane hangs out with the others in the library, he can't help but remember what's wrong with this picture.

Don't get him wrong—he's super grateful to Joey for inviting him here tonight, especially considering this is the first YouTube party anybody's ever invited him to. (He can only assume everyone else in the community thinks his very presence is a fun-killer.) And he loves being in the 1920s—he doesn't have to text people back, he doesn't have to worry about keeping up his Snapchat, he doesn't have to make any videos...this is great. This is vacation.

But he knows that all is not as it seems. There's something up with this house, and he's determined to get to the bottom of it before anyone gets hurt.

Unfortunately, just as he's about to sneak off with Eva to "look around," Joey shows up and immediately asks how the dart game’s going, so Shane has to spend the next several minutes pretending to play darts with the gang. Despite the fact that he's not really trying, he still manages to get the dart extremely close to the center (which is better than Matt did when he thought it was a good idea to throw it over his shoulder, but hey, to each their own).

Once that's over, he pulls Joey aside and gets to the point. "Can we, like, look around?"

"Look around?" Joey seems a bit taken aback by the question, but he recovers quickly. "Uh, no, I think we should just stay down here. Dinner's almost ready, so I think we should just...hang out here..." His eyes dart away from Shane and towards the mahogany floor. "Yeah."

But Shane can tell that he's lying just by looking into his eyes. There's something Joey Graceffa does not want his guests to see.

Shane steels his nerves and prepares to venture into the unknown. He doesn't want to face whatever's out there, especially considering some of the stories he's heard about this place. But he has a mission, and he's gonna get it done or die in the attempt.

He hopes it's the former, though. He has another week's worth of videos to edit when he gets home, and the last thing he needs is for some stupid house to go and screw it all up.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: Dinner is served, dangit! Also, Shane and Eva's Not-So-Excellent Adventure.
Paradise Flawed

Chapter Summary

While everyone else goes off to dinner and continues enjoying themselves, Shane and Eva ignore Joey's request and go exploring anyway—and then proceed to stumble upon a terrifying truth.

Chapter Notes

Boy, you guys do NOT know just how hard it is having to juggle eleven different POVs. It's going to be a lot easier to handle once I get to kill some fools.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The dinner bell clangs, and Joey's voice rings out over the hustle and bustle of the group. "Dinner is served, so head on into the dining room!"

Now's my chance.

As the other guests file into the dining room, Shane pulls Eva aside. She nods, and the two of them sneak off in the opposite direction. No one notices, and the next thing Shane knows, they're on the majestic staircase, heading into the unknown.

"This is so creepy," Shane comments, making sure to laugh a little to put Eva at ease. He knows the dark truth behind his statement, but he doesn't want to scare away his companion.

Fortunately, Eva's too busy gazing at the beautiful things around her to fully grasp the implications of what he's saying. "I know," she remarks offhandedly, a curious smile still shining across her face.

Shane's own smile disappears the second Eva isn't looking. He's trying so hard to keep his cool and remember his mission, but there's a part of him that just wants to run screaming out of this house, jump into Joey's time-traveling car, and never look back.

Snap out of it, he scolds himself as they turn a corner on the staircase. You're the Renegade. You're wild, unpredictable, laughing in the face of danger. You can't give up now. They need you. They don't know it yet, but they need you.

He gulps, fakes a smile, and faces the dark staircase ahead.

"Oh, the salad looks delicious!" Joey exclaims as he takes his place at the head of the table. So far, this party's been going great—everyone loves his brand-new house, everyone's getting along, and no one's gotten so much as a paper cut. A plus, Joey. Ten outta ten.

Everyone takes their seats. Lele takes a while to find hers, but eventually settles in next to Sierra. And of course, the first thing she wants to know is "So how did you get this house, anyway?"
"It just happened," Joey replies. "Fell into my lap." He remembers that day like it was yesterday: the letter, Arthur's announcement, the disbelief on Daniel's face...

Oli brings him back to reality. "Thanks for inviting us, by the way."

"No, of course!" says Joey, who's pretty much sky-high at this point. He's gotten more compliments over the course of fifteen minutes than he usually gets in a day, and it's honestly doing wonders for his self-esteem right now. Between that and all of the fun he's having with his friends...he really ought to throw parties more often.

"Wait..." Sierra's green eyes dart around the table. "Where's Eva and Shane?"

Joey gives the guests a quick once-over and...yep, there are two empty seats where the Renegade and the Journalist ought to be. What in the world...

The guests immediately launch into a chorus of "ooooooohs," no doubt jumping to some very dirty conclusions. As for Joey, a part of him feels a little disrespected. He told Shane not to go exploring, and what does he (and Eva) do? Go exploring anyway. It's kind of insulting, to be honest.

If they even went exploring. He doesn't know the exact nature of the relationship between those two, but...

*I swear to God, Shane and Eva, if you two went off to do...you know...I will never invite either of you back here ever again.*

"You scared yet?" Eva teases Shane, not feeling scared in the slightest. Yes, the atmosphere does kinda remind her of a horror movie, but *come on.* It's just a house. Joey's been living here for weeks, and nothing terrible has happened to him.

Besides, the 1920s were a fascinating time period. She read up on it before she got here—flappers and bootlegs, Prohibition and jazz music...a decade of prosperity and social change. And now she's part of it. She's tempted to pinch herself, just to make sure she isn't dreaming.

They finally reach the top of the stairs, Eva still enraptured by the unbelievable grandeur of it all...and then she sees something her history books could never have prepared her for.

Someone's got a body.

"Wait." Eva stops dead in her tracks. Yep, that's a body all right, and whoever's got it just dragged it away down another hallway. "Wait, what?"

She's about to go charging in after it (still wanting to see everything, still not caring about the consequences), but Shane grabs her arm and pulls her away from the scene of the crime. "Whoa, whoa, whoa." He seems just as unnerved as she is, but at least he's managing to keep his cool (how he does it, Eva has no idea). "Maybe, uh..."

They stand there, wondering whether or not to run, pondering what this could mean for them and their friends, and then...the maid appears, blood on her face, a cold ruthlessness in her eyes.

Suddenly, Eva isn't feeling so brave anymore.
Oddly enough, the minute he catches Sarah the maid in the act of hiding a body, whatever fear Shane still had evaporates. Now that he knows who the enemy is, completing his mission and saving his friends suddenly seems so much easier than it did previously.

Funny how that works.

She approaches them, a sociopathic smile on her face. "The dinner's ready."

"Where's...where's the bathroom?" Eva stammers. Shane, sensing her fear, puts a protective hand on her shoulder. He dragged her into this mess; the least he can do is protect her from whatever the maid has planned for them.

Sarah ignores the question. "You should probably head downstairs." It's not a suggestion; it's a threat.

Shane turns to Eva, his mind shouting *get her out of here, don't let her see.* "Yeah, here, turn around."

Eva doesn't need to be told twice; she immediately makes for the staircase and doesn't look back.

Once Eva's safely out of the way, Shane looks the maid dead in the eye. "I know what you're doing." There's a hard edge to his voice, and his cold stare never leaves Sarah's soulless eyes.

She stares back, her very look spelling death.

After shooting one more glare her way (just to make sure she knows he means it), Shane follows Eva back downstairs.

He knows now what he has to do. He isn't going to enjoy it, but if it means completing his mission and getting his friends safely home, he'll do anything.

He just hopes this house doesn't get to them first.

The gates have been locked.

The exits have been barred.

The time-traveling car has been...taken care of.

*Oh, those foolish little people, sitting there in the dining room eating their food. They think that everything's peachy keen (well, except for the Dawson boy—must take care of him ASAP). They think that they're going to throw their party and then go home.*

*They don't know how doomed they really are.*

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: Bedazzled headbands, secret notes, and the first attack of the night.
Shane and Eva return, GloZell has an impromptu musical number, and then...disaster strikes.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dinner's going great so far, so GloZell figures now's as good of a time as any to break into song. "Sittin' here with the food/Havin' fun with Jo-eeey..."

"Oh my!" Joey's grinning up a storm over there, sitting real pretty at the head of the table like some kind of fancy lord or something.

GloZell grins back and gets to the point. "I wish he'll give me some of that mon-eeey!"

Everyone laughs.

"I just got the house, okay?" Joey insists. "I didn't get money."

Oh, sure you didn't, sweetie.

"You could put it on the market," Matt pipes up.

As if. When you get a fancy house like this, why on earth would you ever want to sell it to any random rich guy who comes along? Uh-uh, nope, I'd keep it forever and show it off to all my friends. I mean, think of all the fun we can have here! This place is damn near perfect!

But not quite.

"That Sarah chick is a little scary though," GloZell remarks, vocalizing her one concern with the place as best she can. "That maid?" She grimaces.

"Yeah, she scares me," Joey admits as GloZell does her best creepy maid impression. "I don't know..."

"She needs to work on her makeup," is what Matt has to say about it.

But to be honest, GloZell doesn't think that makeup is gonna fix the problem here. I mean, look at her. She just stands there, scowling at everybody like we all peed in her soup or something...ugh, you'd think she's gonna shoot up a Dairy Queen if we look at her wrong.

When I become Mrs. Joey, and I get into the house, she's the first one that's gotta go.

Oli can't help but notice that quite a few of his fellow guests seem to be kind of...well...gold-diggers. Between Lele eyeing up the entire house and interrogating Joey on how he got it, to GloZell straight-up admitting she wants Joey's cash, they seem to have a lot of girls who want money.
As for Oli himself, he's trying to steer clear of all the money talk. He came here to have a good time, not to fish some extra coins out of Joey's wallet or whatever. He'll leave that to the others.

He has to hand it to the staff though; the food is delicious. Savory pork chops, buttered broccoli, creamy mashed potatoes that just melt in your mouth...it's not quite as good as the kind his mum makes, but it's up there.

"We should place bets to see where we think these two are, first of all," says Justine, gesturing to the empty chairs where Shane and Eva ought to be.

"Yeah, it's been a long time, they can't be in the toilet!" GloZell frowns. "You can't drop deuces that long!"

While she's talking, Oli glances at the entrance to the dining room, hoping to see their two missing friends ready to rejoin the group. Of course, he is once again disappointed; there's still no sign of either Eva or Shane. Oli knows that they're probably either taking forever in the bathroom or (if the more dirty-minded guests are right) making out somewhere, but he still can't help but worry.

What if they're lost? After all, this house is humongous...it's the kind of house you could easily get lost in...and who knows what's waiting up those stairs...

Sierra literally couldn't care less where Shane and Eva are. Sure, this house is big and all, and she still isn't quite sure what's taking them so long. But they're both adults; they can take care of themselves. Honestly, a part of Sierra wishes she'd gone with them...after all, it's fun to go exploring, and Shane is kind of cute, even if he can be a bit of a troublemaker sometimes.

Ah, well.

"So is this impressive to you?" Joey asks her, no doubt fishing for even more compliments. "My estate?"

To which Sierra replies, "Oh...it's cute."

Everyone gasps.

Well, what else is there to say? It's a nice house, but Sierra's still trying to stay in character, and she knows that the Heiress wouldn't be particularly impressed. She comes from a really rich family, she doesn't really work, she was handed a lot of things in her life, so...yeah.

"Am I the only po' one here?" GloZell asks, earning another round of laughter from the group.

"Well, you got a bedazzled headband on," Tim points out.

GloZell pauses for a second before responding. "I stole it."

This, of course, results in even more laughter—and yes, Sierra's dainty little giggle is a member of that chorus. She knows she should try to be more haughty, but she can't help it. GloZell's just way too funny to be ignored.

She finishes her mashed potatoes and is just about to start in on her bread (she's so grateful that someone thought to make some bread, because she literally can't get enough of that stuff) when all of a sudden, everyone starts cheering as if somebody made a three-pointer in a basketball game.
Shane and Eva have returned.

The minute Eva enters the dining room and takes her seat next to Oli, the interrogation begins.

"Where were you?"

"You're a little late!"

"Where were you guys?"

It's enough to make Eva want to bang her head against a wall, but she figures that wouldn't be proper etiquette.

Shane, who is currently sitting between GloZell and Justine, ignores the questions and immediately turns his attention to the food. "What is this?"

"Do not change the subject, please!" Joey's tone reminds Eva of a kid desperate to hear a juicy secret. "We want to know where you guys were!"

Eva wants to tell them what happened so bad, but what in the world is she supposed to say? Oh, we were just wandering around and we found the maid disposing of a freakin' body, how are you guys doing?

No way is she telling them that. They'd do one of two things: laugh at her, or panic. Neither of which would be at all productive. It'll be better for everyone if she just keeps this to herself.

Besides, it's too early for this.

So she lies. "I was in the bathroom!"

"For that long?" Joey scoffs.

"Is this real food?" asks Shane, thinking with his stomach as usual. "Can we eat this?"

But Joey won't let up. "Why are you changing the subject? I want to know where you guys were!"

It then occurs to Eva that oh God, do they think we were...? Nope, nope, nope, nope, nope. "As much as I love a good makeout..." But not with Shane, good Lord...I mean, I'm sure he's a good kisser and all, he's certainly kissed a lot of people, but come on, guys, we're just friends, what the heck? "...I was literally pooping."

"Oh, okay," says Joey, and Eva breathes a sigh of relief.

Having apparently finished questioning Eva, Joey turns to Shane. "What about you?"

Shane swallows another bite of food, pretending he didn't hear the question. He knows what he saw, and he knows Eva saw it too, but...now's not the best time to mention it. Let Joey and the others live in blissful ignorance for a little while longer.

Not that he can keep it a secret forever, obviously. Eventually...he's gonna have to tell everybody. And boy, he is not looking forward to seeing the happy smiles vanish off of his friends' faces.
Fortunately, he's saved from having to respond by Arthur's arrival to the dining room. The butler's appearance prompts several "ohs" and "hellos" from the group, but Arthur doesn't seem to notice. He circles around the table until he's reached Shane, and then taps him on the shoulder.

Shane looks up from his food, and the butler hands him a rather official-looking piece of paper. A note...at this time of night...oh God.

"Okay, now you have to open it and read it to us!" exclaims Lele from across the table.

The group shouts their agreement, and Shane grins, pretending that everything's normal. "Y'all jealous?" *Keep your cool, Dawson, it's fine, it's fine, it's probably Ryland or Garrett wondering where you are, or Catrific trying to convince you to do another collab with her...*

"What is it?" asks Eva.

"What's it say on the front?" Justine wants to know.

Ignoring his friends' barrage of questions, Shane reads the note...

So far, this party's gone okay. Justine's said hi to all of her friends, met a few new ones, gambled a little...and yeah, she still hasn't gotten used to the whole we're-in-the-1920s-now thing, but that's okay. At least it'll be a cool story to tell everybody when she gets home.

But if there's one thing she *hates*, it's not knowing things. So when Shane randomly receives some sort of note from nowhere, of *course* she tries to peek over his shoulder and catch a glimpse of what it says. But all she sees is the word "fifteen" before Shane maneuveres it out of her line of vision.

_Goddamn it, Shane. First you won't tell us where you and Eva snuck off to* (she doesn't believe Eva's "oh we were in the bathroom" baloney, not at all), *and now you won't even tell us what your little telegram says. Why are you being so secretive lately, huh? What've you got to hide?*

But then she gets distracted by the arrival of the maid (ugh, GloZell's right, that girl's creepy), who's holding a covered dish of some sort. Assuming that this must be the dessert, Justine's sweet tooth gets the better of her, and she whoops and cheers along with the rest of the group.

Of course, no one's cheering harder than Joey. "Wonderful!" he shouts with an approving smile, and for a few seconds, Justine shoves all of the confusing stuff (the time period, the note, Shane's strange behavior) to the back of her mind. *Forget it, girl, it's not worth it, let's just kick back our heels and eat some—*

"OH MY GOD!"

Shane Dawson, who was perfectly fine a mere five minutes ago, is now coughing up blood all over Joey's fine china.

Pandemonium breaks out in the dining room. Everybody's screaming and squirming in their seats, some of them craning their necks to get a better look at Shane's plight, others trying to scoot their chairs as far away from him as possible. Joey shouts Shane's name, panic in his voice, his eyes wide with shock and concern.

As for Justine, she stays glued to her seat, watching in horror as her friend convulses and chokes right next to her. *What is this place?* screams her confusion, once again forced to the forefront of her mind.
I...I don't like it.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: What's up with Shane? He isn't...*dying*, is he? IS HE?!!
Also, puzzles!
Dawson Down

Chapter Summary

Shane's pretty much on death's door at this point, but never fear! Joey and friends still have one more chance to save him...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Oli sums up Joey's muddle of thoughts with a single, bewildered sentence: "What the hell is going on?"

By this point, Shane's no longer in his seat, having staggered over to the nearest window and collapsed in a heap on the floor. He's still coughing up blood, but at least someone thought to provide him with a napkin. Joey rushes to his friend's side, his heart going twenty kilometers a minute, hoping against hope that it's all some sort of sick prank.

"I think I got poisoned," Shane somehow manages to choke out before another spray of blood erupts from his mouth.

"Oh, Jesus!" screams GloZell. 

Oh Jesus is right. "He says he was poisoned!" Joey informs the group, just in case some of them didn't catch what Shane said (half of them are still busy running around like chickens with their heads cut off, so it's possible). 

Everyone starts talking at once. Eva points and shouts "It was the maid!" while GloZell screams a string of prayers and curses.

Joey is trapped in a state of shock. He doesn't know what happened, he doesn't know who did this to Shane, and he certainly doesn't know what to do about it. All he knows is that Shane Dawson, one of the closest friends he has, is dying right in front of his eyes.

At least Matt still seems to have his wits about him. "I'm reading the telegram," he announces, snatching the fallen note from Shane's abandoned plate. Justine's by his side in seconds, looking over his shoulder as he reads.

"What does it say?" several people ask for the second time tonight...except this time, no one really wants to know what the damn thing says anymore.

Matt looks up from the telegram and confirms their worst fears. "It says he's been poisoned."

Poisoned. The very word sends chills down Joey's spine. He never dreamed that any of his friends would meet such a terrible fate...but then again, it's my fault, isn't it? I invited him here. He'd probably be at home trying some milkshake or whatever if it wasn't...if I didn't...

Honestly, he's beginning to regret throwing this party in the first place. After all, Shane's life is way more important than Joey's sleep cycle.
The news that the telegram predicted Shane's poisoning earns several more "whats" from the guests, but then Lele of all people points out what might be the worst part of this entire sordid story. "So he was...He knew!"

Deciding he has to see this for himself, Joey snatches the telegram from Matt. His hands shake as he reads it aloud to the guests, a part of him still praying that maybe someone will yell "Pysch!" and the entire thing will turn out to be just a horrible nightmare.

*In fifteen minutes you'll be dead...your lungs filled with blood...HOWEVER, you know I love games. There is an antidote hidden on the first floor of the house. If you and your friends are wise enough, they'll be able to solve the clues and save you.*

**Antidote...** Joey's mind is racing to catch up with his mouth. *So things aren't hopeless after all. We can save him. We can save him...*

**The symbols of your cult mark the clues leading to the antidote. It all begins with your last dish of the night.**

**May you die in horrible pain, my cursed enemy.**

...Matt did not sign up for this.

Going to a dinner party, thinking you'll have a good time, and then one of your fellow guests goes and gets himself poisoned...that's the kind of thing that happens in old mystery novels. Not real life. This is ridiculous. This entire situation...it's ridiculous and terrible and tragic and unbelievable all at the same freakin' time.

And now...it's up to them, isn't it? They're the only ones who can save Shane—and, to be honest, Matt isn't sure if he's up to the task.

**It all begins with your last dish of the night...**

"What does she have under there?" asks Justine, her voice trembling as she points to the maid.

Matt glances at Sarah and *yes,* she's still holding that covered dish she brought in seconds before Shane...*don't think about it.* "She's got the last dish!"

Oli rubs his eyes and backs away slowly. "What the hell..."

"*What does she have under there?*" Justine's tone is bordering on frantic at this point.

The maid places the dish on the table, and Matt can't help but stare in apprehension. *What's under there? How do we know it's food? It could be a freakin' bomb for all we know...*

Eva, who's closest to the dish, reaches for it. "I'll open it."

"Girl, I will fork you up," snaps GloZell, brandishing her fork in Eva's direction. "What is underneath there?"

Eva takes off the lid and *omigod it's a head it's a freakin' head why is there a head there what is going on no no no no no no...*

And right there and then, Matt's brain switches on the mute button, and everything becomes a rush of soundless shapes and darkened lights. Nothing makes sense. Everything's insane. He's crossed
reality's threshold, and there's no going back.

When he sees what's under the lid, Oli's first thought is *good God, she wasn't expecting us to actually eat that, was she?*

It's a head. It's a flipping head—brown hair, closed eyes, bloody mouth, clearly male. And it's dead, and it's *human*, which means that...*nope, not going there.*

Of course, everybody screams. Eva, Lele, and Sierra are in full-blown panic mode, pushing each other and hiding behind the chairs in an effort to get away from the horror before them. Arthur tries to calm them down, but he might as well be trying to stop an earthquake for all the good it does.

"Wait." Oli takes a closer look at the head, and he can't help but notice the piece of paper sticking out of his...*ugh, that's revolting.* "There's something in his mouth."

Ignoring his friends' shouts of disapproval, he reaches into the bloodstained mouth and fishes out the rolled-up slip of paper. It's disgusting, yes, but if it'll save Shane, it's got to be done.

"Are we not gonna call the police for this?" Lele wants to know.

Tim shushes her as Oli unrolls the paper and reads it aloud to the group.

*Something is not okay with this room. I like it in a perfect order, but certain things want to wander around the table instead of finding their perfect fit. Can you figure it out?*

"Wait, what?" is Joey's immediate reaction.

"This is what we gotta look for," Oli explains, pointing out the strange symbol scrawled on the side of the first telegram. "This symbol."

Justine's already up, wandering around the table, taking quick glances at everything in the room. "That symbol...that symbol means something."

"Why are we still here?" Sierra asks. "I feel like we should..."

Oli tunes her out, focusing on the two notes in his hands. "A perfect fit..." *Think, Oli, think, you can do this..."* "...can you figure it out..."

He glances over at Shane, who's lying on the floor, looking like he's halfway to the grave already. Arthur's kneeling over him, monitoring his condition...*but he's not a doctor, we need a doctor, were there any good doctors in the 1920s? I don't know...*

Shane is dying. There's no question about it. This guy is *literally* coughing up blood over here, and everyone else...well, to be honest, one or two of them are still eating their food, apparently not really bothered about what's happening. And their non-reaction boils Oli's blood—don't they notice that Shane's life is on the line here? Don't they *care?*

"Come on, guys!" he shouts, a hint of irritation mixed with desperation in his voice. "Shane is, like, *dying!*"

"I'm too stupid for this!" shouts Lele, and Sierra's inclined to agree. Not about Lele (Lele's no genius, but she's a lot smarter than she gives herself credit for), but about her. Sierra Furtado. She's an idiot,
and she knows it, so why even bother?

Besides, she's convinced this isn't real. It can't be. The notes, the clues, the severed head on a platter...it's all too ridiculous to take seriously. Shane's just being Shane, playing some sort of colossal prank on them, pretending to die just to scare the heck out of his friends. And Joey's probably in on it, since everyone knows that he and Shane are tight. Heck, this house probably isn't even in the 1920s, and there's probably secret cameras installed everywhere so that "Shoey" (is that what they're called?) can film this entire thing and put it up on YouTube. MY FRIENDS WATCH ME DIE, they'll call it, or some equally clickbait-y title, and it'll get ten million views and everyone will laugh at them.

Yeah. It's a prank. It has to be. Sierra can't bring herself to consider the alternative.

"Omigosh," moans GloZell as everyone continues scouting the room for clues. "Shane gon' die..."

"Wait!" Matt's standing by the window, a glass holder in his hands. "What was that symbol on there?" He holds it up, revealing a glowing symbol on the top left of it. "Was it this?"

Eva makes a beeline for Matt and glances at the symbol. "Oh...yes it is, yes!"

The next several minutes are utter chaos—everyone's running around, searching for the three glasses that fit in the holder, trying and failing at least twenty times in the process. Finally, Oli shoves the last glass into place, and two seconds later, GloZell's distinctive voice rings out over the chatter of the rest of the group. "Whoa! No, Jesus! I rebuke you, Satan!"

This, of course, gets everyone's attention, and it doesn't take long for them to find out what she's screaming at: an open box that Sierra is positive was not open before.

"Oh, lordy," GloZell frets, "it opened up by itself!"

The box (small, black, slightly sketchy-looking) has a note pinned on the front and three separate compartments inside. Each has a pitch-black lock on it, and each contains a small vial of yellowish liquid.

*The antidote.* It has to be. Or, at least, the pretend antidote...they'll get it unlocked, then give it to Shane, and he can be all "hahaha got you so good, you should've seen your faces," and everyone will laugh and continue with their dinner. And then maybe Sierra can finish that bread without feeling so guilty about it.

Sierra kneels in front of the box and begins to read the note.

*There are three keys to unlock life, all hidden from view, but with one's strife you can attempt to save an innocent life.*

"This is long," Sierra complains. "I don't wanna read this." She moves aside and lets the much-smarter Eva take over.

*In the first floor study, one key to life is as high as a mountaintop. It's only a small thread, but it can give you what you're looking for. In the library is the second key, which lies hidden between the nine circles of hell described by letters and words. In the foyer is the third key to life, which can easily be found, but no one person can retrieve it without the helping hand of a friend.*

"An innocent life?" Really? Has whoever wrote this note even seen Shane's vids? That guy's about
as innocent as a dirty-minded college kid.

Not that it matters, of course, because he's still freakin' dying. And Tim sure as hell isn't going to sit back, pop a couple beers, and watch Shane Dawson die.

So now he's in the library, a card-carrying member of Team Letters and Words. "Uh..." He scours the place, scanning the shelves for potential clues. "Letters and words are in books..." Come on, DeLaGhetto, you have one job, dammit!

Now, if it was just him, he knows he could probably do a pretty decent job. But he's got Andrea, Sierra, and Justine with him, and he knows that none of them have read a book in years. That might be a problem.

"Is this a..." Sierra pokes at an especially thick book on the mantlepiece. "Is this a thing?" She giggles.

Yep. Definitely a problem.

Matt's in the foyer with Lele and Oli, trying to work out the "helping hand of a friend" clue. So far, all they've found is yet another box (seriously, if Matt sees one more box tonight he might start smashing things and scream-singing "I'm a Yankee Doodle Dandy").

"Where's the key?" he asks no one in particular, peering into the rectangular box before them.

But as usual, Oli is right on top of things. "Hold on, wait!" He waits for Matt and Lele to get their heads out of the box, and then he starts poking around the hole—or, at least, one hole in particular. "The square...so we need to get it to the square..."

Before Matt has a chance to react, Oli's gone and stuck his hand straight through the hole.

"I've got something!" he shouts in triumph. "A box...a box of some sort..."

The pieces click together in Matt's mind: the key, the key, this has to be the key...but how in the world are we going to get that box out of this gigantic box?

The three of them start sticking their hands through every available hole, feeling around, pushing the box, trying to guide it towards the exit...

...the helping hand of a friend...the helping hand of a...

One key to life—Shane's life—is as high as a mountaintop, and that's the key that Joey's group has set out to find.

"Look, look!" GloZell points to one of the study's many paintings. "There's somethin' sticking out of that mountain."

Joey and Eva drop what they're doing and take a gander at the painting in question. Yes, there's a mountaintop (high as a mountaintop), and GloZell's right; there is some sort of string sticking out of it.

"I don't know now, don't mess up these people's paintings..." warns GloZell as Joey gets to work pulling on the string. "That's someone's painting!"
Personally, Joey doesn't give two cents about the painting, not when Shane's life is on the line. So he gives the damn thing a few good yanks, the string comes loose, and there's the key.

"A key!" he shrieks, smiling for the first time since this entire mess began. We got it, we got it, thank God, we can still save him...

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: The search continues...can our heroes find all three keys and save Shane before it's too late? Also, math class is in session, GloZell's pointing fingers at Joey, and Oli is so done with everything.
The guests are still desperately searching for the three keys so that they can unlock the antidote and save Shane. But will their efforts be enough, or are some riddles simply unsolvable?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The good news: that book Sierra found on the mantlepiece is the book they're looking for.

The bad news: it's locked, because of course it is. And now they've got to solve a riddle to unlock it, because of course they do. Wouldn't want to make this thing too freakin' easy, now, would we?

"So there's two devils," Andrea explains, trying her best to conceal her confusion. She's the Fixer, she can fix anything, surely a simple math puzzle isn't beyond her abilities. "How many souls has he perverted this week?"

iJustine's already way ahead of her. "Three young ones."

Andrea stares at the riddle before her. It's a sea of words and numbers and devils and perverted souls, none of which make any sense to her. And the font is kind of hard to read; she's honestly getting a headache just looking at it.

"To confound the king of devils and avoid his fiery wrath, he gives them a riddle instead of a straight answer." Justine takes a deep, shaky breath. "Okay."

And that's when Andrea starts to panic. She's no good at math—never has been—and Fixer or not, this is way too confusing for her tiny YouTube brain to comprehend. "We're YouTubers," she frets aloud. "We're not mathematicians."

"Where's the mathematician?" giggles Sierra.

"It's all right." Tim takes the book from Justine. "I'm Asian. I got this."

Thank God. She's known Tim for ages; he was the first YouTuber she ever met, and as such, she has complete faith in his abilities. Yeah, he can be a bit stubborn at times, and yeah, he doesn't always take things as seriously as he should, but if there's anyone Andrea trusts to solve the riddle and get them out of this mess, it's Timothy DeLaGhetto.

She moves aside and lets her friend take over.

"Guys, we got a key!" screams Joey, racing through the foyer like he's in a marathon or something.

Lele ignores him. Sure, she's happy for him and all, but she's got her own key to get right now. She doesn't have time to think about Joey and his mountaintops.
And speaking of keys, omigod, this key does not want to leave its nice little hidey hole, does it? She and Oli have been pushing at it and reaching for it and budging it for the last several minutes, but ugh, it's being such a little...

"Put you hand in there," suggests Oli, and Lele does exactly that, fuming internally about how freakin' hard this thing is. How on earth are they supposed to get the key if the damn thing won't cooperate?

And that Matt guy isn't helping. He's just standing to the side, sometimes going on about how wrong they are, being all "let me give it a try here" every couple of seconds. Is he usually this condescending? Honestly, if he thinks he's being helpful by standing there asking to try instead of, you know, actually trying, he's got another think coming.

A part of Lele wants to chew him out right here in front of God and everybody, but she can't. She's got to stay focused. She's got to get this stupid key out of the stupid box, unlock the stupid antidote, and save Shane. The "Matt you are such a self-righteous jerk" rant can wait.

"It has to be this one," Joey tells Eva and GloZell, sticking their key into the one compartment they haven't tried yet.

Lo and behold, it opens, and Eva breathes a sigh of relief. There we go. There we go. Now we're getting somewhere. She hopes to God that the other two groups find their keys just as quickly, cause if they don't, Shane's going to die...and then she'll come for me.

Joey fishes the tiny bottle out of the compartment. "I got it!"

Eva snatches the bottle from him, grasping it between her fingers like it's holy water. She kneels down next to Shane, unscrews the cap, and holds it out to him. He takes it with trembling hands and downs the whole thing in one swallow.

One down. Two to go.

Don't you dare die on me, Dawson.

"We need all three in order to cure him!" shouts the butler, as if they didn't know that already.

Trying to ignore her tear-stained thoughts, Eva keeps her eyes fixed on the ginger-haired boy she's going to all this trouble for. C'mon, Shane, you can do this, you're gonna make it, you've gotta fight it...Shane, please, hold on, they're coming, just stay awake, stay alive, don't leave me...

I can't keep this secret alone.

"There's three young ones," mutters Tim, going through the riddle once more. "And how old are they?"

Andrea shakes her head. "We're not doing very good, man!"

Justine's pacing back and forth, trying to escape from the muddle of confusion she's spent all night being stuck in. She hates math, she hates riddles, she hates unclear mumbo-jumbo, and she sure as hell hates it when her friends get freakin' poisoned. Needless to say, tonight has not been a good night for her.
"If you multiply their ages," Tim continues, "you will get the number thirty-six. If you add all their ages together, you will get the number of devils in the grand council."

So now we gotta tally up the ages to equal this number, and then divide, and maybe throw some multiplication and goddamn ratios in there while we're at it...I don't know, don't look at me, guys, I skipped this class.

Tim points at the small, winged creatures engraved on the cover of the book. "Oh, wait, is this the number of devils?"

"That doesn't have anything to do with it!" Sierra protests. She's still giggling as she says it, and Justine can't help but wonder if the girl is secretly some sort of giggle machine.

"It'll help us solve the riddle!" Tim insists.

So they count up the devils, and there's thirteen of them, and Justine's just glad they're making progress. They can do this, Tim's good at math, he can figure it out, she trusts him...

"Do we have, like, a pen?" asks Tim.

"A pen?" Sierra's almost hysterical. "We don't have a pen! We don't have time for a pen!"

Her statement is immediately proven correct by the butler. "We only have three minutes!" he shouts, and even Justine's optimism begins to wear thin.

"Open your mouth!" Eva screams, watching with wide eyes as Arthur shoves a napkin into Shane's mouth. ...Shane, come on, you can do this, I know it hurts but you gotta hold on...

Joey interrupts her litany of prayers with the mystery everyone's been too preoccupied to think about. "Who poisoned him? That's my question."

The maid, the maid, it has to be, she poisoned him, she's going to kill me...

"You know what?" GloZell points an accusing finger at Eva. "It could be you, because you were off with him. You're the only one who had access to him."

"Yeah!" Joey agrees.

Eva's heart sinks. She should've known this was coming. She was the last one alone with Shane, so of course she's going to top everyone's list of suspects. Even if she tries to tell them the truth, they sure as hell won't believe her, and since Shane's too sick to speak, he can't back up her story.

So she lies. "I was peeing!"

"Peeing with poison!" Joey scoffs.

For the second time tonight, Eva chokes back tears. All she wanted was to have fun and explore the 1920s...and now, not only is her friend fading fast, but she's being accused of his murder. It's almost enough to make her wish that she was the one dying on the ground.

Almost.
"Pinch it up, pinch it up," Oli repeats, as if it's some sort of mantra. They've been working on this box for what feels like years now, and he's honestly getting sick and tired of fumbling around in there.

And from the looks of it, so is Lele. "It can't go up!" she complains through gritted teeth, pushing at the box as if it's a wall she's trying to break down.

At least Matt has finally started helping. He's got his hand stuck through a different hole, nudging the box towards Lele and Oli in a final desperate attempt to make some progress. "I've got it all the way in the back right now."

Oli has never been so frustrated in his life. He has no idea where this box is going, they need the key, Shane's still dying, and Lele and Matt are rolling their eyes and glaring at each other. This entire situation is a complete and utter mess, and a part of Oli wants to throw in the towel right now.

Concentrate, he tells himself (and, by extension, Lele and Matt). Keep trying. If we ever want to get this key out, we need to work as a team.

"Joey, you know what?" GloZell snaps, her patience damn near close to the breaking point. "I think you might have done it."

Joey's got that stupidly adorable little oh-I'm-Joey-Graceffa-and-I'm-such-an-innocent-flower-who-can-do-no-wrong grin on his face, and GloZell is fighting the urge to slap it right off him. "Why do you think I did it?"

Oh, don't you play innocent with me, sweetheart. "He has more followers than you," she growls. "You probably tried to kill him!"

"You think I'd want to kill Shane?" he asks, as if there's no reason in the world why he'd possibly do such a thing. "Why would I wanna kill Shane?"

"To take over his accounts!" Eva pipes up.

"I don't get access..." Joey stumbles over his words. "The person who kills someone doesn't get their YouTube account!"

But GloZell has stopped listening to Joey's nonsense ages ago. "You are the...the YouTube killer."

Joey laughs. "The YouTube killer..." He's still got that damn grin on his face.

"You are the YouTube killer!" shouts GloZell.

"You know what—"

"Zip-zap-a-doop-bappa-doop-ba-doop!"

My love for Joey is strong, but he is tryin' me, GloZell fumes to herself as Joey and Eva huddle over Shane. He is tryin' our love right now.

May you die...in horrible pain...my...cursed...enemy...

Well, he certainly got the "pain" part right, sighs the sliver of Shane's mind that isn't currently
preoccupied with it hurts, God it hurts, make it stop, make it stop hurting...

He hears Joey, GloZell, and Eva arguing above him...but their shouts and accusations seem miles away, like he's listening via a broken-down crank phone. Words and shapes have long since become indistinguishable. Everything is a blur of color, blood, and fire.

He can feel the strings attempting to drag him towards the darkness, and a part of him wants so badly to heed their call, but—he can't—stay alive—it hurts—hold on—don't—

"Shane."

Her familiar voice breaks through his thoughts like waves breaking onto a California beach. He turns around, and there she is—wrinkles and glasses gone, hair no longer white, but he'd still recognize her anywhere.

"Grandma?" he murmurs, struggling to see her through the haze of pain.

She smiles (God, it's been so long, he thought he'd never see that smile again) and extends a hand out to him. "You can let go now, Shane," she whispers, her voice so much sweeter than he remembered. "It's all right."

"But...my mission..."

"You did all you could." She shakes her head sadly, a faraway look in her tear-stained eyes. "Sometimes, that's all you can do."

The strings begin to break. The colors fade to black. And Grandma Dawson reaches through the darkness, tugging her grandson towards the not-too-distant light.

Shane smiles, closes his eyes, and collapses into her embrace.

Joey sticks his head in the foyer and...yeah, no one's making any progress. Oli's muttering things under his breath, and Matt and Lele seem about ready to start screaming insults at each other, but the key is still firmly entrenched in the box. Tim, Sierra, Andrea, and Justine aren't doing much better; they've currently got their collective heads together over an old-looking book, counting things and calling out numbers, but they don't seem to be any closer to solving whatever puzzle they're working on.

And there's ninety seconds left...oh, God, we're not gonna make it, are we?

The more desperate part of Joey considers running over there and smashing open both the box and the book. Screw the puzzles, screw the games, just give him a hammer and let him tear the place apart.

"Ladies and gentlemen..."

No, oh God...Arthur, don't say it, please don't say it...

"Time is up."

No.

Ignoring GloZell's screams, Joey turns and faces his fallen friend. Shane—oh, God, Shane—has stopped convulsing; he's on the ground with his head on a pillow, lying still...too still...
"Shane is dead."

And Joey's world implodes.

Chapter End Notes

So...yeah. You heard the man. The first death in Escape the Night has officially happened. And it's Shane. Holy schmoke.
Keep in mind what I said before: this is a NOVELIZATION. I'm sticking to the events that happened in the TV show, and since Shane was the first to die there, he's the first to die here too.
Sorry.
Next chapter: Accusations. Accusations everywhere.
Shane's dead, and now comes the all-important question everyone always seems to ask in these situations: Who killed him?

Joey doesn't cry. He's the host of this party; there are nine other people looking to him for guidance. He can't afford to let them see him cry.

But inside, he's a writhing, screaming mess of sobs on the ground. It's as if someone ran him over with a steamroller, then set his crushed, flattened body on fire, just to prove a point.

His brain is assaulted with memories—Shane snarking about random celebrities, Shane laughing at Joey's lame jokes, Shane and Joey hanging out together talking about the stupidest things. Years of collabs, smirks, and genuine friendship...and now Shane's gone, killed by the very party Joey worked so hard to plan.

It's my fault. My party. My responsibility. I'm the reason he's dead.

Mixed with the avalanche of grief for Shane are a few specks of genuine fear. He's scared for his life and, more importantly, the lives of the nine other YouTubers he invited here tonight. If Shane can die...what's to stop all of his other friends from suddenly dropping dead too?

He can't let that happen.

As GloZell shakes Shane's body and everyone else races into the room, Joey pushes back the basketball-sized lump in his throat and prepares to face his guests. He's going to figure out who did this, lock the sicko in 1920s jail forever, then return to 2016 and try to live in a world without Shane Dawson.

Sierra still doesn't believe it.

Sure, her group didn't figure out that stupid riddle fast enough, but that doesn't matter. Shane isn't dead. This is all part of his disgusting prank, and frankly, she doesn't find it funny anymore. A part of her wants to kick Shane right in the nuts—if he's going to be such a heartless jerk to all of his friends, some retribution is clearly in order.

Then again, she should probably play along for the cameras. She can always kick Shane in the nuts once it's over.

"What happened?" asks Joey as Team Letters and Words enters the room.

"We opened the book," Sierra explains, adjusting her tiara as she does so. "We were so close!"
"Well, he's dead now," Joey fumes, "because of you guys!"

Sierra's hands fly to her chest in outrage. Prank or no prank, she does not appreciate the implication that she and her friends are responsible for Shane's "death." "It's not our fault!"

"We found our key in, like, a few seconds." Joey's tone is low and fierce, and he seems to be shaking with...anger? Grief? Something.

Everyone starts talking at once, flinging angry words every which way. Justine kneels down and puts her gloved hand on Shane's shoulder, as if to protect him from the pandemonium he's caused.

"Hold on!" It's Matt who finally shuts everyone up, holding out his arms like a cop slowing traffic. "We gotta figure out who killed him first!"

_No one killed him!_ Sierra wants to scream. _He's not dead! He's fine, this is a prank, a YouTube video, everything's fine, please let everything be fine, please..._

Shane's gone, and that sucks, but Matt doesn't have time to wallow in sadness. Not when there's a murderer on the loose.

"No, you know who killed him, probably?" Lele gestures to Tim, who's standing on the other side of Shane's body with an irritated look on his face. "I mean, what are you? Aren't you, like, a murderer?"

"No, no, no, no, no!" _Not Tim. It wasn't Tim. I'll bet my life on it if I have to._

"I don't kill my friends," says Tim, somehow managing to keep his voice calm despite the fact that he's just been accused of murder. "I just kill people who owe money to me, all right?" He's still playing up his Mobster character despite everything that's happened, and Matt's got to hand it to him; that takes dedication.

(He himself abandoned the Professor long ago.)

"Does he owe money to you?" Joey wants to know.

For the second time in five minutes, everyone starts shouting at once. As for Matt, he narrows his eyes at the blonde girl who just tried to pin the murder on one of the few friends he has here. The same girl who was bossing everyone around during the box thing...the same girl who made it perfectly clear she wanted this house for herself...

If anyone here is capable of murder, it's Lele Pons. He's sure of it.

Now that Shane's officially...passed on, Eva knows she's next. She was there. She saw what the maid was doing. If the other guests don't kill her (she can tell that several of them still hold her responsible), Sarah surely will.

Justine waves her hand around for several seconds, trying to get the group's attention. Once she has the floor, she speaks, panic and confusion rushing every word. "What do we do with the body? I don't care who killed him—we need to get rid of it!"

_Oh, don't worry about the body, Justine, _the bitter part of Eva's mind replies. _The maid'll take care of
it. She'll probably throw him in a ditch somewhere, or chop him up into teeny tiny pieces, or use his head for our next meal... The thought makes her ill.

"Probably because you killed him!" shouts Sierra.

"I honestly think it was Eva!" Joey's accusation feels like a shot to the heart—a shot she knew damn well was coming to kill her. "She was the last to be seen with him!"

At this point, Eva's fighting back tears. "It was not me!"

"Who had a motive to kill him?" asks Matt, still playing detective. "Did anyone hang out with him before we came here?"

And that's when all the pieces fall into place.

The maid was disposing of a body, yes. She saw that, and so did Shane, which explains why someone would...silence him. But just because she had a body doesn't necessarily mean she was the murderer. She's an accomplice...she's an employee...the real killer must've ordered her to get rid of it...which can only mean that the real killer is—

"I think Joey was the person who killed him!" She knows full well she's risking her life by outing him now, but she's already a dead girl walking, so what the hell does she care? "And he's gonna kill us all!"

"I agree!" shouts GloZell, glad she's not the only one who's got her eye on Joey Graceffa. "It's Joey!" She turns to Joey, who's staring at her with that innocent who-me grin still plastered on his face. "Don't be lookin' at me all cute and fine! You a killer!"

Joey opens his mouth, but Eva shouts him down before he has the chance to say a word. "All I'm saying is, we found our clue exceptionally quick...with the help of Joey!"

"With the help of me?" Joey's keeping up that I-can't-believe-you'd-ever-suspect-little-ol'-me act he's got going on. "It was GloZell who found it!"

"Nuh-uh, no, you are not pinning this one on me, sweetheart. It's your house!"

"Who was sitting next to Shane at dinner?" asks Matt.

Several people shout Justine's name. Justine herself shrinks back into a corner, looking like she wants to clap her fancy little heels together three times and leave this topsy-turvy world. GloZell can't say she blames her.

Joey's name is also brought up, and Joey (of course) immediately responds with "No, I wasn't sitting next to him."

"You were very close to him," Matt points out. "You were in proximity."

"I was two seats away!"

Matt then turns his attention to GloZell. "You were sitting right next to him as well!"

As the guests continue to bicker and fight among themselves, GloZell glances at the glamour and fanciness around her. Twenty minutes ago, she was dying to be a part of it. She had it all planned out: she was gonna get herself into Joey's good graces, convince him to let her stay in the house with
him, then live in the lap of luxury for the rest of her life. The 1920s thing wasn't even that big of a deal; after all, she'd be rich, so what would it matter?

But now that a guy she's known for years has gone and died in this damn house, she can't help but wonder: Is it worth being with Joey for all this? Is he really going to stay in this house, this mansion, this...crime scene?

At any rate, she sure as hell can't live here.

Tim's been to a few parties, and he's seen some crazy stuff go down, but this is the first time he's been to a party where someone actually died, and...yeah, in all honesty, he liked it better at that one college bash when some drunk frat guy wore a toga and tried to teach everyone how to perform Greek dancing.

And that's saying something, because that night was weird.

"Guys..." Eva, now the lone survivor of the Dawson-Gutowski Mystery Adventure Trip, is clearly shaking in her fancy 1920s shoes. "What if it's none of us, and it's...the maid?"

Lele bursts out laughing. "Look at her!" she squeals, pointing to the stony-faced cleaning lady.

Eva ignores Lele's hysterics. "She served the head!"

"No, the cook is the one who prepared the dessert," says Tim, figuring he might as well add something to the conversation instead of just standing around looking cool.

Joey takes the opportunity to search Shane's body for clues. At first, Tim thinks he's gonna take his wallet (and he's jealous, because he wants to take his wallet), but after about a minute, he pulls yet another old-looking piece of paper out of Shane's coat pocket. "Listen to this!"

If you're reading this, I have failed in my mission. My killer is not who you might think it is; it's the house itself...

Everyone gasps.

Tim raises an eyebrow. That doesn't make any sense; how can a freakin' house kill somebody? What the hell have I gotten myself into?

Joey keeps reading.

...which is possessed of an ancient evil that has locked it in time.

I came here tonight with the intention of destroying it. I am a member of a secret organization known as the Society Against Evil, and we've been battling this wicked force for centuries.

There are four artifacts, which the evil has hidden behind a series of puzzles and clues. If they can be gathered, and a binding ritual can be performed, the evil will be locked away.

However, to complete the final task to retrieve each artifact, the group must vote on two people who must undertake a dark challenge.

Tragically, one of them will die.

But to help you along the way, the Society Against Evil has marked the clues with their symbol.
The symbol...of course, the one on that telegram, it must be...

You have until sunrise to recover the artifacts before you are trapped here forever. What lies ahead will not be easy, but I'm afraid you have no other choice if you want to get back to 2016.

Good luck, guys. Whatever happens...I'm glad I got the chance to know you.

Signed,
Shane Dawson

For the next minute or so, silence reigns over the room. All eyes are on Shane's body, as if they expect it to start doing cartwheels or something.

Hey, it could happen. After being served a human head for dessert, Andrea's prepared for anything.

To be honest, before they found that note, she hadn't the foggiest idea who killed Shane. After all, they just got here; she doesn't feel like he made any bad blood with anyone yet.

Bad blood...too soon, Andrea. Too soon.

But now it turns out it's the house that offed him (how is that even—never mind), and the rest of them have to...they have to...

"Okay, so there's an evil spirit running 'round here," says GloZell, finally breaking the silence, "but we gotta find like, what, four of these lil' things? Or we gon' be stuck in the house?"

Thank you, GloZell, for summing that up.

Joey's house, once so splendid, now menaces Andrea's frazzled mind—it's not even a house anymore, it's a freakin' death trap. Even if they do as the letter says and find those four artifacts, four of the guests are still going to join Shane in death. And that's if they find the artifacts in time. If they don't, they'll stay here forever—stuck in the wrong decade, separated from their families and friends, trapped in a house that's clearly out to kill them all...the thought alone is enough to make her shudder.

Well, one thing for sure—she'd rather die than get stuck in 1920. So if the group votes, and she's chosen for death...she's strangely fine with it. After all, out of everyone here, she (stupid little Andrea Brooks, doesn't even know what a Fixer is) is clearly the most expendable.

Besides, anything's better than being trapped in this hellhole for eternity.

Lele does not want to die.

She came here tonight to have a good time—have some drinks, make some friends, maybe steal some kisses. She did not come here to get caught in some sort of creepy And Then There Were None-type nightmare. Especially if it could very well get her killed.

I mean, come on, I'm only twenty, I'm too young to die, I don't want this...

Not that she wants any of the others to die, either. Sure, Matt is a bit bipolar, and sure, Tim's whole Mobster thing freaks her out, but none of them deserve to be murdered by group vote. She's already seen one death tonight (ugh, if we'd only been faster...); she doesn't need to see any more. Besides, the last thing she wants is to have blood on her hands.
So when Joey holds up a hand and says "Guys, I think we should leave, follow me, I have a car that can take us out of here," she's practically the first one out the door.

Next thing she knows, she's racing down the porch steps with Joey, Eva, and Justine. Sierra, Andrea, Oli, Matt, and Tim are right behind them, but GloZell is having a bit of trouble running in all that fancy bling she's got on.

"Just a moment," says Arthur, who's bringing up the rear. "Wait for GloZell."

"Wait for GloZell!" Tim shouts at the others.

But Lele's in too much of a panic to wait for anyone. She's practically sprinting (in heels, mind you, which are killing her feet right now, but hey, better her feet than her) after Joey, Eva, and Justine, who are almost to the car.

The car...the same time-traveling car that brought them all to this evil-infested house in the first place.

"We're not gonna fit in one car," says Matt to no one in particular, and Lele wonders if they're going to have to play that Volkswagen Beetle game from way back when. *How many YouTubers can we fit into a tiny 1920s automobile?*

GloZell's still being a slowpoke, so of course Tim's staying with her, shouting "We can't leave GloZell in the 1920s!"

"Please don't leave me in the 1920s," begs GloZell as she finally reaches the steps. "It wasn't a good year for us."

"Guys, wait!" screams Sierra. She's almost at the bottom of the steps, but she looks about ready to burst into tears at this point. "These shoes hurt so bad!"

And then—*boom.*

The time-traveling car—their ticket home—explodes in a flash of fire and light. Everyone screams, GloZell shrieks "Jesus!", Justine takes off running back towards the house, and Lele...Lele watches, dumbstruck, as her only escape route goes up in smoke.

There's no way out. They've got to play this house's twisted game, and somebody's going to die. No—four somebodies. And counting Shane, that makes five people who are never going to see 2016 ever again.

Lele will do anything—*anything*—to make sure she isn't one of them.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: The gang talks things out, then messes around with some spirit boards. Also, Tim's wallet was in the car, because of course it was, and Justine's worrying about all the potential emails she's missed.
The Spirits Speak

Chapter Summary

Faced with the crippling realization that there's no other way out, Joey and his nine remaining guests get to work on those clues. Also, there's a spirit board involved, because it wouldn't be a horror show without one.

Chapter Notes

Before anyone asks: No, I will not be covering all of the "months before the guests arrived" segments. They distract from the actual story, and all of the information learned in them is already covered by in-story events. They were great for the show, but unnecessary for the novelization.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As the ten remaining YouTubers run screaming through the door, leaving the ashes of their time-traveling car behind them, Matt's heart is beating faster than a pronghorn antelope on cocaine. He can hear Justine screaming Joey's name, as well as several people shouting expletives, but all of the craziness seems so far away...like he's a character in a movie, and this is all just make-believe, and he isn't trapped in a house that's possessed by the freakin' devil or something.

This can't be happening. It can't be. Not to him.

"Okay, what just happened?" Tim asks loudly. He still appears to be the calmest of the bunch, and Matt's glad of it. At least somebody managed to keep his head.

The group gathers around a table in the library, all of them rattled by what they just saw. The images are still seared in Matt's mind—fire and smoke everywhere, that horrific cracking noise, his friends' terrified screams...and the man, the man they passed on their way back in, lying on the ground with his face in the grass...

"I don't understand what just happened," says Oli, his voice shaking.

GloZell has a hand to her forehead and a panicked expression on her face. "I can't believe it!"

"Who was that guy?" questions Lele, who's grabbed a seat next to Justine. "Was that the driver?"

"Yes! He was just lying on the ground!" shrieks a still-hysterical Sierra.

This prompts a flurry of comments from the group about whether they should go back for him, but the debate is cut off by a clearly livid Lele. "I'm not going near that car at all!" she seethes, crossing her arms in defiance.

And that's when Matt realizes: they're stuck.

They're trapped in this house, which means that they're going to have to go get those artifacts Shane
spoke of, which means that (if that letter was right) people are going to die. Which means that he could—

No.

It won't happen. He won't let it. He has a family, friends, a girlfriend, a career...he has a life. He, Matthew Haag, otherwise known as Nadeshot, is not going to die tonight. He'll make sure of it.

Justine's sitting at the table, nestled between Eva and Lele, trying to process what she's seen tonight. Everything happened so fast; one minute, they were having fun and enjoying the party like normal people, and now...Shane's dead, the house is evil, she saw a car blow up right in front of her, omigod what if we actually were in that car we'd all be dead oh God...

"Here's the thing." Matt's trying to keep his voice steady, but Justine's known him for too long to fall for it—he's just as terrified as the rest of them. "I'm trying to get back to 2016. We've got to find the four artifacts, or...we can't go home. That's really what it comes down to."

Can't go home...the mere thought is enough to send Justine dangerously close to a full-blown panic attack. Fortunately, she manages to restrict herself to a few quick, sharp breaths (and maybe one or two tears, but nothing noticeable).

GloZell, hilarious as she is, is not helping Justine's nerves. "Well, somebody's gon' die—maybe we can just decide who gon' die."

"No!" Joey stares at her as if she just suggested sacrificing the butler to Satan. "Omigod!"

Justine shoots a quick smile his way. Even if what the note said is true—even if somebody really has to die—she's still got Joey Graceffa on her side. And Joey would never let them hurt her...would he?

Don't think about it.

"People are going to die, regardless," says Matt. "It said that we have to vote people in to do the challenges."

But Justine has had enough talk of death and dying for one evening, thanks. "I wanna get the hell out of here," she snaps. "I don't know about you guys, but I haven't checked my email in, like, forty-eight hours."

To be honest, her emails are the least of her worries. But hey, if she focuses on the small stuff (like how she's still waiting for a reply from Olga Kay about that collab they were thinking about doing), she can try to ignore the possibility of her impending death.

For now.

While everyone else is panicking and debating what to do next, Sierra's still waiting for the inevitable "it's just a prank, bro."

I mean, come on. It has to happen. Pranksters are all the rage on YouTube these days...there's no way in hell that I just witnessed an explosion, let alone a murder. Shane's playing us, Joey's playing...
us...this is all a sick game, and it's gone on too long, and I just wanna go home.

(A smidgen of doubt surfaces in her mind, but she pushes it away and sticks with her story.)

"What do we know?" asks GloZell.

Joey sucks in a breath, and Sierra can tell that he can't possibly keep up the charade for much longer. "Okay, well, we know from Shane's pocket that that symbol that was on the square—" (he's referring, of course, to that weird Society Against Evil scribble, as if there really is a Society Against Evil) "—is what's gonna lead us to our next clue."

"So we've got to look for more of those symbols throughout the house." Matt's keeping calm (mostly) and trying to think his way out of this situation. Prank or no prank, Sierra has to admit that he's got the right idea.

Plus, he is attractive, in a dweeby sort of way.

Tim, who's standing next to Andrea (as usual), suddenly lets out a loud squawk of annoyance. "Dammit!" He throws his hands up against his temples. "My wallet was in the car!"

He turns away, muttering curses under his breath, and Sierra tries her best to suppress a giggle.

"Okay, you know what?" says Lele, paying no attention to Tim and his lost wallet. "I think that we should just, like, start looking now."

Eva squirms in her seat, the panic on her face giving way to a resigned determination. "So should we just split up?"

"I think we should split up," Joey agrees.

"Omigod." Sierra cannot believe these people. Putting aside her "it's all a prank" theory, has no one seen a horror movie around here? "Splitting up is never a good idea, okay?"

"How much time do we have?" asks Lele.

"We have until the sun comes up." This is the first time Andrea's said anything in ages, and to be honest, Sierra kind of forgot she was here. Ah well. There's one in every barrel, isn't there?

GloZell's standing behind Lele, eyes wide, mouth open. "What?"

"We have the one night," says Matt, as if they didn't hear it the first time, "or we're stuck in 1920."

Sierra doesn't believe it, of course she doesn't, it's all a load of crap and she knows it, but even she can't help but feel a rush of panic at the thought of being trapped in this freak show forever. "Why are we standing here? Let's do it."

"We need a clue," says GloZell.

Speak of the devil...

Seconds after GloZell's remark, Sketchy Sarah walks in with a giant wooden box. The last time she walked in with something, it was a head, so...to borrow a line from Star Wars, Sierra's got a bad feeling about this.
The maid places the box on the table, and Oli instinctively steps away. He doesn't know what's in there, but it's probably something horrid, and whatever it is, he doesn't want it near him.

"This arrived in the post earlier today," says Sarah, as if everything's normal, as if a car did not just blow up, as if they didn't just watch Shane die. GloZell was right; everything about this woman screams danger, stay away.

She whisks the box off and there's a flipping hand in there what the hell.

Cue more screams.

"What the hell is that?" Oli gasps, unable to take his eyes off the hand. It's long and skinny, pale white, black nail polish, with the strangest tattoos up and down the arm. Also, there's a glowing yellow star of some sort on its wrist (clearly this hand's former owner has been to some shady tattoo parlors).

As he stares at it, all Oli can think about is the "dessert" they were served earlier. Does this hand below to the same person whose head was...

He stops his train of thought right there before he has the chance to throw up.

"Did this come from the bayou?" Matt asks, as if he's talking about a dead beaver and not an actual human hand.

But then everyone notices the note attached to the hand, and of course they all start pestering "what does it say, what does it say" until finally GloZell takes the initiative and begins to read it aloud.

*Her essence can speak to you through the spirit board...*

"Uh-oh!" gasps GloZell.

"I don't mess with boards," announces Sierra.

Justine points to a strange-looking Ouija-board type object next to her. *Spirit board!*

Eva, who seems to have become the designated reader of notes at this point, takes over for GloZell.

*Her essence can speak to you through the spirit board in the library, giving you clues; however, it requires great strength to speak from across the grave and can only occur once an hour.*

"So she's kind of like a lifeline," Eva explains.

"Okay, may I make a suggestion?" pipes up Arthur the butler, who's standing behind Tim and has pretty much gone unnoticed until now. "Someone should act as the voice and read the invocation."

Oli shrugs. Spirit board. Why not. Just as long as it's not another body part, he's not going to complain.

Tim doesn't mess with spirit boards. Never has. He doesn't want to open up that door and give a ghost a path to peek its way in. And he sure as hell doesn't want that ghost to then haunt his life forever and ever.

So, of course, when it turns out that they have to mess with a spirit board, he swallows all possible sarcastic remarks and inches as far away from that thing as he can.
Thank God for iJustine. The blonde, who's clearly either hella brave or hella stupid, picks up the invocation note thingy and starts to rattle it off. "We call you now to bless our meetings," she recites in a trembling voice. "Heavens promise our spirits thrive, so now for the living let the...dead come alive?"

This results in a bunch more yelling from everybody around her, as if they haven't done enough of that tonight. Tim locks eyes with Andrea, who smiles weakly in his direction. He shoots back a reassuring whatever, it's cool, it's cool kind of grin (of course, this is totally not cool, but hey, at least he's still got his homegirl, so how bad can things be?).

"Greetings, spirits." Justine's voice is flat and emotionless as she finishes the invocation. "Speak to us."

_and if you could maybe not kill us all right now, that would be great._

For a good five seconds, silence lingers over the group.

Eva stands farthest away from the spirit board, her earlier fear replaced with a grim resignation. She knows now what she and the others must do to escape this house—and though the particulars of the situation are too horrible to think about, she can't run around in a panic any longer. Maid or no maid, she's got to keep her cool and figure out these clues before she...no, _it_ kills them all.

So when one of the letters on the spirit board lights up, she allows herself a single second of surprise, then turns her attention to what it's trying to tell them.

Justine has no such inhibitions. "Omigod!" she screams, practically jumping away from the spirit board. "It just lit up, I'm not even joking, this just..." She's a stuttering mess. "This just lit up."

"Okay, so ask it something else," says Eva. _Don't be scared, pretend it's a game, it's all a giant puzzle and we must solve it. Puzzles are fun. Everything's fine. They can't hurt you if you outsmart them._

It's Oli who notices the spirit board's pattern. "Oh, wait, hold on, there's B..."

All eyes are fixed on the board as it continues to spell out a word.

"O..."

"O..."

"K..."

"Book!" several people shout at once, but the board is not done yet.

"S."

And then, finally, it goes dark.

"Books." Joey's already up and about, heading straight for the bookshelves. "We need to look at the books."

Eva takes a deep breath. Books. Okay. They're in the library. That could mean anything. Books are everywhere. But that doesn't matter; she'll look through every book in the world if she has to. If it means escaping this house and leaving behind the memories of Shane choking and dying on the
ground, she's all for it.

She just hopes that she comes out of this alive.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: Books, combinations, and chess (oh my!). Also, Tim likes Guess Who.
Experimental

Chapter Summary

The spirit board said "books," so now, they've got to look for books. Obviously.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jesus, that was intense. First Shane died, then the car blew up, and now a spirit board just went and talked to them...if she didn't know any better, GloZell would swear she's dreaming.

But oh no, it's not a dream, it's real and true and terrifying.

While everyone else scouts around the library looking for the books they need, she's in the parlor with her old friend Joey Graceffa, scouting 'round in case the demon went and left something in there. To be honest, she's still a wee bit wary of Joey (Shane said the house did it, and she believes him, but Joey, it's your house), so she stays behind him as he searches the lil' tables and stuff.

And lo and behold, there's a book!

"That's gotta be it," says GloZell as Joey picks up the book in question. "What's on the side?"

Fortunately for Lele's patience (I mean come on, they can't spend their entire freakin' lives looking for these clues), Matt finds whatever it is they need to find in fifty seconds flat.

"So I'm not sure if I was supposed to open this cabinet," he confesses, standing next to a clearly already-opened cabinet, "but there is a symbol here...on the chest..." He points at the locked chest inside the cabinet and yep, he's right, that's the same freakin' symbol all right. "And there's a lock with a symbol on it."

Lele frowns. "So we need a key."

"No, we need a code!" Sierra exclaims.

Lele takes a closer look at the chest and ugh, she hates these combination lock things. Mainly because she's always too stupid to remember the combination.

Oli, who's holding the one book they did find, absentmindedly skims through its pages. Eva stands next to him, her brown eyes fixed on the symbol glittering on its spine.

"All right, so the code is probably in the book," says Tim, pointing to the book in Oli's hands. He's still got that slick-but-suspicious Mafia vibe to him, and demons or no demons, he's still at the top of Lele's most-likely-to-be-the-murderer list.

"Wait, hold on!" Oli, on the other hand, is not even in her top twenty. Out of all the boys, he's probably the nicest one here. "This has a number on it!"
He holds up the book, and there's a golden 6 glittering on its spine.

Eva points at the study, muttering something about another book, and that's when Lele realizes what they've got to do. "There's another one here," she shouts, pointing at a book someone left next to the potted plant. "Where's the other book?"

"Okay, so get the other book," says Oli.

One or two people dart off to the study, presumably to get that book Eva was muttering about. Lele marches over to the potted plant, but Justine gets there first, and the two blondes huddle over the red-covered book before them.

"What's that?" asks Justine, turning the book over so that its spine is visible. "I mean...that's a symbol."

She's right; it is that freakin' symbol again. Honestly, Lele is getting real tired of seeing that thing everywhere she goes. When she gets home, she's gonna make damn sure she never sees another weird symbol again.

If she gets home...

She will. She will.

"This is the first book," Oli remarks, holding up the book in question. He's actually not sure if the book he has is the first one, especially considering the fact that it has the number 6 on it. Anything's possible, really.

As a matter of fact, he doesn't really know much of anything about this strange situation they seem to have gotten themselves into. Spirit boards, exploding cars, demon-infested houses, actual bloody murders...it's the dinner party from hell, and Oli just wants to go home and forget it ever happened.

Stop it, snaps the reasonable part of his brain. Now is not the time to feel sorry for yourself. You've got to figure out these clues, or you'll be stuck here forever. So get on it.

"This is five!" shouts Lele, shoving her way through the group, a red-covered book with the number 5 on it clenched in her hands. "Five!"

Oli takes Lele's book and holds it up against his own. "But look..." He hasn't noticed it until now, but both books have little arrows on their spines as well as the numbers. "They both have arrows. Look."

Next to him, Eva wordlessly hands him another book. At the same time, Joey shouts out, "Wait, I have one! I know where there's one too!" and sprints off to the parlor.

And you couldn't have told us that twenty seconds ago?

"There's one," says Sierra, grabbing a fourth book and handing it to Oli. "We need four."

Oli barely has time to examine the four books further before Joey comes back brandishing yet another one. "Guys, I have a book as well."

"This is some demon stuff," Eva mutters to no one in particular, and Oli's inclined to agree.
The group spends the next forty seconds gathering up the books (they all have that same Society Against Evil symbol on them) and putting them all together on the table. Once that's done, Joey can't help but notice that the arrows on each book point in different directions. Not only that, but each has a different number: one has a 6, another a 5, another a 3, another a 4, and the last one has an 8.

"Wait." Joey points at the container that still holds that disgusting hand. "Maybe it has something to do with this?" He counts up all of the dials on the side of the container. "One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight...There's five here. We need three more."

"Hold on," Matt calls out. "I've got one more."

So he does, and it's the one with the 7 on it. "Okay." Joey takes a deep breath and watches Matt place the book with the others. "We need book one and two." _Hurry up, hurry up, who knows how much time we have?_

Oli, who left the room momentarily to go look for books, comes barreling back in with (you guessed it) another one. "Guys, I found the other book!"

Joey smiles. _We're getting there. We're getting there. We're almost freakin' there, thank God._ "So we need one more!"

_But where could it be...?_

Andrea wanders through the house, keeping her eyes peeled for the one book they haven't found yet. So far, this has gone okay; nothing truly terrible has happened since Shane died. The exploding car was shocking, but in hindsight, she should've known that the house wouldn't let them get away that easily. And even the hand really wasn't that scary, especially after the head.

No, all that was really par for the course. What truly terrifies her is what comes after...the unknown, with all its promises of pain and death...and worst of all, that lingering chance of being trapped in this nightmare forever...

_First things first. Find the book now. Freak out about this mess you're stuck in later._

After a bit more wandering, she finds herself standing in front of this giant grandfather clock. It's brown, shiny, relatively new-looking...and it has cabinets. Large, roomy cabinets that could easily be used to hide something.

No one else in the group is even acknowledging its existence.

Andrea, of course, puts two and two together and opens the cabinet door. Sure enough, there's a green-covered book, and it's got the symbol on its spine just like the rest of them.

"Found it!" she shouts triumphantly, sending the rest of the group running in her direction. "It was in the clock!"

As her friends gather around her, clamoring to see the final piece in this literary puzzle, Andrea's feeling extremely proud of herself. _I found it. I found the last book. I'm not completely useless after all._

_Maybe I can make it. Maybe...maybe I can live._
Well, GloZell is sure glad that's over. She's had enough of this game (*I mean, a clock? Really? What is this, hide-and-go-seek or somethin'?). so now that they've got all the books, she's more than happy to help her friends lug the whole lot of 'em back to the table.

Oli, who's been going all genius on them lately, points at the books and launches into yet another explanation. "Look, they all have different arrows. And the box has dials...I think these books are telling us where these dials have to be."

"You're right," Eva murmurs, getting on her knees and reaching for the first dial. "You've got to be."

So she gets to work (she's clearly the other genius in the bunch; GloZell won't be surprised if her and Oli run off together and start geniusing out in the corner while everyone else gets murdered), turning each of the dials every which way as Oli reads off the direction each arrow is pointing in.

After a minute of this, the last dial jolts into place, and the candle things around the hand light up. GloZell somehow holds in her shouts and prayers this time around, but dammit, this "demon stuff" (as Eva put it) still gives her the willies every single time.

Everyone else starts cheering, only for their cheers to be cut short by some creepy demon whisper. (And flickering lights. Of course the lights are flickering. Why not?) "Three...four...five...seven..."

"What the..." Justine backs away, fear illuminating her baby blues. "Guys..."

"Three...five...four...seven..."

The lights come back on. GloZell glances over at Justine, and of course the poor girl looks about ready to have a heart attack. "Five four seven!" she practically squeals, clutching the table like a drowning swimmer clinging to a life preserver.

But GloZell knows what she heard. "It said three five four seven."

Sierra makes a grab for that locked box Matt found earlier, snatching it up with her little gloved hands. She's a tiny lil' thing, so how she's able to hold up that heavy-looking box GloZell doesn't know, but somehow she manages to carry it from the cabinet to the table.

"Bring it over here!" shouts Joey.

Sierra does so, and the box lands on the table with a satisfying *plunk*. Once that's done, she bends over and gets to work on the combination. "Three..." *How in the hell is this chick so calm? Even our two wunderkids over here are obviously freaking out internally, but here's Sierra going at it like it's just a normal Saturday. ...five...four...seven..."

Sure enough, the box is unlocked. Sierra opens it up to reveal a note and...

"Chess pieces!" exclaims Justine.

"Chess pieces?" questions GloZell.

Tim shrugs. Joey bites his lip. Sierra frowns into the box. And GloZell has no idea what in the heck is going on.

"Chess board," says Matt, pointing across the room. "Over there."

It's a chess board all right, and everyone starts talking at once. Tim, though, quickly puts an end to that nonsense by being all "Let him read, let him read!" and then everyone quiets down and lets Joey
read the note.

Thirty men and only two women, but they hold the most power. Dressed in black and white, they could fight for hours.

Chess. Really. Of all the things this house had to throw at them, it goes with chess. GloZell never thought much of that game in the first place, but now all this intellectual nonsense is beginning to hurt her head.

She wishes they had a dumber ghost. They’d probably be out of the house by now.

The ladies need to find a perfect pair...a handsome knight on their right with a flair.

The game’s all set up, the ladies (Sierra and Justine) are sitting at the chess board ready to play, and Tim's standing with the others, glad he's not the one playing. He's never been much of a chess kind of guy—great game, yeah, but not for him. He's more into Yahtzee. Or Guess Who.

Guess Who. Yeah. That's my shit!

Justine's sitting on the left side of the table, maneuvering the white chess pieces, while Sierra's taking care of the black ones on the other side. It's almost poetic; a blonde-haired girl with white chess pieces, a dark-haired girl with black chess pieces...He knows it wasn't intentional, but it's still kinda funny.

Once the knights are in place, Tim reads the next part of the note aloud.

Yet one of these ladies is in deep sorrow; her white-bearded husband will not have his home tomorrow.

Because a vicious bishop.

"Bishop!" Joey's getting way too overexcited over there. "Bishop is gonna get the king."

"That's these," Tim informs Justine and Sierra, pointing to the bishops. Chess might not be his game, but at least he knows which pieces are which. The girls, on the other hand, are staring at the board as if it's an alien artifact or something.

Eva (now there's a girl who could win a game of chess) gestures to one of Sierra's black bishops. "So you need to move the bishop over..."

Tim continues reading.

...took his house, a beautiful medieval castle.

"So would these be considered the castles?" Matt asks, pointing to the white rook in the corner of the board.

Tim nods, glad someone's finally getting it. "Yeah."

"And then the bishop just goes and takes his spot." Matt reaches over, grabs Sierra's bishop, and moves it to the spot currently occupied by Justine's rook. "So push that off."

Seconds after Justine whisks the rook off the board, a compartment flies open beneath the table. Seriously, what the hell is with all these compartments? Whoever's running maintenance 'round here
really needs to get those things checked.

Everyone gasps—except for Joey, whose face busts out into the biggest grin Tim's ever seen in his life. "We did it!"

"Omigod." Sierra's panicked voice is almost a whisper. "What?"

"That scared me so bad," Justine admits.

Inside the compartment is (of course) another note. Before Tim has time to make a snarky remark about the number of notes they've encountered, Oli picks up the note and begins to read it aloud.

Today's experiment was a success. The machine was able to consume the life force of two college students and produce an ungodly monster.

However, the machine's demand for power is endless. I'm using an ancient artifact with an...

Oli stops reading for a few seconds to stare pointedly at the group. "Artifact." He couldn't have made it more obvious if he started jumping up and down screaming "clue, clue, clue right here!"

...with an origin I do not wish to know as a source, but it has come with a price. My mind can no longer distinguish between reality and nightmare.

I've locked the key to the machine inside the green cabinet in the ballroom, but my scattered mind cannot recall where I left the combination on the first floor. All the thoughts I can hold are the four elements of triangles I learned as a boy: fire, water, air and earth.

Fire, water, air, and earth. Okay. So we're going all Last Airbender up in here. That's fine. Tim can play that way. He's gonna find these elements and get himself and his friends out of this creepy-ass house before anybody gets hurt.

But if the Fire Nation starts attacking, I'm out.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: Let's split up, gang! Also, no one understands 1920s technology, and Matt wants Lele dead.
Elemental

Chapter Summary

Fire, water, air, and earth...now where in the world would the guests find such things?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Another task. Another scavenger hunt. Another chance to get scared out of her mind. This is not Justine's idea of fun.

"Okay." They've split up, and Eva's taken charge of the group Justine is in. "Fire, water, air, and earth."

Sierra points to the floor beneath them. "I mean, this is earth..."

"Think of something that's trying to hide in plain sight," advises Matt, who's currently examining a golden...gramophone? Is that what it's called? Justine has no idea; she knows next to nothing about 1920s technology. She wishes she had an Internet connection so she could Google it, but of course there isn't any Internet in the 1920s either.

And to think she, iJustine, whose entire life is the Internet, could end up stuck here...the idea alone is enough to make her wince.

"Okay, but look for a number," Eva reminds them, "'cause we're looking for a code."

Justine joins Matt at the gramophone. It's large, and it's shiny, and she thinks they used it for music. Yeah. After all, it looks a lot like a giant Grammy (and she should know, since she's been to the Grammys once or twice). "This is like my first iPod."

Matt chuckles.

Justine, Matt, and Lele leave the gramophone (and the rest of the group) behind and continue searching the first floor. For a while, they have no luck, and Justine's frustration (and fear) levels are rising at an alarming rate.

Eventually, they come across a metal object of some sort (again with the retro '20s technology, what the hell), and Lele stops right in her tracks. "Air?" She's pointing to it, a befuddled yet determined look on her face. "That air?"

Matt shakes his head and launches into a rant about how this thing couldn't possibly be air, but Justine isn't listening. She's too busy sifting through all of the 1920s memorabilia, keeping her eyes peeled for that symbol, and hoping against hope that she makes it through this elemental nightmare.

Andrea, Joey, and Oli have stumbled upon a box. There are flowers of some sort (daisies? tulips?) on one side and a hole in the other. Andrea's never seen anything like it, but then again, she supposes it could count as water...or maybe earth...
"Yeah, look." Oli points to the side of the box. "Here's the symbol on the box, here."

"What do we do?" Joey asks.

Grab a match and burn this house down, the snarky part of Andrea wants so badly to reply. Sheesh, maybe Tim's attitude has started to rub off on her.

Joey stares at the hole as if he's expecting the answer to be inside. "We have to put something in there."

"What would fit in there?" asks Andrea, eyebrows raised, perplexion on her face.

The boys shrug, and they both start searching the room for something that would fit. Andrea is left in front of the box, wondering why this "evil" that's infested Joey's estate would even bother giving them a chance to escape. If the house is powerful enough to strike down Shane Dawson, why doesn't it just kill them all right now, before they have the chance defeat it?

Not that she's complaining.

She rifles through some drawers and finds..."A lightbulb?" Would a lightbulb fit through the hole? I don't know...

So she tries it, carefully placing the lightbulb inside the hole. Nothing happens.

Andrea sighs and tucks a stray strand of copper-colored hair behind her ear. Of course it didn't work. It's not an element. The elements are fire, water, air, and earth. Lightbulbs, incandescent or not, are not part of the equation.

Oh, well, murmur her thoughts as the boys return empty-handed. Maybe I'd better step aside and let Joey and Oli handle this one. After all, they're both light-years smarter than me.

Sierra follows Tim and Eva into the study, still convinced it's all a prank...though, to be honest, the more time passes, the weaker her theory becomes. Why would they drag it out this long? What's with the scavenger hunt? You'd think Shane and Joey would've fessed up by now, instead of letting us all believe we're going to be murdered by the demon who lives in the house or whatever...

What if...what if it's not a prank? What if it's real, and there's really a demon, and Shane is really—

No.

She can't believe it. She won't. Everything's fine. Everything's going to be fine, goddamn it. No one is dead. And no one is going to die.

Sierra yanks herself out of her thoughts and glances around the room. It's a typical study—desk, chairs, what have you—with nothing particularly interesting inside. Nothing, that is, except for a silver fan, which appears to be the cause of the breeze fluttering through her dress.

"Wind?" Sierra points to the fan. "Is wind one?" She's already forgotten what they're supposed to find. Ah, well. No big deal. That's why she's in a group with Eva—remembering things is Eva's job.

And remember it she does. "Fire, water, air, and earth."

"Well, the fan is on," Sierra remarks as she and Tim examine its whirring silver blades. "And there's air."
"Look!" Tim shouts, pointing to the base. "The symbol's on the fan!"

So it is, and Sierra feels significantly smarter than she did previously. "Yeah, okay, we found it."

"Okay, all right." Eva's taking everything in stride, and Sierra can't help but wonder if she's in on the prank as well. Or maybe she's figured it out—after all, she is the smartest one here.

Whatever, whatever, it doesn't matter, they just need to find the combination and get out of here. "Is there a number?"

"Are we gonna die here?" Justine squeaks, vocalizing Lele's own fears.

Matt's staring into the corner, not even facing the girls as he speaks. "We might."

*Wow, Matt, way to be optimistic over there.* Honestly, the more Lele sees the Professor in action, the less she likes him. He seems like a smart guy, but he's *way* too self-righteous for her taste.

"Because I don't wanna die in the '20s." Justine's voice is shaking so hard she might as well be an earthquake. She didn't really make much of an impression on Lele before all the craziness went down, and she hasn't done anything suspicious so far, but...something about her reminds Lele of the stereotypical dumb blonde beauty who gets brutally murdered fifteen minutes into the movie. *Look who's talking,* she snarls at herself. *You're just as blonde as she is. And probably just as stupid, for that matter.*

"Oh!" Matt's kind-of-deep-but-not-really voice brings her back to Planet Earth. "I found a clue!"

Lele whirls around. "You..." It's the thing, it's the goddamn *thing* she pointed out five minutes ago. "No!"

"I found it." He's got the thing in his hands, and that freakin' symbol is shining on its backside. "It was right on the back. You were right from the beginning."

Lele snorts.

"What *is* it?" asks Justine.

Matt smiles. "A heater. *This* is fire. *We* found fire, you guys!"

*You mean I found fire,* thinks Lele, a satisfied smirk sneaking its way onto her face. *I was right. You didn't believe me, but I was freakin' right.*

As the group continues to examine the heater, Lele's missing self-confidence comes rushing back in like a tidal wave. She can do this. She's *Lele Pons.* Seven billion loops on Vine. Millions of people counting on her for their six-second bursts of entertainment.

Creepy house? Bring it on. She's not scared.

Right?

It's Oli who finally realizes what Joey's been trying to puzzle out for three minutes now. "This is water."
"Oh!" Water—of course! It all makes sense now. There's flowers, which need water to live, and a hole to pour the water into...Joey's furious with himself for not realizing it sooner.

Thank God for Oli White, that's for sure.

Speaking of Oli, he's already back in action, taking the flowers out of the vase before Joey and Andrea can even blink. He marches over to the hole, tips over the vase, and starts pouring water into the box.

"How much water are we gonna put in there?" Joey wants to know.

Oli doesn't reply.

After what seems like an eternity, Oli stops pouring...but all of the water he's poured in has been sucked through the (possibly black) hole.

"It's eating it!" Joey gasps. "It just sucked it all down!"

He's getting kind of frustrated. It's water, it has to be water, but shouldn't they have found a number by now? The water's just going in and nothing is happening. Is this a dead end? Are we gonna end up stuck here? I know it's my house and all, but I'd rather not be trapped in the same house as a psychotic demon killer...

"Where did it go?" Andrea's question conceals an undertone of curious excitement.

Joey shakes his head, staring at the hole, wondering if he's ever going to see Daniel again. "I don't know."

"Wait, what's the number?" Tim asks, squinting at the symbol. He's not the type to scare easily, but the way that thing is just glowing at him, like it's been burned into the base of the fan...yeah, that's freaky. That's definitely freaky.

Sierra points to the blades. "It's probably on the thing," she explains in that oh-so-eloquent way of hers.

"On the blade." Eva's the one to put the pieces together. "We need to turn it off."

Pffft. Is that it? Tim was expecting more of a challenge. Whatever. At least he won't have to spend ten minutes looking for a damn book again. "Here, put your finger in there," he instructs Sierra, inching closer to the fan as he speaks.

Sierra looks as him as if he just told her to shoot herself in the head. "No!"

"It'll stop it," Eva points out.

"And cut my finger off?" Sierra's voice is fluctuating between a squeal and a gasp, and Tim tries to suppress the urge to facepalm.

Since Sierra clearly isn't going to cooperate, Eva pulls a spare button out of her pocket and uses that to stop the fan instead. The whirring silver blades come to a grinding halt, and the group is confronted with a shiny yellow number embedded into the fan.

8.
"Eight!" The girls race out of the room, screaming the number at the top of their lungs. "Eight, we found it, we got it, eight, guys!"

Tim takes one last glance at the fan, chuckles, and follows his friends out the door.

Matt barely has five seconds to examine the heater before Lele swoops down on him like a vulture in pearls. "This is my clue, actually!" she practically screams, her Venezuelan accent sticking out like an irritating snicker in a silent room.

"Oh." Matt gets out of her way. "You take the clue."

Lele snatches the heater, grumbling as she does so, and Matt backs away with his hands in the air. He's disliked the Hustler from the get-go: her bossiness, her stubbornness, her attitude in general...even her laugh is annoying. He honestly doesn't understand why she's so popular with the Vine crowd. Maybe she's more tolerable in six-second doses?

And didn't Shane's note say that someone had to die?

As the girls cluster around the heater, Matt contents himself with glaring at the back of Lele's head. Calm down, he tells himself, trying to ignore the twinge of loathing curling its way around his heart. Don't let her get to you.

If all goes well, Lele Pons will not survive the night.

"Where is this going?" Oli snaps, scowling into the bottomless pit before them. He's allowed Joey to take over pouring duties, but they still haven't had any luck with the water. Unless they're supposed to stand here pouring water until they all die, they are obviously not doing something right.

Joey stops pouring and frowns. "We put the water in the wrong hole."

He places the vase down and picks up the box instead, then starts pouring the water back into the vase. Not knowing what else to do, Oli helps him, muttering "Oh, God, this is not a good idea..." under his breath as he does so.

Of course, as soon as they tip the box, water starts going everywhere—in the vase, on the floor, and all over both boys' 1920s outfits. Oli, who does not want to ruin his perfectly good fur coat, stops pouring and shoves the box back onto the table.

Joey starts to laugh—a genuine, heartfelt laugh, the first time he's done so since before Shane's death. And even as Oli scolds his friend ("That was the worst idea ever!"), he can't help but smile.

Enjoying myself is a lot more fun than fearing for my life, that's for sure.

GloZell's been wandering through the house for the past several minutes, but that's before she realizes that she's an awful detective. I mean, I dunno about the rest of 'em, but I don't know nothin' about these element things. Why in the hell did I ever think that I could do this alone?

So instead, she joins Justine, Lele, and Matt, who are all messing about with some heater they found. "We need to plug it in?" she asks, feeling completely out of the loop. "I don't think we need to turn it
on...there's no bulb in it...

"Well, it's a heater," Matt explains, all Professor-like and such, "so it radiates heat."

_Well, I knew_ that, GloZell's brain scoffs at him (how she manages to bite her tongue, she has no idea). _I'm not a complete doofus._

She can see why Lele doesn't like this guy.

Just when Andrea's thinking that this puzzle can't get any weirder, Oli grabs a flower and starts poking around the box with it.

"What are you doing?" Joey asks.

Andrea raises an eyebrow. "Are you _fishing_?" He's probably on to something, considering he's been staring at this box longer than any of them, but still...what kind of clue could possibly be hiding within the watery depths of the seemingly bottomless box?

_A monster? Oh, God, I hope it isn't a monster, I don't think I'm ready to watch my friends die..._

Before she has time to panic, Joey gasps. "What is that?"

"I've got it!" shouts Oli, using the flower to push an object towards the top of the hole. "I've got it! Yes!"

Joey reaches into the box and pulls out...a tennis ball?

He seems happy about it, and Oli's over there screaming "Yes!" and doing a victory dance in front of the cabinet. As for Andrea, she smiles and claps, but she can't help but feel a bit duped. The tennis ball is an anticlimax, especially when she'd already prepared herself for the worst.

_Just be glad it isn't a monster, you ungrateful idiot._

Joey holds up the ball to reveal the number 3 in golden ink, and all thoughts of monsters are banished from Andrea's mind. _We've got it. We've got water. We're one-fourth of the way there._

_Thank God._

As Justine watches with wide blue eyes, Lele gets on her knees and plugs the heater into a nearby outlet. (Justine's honestly surprised they even _had_ outlets in the 1920s, but whatever. At least modern technology has not _completely_ abandoned her.)

Then, seconds after the cord has been plugged in, the space right above the outlet lights up. A golden 5 stares at the group, and the group (including a bewildered yet satisfied Justine) stare right back at it.

"This is five," Lele lets them know.

Seconds after she says that, Justine hears Joey's triumphant shout from the next room. "Three! Guys, we got three!"

"We have five!" Lele and GloZell holler back, their voices combining to form a strange sort of chorus. "Five!"
Justine collapses onto a nearby couch, overwhelmed by the group's good fortune. They did it. Two out of four. The elements are revealing themselves. Home—her channel, her family, her friends, her life—seems within reach.

And best of all, nobody else is dead.

Yet.

Sierra hates the dark. Always has. Even when she was a little girl...she remembers many summer nights of refusing to fall asleep unless her trusty night-light was plugged in.

And now she has to go outside. In the dark. With nothing but a tiny flashlight to light her way. All to find whatever the hell "earth" is and solve Joey Graceffa's twisted idea of a puzzle.

Yeah. How about no.

"This is sketchy," mutters Eva as the group treks their way past various windows. "This is a basement situation." She stops at an open window, her flashlight shining into its darkened depths. "This one's open..."

At this point, Sierra and Tim have joined her at the window. Sierra stands several paces back, not willing to get any closer to that thing than she has to. It's a prank, of course it is, but she still has this odd fear that some sort of demonic creature will attack from the window and eat her alive if she gets too close.

Judging by Eva's facial expression, she isn't too crazy about the idea of investigating a creepy window either. "I don't wanna look in there," she announces, turning away from the window and heading off in the opposite direction. Before either Sierra or Tim can react, she's at least eight feet away, examining a clump of sinister-looking bushes.

Sierra sticks close to Tim, reaching for his hand despite herself. "I'm scared."

"Do you want to get trapped in the 1920s?" Tim replies.

"No!" It's a prank, it's a prank, it's a prank, this is not the 1920s, she's still in 2016, she's going to see her friends and family again, she's not going to...she can't...she won't...

...no, no, no, no, no, no...

"I wanna go to 2016."

I want out of here.

Finding earth is a hell of a lot harder than finding air, that's for sure.

Tim's been scouting around with the girls (and Arthur, who randomly showed up right the hell out of nowhere three minutes in) for at least ten minutes now. He's got sweaty palms, a dinky little flashlight that doesn't even work properly, and a raging hangover-level headache. Which is weird, considering he's pretty sure he only had one or two drinks before dinner.

Whatever. He feels drunk. He feels like a guy who got drunk and tried to get his phone to text a booty call but ended up drunk texting his ex instead. And between the menacing shadows, Sierra's
trembling hand, and that weird-as-hell look on Arthur's face, that drunk-all-summer feeling is only getting worse.

It's the butler, of all people, who finally finds something. "What's this?"

The millisecond after Tim hears that, he is **there**, right next to Arthur, peering at a clump of dirt not far from the bushes. There's some sort of white thingy sticking out, illuminated by their worthless flashlights. It can't—then again, he supposes it **could** be a finger. Dismembered body parts seem to be a trend around here.

As Sierra and Eva look on (Arthur having apparently decided "screw this" and left), Tim pushes the dirt off of the white thing. Luckily for everyone, it is *not* a finger—just a pair of pale white handprints.

"It's a handprint, it's a handprint!" Sierra, thank God, has gotten over her fright and is now hyperventilating with excitement. "In the dirt, in the dirt!"

**Two** handprints, actually. Not that Tim's one to judge. And why would there be hidden handprints in the dirt anyway? Unless... "I think it's a box."

A few scoopfuls of dirt later, he's right.

Tim fishes the box out of the dirt. Together, the three of them pry it open to reveal a golden 2 gleaming in the darkness.

"Two." Sierra springs to her feet and makes for the house as fast as her little legs can carry her. "Dirt two! Guys! We found it!"

Eva follows her, smiling that confident Eva smile. And Tim, who brings up the rear, is stuck with the box.

Well, that's two of them out of the way. He sure as hell hopes that the other seven YouTubers found water and fire already, because he does **not** want to be the one doing all the work around here.

Two is earth.

Three is water.

Five is fire.

Eight is air.

As her friends look on, Eva enters the combination into the lock. Her hands are shaking, her mind's a mess, and her heart is still struggling to mend itself, but none of that matters now. All that matters is these numbers, their elements, and the green cabinet in front of her.

One step closer to home. To 2016.

The cabinet door swings open, revealing a cog-shaped key inside, and the group bursts into cheers. Joey, especially, is clapping and shouting "Awesome! Good work!" as if everything is okay. As if the hard part's over with, and it's all rainbows and sunshine from here.

But as much as Eva would like to believe that her nightmare is over, she knows in her gut that it's only just begun.
There's a note. Of course there is.

"What is it?" asks Sierra.

"Read it out loud!" demands GloZell.

Eva does so. What else is she going to do?

_The ungodly machine is in the basement._

"Oh, God," Eva groans. "Not the basement!" Of course. The basement. She should have known. Those dark windows, the shadows on the wall...that basement is _clearly_ a death trap.

Heck, this entire house is.

_The cog key will ignite its wicked engine, but understand...once the machine has been started, it can only be stopped by the loss of an innocent life._

Justine gasps. GloZell puts a hand to her mouth. Oli looks like he's about to throw up all over his suspenders.

_Two guests must be selected by the vote of the group..._

Here it comes. The murders. The eliminations. Sentenced to death by their so-called friends. One among the ten has got to die.

"Timothy!" shouts Lele, pointing at the Mobster with an accusing gloved finger.

..._to be locked in the machine. Then those two must each choose a partner who will aid them in defeating the machine._

"I'm not going in the basement," announces GloZell.

"Timothy is one of 'em," Lele insists. "He just kills everybody, so he deserves to die."

"I don't kill my _friends_!"

Matt, who's standing next to Tim, shakes his head. "Yeah, I think we need to lay off Timothy, all right?"

Eva nods. As much as she loves Lele, Matt's right; the blonde's accusation makes no sense at all. Tim's the Mobster, yeah, but that's just a _character_. He doesn't _actually_ kill people any more than Eva _actually_ writes newspaper articles.

"I may have a method for voting," Arthur pipes up. "Please, have a seat."

_Yeah, have a seat_, mutters the bitter part of Eva's mind as she takes a seat between Andrea and Sierra. _Have a seat and pray you don't die._

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: The first vote of the game! Two guests will be selected to go down in the basement and face death...but who? Also, conspiracy theories, because those are always
fun!
Useless, Sketchy, Strange, Insane

Chapter Summary

Our heroes must select two guests to be locked into the machine...but who will they choose?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

This is crazy.

First of all, ungodly machine. What the hell is that? Anything with the word "ungodly" in it is not something Oli is willing to go anywhere near, thank you.

And now someone's got to go down there and die?

"Here is how the final voting will work," says Arthur once everyone has taken their seats. He's holding a grey hat in his hand, and he's surveying the group as if he's trying to determine who looks the most expendable. "Each one of you will write down the name of the person that you want to attempt the final task and put it in this hat. I will then draw two names who must face death." He says this rather matter-of-factly, as if he's reciting the flipping stock exchange. "Please, discuss this among yourselves."

Joey is the first to snap out of his shock-induced stupor. "Omigod." He stands up, grabs Justine's wrist, and gently tugs her to her feet. "Okay, come with me."

They head off together. Joey shoots a stare at the rest of the group, as if to warn them against voting for him or his longtime friend.

Oli's head is swimming with a painful combination of confusion, fear, and flat-out disbelief. This is insane. Crazy. Bonkers. What kind of a dinner party do you go to where you vote two of your friends to go into a basement and fight a bloody machine?

That just doesn't happen!

Once Joey and Justine are safely out of earshot, the "does Tim deserve to die" argument commences once again. And frankly, Matt is sick of it. He knows the guy. He's his friend. He can't be a murderer.

Lele, on the other hand...

"I kill people for business," Tim protests. "Not for pleasure."

GloZell pipes up, gesturing with her right hand as she talks. "Well, out of all of us, you are the worst one, so..." She shakes her head. "You're going to the devil."

Tim smirks at her as he adjusts his plaid coat. "But I'm the best dressed."
"Okay, with an attitude, too?" Lele, still glaring daggers at everyone within a three-mile radius, has entered the conversation. "No, no, no."

Lele Pons. Claiming someone else has an "attitude." Pot, meet Kettle.

"You guys are very quick to throw stones from over there," says Matt. He makes sure he's looking right at Lele when he says that, so she knows that he's on to her.

She doesn't even blink. "Are we?"

Of course, all this talk of who deserves to die is completely irrelevant as far as Matt’s concerned. He's already made his decision. In a way, he made it long before it needed to be made.

Lele.

It's got to be Lele.

Lele needs to go.

Eva and Sierra have joined Justine and Joey in a secluded corner of the room, far away from any of the others. Justine's shaking with fear (and a bit of guilt as well—here she is, about to send one of her friends to their death), but she's trying her damnedest not to let it show.

"I think we should form an alliance," Joey whispers, his soothing voice doing wonders for Justine's frazzled nerves.

"Me too." Eva glances around the room for a second before turning her attention back to Joey. "But who do we kick out?"

Sierra giggles. Which is weird, considering that this situation is not something to giggle at, but Justine decides to let it slide. "Someone who's useless."

The second she says that, a certain copper-haired girl pops into Justine's mind.

"Andrea."

Justine's right. As much as Joey cares for Andrea, she hasn't really done all that much to help the group. She's been in the shadows, taking a backseat to the other, more proactive YouTubers.

She hasn't put in effort. She's just...well...standing there.

"I'm the one finding all the clues here." Eva's voice is a low hiss. "I cannot die. We'll all die."

"I'm not voting for you," Joey assures her.

Justine's face is an emotionless mask. "Andrea. She's cool and all, but...it's got to be her."

"Okay," murmurs Sierra, staring at the floor. "I think we know what we have to do."

Andrea Brooks does not deserve to die. Of course she doesn't. But...someone's got to, and she hasn't done anything to convince Joey that she should be allowed to live.
He hates himself for thinking that.

At this point, Lele's about ready to flip Arthur off. *What the hell's with this guy's attitude? "Hum-de-hum, let's all sit down and vote, somebody's going to die, no biggie!"*

*Screw you, Arthur. And screw your creepy maid friend, too. You can both go die yourselves for all I care.*

"Eva." Oli's voice shakes slightly, and Lele can tell that the poor guy does *not* want to do this. "She was the last person with Shane, and he's dead. And she still hasn't explained..."

"What happened," finishes GloZell. "She just said she was in the bathroom."

"She was not in the *bathroom!*" Oli scoffs.

GloZell's face is a stone wall of resolution. "Okay, so let's go with her."

Lele shifts uncomfortably in her seat. Yeah, Eva's whole "sneaking off with Shane and then not telling the group where the hell they snuck off to" shtick *is* a bit fishy, but...no. Not Eva. Eva's been nothing but nice to her the entire time they've been at this creepy-ass house. She's *not* choosing her.

She considers choosing Tim. The guy's a *Mobster*, for crying out loud. Sure, Lele's Hustler character might be a bit shady in the morals department, but Tim's character *literally kills people*. If *that's* not a crime worthy of death, nothing is.

But now that she thinks about it, she isn't really up for choosing Tim either. He's a pain in the neck, no doubt about it, but—

Oh, *dammit*, it's time to vote, everyone's going up one at a time and dropping names into the hat like it's a freakin' raffle or something. She can't dilly-dally anymore. She has to choose.

She chooses Matt. Of course she does. He acts all holier-than-thou, he's been giving her dirty looks since dinnertime, and he seems rather...you know...bipolar.

She doesn't like that.

Joey doesn't feel safe. How could he? *His* name could very well go in there. After all, he invited them here; what's to stop them from deciding that this whole mess is his fault? That they'd all be better off without him?

*No.*

He has to live. For Daniel, for his family, for everything he left behind. He needs to make it back to 2016.

This house chose him. He won't let it consume him.

It's Oli's turn at the hat. The pen's between his trembling fingers. He's about to vote one of his friends in to fight an ungodly machine.
He takes a deep breath. You can do this. Just write down three letters. E-V-A. It's not that hard.

But then, she pops into his mind, fear on her face, tears in her throat, begging the group to trust her..."It was not me!"...don't pick me, Oli, please, I don't want to die, I'm scared...

He can't.

He can't do it. Not to her. Not to anyone.

He scribbles on his paper for a bit and then returns to his seat.

Seconds after Andrea sits down (she picked Eva, because why not), Arthur picks up the hat and shakes it for several minutes. Just get on with it, Andrea wants to scream at him. Pick a name already.

She can't take the suspense. Especially when lives are on the line.

As Arthur (finally) reaches into the hat, Andrea squeezes Tim's hand. She can't help but remember all the awful things Lele said about him earlier—that he kills people, that he deserves to die. She knows that's not true, of course, but what if someone voted for him? What if it's his name that gets picked out of the hat?

No. She can't lose him. She'd rather die herself.

There's a slip of paper in Arthur's hand now. He's clearing his throat, preparing to read it. Andrea's on the couch, her heart in her mouth, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

"Andrea."

Oh.

Of course. She's been so worried about Tim, she forgot to worry about her own life. And now, here she is, twenty-nine years old, trapped in a year she doesn't belong in, chosen by her friends to go down in the basement and put her life on the line.

Everyone gasps. All eyes are on her, as if they're expecting a reaction. Some tears. A tantrum. Anything.

She sits there.

She's not angry. She's not depressed. She's not even frightened. She feels...numb. Emotionless. Hollow. As if the sound of her name on Arthur's lips has already killed her.

The ungodly machine. Well. Okay, then. There's worse ways to go.

The real question is...who's going down there with her?

Lele feels sorry for Andrea. Honest to God, she does. The Fixer seems like a nice girl, though they haven't really talked much or anything. And of course she doesn't deserve to be killed via "the ungodly machine." (What even is that, by the way? Does anyone actually know?)

But she's got no time to think about that now. Not when Arthur's getting ready to draw the second
The butler whisks another piece of paper out from the hat. He unfolds it, smiles, and reads it aloud to the group.

"Lele."

Lele gasps. What? No. It can't be. Not her. They picked her? Who the goddamn hell voted for her? Was it Matt? It was probably Matt. She knew that boy was up to something.

Dammit, dammit, dammit, dammit, dammit.

"Omigod," is all Eva has to say about it.

"Wait." Lele's trying to keep her voice calm (which is freakin' hard, since she's got this ridiculously strong urge to curse out the entire pack of them). "So that means I go down in the basement?"

Arthur nods.

Great. So now she's going to be locked in whatever the hell the "ungodly machine" is supposed to be, and if her partner or whoever doesn't save her, she's dead. Wonderful. Just what she always wanted.

Arthur, still acting as if this entire situation is just a normal Saturday for him, turns to Lele's fellow victim. "Andrea?"

"Yes?"

"You get to pick your partner first."

"And the partner solves the problem," says GloZell. "For you."

Lele sighs and rests her head on GloZell's fur-covered shoulder. Okay. Okay. She can do this. All she needs to do is pick the right partner, and she'll be fine. She's not going to die. She's not.

But what if—

Shut up!

"Hmmm..." Andrea closes her eyes, banishing all thoughts of home from her mind. A partner. She needs a partner. Someone to save her. Or kill her. Either way.

But who?

"I'm going to pick..."

She briefly considers choosing Tim. After all, he is the closest friend she has here, so she knows he'll at least make an effort to save her. But after chasing off a few memories of collabs and inside jokes, she decides against it. If worst comes to worst, she doesn't want him to have to watch her die.

Eva's clever, but she still doesn't trust her. Matt's smart, but he's too cocky. Oli's resourceful, but his expression's clearly screaming God, no, don't pick me. GloZell and Sierra are not even in the running. And Joey...well...he's her friend, but who's to say he isn't in on this nightmare? It is, after
all, his house.

That leaves one other guest. Yeah, the Gambler's not the brightest bulb in the drawer, but maybe...

"Justine."

"What?" Justine jumps backwards in her seat, her eyes wide with shock. Me? She picked me? All these geniuses, and she goes with—"No, I'm an idiot, you don't want me!"

Everyone starts talking at once. Lele's laughing, Joey's shouting, GloZell's jaw is practically unhinged, and whatever explanation Andrea might have for this completely ridiculous choice is drowned out by the sounds of disbelief.

As for Justine, she's pretty much a puddle, flailing around like she swallowed a jumping bean. She can't believe it. She just can't believe it. Andrea was there during the "letters and words" challenge. She saw how terrible Justine is at solving puzzles. So why the hell would she pick her—her, iJustine, the dumbest dumb blonde to ever dumb—to save her from the bowels of the ungodly machine?

And what's more, Justine voted for Andrea. That's the worst part. She voted for Andrea, and she convinced Joey and Eva and Sierra to vote for her too. And now she's the one responsible for saving her. Is this some twisted form of payback?

She buries her head in Oli's right arm and laughs.

"So Andrea picks Justine," shouts Arthur, trying desperately to calm down the shrieking masses.

Justine? Really? Suddenly, Lele's chances of survival are looking a lot better.

Right. So now it's her turn. She's got to pick a partner. Frankly, she could pick Shane's corpse and still have a fighting chance, but since she's got to pick someone who's still alive...

"Okay, I'm picking Eva!"

Eva's a freakin' genius. If she can't save me, no one can.

Arthur nods, almost as if he was expecting this. "Lele picks Eva."

Without saying a word to anyone, Eva rises from her seat. She picks up the cog key, hands it to Arthur, and mentally prepares herself for whatever terrifying nightmares might be down there. After all, it's the basement. Anything can happen.

The maid's still there, standing next to Arthur, looking even creepier than usual. Eva ignores her.

She doesn't care what's down there. It doesn't matter. She has a job to do. It's her responsibility to get Lele out of the ungodly machine alive.

She has to get the challenge done. She has to save Lele.

She has to.
Lele, Eva, Andrea, and Justine follow Arthur out of the room.

Tim watches them go, his eyes fixed on Andrea's retreating figure. He's not sure if he trusts Justine to put in one hundred percent to save his friend; he kinda feels like she's part of the reason why Andrea's going into the machine in the first place.

But that doesn't matter. Andrea picked her, so obviously she sees something in her. And by God, Justine better come through and get Andrea back upstairs alive, or else she's gonna land a permanent spot on the Timothy DeLaGhetto Shit List.

She's the last to leave. She's going. She's almost out the door. This could be the last time he ever—

"Andrea!"

She whirls around, her black robes rustling, a hint of regret in her brown eyes. "Timothy?" The name's an uncertain whisper, as if she's still trying to process her situation.

"Hey..." Tim wants to grab her, hug her, save her, get her out of here. But all he can do is choke out, "Come back safe, okay?"

Andrea smiles through her tears. "I...I'll try."

The door slams behind her. Their footsteps fade into the night.

And Tim, for the first time tonight, is honest-to-God terrified.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: The ungodly machine! Will Justine save Andrea? Will Eva save Lele? Either way, someone is definitely going to die...
Chapter Summary

Lele and Andrea are trapped in the ungodly machine, and only one will come out of this alive. It's up to Eva and Justine to decide who lives and who dies...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The walk from the living room to the basement feels like a walk to the guillotine, so Lele figures she might as well pass the time with pep talks. You've got this, she tells herself. You're gonna make it. You've got Eva freakin' Gutowski on your side. Unless iJustine suddenly develops Einstein-level intelligence, you'll be fine.

But five seconds after she enters the basement, all of her hard-earned confidence evaporates faster than an ice cube in Hawaii.

"Are you serious?"

The ungodly machine—now she understands why the hell they call it that—is a giant, demonic contraption that takes up half of the dimly-lit basement. There are two large glass chambers, each large enough for a person to fit inside, as well as a rusty-looking engine about the size of a small elephant. Not far from those are two control panels, each with at least twenty-two wires sticking out from under them. Lightbulbs, containers, and weird tool-like things are scattered around the room, and there are enough screws, levers, and buttons to equip every mad scientist in the tri-state area.

"This is like Saw!" Lele shouts, her voice bouncing around the cavernous room.

Next to her, Eva's previously-determined expression has morphed into genuine concern. "Until Dawn..."

Lele feels sick. She's seen this stuff in movies—creepy basements, torture chambers, innocent people trapped in some sicko's twisted game. Nobody ever comes out alive.

She regrets coming here tonight.

"Ladies." Arthur faces the girls, his back to the machine, his arms extended. "Welcome to the ungodly machine."

Lights flash. Andrea flinches, but somehow manages to keep a straight face. Calm. Stay calm. It's gonna be okay. Don't think about monsters, don't think about dying, don't...

"Why do you even have this down here?" Lele, unlike Andrea, is not even trying to hide her emotions; fear, anger, confusion, and a dash of hatred dance across her face. She'd probably spit in the face of Death itself if she had the chance.

Arthur ignores Lele's outburst. "Please, read the directions."
Lele makes a grab for the open notebook in the corner, but Eva gets there first.

To free the artifact from the bowels of the machine, it must be forced into malfunction. The machine is started by placing the cog key in the center console.

The two guests selected by vote must be locked in separate glass chambers. Their partners will have thirty minutes to try and disrupt the machine. If either side causes a malfunction, their respective chamber will open. However, the other chamber will fill with a noxious gas, killing the guest whose partner was not quick enough.

If after thirty minutes the machine has not malfunctioned, both guests will be killed by the machine and a monster will emerge.

No. Andrea struggles not to scream. She knew it, she knew it, she knew there was some sort of creature skulking about this God-forsaken house. And now, if Eva and Justine fail to complete whatever awful puzzle lies before them, Andrea's nightmares really will become reality.

And yeah, if that happens, she won't be around to see it, because she and Lele will both be dead by then. But what about Justine? Or Eva? Or the six people waiting upstairs?

The last thing she wants is for her friends to be eaten alive by an ungodly monster.

Well. It's happened. Lele's locked in a freakin' glass chamber, watching Eva and Justine fiddle around with their manuals, hoping against hope that this crazy Saw scenario won't go all Jigsaw on her ass.

And Arthur's not helping. Yeah, he locked the girls into their chambers, and yeah, he started the machine, but now that the damn thing's in motion, he's just standing there watching it all go down. He's acting like this is all a goddamn game or something.

What was it he said before he started the machine?

It begins.

"What?" Eva's hunched over her manual, her eyebrows raised in that typical what-the-hell expression. "This is not even in English."

Over at her end of the room, Justine's just as befuddled. "It's just all these weird symbols."

Lele's freaking out. Listen, God, I know I haven't been the greatest person, I've done some things I really shouldn't have, but I swear, if you get me out of this, I'll change, I swear to God I'll change...

Dios te salve, Maria, llena eres de gracia, el Senor es contigo, bendita tu eres entre todas las mujeres...

After several minutes of squinting at symbols, Justine finally gets it.

The blueprints have different levers. So that means she and Eva have to lift the levers up and the levers down, and they have to get them in the correct combination. Each lever has a corresponding code that's matched up with the decoder she's been provided. Of course, it's up to her to decode which way the arrows go.
"D-13," she mumbles to herself, pushing the final lever into position. "So you just have to match them up..." She frowns. "Do I gotta push harder? Is something not right?"

Andrea sighs.

Justine tears herself away from the levers to face the girl she's supposed to save. "Girl, I'm trying."

She thinks she's got it right. She thinks. But nothing's happening and it doesn't make sense and everything's insane and now there's only fifteen minutes left and—

"Eva has solved the first step."

What the hell?

"Oh, we're in deep shit," Andrea moans.

"Okay, but..." Justine doesn't get it, how is this not working, what am I doing wrong? "Ahhhhhh!"


Eva smiles. She's cracked the code, and now the power core has been sufficiently overloaded. She's feeling pretty confident (in fact, her confidence is bordering on arrogance at this point), but there's no time to celebrate her accomplishments. Not when Lele Pons has fifteen minutes left to live.

She turns her attention back to the instructions.

Remove bolt...

"I'm gonna die in here," Andrea complains.

Justine, who's still working the levers, throws up her hands. "I'm doing exactly what this is telling me to do!"

The bolt is stuck in a vat of ice water not far from her control panel. Eva strides up to it, braces herself, and plunges her hand into its icy depths.

"Oh!" she exclaims, feeling the water seep into her pores. "It's so cold..."

And it is. It honestly is. It feels like someone took a bucket of ice and left it out in the middle of an Arctic winter. Her hand is already getting numb, and she's only been going at it for approximately two and a half minutes.

A part of her is tempted to give up and head for the nearest fireplace, but one look at Lele's fearful brown eyes is all she needs to keep going.

So she unscrews. And unscrews. And unscrews. And then unscrews some more. She's been unscrewing for the past five minutes, and this damn bolt is still stuck.

If I get hypothermia, I know who to blame.

Justine's still fiddling about with the levers, and Andrea's beginning to panic.
Being brave was easy before. She was upstairs, in the safety of the living room, and her name was pulled, so of course she tried to accept her fate with dignity. But now, when she's actually trapped in the tube she very well might die in, keeping her cool is a hell of a lot harder to do.

Perhaps she wouldn't be so scared (Is this it? Am I going to die? Should I start writing my last will and testament while I still have the chance?) if iJustine wasn't being...well...iJustine.

_Come on, come on, get it together, now's not the time to fuss and fume._

She's seconds away from snapping when Justine's control panel finally lights up. Andrea's paid enough attention to the proceedings to know what this means—the code has been cracked, and Team Andristine is free to move on to the next step.

"Oh." Andrea clasps her hands together, her faith in her partner halfway restored. "Okay."

After a quick glance at the instructions, Justine turns to the vat of water next to her control panel. She reaches in, gives the bolt a few good twists, then draws her hand back so fast you'd think a scorpion's stung her. She faces Andrea, her arms outstretched, her right glove dripping with water. "Girl, I can't get the bolt."

Andrea frowns. Why is her partner giving up so soon? Especially when Eva's over at the other vat, unscrewing like there's no tomorrow?

Come to think of it, how come Justine didn't take off her glove before she stuck her hand in the vat? Is she even trying?

To make matters worse, Eva has somehow managed to get her bolt unscrewed. Her hand emerges from the water, clutching the bolt, and Andrea's heart drops several more stories.

"You can do it, Eva!" shrieks Lele from her tube.

Meanwhile, Justine grabs the instructions again. "This is ridiculous!" she shouts, glaring at the symbols before her as if they're personally responsible for Andrea's plight.

_This is my fault, _Andrea frets, watching Justine glower at the bolt. _She was right. I should have picked someone else. Now we're way behind and Eva's almost there and I...I'm going to..._

"I'm getting really fussy!" Justine complains, yanking off her gloves as she speaks. "Really, really fussy!"

Andrea bites her lip, her eyes fixed on Justine, trying not to think about the enormous amount of progress Eva's made, trying not to think about dying, trying not to think about leaving her loved ones alone in 2016. "You gotta hurry."

As Eva uses the bolt to open up the control panel, Lele's emotional state is bouncing back and forth between confidence and fear. She still has at least twenty prayers left to run through, but it's okay. She's got Eva. Eva's in the lead. Unless Justine makes a miraculous comeback, she won't—she can't—she's not gonna—

"Eva, you got this!"

Almost there. She's almost there. She's gotta do it. She's _gotta._
"Girl, you wanna give me a hand?" This from Justine, who’s still struggling with the bolt. "Did you actually take this bolt out?"

And just like that, the panic is back, swimming like blood through Lele’s veins. "Don’t—don’t—don’t!” she screams, pounding her hands against the glass. "Don’t tell her anything!” Eva, don’t, just keep going, please, save me, get me out of here...

I don't want to die I don't want to die I don't want to!

Of course Eva’s not going to help Justine. She doesn’t want Andrea to die, but the fact remains: there's no way on earth that both Andrea and Lele are getting out of this alive. And since Eva’s job is to save Lele, that's what she's going to do.

Besides, Justine's being a bit sketchy. Not taking off her gloves...barely even trying to get at the bolt...spending far more time complaining than actually attempting to solve the puzzle...honestly, Eva doesn't think she's giving it much effort at all.

She doesn't want Andrea dead...does she?

Eva’s next task is to take the screw and use it to bust open the control center. She does so, revealing a maze of wires, each one a different color of the rainbow. Red, orange, yellow, green, blue, purple...it’s like Joseph’s coat of many colors up in here.

She consults her manual. Each wire goes with a certain jack (for instance, the green wire goes in the jack that has the little arrow symbol above it), and she must re-wire the control center so that all of the wires are in the correct jack.

Then, and only then, will Lele be released from her chamber. And Andrea...

She's not going to think about Andrea.

At this point, Justine never wants to see another bolt ever again for as long as she lives. She hates bolts, she hates levers, she never even asked for this job, she's too dumb, why the hell did Andrea even pick her?

She grabs a skinny-looking piece of metal (don't ask her what it's called, because every freakin' thing in this place looks the same to her) and lowers it into the vat. No way is she sticking her hand in there again. She's already gone and ruined a pair of perfectly good gloves; she's not in the mood to freeze her fingernails off too.

After a few good thrusts, the bolt is off.

"Oh, God." Justine snatches the bolt from the water so fast it almost gives her whiplash. "I did it!"

Andrea pumps both her fists in the air. "Oh, yeah!"

"Hallelujah!" shrieks Justine, holding the bolt triumphantly above her head. "The bolt has been removed!" I'm gonna do it. I'm gonna save her. I've just got to connect a few wires or whatever, and then—

She opens her control center and omigod I've changed my mind, look at all these freakin' wires, what
the hell, this isn't fair, how am I supposed to sort this mess out? And Eva's got a good head start...oh God...

"Come on!" shouts Andrea from her tube. "You're almost there!"

And then, Eva puts her final wire in place, and all hell breaks loose.

It happens so fast. One minute, Andrea's in her tube, watching the craziness go down, and the next...there's gas. Everywhere. A cloud of black smoke, stinging her eyes, piercing her nose...she can't see, she can't move, she can't speak...

...she can't breathe...

...it hurts...help...

...Mom, Dad, Brittany, Tony...

...Teala...Lauren...

...Timothy...

...I don't want...

And then the world goes black.

"Eva's done it."

Lele's chamber swings open. She steps out, open-mouthed, not sure what the hell just happened.

Eva yanks herself to her feet. Justine's got her head in her hands. And Andrea...she's leaning against the wall of her now-murky chamber. Eyes closed. Not moving. Not...omigod, she's...she's...

"Justine, I'm sorry," says Arthur, not sounding very sorry at all. "Andrea did not survive."

"Omigod!"

Lele throws her arms around Eva, laughing and crying at the same time. Her soul is a jumble of thoughts and emotions—a dash of omigod Andrea poor thing she didn't deserve it mixed with a healthy dose of I survived I'm still alive thank you thank you thank you.

Eva buries her face into Lele's shoulder and sobs. As for Justine, she stands there, staring at Andrea's corpse with the strangest look on her face.

"You've caused the machine to malfunction," Arthur explains, "and it will now produce—"

As he speaks, a compartment opens, and out pops the weirdest object Lele has ever seen in her life. It's grey, triangle-shaped, and glowing, with all sorts of weird symbols etched into its surface.

"—the artifact."

Eva, who's somehow managed to regain her composure, picks up the artifact (as well as a few bits of paper next to it) and tucks it under her arm. The brunette still seems a bit down, but Lele grabs her
arm and grins at her anyway. She considers getting down on her knees and kissing her feet in gratitude, but decides against it.

Andrea Brooks is dead. And Lele's sad, of course she is, but it's kind of hard to grieve when it very well could've been her dead in that tube. Someone had to go, and all things considered, she's glad she got out of this alive.

_Besides, she's in a better place than I am right now_, she thinks to herself as she, Eva, and Justine follow Arthur out of the basement. _This house is the devil's house._

Chapter End Notes

So...yeah. RIP Andrea. Sorry you had to die so soon.
Next chapter: Betrayal! Also, Justine says some things she doesn't mean, Matt is upset about Lele's survival, and Oli stumbles upon a shocking revelation...
An Eye for an Eye

Chapter Summary

In the aftermath of Andrea's death, the group becomes suspicious of iJustine. And their level of paranoia only increases from there...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"I hope Lele comes back from the ungodly machine," GloZell announces to no one in particular. "I really do."

I don't, thinks Matt, a shiver running up his spine at the thought. He doesn't know Andrea too well, so he doesn't have much of a stake in her fate one way or the other, but...Lele. Ugh. Lele.

He hates everything about her, and he hopes to God she's dead...because if she comes back alive, it'll be his head on the next platter.

Joey straightens up in his seat. "They're coming."

Arthur is the first to arrive, his face an unreadable mask. Three pairs of heels echo on the pavement behind him. Matt sits there, hands clenched together, praying for the best-case scenario. Kill her, please, she's an awful person, she doesn't deserve to be here, she's the problem, she'll ruin everything, please, God, please...

Justine walks in. Her pretty mouth is turned downwards into a frown, as if she's a six-year-old who was denied a chocolate bar. Eva's right behind her, a satisfied smirk on her otherwise stoic face. And leaning on her arm, grinning like there's no tomorrow, is...oh, no.

Lele.

"I survived!" she shrieks, her shrill voice stabbing Matt's ears like a knife in the gut. "I know you're all happy about it." Giggle. Wink.

GloZell slams her cane on the ground. "I knew it, I knew it, I knew it!"

Great. Just great. Matt's practically-foolproof plan has gone and exploded in his face. Against all odds, Lele Pons is still freakin' alive.

And now...everyone knows that he was the one who voted for Lele. Suppose somebody tells on him? Suppose they go up to Lele and be like, "yeah, Matt had it out for you, let's vote him in next!" and then he ends up a corpse in the basement?

No. That won't happen. It won't. He won't let it. He is not, repeat not, going to die.

But Lele is. Sure, it didn't work this time, but there are still three more artifacts left to retrieve. All he has to do is keep voting for her, over and over, until she finally bites it.

Then, and only then, will all be right with the world.
It doesn't take Tim long to put two and two together. Lele's here, still alive and kicking, and if she made it, that means—that means—

_Andrea Andrea no please Andrea don't God please no no Andrea not Andrea anyone but Andrea no no no no_

"Andrea's dead!"

"I seriously tried," says Justine, as if a stupid non-apology will make everything better. "Like, I honestly did everything. I think I was sabotaged."

_Bullshit._

"What did you have to do?" Sierra asks.

"There was, like, this big contraption," Justine explains, "so then we had to go down and solve all these puzzles..."

"It was really creepy," Eva concurs.

Justine points at her brunette rival. "...and she solved hers super quick. I did the same exact thing, but nothing was working."

Tim isn't having any of this bull. He doesn't care _what_ stupid puzzles they were supposed to do, or _how _long it took them to do it. All he knows is that he had a friend—a best friend, Andrea Brooks, his homegirl now and forever—and now she's gone. Killed by the freakin' "ungodly machine." Murdered by the very idiot who should've saved her life.

And as he watches Justine flounce and grimace in front of him, Tim's grief transitions into red-hot hate.

_She wanted Andrea to die._ His hands curl into fists beside him. _She totally didn't play to save Andrea's life. She set Andrea up._

_Justine is the rat. I know it._

Tim leans forward, his voice a dangerous growl. "You let my friend die, Justine."

At this point, Justine's angrier than she's ever been in her life. She's mad at herself for not saving Andrea, she's mad at Andrea for dying, she's mad at Eva for solving her puzzle so damn quickly, she's mad at Tim for blaming it all on her...heck, she's even mad at the stupid butler for just standing there and letting it all happen. She's mad at pretty much everybody (except for Joey; she could never be mad at Joey), and all of her anger is bubbling up inside her like a can of nitroglycerin ready to explode.

And explode it does.

"Maybe she _needed_ to go, honestly!" she snaps. "What was she even _doing_ here?"

Everyone gasps.

"You _killed_ her!" shout Oli and Tim in unison.
Justine's seeing red. Her mind is begging her to *shut up, Justine, stop making it worse*, but her mouth just keeps on talking as if consequences don't exist. "All I'm saying is, we were over there, trying to open up that lock, and I was like, oh, hey, *Fixer.*" She makes air quotes around Andrea's occupation. "Why don't you *fix* the problem? And she was like, 'mmm.'" She holds up her right hand in the classic talk-to-the-hand maneuver. "Didn't even try to help. And that's where I got a little bit upset, so you know what?"

"So you killed her?" Joey wants to know.

No, she didn't, of course she didn't, she tried her damnedest to save the girl, it's not her fault Eva's a genius and she's a total moron. But for a few crucial moments, Justine Ezarik is too goddamn furious to care.

Fine. *Let* them think she's a murderer. They weren't there. They didn't *see.* They don't have to sit here and live with the guilt for the rest of their goddamn lives.

"*Who's* the *Fixer* now?"

Oli's in shock. Losing Shane was bad enough, but losing Andrea too...it's like watching someone shoot a three-month-old puppy right in front of him. She might not have been that big of a help, but she was too sweet to die in such a terrible way.

But it's done. She's gone. They've killed her. And for what?

"We got an artifact," Eva explains, pulling out the strangest object Oli has ever seen in his life. "One out of the four."

After everyone passes it around for a bit ("Gosh, it's heavy," GloZell comments, watching Joey's hands struggle under its weight), Lele places their prize on the mantlepiece. Looking at it, Oli feels uneasy; it's the kind of artifact one would expect to find in an abandoned pagan temple. It's supposed to help them get home, but...who *knows* what that thing is capable of? Especially considering that they had to kill Andrea to get it?

Lele turns to the rest of the group. "Only three more artifacts to find."

*And three more people to kill.*

Out of the corner of his eye, Oli can see a bit of paper sticking out from the bottom of the mantlepiece. It's small, white, barely noticeable, but he's learned long ago that nothing in this house can be taken for granted. A *clue. Our next clue. It must be.*

He straightens up, marches over to the mantlepiece, and snatches the paper from its hiding place.

Eva frowns. "Oli..."

"What are you doing?" Matt wants to know.

Oli shrugs, unfolds the paper, and reads it to the rest of the group.

*You've been warned. One among you is in league with the evil of the house.*

Matt turns to face the rest of the group, a suspicious gleam in his dark brown eyes. "Someone's working with the evil?"
"Guys, who is it?" Sierra whimpers.

"It's not me," declares Lele, "because I almost died!"

"It's your house!" GloZell snarls in Joey's direction.

Tim (poor guy, Oli can tell that Andrea's death hit him pretty hard) adjusts his coat. "So," he says bluntly, glaring at Justine, "who's the rat?"

Oli doesn't know who's in league with the evil. *He* sure as hell isn't. But if the note in his hands is right, it could be *anyone.*

Even Tim. Even Eva. Even *Joey.*

So now he can't trust anybody. Great.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: Aren't accusations fun? Also, now they have to do a seance, because we might as well stuff every horror cliche we can into this story.
Judas Among Us

Chapter Summary

One of the guests is working with the evil of the house. The question is...who?

Chapter Notes

Congratulations to Escape the Night for winning the 2016 Streamy for Best Ensemble Cast! You guys deserved it. I'm so proud of all my little YouTube babies. And now, back to our regularly scheduled murder fest.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It's been two minutes since Oli's revelation, and everyone's already screaming at each other like they're a bunch of baboons in a cage. Except for Joey. Joey's sitting there, saying nothing, trying his hardest not to get caught in the crossfire.

"Who's the rat?"

"It's her, isn't it!"

"I think—"

"It's not me!"

"You're—"

"One of you guys—"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah!"

"One of us is the killer!"

The "someone's working with the evil" bombshell is enough to make Joey want to crawl into the nearest cupboard and never come out again. He's already lost two of his friends to this house; the only thing that kept him going was the belief that those who remain are all good people. People he knows. People he trusts. People who don't deserve to die.

And now...well, apparently, one of his friends is no friend at all. Someone—someone in this room—wants them dead.

But who?

"How did you even see it from that far?" Lele snaps at Oli.

"I have good vision!"
"Bullshit!"

"We can't blame it all on one person," says Oli, his voice calm. "It could genuinely be any of us."

Well, thinks Joey, at least someone's trying to be the voice of reason in this mess.

Justine points at Arthur and Sarah, who have been standing in the back doing nothing this entire time. "What about these two back here?"

"We could blame you too!" shouts GloZell, jabbing a gloved finger at Oli.

To which Oli replies, "Who's to say it's not you?"

"Zappa-dap-doop-dap-doop-dap-no!"

After GloZell's nonsensical rant of gibberish is over, the entire group devolves into a shouting mess. Accusations are flying like missiles, Matt and Lele are screaming at each other, Sierra's practically in tears, and Joey can't bring himself to meet his friends' furious eyes.

Someone's working with the evil, and to be honest, this information doesn't surprise Matt in the slightest. All these notes, the car blowing up, Shane, Andrea...demons or no demons, there has to be someone to blame.

As for who's working with the evil, well...of course Lele is still his prime suspect. She's bossy, self-centered, and all-around insufferable, not to mention the only one here with no redeeming qualities whatsoever. If anyone here is capable of orchestrating a grand plot to kill them all, it's her.

But after the incident with the ungodly machine, another possibility has arisen. Yes, she's his friend, and yes, her personality is nowhere near as horrid as Lele's, but her behavior has become too suspicious to be ignored. Heck, she killed Andrea; she practically admitted it not five minutes ago. He can't let their friendship cloud his judgement anymore. He has to—he must—

"Justine took out Andrea." He tries to keep his voice steady, but there's still a few shades of anger and regret. "She sabotaged the entire death machine." Jenna Ezarik pops into his mind, and it takes all of Matt's willpower to ignore her. "It's gotta be Justine."

Shock and horror (and perhaps a bit of guilt) dance their way across Justine's pale face. "I told her not to pick me cause I'm stupid!" she screams, her eyes flickering with fear.

Matt gulps, but stays the course. "That doesn't change the fact that you killed her!"

"You're not stupid!" snaps GloZell.

Everyone begins shouting at Justine, who's furiously trying to defend herself, and Matt can't bring himself to look his former friend in the eye. I'm sorry, Jenna, he thinks morosely, letting his girlfriend's image linger in his mind. But...your sister...I think she's a murderer.

And murderers cannot leave this house alive.

Joey can't do it.

He's tried. He's freakin' tried. He knows that everyone's in shock, but their hysteria is beginning to
get the best of them. To call Justine a murderer? Justine? His first and oldest friend? The one he's
known for pretty much his entire time on YouTube? The girl who laughs at everything, who likes
makeup and cooking and video games, who couldn't even keep a straight face when they were on
*Fight of the Living Dead* together?

Justine Ezarik? Working with the evil? They can't be serious.

And besides, now is not the time to go around blaming everybody. They can't waste valuable time
turning against each other, especially considering they're supposed to be a team. If they're going to
get out of here, they need to work together.

*This blame game is going to be the death of us.*

"Okay, listen!" Joey shouts, stopping the "whodunit" speculation in its tracks. "Listen, guys, Eva
brought back a note that was with the artifact."

This is true. Eva did find a note. And a photograph. She hadn't mentioned it, because she was too
consumed with guilt and grief over Andrea's demise. But Joey's right; letting emotions take over
won't do anyone any good. Time to examine the clue and figure out how to get out of here.

As everyone pushes and peeks around him, Joey opens the note. He pulls out the photograph and
stares at it in surprise. "What the heck?"

"It's a super creepy picture," Tim remarks.

Joey frowns. "I don't know her...

"Who is that?" GloZell pipes up, pulling herself to her feet and narrowing her eyes at the photograph
before them.

Eva examines the photo. It's a woman, that's for sure, and she's probably the most beautiful woman
Eva's ever seen. She has blonde hair, soft lips, perfect skin, a crimson scarf, and emerald earrings that
really compliment her skin tone. Her eyes are the same color as her earrings, and the intensity of her
gaze is enough to pierce the strongest soul.

"Hold on," says Joey, brandishing the note. "I have a note that came with it."

The note. Of course. What else is new?

Joey reads it aloud.

*The location of the next artifact can only be found by speaking to the woman in the photograph. The
inconvenience is that she is no longer with the living.*

"Omigod," murmurs Sierra, adjusting her tiara nervously.

Eva cringes. *Ugh.* She should've known this was going to happen; with all of the death she's seen so
far, talking to ghosts seems like the next logical step.

*To get answers from across the grave, you must perform a seance...but, to ensure the circle does not
open a doorway to unwanted spirits, there must be acquired a unique part of her beauty, an article
of clothing, and her birthstone.*

Okay. Okay. So they have to find some more items hidden around the house somewhere. And
then...and then they've got to do a seance. They've got to talk to a dead woman. Of course they do.

Since talking to the dead is a thing now, Eva kind of wishes they could talk to their friends. Shane's part of the Society Against Evil; he'd be a valuable asset against the demons. And Andrea...she probably wouldn't be as willing to help, considering that they sent her to her death, and she especially wouldn't want to help Justine (is she working with the evil? Eva won't be surprised if the answer turns out to be yes). But she is—no, was—friends with Tim, so maybe she'd help them fight the demons for his sake.

But no. Instead of familiar spirits, they've got to conjure up a woman from who knows how long ago. A woman they know literally nothing about. What if she refuses to help them? Or worse...what if she's a malevolent spirit who's out to kill them all?

*Don't think about it.*

She turns the picture over, and of course there's another message written on the back.

*If you seek the three, you must study the picture, giving it all your attention, but must tear it to pieces right after you proceed. Once the objects have been found, return them to the golden dish, and the seance ritual will be revealed.*

Speaking to the dead is the *last* thing Oli wants to do right now. *Especially* after losing two of his friends to demonic forces. It's like this house is just using this poor woman to taunt them—*she's dead, they're dead, everyone is going to die.*

Justine, still trembling, picks up the golden dish.

"So we need to find the three items," says Matt, pointing at the photo in Eva's hands, "and return them to the dish for our next clue."

Yep. That's the long and short of it. And then something terrible will happen, probably. After the events of the past few hours, Oli can't imagine anything good coming out of this mess.

"What do you see?" questions GloZell as the guests crowd around the picture.

"A scarf," Sierra replies.

Eva grasps the picture between her fingernails. "Green," she says calmly, as if she's playing I Spy with dead people.

"Emerald!" shouts Joey, pointing at the woman's earrings. "Emerald, right?"

Eva nods. "Yeah. Emerald green."

Oli squints at the photograph. The woman has earrings on (emerald, apparently), as well as a vibrant red scarf around her neck. Also, she has some *really* nice blonde hair, and her eyes are the same green color as her earrings. She looks like a flipping supermodel.

"Any women's items, we should just be on the lookout for," Eva tells the rest of the group.

Joey nods. "Okay, rip it up, we're good."

As Eva tears the photograph to shreds, Oli's heart sinks. He's pretty sure they've got a good image of the woman, but...what if they forget her? What if they can't find anything that has anything to do
with her because they're all too short-sighted to remember a simple photo? What if...what if they end up stuck here forever?

It won't happen. It won't. He's going home. He's probably going to need therapy after this, but he's going home, dammit.

"Girl, hurry up and rip it up!" shouts GloZell, tapping her foot impatiently. "I'm ready to go! Hurry up!"

"Do we need to split up and look for the items?" Matt wants to know.

Before anyone can answer his question, another drawer flies open. At this point, Oli's gotten used to things opening up out of nowhere, so he manages to keep his flinches to himself.

Eva, too, has apparently mastered the Art of Not Being Scared by the House; all she does is glance upwards and say "What?"

"The drawer is open!" gasps GloZell.

The nine remaining YouTubers gather around the drawer, and iJustine is the first to notice what's inside. "Keys!" she cries, snatching one up before Oli has the chance to process what's going on.

"There's three keys," Matt points out. "Could these be to the rest of the house?"

"Okay, so we should split up!" Lele suggests, though it comes out sounding more like a command. "Let's split up into three groups!"

Justine nods. "Okay."

"May I suggest that we go check upstairs?" Arthur chimes in.

GloZell cringes. "I don't wanna go upstairs!" she complains, traces of fear lining her otherwise defiant voice.

But Arthur doesn't seem to care. "Come on, everyone, this way!" He immediately makes for the nearest staircase, and the group has no choice but to follow him.

To be honest, GloZell's right; the idea of going upstairs does not appeal to Oli in the slightest. He groans and drags his feet, not bothering to take in his surroundings. "Upstairs," he grumbles under his breath, "in this creepy flipping house!"

Joey whirls around. "Excuse me!"

"Sorry," mutters Oli, keeping his eyes glued to the back of Eva's head.

Whose house is it?

It's Joey's house.

There's something fishy going on.

They've been walking up and down staircases for the better part of eternity, and GloZell's not too keen to find out where the hell they're going. The first floor of this place is creepy enough; who knows what sort of craziness lies upstairs?
"Joey," asks Matt as the group continues to lumber up the stairs, "how many floors is this house?"

Joey doesn't reply. To be honest, GloZell thinks that he's the one in league with this evilness that's going on. He has to be. It's his house. And if it isn't him, then it's Justine. GloZell loves her to bits, but the whole business with the ungodly machine is way too suspicious to let slide.

So those are her suspects. Justine or Joey. Or both, for all she knows.

They arrive on the second floor, and the first thing GloZell notices is the wallpaper. "Ugh." It's a weird white-and-orange color, with leaves and things. And the furniture isn't much better—it looks all musty. "We need to redecorate this."

There are three doors. Of course. One for each key. Time to split up (again) and find this chick's things.

She joins Lele and Tim at one of the doors. Lele uses her key, and sure enough, the door opens, revealing a room with the biggest window GloZell has ever seen in her life. "Whoa!"

So here they are, in some old lady's room, and they're supposed to find these emerald earrings. Which seems tough, considering the fact that there's jewelry all over the place. But hey, it's just a pair of little ol' earrings, they'll find them in no time.

In fact, here's some right now. "Here they are!" shouts GloZell, snatching some green ones out of a box she just opened. "Here they are!"

Tim's by her side in seconds. "Is that it?"

"That's emerald," GloZell insists.

"No, no, no." Lele shakes her head, disappointment flashing in her brown eyes. "They were long."

GloZell sighs and puts the not-long earrings back where she found them. Looks like they're gonna be here a while. She just hopes nothing pops out at them, because all these jumpscares are gonna give her an aneurysm one of these days. How do those Let's Players manage it?

"Wait, careful!" Sierra cautions as Eva opens up the second door. She has no freakin' idea what Joey has planned for them, but whatever it is, she'd rather not be taken off guard. When a prank's gone on too long, it's best to just roll with it and wait for the inevitable punchline.

And Andrea...

She's not dead. She's not. Shane sure as hell isn't, so Andrea isn't either. They must've told her it's a prank and whisked her out of here...yes, that's it, it has to be. And now she's on her way home, ready to make another video for her AndreasChoice channel, talking to her friends on the phone, and definitely not dead.

Yeah. She's fine. They're fine.

The door opens, and Sierra follows Eva and Matt inside. "Omigod," she murmurs, her nerves on edge, her heart pounding its way out of her chest. "This is just creepy."

"Look." Eva points to a shelf filled with wigs. "There's wigs here."

Sierra glances around the room. There's wigs everywhere—on the shelves, in the drawers, in the
"Okay, that's a lot of wigs."

"I think we're looking for a lock of hair," says Matt. "That's what the clue said."

So they look, though Sierra isn't quite sure what they're looking for. She's already forgotten what the hair looks like; heck, seconds after they ripped that photo up, she was like "wait, what color was her hair again?" Ah, well. That's what Eva's for.

Matt leans against the cabinet. "My question for you is...now that we're away from everybody else, who do you guys think is working with the evil spirit?"

"I don't know," sighs Eva.

"I think it's Joey." He's pranking us, Matt. There isn't any evil spirit. He's gonna string us along for a little while longer and then be like, "hahaha, you just got pranked!" Haven't you guys ever seen Prank Academy? "We're in his house. I don't trust him."

"See, I still think it's either Lele or Justine," says Matt, counting his two suspects off on his fingers.

"I don't think it's Lele," says Eva, shaking her head. "I think Lele's just...

Sierra smiles and finishes her sentence for her. "Lele's just crazy."

"But—"

"I think it's either Justine or Joey," Eva concludes, cutting Matt off before he has the chance to finish his sentence.

"I don't know..."

Eva turns back to the bookshelves. "Well, whoever it is," she says, an air of finality in her voice, "we need to be careful."

Careful. Yes. Prank or no prank, being careful is always the best policy. Now all Sierra can do is keep looking for the hair and hope that her prank theory turns out to be right.

Because if it isn't...

"This is great stuff, to be honest," Lele remarks, rifling through the boatload of jewelry before her. Yeah, this whole thing is still creepy as hell, but hey, she might as well look on the bright side. These necklaces are the most beautiful things she's ever seen. She would kill for jewelry like this.

Wait. Never mind. Wrong word.

While Lele eyes the jewels, the normally unflappable GloZell Green is beginning to lose her composure. "I don't wanna be stuck here!" she cries, tears collecting at the corners of her eyes. "I wanna go back home!"

Under normal circumstances, Lele would be complaining right along with her, but she's too enamored by the jewelry to care. "How much do you think these things are worth?" she asks, fondling a particularly pretty necklace.

A smile darts across GloZell's otherwise frightened face. "I know, right?"
Tim's ignoring the conversation completely. He's all business, riffling through the jewels, keeping a lookout for any sign of the famous emerald earrings. Then again, he's a boy, and boys aren't big on jewelry to begin with.

Oh, well. His loss.

While nobody's looking, Lele takes the opportunity to clasp the necklace around her neck. It peeks out between the pearls, completely indistinguishable from the rest of her shiny ensemble. No one will miss it. Obviously.

"It's not here!" shouts a clearly frustrated GloZell.

Lele shrugs. Whatever. If she dies, at least she'll die in style.

Justine, Joey, and Oli are in the third and final room, searching for the red scarf the lady was wearing. So far, no luck. Of course, Justine's still trying to calm down from her burst of Andrea-induced anger, so she's not exactly in the right frame of mind to focus on the task before her. And being accused of murder sure as hell isn't helping matters.

She doesn't know who's working with the evil spirit. But it's not her. They can think whatever they want, but she, Justine Ezarik, is not a freakin' psychopath. She'll swear it on every Bible in the world if she has to.

"Where could the scarf be?" Oli sighs, staring at the ceiling of the bedroom.

"I have no idea." Joey rifles through a few blankets, then turns his attention to the others. "It didn't give us any more clues, right?"

Arthur's standing in the corner, watching the guests search, and it occurs to Justine that he hasn't been doing a lot to help them out. He's just been ordering everyone around, reading off instructions, and occasionally doing something vaguely useful. Heck, why wasn't he helping them with the ungodly machine? Why was he just standing there watching Andrea die?

Whatever. It doesn't matter. She has a scarf to find.

The three of them keep up the search for what feels like forever. By now, Oli's getting visibly frustrated, kicking at boxes and glaring at everything in sight. "There's nothing here!"

To be honest, Justine's getting kind of frustrated herself. They've looked pretty much everywhere. How hard can it be to find a bright red scarf? And why does this house like messing with her mind so goddamn much?

"Wait!" Joey emerges from underneath the bed with a brown tissue box. "I found something." He opens the box, and there it is: silk, scarlet, perfect. "I found it!"

Thank God.

Oli breathes a sigh of relief. "Where was it?"

"It was in the tissue box." Justine makes a beeline for the door. "Let's go. We gotta find the others."

As Joey follows Justine out, he throws their prize around his neck. The red of the scarf clashes beautifully with the black of his suit, and Justine has to admit, he doesn't look half bad.
But she has no time to appreciate her friend's fashion sense. "Guys, we found something!" she shouts, stampeding down the stairs, trying not to trip over her own high heels. "We found the scarf! Meet us downstairs!"

Things are looking up.

Tim's still searching the cabinets, keeping a sharp eye out for any sign of green, when Lele suddenly shrieks "I found them!"

He doesn't trust her. Not after GloZell's false alarm three minutes ago. So he heads to her side, knocking random boxes out of his way, and takes a closer look at the earrings in her hand.

She's right. They're there. The emerald earrings. Mission *freakin'* accomplished.

"Omigosh!" GloZell is all smiles once more, hugging the living daylights out of Lele. "Oh, you the best!"

Lele's grin could give the Cheshire cat himself a run for his money. "We're not gonna die!"

For the first time since Andrea's death, a smirk sneaks its way across Tim's face. Yeah, he'll admit it, Team Emerald Earrings can be total badasses when they want to be. Now all they've got to do is go downstairs, wait for everyone else to find their items, and get ready to say hi to a dead chick.

Which is gonna be freaky as hell, not gonna lie. How many times is he gonna have to break his "I don't mess with ghosts" rule tonight? If he ends up having to summon a demon, he is *out* of here.

The next thing he knows, he's back in the living room, and Lele's handing the earrings to Justine.

Ugh. *Justine.*

He's still sore about Andrea. Of course he is. He's known her for years; it's kind of hard to come to terms with the fact that he's never gonna see her again. And watching her murderer prance around like nothing ever happened...it boils his blood.

What goes around comes around. He'll make sure of it.

There's a crease in the wall. It's subtle, practically invisible to the casual passerby, but Matt's time in this house has sharpened his senses. He heads straight for it, legs trembling, wondering what in the world this crease could mean.

He nudges it, and it opens. "There's a bathroom inside," he says, his voice incredulous, staring at the tiled walls and gilded white toilets. A bathroom. Of all the things that could've been behind that wall, they had to throw a bathroom at him.

Why not.

Matt investigates, and his search for the wig eventually leads him to the shower. Trying not to think about the shower scene from *Psycho,* he throws back the curtain.

There it is. The wig. Blonde, curly, *amazingly* gorgeous.

He grabs it and brings it back to Eva and Sierra, both of whom are practically jumping for joy at the
sight of it. Matt can't say he blames them; after all, they've done it. They've recovered the "symbol of her beauty." The mysterious dead woman is like a puzzle, and all of her pieces are gradually falling into place.

*Let's start the seance.*

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: Seance time! Also, Sarah the maid is still creepy, GloZell is genre-savvy, Justine's claustrophobia kicks in, and everybody fails their geometry test.
The Seance

Chapter Summary

Our heroes are now ready to speak to the dead! With a little help from Sarah the creepy maid, the seance begins...but what they learn could change everything.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Seconds after the lock of hair joins the earrings and the scarf in the golden dish, yet another drawer pops open. This is no surprise to anyone, least of all Joey. After a certain number of pop-up scares, his brain has become practically immune to their effects.

Lele, however, still seems surprised. "Another drawer opened up?"

"What's in it?" Oli asks.

Joey approaches the open drawer, braces himself, and reaches inside. He pulls out a small brown scroll, held together by milk-white binding.

"Joey, what is that?" Matt wants to know.

"It's a scroll," says Joey, hesitation lining the edges of his voice. He takes a deep breath, removes the binding, opens the scroll, and...

"Oh, God, no!"

It's a diagram. There's an outer circle sketched in black ink, along with a note stating that the circle must be seven paces across in diameter. Inside the circle is a triangle, and the directions clearly indicate where the "remnants of the deceased" are to be placed within the triangle. Finally, at the center of the triangle, a tiny triangle serves to mark the place where the "mouthpiece of the group" has to sit.

Joey gulps. He's never done a seance before—heck, he's never even done the Charlie Charlie Challenge, let alone summon anything. Why would he want to mess with ghosts? Isn't meddling with the supernatural supposed to be a bad idea?

Then again, everything about this situation is the definition of "bad idea."

"Guys." Lele points to the note on the side of the scroll. "Read this."

Sierra shakes her head. "This is so creepy."

As Joey watches in nervous anticipation, Eva reads.

*You are now ready to speak to the dead. You may construct the seance circle, enclosed with white sand.*

Before Eva can finish, Arthur dashes into the room, accompanied by a burly man with a thick black
beard and a permanent scowl. "Ladies and gentlemen, Marvin's our groundskeeper."

Marvin nods at the group. Joey, of course, knows him already; he's been tending the gardens for as long as Joey's lived here. And yet, in all that time, he hasn't said a word—not to Joey, not to Daniel, not to anyone.

"Here is some sand," Arthur adds, placing a bucket on the ground inches from Sierra's high heels.

Eva continues reading.

*Each participant sits in front of a candle. One among the group needs to act as the voice of the deceased and sit in the center of the circle.*

Joey gulps. "Okay." He glances around the group, hoping against hope that this is not another death sentence. "Who wants to...uh..."

"I will."

Sarah. Of course. The maid. The one who's unnerved Joey from the beginning. She's standing there, arms folded, a twitch of a smile on her face, looking like she wants to use her butter knife to surgically remove Joey's spine.

"Great. Sure. Thanks, Sarah."

Better her than us.

So Sarah's gonna go be the "voice of the deceased" or whatever. Go figure. GloZell's not surprised at all. She knew there was something up with that maid. She knew it from the start.

But the real question is, why the heck are they even doing this? She knows it's to get out of the house or whatever, but come on. Doesn't anybody watch movies around here? Messing with dead folks never ends well.

"Yeah, the sand," says Matt as Joey puts the finishing touches on their circle of creepiness. "All around. In a circle."

GloZell can't contain her anxiety. "You know what, we playin' with some real scary stuff right now..."

"Yeah," Sierra agrees.

Eva's still hunched over the directions. "It also says that the circle has to be seven paces across in diameter."

"Oh, God," Justine groans. "I'm not good at reading directions! This is crazy!"

"We've already messed up," sighs Sierra, shaking her head.

GloZell sits there behind her lil' candle, biting her lip so hard there's probably gonna be teeth marks there tomorrow. This is a mess. Here they are, messing with stuff they shouldn't be messing with, and Eva's the only one who seems to be paying any attention to the instructions. And they've got to follow the instructions, cause if they don't, somebody's gonna get possessed.

Hasn't anybody seen *The Poltergeist*? She can't be the only one, can she?
So now Oli's making the lil' triangle with the sand, and Eva doesn't seem too happy with his work. "No one is dumb enough to make the triangle like this," she complains, "unless they were trying to sabotage us!"

"Listen!" Matt's waving his arms around like a traffic cop at rush hour. "Everyone stop for one second!"

They stop.

Matt points to the third line in the triangle, which is currently directly in front of where Sarah's sitting. "The way you guys explained the diagram, this line needs to be behind her."

"Yes!" shouts Eva.

"So let's just move the sand back a little bit," Matt continues, crouching down and pushing the sand backwards. He's making an awful mess of it, but GloZell decides that she'd better keep her big mouth shut this time around.

"Omigod," moans Sierra. "Does someone have a broom up in here?"

Eva sighs and stares at the now-messy floor. "We're all gonna die."

_Obviously, nobody know how to do geometry_, thinks GloZell, squinting at the lopsided triangle they've created. _Everybody done failed that math test._

It takes three more minutes and a lot of wasted sand, but finally, the circle is completed. Justine takes her place between Oli and Eva, trembling at the thought of what's to come. She's already seen two of her friends die right in front of her (and she can tell that everybody still blames her for what happened to Andrea, but whatever, she'll worry about that later), not to mention all the weird stuff with the spirit board/exploding car/various dismembered body parts. And now they have to talk to the dead?

She doesn't want to. She's seen enough. She hates this place, and goddamn it, she wants out of here.

Arthur nods at Tim, who's holding a small piece of parchment in his hands. "Read the invocation, please."

"All right, here we go." Tim's voice is eerily calm, and Justine can't help but wonder if he's the one working with the evil. "Caroline Eastwick, you who lived yesterday, hear these words, hear our cry. We seek your guidance in recovering an ancient artifact. Cross now the great divide and show yourself here."

The dim lights flicker. Thunder clashes, causing Justine to squirm in her seat. "Oh..." They're coming. She knows it. She can hear ghostly footsteps clattering on the pavement outside. "Hell no!" _Joey, help, I'm scared, make it stop make it stop make it..._

And then, as the storm reaches its climax, Sarah opens her eyes.

Her eyes are pure black. The pupils are missing. She speaks in a voice that's not her own.

_"I am here."_  

Joey gasps. Eva's jaw drops. Sierra mutters "omigod" under her breath. And Justine...Justine's in a
stupefied trance, staring wide-eyed at the scene unfolding before her. She wants so badly to take to her heels and run screaming out of here, but her petrified body refuses to move.

"My name is Caroline Eastwick," says Sarah—no, this isn't Sarah, this is her, the woman in the photograph, the girl who should be dead. "I'm speaking through the mouth of your friend."

"We need to ask her something," Oli stammers, but whatever it is he's planning to ask is interrupted by Caroline's otherworldly voice.

"I was taken against my will and buried in a coffin bound with an iron chain. My life was taken in order to hide the artifact from the living. To retrieve it, you must find my coffin, exhume it from the earth, and release me."

**Coffins.** Oh, God. Why coffins? Why does it have to be coffins? Justine's a good person. She doesn't deserve this. It's like this house is *trying* to scare her to death.


She doesn't consider herself a claustrophobic person. She's perfectly fine in tight spaces, just as long as there's a way out of them. But being locked in a room where she can't get out...no handles...no nothing...she's stuck...that's unacceptable. And being buried alive, like poor Caroline apparently was...oh, God, that's even worse, how could they?

She hates coffins. She hates funerals. And now, here she is, about to go dig one up from the ground and "release" a girl who was buried alive. As if tonight couldn't get any worse.

*Joey, I love you and all, but this is not how you throw a party."

"You must also find the key to unlock the chain that seals it," Caroline continues. "The path that leads to the key starts at..."

She falls silent.

No. "At the where?" Eva's not having it. She's *so close* to finding out the location of the coffin; she's not about to let Caroline withhold a vital piece of information from them for the heck of it. "Uh-uh. At the where?"

"At a fork beneath the weeping tree."

"The weeping tree!" shouts Joey.

Lele bites her lip. "Do you know where that is?"

"Take the low road."

Matt sits next to Sierra, listening intently to Caroline's instructions. "She said take the low road," he remarks, as if they didn't hear her. Eva's tempted to chew him out, but decides against it.

"I do not know where the coffin has been buried." Caroline seems agitated, and Eva can tell that this seance isn't going to last much longer. "I remember being carried past the red stone."

"Red stone," murmur several different YouTubers, as if they've been hypnotized. Eva sits there, legs crossed, hands folded, ignoring the emotions struggling within her heart. If finding Caroline's coffin is going to get them out of here, then she'll do it. She'll do anything.
"Near the back...near the back of the house..."

They're losing her. They have to go. Now.

"Hurry!" screams Caroline, her voice an anguished plea. "Release me from this hell!"

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: The worst Easter egg hunt ever. Also, everyone's still playing detective.
Hello Darkness, My Old Friend

Chapter Summary

As per Caroline's instructions, the group sets out to find both the coffin and the key. This requires splitting up again, despite the fact that (as Sierra pointed out previously) splitting up in horror stories is generally a bad idea. But whatever.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Caroline's gone. There's only Sarah, hunched over, eyes closed, silent.

Omigod. Sierra stares in horror at the motionless maid. Omigod, is she dead?

Next to her, Matt's already on his feet, scrambling for the door. "Back of the house!" he exclaims, urgency lining his otherwise calm voice. "Go to the back of the house!"

"You okay?" asks Tim, putting a hand on Sarah's still shoulder. "You good?"

She opens her eyes, smiles, and nods.

Sierra breathes a sigh of relief. Sarah's fine, of course she is, why was she even worried? This is all part of the prank, it has to be, they didn't really talk to a dead person, it was probably a recording combined with some spooky special effects, but...it seemed so real...what if...?

It's fine. It's okay. No one's dead. No one's going to die.

The mantra races through her veins, doing its best to soothe her troubled nerves, but she still can't get Caroline out of her mind. Hurry, echoes her desperate hiss. Release me from this hell.

Where are Shane and Andrea? Alive? Dead? Trapped in that same hell?

She doesn't know. She doesn't want to know. She'd rather live in denial.

They've broken off into two groups. One group sets out to find the key to the coffin, while the other is responsible for finding the coffin itself. Joey's a member of the latter group, as are Oli, Eva, Tim, and GloZell. So now, here they are, trekking through the darkness, armed with flashlights and Caroline's clues, and Joey can't shake the feeling that something terrible is going to happen.

Not another death. Please, God...I don't think my heart can take another death.

"There's a red stone!" shouts Oli, using his flashlight to illuminate a crimson boulder. "We found a red stone!"

"Oh my goodness!" exclaims GloZell.

They race each other to the boulder, and Joey nearly trips over his own feet in the process. Once he arrives, he immediately notices the note carved into a piece of wood that's been nailed onto the stone.
Go to the tree 27 paces from here.

"Is that the tree?" GloZell wants to know, using her cane to point at a large oak not too far from them. "There's so many trees!"

She's right. The front lawn is littered with trees of all shapes and sizes, and Joey can't tell which one is the tree they're looking for. "It's probably up here," he mutters, mulling over the note in his mind. 27 paces...footsteps. They're talking about footsteps. Aren't they?

"One...two...three..."

Matt's in a group with Sierra, Justine, and Lele. And Sarah, but after the incident with the dead woman, Matt's decided it would be better for his own mental health to just pretend that she does not exist.

"I am not wearing the right shoes for this!" Sierra complains loudly, stomping her way down the muddy path. Lele's right behind her, flashlight at the ready, glowering at every suspicious shadow.

Matt's walking hand-in-hand with Justine. She's shivering in the cold, holding her mink coat close to her heaving chest. His friend. Or, potentially, his murderer.

He has to know.

"Are you the one that's working with the spirits?"

She stares at the ground, sadness swarming her once-bright eyes. "No, I'm not." Her denial is tearful, but quiet, as if she already knows that the evidence is stacked against her.

And somehow, despite every instinct screaming otherwise, Matt believes her.

"I think it's Lele."

"Guys?" Sierra's impatient voice interrupts their conversation. "What are you two doing back there? Hurry up!"

Matt snaps to attention. "We're try...I mean...we're just...chatting."

"Twenty-six...twenty-seven!"

"Look!" shouts Eva, pointing to a tree inches from her head. Tim's near the back of the group, stuck between Oli and GloZell, but even he can tell that this has got to be the right tree.

Scavenger hunts have never been his thing anyway.

"Oh, there's another clue!" Joey shrieks, scrambling his way to the base of the tree. "Guys! Come on over here!"

They do so, and there's a piece of wood with an arrow etched into it. It's accompanied by a note, because of course it is.

*Hold the string at the tip of the arrow and follow it to its end, where you will find the missing heart of the forest beneath your feet.*
Eva squints at the note, her face screaming befuddlement. "String?"

String. Yes. And there's a piece of string, not too far from the arrow. Because clearly what this crazy-ass nightmare needed was another puzzle to solve.

Joey grabs the string and gets to work unraveling it. Meanwhile, Oli shines his half-broken flashlight at the forest, muttering "Where would you bury a coffin?" under his breath.

As Tim watches his friends do their thing with the string, it occurs to him that one of these people might be the no-good backstabbing traitor. Of course, he's all but convinced that the traitor is Justine, but hey, it never hurts to double-check. "Okay." He takes a deep breath, trying not to think about Andrea. "So nobody here is the rat, right?"

"No," murmurs Eva.

"I'm not," says Joey.

Oli shakes his head. "You know, I do like hunting and everything, but I would never kill anyone."

Tim nods. Eva, Oli, Joey, GloZell...they're all cool. None of them have done anything suspicious, and besides, they're his goddamn friends. "Everyone here, I trust you guys." He bites his lip. "I don't know about that other group."

And by "that other group," he means "Justine."

"Why?" Joey asks.

Because Justine killed Andrea. Straight-up murdered her. And I'm sure as hell not gonna let that slide. "Because I still don't like the way Justine handled the challenge, and I think she's the rat."

"Okay, I've known Justine for a long time," Joey protests. "There's nothing fishy about her. I trust her."

You would. Joey's great and all, but homeboy is too damn naive for his own good.

"Hurry up!" snaps GloZell.

And so, with the "who's the rat" question still hanging in the air, the group turns back to their game of strings. Tim stands there, fiddling with his fingers, fresh out of jokes to tell, glaring at the string with furious brown eyes.

He's always been a sarcastic little smartass—quick with a quip, unafraid to say what's on his mind. But now, for the first time in his life, he keeps his darkest thoughts hidden inside the recesses of his soul, where they wait with baited breath for the chance to get revenge.

Justine's stumbling down the murky path, still struggling to make sense of what's going on, when she notices a second path peeking out from within the trees. "There's another road down here, guys!" she shouts, pointing to it. "Is this the low road?"

Matt frowns. "That's the road we came up on."

"We took the wrong road!" exclaims Sierra.

Justine sighs. She's so confused. There are too many roads. Too many paths. Any way they go could
potentially be correct. Or wrong. Who knows? Who cares? Why is she doing this? Because some creepy ghost told her to? She shouldn't have listened, she shouldn't have gone, she should've just stayed in the house...

Do they still blame her? For Andrea? That wasn't her fault, it wasn't, she was an idiot, she was too slow, she's not a murderer, she's not. Tim's out to get her, Lele keeps glaring at her, they just spoke to a dead girl, now they're going to dig up a coffin, she hates coffins, everything's going wrong, when will this nightmare be over?

Soon, whispers a voice in her head, a voice that sounds suspiciously like the voice of Caroline Eastwick. Very soon.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: Lele plays the piano, our heroes dig up a coffin, and then...another task...
Chapter Summary

The search continues! Eventually, both coffin and key are found, but does the group have the emotional strength to do what must be done?

Chapter Notes

ESCAPE THE NIGHT HAS BEEN OFFICIALLY RENEWED FOR SEASON 2!!!!!!
On the one hand, THIS IS AMAZING THIS IS THE BEST NEWS EVER I LOVE THIS SHOW SO MUCH. On the other hand, I guess this means I'd better finish up this novelization before Season 2 happens, which is gonna be hard, considering the fact that we're still only on Episode 3.
But I'll do my best!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"The string is over!"

Okay. Oli takes a deep breath, letting the cool night air attempt to calm his quivering lungs. Okay. It worked. We're getting there. Thank God. "Guys, I think it's here," he says, using his flashlight to point at the spot below them.

Eva, Joey, and Tim immediately start poking around in the dirt. GloZell stands to the side, watching the others go at it, muttering a string of gibberish to herself.

As for Oli, his nerves are beginning to get to him. Yes, the string ended, and yes, they found a spot to dig, but what if they got it wrong? After all, you can never be too careful, especially when you're dealing with supernatural puzzles. "Are we positive that this is—"

"We found it!" shouts GloZell.

So they have. "I told you it was there!" exclaims Oli, his confidence instantly restored. Of course it's there. It's fine. There's nothing to worry about. They're on the right track. They're fine. They're fine. They're fine.

There's a piece of the puzzle—half of a green heart—peeking out from the dirt. It's accompanied by a note, which Joey takes it upon himself to read.

*The heart of the forest longs for its missing half. Take the string and fold it in half. Using the druid statue as a center point, make a circle with the string. Inside the circle, you'll find the other half of the heart. Reunite the pieces and the forest will reveal the location of the coffin.*

Fortunately, it doesn't take them long to find the druid statue. It's sitting on a rock, apparently deep in thought.
"So we use the statue as the center point, right?" Tim asks.

"Right," mutters Eva.

The group uses the string to make a circle around the statue's neck. Joey grabs the other end of the string and walks off with it, finally stopping once he's out of string. "Okay." He turns to face the others. "This is the distance we can go in any direction from the center, so..." He waves his flashlight around like a frenzied firefly. "Let's look around in this area."

Oli frowns. "You think it's around the tree?"

Joey nods, and Oli once again gets to work. He's still not quite sure what's happening, but he figures wondering about it isn't going to help him any. Better to focus on the task before him; the rest can wait till later.

Besides, at least the druid statue isn't going to kill anyone.

Probably.

"There's a piano down there," says Matt, pointing at a brown baby grand three feet down the road from them.

Justine rubs her eyes. "I'm sorry, what?"

She's hallucinating. She has to be. Too many drinks, not enough sleep, and now she's seeing pianos in the middle of nowhere. Come to think of it, that would explain this entire twisted night.

Either that, or it's all an awful dream, and she's going to wake up any minute now.

Lele, being the devil-may-care person that she is, heads straight for the piano without even thinking twice. The others follow her, though Matt doesn't seem all that keen on doing so. "I don't even know if we should go near it," he remarks, his hands in his pockets.

"Hey." Justine throws up her hands. "Look, I don't do coffins, but I'll do pianos."

So they approach the piano. All of its keys are black, except for two white ones that Lele takes the opportunity to fiddle around with. "These are the only two white keys," she informs them.

"Is there a key?" Sierra asks.

Lele doesn't respond. Instead, she plays with the keys a few more times, then turns her attention to the cover of the piano.

"The keys pop out," points out Justine, "so maybe something—"

But before she can finish, Lele's pried the cover off, revealing a small wooden box. Lele grabs it from its hiding place while the other three look on in trepidation.

"What is that?" questions Sierra.

"What's inside?" Matt leans in closer. "Is there a key?"

There isn't. In fact, the box is completely empty. But before Justine has the chance to nope right out of there, she hears a soft melody begin to play. It's a sad but sweet piece of music, only a few notes
long, and for perhaps the first time tonight, Justine knows what to do.

"Shh, listen!" she snaps at the others, who are still arguing among themselves. "It played a song!"

Silence. Yes. There it is again. A music box. This is a music box. And the piano...of course.

"No, it didn't."

Yes, it did, Sierra, come on, why is nobody listening to me? I heard it! I goddamn heard it! I know what I heard!

Guys...

"Check the trees, guys!" shouts Joey, waving his flashlight every which way. He looks a bit like a malfunctioning lightbulb, but Eva's too busy to care.

They've been looking for the missing piece for the past four minutes. Eva, especially, is running around, investigating every blade of grass, every odd-looking rock, every inch of bark on every tree. She's looking for anything at this point; it's like an Easter egg hunt, except for the fact that their lives are at stake.

Finally, while she's scouting around a particularly old-looking tree, she finds the missing piece peeking out from its branches. She gasps and immediately snatches it up. "Found it!"

"She found it!" shouts Joey.

"Where?" asks Oli.

"What?" snaps a clearly confused GloZell.

"It was in the tree," Eva explains, holding up her prize for the others to see.

GloZell shrieks "Yes!" and does her happy little GloZell dance. Eva can't help but grin at her friend, and for a moment, she forgets to be the no-nonsense, emotionally guarded girl she's becoming. She lets herself smile. She lets herself be happy.

But two seconds later, the moment has passed, and Eva is all business once again. "Okay, guys, come quick," she orders her companions, handing the missing piece to Tim.

Tim now has both pieces, and he struggles to smash them together. The others watch as he twists them around, trying to create a whole out of the two halves, but it's apparently a lot harder than it looks.

"That's confusing," comments Joey.

After a while, though, Tim gets it right. "Oh, here we go," he says, and the pieces combine.

Seconds after they do, a patch of ground not far from them lights up like a celestial fireplace. Eva's heart nearly stops at the sight. The coffin. Caroline's coffin. They've found it. The search is over.

But now comes the hardest part of all.

"Marvin!" Joey shouts at the groundskeeper. "Shovels! Please!"
"Listen to me." There's a hard edge to Justine's insistent voice. "This music box is playing a song. We need to replicate..." She nods towards the piano, her eyes glazed and unfocused. "That."

On second thought, she's right. There is a song playing. Sierra's a bit miffed she didn't notice before, but whatever. No big deal. Certainly not something to get all worked up about.

Come to think of it, why is Justine acting so sketchy?

Lele, who's closest to the piano, tinkers with the keys, trying to puzzle out the melody. Matt's on the other side of the piano, and he's apparently gone back into Professor mode. "So we gotta go high to low to high."


She pounds out the song, and as the last note rings, the group hears a thud. Sierra peeks under the piano, and there's the key.

"Oh!" shouts Lele. "It fell!"

Matt frowns. "The key just fell out of the piano?"

"Guys, we found the key!" shrieks Sierra, grabbing it from Lele and waving it in the air. "Okay! Let's go!"

She takes off, running for the path, not bothering to look behind her. Almost over. It's almost over. Joey can't drag this on forever. The coffin, wherever it is, has got to be the end of the road. They'll open it up, and Shane and/or Andrea will be in there, alive. Either that or there'll be a note saying "YOU JUST GOT PRANKED!"

The end is near. She can hold it together till then.

"Oh my goodness," murmurs GloZell, watching her friends dig. Here they are, a bunch of YouTubers, digging up a coffin in the middle of the night, with a creepy ol' evil spirit chasing them around. All they need is a couple of chainsaws and they'll have a nice lil' horror movie going.

If she'd have known this craziness was gonna happen, she'd have stayed home. Watched some Netflix. Popped some popcorn. Made a few vids, maybe. Instead, she's at Joey's murder house on what might be the last night of her life.

And she's the black chick. Of course. Black folks never last long.

As the others keep digging, GloZell glares daggers at Joey Graceffa. It's his house. His responsibility. He's the reason why they're here. Why the hell would he invite them to their deaths?

And Justine, too. She killed Andrea. She said so herself. She seemed like such a sweet girl, with her iPads and her cupcakes, but nope.

GloZell shakes her head bitterly, glancing at the shadows on the ground. And to think she thought these people were her friends.

Guess I thought wrong.
After Lele, Matt, Justine, and Sierra run around the forest for a bit (and Lele nearly trips over a dead tree branch, *ugh*, she *hates* running in these stupid shoes), they find Eva, Oli, Tim, GloZell, and Joey digging like a bunch of frenzied gophers. Lele can only assume that they've found the coffin. Which means it's time to unearth Caroline Eastwick's dead body. Yay.

"Did you guys find it?" Joey wants to know.

*Omigod. Of course we did, Joey. We wouldn't be here if we didn't, now, would we?*

Instead of responding, Lele grabs a shovel and helps out with the digging. It's her first time digging up a coffin, but she figures she might as well give it a go. New experiences and all that. Also, standing around doing nothing makes her feel stupid. Which she is, of course, but that's besides the point.

It's hard, though. Her back aches, and so do her shoulders, and how many shovelfuls of dirt does it take to dig out a coffin anyway? Because it sure as hell shouldn't take this long.

At least GloZell is here to provide some entertainment. "We gotta dig, dig deeper..." she sings, using her flashlight as a microphone.

On the other hand, there's Justine. The Gambler backs away from the coffin space, her trembling hands in the air. "I just don't like this at all."

"Suck it up, iJustine!" snaps GloZell. "It's gonna be all right!"

"We've seen so much death already," Sierra points out. "*What* is your problem all of a sudden?"

"Justine knows what's in there!" There's a cold, accusing look in Timothy DeLaGhetto's normally bright eyes.

"Yeah," GloZell agrees. "Maybe iJustine knows what's going on."

Tim nods. "I think so."

Lele bites her lip. To be honest, Tim's right. Justine doesn't seem very trustworthy, especially after the whole thing with the ungodly machine. Either she's behind this, or Matt is.

One of them has got to go.

"The lock's right here!" shouts Matt. He's never been more relieved to see a lock and chain in his life; digging up that coffin was a lot harder than he expected it to be. "Who's got the key?"

Sierra holds up the key. "I have the key."

"Open up!" orders GloZell. "Open up!"

Sierra smiles, hops into the hole, and gets to work on the lock. Matt's impressed; he thought the Heiress was all snobbish elegance, but apparently she isn't afraid to get her hands dirty.

He can respect that.

"Girl, you're standing on a *coffin* right now!" squeals Justine.
"There you go," says Tim with a smile. "You got this."

"I got it," Sierra confirms, and the lock clicks open.

Everyone else springs to work, grabbing the ropes positioned around the coffin. With one good yank, the coffin springs free. Justine makes a noise that's halfway between a gasp and a scream, but nobody pays her any mind. Instead, they throw the coffin on the ground.

"Oh my goodness," gasps GloZell.

So the time has come to open the coffin. Matt's not looking forward to seeing a dead body, especially one that's apparently been dead for years. It's probably a mess of bones and maggots by now. Why they even need to bring it out, he has no idea.

But they do. So they will.

"Are you guys ready?" Eva asks.

GloZell pales. "What could it be?"

They open the coffin, and...

"It's empty!" shrieks GloZell.

Eva frowns. "Where did the body go?"

There's nothing inside. No body. No bones. Not even a maggot. The coffin looks like it's never even been used. It's the most anticlimactic thing Matt's ever seen.

 Seriously?

But there is a note. So Matt picks it up, unfolds it, and begins to read.

_I can feel your presence near. My spirit will soon be free. There is only one more task ahead of you._

_The hiding ritual used to conceal the artifact required an unwilling soul to be buried alive...and it was mine. Now, another unwilling soul must be buried to reverse the spell. Only then will the artifact rise from its earthen tomb. I know it is a horrible thing to require, but if I had told you in the beginning, you never would have come this far._

_The group must vote, but only one name will be drawn this time. That person must be taken away against their will and buried alive in this coffin._

_Please do not falter now._

"Oh, God," moans Justine.

"Are you kidding me?" Joey snaps.

Matt turns to the rest of the group, still struggling to process the horrible truth. "We've got to kill somebody."

Chapter End Notes
Next chapter: Arguably the saddest death in the entire story, so I hope to God I do it justice. Prepare the tissues.
Eva's in shock. After everything that's happened so far, she thought she could handle anything this crazy house threw at her. But that was before the demons told them—no, ordered them—to murder one of their friends.

_Buried alive..._

She should have known. Caroline's story was a warning, an urgent message from beyond the grave. She was taken against her will, buried in this very coffin, and died of suffocation after hours of crippling fear. And now, someone in this group is about to suffer a similar fate.

Eva's never been so scared in her life.

Arthur, however, seems completely unaffected. "Each of you come up here and write the name of the person that you think should go in the coffin," he says in a calm voice, holding out his hat. "The more votes for a single person go in there, the better chance of me drawing the name, but it's still up to draw."

_Stay calm, Eva orders herself, trying her hardest to keep a straight face. Don't let them see you sweat. You're gonna make it. You're gonna be okay._

But is she? No one is safe. Her name could go in there. She could be buried alive. This...this could be it.

To be fair, the other members of the group seem just as scared as she is. Justine's a whimpering mess. Matt's got his head in his hands. Tim's muttering something to himself. And Joey...Joey turns to face the group, a twinge of fear hiding in the corners of his frown. "I am so sorry that you guys got invited and messed up in this," he says, breathing heavily, "but...please, do not put me in this coffin."

Eva sighs. This is too hard. No one deserves such a terrible fate. Why can't they do something else? Anything else? Another challenge? Another puzzle? Heck, she preferred the ungodly machine to this sadistic scenario.

But no. They have no other choice. Someone has to go.

The question is...who?

_Coffins?_

_Buried alive?_
Justine can hear her frightened heart booming in her ears. She's hyperventilating, downing gulps of air as if they're bowls of lifesaving medicine. Her legs are useless rubber beneath her. Her mind's a tangled mess of fear, disbelief, and despair.

Why? Why this? Why does it have to be this? She doesn't like coffins, she doesn't want to watch a friend get buried alive, she sure as hell doesn't want to get buried alive herself...is this house trying to break her?

Of course it is. Who is she kidding? This party's been a nightmare ever since Shane got poisoned. It's the evil's fault. It's messing with them. It's playing on their deepest fears. Shane's dead, Andrea's dead, and now someone else is gonna die in the worst goddamn way possible. Underground. Buried. Trapped. Suffocating.

"I wanna go home I wanna go home I wanna go home I wanna go home..."

"Who do we think's been working with the spirit?" pipes up Matt, still playing detective after all this time. "Because someone's been orchestrating this entire thing..."

And then, much to Justine's horror, the group turns on her.

"I think iJustine!"

"Justine!"

"I think we should put Justine in the coffin!"

"Justine! I think it was Justine!"

"I will not..." Justine forces the words out of her suddenly dry throat. "I won't go!"

"Look at how scared she is!" shouts Joey. "Do you think—"

But GloZell shouts him down. "I think it's time for her to go!"

No. She can't. She won't. Not like this. Anything but this.

She's crying now. The tears fall like a rainstorm, moistening her pale face, washing away her glamorous 1920s makeup. The Gambler's gone. There's only Justine, broken, sobbing, pleading for life.

"Please, do not, whatever you do, do not put me in that box!"

"Let's disperse a little bit," Tim suggests.

As Oli joins Tim, Eva, GloZell, Sierra, and Lele in a secluded spot not far from the coffin, he can't take his eyes off of Justine. The blonde's a hysterical wreck, blubbering a string of desperate exclamations, losing her mind right in front of their eyes.

But why? Why is she acting so strange? Nobody else is. They're all scared, but they're not crying and saying "oh, I don't want it to be me."

"She's acting so sketchy, you guys," says Sierra, shaking her head.
GloZell nods. "I think it's time for her to go."

This bothers Oli. Here they are, about to kill someone, and GloZell's acting like they're voting a contestant off of a game show. "We are talking about putting someone in a coffin, though!" he reminds them, pointing at the coffin as he does so.

"Someone has to go," GloZell snaps. "Do you want to go?"

"No!" The thought makes Oli shiver. "I do not want to go!"

"No," GloZell agrees. "It needs to be her."

Tim steps forward, his hands in his pockets, a vindictive gleam in his eyes. "It's either her or all of us."

"There you go," says GloZell.

Oli doesn't want to vote for Justine. He doesn't want to vote for anyone. Can't he just scribble on his paper again? Does he really have to do this?

Why can't everyone live?

"Please don't vote for me," Justine whimpers. "I can't go in that box!"

Tears cloud her sky-blue eyes, and another flood of memories bombard Joey's mind—Justine's laugh, Justine's smile, Justine baking cupcakes with him, Justine shouting at video games while Joey chuckles beside her...

She's his best friend. He trusts her. She's good. And it's killing him to see her this way.

"I'm not gonna vote for you."

Screw the others and their stupid theories. Justine Ezarik is not working with the evil, and he is not going to stand by and let them bury her alive. Not while he still has a chance to save her.

"It's not gonna happen! You're not going in there!"

He lost Shane. He lost Andrea. He's not losing Justine too.

"Who else deserves to die?" asks Matt.

Joey's voice is a nervous whisper. "I say Tim."

Tim. Yes. "I say Tim as well." Tim, of course Justine's voting for Tim, he wants her dead, he's trying to kill her, what goes around comes around. "He has been out to get me this whole time." Ever since...ever since Andrea died.

I'm sorry, Andrea. I'm so sorry. I tried to save you. Honest I did.

"This is the worst party ever."

I don't wanna go in that box.
"Are we unanimous?" asks GloZell.

"Yes," whispers Eva, staring at the ground. "I better trust you guys."

So it's decided. They're going to vote for Justine. And yeah, GloZell feels bad about it, but they've gotta kill someone. Why not go with the girl who let Andrea die?

"I love her," she mutters, trying to forget the good times they had together, "but it's time for her to go."

"Let's put it to a vote!" shouts Arthur, waving his hat around like this is all fun and games. "GloZell, please go first."

GloZell sighs, approaches the hat, grabs a slip of paper and a pencil, and writes Justine's name down.

Matt goes third, after GloZell and Lele. He can tell that both girls voted for Justine; their guilty glances in her direction prove it. And yes, a part of him is tempted to follow their lead, but...

He can't.

Is Justine working with the evil? Half an hour ago, he would've answered that question with a resounding yes. But after further consideration, he's not so sure anymore. Yes, she killed Andrea, but that could've been an accident. He wasn't there. He doesn't know. And he doesn't want to condemn his friend (and his girlfriend's sister) to death when her guilt has yet to be proven beyond a reasonable doubt.

Lele is a far more likely suspect.

So he votes for her.

Joey doesn't think he can go through with this.

He reluctantly scribbles Tim's name down on the piece of paper provided, but doing so makes him feel sick to his stomach. He doesn't want Tim to die this way, or Justine or Lele or GloZell or anyone.

It was easier last time around. Then, they were just voting people into a challenge. No one's demise (or survival) was guaranteed. Andrea had just as much of a chance as Lele had. The cards just happened to fall in Lele's direction.

But this time, things are different. This time, they're going to choose one of their friends to go into this coffin and die.

Justine is the last to vote. She moves robotically, blocking out the sights and sounds around her, her scattered mind a trillion miles away. T. I. M. Three letters. A flourish. And it's done.
She walks back to her spot in the circle. As she passes by the coffin, goosebumps prickle warnings on her skin.

Arthur begins to shake the hat. "And now," he announces, "we're going to decide who's going in the coffin to be buried alive."

The phrase "buried alive" is enough to summon more tears to Justine's already-soaked face. She hunches over, her hair hanging loose, her shaking hands glued to her knees, feeling like she's about to throw up all over her white high heels. Joey tosses a reassuring smile in her direction, but she's too goddamn terrified to care.

They hate her. She knows that. She's seen the venom in Tim's frown, the anger on GloZell's cheeks, the hint of suspicion in the pupils of Matt's eyes. Joey's the only one who still loves her. The rest want her dead.

Fine. Kill me. Poison me, stab me, shoot me full of bullets, I don't care. But please, please, don't bury me alive.

"Oh my goodness," murmurs GloZell. "This is terrible. Oh my goodness."

Cold. God, it's so cold. It's summertime, but it feels like winter. The moon's an indistinguishable slip of white in the sky. Are those coyotes howling in the distance? She doesn't know. How's she supposed to know? She's stupid. Stupid. Stupid.

Arthur grabs a slip of paper.

"Who's the Fixer now?!!"

He unfolds it. He clears his throat.

"Justine."

Everything goes mute. The world dissolves into shadow. Panic and betrayal attack Justine's brain.

"No, you guys, how could you guys do this to me?!?"

No. It's Joey's turn to panic. Not Justine. Oh, God, not Justine. He promised her they wouldn't choose her. He promised.

Moments after Justine's name is called, she's off, shoving her way past the others, sprinting like a madwoman into the forest, screaming all the way. Everyone else starts talking at once, shouting "No!" and "We need her!" and "Omigod, you guys!"

Joey runs after her, determined to protect her, but Marvin gets there first.

The groundskeeper grabs her around the waist. She struggles, but he's a lot stronger than she is, so it's not much of a contest. Lele and Tim each take a leg, and together, they carry her towards her final resting place.

"Please—guys—" Justine's hyperventilating. "You don't understand—no, you—you can't do this to me—"

And that's when Joey springs into action, jumping in front of Marvin and the others, blocking their path to the coffin. "Guys! Stop! No! We can't do this!" Don't, she's good, she's my friend, please,
"don't kill her, we'll find another way, there's gotta be another way!

"We have to!" shouts the group in unison.

"No!"

But GloZell pulls him away, pinning his arms behind his back like he's a common criminal. Joey tries to wriggle free, but her grip is too strong, and he has no choice but to watch as his friends bury Justine Ezarik alive.

"Joey, why?" sobs Justine as she's forced into the coffin. "Joey, don't let them do this...

Joey keeps struggling, desperate to save her, desperate to defy the demons, desperate to escape this bloodstained hell. "This is sick!"

The lid slams.

Tim's the Mobster. His character gets rid of bodies all the time.

But usually, they're dead.

This time, the victim's alive, and as Tim helps move the coffin back into the hole from whence it came, he can still hear Justine's muffled sobs. For a few seconds, he feels kind of guilty about killing her.

But then he thinks of Andrea, brown eyes wide with fear, dying in the bowels of the ungodly machine, and any guilt about her murderer's fate is banished from his mind.

_Guess what. It's an eye for an i...Justine._

They bury her right away.

Lele grabs a shovel and gets to work, throwing scoops of dirt on top of the coffin. The others do the same, except for Marvin, who stands on the coffin to prevent Justine from escaping.

Oli, being Oli, has decided to apologize to the soon-to-be corpse. "I'm sorry, Justine!" he shouts. "We've got to do this!"

But do they? Do they really? Lele came here to have fun. She did _not_ come here to murder anyone.

_She's still screaming._

"Don't think about it!"

"Don't pay attention to the screams!"

GloZell sticks her fingers in her ears. "Lalalalalalala...."

Lele closes her eyes, sings twenty Taylor Swift songs in her head, and tries her hardest to block out the awful sound. But it's no use. Justine's cries worm their way through her ears, down her arteries, and into her heart.
"Joey..."

He can still hear her. Her voice is muffled, and her screams are beginning to grow hoarse, but she's still alive. She's alive, and she's calling for him, and he can't save her, and his heart is a thousand shattered pieces on top of her coffin.

Justine...

"Joey," snaps Tim, "you're not gonna help us out?"

"No!" Of course he's not. He doesn't want any part of this. He might have failed to save Justine, but he refuses to become her murderer. "I'm not gonna help!"

"Do you want us all to die, Joey?"

"I mean, really!" clucks GloZell.

Joey points at the half-buried coffin. "This is sickening!"

But Tim won't let up. "Joey has to at least shovel one pile of dirt."

"No!"

Who are these people? Tim, GloZell, Lele...these aren't the good-hearted YouTubers he knows and loves. These are monsters. Cold-blooded killers. Demons in human form. He tried so hard to keep them all alive, and this is how they repay him. By killing the girl he cares about the most.

He kicks the ground, sending particles of dirt into the cold night air. "There. Happy?"

"Wait!" Eva holds up a hand. "Guys, do you hear that?"

Silence.

"I think she stopped."

Joey sinks to his knees, his head downcast, his eyes stinging with tears. So it's official, then. She's gone. He's never going to see her again. All he has is a war-torn heart and a blackened soul.

It's unexplainable.

Matt stares at the shovel in his hand, choking on the words he can't bring himself to say. Fifteen minutes ago, Justine Ezarik was standing next to them, alive, and now...they've buried her.

He buried her.

A tiny part of him isn't sure he wants to live anymore. He can't bear the thought of looking Jenna Ezarik in the eye and telling her he let her sister die. But his survival instincts are stronger than his spirit, so he closes his eyes and begins to breathe.

Relax. Forget. Survive.

As the last shovelful of dirt is thrown on top of the now-completely-submerged coffin, thunder crashes, and a cloud of dust erupts from a spot about seven feet away from them.

"Wait!" Oli holds up a shaking hand. "What's that noise?"

Matt heads towards the cloud of dust. "It sounded like it came from over there." Focus. Find the artifact. Move on.

"Dig!" orders GloZell.

So they do. And they uncover a black box, which shimmers like a ghost in the moonlight. It has the marking of the Society etched onto its triangular lid.

"Joey," says Matt, "can you open it?"

Joey sighs, kneels down, and opens the box. Inside is the second artifact, which appears identical to the first. It lights up in a demonic red haze, pulsing with a cold, terrifying magic.

"See?" Tim puts a hand on Joey's shoulder. "It was all worth it, Joey."

Joey does not respond. In fact, he doesn't even appear to notice Tim's remark. He stares at the artifact, a catatonic expression on his face, and Matt's beginning to question the Savant's sanity.

"What is that?" asks Eva, pointing to a small object nestled in the corner of the box.

"That" is a cube-shaped box. Joey passes it to Lele, who passes it to Eva, who attempts to open it. No luck.

A frown scampers across GloZell's befuddled face. "It doesn't open?"

"Alright, I'm done," murmurs Joey, yanking himself to his feet, all traces of emotion gone from his voice. "Let's go."

As the group heads back to the house, Sierra can't help but glance at Justine's grave. The dirt is brown, rocky, and uneven; it looks like someone attempted to hack at the ground with a chainsaw. There is no headstone. No epitaph. Not even a flower. No casual passerby would realize that a girl is buried here.

Tears sting Sierra's soul. It's true, then. It's real. She can't go around pretending it's all a prank anymore. Not after watching a sobbing YouTuber suffer one of the cruelest fates imaginable.

Shane's dead. Andrea's dead. Justine...

Oh, God.

Are they gone?

The air's too thick. It's a thousand blankets on top of her struggling chest. She can't even move without bumping into the sides of her wooden prison.
How much time has passed? An hour? Two?

She doesn't know.

How could they?

Joey...

She's tired. So tired. Maybe if she just goes to sleep, she'll wake up in her own bed, in her own house, in good old 2016. That would be nice. No coffins. No tears. No pointing fingers. No ghosts.

Her eyelids flutter.

...hey, what's up, guys...it's me...iJustine...today we're going to be unboxing...me, I guess...cause I'm in a box...don't forget to like and subscribe...


Can't think. Too light-headed. Time is running out.

...and I will see you guys...in the next video...good night...it'll be better tomorrow...peace...

Chapter End Notes

RIP Justine. You deserved so much better. Excuse me while I cry for eight hundred years.
Next chapter: Joey mourns, Oli Hulks out, and GloZell's made up her mind.
Witness for the Prosecution

Chapter Summary

Joey still hasn't recovered from Justine's death, and to make matters worse, GloZell's convinced that he's the one working with the evil. Ah, well. There's still this box they have to open.

Chapter Notes

Before we begin, I'd like to take a moment to remember our dear, departed friend, who we will all miss dearly. And no, I am not talking about Justine, Andrea, or Shane. I am talking about Vine.
RIP Vine. Thank God Lele's still got YouTube. Assuming, of course, that she survives this story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As Joey places the second artifact on the mantlepiece, he murmurs a quiet farewell to iJustine. He's never been ultra-religious, but the thought of her teaching the angels how to use an iPhone comforts him.

Somewhat.

It hurts. God, it hurts. It feels like a thousand knives stabbing every square inch of his skin, digging their way through his muscles, burrowing into his bones. Her screams still echo in his mind, like an unholy choir of fear.

"Joey, why?"

"Joey." He turns around, and there's Oli, a mask of regret on his face. "Look, I'm sorry, man, but...one of us had to go."

Joey nods. In a way, Oli's right; the house demanded blood. But why Justine? Justine, who haunts him even now, dancing her way through the scattered pieces of what was once his heart...

It doesn't matter. He's done caring. He doesn't even have the energy to hate Justine's killers anymore. He's tired, and he's broken, and if he survives tonight, he's going to do it on his own terms. Everyone else can die, or live, or do whatever the hell they feel like doing.

This house can't hurt him anymore.

The group huddles around a table, some of them fighting back tears, all of them suppressing memories of a beautiful blonde girl who moved and breathed and blinked and lived a mere fifteen minutes ago.
It's Matt who finally mentions the elephant in the room. "Guys...I mean...we just killed Justine."

GloZell glowers at the table, using her palms to tap out a rhythm on the smooth wood. She's gotta admit, she can't believe what they've done—what she's done—but there's no point crying over spilled milk. It's done. It's over. Justine's gone, and GloZell's still here, and she can't waste time boohooing when there's work to do.

Besides, she's finally figured out who's working with the evil. She had her suspicions before, but the whole business with Justine has blown away the last remaining speck of doubt from her mind.

"We buried Justine," she snaps, "but you were acting like you were just so sad, and I just don't believe that you were really so sad. I didn't buy the act at all, Joey."

"You didn't buy my act?" asks Joey incredulously.

"No, not at all." GloZell launches into a Joey Graceffa impression, waving her hands around and speaking through fake tears. "Oh, you know, this my friend..."

Joey looks like somebody went and shot his dog. "She was my friend!"

"I don't believe that," GloZell snorts. "I don't believe it at all."

He was there, blocking their way, spouting some bull about how "we can't do this." Probably would've stopped them if they hadn't outnumbered him eight to one. And then he cried and carried on and threw a fit instead of helping. Yeah, Justine and him were close before this all happened, but come on. If he really cared about the girl so damn much, why on earth did he invite her here? Why did he invite anyone here, considering there's an evil spirit running 'round? He's lived here for three weeks and counting. It's his house. He had to know.

"What is wrong with you?" Joey shouts.

"What is wrong with you?" GloZell replies.

Oli, bless his heart, is trying his best to keep the peace. "We can argue about this as much as possible and accuse everyone, but—"

"No!" GloZell jabs a finger at her former friend. "I'm just accusing him! Joey!"

Joey, of course, acts all shocked again. "Why are you accusing me?"

But GloZell's had it. "No words from you, Joey," she growls, her voice venomous. "I don't want to hear anything from you."

"She's being so—"

"Dat-dat-dat-dat-dat!"

It all makes sense. His house. His rules. His demons, out to kill them all.

Joey's the traitor. She'd bet her life on it.

"Can we just figure out the box?" sighs Matt. He doesn't mind a good discussion now and then, but he'd rather bash his brains out with a baseball bat than listen to GloZell and Joey bicker. Especially when they've only got till sunrise to get out of here.
"Okay." Joey stares at the floor, his voice a lifeless murmur. "Let's figure out the box."

The box. Yes. The square-shaped box, found along with the artifact. They've buried Justine alive in her grave, and this box is all they have to show for it. "We have killed so many people already," Matt laments, squinting at the box, half expecting Justine's ghost to pop out and kill them all.

"Technically we've only killed two," Joey points out.

"Well..." The image of Shane Dawson coughing up blood envelops Matt's mind. "There's three dead."

Forget it. Doesn't matter. Back to the box.

Matt picks up the box. He shakes it, and it makes a faint rattling sound. "My only question is, what's going on in here?"

"I have no idea," Joey confesses.

Seconds after Matt puts the box back on the table, Sierra snatches it up. "It's just a piece of wood!" she complains, trying and failing to find a way to open it. "Literally nothing in it!"

Matt can tell she's beginning to lose patience with the situation. Meanwhile, GloZell's still glowering at Joey, Eva's got her hands clasped together, and there are still a few stray tears glistening on Joey's cheeks.

What a merry band of idiots we are, huh?

Tonight has been, without question, the worst night of Oli's life.

He's been served a human head. He's watched Shane choke on his own blood. He's seen their only escape route get blown to smithereens. He's played with Ouija boards and spoken to ghosts and dug up coffins and sent both Andrea and Justine to their deaths. And he's done it all knowing that one wrong move could cost him everything.

He's gone through so much tonight. And now...

He just wants to smash something.

Yes, he knows it's not wise to indulge his impulses, especially when said impulses are violent ones. But he can't help it. He's got a thousand gallons of anger, guilt, and fear bottled up inside, and he feels like he's going to drop dead if he doesn't let it out.

So he snatches the box from Sierra and smashes it on the table.

GloZell screams. Lele gasps. Sierra says "omigod." But Oli keeps smashing, channeling every ounce of omigods and what-the-hells and I-don't-wanna-die-here-damnits, pounding Shane, Andrea, and Justine out of his scrambled mind. A ferocious, otherworldly roar rings in his ears, and everything around him's been tainted with scarlet-colored blood.

Finally, the rage subsides. The screams disappear. The world returns to its proper colors.

And all that's left of the box are a few wooden pieces and a small slip of paper.

An emotionally exhausted Oli slumps against the table, his eyes clenched shut, his shoulders shaking.
He's done. He's had enough. He doesn't want anyone else to die. He doesn't want to live in this madhouse anymore.

He wants to give up.

But he can't. That's the thing. He's got to keep at it. If he gives up now, he's...he's going to die.

Oli takes a deep breath and attempts to pull himself together. He can do this. Two more artifacts, and then—home. His mum and dad. James. His channel. His friends. 2016.

He can last till then.

Much to Tim's relief, Oli's temper tantrum ends before he has the chance to Hulk out on anything (or anybody) else. Thank God. The Brit's stronger than any of them; if he loses it, they're all screwed.

Also, the sad demise of the square-shaped box (RIP Boxy, always in our hearts) has provided the group with another clue: a piece of paper with the word "idle" written on it.

"Idle..." mutters Joey.

"Idol?" GloZell frowns. "Like a singing competition?" She breaks into song for the fourth time tonight. "iJustine is goooooone..."

iJustine. Tim recoils at the sound of her name. No. He's done with her. She's dead, the murderous bitch, she's dead, and he's done letting her crimes eat away at his soul. He's gonna move on, and he's gonna forget her, dammit.

He won't forget about Andrea, though. He could never forget about Andrea.

"No!" Joey sounds like he's resisting the urge to kill GloZell on the spot. "That's I-D-O-L! This is I-D-L-E!"

"Oh," says GloZell.

Eva furrows her brows at the paper in Sierra's hand, and Tim can see the hamster wheels turning in her brain. "Idle is like when something is running on and on, right? So maybe we need to turn something off."

"Or maybe we need to turn it back on so it's up and running," Matt suggests. "It might be idle right now."

"Or maybe they're just letters to a code!" scoffs Lele.

"Let's just kill somebody."

The words are out of Tim's mouth before he has a chance to register what he's saying. Fortunately, the sight of seven pairs of eyes staring at him in shock is enough to bring him back to his senses. Dammit, um, haha, no, that's not what I meant, I was joking, I want out of here, I'm pissed, we're all pissed, it's been a rough day, don't kill me.

Matt wanders over to the bookshelf. "I still think this peacock flower is gonna come in handy," he remarks, picking up what is clearly a peacock feather (dammit, Matt, off by one F word) and showing it to the group.
To which Lele responds, "Shut up, Matt."

Tim snorts.

"Wait!" Oli's standing in front of one of those old 1920s mantlepiece clocks. "Does this mean anything?"

*I dunno*, mutters the smartass part of Tim's screwed-up mind. *Does it?*

Eva squints at the clock. The hands are frozen in place, trapped at three minutes after five. Engraved onto the base is a golden message, which Eva proceeds to read aloud.

*Letters become numbers and numbers become letters.*

"That's weird," Eva remarks, not sure what else to say about it.

"The time!" Joey points at the hands. "The time is stopped because it's idle! The time is idle!"

*Of course.* Eva mentally kicks herself. She should have realized sooner. Idle...stopped clock...it all makes sense. Now if they could just figure out the whole "letters become numbers" bit...

"Joey, you are a genius!" exclaims Matt.

"Or he could be the demon," GloZell points out.

Sierra's sitting alone at the table, a strange little smile on her otherwise frightened face. "Or he knew."

"Wait." Joey begins to fiddle around with the clock. "There are so many knobs. What are those?"

"Can you put each hand on a letter?" GloZell wants to know.

Upon closer inspection, the clock turns out to have *four* hands; two of them are hiding under their compatriots. And, of course, there's four letters in the word "idle."

*Letters become numbers...numbers become letters...*

It clicks.

"Idle." The word practically cannonballs its way out of Eva's mouth. "There's four letters. Four numbers. Each letter corresponds to a number." She's talking so fast, she can feel her lungs working overtime just to keep up. "The clock. We have to use the—"

She stops to catch her breath, and Matt picks up where she left off. "Let's count it in the alphabet. I is..." He counts out the alphabet on his fingers. "A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I...I is nine."

"Yeah!" exclaims a triumphant Tim. "And we have four hands!"

Matt turns his attention to the clock. "So set it to that time."

Thanks to Matt and Eva's joint revelation, it doesn't take long for the group to work out the rest of the code. D is 4, L is 12, and E is 5, so they set each hand to its respective number.

And then, with a loud crash, at least six books fall off a nearby bookshelf.
Despite Eva's efforts to bite back her fear, a scream escapes her mouth, and she immediately makes a grab for Sierra's white shoulders. She's not the only one: GloZell nearly falls out of her chair, Lele clamps a hand to her mouth, and Joey squeals like a chicken on the chopping block.

Tim, however, just rolls his eyes. "What did you do?" he snaps, turning away from the clock in indignation.

"Oh, lord," moans GloZell. "I think I peed on myself."

Upon closer examination, the space where the books once stood appears to be home to a keyhole. And on top of that, said keyhole has the Society Against Evil symbol printed above it.

Eva takes a deep breath, closes her eyes, and smiles. She's not scared anymore. No need to be scared when everything's going as planned. All they've got to do is find the key, and they'll be one step closer to recovering the third artifact.

She's almost there.

She's almost home.

Almost.

Sierra stares at the keyhole, her mind still struggling to catch up with her eyes. She's spent the last fifteen minutes trying her damnedest to accept the fact that this nightmare is real, and she's almost succeeded. But despite everything, there's still a tiny part of her that wants to lock herself in her fantasyland and never come out again.

She can't let go of her "it's just a prank" theory. Not completely. She know she should wake up and face the facts, but...pretending it's fake is the only way she can maintain her sanity.

So she stands there, watching with frightened eyes as Matt rummages through the fallen books and picks up yet another photograph. He hands it to Joey, and everyone crowds around him, peeking over each other's shoulders to get a closer look.

It's a foyer. A foyer identical to the one in this godforsaken house.

"We should go out there and look," says Matt.

Joey murmurs agreement, and the group heads for the door. Sierra's preparing to follow them when she feels a hand grab her sleeve.

"Hey, wait. Sierra."

It's Tim. He tugs her to the window, and she's too dumbstruck to resist. *Tim, what are you doing?* murmur the danger signals in her brain. *You don't talk to me. Why are you talking to me, Tim?*

"Look." Tim points out the window. "Look right there."

Sierra looks, and there's a car. A 1920s automobile, almost identical to the one that exploded earlier. A car she's pretty sure was not there before.

Tim turns to her, a sly grin on his face. "Maybe we should check it out."

"I don't think we should separate." She tries to keep her voice calm, but every part of her body longs
for an escape route. "It's never a good idea to separate. I'm just saying."

But Tim insists. "Let's let them look for the key," he purrs, "and we can just go check it out real quick."

Sierra wants to say no. She wants to rejoin the group, find the key, and continue searching for a way out of here. But curiosity proves too strong, and against her better judgement, she finds herself following Tim out the door.

She doesn't trust him. He's too sketchy, too suspicious, too much of a smooth criminal in that plaid jacket of his. Sure, he's been nothing but a gentleman to her this whole time, but how many times has she heard stories of charming men who turned out to be psychopaths? "Can't believe he killed thirteen people, he was such a nice guy..."

Why did he choose her? They're not friends. She doesn't even know the guy. And now, here he is, luring her outside, away from the safety of the rest of the group. And she, like an idiot, is going along with it.

What are you doing, Tim? What's going on? Are you working with the evil?

Are you going to kill me?

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: While everyone else has fun with mannequins, Tim and Sierra attempt to escape. But the house isn't going to let them go that easily.
Chapter Summary

Tim and Sierra examine a 1920s automobile. Meanwhile, the other six YouTubers enter a secret room and are confronted with a murderous masterpiece.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The group's in the foyer, comparing the photograph with the actual, physical room. So far, Oli sees no difference.

"Can I see the picture real quick?" asks Matt, taking it from Joey's hands before the latter has a chance to respond.

Not that Joey notices; he's too busy examining the staircase. "Maybe we can feel for, like, trapdoors or something...

"It's so black," Lele mutters.

It is black, though the black seems to have been blended with a shade of chestnut brown to create an almost chilling color. There's a painting on the wall, and the entire bloody staircase looks like a spiral road to nowhere. Oli stands next to Matt, trying to examine the room, but everything here seems to be in order. Nothing strikes him as particularly suspicious.

Matt has a similar attitude. "I've been looking long and hard—"

But his complaint is cut off (much to Oli's relief) by a shout of "Wait!" from Joey. Their host pokes at a piece of wood lodged in the bannister, and a few seconds later, it falls onto the ground.

"Omigod!" shouts Eva.

Omigod is right.

The key's inside. Oli's relieved for about two seconds—but then he realizes what comes next.

Oh, no...

The group gathers around the door. Joey, who has the key, prepares to use it.

"I'm scared," murmurs Eva. She's not lying; Oli can feel the vibrations of her trembling body, and he's not even touching her. "I don't want to do this."

Oli couldn't have said it better himself. This door clearly leads to a secret room—a room no one had any clue existed. Who knows what the hell's in there? It could be ghosts, it could be monsters, it could be instant death...

Joey opens the door.

"Oh, no!"
"What the hell?"
"I don't like this..."
"Aaaah!"

It's a secret room, all right. A secret dining room, dimly lit, with both food and place settings on the table. And sitting at the aforementioned table are the creepiest mannequins Oli has ever seen in his life.

But before Oli has the chance to examine his surroundings, Matt asks an incredibly worrying question. "What happened to Tim?"

Tim. Oli's eyes dart around the room, hoping to catch a glimpse of his friend, but it's no use. The Mobster is nowhere to be seen.

Come to think of it, neither is the Heiress.

"Tim..." GloZell bites her lip. "Tim is with that other chick. Sierra."

Oli feels like pounding his head against the mashed potatoes. Bloody hell. First it was Shane and Eva wandering off—and after they returned, Shane died. Now, Sierra and Tim have gone and done the exact same thing.

What are they doing?
Are they with the evil?
Or worse...are they dead?

Tim doesn't know if he's tripping or not. Maybe he is. Who knows. Hell, this entire experience has been an acid trip as far as he's concerned. But if there really is a car out there...

Now's my chance.

He's gonna go outside, get in that car, start it up, and hightail it out of here. He doesn't even care where the hell it takes him; he could end up in a volcano for all he cares. Anything's better than Joey's creepy death house.

Of course, he's still a little paranoid, so he takes Sierra with him. He trusts Sierra. Plus, she's kind of cute.

They approach the car, and Tim can tell that she's freaked out, so he tries his best to talk her out of her terror. "I just feel like...maybe..."

"Don't get too close!" Sierra squeals. "It might explode!"

It might. But Tim's got no time to dwell on the it-mights of their situation. "What if this is, like, the key to getting us home right now?"

So he approaches the car, and his dark-haired companion reluctantly follows him. But when they try the door...

"Oh, shit."
"It's locked." Sierra throws up her hands. "Are you kidding me?"

"Oh." Fortunately, the window on the driver's side is busted. Tim reaches through it, trying not to cut his hand on the glass, and grabs the lock. "Okay. Here we go."

"Open it! Open it!"

He does. The car door swings open, and Tim mentally thanks whatever God may or may not be in existence.

"What the heck!" Sierra is nowhere near as enthusiastic. "Do we get in? Like..." She glances back at the house. "We can't leave them!"

"Do you really like them?"

"I like some of them!"

Tim is, of course, joking. He has no intention of leaving Joey, GloZell, Matt, Eva, Oli, and Lele here. As soon as he gets the car started, he plans on taking Sierra somewhere safe, then turning around and picking up the others one by one. Yeah, it'll probably take a few hours, and he'll basically be a glorified chauffeur, but it'll be worth it.

They're good people. They don't deserve to die. The only one who deserved to die is already dead.

"Just get in," he instructs Sierra.

"Fine." She climbs into the passenger seat, bumping her tiara on the door as she does so. "Ow, my crown..."

"Be careful!"

He's got one shot. He refuses to throw it away.

Sketchy mannequins.

Sketchy mannequins everywhere.

Eva does a quick head count. There's four of them: a sharply-dressed man sitting at the head of the table, a blonde woman sitting directly across from him, and two children (oh, God, child mannequins, why) sitting on the sides. All of them stare blankly into the distance, like a group of zombies without the hunger for human flesh.

It's just a bunch of mannequins. Nothing to be scared of. So why is Eva shaking in her shoes?

"We have another clue!" announces Matt, snatching up a note from the table. He reads it aloud.

My dear employer, how grateful I am for your generosity in seeking out my work. Few understand its true importance, and to that end, I must be absent for a time. The need inside me requires that I feed it regularly.

This piece is almost complete, and I will be calling it "Dinner for Five." I'm sure that with some careful examination you will see how to finalize the details.

Warm regards,
Calvin

Eva grimaces. She doesn't know much about art, but no one in their right mind would consider this creepy "piece" artistic. And the note, even while being read by Matt's businesslike voice, betrays a flawless portrait of a clearly deranged man.

...few understand its true importance...the need...the need inside me...

Whoever this Calvin guy is, he's sick in the head.

"The need inside me requires that I feed it regularly..." Joey frowns. "Do we have to feed the mannequins?"

Ugh. Eva recoils at the thought. God, no. I didn't come here to—no. Just...no.

Fortunately, before she's forced to play "here comes the airplane" with a child mannequin, Oli points to a nearby cherry pie. "Do you think that something is in here?"

"You could give it a peek," says Matt with a shrug.

Oli does so, digging through the cherry pie with a knife and fork from the table. Despite her distaste for this entire situation, Eva rushes to his side, and the other four join them just as Oli discovers a...a...oh, no....

"Ew!" Joey looks like he's about to throw up. "What is that?"

"That" appears to be a thumb. Or maybe a toe. Whatever it is, it's a body part of some kind, and...yeah, Eva's never going to eat cherry pie again.

"Ugh!" Oli screams, dropping the thumb onto the table.

"Erg," moans Lele. "Oli, what the hell?"

Matt's the only one who doesn't seem disgusted (either that, or he's extremely good at hiding it). "Is it a mannequin thumb or a human thumb?" he asks Oli, who's retrieved the thumb and is currently in the process of examining it.

Oh, no. Not a human thumb. Please, not a human—

"It's a mannequin's thumb."

Thank God. Now, back to the puzzle. Focus, Eva. Focus.

Eva ignores her nausea and points at the male mannequin. "Is he missing a thumb?"

"I don't know," Oli replies.

"Check his hand," suggests Eva. "I bet he is."

Oli checks, then shakes his head. "No, he's not."

"What?"

"Maybe it's not a thumb," says Matt, leaning against an empty chair with the strangest expression on his face. "Maybe it's some other body part, like, I don't know..."
Joey's eyes light up like Christmas lights. "A toe!"

Of course.

Everyone starts taking shoes off of mannequins. Everyone, that is, except for Lele, who sits defiantly in the nearest empty chair. "No, I'm not taking—" She scowls. "No!"

Eva doesn't blame her. It's a disgusting, nauseating puzzle. But it's still a puzzle, and puzzles must be solved, with or without sketchy mannequins staring them down.

Sierra sits in the passenger seat, watching as Tim attempts to start the car. He can't. Of course he can't. He hasn't got the key. And you can't start a car, even a 1920s one, without a key. How could they have been so...so...stupid?

Not that Tim's willing to give up just yet. "Is there, like, a symbol here somewhere?"

There isn't.

Frightened tears threaten to escape Sierra's eyes. This isn't working. Nothing's working. She's stuck here, all alone, in an abandoned car, with only Timothy DeLaGhetto for company. And he's by far the shadiest member of the entire group. Heck, he's probably only pretending to work on the car, when in reality he's waiting for the perfect moment to strike—attack her—murder her—

Unless it's a prank. There's still a chance...

Stop.

Tim lets go of the wheel and opens up the glove compartment. "Oh!" He pulls out a small photograph and two pieces of paper. One is large and covered with a strange, loopy handwriting. The other is the size of a Post-It note, with two words screaming at them in blocky letters.

"Slow down."

"Slow down." Sierra snatches the papers. The thump-thump-thump of her panicked heart echoes like church bells around them. "Wait."

"Oh, it's the symbol!" shouts Tim, pointing to the papers.

And so it is.

Sierra's mind is a cloud of smoke. "We have to—we have to go tell—the others, we have to go tell the others, we have to get out of here, hurry."

"Who is this guy?" Tim remarks, pointing to the photograph. "He's creepy looking."

He's right. The man in the photograph smiles at them, but his smile is laced with malice; it's the smile of a predator advancing on his prey. And his cold, emotionless eyes send danger signals vibrating throughout Sierra's already anxious body.

Is this their foe? Is he going to kill them?

Tim tosses the photograph aside and turns his attention to the Post-It-sized note. "Slow down? What does that mean?"
"I don't know," stammers Sierra.

"Slow down." Tim frowns. "We're in a car. Maybe..."

He starts pumping the brakes. When that doesn't work, he sticks his head under the dashboard, muttering to himself as he does so. Is he looking for a weapon? Is this where he pulls out a weapon and—

Nope. Instead, he pulls out a key. A key. For a few moments, Sierra's faith is restored. Maybe he's right. Maybe this is our way out. Maybe...

But when Tim sticks the key into the ignition, it won't turn, and just like that, her hopes come crashing down. "I don't think it's gonna work," she sighs, wondering what the others are doing right now.

"It has to!" Tim insists. "It's part of the clue!"

He tries again. And again. And again.

No luck.

Finally, he pulls the key out of the ignition, but there's still a spark of determination in his eyes. "Well, maybe there's a clue in the trunk."

The trunk. Of course. The perfect spot for a serial killer to hide his victims' bodies. This is it. He's going to kill her. She is going to die.

"Come on."

"I'm scared." Tim, please, don't do this, it doesn't have to be this way. "I don't wanna look in the trunk." Please, Tim. Please.

"We have to."

"Tim, no—"

It's too late. He's already out of the car. She follows him, resigned to her fate, murmuring a quick goodbye to her loved ones, trying not to think about what he's going to do to her. I hope it's quick. Quick and painless. A bullet to the brain, a stab through the heart, something like that. Don't torture me, don't rape me, don't drag it out any longer than it has to be. Just get it over with.

You owe me that much.

It's official. GloZell's all out of what-in-the-worlds to give. No amount of demon ghosts can scare her anymore.

Seriously. She's seen it all. Spirit boards, severed heads, coffins, ghosts, exploding cars...and now, a secret room with freaky mannequin people. Not to mention enough jumpscares to give her an aneurysm.

And the deaths. Three deaths. She wasn't there for Andrea's, but Shane coughing up blood and Justine screaming for help are probably gonna be permanent fixtures in her nightmares from now on.
The point is, she's done. She's not scared. She's freakin' furious.

So she stands there, seething, biting her tongue, as Oli retrieves a note from a mannequin guy's cut-off toe. This is all part of Joey's twisted game, and if she knows anything about karma, it's gonna come back to bite him in the ass. And she hopes to God she's there to see it.

Oli clears his throat and reads.

*I thought my wife was a saint, and then Calvin showed me the hole in her soul...before I pried a lung from her chest.*

"Her." Joey's off, heading straight for the mother mannequin. "Her. Woman."

The group hurries over. Eva and GloZell get there first, and—

"Oh my goodness!"

Inside the mom's chest is a hole and a note. GloZell's not scared, of course she isn't, but she is about ready to nope right on out of there. *A hole in a lady mannequin's chesticles...like, who does that?!*

This Calvin guy is demented and sick. She hopes she never meets him.

Before Lele has the chance to say "screw this, I'm outta here," Eva snatches up the note and reads it aloud.

*Mothers should know what's in their child's head. Then he cut one open to show me. I can never look at my children again.*

Wonderful. Children with their heads cut open. Because that's exactly what this shitshow needs.

Matt's already muttering something about "cut the head open," because he's Matt, and he's a stuck-up moron. Personally, Lele's pretty sure that the same effect can be achieved by removing the (ridiculously ugly) wigs from the mannequins' heads. It's simpler, cleaner, and doesn't require any mutilations.

Fortunately, Oli has the same idea. "Take her hair off!"

So they all get to work, and before long, every wig is off. But, much to Lele's indignation, no one finds anything.

"Okay, wait." Joey frowns. "Repeat it again."

Matt scrunches his eyebrows into weird caterpillars. "Uh..."

"Wait!" Joey points to a nearby set of drawers, one of which is open. "This is open! Was this always open?"

No. It wasn't. Lele remembers those drawers; they're the only elegant thing in this entire freaky room. And when she scrutinized them ten minutes ago, all four drawers were closed.

It's the next clue. They did it, whatever "it" was.

Joey pulls out a photograph from the drawer, glances at it, and gasps. "There's a picture." Sorrow and grief are in his voice, and he looks about ready to collapse in a sobbing heap on the floor.
"Oh, no," moans Eva, peeking over Joey's shoulder to get a closer look. "A family, maybe?"

She's right. It's a family. A mom, a dad, and three children, all in a row, sitting at a dinner table just like the one in front of them now. Four of them look freakishly similar to the mannequins sitting at the table.

But the fifth—a dark-haired teenager who glares daggers at the camera—is nowhere to be seen.

"Where is she?" asks GloZell, glancing around the room, as if the missing mannequin's going to magically appear out of nowhere.

Which, to be fair, it might.

Lele stares at the picture, her head swimming with fear. She can't shake the feeling that these poor people, like Caroline Eastwick and the two college students, are dead. Victims of the house. Killed by that Calvin guy, whoever the hell he is, to hide the third artifact from the living.

Maybe that's why the fifth mannequin is missing. Maybe the girl escaped.

And maybe I'll grow wings and fly to the moon.

Trying to ignore Sierra's unintelligible squeaks, Tim opens the trunk.

"Omigod!"

There's a mannequin tied up in there. She's a dark-haired girl, with a white dress on and a terrified expression on her plastic face. Come to think of it, she looks a lot like Sierra, except she's not wearing a crown.

"Is that actually a dead body?" Sierra whimpers.

"No." Tim attempts to put a hand on her shoulder (y'know, because she's scared, and maybe he can calm her down a bit), but she wriggles away. "It's, like, a mannequin lady."

He does a quick scan of the rest of the trunk. No key.

"All right." He gulps down the lump in his throat and tries to conceal his disappointment. "We should tell the others. I'm gonna grab her."

"What? Why?"

"So they believe us!"

"Omigod." Sierra rolls her eyes. "Are you serious?"

"Yeah." Of course he's serious. They're stuck here, so they might as well make the best of it. Who knows, maybe this mannequin will end up being a clue of some sort.

First things first. Grab the mannequin. Get back inside. Rejoin the group. And make sure nothing weird pops up and tries to kill him or Sierra.

Then, maybe, he'll find another way home.
They're at a dead end.

Matt and the others have pretty much turned this whole room upside down, but they still don't know where the missing mannequin is. And they don't have any other clues to help them.

To make matters worse, Tim and Sierra are still missing. The two YouTubers least likely to be working with the evil (Sierra's too timid, and Tim, well, Tim's his friend), and now they're gone. Perhaps they're dead. The evil could've killed them for all he knows.

Is this it? Is this where we give up?

No. He can't. He won't. Not now. Not ever.

Footsteps. Matt straightens up, ignoring the hustle and bustle around him, his eyes fixed on the entrance to the secret room. Are those Sierra's high heels click-clacking against the floor? Is that Tim's voice echoing down the hallway?

It is.

They're here.

They're alive.

And with them is the fifth mannequin they've been missing.

The group breathes a collective sigh of relief.

"We found some crazy shit," announces Tim as he enters the room, the mannequin slung over his right shoulder. He grins at the group with that typical everything's-gonna-be-fine expression on his face.

"Yeah, we found some crazy shit!" is Oli's quick reply.

Matt points at the mannequin. "We've been looking for the girl!"

"She was tied up in the car outside." Sierra looks like she's about to pass out. Whether it's from exhaustion or fear, Matt has no idea.

"Listen up, you guys!" shouts Tim, holding up a piece of paper. "There's a note!"

All my life, I wanted to go to a dance. Nothing fancy—I just wanted a boy to ask me. Then Calvin came along...only it turns out dancing isn't what he had in mind at all.

"Okay." Joey speaks between worried breaths. "Calvin is some sort of psychopath who set this whole room up. That's who Calvin is."

He's right. The more Matt hears about Calvin, the less he likes him. Anyone who would kill children and turn their deaths into a "work of art"...that's not someone Matt wants anything to do with.

"What do we have to do?"

Now that they've finally found the poor mannequin girl, the rest comes easy.
GloZell grabs the mannequin dad and moves him so that he's right next to his mannequin daughter. Everyone else maneuvers the remaining mannequins into the right position.

"She looks like the Grudge or something!" snickers Joey. He points to the smallest mannequin child, who's got her head in her mashed potatoes. At this point, GloZell's itching to tell him off, but she somehow manages to keep her big mouth shut.

For now.

Soon, it's over, and another drawer flies open. Joey shouts "Another clue, guys!" and snatches up the note.

*My employer,*

*I have hidden the artifact given to me, as you requested, in my new art installation on the second floor. I'm afraid it can only be experienced by two guests selected by a vote.*

*I have hidden the artifact given to me, as you requested, in my new art installation on the second floor. I'm afraid it can only be experienced by two guests selected by a vote.*

*They should be prepared to play...perverse games.*

Everyone groans.

GloZell cringes. Everything's already been perverted and twisted, so she supposes it's gonna go to a whole 'nother lever of gross and sickening. And frankly, she's not okay with that.

Especially considering that some other poor soul is probably going to die.

As the group leaves the secret room, Tim's shuffling his feet, not looking all that eager to go through the whole voting thing again. "Every time we vote, something bad happens, man!"

*Ain't that the truth?*

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: More voting! Who will go upstairs and play the perverse games? Also, some relationships strengthen, while others are destroyed forever.
Chapter Summary

So who's gonna go play the perverse games? There's only one way to find out...

Chapter Notes

A quick note to Joey, Sierra, Tim, Oli, Lele, Eva, Matt, and GloZell: Maybe y'all should just stay in the 1920s. Leave the murder house, find a town, and make new lives for yourselves. 2016 isn't really worth going back to. (who am I kidding, they can't hear me, on with the story)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Ladies and gentlemen." Arthur stands before them, hat in hand once again. "We've decided to put it to a vote to see who will go upstairs and play a perverse game."

Eva wrinkles her nose, her mind a strange mixture of logic and emotions. Perverse games...well, if that's the case, it would be to their advantage to vote in the most perverted person in the room. Lele.

Heck, the Hustler's eyes are twinkling already.

But upon closer reflection, Eva discards that option. Yes, Lele would most likely enjoy the challenge, considering what a dirty mind she has. But it's also, more likely than not, a death challenge. And however perverted Lele might be, Eva doesn't want her friend to die. Especially after she went to all that trouble to save her from the ungodly machine.

"Are these games gonna be fun?" Tim demands to know.

Matt does a quick head count. "Four guys. Four girls."

The situation quickly devolves into a boys-against-girls competition, with Matt, Tim, and Joey heading off to the farthest corner of the room. Oli gets up to follow them, but then reconsiders. "I'm gonna stay here."

He joins the girls, and Eva tries her hardest to stop herself from smiling. She likes Oli. He's smart, he's strong, and he's by far the most level-headed member of the group. She'd rather have him on her team than anyone else, that's for sure.

GloZell, Eva, Lele, and Sierra crowd around Oli, who has the suspicious look of a detective on his face.

"Matt has been acting...strange."
"Lele is killing people off," snaps Matt the second she's out of earshot. "She needs to go."

Joey nods. "I am down."

Tim shrugs. He hasn't got a problem with Lele. She's hot. If she's going in to play the perverse games, maybe he should vote himself in as well. Yeah, he could die, but at least he'll have a chance to...play with her.

The real question is, why does Matt want her gone?

"I don't trust her. I know she doesn't trust me, but...she needs to go."

Of course. That makes perfect sense.

Not.

"They're talking crap about us right now!" Sierra complains.

Oli frowns. He still isn't a fan of the whole "vote someone in to die" system, and none of the girls strike him as particularly dangerous. So he might as well find out who the other guys are planning to vote in, just so that whoever it is isn't blindsided by the betrayal.

"Eva," he says, pointing at the girl he's grown to respect the most throughout this game, "do some detective work."

Eva nods and rolls into her hiding place.

"You voted for her earlier," Tim points out. "Do we want to send her in again?"

Matt sighs. He doesn't think they understand the gravity of the situation. Lele's the traitor. It's obvious. And traitors have to die.

"She got what was coming to her," he explains through gritted teeth. "She's got Eva over here trying to sneak around..." Because of course he notices the brunette hiding under a nearby couch. Sent by Lele, no doubt. He's not stupid. "She's gonna fall behind."

Tim sighs. "All right, man."

"Let's go." Matt holds out his fist. "Knuckle bumps."

Knuckle bumps are exchanged. Matt's glad of it; at least he still has a few friends in this Survivor Island-esque scenario. All he can do is hope to God that they won't turn on him.

It's voting time. And GloZell knows what she has to do.

"Lele." Arthur nods at the blonde, who's currently eyeing the others suspiciously. "You may go first."

Lele approaches the hat. As she jots down her vote, she calls out the name of the person she's voting for. "Matt."

Everyone gasps. GloZell's mouth widens into a O. She knew that girl had guts, but damn. "That's fine," says Matt with a shrug, as if he was expecting it.

GloZell's next. She takes a deep breath, takes the pen from Arthur, and hunches over her ballot.

_I didn't wanna do this, babe. I loved you. You were my friend. I had my suspicions, yeah, but I was kinda hoping that you weren't the one in league with the evil. But...you obviously know more than you're letting on to. And it is, y'know, your house._

_Sorry. It's over. I gotta put a stop to this before you go an' try to kill us all._

_I can't be with no killer._

As GloZell returns to her seat, Joey can't help but ask the question that's been nagging him for the last half hour. "I hope that you're still not...thinking..."

"It's _your_ house," GloZell shoots back. "You _have_ to know what your servants are doing."

"Remember what I said? It's not my—"

"Who you gettin' loud with?"

"Because!" Joey's seeing red. "I've already told you! I don't own this house!"

He's known GloZell for a long time. She's warm, she's funny, she's tenderhearted...or, at least, she _was_, before he invited her to his dinner party. Now, after everything that's happened, the old GloZell—the one he was friends with—is gone, perhaps forever. In her place is an angry, overly suspicious woman who keeps coming at him with furious accusations.

And Joey's honestly getting sick and tired of it.

"Just to squash this right now," he snaps, gesturing to the group as a whole, "do you all blame me for everything that's going on?"

A yes from GloZell. A no from everyone else.

"So it's just you!" His voice is triumphant. "You're the only one who thinks that I'm at fault for all this!"

"Joey," interrupts Arthur, "it's your turn."

Joey gets up. As he makes his way to the hat, he can hear GloZell muttering "You _better_ not write my name."

He's tempted. Oh, God, _is_ he tempted. After everything she's said about him, voting her in to play the perverse games would be _such_ sweet revenge. But then, he remembers the girl she used to be, all smiles and jokes and "is you okays," and he ends up voting for Lele instead.
Speaking of Lele...

"Well, someone's working with the evil," says Matt, as if they didn't know that already. "I think it's her." He indicates Lele. "I've said it from the start."

She smiles that quick-yet-dangerous smile. "You know," she replies, her tone curt and matter-of-fact, "I can't wait to see you die."

He doesn't even flinch. "I understand."

By this point, everyone's done voting, and it's time for Arthur to make his two selections. He snatches a ballot out of the hat, clears his throat, and reads it aloud to the very nervous group.

"It's Joey."

"What?" Joey's in shock. No, oh God, no, this can't be happening, I can't go upstairs, I can't, I'm gonna die, I'm not ready to die, don't make me...

"Who put me in there?!?"

GloZell bites her lip.

Sorry, boo.

Well, that was a shocker.

Lele didn't even think it was possible to vote for Joey. The guy's the owner of the house, for crying out loud. Shouldn't he get a special exemption or something?

Then again, the rest of them aren't out of the woods yet, either.

Arthur draws the second name.

Please be Matt please be Matt please be Matt please be Matt please—

"Lele."

"What?" She's pissed. She just got done almost dying two hours ago. And now, they've gone and voted her in for the second time tonight. "Again?"

It's Matt. He has it out for me. He's gonna vote me in, over and over, until he gets me dead. He probably voted for me to get buried alive too, the dirty rotten no-good son of a bitch.

Well, I'll show him. I'm gonna go in there, and I'm gonna play those perverse games, and I'm gonna come out of this alive. I survived the goddamn ungodly machine. I can survive this too.

I won't die.

I refuse.

Matt murmurs a prayer of gratitude. He did it. Lele's in. Now all he can do is hope that she's the one
that dies throughout this process.

Arthur puts the hat down. "Joey and Lele, if I could have you both come with me..."

They get up (Joey with an expression of terror on his face, Lele with an angry scowl on hers) and trudge after the practically skipping butler. As they leave, the others wave goodbye.

"Good luck, guys," says Oli.

"Good luck, Joey," clarifies Matt.

GloZell looks like she's about to cry. "Bye, Lele-lala-lulu."

"Please, come this way," says Arthur, and with that, the three of them disappear up the stairs.

An awkward silence fills the room. Matt tries to think of something non-Joey-and-Lele-related to talk about, but his mind is disturbingly blank. It's like tonight has sapped him of thoughts, emotions, personality—everything except the will to survive.

Oli finally breaks the silence. "Who voted for Joey?"

Right on cue, GloZell cracks up. Her laugh is a maniacal cackle, as if she's a supervillain who's about to reveal her evil plan.

"Omigod." Sierra points at the Jazz Singer. "It was her, wasn't it?"

"I voted for Joey."

*The plot thickens.*

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: Joey and Lele do dirty things with mannequins. And then somebody dies. Great stuff!
Mannequins and Murder

Chapter Summary

Joey and Lele have been chosen to play "perverse games." Will they escape with their lives, or will the mannequins upstairs prove to be their undoing?

Chapter Notes

Fair warning: This chapter does kinda-sorta contain some vaguely sexual content, and I'm too lazy to go back and change the tags. So if you're not into that kind of thing, be careful.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As he ascends the staircase, Joey can feel his heart pounding panicked rhythms into his rib cage. His throat feels like sandpaper. His hands tremble. His eyes are clouded with an an anxious glaze.

This is real.

Someone (he doesn't know who, though he has his suspicions) has chosen him to go upstairs and play "a perverse game." A game that has a fifty-fifty chance of killing him. Yes, he's still depressed about losing Justine, and he knows the others are probably mad at him for trying to save her, but he never imagined that he'd be forced to follow her to the grave.

And even if, by chance, he doesn't lose his life, he'll have to watch Lele lose hers. Lele, whose eyes are blazing red with a passionate determination, who's breathing every breath as if it's a middle finger to those who want her gone. Lele, the Latina, the blonde Viner whom Matt convinced him to vote for.

He regrets his vote.

They reach the top of the stairs, and there's Arthur, standing in front of a door that's never before been opened. "Ready?"

No. He's not. He doesn't want this. But he grits his teeth, curls his fingers into fists, and tries to focus on the memory of Daniel Preda's face. No matter what this twisted room has in store, he's going to do whatever he can to get back home to him.

And if he can't...well, at least he'll see his friends again.

"Have fun," Arthur sneers, opening the door.

Lele's expecting prostitutes. Or male strippers. Or maybe some sort of weird sex demon that's gonna try and screw them to death. What she's not expecting is a bunch of half-naked mannequins in various compromising positions.
But when she enters the room, that's exactly what she gets.

**Mannequins.** Okay. Maybe this won't be so bad. They're not alive. She doesn't have to talk to them. And they sure as hell don't *look* life-threatening. It's just...*weird.*

Then again, this whole *house* is pretty much Weirdness Central. Being forced to have sex with a dozen mannequins is honestly par for the course.

"Wait." Joey heads for the desk, ignoring the lingerie-clad mannequin sitting there. "There's a clue right here."

*Start the party with a spin of the bottle, and swap spit with your plastic friends. Kiss them enough, and you will get a number from under the door.*

Joey turns to Lele, his anxious expression replaced by a bemused smile. "I think we're about to have an orgy. With mannequins."

They laugh. *God,* it feels so good, letting giggles escape from her mouth like birds from a cage. This is the first time she's laughed since...since...

She can't remember.

She *can* remember the first time she ever played spin the bottle. She was in eighth grade, and she and her friends just wanted to get their first kiss over with. So she ended up locking lips with Patrick Sparks from two doors down, who's probably forgotten all about her by now.

The bottle's already been set up, with several mannequins placed at various points around it. Joey and Lele sit down, both of them still snickering, and Lele takes the first spin.

It lands on a female mannequin, who's lying on the ground with her head leaning up against the wall. She stares at the two humans with a come-hither look on her plastic face.

"So you have to kiss her?" Lele asks.

Joey busts into another round of giggles. "*You* have to kiss her!"

"*I* have to kiss her..."

*And that, ladies and gentlemen, is how I turned lesbian.*

She's down on all fours, leaning over the mannequin. "I have to, like, *tongue* kiss it?"

"Give her a good ol' kiss," Joey chuckles.

"Okay."

So she starts making out with the female mannequin. It's her first time kissing a mannequin, but she thinks she's pretty good at it. *Ooooh, you like that, baby? Hmmmm? You want it? You want me to—*"Okay, all right, that's enough!"

Lele lets go of her new plastic girlfriend and returns to her seat. Satisfied, Joey spins the bottle...and it lands on Lele.

He gasps.
She snorts. "I'm not a mannequin, though. Did it say that it has to be a mannequin?"

"I don't know."

"Yeah. It said that."

"Okay."

"Do you want me to read it?"

"Someone doesn't wanna kiss me!"

Lele rolls her eyes. Typical Joey, teasing her about her romantic standards. He's not a bad-looking guy—kind of cute, actually—but he's more like a big brother than anything else. Also, he's gay.

Of course, she has to defend herself. "No, I'm just saying, it said a mannequin."

"Oh, sure. Okay."

"No! I'm not kidding!"

"That's fine. I'll spin again."

He spins again. This time, it lands on a dark-haired girl mannequin who looks a bit like Vivien Leigh.

"Okay, fine," Joey sighs. "I'll kiss her." He gives her a peck on the side of her mouth; the kiss lasts about half a second. "That was very nice."

As if on cue, a piece of paper appears from under the door. Joey and Lele leave the circle and run to pick it up.

_Four._

"What does that mean?" Joey asks.

Lele frowns, squinting at the number, unable to get rid of the apprehensive stone lying in the pit of her stomach. "I don't know."

Matt stretches out on the white couch, feeling more comfortable than he's felt in ages. "If we wanna get out of here and get another artifact, the one person we should sacrifice is Lele."

"You just don't like her," GloZell remarks. "I'll be surprised if she doesn't come back. I'll be really shocked."

_She's one to talk. She just admitted that she was the one who sent Joey upstairs to die. And now she wants to complain about Matt doing the same to Lele? This is a classic case of the Jazz Singer calling the Professor black._

She is, of course. And he isn't. But that's beside the point.

The point is, Joey hasn't done anything incriminating. He hasn't snapped at anybody, he hasn't bossed anyone around, he hasn't been the insufferable drama queen that Lele's been. She's bringing the group down. If they're going to make it, she has got to go.
"Or maybe he *likes* her," snickers Tim, because he's Tim and he's legally required to turn everything into a joke.

"Yeah, whatever." Matt wriggles away from Tim's fingers. "Stop poking me."

*Then, one of you must move to the bed and complete the ménage à trois. Count to ten while giving it all you can.*

"What's a ménage à trois?" Lele wants to know.

Joey gulps. He can feel the color rushing to his cheeks. He was expecting something perverted, but this is ridiculous. "A threesome."

"Okay." Lele pats him on the back. "Good luck."

*Nope.* She's the twisted one. She should do it. "That's all you, girl."

Lele seems surprisingly okay with this. She approaches the mannequin couple, a smile on her face, a mischievous gleam in her brown eyes.

"Take your coat off," orders Joey.

She does. Her silver blouse shimmers in the lamplight. The pearls jingle like a dozen Christmas bells.

"Come on!" Joey's standing to the side, watching as Lele prepares for her threesome. "You need to get into it!"

Lele inserts herself between the plastic pair. She kisses the girl mannequin, keeping her eyes open as she does so, while simultaneously caressing the boy mannequin's shoulders. Joey tries to keep a straight face (*don't laugh, don't laugh, you could die in here*), but he's too weak, and he dissolves into another round of laughter.

He can't help it. He's enjoying this too much for his own good. Plus, let's face it: if he's gonna die, he might as well die happy.

"Five...six...seven...eight...nine...ten!"

Seconds after Lele yanks herself away from the mannequins' embrace, another number appears from under the door.

Seven.

"Yes!" cheers Lele. She turns to Joey, grinning like a predator advancing on its unsuspecting prey. "Okay, now you're next!"

"It's *his* house." GloZell feels strangely calm; her anger seems to have gone upstairs with Joey. "He had to know what's going on. So I picked him. Sorry."

Matt's head is tilted to the left a bit, and he's staring at GloZell with the strangest look on his face. Whatever. Of *course* he doesn't believe her; he's still convinced that Lele's the traitor. GloZell's the Jazz Singer, not the Gambler (who's dead now, anyway, so what difference does it make), but she'd put good money on Lele coming back downstairs alive.
She's a survivor, that one. Maybe it's a side effect of being Latina, but Lele's got a fire in her that refuses to burn out.

"It seems odd," Eva admits. "Like, why would you invite a bunch of people over here if you didn't know anything about the house?"

_Exacty._

"I've heard it's true..." murmurs Oli halfheartedly, but no one's paying any attention to him.

Tim's still in Jokester Mode. "So, like, he's not dying. Maybe he's just getting, like, you know, hit with some ghost dicks..."

To which Oli replies, "What?"

GloZell rolls her eyes. This is ridiculous. Two of their own are upstairs, probably fighting for their lives against whatever perverted game's in store for them, and all Timothy DeLaGhetto can do is make dick jokes.

Oh, well. Once Joey's exposed for the conniving, no-good traitor he is, everything will be okay again.

Won't it?

Eva's conflicted.

On the one hand, Joey doesn't seem like the type of guy who'd kill his friends. Especially considering his last-minute attempt to save Justine from her grave. Would a guy who wants them dead _really_ go to all that trouble? (And yeah, she _did_ accuse him earlier, right after Shane died, but she was emotionally compromised at the time. That doesn't count.)

On the other hand, GloZell is acting like she knows something. And when a soulful woman knows something, she's probably right.

_Is Joey...?_

She doesn't know. And it's the not-knowing that's eating her up inside.

_Then, find the lone woman leaning on the chair who could use some help from behind. Bang away until the final number appears._

"Bang away until..." Joey takes a while to understand his task, but once he does, he starts laughing and squealing "No!" at the same time.

Lele doesn't care. He can protest all he wants; he is _not_ getting out of this one. If she had to do a ménage à trois with mannequins, he's gonna have to suck it up and start banging.

She thumps him on the back.

"No! No!"

_Yes._
Joey sighs, gets behind the mannequin in question, and starts humping it. "Woo-hoo!" he cheers sarcastically, slapping her butt a few times. "Yeah! All righty, cowboy! How long do I have to do this for?"

"Until the final number appears," says Lele with a grin.

"Come on!"

She shrugs and crosses her arms, glad she's not in his position. "I'll wait."

"Okay." Joey yanks the wig off the girl's head and starts waving it around. "Woo! Yeah!"

*Omigod.* He's *going* for it. He's banging that girl like she's a freakin' firecracker. It's like he was never gay.

The final number appears.

"Thank God," says Joey.

*Two.*

"Wait." Joey, having abandoned his mannequin lover, is now fiddling with the desk. "There's a lock here."

Of course. They did all that work for a goddamn *combination.* How many of these lock things are in this stupid house?

*Four...seven...two.*

The desk opens. Inside is a small journal with a sleek dark color. It looks like the kind of diary a teenager would keep—a teenager who angsts all the time and worships Hot Topic.

As Lele looks on, Joey flips it open to the very first page.

*This is a murder journal. The person's name you write on the next page will die a horrible death in the next minute. Once their life has been snuffed out, the artifact will be released.*

*The name should be considered carefully, and once written down, the journal must be placed back in the drawer.*

On the next page is a list of "murder victims." The first six spaces are filled with names of people Lele's never heard of, but the seventh space...the seventh space has been conveniently left blank.


She doesn't *want* this. She came in here, adrenaline pumping, prepared to fight for her life. But instead, she and Joey have become executioners, forced to choose which of their friends will be the next to die. It's sick. It's disgusting. She's a Viner, not a *murderer.*

Though, come to think of it, this *is* a great way to save herself from Matt...

"I know you're friends with Matt," says Lele, her tone hesitant, "but...I honestly think Matt should die."
Joey blinks. "But he helps us." He knows it's a lame argument (pretty much every member of the group helps them somehow), but he's not ready to sentence Matt to death just yet. Not until after he's carefully considered every possible option.

"He helps—he wants me dead, okay?" Lele's tone has switched from hesitant to insistent; her words could outrace a panicked pronghorn. "This is about survival. He wants me dead. So either way, he wants me dead, and he's gonna do whatever it takes to get me dead."

Joey's about to respond, but then he notices the anxious expression on his co-conspirator's face, and it hits him: Lele's scared. She doesn't want to die. No one does, of course, but especially her; the mere thought of leaving this world is enough to send her into a defensive frenzy. He can only imagine the terror she must have endured in the ungodly machine, and that's not even considering Matt's vendetta against her.

Of course she wants Matt gone. She sees his death as the only way to save herself.

And Joey...well, Joey's spent the last ten minutes playing this twisted game with her, and the mutual embarrassment has created a strange sort of bond between them. He's got to protect her. She's the new Justine—blonde, spunky, terrified—and Joey's not going to let them kill her this time.

"Listen." He looks her square in the eye, a determined edge to his voice. "After this, I feel like we're so bonded...I will vouch for you that you're good. And I'll make sure that Matt never votes for you."

"It's not gonna happen! You're not going in there!"

Lele sighs. "All right. Whatever. Got any better ideas?"

He does.

"You are the YouTube killer!"

"GloZell."

"GloZell?"

"Yeah."

"Why?"

Joey can feel his lips moving, but the rest of him's a million miles away. "I bet you she's the one who put me in this room. She wants me dead."

The Joey from four hours ago would've been shocked. What? Kill GloZell? Are you crazy? She's your friend! What are you doing? You can't go around killing people, you...you murderer!

But that was then. This is now. Joey's not the same.

"Let's spin the bottle—"

"No." He prepares his pencil. "I don't want to."

She's smiling, her lips drenched in green lipstick, pulling him into one of her killer bear hugs. She's doing the Eat It or Wear It Challenge with him, dumping a can of pumpkin over his head. She's listening to his problems, letting him cry on her shoulder, being the best friend he could ever hope to have.
None of that matters. He's different. She's different.

"I'm sorry."

*It's either her or me.*

"I'm putting GloZell down."

*First name: GloZell. Last name: Green.*

Lele stares off into space, her voice flat and lifeless. "Well, it is your house, so..."

"It's not my house," says Joey automatically, but he isn't really listening. He stares at the murder journal, blue eyes wide, transfixed by the horror of what he's just done.

*She's dying.*

*She's dead.*

*I killed her.*

"Oh, God."

They've been sitting here for about fifteen minutes, and Matt's still talking.

"...sabotaged. She wouldn't even let me play the game. And guess what? We didn't get the key, Shane got it..."

*We get it,* sighs Sierra internally, rolling her eyes at the ceiling. *You don't like Lele. You think she's the traitor. You want her to die. Now could you please shut up about her before I lose my—*

"Mmmph."  

It's GloZell. She looks like she's swallowed an especially large hairball. And the noises that she's making are too weird even for her.

"You okay?" asks Oli.

GloZell opens her mouth to respond—and then the convulsions begin.

The room erupts into screams. Oli reaches out for GloZell, but she's yanked away from him by some sort of invisible hand. She writhes off the couch and onto the ground, her chest heaving, her body locked in a fruitless fight for air.

"No!" sobs Eva.

"Help!" shouts Oli.

Matt's voice is calm. "GloZell, are you okay?"

Tears sting Sierra's eyes. *Of course she's not okay, you idiot. She's sick...she's going to...*

As GloZell continues to thrash about on the floor, pools of blood trickle from her mouth. Her wig falls off her head, exposing her pitch-black hair, and her once-powerful voice has been reduced to a handful of frog noises. Her ailment forces her body to thrust up and down on the carpet.
Tim takes the opportunity to shout "She's twerk dying!"

Sierra resists the urge to smack him.

Lele can hear the screams from all the way downstairs.

"No!"

"Oh, no, girl!"

"Help! Somebody! Help!"

"Omigod." Lele's hands are on her mouth, and she's trying her best not to burst into tears in front of all these mannequins. She can't believe it. She won't believe it. This is not freakin' happening.

"Bye, Lele-lala-lulu..."

Joey turns to face her, guilt stamped across his face like permanent ink. "I don't want them to know that we..." Killed her. "...put her name in the book."

"Just say that we unlocked something," Lele suggests. "And then it just said that one of them was gonna die."

"Yeah."

It's her fault. She let Joey put GloZell's name in the journal. She should've stopped him. She should've.

Too late.

If she wasn't going to hell before this happened, she's definitely got a date with the devil now. All she can do is make sure that she holds it off for as long as she can.

No... GloZell's fighting for her life with every ounce of strength she's got, but whatever demon's got her isn't letting up. No, God, please, no, no...

...not like this...

...not like this...

...not like—

Another drawer opens. Inside is (of course) the third artifact, along with an ADMIT ONE circus ticket.

"Omigod." Joey stands there, his heart beating so hard he's afraid it's going to burst out of his chest, as Lele snatches up their prizes. "Holy crap."

Three out of four.

Tim's voice echoes in his head. "See? It was all worth it, Joey."
There was a time, not so long ago, when Joey would've felt something. Pain. Grief. Regret. A sense of shame. His conscience, prickling his mind, sending him GloZell-related memories, condemning the horrible crime he's committed.

But it's too late now. Justine's dead. His conscience died with her.

*It's my party, and I can kill whoever I want to.*

Matt kneels beside GloZell's motionless body, trying valiantly to keep his composure. "Are you okay?"

No response.

He reaches out a trembling hand, prays for a miracle, and checks her pulse.

Nothing.

"She's dead."

GloZell Green. Dead.

This wasn't supposed to happen. Not to her. Lele, yes, it should've been Lele, it should've—

*Dear God, Lele Pons, what the hell did you do?!?*

Chapter End Notes

RIP GloZell. You were the funniest one there, and now...well, now you're gone. Ah well. At least us humor enthusiasts still have Tim and Lele.

Next chapter: How is Joey gonna talk his way out of *this* one? Also, strange noises, and another Matt/Lele fight.
GloZell's dead. And Joey's got a lot of explaining to do.

"Remember," Joey hisses, "don't say anything."

"I won't," murmurs Lele.

"Promise?"

"I know!"

Of course she won't. Joey's her friend. Yeah, he's technically a murderer now, but so is she. And what the others don't know won't hurt them.

They enter the parlor.

GloZell lies in the center of the room, dead as a doornail. Everyone else stands around her body in various states of shock—Oli's got his head in his hands, Sierra looks about ready to faint, anger boils on Matt's face, and Tim is uncharacteristically silent.

And then there's Eva. Eva, poor Eva, the only one in the group who's been there for every death so far, who's tried so hard to ignore her emotions and stay focused on their mission, is now pinching tears from her darkened cheeks. "Guys!" she screams, pain in her voice, choking on her own terrible announcement. "GloZell died!"

Eva, I'm so sorry.

"It was exactly like what happened with Shane," explains Oli, his mind trying its best to process the death he just witnessed. "She choked."

"But longer," Tim points out.

Oli's confused. Joey and Lele were the ones voted into the challenge. Not GloZell. She was in the safe zone. Nothing was supposed to happen to her. Why is she dead, while the ones they chose for death are still alive?

He has no idea.

He points at the artifact in Lele's hands. "You guys got the artifact." That's a relief. The artifact is the only thing that makes sense about this entire scenario.

"What happened?" squeals Sierra.
"Wait, what happened upstairs with the perverse games?" asks Matt. "What did you guys do?"

Joey's eyes dart around the room. "There were mannequins." His voice is catatonic yet again. "We had to do things that I don't..."

"Yeah." Lele jumps in, on the defensive as usual. "It was perverted. So."

Tim is the first to put the pieces together. "No! Look!" He points. "They got the artifact, so someone else had to die!"

And that's when Oli understands. *Oh, God. Of course. It all makes sense. GloZell was going in at Joey, and now...* 

*Joey's killed GloZell.*

Matt doesn't believe it.

Matt doesn't believe it *at all.*

"You went upstairs." Eva's talking now, and she looks and sounds like a female version of Sherlock Holmes. "And your name was called because GloZell put you up there. So GloZell died."

Joey's eyes widen. "She put my name in there?"

"Yeah!" pipes up Sierra. "She just told us!"

Matt frowns. "That is very true." For a few moments, the wheels begin to turn in his mind, and Joey jumps up a few spots on his suspect list.

But that's before his number one suspect opens her mouth and talks.

"Okay, we were playing spin the bottle and kissing mannequins," Lele snaps, "so I don't think we were focusing on who we wanted to kill!"

"Listen." Matt can feel his blood boiling. "To be honest with you, I don't want to hear *anything* that you have to say, because every single time—"

"Matt! No! She's good!"

*Like hell she is.*

He raises his voice, drowning out Joey's pleas. *Every single time she goes to play a game or goes into the hat, she doesn't die!"

This proves it. This proves, without a doubt, everything he's been trying to explain to the others. Lele has *everything* to do with all the death going on in this house. *She's working with the evil spirit. She's the guilty one.*

What was that old Harry Potter quote?

*Neither can live while the other survives.*
Joey gulps. This isn't working. Matt's still convinced that Lele's the traitor. Maybe he should've let her write his name down.

"Okay, you know what?" Fire burns in Lele's eyes; she finally seems to have reached her breaking point. "Here's the truth, okay? We voted, Joey wanted her to die, and that's it."

"Lele!"

"It's the truth! I had to, Joey! I'm tired of him blaming it all on me!"

Matt turns his attention to Joey, pointing a trembling finger at GloZell's corpse. "You voted for her?"

I had to.

I don't regret it.

I'd do it again in a heartbeat.

"We had to vote for someone!" screams Lele. "Anyone!"

"But you don't understand—"

"No." Joey closes his eyes. He can still hear GloZell's voice, hollering accusations in his ear. "Listen. There was a journal. A death journal. Upstairs. And whatever name we put in the journal died."

"You are the YouTube killer!"

"Joey, why?"

"It's your house!"

"Joey, don't let them do this!"

"YouTube killer, please don't, YouTube killer, please don't!"

They're his ghosts now. Both of them. The girl he murdered, and the girl he failed to save.

Just as Eva suspected. GloZell voted for Joey, and signed her own death warrant in the process. Poor girl.

Maybe she was right. Maybe she, in her Jazz Singer black woman wisdom, figured out the truth about this place—and its owner. Maybe Joey Graceffa is working with the evil, and GloZell Green died because she knew too much.

Or maybe he isn't, and he only killed her because she tried to kill him first.

Either way, Eva definitely has her eye on Joey right now.

Just when Lele thinks she's in the clear, Matt turns to face her again. "So you went up there with Joey," he sneers, malice dripping like honey from his voice, "and got her killed."

How dare he. How dare he blame her for Joey's crime. How dare he act all holier-than-thou when he's just as much of a scumbag as the rest of them. How dare he cross his arms in that B-boy stance,
pointing his greasy fingers at her like she's the devil incarnate. How dare he.

She snaps.

"Actually, it was either you or her!" she screams, relishing the astonished look on his oh-so-saintly face. "And he saved you. He saved you, so shut up and sit down!"

With that, she shoves him onto the couch and leaves him there to blink his life away.

"Well, in that case, thanks, guys!" says Tim in a halfhearted attempt to defuse the situation. But Lele's too far down the rabbit hole of I'm-so-done to care.

It should've been him. Matt. Not GloZell. GloZell was her friend. Matt just wants to watch her die.

And she refuses to give him the satisfaction.

Tim takes a deep breath, trying his best to tune out the Matt-Lele fight. Man, those two are going at it like cats and dogs over there. By the time this is over, one of them is gonna end up bumping off the other.

Either that, or they'll have a few rounds of hate sex. One of the two.

Joey takes a deep breath. "Let's just take the artifact, let's bring it over there, and let's get the hell out of here."

Tim couldn't agree more.

Though, to be honest, he's kind of bummed about GloZell. She was weird, but the good kind of weird, like peanut butter on top of a chocolate sundae. Not to mention that she was the only one here who had a chance of outdoing him in the comedy department.

And losing her...it sucks. It really sucks.

But hey, he might as well look on the bright side. At least they have the third artifact. One step closer to getting home to his cat. All he has to do is not die, and he'll be good.

Almost there.

Almost home.

2016, here we come.

It still hurts.

Sierra's spent the last four hours losing people, and every death feels like another knife in her gut. Sure, she spent three of those hours dulling the pain with her "it's just a prank" theory. But now that she's finally let that theory go (even her last stubborn piece of hope ended up dead on the ground with GloZell), all four wounds have been reopened, and she's bleeding like a half-dead soldier on the battlefield.

The thought of home—we're almost there, one more one more one more one more—is the only thing preventing her from succumbing to the pain.
Lele places the third artifact on the mantlepiece with its siblings.

"Only one artifact left."

And then, before Sierra has the chance to pull herself together, an unearthly roar permeates her ears. It's loud, it's beastly, it's bone-chilling, and it threatens to destroy whatever courage still dwells in her frantic heart.

Everyone screams. Oli hides behind Joey. Tim jumps up onto a nearby chair.

"What was that?" stammers Joey.

"It sounded like an animal!" Eva shouts.

Sierra's trying her hardest not to cry.

Arthur steps forward. "The evil of this house knows someone is trying to imprison it. It's unleashed its guardian to make sure that doesn't happen."

"What guardian?"

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: What guardian, indeed? Also, Sierra smells sexism, and Tim's attempts at cheering her up backfire spectacularly.
The Awakening

Chapter Summary

A random circus ticket might be all that stands between the group and the monstrous Guardian...

Chapter Notes

Please note: I have made a few edits to some of the more recent chapters. So if something in this chapter doesn't make sense, I'd suggest you go back and look at 24 and 25 again. Sorry for being an idiot.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"What Guardian?"

But Arthur does not reply.

Great. Sierra droops, her diamond tiara barely hanging on to her hair. She's just watched another friend die in front of her, and now, here comes the "Guardian," ready to finish off what's left of the group.

"What the hell was that noise?" Joey whimpers.

"Guys..." Even Eva's a nervous wreck. "Something's coming for us."

Sierra's lungs are screaming like hurricane sirens in her ears. "Something," she stammers, trying to ignore the tears pounding against her eyelids, "or someone?"

"That was definitely something!" There's a hint of anger mixed in with the fear on Joey's pale face. "A someone does not sound like that at all!"

Something. Okay. An animal. A lion, maybe, or a dragon, or a three-headed dog. Or worse.

"Guys, don't forget, GloZell is dead," says Oli, as if anyone could have possibly forgotten that little nugget of information.

And then, while Sierra is still absorbing the shockwaves of panic racing through her, a lightbulb goes off in her otherwise clouded brain. Four deaths. One—Shane's—was due to circumstances beyond their control. But the other three...Andrea was chosen for death, so was Justine, and now... "Another girl, you guys. Three girls have died."

"Yeah," Lele agrees.

"I think that's a little sketchy."

Joey frowns. "Why is that sketchy?"
"Oh, Joey. Isn't it obvious?"

"Don't forget—Shane died," Oli points out. "He's a guy..."

But Lele, much to Sierra's relief, is having none of it. "He was poisoned, okay? We're literally voting for girls."

*My thoughts exactly.*

Tim, of course, *has* to insert himself into the conversation. "So maybe the evil spirit hates girls for some reason," he says sarcastically. "Maybe it's a girl."

*Shut up, Tim. I'm serious. Every non-Shane person who's died so far—girls. All of them. We started with six. Me, Lele, and Eva are the only female YouTubers still alive.*

*This isn't a coincidence. It can't be. Someone is trying to kill off all the women.*

"There's a lady-killer on the loose!"

"Sierra—"

But it's too late. Sierra's "it's just a prank" theory has been officially replaced by her "sexist demon" theory. And this time, she has concrete evidence to prove it, as well as the beginnings of a plan to save the few remaining females. "I think us girls have to stick together," she announces, glaring at the boys like they're the living embodiment of all that is wrong with the world.

Joey raises his hand, as if he's a student in Professor Furtado's course on Women's and Gender Studies. "Can I be a part of that since I'm, like, gay?"

Even Sierra has to smile at that.

But then, the smile fades away, and she hovers over Lele and Eva like a concerned mother hen. Sure, Eva's a bit too smart for her own good, and Lele may or may not be clinically insane, but they're good people. Both of them. And she can't let the lady-killing demon destroy them—or Sierra herself, for that matter.

*No more dead girls. Not now. Not ever.*

Sierra's losing it. Oli can tell by the scattered look in her flickering eyes, by the paranoia that gains strength every time she speaks. It's like she's using her perfect nails to cling to her last trembling gasp of sanity.

Poor girl.

Her theory makes no sense. Yes, three out of the four dead YouTubers are female, but that has nothing to do with why they died. Andrea was seen as useless and easily expendable, Justine was everyone's top suspect in the "who's working with the evil" mystery, and GloZell...well, GloZell's death was Joey's fault. Not her gender's.

Oh, who is he kidding? It doesn't *matter* why his friends keep dying. The point is, they're dead, and they shouldn't have died, and now he can't even think about them without feeling nauseous. No wonder Sierra's going crazy.

On the bright side, seven still live. And Oli's going to make sure it stays that way.
"Look, we can talk about this all we want," he says, struggling to keep his voice calm, "but if we're going to get out of this, we need to stick together. Blaming people and pointing fingers is only going to make things worse."

*United we stand. Divided we die.*

Personally, Tim's had enough of this shit.

Everyone's freaking out about the Guardian, whatever the hell *that* is, and being all "we're gonna die, we're gonna die, aaaaaaah!" They're *not*. They've survived a lot of crazy shit; some stupid lion-voiced son of a bitch is *nothing* compared to the ungodly machine. Or the mannequins. Or even the exploding car.

*Come on, you guys. Just gimme a shotgun, and I'll blow the bastard's head off. No sweat. We've got this in the bag.*

So when Matt reminds them that "We have three artifacts, guys. We are one more away from getting back to 2016," it takes all of Tim's willpower not to squash him in the Timothy DeLaGhetto Killer Bear Hug.

Instead, he stares at the carpet, keeping his grins to himself.

"Lele and Joey," says a surprisingly businesslike version of Oli White, "when you were upstairs, was there *anything* else that you found? Any clues? *Anything* we could use to—"

"Yeah." Joey reaches into his pocket and pulls out a fifty-cent ADMIT ONE ticket to a circus.

A *circus*.

Because you can't have a 1920s mansion without a *circus*, right?

Joey turns the ticket over, and there's a note written on the back. Tim barely has time to wonder who's writing all these notes before Joey clears his throat and reads.

*Round and round the room we go.*

Tim shrugs. "What if there's, like, a carnival ride?"

"A merry-go-round," suggests Sierra.

But Oli shakes his head. "What goes round and round *in this room?" he asks, wrecking Tim and Sierra's merry-go-round fantasy before it even has the chance to take off.

What a buzzkill.

"There *is* a record player," Matt points out. "That goes round and round."

"Is there a record on it?" Joey wants to know.

They check. There isn't.

"There's also a phone from back in the day," says Matt, holding up one of those old-fashioned rotary phone things.
He cranks it. Nothing happens.

"When you flush a toilet, it goes round and round," jokes Tim.

Sierra shoots an "are-you-crazy" look his way. "There's no toilet!"

"Oh." He can tell that she's not in a good mood. He doesn't blame her; watching someone die on the living room floor can do that to you. But hey, he's the comic relief, maybe he can cheer her up. "Give me a kiss."

She giggles. "You're creepy. Just saying." On the one hand, she's smiling, which is an improvement, but she's also looking at him like he's a psycho or some shit. "Trying to make out with me?"

Nah. Just trying to lighten up this doom-and-gloom atmosphere.

Sierra still doesn't trust him.

Yes, he didn't kill her, which is always a plus. But he did lure her out to the car, all by herself, without telling the group where they were going, which is textbook serial killer behavior. If they hadn't found the mannequin tied up in the trunk, who knows what could've happened?

He's sketchy. He's creepy. He's disturbingly charming. He's like Ted Bundy, if Ted Bundy was Asian.

Timothy has got to go.

Joey's messing around with a lamp when—

"Guys!"

There's a piece of paper hiding underneath the lamp. A note. Round and round...of course. The lamp. Round.

"Is this it?"

It is.

The carnival is coming to town! Follow your nose to the show!

"Wait." Joey wrinkles his nose. "Smell."

Eva sniffs. "It smells like oranges."

It does smell like oranges. Which is strange, considering they're in the parlor, where there are no oranges to be seen. Maybe it's some sort of weird perfume Sierra's wearing.

He sniffs her.

"It's not me, Joey!"

"Oh."

Now he feels stupid.
Follow your nose...

Eva sniffs around the first floor, trying to pinpoint the location of the wonderful orange smell. Honestly, she's surprised she can smell anything at all—her sense of smell has never been her strong suit—but the scent is strong enough to permeate even her subpar nostrils.

Finding it, however, proves difficult.

"It just smells bad in here," Sierra complains as they investigate the dining room. "Not like oranges."

"Yeah, it doesn't smell like oranges in here," Joey agrees.

"Guys!" Oli seems unusually agitated. "There are, like, fifteen to twenty orange trees outside...are you sure we have to find it inside?"

But the rest of the group has already moved on to the next room. Here, the scent is stronger, and Eva's pretty sure they've almost found it...whatever "it" happens to be.

Joey fiddles with the globe. "Oranges are in Florida. Maybe they're on the map? On Florida?"

"Orange chicken!" Tim shouts. "Chinese food! Maybe look at China!"

Eva sighs and rolls her eyes. Nice try, Timothy.

At least Oli's calmed down a bit, though his chestnut-brown eyes are still darting across the room like an anxious tennis ball. "Guys," he says, sniffing at the air, "this smells a lot like oranges right now..."

Joey's standing on a small stepladder, scanning the area behind the cabinet. "There's oranges over here. I don't know if it has anything to do with—"

"Does it have a symbol?" Matt asks.

"Omigod!" Joey points. "Lookit! It's a box!"

Bingo.

Oli, his muscles glistening through his dirtied shirt, grabs the box and carries it back to the parlor. Eva follows, examining their clue, the smell of oranges practically overpowering her poor nose.

"How did we not see that this entire time?" Matt mutters to no one in particular.

Probably because we're idiots, Eva's exhausted mind replies.

Oli puts the box on the floor, and Lele kneels down on the carpet in an effort to figure out what the hell is going on. So they've got a box. Whoop-de-do. High fives all around. But how is this thing going to help them fight the Guardian?

"So we have the marking here," says Oli, pointing to the Society Against Evil symbol that's etched onto the side of the box. That symbol's a staple of the house now, but Lele still wants to punch something every time she sees it. Probably because it brings back too many bad memories.

"Does it open?" Sierra asks.
Eva frowns. "What if it's, like, a box for tickets?"

Well, it certainly looks like a ticket box. It's brown, striped, medium-sized (and kind of ugly, honestly), and it's got the little ticket slot on top. I guess we're sticking with the circus theme, then. Yay.

"Oooh!" Tim (who's either way too optimistic or absolutely crazy, Lele isn't sure which) claps his hands together like a two-year-old. "Put the ticket in there!"

Joey takes out the ADMIT ONE ticket and drops it into the box. The lid swings open, revealing two clown masks and a note.

Moments later, the second roar hits Lele's ears like a boxer knocking out his much weaker opponent. She cringes. Her body absorbs the sound, converting it into a cocktail of adrenaline and fear.

Joey screams. So does Sierra. Even Tim looks rattled.

Matt's eyes are squeezed shut. "That is terrifying."

They take out the clown masks, passing them around like this is the world's creepiest game of Hot Potato. Lele, figuring she might as well take her mind off all the weird shit, grabs the note and reads it aloud.

*Now you see me, now you don't. Time is not forever. Time runs out. Your share is only one-sixth of an hour, not a moment longer.*

Okay. Never mind. This shit just got even weirder.

Arthur shows up out of nowhere, carrying another note. "It appears that you've also left this," he says, handing the note to a bewildered-looking Eva.

Sierra's voice rasps and fades to a whisper. "What...what is that?"

"Oh, no," groans Eva.

"Wait." Joey points to yet another note etched onto the side of the box. How they didn't notice that before, Lele has no idea. "What's that, what's that, what's that, what's that?"

Lele decides to let Oli take this one. She's done enough note-reading to last a lifetime.

*The Guardian is awake. Its rage can tear asunder both tree and mountain. There is a melody that is played when horses run in a circle that will summon the Ring Leader and his cursed carnival. His whip and wit have the power to subdue the monster. The first key to unlocking the horses waits in the river that flows to the sky on the back of the estate grounds.*

More monsters. More riddles. Another chance to die.

*Oh, crap.*

Matt flinches. He's spent the last several minutes trying not to worry about this Guardian business, but now that it's awake, it's time to start worrying.

At least there's a way to defeat it.
"Eva," squeaks Sierra, "what does that say?"

Eva holds up the note that Arthur gave her, squinting at the untidy cursive. She reads.

*The two wearing the clown masks will be invisible to the Guardian and should search for clues. The rest of you must hide from the Guardian past the grass line on the back of the estate. Every five minutes, a gong will sound, and one of the masked guests must run to the exchange circle and place the mask on another guest.*

*The Guardian patrols the grass-covered area. If everyone is captured, the Guardian wins, and the artifacts will be recovered by the house. You will be back at the beginning.*

"No!" gasps Joey.

A lump forms in Matt's throat. He plays with the mask in his hands, twisting the red nose like it's an especially flexible doorknob. They can't start over. They can't. Not after everything they've been through. Not when they're almost home.

Because if they do...Shane, Andrea, Justine, and GloZell will have died for nothing. And more people will have to follow them to the grave.

He can't let that happen.

*Please decide among you who will wear the masks first.*

"Should we have our fastest people without the masks, then?" suggests Matt, a hint of fear leakage out of his otherwise brisk voice. He points to the girls. "You guys are wearing heels..."

"We're fast," mutters Lele.

Matt frowns. Of course. She's still alive, and she's just as troublesome as ever. "Well, I was just looking out for your safety," he sighs, trying to avoid her furious gaze. "And your ankles."

"What do you have against girls?" Sierra shoots back.

*You're still on your sexism kick, I see. Okay—*

"Honestly," snaps Eva, pointing at Matt, "I would be perfectly fine leaving him in 1920..."

*Oh, God, no.*

At least Tim's on his side. "I think he was trying to help!"

Matt's just about to tell them all where to stuff it when another roar shakes the room like an earthquake. He springs to his feet, glancing around the room, his heart beating faster than a Derby-winning thoroughbred. *It's coming. It's almost here. We have to go. Now.*

"Marvin says that the Guardian is on his way to the house as we speak," says Arthur, passing out flashlights to the terrified group.

"Oh, no," moans Eva.

And then, before anyone has the chance to do anything, the Guardian appears.
Next chapter: Our heroes vs. The Guardian! Also, Eva's intellect, Lele's street smarts, and Matt's nonconsensual sacrifice.
The Guardian

Chapter Summary

The Guardian is awake! Now, it's up to the seven remaining YouTubers to summon the cursed carnival before the unimaginable happens...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

To call the Guardian a "monster" would be an understatement.

First of all, it's huge. It's the size of a small horse, and its muscles look like those of a pumped-up steroid junkie. It could probably break Oli's body in half with a flick of its pinky finger.

Second of all, it's ugly. Its skin is the color of soot, and its face looks like someone smashed it with a baseball bat. Horns poke out from the top of its bald head. Its teeth are white daggers. Its shoulder blades are actual blades. And worst of all, there's a murderous look in its pitch-black eyes, as if it would like nothing better than to rip the life out of any human it can get its humongous hands on.

As if? There's no "as if." It wants to kill us.

It claws at the window, slobbering all over the glass, bellowing at the terrified group. They scream. Matt falls flat on his back, knocking over a chair in the process. Sierra and Joey almost trip over each other trying to reach the door.

Oli runs. What else is he supposed to do?

They sprint out the door, across the lawn, and towards the back of the estate. Oli's lungs are struggling to keep up with the rest of his body, but the fear of being mauled by the ungodly beast proves to be the world's greatest energy boost.

Even Tim is beginning to freak out. "Where's the safe zone?"

"Omigod!" squeals Sierra. "These freakin' shoes!"

"There it is!"

Just as they reach the safe zone, the Guardian arrives. It's surprisingly agile for such a large creature, bulldozing its way toward them like an out-of-control freight car.

The sight of it is enough to send Oli into hysterics. "Omigod." He's sobbing, rocking back and forth, hugging himself in a vain attempt to stop the flow of panic. "We need a plan, we need a plan, we need a plan!"

"Everyone be quiet!" snaps a clearly agitated Matt. "We gotta figure this out!"

Then, much to Oli's relief, the Guardian stops right in its tracks. It growls, attempting to break through whatever invisible force field is protecting the group, but all it can do is stare at them with its malevolent eyes.
"We're safe here," sighs Oli, blinking the tears off of his sweat-drenched face. "We're safe."

For now, at least.

Sierra's going to die.

She should have seen this coming. She's the weak link, the girl who's done nothing but stick her head in the sand this whole time, the wimp who cries and whines and moans at everything, the only one who hasn't helped the group. And to think she thought that Andrea was useless.

Now, she's got a clown mask on her face, and she's going out to face the Guardian.

Yeah. She might as well kiss her life goodbye right now.

On the bright side, Eva's got the other mask, so at least she's not alone. Plus, these things are supposed to make them invisible to the Guardian, or at least that's what the note said, so maybe...

"Go!" Joey's voice breaks through her frantic thoughts. "You guys are good!"

Eva takes off. She darts past the Guardian, who's too busy roaring at the others to register her departure. Sierra takes a deep breath and follows her.

The clue. The clue. What was it?

The first key to unlocking the horses waits in the river that flows to the sky...

She's not good with riddles. Never has been. Maybe it's a sprinkler? Is there a sprinkler here? She doesn't see one. Did they even have sprinklers in the 1920s?

Eva? Little help here?

While Eva and Sierra look for whatever weird sky-river they're supposed to find, Tim's chilling with the others in the safe zone. He's kind of freaked out, not gonna lie, but it's fine. No biggie. Everything's under control.

Assuming, of course, they don't all get themselves killed.

"Okay." Joey's teeth chatter in the cold. "Let's make a plan for when I go."

"I'll distract him," offers Lele.

"You sure?" Tim frowns. "Cause you don't have to. I'll do it. I'm fast."

"So am I!"

Which is true. She is pretty fast, and she can pack a mean punch when she wants to. But Tim doesn't feel good sending her out there all by herself. Those heels she's wearing don't look too comfortable, and he'd rather not watch her trip and fall and get eaten by the Guardian. No matter how crazy she is.

Speaking of crazy, Sierra's waving her flashlight around like a monkey on a sugar rush. "Did you find anything, Eva?"
"No," Eva replies.

"I don't see anything!" squeaks Sierra's trembling voice. "I can't breathe!"

A gong goes off.

*Time's up.*

"Oh, shoot!" shouts Joey.

Lele grabs Tim's hand. "Let's go!" she shouts, attempting to yank him out of the safe zone. Tim, who's nowhere near ready to go yet, pulls his hand away.

"Hold on." Joey raises a trembling hand. "Not yet."

As Oli repeats "wait" over and over, Eva and Sierra reach the exchange circle. They stand there, masks still on their faces, as the Guardian patrols the area directly in front of the safe zone.

"Now!"

Tim zooms out the safe zone. The Guardian, of course, goes for him, leaving Joey and Lele free to run to the exchange circle. Matt's about to follow them, but Oli holds him back, screaming "We don't want to send everyone out!"

Just when Tim's about to head back to the safe zone, he slips on some wet grass.

*Dammit.*

He scrambles to his feet, but it's too late. The Guardian is there, teeth bared, claws out, inches away from him. There's no way he's going to make it back in time.

"Tim!"

*Hey, at least I went out a hero.*

*No.*

Eva doesn't *want* this. Watching the others die was bad enough, but she *can't* watch Tim get ripped apart by this vile freak of nature. She *can't*. Somebody's got to draw the line somewhere.


And then...Tim disappears.

Eva blinks. The Guardian's still there, looking even angrier than it did previously, but there's only a few fireflies where Timothy DeLaGhetto used to be.

*Is he dead?*

*Am I dead?*

Tim's in a darkened room, chained to the wall, his backside still smarting from his tangle with the Guardian. He has no clue where he is, or what's going on, or why he isn't a bloody mess on Joey's
lawn. But hey, he's still breathing, so that's a good sign.

"What the hell..."

"You're not dead." A strange voice slimes its way into his ears. "Yet."

He looks up. There's a thing on the ceiling. Kind of like a frog, except frogs don't usually look like they want to suck out your eyeballs.

"Great. Thanks. Now, if you don't mind, I've kind of got a few friends who need my help, so if you could just let me—"

"Not. So. Fast."

The frog-like creature wriggles its eyebrows, and a jolt of pain shoots up Tim's spine. He bites back his screams, choosing instead to squeeze his eyes shut and scowl at the ground. Fortunately, the pain only lasts about a second. Maybe two.

So it's to be torture, then. Whatever. He's down with that. As long as nobody starts playing any Jacob Sartorius songs, he'll be fine.

"It's not fair!" complains the thing, squinting into Tim's defiant brown eyes. "Why you? Why not the Furtado girl? She would've screamed..."

Tim shrugs. "Sorry not sorry."

"It doesn't matter. That was just a taste. I will make you scream...in due time..."

"That's my girlfriend's job."

"Shut up!"

Tim glances around the room, hoping to catch a glimpse of his friends, but the bastards didn't even give him a TV or anything. How is he supposed to know how they're doing if he's stuck in here?

"Your friends..." The creature seems to have read his mind. "They will come. The Guardian will catch them, one by one, and they will join you in this cell. And once they're all here, the real fun will begin."

Tim snorts. "I know. You'll take the artifacts back. We'll have to start over. Whatever. It's not gonna happen."

"Foolish boy." Its eyes flicker crimson, and it sneers at its prisoner through dagger-shaped teeth. "Did you really think it would be that easy?"

Shit.

"But the note said—"

The creature laughs. Its giggles feel like freezing water being poured down his shirt. "The note told only a part of the story."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Once your friends fail," it chortles, "the artifacts will be taken from them. That is true. But, alas, a simple reset button is not an adequate punishment. The stakes must rise."
Yeah. Like the stakes aren't high enough already.

"Failure must be paid in blood. You were captured first. You, Timothy, shall suffer the consequences."

Tim grits his teeth. He doesn't like the way this conversation is going. "So you're gonna—"

"—kill you. Yes. Slowly. Painfully. While all your friends look on. You will suffer like no one in the history of the world has ever suffered before...and then, once your little body has reached its limit, you will go to join your dear friend Andrea."

Okay. Okay. First of all, Andrea's off limits. Second of all, how dare this thing call him "little" when it's literally the size of a freakin' frog. That's like a dude with twenty different side chicks calling some other guy a cheater.

And as for the whole "you're gonna get tortured to death" bit, he's not too worried. No one else has been captured yet, have they? There's still six people running around Joey's lawn, so Frog Guy's gonna have to wait a while before he tries anything. And Joey, Matt, Lele, Oli, Eva, and Sierra are all too smart to get captured. They won't let him down.

He hopes.

*I'm not gonna die. I won't. It's not gonna happen. Not now.*

*I'm not ready.*

Tim's gone. Sierra doesn't know where he is, or even if he's still alive. And as she watches Eva give her mask to Joey and run back to the safe zone, tears prick her face like tiny needles.

Then, Lele arrives, and the Heiress's tears are replaced by adrenaline.

She shoves the mask on Lele's face, practically crushing the blonde's nose in the process, and takes off. The Guardian lunges for her, its claws missing her dress by inches.

"Go, go, go!" screams Oli from the safe zone. "Run, run, run, run, run!"

She's running. She's running as fast as she can, but she can still feel the Guardian's meat-flavored breath on the back of her neck. How she hasn't fallen into its clutches by now, she has no idea.

*Too close. Too close.*

"Sierra!"

Her legs are getting tired.

The Guardian's roar rings in her ears.

*I'm going to die. I know it. The Guardian's going to get me. I'm going to disappear, just like Tim, and then I'm going to die oh God oh God..."

"Well done!"

She stops. She opens her eyes. She's in the safe zone, with Oli and Eva fussing over her like a pair of overprotective parents. The Guardian's still growling at her, but it can't break through whatever
invisible barrier separates them.

*I'm alive.*

She savors it, gulping oxygen like water, listening to the *thump-thump-thump* of her still-racing heart. The tears reappear on her cheeks, but she welcomes their arrival. Even her throbbing feet don't hurt as much as they used to.

Now that Joey's wearing a mask, it's his responsibility to find the key. Problem is, he doesn't know where to begin. So he does what every stumped game show contestant tends to do: phone a friend. *Several* friends, actually.

"What do you guys think?"

Lele, his fellow mask-wearer, is too busy investigating the pool to acknowledge his question. Which is good. At least *someone* seems to know what they're doing.

Back in the safe zone, Matt frowns. "Maybe, like, gutters?"

"Yeah!" Eva shouts, jumping up and down, waving her arms around like she's trying to flag a taxi. "Look for a gutter! Cause, like, evaporation, and then, like, the lake..."

"I like that," says Matt.

Joey likes it too. So he looks for a gutter, flickering his flashlight across the sides of the house, while Lele continues to search the pool area. No luck.

"Maybe a birdbath?" suggests Eva.

*A birdbath.*

He knows he has one. He runs to it, trampling several bushes under his overenthusiastic feet. "Over here!" This is it. It has to be. It makes perfect sense. Eva's a genius, and they're finally, *finally* getting somewhere. "Lele! Over here!"

Lele joins him.

They look, and *there it is*—a key, shining like gold in the water. "I got it," Joey murmurs, snatching it up, repeating the mantra over and over. "I got it. I got it."

"We got it!" Lele screams.

The group rejoices.

"I can't see *anything* with this mask on!" Lele complains, stumbling her way to the poolhouse. She's glad they got the key and all, but *ugh*, clown masks and high heels are *not* a good combination. *Especially* not when there's a crazy monster on the loose.

Joey tries the key. It works. Thank God. They're in.

They enter the poolhouse. There's a giant chest on the floor, so they immediately attempt to open it.
Much to Lele's frustration, the damn thing stays shut.

"Wait." Joey's eyes light up. "The sides. The sides."

So they unclasp the sides, and lo and behold, the chest opens to reveal...another chest. A smaller one. With a combination lock on it. Lele somehow manages to stop herself from smashing her head against the floor.

"Let's take this out," Joey sighs.

They do so, lifting the smaller chest out of the larger one. It's a lot heavier than Lele thought it would be; her arms are screaming for mercy by the time they finally put it down.

She shakes her head, massaging her aching arms. "Should we take it back?"

Before Joey can respond, the gong goes off, and Lele knows her time is up.

"Gotta go."

"Oh, God." Joey hunches over the chest, looking like he's about to throw up all over it. "Good luck, Lele."

Thanks. I'm gonna need it.

Lele runs out of the poolhouse, across the lawn, and all the way back to the exchange circle, where she takes off her mask and waits for her replacement. Fortunately, the Guardian is too preoccupied with roaring at the sky and showing off its ugly abs to notice her arrival.

Unfortunately, the disgusting beast is also guarding the safe zone, so it's up to Eva to distract it.

"Yo!" she shouts, skipping out of the safe zone, waving her flashlight in the air. "What up! Come over here! Oli, go!"

The Guardian lunges for her, its teeth bared, but she slips back into the safe zone. Meanwhile, Oli barrels across the lawn, his arms pumping, a terrified expression on his face.

"Good job, Oli!" cheers Matt.

Yes, yes, well done, Oli, murmurs Lele's mind. Now, Lele, it's up to you. Go back to the safe zone, and try not to get yourself killed.

Oli arrives at the exchange circle. "Put it on me!" he gasps, his breaths short and staccato.

Lele puts the clown mask on Oli's damp face, then runs.

"No! Don't go yet!"

Too late. The Guardian's right behind her, snatching at her pearls. She can hear her brain shouting shit shit shit as her heart pounds liquid fear through her veins. I'm not gonna go out like this, she tells herself, sprinting towards the safe zone as fast as her legs can carry her. That demon, or whatever it is, is not gonna get me like it got Tim. I won't let it. I won't.

And she doesn't. She crashes into the safe zone, nearly flattening poor Sierra.

"Look at those legs!" shouts Matt to no one in particular. "Look at the speed!"

She flips him off.
So now Oli's invisible to the Guardian. Which is good, because he won't have to worry about being killed or captured or...whatever it was that happened to Tim back there. *(Tim, please, come back, don't be dead, I don't want you to be dead.)* He's got five minutes of peace, and he intends to make the most of them.

Joey sticks his head out from behind the poolhouse door. "Oli! In here! Quick!"

"Did you find anything?"

"We found this chest." Joey points to a medium-sized box with a lock on it. "But we don't know what the combination is, so we have to look around here."

As soon as Oli enters the poolhouse, he begins to examine his surroundings. There's several mirrors scattered around the room—some the size of a person, some medium-sized, and some small enough to carry. There's also two lamps encased in iron frames, a few plaques with strange inscriptions, and a large tapestry that covers the entire left wall. And, of course, there's the two iron chests on the floor.

Oli goes for the larger chest first. "Is there anything on here that says anything about combinations?" he asks, examining the open lid. There isn't.

"Wait," exclaims Joey, pointing to one of the lamps. "There's a three on that."

So there is. Oli pulls himself to his feet, smiles, and begins to examine the other lamp. If there's a number on one of them...maybe this is the key to figuring out the combination.

Sure enough, there's a number.

"Four!" shouts Oli.

Joey squints, his eyebrows arched, his face the picture of concentration. "Three...four..."

"Look!" Oli snatches up one of the hand-held mirrors and brings it over to Joey. "Two! Two!"

"Three...four...two..."

The two on the hand-held mirror, unlike the numbers on the lamps, is in the form of a Roman numeral. Oli, who's suddenly thankful for that brief Latin course he took in high school, grabs the other hand-held mirror and turns it over.

*IV.*

"Four!"

Joey kneels back down, his fingers tickling the combination lock. "One, two, three, four? Or two, three, four?"

Oli facepalms.

"Three...four..."

"Three, four, four." Oli rattles off each number as he points to the corresponding mirror or lamp. "And a two."

"Didn't work."
Oli's heart sinks. It should've worked. Those were the numbers. Unless..."Is there any kind of order?" he wonders aloud, turning his attention to the plaques with odd inscriptions. "What is this?"

*It's gibberish. Either that, or some strange language I don't know. And I don't have enough time to—*

*Oh.*

*Oh, no.*

On the side of the iron frame encasing one of the lamps, there's a number. Another number. Shouldn't there only be four numbers? Where did the extra one come from?

"Wait! Hold on!" He checks once more, just to make sure his eyes do not deceive him. "There's a three on there as well!"

"There is?"

Oli runs to the other lamp, shining his flashlight against the side of the frame. "And there's a one here! What the hell?"

"Oh, God," moans Joey. "I don't know..."

Too many numbers. That's the problem here. Too many numbers, and not enough spaces on the combination lock. And on top of that, Joey's almost out of time, and Oli's not sure if his replacement is going to be much help.

Unless it's Eva. Eva's the smart one. *She* could figure it out.

Probably.

In desperation, Oli flips the switch. The lamp with the three on the front and the one on the side lights up first, followed by the one with the three on the side and the four on the front. "Three, one, three, four."

"Three, one, three, four," Joey repeats, inserting the numbers into the lock. When nothing happens, he sighs and shakes his head.

"Goddamn it," Oli snaps. "That's not right?"

As if on cue, the gong goes off. Joey drops the lock, pushes his mask over his eyes, and scrambles to his feet. "Gotta go. Good luck, Oli."

He leaves, and Oli is left to continue the investigation alone.

"Joey's coming."

This is it. Finally. It's Matt's time to shine. He's going to go out there, and he's going to have a big heroic moment, and everything's going to be fine again. "Okay." He takes a deep breath, letting his excitement collide with his kind-of anxious nerves. "I'm going. Sierra, Eva, create a distraction."

Eva nods, though she's not really looking at him. Sierra, meanwhile, is far too busy shooting frightened glances at the Guardian to even acknowledge his suggestion.

*Okay. Okay. Whatever. You can do it. Time to show them all what you're made of.*
Seconds after Joey arrives in the exchange circle, Eva jumps out of the safe zone once again. This time, though, Sierra comes along.

"Hey, look!" shouts Eva.

"Hi," whimpers Sierra, though her heart's clearly not in it at all.

The Guardian stomps towards them. Matt, figuring now's his chance, starts running towards the exchange circle.

And that's when his entire beautiful plan goes down the drain.

Eva and Sierra hop back into the safe zone as soon as Matt takes off. The Guardian loses interest in them and charges after Matt instead. Matt's running like the wind, but apparently monsters can run a lot faster than the movies led him to believe, so now the damn thing's right on his tail.

"Someone distract!" screams Joey, his voice shaking. "Distract! Distract!"

But no one moves. And Matt is left to face the beast alone.

Sierra! Eva! He's boiling mad, but he's too busy running to chew them out at the moment, so he settles for a good old mental rant.

What the hell did you guys just do? That was not a distraction!

Forget it. He's almost there. A few more steps. There's Joey, mask in hand, waiting for him. He can do it. He can do it. He can—

The Guardian grabs him.

The next thing he knows, he's in a dungeon, his hands and feet confined by heavy chains. He tries to wriggle free, but all he manages to do is chafe his wrists on the metal.

"Matt?"

He knows that voice.

"Matt? Is that you?"

Matt looks up, and there's Tim, chained to the opposite wall. He's looking a little paler than usual, and his hands are shaking, but he's still got that cheeky DeLaGhetto grin on his face.

"Hey, Tim." Matt tries to smile back, but a halfhearted grin is all he's able to force onto his face.

"You okay?"

"Been better."

Matt's got so many questions—Where are we? What's going on? Why aren't we dead?—but before he gets the chance to ask any of them, he is interrupted by a bone-chilling voice.

"Hello, Matthew."

There's a frog on the ceiling. Well, at least, it looks like a frog; it's probably a demon of some sort. Or maybe a ghost. It's probably better not to think about it.

Matt sucks in a shaky breath. "Um...hi?"

"Look at you," the creature sneers. "Thought you were going to be some kind of hero. Thought you
were going to go out there and save everyone, weren't you?"

"I—"

"But they didn't pull their weight. They sacrificed you. To me."

"Dude!" Tim's voice is an angry shout. "Leave him alone!"

"Why should I? He's here. And because he's here, you're one step closer to your final moments. What a good friend."

Wait, what?

Matt turns to face his fellow prisoner, who's currently nurturing a rebellious sparkle in his eye. "Tim? What..." He gulps down his words, trying to ignore the terrible feeling in the pit of his stomach. "What is it talking about?"

Tim open his mouth to respond, but the thing beats him to it. "This."

It jerks its head, and Tim begins to convulse, his body vibrating like it's undergoing a terrible earthquake. A few anguished groans escape from between his gritted teeth.

"No!"

They're hurting him. They're torturing Timothy.

"Stop it!"

The creature—a demon, it's got to be a demon, Matt has no doubt about that now—shrugs. "Whatever you say...Professor."

The convulsions stop. Tim's against the wall, gasping for air, his face even paler than it was previously, a few scattered teardrops glistening from the corners of his eyelashes. Matt wants to run to him, to see if he's okay, but the chains hold him back.

"It's pointless, Matthew." The demon's voice has become a gloating ooze. "This is never going to end. You—all of you—are going to die."

"That's not true..."

It laughs, pointing at Tim with a single bony finger. "He dies first. As soon as the Guardian has succeeded in capturing the others, you can all sit back and watch me kill him. Then, once he's dead, your precious artifacts will be stolen from you, and everything you've worked for will be lost. You will never leave this house alive, and neither will any of your pathetic little friends."

Angry tears stain Matt's cheeks. No. It won't happen. Tim's not going to die, and neither is anyone else. They'll make it home. They will. They will. They will. Except for Lele. Lele can die right now for all he cares.

Oh God...

He won't believe it. He doesn't want to believe it. And yet...there's a small part of him, about the size of a curled-up fist, that's already begun to believe the creature's words. And that's the part of him that's taking his dreams and flushing them down the drain.
This is never going to end. We are all going to die.


Concentrate.

"I'll distract him," suggests Lele. Before anyone can object, she's out in the open, clapping her hands and talking in a tiny baby voice. "Hey!"

"You have to stay close to him!" shouts Joey from the exchange circle.

Since Lele's being distracting, Joey's in the exchange circle, Oli's already got a mask on, and Sierra looks like she'd rather eat horse poop than go out there again, Eva figures she might as well take another stab at the whole "mask of invisibility" thing. So she runs to the exchange circle, trying to ignore the nighttime breeze fluttering through her practically-useless coat.

Lele, thank God, still has the Guardian under control. "Hey! Hey!"

The Guardian swipes at her skirt, but she's back in the safe zone before it has the chance to capture her.

"Give me the mask!" Eva's running so fast, she has to grab Joey's shoulders in order to come to a complete stop. "Joey, give me the mask!"

He does. She puts it on, the string slipping comfortably between her ears and her hair. Only when she's sure it's on securely does she look up to see how Joey's doing.

She immediately regrets it.

Having apparently decided that Lele isn't worth the effort, the Guardian shoots like a rocket across the lawn. Joey's practically flying, his blazer flapping in the wind, but the two of them appear to be heading towards a collision nonetheless.

"Joey!" screams Sierra.

Eva's throat goes dry.

But then, just when it looks like the Guardian is about to get its filthy claws on Joey Graceffa, the Savant leaps over its outstretched arm and lands on an overgrown patch of grass in the safe zone.

He's safe. Which means that Eva can go find Oli without any more disappearances on her conscience.

So off she goes, jogging past the pool, her flashlight clenched tightly within her sweaty hand. "Oli?" she calls, letting the name echo around the courtyard.

"Eva!" It's his voice, all right; she'd know that British accent anywhere. And it's coming from the poolhouse, so that's where their next clue must be. "Quickly! Quickly, Eva! You're good at this!"

Eva's glad she's got the mask on. She'd rather not be caught blushing when there's a mystery to solve.

She dashes into the poolhouse. Oli's on the ground, frowning at a combination lock. There's mirrors scattered here and there, but what really grabs Eva's attention is the pair of tablets with weird
inscriptions. "What is this?" She shines her flashlight on each tablet. It takes her a few minutes, but she soon figures out what's up with the gibberish written there. "It's backwards."

Oli straightens up. "Really? What does it say?"

"I don't know." Eva squints at the inscription. She's never been good at reading things backwards, but hey, she might as well give it a try. "N...G...nine?"

"Check the mirrors!" That's Joey's voice, shouting at them from the safe zone. "Look at it in reverse! The mirrors! Use the mirrors!"

*The mirrors.*

Eva understands. She picks up one of the mirrors (the one with the four on it) and holds it up to the tablet on the left. Sure enough, the inscription begins to make sense.

"That says eight," she informs Oli.

"Omigod!" Oli grabs the mirror with the two on it. He's so excited, he comes dangerously close to dropping it on the marble floor. "Yeah! Here! Look!" He holds it up to the second tablet. "Seven! Seven!"

"So that means..."

"Three, seven, eight, four!"

They're so close. So goddamn close. But when Eva tries to punch it in, the stupid lock refuses to acknowledge her attempt. "It's not working!" she moans, rattling the lock in frustration.

"Oh, come on," sighs Oli. "That is it. That is it."

"No!"

"You sure?"

The gong goes off.

Oli backs out of the room, not looking too eager to face the Guardian again. "Two, seven, eight, one?" he mutters, more to himself than to her.

She tries it. "No."

"Dammit."

And then he's gone.

Eva closes her eyes, forcing her furious tears back into her brain. She's got to stay strong. She's got to keep trying. She can't let a minor setback destroy her concentration. This puzzle, no matter how difficult it is, is *not* going to break her.

Besides, she's on the right track. That's *got* to count for something.

Oli's getting *so* frustrated. They are *so* nearly there, but he *still* can't seem to figure out the bloody combination. And, on top of that, now he's got to go risk his life again.
Great.

He enters the exchange circle without incident. Lele and Sierra are busy distracting the Guardian ("Yoo hoo! Over here! Hey, look at me!"), and Matt has apparently vanished off the face of the earth, so Joey's the one who shows up to take his place.

"Here you go," murmurs Oli, handing over the mask. "Do you—"

"Yeah. Can't talk. No time. Go!"

Oli runs. He doesn't think, he doesn't speak, he doesn't check to see if the Guardian's behind him or not. He just runs, hoping against hope that the Guardian won't catch him.

"Oh, God!"

*Oh God is right.* He can hear the Guardian's roar, which means it can't be too far away. *Keep running keep running keep—*

Safe.

"Where's Matt?" he asks between breaths, dreading the answer.

Sierra shakes her head. "Gone. It got him. Just like Tim. He just...disappeared."

Tim's got a lot of respect for Matt. Sure, he might be a bit too paranoid about the whole Lele thing, but homeboy can be pretty damn smart when he wants to be. But now...well, *now*, the poor guy's so demoralized, he's staring at the floor with a lifeless expression on his tear-stained face. You'd think that he was the one who just got tortured.

And Tim can't have that. He might still be aching from the whole torture thing, and the frog dude might still be watching from the ceiling, but neither of those things are gonna stop him from cheering up his friend.

"Matt." He looks him dead in the eye. "Snap out of it. I don't care what Frog Guy said, *nothing* is going to—"

"It's not fair."

"Yeah, well, but—"

"Don't 'yeah-well-but' me, Tim. You just got tortured. And if this keeps up, you're going to die, and I..." A brief, uncertain pause. "I don't want you to die."


"And I know that thing's trying to mess with my head, saying all that stuff about how we're going to die, but...what if it's right? What if we fail, and we all end up dying in various horrible ways, and none of us ever see 2016 again?"

"Bro. Chill. We're almost there. I'm not...it's not gonna happen."

"I know." Matt falls silent for a few moments, using the little freedom his hands still have to fiddle with his suspenders. After what seems like an eternity of silence, he looks up. "But...Tim..."
"Yeah?"

"What if it does?"

Joey's figured it out.

He storms into the poolhouse. "The third number is four," he gasps, pointing to the lamp with the four on the front and the three on the side. Then, he turns to the other lamp, the one with the three on the front and the one on the side. "This is the first number. First number's three. And then these..."

"Eight and seven," Eva reports.

_Three, seven, four, eight._

They try it. For three excruciating seconds, nothing happens. And then, just when Joey's beginning to wonder what he's doing wrong, Eva lets loose with a loud and proud "Yeah!"

The lock clicks.

"You got it!" Joey's running on fumes, racing around the place like a car about to burn out. "Yes!"

Eva opens the chest. Inside, there's a music box, shaped like a carousel, the horses dancing on their tiptoes. It's one of those ridiculously girly things Justine would've liked.

Don't think about her.

Joey grabs it. "Okay, we need to play the music, because—"

Wait. There's a note.

_Stand on the circular stone platform next to the house. Raise the horses to the sky and let the music play._

"They're coming."

There they are. Joey and Eva, running towards a platform of some sort, looking a bit stupid in those clown mask they've got on. But Lele's not complaining, because they've got the horses. Which means..._omigod, we did it._

"Yes!" shouts Oli.

_Suck it, Guardian._

Joey steps up onto the platform. Eva follows him, the horses nestled between her perfect nails.

Lele frowns. "Wait. What are they doing?"

Eva twists a knob on the box. Then, before Lele has the chance to figure out what's going on, she raises the carousel above her head. A strange tune plinks its way through the air, echoing all the way back to the safe zone.

The Guardian roars.
And then...was that a whip?

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: Roll up! Roll up! It's time for the greatest show on earth! Also, the group must throw two of their own under the bus once again.
Freak Show

Chapter Summary

The gang somehow ends up at a circus. In Joey's backyard. Because of course they do.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Suddenly, a ringmaster and his weird lady sidekick appear out of nowhere.

"Omigod." Sierra stares at the new arrivals, unable to take her eyes off of the whip in the ringmaster's hand. "Who is that? What's going on?"

Oli shakes his head. "I have no idea."

The ringmaster is fairly well-dressed; he's wearing a neat black coat over his vest, there's a black top hat on his head, and his matching black tie would not be out of place at a costume party. He has black skin, a strange black mustache that curls around his lips, and an unsettling gleam in his almond-shaped eyes. His sidekick, meanwhile, has short black hair, a hat made out of peacock feathers, and a tiny dress that leaves nothing to the imagination.

Who are these people? ponders Sierra, biting her lip. What do they want? Are they going to save us from the Guardian? Or...are they here to...

"Come on!" he shouts. His voice is like sandpaper mixed with margarine. "There is no need to hide in the woods! Everyone is welcome at the show!"

The show?

"Welcome!" The lady sidekick extends her arms, as if she's inviting the whole world to whatever freaky spectacle they're about to see.

Everyone approaches the ringmaster, inching towards him as if they're under his hypnotic spell. Even the Guardian—the bloodthirsty beast who's terrorized them for the past half hour—has suddenly turned docile, slinking towards the ringmaster with its head hanging low.

Is it...ashamed?

What's happening?

And where are Matt and Tim?

The sound of the whip slices through Matt's eardrums, snapping him out of his funk. He looks up.

"They did it." Tim's trademark grin is back on his face where it belongs. "The whip. The ringmaster. His whip and wit have the power to subdue the monster. That's what it said. Matt, they freakin' did it!"
The frog creature, on the other hand, looks downright furious.

"So." It curls its lip. "Your friends have succeeded. The Guardian, damn him, has been neutralized. I suppose this means I'll have to let you two go."

"Yeah!" cheers Tim, pumping his fist in the air.

Matt exhales. They've done it. They've found the horses. They've summoned the ringmaster and his cursed carnival. He's not going to have to watch his friend get tortured to death after all.

"But do not think for a moment that this...setback changes anything. The evil of this house is too strong to be defeated by a foolish little group of people who make YouTube videos for a living. It will claim your lives. Not now, perhaps, but before the night is over, every last one of you—"

Tim shrugs. "Yeah, yeah, yeah. Whatever. Shut up."

Matt snickers.

In a flash, they're back on Joey's lawn, walking towards a man with a bullwhip in his hand and a smile on his face. "Come on!" he laughs, cracking his whip against the marble walkway.

Not knowing what else to do, Matt and Tim join the rest of the group.

The Guardian mumbles something to itself. Almost immediately, the ringmaster turns to face it, and the merriment in his eyes is replaced with a burning anger. "You!" He points at the Guardian. "Come here and kneel before me, you ungrateful runaway!"

Much to Matt's surprise, the Guardian obeys. It shuffles sheepishly towards the ringmaster, brushing past a trembling Sierra as it does so, and kneels in front of him.

There's an odd sort of pain in the ringmaster's voice as he speaks. "I made you into something that people would travel for miles to see...and you threw it all away." He sighs, composes himself, and glares at his captive. "There will be punishment."

'Hmmmm. So, apparently, the Guardian was some sort of attraction at the ringmaster's circus, and then it escaped just in time to make their lives hell. To chase them around, capture them, nearly kill them, scare them out of their minds...

Matt doesn't consider himself a sadistic person. But whatever "punishment" the ringmaster has in mind...I hope you make it suffer.

The ringmaster turns back to the group, smiling once again. "I think a celebration is in order."

"Yes!" exclaims his sidekick. "Celebrate!"

"For the return of our beloved Sam..."

Sam? So the Guardian has a name now?

"My esteemed guests...I ask you to join me in an evening of the thrilling bizarre..."

Tim frowns. Eva bites her lip. Lele's got an "are-you-serious" look on her face.

"The carnival!" The ringmaster cracks his whip once again. "Yes! The curse! Follow me!"

So now they're going to go see a circus. A cursed one, no less. Matt can think of a million reasons
why this is a bad idea, but he'd rather not say no to a guy who single-handedly neutralized the ferocious Guardian, so...yeah. Circus. Cursed circus. Fine.

It's like he's in the Twilight Zone. And he's not too anxious to see what's on the other side.

There's a *circus* now?

What the *hell* has Lele gotten herself into?

Whatever. She's here, and so are her friends, and so are Arthur and Sarah for some reason. (Shouldn't they be, y'know, *cleaning* something right about now?) And they're all lined up at the front gate, ready to go see the creepiest show on earth.

Also, there's a bearded lady in the ticket booth. Because screw it, that's why.

"I need your tickets, please!"

"I have a ticket." Joey pulls the ADMIT ONE ticket out of his pocket and hands it to the bearded lady.

She takes it, puffing her pitch-black lips, studying Joey through a faceful of mascara. "Welcome to the circus," she purrs. "Now, go."

They enter. There's weird posters, strings of tiny lights, a man juggling bright blue bowling pins...and, in the center, a red-and-blue tent, which is clearly the nucleus of the whole damn operation.

"This is terrifying," says Matt, and for once, Lele agrees with him.

Joey points at the bearded lady, looking like he's trying to bring back a long-forgotten memory. "I think I know her..."

But before he can elaborate, a bird-man thing (short black wings, insanely long legs, demented expression on its face) pops up out of nowhere and scares the shit out of the group. Joey screams louder than any of them, nearly stepping on Lele's toes in an effort to escape from the jumpscare.

"What the hell!"

They're about to enter the tent. The ringmaster won't stop grinning at them—hell, he looks like he just escaped from a mental ward. And if it's so freakin' scary *outside* the tent, who *knows* what this twisted show has in store for them?

One thing for sure: if there's clowns, Lele's dead. She *hates* clowns.

As soon as the group sets foot in the tent, Lele points. "Is that the artifact?"

Joey looks, and she's right. There's the artifact, on display, sticking out like a sore thumb in the middle of all this color. "Omigosh!" One more. The last one. They're almost out of here.

"We *need* that," Eva gasps. "That's the last artifact. We're here. We're going to get it."

*But what are we going to have to do to get it?*
"This is my greatest achievement," says the ringmaster, pointing to the artifact with a smile on his face. "It took me half a life to get. But..." He pauses, letting the word "but" hang in the air like an empty noose. "I will make you a deal."

Joey gulps. He can feel his stomach slide into his intestines.

The ringmaster surveys the group; he looks like he's trying to decide which pig is fat enough to be slaughtered. "Find me two willing performers for tonight's show, and I will loan you the artifact."

Of course. I should've known.

"I must warn you," the ringmaster continues, "this show can sometimes be quite...precarious."

Precarious. Dangerous. "This is a death," Joey gasps, his body struggling to regain control of his lungs. For the fourth time in five hours, there will be a vote, and he'll have to dip his already-stained hands in someone else's blood.

At least it's almost over. One more vote. One more death, and the remaining six YouTubers will be free to go.

"It was all worth it, Joey."

As the girls form a huddle in the corner of the tent, Sierra's plan is already in place.

"We need to make it so that it's girls against guys," she whispers, her voice a determined hiss. "Every girl is dying, and it's messed up."

Eva nods. "It can't be a girl."

Sierra glances over at the boys, who are talking among themselves at the other side of the tent. "Timothy is sketchy." His smirk is burning like a fire in the back of her mind. "Like, what kind of guy lures a girl outside to a creepy car, like, by herself? That's not okay."

A boy must die. And Tim's the one who deserves the ax the most.

"I feel like Sierra's super calm," says Tim. Which is a lie, and everyone knows it, but Matt's not in the mood to nitpick other people's suggestions. "Maybe she'll be better at doing stuff like...y'know...walking the tightrope..."

Joey turns to Matt, his eyes ablaze. "We can't do Lele again."

Matt sighs. "I know." He still thinks that Lele's the one who's working with the evil spirit. It's the only logical explanation. But on the other hand, she does seem to be calming down a bit, and...he just doesn't know if he has the heart to vote for her yet again. Especially after everything he's already put her through.

She, however, has made it clear that she has no such inhibitions.

"You know, I can't wait to see you die."

"You guys pick," he mutters, slumping against the nearest bench. "I don't want to be the bad guy again."
Eva's always been a fan of the circus. Under normal circumstances, she'd love to perform acts of derring-do in front of a crowd of awestruck circus-goers. Heck, she'd probably be the first to volunteer.

But not this time. She loves the circus, but she's not quite ready to die.

She turns to Lele. "I think we should go with..." Yes, Tim's had his moments of sketchiness, but at least he hasn't tried to murder her best friend at every opportunity. "Matt."

Lele snorts. "I am going for Matt!"

Oh. Right. It's like going up to a monkey and saying "hey, I think you should eat this banana." The monkey's going to eat the banana whether you want it to or not. And Lele's going to vote for Matt. Of course.

Honestly, just as long as Lele and Oli survive, Eva's pretty sure she'll be okay.

Hey, at least someone agrees with Lele about the whole Matt thing.

"Joey, what are you doing?"

She looks up, and there's Joey, coming to join their circle. "Gonna check on the girls," he hisses over his shoulder. "Be right back. Maybe. I don't know."

Lele's heart soars. He's defecting. He cares. He really cares.

As Joey approaches the girls, Eva puts one arm around Lele's shoulder and the other around Sierra's, pulling them close to her like a protective mother hen. Lele snuggles up against her, glad she doesn't have to face this house's craziness alone.

Joey's voice drops several octaves. "We don't need them."

"Exactly!" shouts Lele.

"We don't need Matt." Eva's tone is brisk and matter-of-fact. "Or Timothy."

"A boy," Sierra insists. "It's gotta be a boy."

Lele nods, drinking in their suggestions, grinning to herself. Matt has to go, of course he does, he's been out to get her this whole time. And he's really close friends with Tim, so why not let them play together?

There it is. That's her game plan. This had better work.

Now that Joey's gone to join the girls, Tim's stuck with two guys who don't seem to care who gets voted in. Oli's got his head in his hands, looking like he wants to go hide in a wardrobe or something, and Matt still hasn't gotten over his bout of depression from earlier. Between their apathy and the girls' desperate whispers, Tim feels like a clown at a funeral.

"Whatever you guys want to do," Matt sighs, playing with the buttons on his shirt.
Oli sinks into his seat. "I have no idea, dude."

Aw, c'mon, guys. You're acting like this is the end of the world or something. How do we know this is even a death challenge? What if we just end up doing a few tricks, getting the artifact, and going on our merry way?

Tim turns to face his friends, keeping that optimistic smile superglued on his face. "Should we be like men and just man up and...y'know...just go?" He strikes a manly pose. "Like, I'll do it?"

Matt shrugs. "Bro, I'm down." A smile scampers like a mouse across his face.

See? Look. I did it. I got you to smile. You're not a grumposaurus after all.

"We will now begin voting," announces Arthur. "Who's ready?"

Not me, mutters Matt's mind, retreating into dreams of home. He promised Joey he wouldn't vote for Lele, and a promise is a promise, but...now who's he supposed to vote for? No one else is dangerous. No one else deserves to fall victim to the carnival's curse.

Oh, what's the use? Maybe the frog thing was right. Maybe they're fighting a losing battle. Maybe he should "man up," as Tim so eloquently put it, and volunteer himself for the challenge. What's the point of surviving if everyone's going to die?

Lele goes first. "Matt!" she shouts, punctuating his name with an extra stab of the pencil.

And just like that, Matt's survival instinct returns with a vengeance. "I'm coming back," he broadcasts, his hands clenched into fists, anger and determination surging through his veins. "For sure. You can put me in at any time. I'm coming back."

She thinks she can break him. Her and Frog Guy both. But he will not be broken.

He will survive.

As Lele returns to her seat and Tim takes her place at the hat, Matt turns around to face the girl who's tormented him for so long. "I'm going to be the bigger man, and guess whose name I'm not going to write?"

"Mine?" chirps Lele in a singsong voice.

"Lele's."

"Well, you're going to heaven," she says sarcastically.

Matt shrugs. Don't let it get to you. "Or you're going to hell."

His fingers are itching to vote Lele in. But since he's taking the moral high ground, he has to choose someone else. Not Tim, of course. Not Joey, because he doesn't want to become GloZell #2. And voting for himself...well, he's gotten over his temporary bout of insanity, so that idea can go straight to the garbage where it belongs. That leaves Sierra, Eva, and Oli.

Eenie-meenie-minee-mo...

Oli sighs, glancing around the tent with a world-weary look on his face. "I can't believe we're doing this again."
Everyone's done voting, so now Arthur's doing the whole "shake up the hat" thing again. "And now," he says, "I will draw two names to face the circus."

Tim checks his watch. Half-past twelve. Really? That late? It was only eight o'clock when he got here. Actually, it was a little after eight, since he was a bit late to the party, but hey, it's not like anybody cared. He made it in time for dinner, didn't he?

Whatever. The point is, he can't wait to go home and sleep this craziness off. Maybe when he wakes up, it'll all turn out to be the result of a massive hangover, and everything will be fine.

He can only hope.

*Andrea...*

No. Think positive. *Positive*, dammit.

Arthur picks a name.

"Timothy."

"Oh." Tim blinks, absorbing his name like a washcloth absorbing kerosene. "Well, damn."

Okay. So he's in. Someone in the group must've thought "hey, there's Tim, he's an entertaining person...charming...attractive...he'd probably be good at performing, why don't I vote him in real quick." That's understandable.

And now, he's going to perform in an actual circus. Big top, tightrope, all that jazz. Time to show this crowd what he's got.

(He decides to ignore the part where he might die.)

Oli hates this. He hates everything about it. Voting people in, forcing them to do challenges, sending them to their deaths...there has got to be a better way to get these bloody artifacts.

*Good luck, Tim.*

Second name. Arthur fishes about for a bit. Oli stares at the ground, his stomach threatening to spill its contents all over his shirt, trying his hardest not to watch Arthur pick Tim's fellow performer.

*Almost over. It's almost over.*

"Oli."

Several people gasp. Eva shouts Oli's name, genuine concern in her voice. As for Oli himself, he feels like someone just snuck up behind him and shoved a bottle of bug spray down his throat.

"You guys voted for me?"

The room erupts into a choir of I-didn't-vote-for-yous, each denial more insistent than the one before. The girls, especially, are tripping over themselves to deny their involvement in Oli's downfall.

Seven people. Two performers. The odds were *entirely* in Oli's favor. And yet, out of everyone in
the group, his flippering name got called.  

Someone has fully stabbed him in the back.

"So I have my two participants for tonight's show!" announces the overjoyed ringmaster, pulling Tim and Oli to the front of the tent. "The rest of you can enjoy the show with our crowd. And I promise you, they won't bite you." He chuckles. "That much."

Joey surveys the crowd. They're only just beginning to file in, but so far, none of them look like very nice people. One woman in particular is eyeing Tim and Oli as if she wants to disembowel them both.

As the ringmaster continues speaking, his eyes dart over Oli's suspenders and Tim's plaid jacket. "But, gentlemen, you cannot perform in these clothes. They'll get ruined."

You know what else is gonna get ruined? snaps the angry part of Joey's mind. A life. You're going to kill someone. And you don't even care.

Screw this circus. Screw it and everything it stands for.

"Let the show begin!"

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: Oli and Tim perform for the crowd! Who lives? Who dies? Who knows?
Are You Not Entertained?

Chapter Summary

Tim and Oli are being forced to put on a potentially deadly show. Could this be the end for one of them? Or worse...both of them?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Oli's in the bathroom, his hands shaking, forcing a striped shirt over his chest, unable to control the frantic fluttering of his heart. He doesn't know what's going to happen, but the possibilities alone are enough to terrify him.

He could die.

He's twenty-one years old. He likes badminton, video games, and making quirky comedy videos. He didn't want any of this to happen. And he's not ready to go.

"Hey, Oli."

There's Tim. He's pretty much done dressing; his beret is crooked, but he doesn't seem to notice.

"Tim." Oli can't do it. He can't look at Tim without waves of regret washing through his body.

"Look, man...I just wanted to say...you've been a good friend, and I didn't vote for you, and this shouldn't be happening, God I'm so sorry..."

"Oli. Calm down. It's gonna be fine." But even as Tim says it, a hint of worry creeps across his otherwise brave face.

He's scared too.

Just as Oli finally gets his clothes on, the ringmaster's sidekick pokes her head through the bathroom door. "Ready?" she chirps, a toothy smile enveloping her jawline.


"Let's do this."

When Tim and Oli reappear, they're dressed in matching outfits: white gloves, black suspenders, black-and-white striped shirts, even black berets on both their heads. They're like Tweedledum and Tweedledee, if Tweedledum was Asian and Tweedledee looked like a lumberjack.

Lele almost laughs, but then she remembers that someone's going to die, so she turns it into a cough at the last minute.

"Ladies and gentlemen, your acts for tonight," announces the ringmaster. "Timothy DeLaGhetto and Oli White! Give them a round of applause!"
The YouTubers clap (except for Eva, who's staring at the boys with a vaguely horrified look on her face). The rest of the crowd, on the other hand, has a disturbingly different reaction.

"Booooooo!

*Oh, don't you dare.* "Why don't you guys go, then?" Lele snaps, turning to face the hecklers. "I don't get it. Why don't you guys go?"

"That's not cool," growls Tim. "That is not cool."

The crowd keeps booing, and Lele fights the urge to bash their disgusting heads together. Tim and Oli are about to risk their lives for these pricks' entertainment, and they have the *nerve* to boo them before they've even done anything. If they're going to be so high and mighty, why don't they just do it themselves? Assholes.

"Now, gentlemen," the ringmaster continues, ignoring the boos, "you will be performing three acts for tonight's show. The first one is a strongman feat. The second—a juggling act. And the third—the high wire walk of death!"

"Death!" shrieks his sidekick.

Lele flinches. *God,* that woman's voice gives her the creeps.

First event: the strongman.

It's one of those "test your strength" games. Oli's not too worried about this one; he's done it at a couple of funfairs before, and he's always gotten a good score.

"Swing the mallet," instructs the ringmaster, handing said mallet to Oli, "and hit the bell!"

Oli takes a deep breath, counts to three, and swings. The puck goes up *maybe* a third of the way before careening back down again.

"Booooooo!"

They're booing. The crowd is booing. He's only *just* started, and they're already booing him.

*Brave. Be brave.*

"One more!" the ringmaster shouts.

*Come on, Oli.* He stares at the bell, his eyes narrowing in concentration. *You can do this. One swing. One.*

He grits his teeth, channels the last trembling remains of his strength, and smashes the mallet onto the unsuspecting lever.

The puck hits the bell.

There's still a few boos, but they're drowned out by the raucous cheers of his friends. Joey and Sierra clap, Matt nods and says "Solid effort," Eva looks like a weight's been lifted off her shoulders, and Lele screams triumphantly at the grumbling crowd.

Oli hands the mallet to Tim. One down. Two to go.
"I got this," Tim proclaims, preparing to swing the mallet. He's actually not so sure he "got this," considering he's never been too good with these strongman things. It's kind of hard when you're a short little dude who doesn't work out too often. And he did just get tortured ten minutes ago, so he might not be at prime physical capacity anyway.

He swings. It goes up about as far as Oli's first attempt did—that is, not far at all.

"Boooooooo!"

Tim glares at the crowd, wondering who peed in their cornflakes this morning. "That was a warmup!"

"One more!"

"Here we go." The wood is cold in his hands. He runs himself through his mental pep talk—you've got this, you're going to make it, you're going to live—and brings that mallet down so hard it almost gives him whiplash. "Bitch!"

It yields the same result.

"Booooooooo!"

Oh, shit. I lost. I'm already behind. Dammit.

He glances over at the others. Eva's got her hands over her mouth, Lele's yelling at the hecklers again, Matt and Joey both look like they're in pain, and Sierra...what the hell is she smiling about?

Whatever. Walk it off. It's only one challenge. He's still got this.

Don't die don't die don't die don't die don't die.

"I promise you, none of you guys can do it better!" Lele screams, shaking her fist at the crowd. "I promise you that!"

Stupid crowd. Booing at everything, not even giving the boys a chance. Ugh. She hates them. She wants to beat them up. Especially that one old man in the front row. He's way too loud—jeering, insulting, waving his striped scarf around like a crazy person.

We hear you, okay?

She hates that old man.

Eva's biased.

She likes Tim and all, he's a cool guy, she's got nothing against him, but...she can't let anything happen to Oli. He's the voice of reason. The sensible one. The one who hasn't lost his mind. And she cares about him a lot more than she's willing to admit.

He can't die.
The juggler reappears. "It is now time to test your dexterity, coordination, and concentration with..." He juggles three balls; they dance in a ring around his grinning face. "A little bit of juggling!"

He hands the balls to Oli.

"I can't even juggle two balls," Oli complains, "let alone three."

Eva looks him square in the eye. "Me neither." Her voice is like a butcher knife, hacking its way through Oli's juggling-related insecurities. "But you're going to know how to juggle today, because you're going to survive."

*Four of my friends are dead.* Dead. *They're never coming back. I saw them die. I lost them.*

*And I can't lose you too.*

"Concentrate!" shouts the ringmaster.

*I'm trying.* Oli stares at the balls. Despite Eva's encouragement, he *knows* he's not going to win this time. The last time he tried juggling something...well, let's just say it didn't end well for anyone.

But he tries. He tries to juggle the balls, and they end up going every which way. Only one is successfully caught. The other two hit the ground.

"Booooooo!"

"Oli," Eva moans, her tone laced with disappointment.

Oli's stomach is beginning to churn. He can't do it. He can't juggle to *literally* save his life. All he can do is hope that Tim is on the same level as him, if not worse.

Tim's got the balls. "I got this," he insists, repeating the phrase for the thousandth time tonight. He takes a deep breath, plasters a smile on his face, and begins to juggle.

And then he fails. Spectacularly. The balls are going everywhere *except* where he wants them to go. He's making Oli "I Can't Juggle" White look like a professional.

Maybe he isn't cut out for this whole circus thing after all.

"Boooooooo!"

"Wait!" Okay, that's it. That is *it.* He's sick and tired of these morons heckling everything he does. If he's going to die, he's not going to do it while people are booing him. "I was warming up! I was warming up! Hey!"

Whereupon he grabs his balls and throws them at the audience.

Now *everyone's* shouting at once. The booers are yelling stuff like "Get outta here!" and "Can't we just kill this guy already?" Even his own friends look pissed; Sierra, especially, is having a freakout right there on the bench.

Tim doesn't care. After everything they've put him and Oli through, the shock and surprise on those idiots' faces makes it all worth it. Also, he's pretty sure he hit one guy in his junk, so at least he'll
have something to laugh about before...

Anyway. Back to trying not to die.

"See?" Sierra was right, she was right, Tim's unstable, he's losing it, he's going to kill someone if they don't oh God. "See what I've been saying about him? I don't trust him!"

Matt puts a hand on her shoulder. "Sierra. It's okay."

No, no it's not, not really, don't you understand? Doesn't anybody understand?

"Now," says the ringmaster, looking like a wolf about to go in for the kill, "for the grand finale—the high wire walk of death!"

"Death!" His sidekick, despite her energetic hand gestures, has devolved into a parrot at this point. Oli's got a funny feeling that English isn't her first language.

The ringmaster points a chubby finger at Oli. "You first."

Oli climbs up onto the high wire, and it is scary. It is scary as hell. It's only about five feet off the ground, but it feels like he's walking between a pair of sixty-story skyscrapers. The people below him are ants on a log. His feet struggle for balance.

"You can do it!"

"Hold on tight!"

"He can't do it," sneers a woman in the second row.

"Yes, he can," Eva snarls. "You got this! Do not fall off."

One step. Two steps. Three. Four. Five.

And then he falls.

"Booooooo!

Eva tries to keep things positive ("He made it, like, one!"), but Oli knows his tightrope efforts weren't good enough. So he stands there, listening to the boos, gulping down his rising panic, fighting to keep a stoic expression on his pale face.

As Tim prepares to take on the high wire, one thought races through his mind: don't fall and split your nuts on the cord.

"Yeah, Timothy!"

It's a sidewalk. That's all it is to him. It's a sidewalk, and he's playing that game where you're trying to walk on the sidewalk's edge for as long as possible. Except this time, "as long as possible" is only the length of the wire.

"Wow!" Joey exclaims. "He's good."


*I made it.*

For once, the audience cheers. Or at least his *friends* do; the rest of them are probably still sore about those balls he threw at them earlier. And Lele, who's shouting "Yeaaaaah!" in their general direction, is rubbing salt into their collective wounds.

He climbs down, a triumphant grin shining across his face. He did it. He *made* it. He finally won something. And he's still not dead.

*What now?*

"There we go!" Oli hears Matt's voice, wrapped in a blanket of dangerous calm. "They did it. They did your three challenges. Can we have the artifact now?"

For a few seconds, there's no response, and Oli allows himself to hope. But then, the ringmaster crushes those hopes with a simple shake of his head. "Not yet."

"Not yet?" shouts Eva. "What do you mean, 'not yet'?"

"There must be a winner," the ringmaster insists. "The score is currently tied—Oli won the strongman, Timothy won the high wire challenge, and both failed miserably at juggling. Clearly, a tiebreaker is in order."

Joey looks like he's about to cry. "Then make them do cartwheels or something. I don't know. Just please, *please* don't—"

The ringmaster isn't listening. "I want you, the audience, to have a voice in the proceedings. To decide the fate of these two performers..." He points at Oli and Tim. "You must vote."

So it all comes down to the audience's vote. The same audience who's been booing them the whole time. Something tells Oli that these people aren't the merciful type.

*And if I lose...?*

His courage is crumbling. He opens his mouth, ready to beg for his life, but the juggler grabs him and drags him away before he has the chance. The ringmaster's assistant does the same to a clearly surprised Tim.

"Where are you taking them?" Lele wants to know.

As if on cue, the curtain disappears, revealing two dunk tanks. "Behold!" shouts the ringmaster, cracking his whip. "The *true* main attraction—my twin aquarium chambers! Full of flesh-eating fish!"

*Flesh-eating fish?!?*
"What?" gasps Sierra.

"Yes," chortles the ringmaster. "Our brave performers shall each be placed in a dunk tank. Whoever drops is going to die. So let's begin!"

He laughs.

Oli thinks of James. How's he going to take it? "Sorry, kid, but your older brother got eaten alive by a bunch of piranhas, my condolences, here's a sympathy card." Will there even be a body to bury?

*Brave. Be brave. Don't cry.*

Apparently, Tim's skills at kicking and thrashing aren't enough to save him, so he's forced to climb into the dunk tank and sit on the little seat above it. Hey, at least he put up a fight; Oli just let himself get dragged like a sack of potatoes with a beret on.

But it's no use. He's here, suspended over the water, and there's *piranhas* down there, and there's only a short drop between his toes and their teeth. Chances of dying: a solid fifty-fifty.

It's not looking too good.

"You will either boo or cheer for each performer," the ringmaster explains to the suddenly interested audience. "Whoever gets the most boos goes down in the tank!"

*Here we go.* Tim's not gonna lie—he's a little scared. Those thugs in the audience probably like Oli more than they like him. After all, Oli didn't throw any balls at them. Plus, he's cute, and the ladies tend to go for the cute ones.


Andrea darts across his mind, but he chases her away.

Joey sighs. "I don't know who did better," he whispers, unable to look at his two trapped friends, wishing it didn't have to be this way.

"Timothy was the one who performed the best," is all Lele has to say about it.

She's right. Oli did great on the strongman, but Tim's performance on the tightrope...Joey didn't even know he could *walk* the tightrope, much less do it so well. "Timothy did do better."

"Okay, that doesn't *matter!*" hisses Sierra. "This is more than a circus act."

"So you're *not* cheering for Timothy?"

"No." She adjusts her gloves, her nose turned up like the Heiress she is. Joey's almost positive that *she's* the reason Tim's in that tank in the first place.

Eva, too, shakes her head, her body trembling with incomprehensible emotions. "I gotta cheer for Oli."

*Okay, but who am I supposed to cheer for?*
"Performer number one! Oli!"

Joey claps. Eva and Sierra cheer; the former is practically screaming Oli's name. There are boos, and they're loud, but Joey tunes them out.

"Performer number two! Timothy!"

This time, it's Matt and Lele who cheer (they agree—it's a miracle!). Joey claps again. The crowd, meanwhile, is still booing. One old man in particular is heckling so hard that Joey won't be surprised if he tries to kill Tim himself.

Decision time. **Oh God.** This is it. Somebody's going to die. One more sacrifice, and then they can go home.

One more.

"All right." The ringmaster strokes his chin, squinting at the audience through beady eyes. "Let's consider this. I think..."

Oli glances downward. The water's murky, so he can't see much, but there's a few ripples here and there. Was that a fin? **Oh no, oh no, oh bloody flipping hell...**

Calm. Stay calm. Maybe he'll make it. But **no,** that would be just as bad, because then Tim dies and Tim's a bit of an idiot but he doesn't deserve to go out like this. Why the hell does it have to be this way?

Eva. Is she crying? Are those tears in her eyes? That can't be. She's Eva. Eva doesn't—

"Both shall go down!"

What?

The seat gives way. He barely manages to catch a glimpse of Tim disappearing into the other chamber before he goes under himself.

**This is it.** The water surrounds him like a thousand-man firing squad. *I'm going to die. I'm never going to see James again, or Joe or Caspar or Mum or Dad or...anyone.*

He closes his eyes, relaxes his muscles, and waits for the piranhas to come.

Shouts of "No!" and "Omigod!" ring in Joey's ears. He sits there, open-mouthed, unable to move, unable to save Tim and Oli, *unable.*

**Both of them?**

**Oh, God...both of them?!!**

He can still see them. Tim's banging on the glass, spewing a flood of panicked bubbles all around him. Oli, on the other hand, is fighting back tears; he appears to have given up completely.

Lele screams. Sierra sobs. Eva's almost hysterical.
"Guys," gasps Matt, "what just happened?"

Did both of my friends just die?

Nope.

Tim's not having this shit. He won't be sucker-punched into an "everybody dies" ending. He doesn't know what the hell Chocolate Monopoly Man is doing, but he's not going down without a fight.

So he struggles. He pounds the glass for a few seconds, then uses what little swimming skill he has to push his way upwards. Hey! Piranhas! Where are you? Come and get me, you bastards! I'm getting away!

Weirdly enough, no piranhas show up.

Huh.

The surface. He has to get to the surface before he runs out of air. It's within reach. He claws for life. And then...he's out.

Tim grabs the bars on the side of the tank. He did it. He survived. He's still in the game, dammit. They aren't getting rid of him that easily.

After some time, Oli's survival instincts take over, and he breaks through the surface. He gulps down air, overjoyed and bewildered at the same time.

I'm not dead.

As he begins to climb out of the chamber, he catches sight of Tim exiting the other tank. The Mobster is sopping wet—his black hair sticks to the back of his head—but he's smiling. And he's alive.

They're both alive.

How?

The ringmaster laughs, a crooked smile on his face, shrugging his shoulders at the rest of the group. "I forgot to put the flesh-eating fish in the tank today."

"You're sick!" Eva shouts.

The crowd boos. The old man in the front row is loudly demanding his money back, complaining about how he "didn't pay to see people not die." Oli doesn't feel sorry for him in the slightest.

"You did bring me my greatest act ever," says the ringmaster, pointing at the still-silent Guardian. "It is a fair trade. Vita!"

"Yes?" chirps the assistant.

"Let them go."
Vita—it's an odd name, but it suits her—wraps a thick blue blanket around each boy's shoulders, then nudges them both towards their still-openmouthed friends.

Oli collapses into the nearest open seat. He's shivering, and he's got a nasty case of wet-head, but he's too exhausted to care. \textit{I'm alive. I made it, and so did Tim, this is so much better than I was expecting, thank you thank you thank you thank you.}

And the best part? It's over. No one else is going to die. They've going to get the artifact, and then they're going home, and then he can go watch some Netflix and forget this nightmare.

\textit{Thank God.}

After everything that's happened, the ringmaster's voice still hasn't lost its cheery tone. "Thank you very much, and have a good night!"

\textit{Oh, no, you don't.} "Wait!" shouts Matt, unwilling to let their host escape his promise. "What about the artifact?"

"Yeah!"

"What about the artifact?"

"If you don't—"

Once everyone's done shouting, the ringmaster shrugs. "We did make a deal, didn't we?"

"We did," Matt reminds him.

"All right." The ringmaster turns to his assistant, who's doing some sort of weird dance in the corner. "Vita!"

"Yes?"

"Give them the artifact."

Five minutes later, they've got the artifact, Tim and Oli are back in their regular clothes, and the seven surviving YouTubers are leaving the cursed carnival for good. Matt's head is still a muddled wreck from the two near-deaths he just witnessed, but it's okay. They have all four artifacts. They're safe now. They're safe.

\textit{So much for "we're all going to die," huh?}

"Oh, wait." Tim turns around to face the ringmaster. "My wallet was in those pants—that you guys—can I—"

Forget it. Matt is \textit{not} letting Tim put himself in danger for the third time in one hour. "Come on," he snarls, pulling his friend away from the ringmaster and his creepy entourage. "We're leaving."

"But my wallet—"

"No!"

\textbf{Chapter End Notes}
Next chapter: Missing scenes. Missing scenes everywhere. Also, tears are shed, and the
group prepares for the ritual that's supposed to take them home.
To Whom It May Concern

Chapter Summary

They now have all four artifacts. They're ready to go home. But first, our seven survivors deserve a quick breather after everything they've been through.

Chapter Notes

Confession time: nothing that happens in this chapter was shown in the TV show. This was inspired by the mid-season recap, in which Joey fills us in about what happened in the past five episodes. So I decided to have him take a moment to write his "recap" down, while everyone else...well, you'll see what everyone else gets up to.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Omigod," gasps Joey, unable to take his eyes off of the four artifacts sitting on his mantlepiece. "We got it."

Eva's struggling to sound apathetic. "What do we do now?"

Silence.

"Well, I don't know about you guys," Lele snaps, "but I'm exhausted. I'm not doing anything until I've got a few minutes of sleep under my belt."

Joey nods. "That's fine." It's been a long night. They all deserve a break. "Let's take ten minutes, and then let's meet back here to do the ritual."

His friends shout their agreement.

So they disperse, and Joey makes a beeline for his private study. He closes the door, locks it behind him, takes a moment to catch his breath, then sits at his mahogany desk with a fountain pen in hand.

He has to tell someone. He feels like he's going to explode if he keeps tonight to himself. And if the ritual goes wrong...if they do end up a pile of dead bodies scattered throughout the house...maybe he can save the next unfortunate group who comes along. Maybe their deaths will be the evil's downfall.

The world must know what really happened here.

To whom it may concern:

You made it just in time. The things we've done...you wouldn't believe...

Shane stains the china with his blood. Andrea disappears into the machine. Justine's screaming, but he's powerless to save her. GloZell is killed by a stroke of his pen. Tim and Oli go under.
They'll haunt us for the rest of our lives.

The living room's empty, so Lele figures she might as well sleep on the couch. She doesn't want to mess up Joey's bed, and she sure as hell doesn't want to wake up to find a demon at her bedside or something.

She kicks off her shoes. Ugh, it feels so good, those things were murdering her feet, maybe now she can—

Wait.

What was that?

Nope. Forget it. She doesn't care. She's done being scared by this freaky-ass house. She's survived every challenge, she's made it this far, she's going to get some sleep, dammit.

She closes her eyes.

She's back in the ungodly machine, pounding her hands against the too-thick glass. Andrea has already been gassed, Justine's a motionless statue, and Eva's working furiously at the control panel. But despite her best efforts, Lele's chamber stubbornly refuses to release her from its grip.

"Eva!" Her voice is almost hoarse. "Eva! It's over! Let me out!"

Eva opens her mouth to respond, but then she's gone. So is Justine. Lele's all alone, trapped in the machine, with only Andrea's dead body for company.

"Help! Somebody! Help!"

And then, it's not just Andrea anymore. It's Shane, lying in a pool of his own blood...and GloZell, convulsing on the ground...and Justine's screams of "Joey, why?" echo around the room. Even the mannequins are there, lips pursed, blowing kisses in Lele's direction.

She throws herself against the glass, and her pearls become beads of blood. "No! Go away! Go away!"

There's Matt, bloodstained, blank-faced, black-eyed, a butcher knife in his right hand. "Should've been you," he sneers through clenched teeth. "Should've been you. Should've been you."

"Matt...please..."

He raises the knife.

She screams. She screams. She screams.

Joey keeps hearing things. He tries to ignore it, focusing on the words he's writing, but the house won't let itself be ignored. Panic builds like layers of sediment forming in his heart.

The ritual. They need to do the ritual. Trap the evil. Soon.

Then, my friend Shane Dawson was... His throat tightens. He forces himself to focus on Shane—his smile, his trademark eyeroll, the fear that flashed across his face seconds before the choking began.
...was poisoned.

We tried to save him.

Tried.

His pen collapses. So does he.

Matt fumbles around in the kitchen, a knife in one hand, a piece of bread in the other. Where's the butter? Do they have any? He has to find it, he needs to leave, he can't stay here. Not now. Not with them.

The bodies.

Shane. GloZell. They've been moved to the kitchen. Her wig is askew. His face is pale. They were so bright, so colorful, so freakin' alive, and now they're a pair of motionless heaps on the floor.

Oh, there's the butter.

Matt grabs it, then runs for the door, nearly tripping over GloZell's right arm. He knows he hasn't actually spread the butter on his bread yet, but he can always do that somewhere else...somewhere where he isn't surrounded by the bodies of his friends.

He's passing through the parlor, and there's Lele, curled up on the couch, muttering a string of terrified words under her breath. Lele Pons. The wicked one. The one who's working with the evil. The one who's done everything in her power to murder him. And now, here she is, fast asleep, completely at his mercy.

Should I...?

His right hand—the one that's holding the butter knife—twitches. He could do it. One stab, and she'd be gone.

She's planning something. She has to be. She's going to wreck the ritual...summon a demon...get everyone killed...who knows what unholy promises she's made?

Her hair sparkles in the candlelight.

I have to stop her. He's at her bedside, the knife aimed directly at her heart. I don't have a choice. If we're going to get out of here, she has to...I have to...

What the hell?!!

He backs away from Lele, shoves the butter knife in his coat pocket, and flees the parlor. Oh, God, moans his conscience. Was I actually thinking about murdering someone? What...what's wrong with me?

It's the house. The evil. It's getting to him. He can't stay here much longer.

Joey's still writing.

The evil forced us to turn on each other. We had to vote to see who'd face the ungodly machine.
Andrea and Lele were chosen, and their partners were Justine and Eva respectively. They left for the basement. When they came back...

He thinks of Tim. Tim, Andrea's best friend, who'd known her longer than anyone. Tim, whose goofy smile shattered when she died.

...Andrea was gone.

Tim misses her.

He's spent the last several hours attempting to be the same old Tim he's always been—stupid grin, crazy heart, maybe a dirty joke or two. No tears. No grief. Hell, he's had his revenge. He's done all he can do for her. Dwelling on her isn't gonna do anyone any good.

But she's still there, in the back of his mind, like a goddamn kid playing hide and seek. And every time he catches himself thinking about her, he feels that familiar avalanche of pain all over again.

"Andrea?" He's sitting on the staircase, holding that book she found. "I made it, girl. For both of us. Just like I said I would. I..." His voice breaks. "I'm so sorry."

And then—tears.

Not his tears, oddly enough. He (barely) keeps it together. But he hears sobs—huge, heaving ones—coming from the front porch, so he drops Andrea's book and runs off to see what's wrong.

The door's ajar. He shrugs, then pokes it open.

Sierra Furtado is a hunched-up heap of white cloth on the ground. Her shoulders shake. Her head's in her hands. Her tiara lies abandoned on the doorstep. She's so wrapped up in her cocoon of misery, she doesn't even notice Tim's arrival.

"Sierra?"

She looks up. Her puffy eyes widen. "Go away," she spits at him, but it comes out sounding more like a sniffle than anything else. "I hate you."

"I know."

"If you're here to kill me—"

"I'm not. I heard you crying, and..." What's he supposed to say? How can he help a girl who wants him dead? "I dunno. I guess I thought you needed a friend or something. But, y'know, if you want me gone, I guess I'll—"

"Wait."

Tim raises an eyebrow. This girl is sending so many mixed messages right now, and he's got no clue what the hell she wants with him. "Yeah?"

"Stay."

She doesn't trust him, but she lets him stay.
She doesn't trust him, but she scoots over on the porch, and he fills the space she left behind. They sit there for a while, listening to the crickets chirp strange songs in the distance.

Tim breaks the silence. "So...uh...what's up?"

What's up? What's up? She's falling apart. She's watched so many people die, she's seen so many terrible things, she's made mistakes she never should've made. And now that she's almost safe, she feels like she's barely survived a fire, and it's left permanent third-degree burns all over her body. She's scarred. She's paranoid. She's grieving.

So she breaks.

She throws her arms around Tim, burying her face into his left shoulder. He's surprised at first, but he adapts, and he begins to rub her back in reassuring circular motions.

"They're dead," she sobs into his jacket. "Shane...Andrea...Justine...GloZell...they're dead, they're really dead, we're never going to see them again, oh God..."

"I know." His arms tighten around her. "I know."

She doesn't trust him. She wishes it was Alex beside her, holding her close, stroking her hair, murmuring wordless comfort as she blubbers on his clothes. But Alex isn't here. He's in 2016, and she's in 1920, and she can't soar down the homestretch by herself.

Tim's all she's got. She doesn't trust him, but she has no other choice.

But they were wrong about her, Joey writes, the black ink bleeding into the parchment. I know Justine was not in league with the evil.

A tear falls down his cheek and lands directly on the i in Justine, staining her name the same way her death stained his heart.

We made a mistake.

Eva corners Arthur, trapping him against the largest bookshelf in the library. "Listen," she growls through gritted teeth. "I saw you. At the circus. Right before we left. You went through the votes. You saw what we wrote down."

"Eva—"

"I need to know." She can feel her heart pounding its way across her chest. "Who voted for Oli?"

"I can't—"

"Don't 'I can't' me. I've lost too much. Who voted for Oli?"

The answer is a reluctant squeak. "Joey and Matt."

She lets him go. He scampers away to wherever butlers go when they're not busy. And she collapses against the bookshelf, biting back her tears.

Joey? She suspected Matt, he seems to have a thing for offing her friends, but Joey? What the hell?
How could he? Yeah, she had her misgivings about him from the start, and GloZell's death didn't help matters, but after the Guardian challenge...she thought...she thought...

*Doesn't matter.*

He did it. Him and Matt both. And Oli almost died. Eva's not going to let that happen again.

*The ritual...* She doesn't trust it. They may have collected the artifacts, but something tells her that the house has something up its metaphorical sleeve. There's going to be a fight. More people might die. These demons could prove dangerous.

And the maid is still skulking about, eyes small and beady, Shane Dawson's blood on her pale little hands. Suppose she decides to murder the last surviving witness?

Eva needs a plan.

But first, she needs to find Oli.

...so Lele and I finally unlocked the desk. *Inside, we found a journal. It said...*

He can't do it.

He killed her. He knows that. But he *can't* admit it. He doesn't want this letter to be used in court against him. He's only twenty-five. He doesn't deserve jail time, especially when he had no other choice.

...*that GloZell was going to die. And she did.*

"Oli?"

Oli looks up from *Lady Chatterley's Lover* to find Eva, her hands on her hips, a scowl scarring her face. "Eva?" He shoves the book aside. "What's going on? Are you—"

"Matt and Joey," she says matter-of-factly, as if she's reciting the stock exchange. "They voted for you."

"You sure?"

"Yeah. Just checked with Arthur. It was them. I'm sorry."

Oli feels like he's been punched in the gut. Joey? Joey Graceffa? The same Joey who was going on and on about how they couldn't vote for Lele, they had to save Justine, they had to get everyone out of here alive? *That* Joey?

And Matt. Matt, who's been acting like the long arm of the law this whole time. *You're the killer. You're working with the evil. You're guilty. Guilty. Guilty.*

If *they* were the ones who voted for him...

"Why?"

"Can't trust anyone." Eva's brown eyes burn with a cynical fire. "We should've learned that a long
He gulps. "I don't...it doesn't matter. We're almost home. The ritual—"

"—might not work, Oli. Okay? This is a horror movie. People have died, and I..." She chokes up. "I don't want to die. I don't want Lele to die. And I sure as hell don't want you to die."

"No one is going to die."

The words have barely left his lips when Eva jumps on him, squeezing him so tight he's afraid she might break him in half. "Say that again," she orders him, her voice a quiet plea, her arms entangled around his waist. "I dare you."

Oli returns the embrace. His fingers lose themselves in the folds of her massive coat. "No one is going to die. I promise."

The ritual will work. The nightmare will end. The seven survivors will return to 2016.

He refuses to believe otherwise.

*We now have all four artifacts, and as I write this, we are preparing the ritual that will end this evil once and for all. By this time tomorrow, we'll be back home.*

He hopes.

*Pray for us.*

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: They're going home. Or are they? Also, Sierra does a thing, Tim has demonic fingerprints, and Satan laughs. No, really. Satan laughs.
Hellfire

Chapter Summary

This is it. All our heroes have to do is perform a creepy ritual, and the evil will be gone forever. Right?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Eva untangles herself from Oli. "Listen." She has to tell him. She can't afford to keep Sarah's secret any longer. Not when their lives are on the line. "Earlier, during dinner, when I went upstairs with —"

"Okay, guys!" Joey's voice chirps from the staircase like a slightly unnerving parakeet. "Break's over! Time to go home!"

Oli's out like a shot, bolting towards the living room, his eyes glistening with an almost delusional hope. Eva sighs, crosses her fingers, promises herself she'll tell him later, and follows him out the door.

The group is back together again. All seven of them are present and accounted for (which is good; Tim was kinda expecting someone to mysteriously vanish and then turn up bludgeoned to death or something), and they're all more than ready to leave this creepy-ass house forever.

Arthur slams a few pieces of paper and a black cord down in front of them. "This is the ritual from Shane's jacket."

"Shane's jacket?" Tim side-eyes the butler. "Why were you snooping through a dead guy's clothes, dude?"

"You did it," mutters Lele.

"That was different! He had just died! We were looking for evidence and shit! Besides, it was Joey who was—"

"Doesn't matter." Matt's voice is sharp enough to cut steel with. "Ritual. Now."

Right.

Eva reads.

*The ritual symbol must be drawn in ash and sand seven feet from each side of the center point. Three of the artifacts must be placed onto the marked points of the symbol, while the fourth artifact must be placed in the center of the inner triangle.*

Tim smiles. Okay. So this is it. This is all they have to do. One more pinch of crazy demonic shit, and then they can go home. He can get some spaghetti. He can feed his cat. He can hit up his
girlfriend for some ass. He can do all the things he normally does, without any evil spirits getting in the way.

He can live.

"We're gonna go home," Sierra sings in Lele's ear. "We're gonna go shopping." She giggles. "2016!"

She's floating. It's like she drank an entire keg of alcohol in a misguided effort to disguise the pain, and now she's drunk enough to laugh her sanity away. Lele's arm is a life preserver. The lights are iridescent.

And why shouldn't they be? She's going home. She's getting out of here.

The setup process goes by in a sandy blur. Before she knows it, the triangles have been drawn, and the artifacts have been placed on their respective points. Sierra's eyes are still moist with a few leftover tears, but those tears are canceled out by her almost-there-almost-safe smile. "Looks good."

"Those look like demonic fingerprints," Joey frets, pointing at a few stray fingerprints in the sand.

"Those are mine," says Tim nonchalantly.

"Oh."

Eva grabs the instructions and reads the next step aloud.

One must sit in the center triangle and wrap the black cord around the fourth artifact seven times, while another recites the binding invocation.

Someone must... Sierra's anxiety creeps up on her once more. This is bad. Danger. Danger.

"Well, you're all in white," says Tim, indicating Sierra. "Are we supposed to sacrifice a virgin?"

"No, no, no..."

He's joking. She can tell by the twinkle in his eye, by the cocky little grin sneaking its way across his face. She doesn't expect her friends to take his suggestion seriously...but, much to her terrified surprise, they do.

"Yeah, Sierra, why don't you help out the group?"

"You haven't done much, honestly..."

"Yeah! You haven't! You've just been standing there!"

"Why is everyone ganging up on me?" Sierra moans, choking back tears for the hundredth time tonight. She doesn't want this. She doesn't want anything to do with this. Not now. Not her. God, no.

Tim, to his credit, tries to save her. "Uh—guys—c'mon—I was joking—"

But it's too late. "I vote Sierra goes in the center," Joey insists, and the others shout their agreement.

"Oh my God!" How could they? What did she do to deserve this? "What is going on?"
Matt turns to her. "You gonna do it?" His voice is the tonal equivalent of a shrug.

Sierra's hands shake. Her body screams run, get away, get out of here. But this ritual is what's supposed to take them home, so she has no choice but to do as they command.

She sighs, adjusts her tiara, and enters the danger zone.

Joey's got nothing against Sierra. She's his friend. But...well...she hasn't been pulling her weight. Everyone else has spent the last few hours doing all these challenges, and she's just been hiding in the background.

It's time for her to step up.

Besides, nothing's going to happen to her. It's just a ritual. All she has to do is wrap a cord around an artifact a few times, and then they're all home free. She'll be fine. She's not going to die. No one is going to die.

Sierra kneels behind the artifact, black cord at the ready. A strange breeze ripples through her dark hair and jostles her tiara.

"I'll read the invocation," says Matt with a smile. "Hooked on Phonics, coming in clutch."

Everyone takes their places around the ring. Arthur dims the lights, and a chill tickles the back of Joey's neck. This is it. If all goes well, the evil will be banished, and they'll be released from the hell that was once his home. But if something goes wrong...

It won't.

"You guys ready?" Matt whispers.

"Yeah." Tim, for once in his life, has a serious expression on his face. "Let's do this, man."

The time has come.

Sierra's heart thumps its way up her throat. She swallows it, chases it down with a cup of don't cry it's okay don't be scared, and begins to wrap the cord around the artifact.

Matt, meanwhile, reads the invocation. His voice is oddly soothing, and listening to him smooths the frazzled edges of her otherwise anxious nerves. "With the thread of the crimes of your own design, I bind your evil seven times."

Demon whispers. Omigod, those are demon whispers. The artifacts are glowing, the room is getting darker, there's freakin' demons whispering to them, and now one of the artifacts just fell over for no reason.

Something's wrong.

"I bind you from behind, I bind you from before, that you hurt my people nevermore."

Hear that? Nevermore. I'm safe, you can't hurt me, you can't get me, go away!

"I bind you from the left. I bind you from the right."
Another artifact topples over, hitting the ground with a sickening *thud*. Oli flinches. Eva screams. Sierra barely manages to stifle a scream of her own.

"I bind you by day, and I bind you by night."

That's five times. Five times she's wrapped this cord around her artifact. Two more, and her part of the ritual will be complete.

"I bind you from below. I bind you from above."

The third artifact falls. The whispers grow louder, threatening to drown out Matt's tranquil voice. To make matters worse, thick black clouds descend upon the group, and Sierra can't see any of their faces anymore.

"I bind you with your own evil within."

She's alone. She's trapped in the darkness. Her heart is frozen in place.

"So let this magic unfold."

Tears sting her eyes. Her job is done, so she pushes the artifact away from her, crosses herself, and squeezes her eyes shut. *I'm scared, I hate this job, I don't want...please...* 

...*help me...* 

"Goddess of the darkest night, bind the presence that haunts this home in thy sacred fires of eternity."

_Foolish children. They sit and play with their half-baked rituals, but still they do not understand. They cannot defeat me. They aren't strong enough. I shall enjoy watching them die._

Wait. Why did she just think that? That wasn't her, it _wasn't_, that was someone else...or something else... *oh God...*

The clouds depart. The lights return. Seven YouTubers straighten in their seats, their eyes shimmering with a nervous hope. Sierra trembles. Lele frowns. Tim looks like he's doing yoga or something.

And Matt...well, Matt's just glad it's finally over.

It _is_ over.

Right?

Joey breaks the silence. "Did we do it?"

And then: the darkest, most disturbing laughter Matt has ever heard in his life. It sniggers in spine-tingling tones, its voice low and sinister, sending shockwaves of fear across the group.

"What was _that_?" Oli exclaims.

Eva's voice is a string of anguished gasps. "That's not—we didn't do it—that sounds like the _devil_!"

"Guys..." Joey stares at the floor. "I don't think it worked."
At this point, Matt wants to bang his head against the nearest hard surface. "Did we read the map the right way?" he asks, hoping that their failure is the result of a careless mistake. Maybe one of the artifacts is in the wrong place. Or maybe they used too much sand. Or maybe—

"Yes!" insists Joey. "It's totally fine!"

Oli's staring at the map as if it's an especially hard geometry test. "We did everything right."

So they did it. They followed the directions. They did what they were supposed to do. For all intents and purposes, this ritual should've worked. And yet, here they are, still stuck in the 1920s, no closer to safety than they were before.

"Furious" is too mild a word to describe Matt's emotional state.

"Do you know," he snaps, his fingers curling into fists, "how much time has been spent just to find these stupid artifacts?" People are dead, goddamn it, they died for nothing, we killed them for nothing, it was all for nothing.

At least Tim is still trying to keep a positive spin on things. "Okay, but what if there's something in here that we're missing? What if there's another clue? What if they just wanna play with us more?"

"Yeah." Joey gets up. "Let's look for it."

Sierra, who's been oddly quiet for the past several minutes, pushes over the artifact in front of her. "Waste of time!" she shouts, tears in her voice.

"I'm so tired," Lele complains.

You just had a nap, snarls the murderous part of Matt's mind. He knew it. She's still alive, and she's working with the evil, so of course she wrecked their ritual. Just like he thought she would.

Maybe he should've killed her when he had the chance.

Lele has no idea what went wrong.

She thought they had it. She thought they were going home. But nope, she thought wrong, because apparently they're missing something, and now everyone's running around the room looking for that elusive Final Clue.

Not Lele, though. She's staying put. She's been looking for clues all night, and she's too tired (damn you, nightmares) to join the search this time. Besides, somebody's got to keep an eye on Sierra.

Sierra...poor girl. Her cheeks are pale, her eyes are glazed with fear, and she looks like a robot whose battery just died. The giggly beauty guru from ten minutes ago is gone, replaced with a lifeless shell of her former self. Lele's heart hurts just looking at her.

"Hey." Lele's whisper is louder than any other whisper in recorded history. "Sierra. It's fine. We're gonna be fine."

But Sierra stares straight ahead, barely acknowledging her friend's existence. "Are we?"

Dammit. I think we broke her.

Before Lele can respond to that, Joey points to a weird black box hidden in the fireplace. "What's
"That's new," says Eva, who's once again morphed into Miss All-Business-All-The-Time. "Pull it out."

So they do, and lo and behold, they find their next clue. "A key," Joey mutters, staring into the box. "There's a key and a note."

Great. More notes. **This** should be fun.

*I've cast out demonic spirits and seen the devil himself, but nothing could prepare me for what I found here. This is truly the house that evil built. It haunts my every moment, and as the days pass, I see more innocent lives devoured in its terrible mouth.*

*I am trapped in the basement until I can find release from this evil.*

Lele's confused. Someone's been trapped in the basement this entire time? That makes no sense. She was in the basement. She almost died in the basement. Where was this mystery other person then?

"I think we should go to the basement," says Joey.

"Okay." Eva shrugs. "Let's go."

Everyone trudges their way out the door. Lele grabs her coat on the way out; it's pretty damn cold down there, and she'd rather not end up a Lele Pons popsicle. (A Ponsicle? No. That's lame.)

"Let's go to the basement," sighs Tim.

Oli frowns. "What do you think there's going to be in the basement?"

"Death machine." Tim's chipper attitude has mysteriously disappeared, and now he's scowling at the back of Joey's head. "We're all gonna die."

Oli's never been down in the basement before. None of them have, except for Eva and Lele, and no one seems particularly eager to make a return trip. Especially considering what happened to Andrea.

But here they are, walking down the cavernous hallway, and it's creepy enough to send chills down Oli's spine. He keeps glancing over his shoulder, half expecting a monster or a demon of some kind to appear out of nowhere and kill someone. Or something. He doesn't know.

All he knows is this: something **crazy** is about to happen. And he isn't sure his brain can take any more craziness tonight.

As they pass by the first room, they can see the ungodly machine—including a two-second glimpse of Andrea's corpse. She's trapped against the wall of her glass coffin, the fumes blurring her face, a disgusting blackish-brownish moisture infecting her body. Oli, who's the first to spot her, takes one look and nearly vomits. "Guys..."

Joey gasps. Lele gulps. Eva bites her lip. Sierra fights back tears. Matt distracts Tim with the classic gullible-on-the-ceiling prank. Tim looks up, laughs, and calls Matt a douchebag, all of which (thankfully) prevent him from seeing what's left of his friend.

Is this their fate? Will they all end up like—
Don't. Forget it. Moving on.

The second room is locked. Fortunately, the key in Eva's hand is able to work its magic, and the door swings open to reveal...

"Omigod." Sierra's mouth drops open. "What is this?"

"This" is a small room, dimly lit, with a statue of Mary sitting on a table, as well as a few candles scattered here and there. At first glance, it doesn't appear to be anything out of the ordinary.

But that's before they notice the priest.

Yes. The priest. There's a priest in the basement. Because, at this point, why not.

"What the hell..."

"Don't!" The priest's right arm shoots out at the group, as if he's expecting them to attack him. "Don't come any closer."

He's a tall guy, about Oli's height, with a frizzy mess of salt-and-pepper hair covering both his head and his face. His hands clutch a Bible. He paces around the confines of a strange, small circle, and his eyes look like those of a death-row prisoner waiting for execution.

It's the circle that catches Joey's eye. "Guys." He points to it, and Oli's attention is drawn to the complicated mess of symbols within its borders. "That looks like what we just tried to do."

The priest's voice trembles. "What happened?"

"We were trying to bind the evil so that we could get home," explains Matt. He sounds calm, but Oli still remembers the anger in his voice after the ritual proved to be a failure. And that was, what, five minutes ago?

Maybe Lele's right. Maybe Matt is bipolar.

"Were you able to accomplish anything?"

"No," sighs Eva. "It didn't work. The devil laughed at us."

"Listen." The priest speaks slowly, as if every word is a step closer to death. "The evil of this house gathers its strength from its five former owners, and when they are released..." He gulps down a breath. "That's when the demon will be weak enough to banish."

Joey turns to the group, resignation in his eyes. "That's why it didn't work."

Wait a minute, complain Oli's thoughts, still struggling to process this new task. First, we had to find the four artifacts to banish this evil. Now we have to release the five former owners of the house? Is this ever going to end?

The priest continues. "I am one of the five former owners trapped in this house. I..." His shoulders slump. He sounds like he's about to cry. "I lost my faith. I failed to exorcise a demon out of an innocent girl, and because of that, she died!" Furious pain sears his voice for a few seconds, only to be replaced by a quiet murmur. "I just need your help. I need my cross so that I can restore my faith and be released. I am trapped inside this circle of protection until my faith is restored."

To be honest, Oli's beginning to empathize with this guy. He's broken. He watched someone die. He
failed to save her. And now he's got to live with that for the rest of his life.

Just like the seven YouTubers scarred by this house.

"For you to retrieve my cross," sighs the priest, "you must perform an exorcism."

"No!"

"Yes! You must!"

Everyone's talking at once, loudly protesting their new assignment. Everyone, that is, except for Oli, who's so befuddled that he can't force a single word out of his throat.

An exorcism?

He's seen exorcisms. In movies. With screaming priests and bleeding walls and people floating above their beds. That does not happen in real life.

But it does. It happens here.

"And for that," the priest explains once everyone's quieted down, "you need to gather holy water and a rosary. They're both in separate rooms, hiding on the second floor. This is my Bible." He hands it to Oli. "Take it. You'll need it."

Oli takes the Bible. It feels cold in his hands, like a tiny iceberg disguised as a book.

"Now that you're on the path to do the exorcism, be aware..." The priest's sad brown eyes dart around the room. "Demons will be haunting you."

Not again.

Another stupid scavenger hunt from the stupid evil spirit house man. Free these owners. Do this exorcism. Find the stupid cross. Just when Tim thought he was home free, they had to throw this stupid bullshit in his freakin' face.

Maybe he should just set the house on fire.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: A plethora of religious references. Also, Lele's time in Catholic school pays off, and Oli can't pronounce demon names.
The group must find a rosary and some holy water. This requires splitting up, because of course it does.

This time, Lele doesn't have to say what's on her mind, because Joey Graceffa's here to say it for her. "That was so frickin' weird!"

"Guys, I hope a demon doesn't touch me," Eva frets. "I'm not trying to get touched."

As she follows the others back upstairs, Lele can hear her pearls jangling against her blouse. Great.

More stuff to find, more things to do, more scary shit to deal with. Five former owners. And an exorcism, because somebody's gotta amp up the danger equation.

Hey, at least they don't have to go back to the ungodly machine.

The ungodly machine... Andrea Brooks's dead body squirms its way into her mind. That could've been me. I could've died in there. I could've died like five times in the last six hours. How the hell am I still alive?

Whatever. She's not complaining. She promised herself she'd survive this mess, and she will. No matter how many times Matt tries to off her. "Let's split up."

So they do. While Joey, Oli, and Eva head off in the opposite direction, Lele rounds up her remaining friends and barges through the first door she finds.

Matt shakes his head. "Oh, this room is just creepy."

For once in his life, he's right. The room doesn't look like much—a fireplace, a basin, a desk, a table with a pitcher of water and a glass on top of it—but it's got this undeniably spooky feel to it. It's as if the demons are hiding under the floorboards, waiting...

"Okay." Screw the demons. She's got a job to do, and she's gonna get it done, goddamn it. "We have the holy water."

Sierra frowns. "Wait...this is the holy water?"

"No, this is the elixir of life," says Tim sarcastically.

"Timothy!"

"Sorry."

Lele takes a deep breath. Holy water. Okay. She's got this. Years of Catholic school memories return to her mind, like baby birds returning to their mother's nest. For the first time tonight, she knows
exactly what she's doing.

When Eva thinks of exorcisms, she thinks of contorting backward-headed dog ladies, writhing against a broken-down bed while priests shriek prayers at them. Not exactly something she wants to see, but pretty much par for the course at this point.

"What are we looking for?" Joey asks.

A rosary. They're looking for a rosary. A small-but-intricate collection of beads, with a tiny cross dangling from the end. That's their mission. Focus. Focus. Focus.

They enter a room. The first thing that catches their eye is a giant wardrobe, right in the center, with the word REVELATION stamped in thick white letters across the top. Someone (probably the same person who wrote REVELATION) has drawn a plethora of demons on the left-hand side of it, which isn't really helping Eva's let's-just-ignore-the-possibility-of-a-demon-attack strategy. There's also a rather lonely-looking angel on the right-hand side.

Eva decides to ignore the decorations and investigate the wardrobe. Upon closer inspection, there's a four-number passlock on it, and her intuition's telling her that the rosary's in there. "We're gonna need to find out what the code is," she reports, trying her best to keep her nerves out of her otherwise flat voice.

She begins to search the room for clues. Oli glances at the Bible in his hand, shrugs, and joins her. And thank God for that, because Joey isn't pulling his weight at all. "I don't wanna open these closet doors!" he whines, jumping up and down like a kangaroo having a seizure. "I think we need to open —"

"What's that?"

In a flash, Eva and Oli are at the bedside table, hunched over a small slip of paper. Joey takes a while to pull himself together, but once he does, he, too, is intrigued. "Did you guys find something?"

"Raum." The word feels like poison in Eva's mouth. "That seems like a demon name."

The sentence is barely out of her mouth when a cold, dark mist shoots its way across the room. It brushes against the three YouTubers, tickling their clothes, filling their ears with unholy whispers.

"Oh, no." Eva backs away, nearly flattening Joey in the process. Goosebumps trickle down her back. "Oh-no-oh-no-oh-no..."

There's a note. Sierra looks on, her fingers squirming against her gloves, as Matt reads the instructions aloud.

When the holy water is complete...

And then—it's back, the awful shadow, darting in and out of the room, banging against the walls like a bull trying to escape its pen.

Sierra screams. She grabs Tim's hand, practically squeezing the life out of it. "Omigod." It's coming. It's coming to get them, it's going to kill them, stop stop please stop make it stop no please no...
The lights flicker. A small white bottle falls off the mantlepiece and crashes against the ground. Matt unhooks his arm from Lele's (wait, she took his arm, what the heck, I thought she hates him, why is she going to him for comfort?) and goes to pick up the bottle. "Maybe something..."

"Lights." The word escapes like a mouse from between Sierra's trembling lips. "I'm scared."

Matt returns, bottle in hand. "This is the vessel. We need to put the holy water in here, but the water isn't holy yet."

Okay. The note. Back to the note. The lights are still flickering, but that's okay, she can ignore that, she can do this...right?

Only use when you know the proper amount of glasses to pour into the basin.

"Okay." How on earth is Matt so calm? "So we need to figure out how much to pour in there. I think this..." He points to the giant brown bowl sitting next to the window. "This is the basin. I think. And there's a note."

Numbers 5:17.

"So we need to figure out what, in this room, corresponds to these numbers," Matt explains.

After the four of them waste a few minutes investigating the room, Sierra finds a Bible hidden in one of the desk drawers. "There's another Bible," she breathes, her voice still shaky, praying that the shadows don't come back.

"Numbers five one seven...five one seven..."

"Numbers five one seven!" Tim's eyes light up. "That's a Bible verse!"

He takes the Bible from her, flips to the corresponding verse, and reads it aloud.

...and the priest shall take holy water in an earthen vessel, take some of the dust that is on the floor of the tabernacle, and put it into the water.

"So we need to find the dust of a tabernacle," says Matt.

Tim raises an eyebrow. "What's a tabernacle?"


"Let's look for Raum in the Bible or something," says Joey, struggling to keep his voice calm. The demon...its inky residue is pretty much gone by now, but the lights are still flickering on and off at random. There's a strange banging noise coming from inside the cabinet, as if there's something in there trying to get out. Even the walls are shaking.

Is this GloZell's revenge? Has she returned from whatever afterlife Joey forced her into, determined to damn his soul to hell?

"You are the YouTube killer!"

"Omigod." Eva, thankfully, has recovered from her fit of fear, and now she's gone back to pretending she's a detective. "What if it's, like, a passage?"

Oli picks up the Bible and begins to thumb through it, muttering things about the Revelation under his breath. While he's doing that, Joey and Eva continue their investigation of the room.
"Wait." Eva narrows her eyes. "There's something over here." She rustles her way through an open drawer, then pulls out a slip of paper identical to the first one. "Dantalion?"

The next thing Joey knows, they're finding bucketloads of names, scattered throughout the room like confetti.

"Incubus."

"Forneus."

"Xaphan."

"I don't even know how to say that," Oli confesses, frowning at the piece of paper in his hand.

Joey decides to help him out. "Belial."

"Moloch," mutters Eva. "These are demon names..."

Joey sticks his head under the bed. It's a risky move, since he's almost positive that there's something under there, and he'd rather not get devoured by a bloodthirsty demon. But hey, if it is GloZell who's haunting them, then maybe his death will satisfy her. Maybe she'll leave his remaining friends alone.

There's nothing there.

_Thank God._

"A tabernacle," Matt explains as his friends search the room, "is like a square...enclosing..."

"Guys!"

He looks up. It's Lele, kneeling in front of the mantlepiece, a white envelope nestled within her hands. The others drop what they're doing and rush to her side.

"What's in there?" asks Tim.

At first glance, nothing. But there _are_ words written on the side of the envelope, so Matt assumes that they're on the right track. "Hold on." He snatches the envelope from Lele. "Let's read this."

_Combine with purified water. Look to Saint Peter._

Well, Saint Peter isn't here, obviously. But there _is_ a painting on the wall, which depicts a man being crucified upside down.

"Is that Saint Peter?" Tim wants to know.

Matt shakes his head. "That's Jesus. I don't really think Saint Peter—"

"No." There's a scary sort of conviction in Lele's voice. "That's Peter. I remember. I was in Catholic school."

"Okay." Matt doesn't have the energy to argue with her again, so he goes back to reading the envelope.

_Find a number of glasses to fill with water._
As the group continues to examine the painting, they begin to notice a series of Roman numerals etched into the canvas. Each has either a minus sign or a plus sign next to it.

It's Lele, damn her, who figures it out first. "That's one number," she announces, pointing to a five with a minus sign next to it. "That's another number. And look—this one. They're everywhere." Fire dances across her brown eyes. "We have to add them all together."

From there, it's just a matter of mathematics.

"So this is plus two."

"Five plus two..."

"...one plus ten equals eleven, minus five..."

"...is six..."

"...plus two..."

"...is eight..."

"...minus three...five!"

Tim steps away from the painting, glancing over his shoulder as he does so. "Did we get the dust yet?" he asks no one in particular.

The word "no" is seconds away from exiting Matt's lips when he remembers—the envelope. "Oh!" He missed it before, he must've, that's why he thought there was nothing there, but a closer look reveals a sprinkling of dirt clinging to the bottom of the envelope. "The dust is inside here. That's what inside. So we've got the dust."

This leads to a trio of "ohs" as Lele, Tim, and Sierra crowd around the open envelope in Matt's hand. Matt smiles, hope returning to his heart, trying his damnedest to forget the frog thing's wicked prophecy.

"This is never going to end. You—all of you—are going to—"

"Shut up."

Sierra whirls around. "What?"

"Never mind."

Oli's never heard of Belial, or Xephon, or Raum, or any of the people connected to these names. Who in their right mind would name their child Xephon anyway?

Oh, who is he kidding, Eva's right, she's always right, these are demon names, they're probably hiding within the Bible somewhere.

But where?

As Eva and Joey continue to search the room, Oli examines the wardrobe they're trying to open. Devils on the left side...an angel on the right side...these decorations can't be a coincidence. These angels and demons are trying to tell him something.
"I feel like there's gotta be one more," Eva remarks. "There's—"

That's it.

"Wait!"

Eva practically trips her way to Oli's side. Joey's not far behind, though he's simultaneously scanning the room with a guilty look in his eyes.

Oli counts the devils aloud. He's in a bit of a hurry, so the first few numbers come out in an indistinguishable blur of sound. "...eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve...thirteen. Thirteen devils."

"And one angel," Eva points out.

"The Revelation." It all comes together like puzzle pieces in Oli's mind. "Thirteen one. The Bible."

He flips through the Bible until he's found Revelation 13:1.

_and I stood upon the sand of the sea, and saw a beast rise up out of the sea, having seven heads and ten horns, and upon his horns ten crowns, and upon his heads the name of blasphemy._

Seven. Ten. One. That's the code.

Eva punches it in, and sure enough, the wardrobe door swings open. "Omigod," she gasps, as if she's overwhelmed by their good fortune. "Yes!"

Joey points at Oli. "You're a genius."

Oli blushes. No one's ever called him a genius before.

They look inside. "Oh," says Joey with a smile, pointing to the dragons painted on the inside of the door. "Dragons. Cute."

There's also seven dials, each with a litany of tiny letters crowding around its center. And a note.

*Find the seven blasphemous names scattered throughout the room. Turn the corresponding dial to the first letter of their name in alphabetical order.*

Well, they've already found the seven blasphemous names. And Eva, being Eva, has already arranged them by alphabetical order on the table. All that's left to do is enter the first letter of each name into its respective dial.

But then, just as Eva gets to work on the first dial, the shadow returns—and this time, it heads straight for Joey. It swirls around him, shrouding his clothes in darkness, and Oli's positive he can hear its blackened laugh.

_Oh, God..._

"Oh, hell no!" Joey screams.

Eva's trembling. "B," she stutters, her eyes glued to her task. "B—what's next?"

Oli rattles off the letters for her, his mind too panicked to process what's happening. "B—D—F—I—" Where are the others? Have they found the holy water? Are demons haunting them as well? "M—R—S."
Once Eva's done messing with the dials, they hear a creaking sound coming from one of the drawers. Eva opens it. "Omigod," she sighs, a relieved expression dancing across her face. "We found it."

She's right. Inside the drawer is a small white envelope and, more importantly, the rosary.

"Yes!" Oli's never been happier to see a rosary in his life. "We got it!"

He turns to Eva. She looks like she just ran a marathon, but she still manages to flash a weak smile in his direction. "Let's get out of here."

Oli couldn't agree more.

So here they are. Team Holy Water. Lele's muttering to herself, Sierra's tripping out, and Matt's putting on his *whatever, it's cool, it's cool* face, even though any idiot can tell he's just as scared as the rest of them.

And Tim? Tim's just wondering how much longer this crazy nightmare will last.

"Now put the dust in the water," Matt instructs Sierra, who's holding on to the dirt-filled envelope for dear life. "Sprinkle it in."

She dumps the whole thing into the pitcher without even blinking.

*Damn.* "Okay." Tim's voice feels hollow. "So we pour that into the basin."

They surround the basin. Sierra's got the pitcher, and Lele's here to hold the glass out for her. "Careful, that's holy water," mutters Matt, as if this stuff is gonna use its holy power to send them all back home.

Sierra ignores him. She pours a glass, and Lele empties it into the basin.

"One."

And so begins the all-powerful water-pouring ritual. Tim's only kind of paying attention to what's going on; he's too busy composing the lyrics to his next mixtape. And *hoo* boy, this one's gonna be *straight freakin' fire.*

*1920s gangsta, I'm the real OG*  
*Mobster comin' at ya with my Godfather dream*  
*Chillin' with my homies in this haunted-ass house*  
*Hope it doesn't kill me...*

Nah. Forget it. Who is he kidding? He can't rap at a time like this.

"Four."

"Guys, we're almost there." Matt's smile looks fake as hell, but at least he's *trying* to put on a brave face. "One more."

One more. Sierra pours one more. One more glass, and then—

"Guys. We did it."

But before the victory party has a chance to kick off, a loud boom nearly blows Tim's eardrums out.
Everyone screams. Sierra runs for cover, tripping over Tim's feet in the process.

_Holy hell!_ He grabs her hand. Drops of almost-holy water stain his sleeve. _Stop jumpscaring us! You're gonna give me a heart attack!

Once everyone calms down, Tim picks up a random piece of paper lying near the basin. "Here we go." He rattles off the prayer, anxious to get this over with. "Oh, water, I exorcise you, that you may put to flight all the power of the enemy through the power of the Lord, who will come to judge the living and the dead by fire. Amen."

The basin glows. Beams of white light illuminate the water within. The four YouTubers watch, transfixed, as their bowl of water takes on a brilliance beyond human comprehension.

And that's it. They're done. They've made holy water.

The light fades, and Tim fills their bottle to the brim with water. That done, he turns to Lele, a grin on his face, determination setting fire to his fear. "Let's go exorcise this girl!"

Lele high-fives him. So does Matt, though he seems a bit less enthusiastic about it.

"You guys are messed up," mutters Sierra, shaking her head.

Lele's job is done.

Her group joins Joey's. Between them, both the holy water and the rosary have been successfully retrieved. Now all they have to do is do the freakin' exorcism, and then they'll be one step closer to getting the hell out of here.

"We have a note," says Oli, because of course he does.

_You now have the items needed to perform the exorcism...but only two may journey into the darkness and face the demon. They must be selected by vote. _

Everyone groans.

_Here we go again._

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: Voting time! Also, Oli is bitter, Sierra feels maligned, and Matt makes a dangerous mistake.
Who will perform the exorcism? Time to find out!

The first name drawn will assume the roll of the first exorcist, and the next name drawn will be the second exorcist.

"So two are leaving today, basically," is what Lele has to say about it.

Matt stares at the floor, deep in thought, a thousand horror movies playing in his mind. An exorcism. He should be scared, but this is nothing new. Not to him. He's seen exorcisms before. He knows what to do.

This is his chance.

"I watch a lot of scary movies." The words are out of his mouth before he can stop himself. "I'll do an exorcism."

He's expecting cries of "Matt, no!" and "please don't do this, you don't have to!" Instead, what he gets is an "all right" from Tim, shrugs from Joey and Sierra, an "okay then" from Eva, and (of course) cheers from Lele.

I love you too, guys.

Oli, especially, seems nonplussed. "Thanks for that, Matt. Anyone else wanna volunteer? Or are we doing a vote?"

They're doing a vote.

Arthur and Sarah stand next to the hat, the latter scowling at its black folds. Lele, Sierra, Eva, and Oli huddle together on the couch. And as Matt goes to join Joey and Tim in the corner, his stomach churns with a vague sense of regret.

"Okay, you know what?" Tim's trying not to let his sense of revenge get the best of him, but he can't forget the girls' efforts to turn this death race into a gender issue. Especially after their boys-are-evil mentality almost killed him. "We'll just all vote a different girl."

Matt nods. "Okay. I'm down with that. They've been trying to get rid of the men this entire time."

"Just that last time," mutters Joey, shifting uncomfortably in his shoes.

So that's that, then. There's three girls, and three boys willing to vote for them (Oli's apparently sided with the girls for some reason). Matt's going to go for Lele, because of course he is, so that leaves
Eva and Sierra to choose from.

Sierra...she voted for him. He knows that. It's her fault he almost died. And yet...

He can't.

He can't vote for her. Not after everything they've been through together. Not after the car and the holy water and her tears on his jacket.

Besides, she's Sierra. She's way too fragile for this Roaring Twenties hellhole. She's a traumatized beauty guru who's spent the last few hours shaking in her Heiress high heels, and if he sends her to that exorcism, she's going to die.

Eva, though...Eva has a chance. She's smart. She knows how to survive.

*Sorry, Gutowski.*

Oli trusts Eva. He trusts Lele. He even trusts Sierra. He trusts the girls more than he trusts the other boys, and that's goddamn depressing.

"Joey." The name feels like salt between his teeth. "Last time, he was chatting with me, and he was like, 'oh, don't vote for that person, we need to vote for this person.' And then him and Matt go and vote for me."

He shouldn't be bitter. He shouldn't. Joey and Matt had to vote for someone, same as everyone else, and Oli just happened to be the guy they picked. But every time he tries to let it go, he remembers—the water—the drop—the fear—I'm going to die—

"They're obviously voting for one of us here," Lele hisses.

Oli bites his lip, forcing his conscience to the back of his mind. "You guys know what you wanna do?"

"Yeah," mutters Eva.

Matt's already in. He sacrificed himself. Oli has to admit, he didn't expect that kind of selflessness from Matt Haag of all people, but whatever. He'll do the exorcism, and if Oli's plan works, Joey Graceffa will join him.

Unless Matt tries to back out. If that happens, Oli's going to make sure that the Professor sticks with his decision.

"Let's do it."

Matt's changed his mind.

He can't do this. He knows he's qualified, especially considering his horror movie background, but...he can't. He needs to survive. He has too much to live for. This was a mistake.

So when Arthur turns to him and says "Matt, you volunteered yourself," he stutters his way through a half-assed apology.
"Uh, I did, but...I feel like...I wasn't thinking clearly..."

"You can't do that!" Eva shouts, anger and disbelief piercing her voice. "You can't just do that!"

Lele shakes her head. "I told you guys. He's so bipolar it's—"

Matt tunes her out.

"Matt." Arthur's the only one in the room who isn't glaring at him right now. "Would you like to volunteer the first name?"

Ignoring his friends' scowls, Matt approaches the hat and takes the pencil from Arthur. Lele's in his ear, chirping her infuriating cacophony of sounds, and he wants to vote for her more than he's ever wanted anything in his life. But he doesn't. If the others decide to ignore his retraction and throw him to the demons anyway, he doesn't want to be stuck down there with Lele.

Joey's out, for obvious reasons. He voted for Oli last time. And Eva clearly hates him.

So he votes for Sierra.

Eva votes, and then it's Lele's turn.

She's voting for Matt. Of course she is. She's not gonna rest until Matt is gone. But this time around, she stays quiet, scribbling out his name without her usual "Matt!" proclamation.

"Come on." Joey's got a mischievous twinkle in his blue eyes. "Tell us."

Why should she? The bastard doesn't deserve a warning.

Matt, being the moron he is, takes it the wrong way. "Oh, a little bit of changing it up?" he sneers as she returns to her seat. "This is a nice change of pace."

As if. "Stop talking to me. What the hell?" You'll never hurt me again.

As the other YouTubers take turns voting, Sierra can't help but worry...what if they vote for me?

It's possible. She won't deny it. She's managed to avoid the challenges so far, but then they forced her to wrap the cord around the artifact during the ritual. They turned against her. And a part of her's convinced they'll do it again.

But this...an exorcism...she can't do it. It's too creepy, and there's demons involved, and someone's probably going to die, and haven't they been through enough already?

Her turn. She votes for Matt. He's not a bad guy, not really, but he volunteered himself. No takebacks.

Finally, once the last person (Tim) has voted, Arthur picks up the hat, and Sierra's heart sticks like cotton in her throat. It's time. It's happening. The scariest challenge yet, and they're about to decide who's going to face it.

Not me not me not me...
"Give them a good ol' stir around this time," Oli requests.

Arthur does so. "May God be with you all."

"If I get chosen," Joey remarks as Arthur draws the first name, "you're taking my place, Matt. You volunteered."

Matt looks like he's about to respond, but before he gets the chance, Arthur reads the name aloud.

"Sierra."

Her blood turns to ice. "What the heck," she murmurs, her voice a flattened shell of what it once was. "You guys. Are you serious?"

"You guys are sick," snaps Lele.

And then—terror—grief—betrayal—oh God they chose me they chose me I'm going to die I'm scared I don't want to I can't do this—Sierra dissolves into a puddle, tears flooding her cheeks, her head against her chest. "Why would you do that to me?"

Watching Sierra's panic attack bruises Matt's soul. They weren't close, but he likes her a lot, and he should've considered her fragile mental state before he voted for her. He wants to take it back.

But he can't.

The second name is drawn.

"Better not be a girl," Lele snarls, her hand on Sierra's trembling shoulder. "Better not be a girl."

"Second name is Matt."

"Well, you got your wish," says Joey with a smile.

Matt sighs. Of course. His efforts to protect himself backfired yet again. "I would really love to know who actually voted for me," he says calmly, trying to keep the pain out of his voice.

"I voted for you."

Oli?

"The drama," Joey chortles.

Arthur checks his watch. "It is time to do the exorcism. Please—"

"No," moans Sierra, who's still a curled-up mess on the couch. "Guys, this is so creepy, why would you put me through this?"

"It's time!" Arthur insists.

Oli approaches a still-shocked Matt. "You're gonna need that." He hands him the rosary. "And you're gonna need that." He hands him the Bible. "And that was for dunking me."

"This is never going to end. You—all of you—are going to die."
Sierra gets up. Her hands are still shaking. She can't bring herself to look at any of the other YouTubers. Tim hands her the holy water, pats her on the back, and mutters "good luck" under his breath.

She doesn't know who voted for her.

She doesn't know why they voted for her.

She didn't do anything to anyone.

She doesn't want to do an exorcism.

She's scared.

And she liked this house much better when she thought it was all a prank.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: Sierra and Matt try their hand at demon wrangling, but their brush with the supernatural has deadly consequences...
Chapter Summary

Did someone call for an exorcist? Well, have no fear, because Matt and Sierra are on the case! What could possibly go wrong?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Once the exorcists' footsteps have faded into the distance, Tim throws up his hands. "All right. Fess up. Who voted for Sierra?"

Joey gulps. "I voted for Sierra," he admits, trying his best to avoid the Mobster's glare, "because her and Matt are the only ones who haven't done it, and they need to start contributing."

Eva's voice is a quiet murmur. "I voted for Sierra."

"Did you?"

"What?"

"Matt was going in there no matter what I did," she explains, "so there was no point in voting for him. Lele, Oli, I love you guys too much to vote for you, and I didn't vote for Joey because I don't want to die."

She's looking right at Joey as she says it, and he squirms under her glare like a bug under a microscope. GloZell. Of course. He killed GloZell, and no one's going to let him forget it. Especially not Eva.

"What about me?" Tim demands to know.

Eva shrugs. "You just got dunked," she says matter-of-factly. "I figured I'd give you a break this time around."

"Aw, thanks."

"You're welcome."

As he and Sierra follow Arthur to the basement, Matt feels like he's walking to his grave. And, to be honest, he very well might be—if this challenge is anything like the others, he has a fifty percent chance of survival.

Or maybe, since Tim and Oli were both spared last time around, the evil's going to execute them both.

"Omigod," squeaks Sierra, more to herself than anyone else, and guilt hits Matt like a bullet to the stomach. It's his fault she's here. She should be upstairs, relaxing with her friends, but instead she's
being forced to help him exorcise a demon. And if he had just voted for Lele, who *deserves* this awful fate, Sierra might have been spared. Between that and his "jk I don't wanna sacrifice myself after all" bullshit, it's clear that karma had the last laugh.

He squeezes her hand. "I promise you, we're gonna be just fine." It's a lie, and he knows it, but what's he *supposed* to say?

She walks in a broken haze, ignoring his failed attempt at comfort. "I'm scared. I'm really scared."

They enter the basement. The smell of rotting flesh hits Matt's nostrils like a punch. "What in the world is *this*?" he coughs, his lungs searching frantically for fresh air. "Why does it *smell* like this?"

Andrea. There she is again. Matt wills himself not to look at her.

"Where are we going?"

Arthur ignores the question, soldering on into the unknown as if this is perfectly normal. Matt tries asking again, louder, but the butler seems determined to keep his ears sealed shut.

They pass by the priest's room.

Sierra's voice is a nonstop whimper. "I don't wanna do this I don't wanna do this I don't wanna do this..."

Finally, the walk of agony is over, and they've reached their destination. Which is, apparently, a scary dungeon basement thing with a table, a candle, and two pieces of paper. And there's a closed door on the opposite wall, which must be where—the exorcism—

*I'm not ready.*

"What's this?" Sierra wrinkles her nose. There's a strange, almost soothing smell mingling with the stench of the basement. "Do you smell that?"

"It's incense," says Matt. "And this is the symbol..." He examines the note before them, frowning at the symbol as if it's all the Society Against Evil's fault. "Okay. It looks like these are the instructions."

To exorcise a demon of this strength, it requires the effort of two exorcists. The second exorcist must take the rosary and holy water and complete four steps—

Right. So that's Matt. He's the second exorcist. And while he's doing that, she has to...*oh God.*

—while the first exorcist holds down the victim, no matter how hard they fight back.

The thought of restraining a woman possessed by demons causes goosebumps all over Sierra's arms and legs. She won't. She *can't*. How is she, a 110-pound slip of a girl, supposed to subdue the supernatural strength of whatever hellspawn haunts their patient's soul?

And what if she lets go?

*If the first exorcist lets go for any reason, he or she will immediately d—*

Matt yanks the instructions out of her line of sight. "Sierra." His voice is calm yet compelling. "It's okay. We're gonna be okay. Sierra. Look at me."
"This won't take long," he insists. "We'll be in and out of there before you know it. And besides, I'm the one who has to do all the dangerous stuff. All you have to do is sit on the bed, hold down the woman, and say a prayer." He hands her the second piece of paper. "The entire time you're holding her down, say this. Over and over. You have to memorize it."

Sierra stammers her way through the prayer. "Saint Michael...the archangel..."

"I've got my holy water," says Matt, taking the bottle from her.

"...be our protection from the wickedness...and banish this evil."

*There.* She puts her hands against her temples, forcing the prayer into her brain. *Saint Michael. The archangel. Be our protection. Don't forget.*

"Once you've got that memorized," Matt reminds her, "you can't let go."

"I know."

"And don't cry, okay? We're gonna be fine. Trust me."

Trust...she's not too good at that. Especially after everything she's been through. Especially after her friends chose her to do a freakin' exorcism. But Matt's been so sweet, trying his best to ease her panicked mind, and it's not like she has any other options.

This is her job. This is what she's doing. The rest is up to Matt.

She has to trust him.

There are four steps necessary to complete the exorcism. Three are written down. According to the instructions, once Matt has completed the first three steps, the fourth and final step will "reveal itself" to him. Whatever that means.

He's got the holy water. He's got the rosary. Sierra's memorized the prayer. There's no point in waiting around any longer. "Let's go."

They approach the door. Matt takes a deep breath, grits his teeth, and opens it.

"Holy shit!"

A woman—*oh, God, that can't be a woman*—snarls at them from the bed. She's on all fours, her face towards the ceiling, her hair a tangled mess of black, her white nightgown barely hanging on to her thin frame. Her face and body have long since shriveled into unrecognizable husks of flesh; she looks like a malnourished monster in human form.

"Omigod," Sierra gasps.

"Um." Matt has temporarily forgotten how to speak. "Uh. Um."

"Do I go?"

"Yeah." He snaps back into action, taking note of the candles scattered throughout the room. "Go ahead, go ahead, I'm just—so—I gotta get—the candles."
Sierra sits down, grabs the woman by the arm, and forces her against the bedsheets. "Go!" she cries, her voice almost inaudible over the hellish growls of their patient. "Go! I have her!"

**Step 1: You will see a cross of chalk on the floor. Use five of the candles to make a star around it.**

"Tell me when to start!"

Matt runs back and forth, grabbing candles and placing them around the cross. "Just keep saying it. Keep saying it. I got you, I got you, I got you."

"Saint Michael...the archangel..." She chokes out the prayer, clearly on the verge of another round of tears. "Be our protection from the wickedness."

"I got you, hold on, hold on, we got the star," murmurs Matt, turning his attention to the second step. **Step 2: Find the censer (the container of incense) and place it inside the star.**

Matt finds the censer in approximately no time flat. As he's racing back to the star, he sees Sierra, tears in her eyes, repeating the prayer like a shellshocked parrot. He has to hurry. He has to save her. Censer. Star. He's halfway there. **Step 3: Draw alpha and omega symbols on either side of the star.**

Sierra can't think. Liquid terror overwhelms her nerves, poisoning her brain with a thousand jumbled screams. The demons roar blood into her ears. Her heart quickens its pace.

"Saint Michael. The archangel."

If Matt wasn't here, she probably would've gone insane by now.

The victim is still writhing, still snarling, and Sierra's having trouble holding her down. *Don't let go,* she reminds herself, sinking her fingernails into the woman's paper-thin skin. *You can't let go. If you let go, you're gonna die.*

"Five candles." What is Matt doing? Why is he on the ground? "Okay. I gotta do this. Hold on. Hold on!"

Papers fall. She screams. Her voice is hoarse from all the screaming.

"Hold on! I've got the omega!"

What's an omega?

"We should be good..."

"Saint Michael!"

Books fall. So does a bottle, which crashes into shards of glass on the ground. Matt's finished doodling whatever-it-was, and now he's searching for...something...

"Hurry! Hurry!"

Matt...please...I can't hold on much longer...
Three steps down. Matt's looking for the fourth step, but he can't find it, and now the spiders in his stomach are beginning to get the best of him. "Did I miss a step?"

"Be our protection from the wickedness! Banish this evil spirit!"

"I'm trying." It's a setup. It has to be. There is no fourth step. The demon's going to kill him and Sierra. "I'm so sorry."

"This is never going to end."

It's his fault. He knows that now. He volunteered himself, backed out, and voted for Sierra instead. And now, his incompetence is going to get them both killed. Well, at least Lele will be happy.

"Do you see anything over there?" he asks his partner, trying to keep his composure for her sake.

"Maybe?"

And then—hope, in the form of a box on Sierra's bedside table. Matt grabs it, throws it onto the ground, and opens it to reveal another note. "I've got some kind of clue!"

How much time does he have left? Is this timed?

He'd better hurry.

He skims through the note, barely paying attention to what he's reading. Fourth step requires you...blah blah blah...holy water...pour holy water head to toe on the victim...something something force...put the rosary on top of the first exorcist...

"Amen!" screams Sierra, struggling to subdue their patient. She's losing her grip. He has to go. Now.

Matt grabs the holy water, pours it all over the woman, and tangles the rosary beads within Sierra's tiara.

Sierra struggles.

"Stay still!" shouts Matt. "Stay still!"

Matt—wait—what are you—no—don't—

Her heart stops.

Matt...I trusted you...

Sierra collapses onto the bed. Matt hovers over her, not sure what the hell is going on. "Sierra? Are you okay?"

She's not responding.

He turns his attention back to the note in his hand.

...in order to complete the exorcism, you must choose. Put the rosary on top of the first exorcist, and
he or she will die, killed by unholy spirits as they flee the victim's soul. Put the rosary on your own neck, and you will be the one to die. Either way, a life is required to set this woman free.

He had a choice. He had a choice.

"Sierra, I'm so sorry." His voice trembles as he faces her corpse. "I did this wrong."

Now that their patient is demon-free, her eyes have lost their venom, and two pools of blue examine Matt through a web of hair. She hands him the priest's missing cross, regret drawn like a painting on her face.

Matt takes the crucifix without looking at it. "Go," he tells the woman, hot tears stabbing his eyelids. "You can go now. You're free."

She disappears.

As Matt stumbles his way out of the room, he can't take his eyes off of the lifeless body of Sierra Furtado. She's tiny in death; if he didn't know better, he'd swear she couldn't have been older than fourteen. Fourteen, and all dressed up, and her tiara is sparkling like diamonds in her dark hair, and teardrops still glisten on her cheeks.

If he had only read the note all the way through...

What would he have done? Killed Sierra? Killed himself? He doesn't know. He'll never know. A brief lapse of judgement, a single error, and she's gone. Forever. Just like that.

Because of him.

Matt enters, clutching a crucifix, looking like he just got back from hell. "I killed her."

"You killed her?"

Of course. Of course he did. Lele scowls at the ceiling, her head throbbing with an almost familiar pain. She should've known. He's a prick, he's a self-righteous bastard, and now he's a goddamn murderer to boot.

Sierra's dead. Another friend gone. God, she's sick of grieving.

He killed her?

"It was an accident," Matt insists.

Eva pushes aside her grief (Sierra, dammit, I voted for you, but I didn't want you dead, I hate this house) and examines Matt's note. It's pretty straightforward. Make a choice, whoever you pick dies, that kind of thing. She doesn't understand how Matt could've screwed this one up.

Joey breaks the silence. "So you didn't read the whole note?"

"I didn't..." Matt's in panic mode. "It was on a time constraint. I was trying to go as fast as I could."

"That doesn't sound right," mutters Eva.
"Part of me is like, I understand," Joey explains, "but the other part..." He shakes his head. "It just makes you look so sketchy right now."

"Sketchy" isn't quite the word I'd use, to be honest...

They don't believe him.

"We don't know what went on!" Lele shouts, her voice throbbing with anger. "We don't—"

"I knew how it was gonna look when I walked up here!"

Their eyes say it all. They think he killed her in cold blood. They think he was too much of a coward to kill himself. They don't understand. None of them understand.

I'm sorry...I didn't mean to...it was an accident...

I don't want to do this anymore.

At first, Tim doesn't react. He stares at the ground, pensive, uncharacteristically silent, while everyone else debates Matt's innocence. And when the time comes to return the crucifix to the priest, he walks to the basement without complaint.

But then he sees Andrea, and all bets are off.

He doubles over, feeling like he's just been punched in the stomach. Andrea. Sierra. One was his closest friend, and the other cried on his shoulder less than an hour ago. They're both gone now. He's a resilient guy, but he doesn't know how much more of this he can take.

He's not gonna cry. He's not gonna cry. He's Timothy DeLaGhetto, dammit. Timothy DeLaGhetto doesn't cry unless it's for the cameras.

They enter the priest's room. Father Whatshisname turns around, and his eyes light up like goddamn Christmas trees. "The cross." He takes his cross from Joey. "Thank you. Thank you. I'm free."

You're welcome.

The priest turns to Eva, handing her a plain brown notebook. "I kept a journal with my observations of the other owners. It will help you find them."

He makes the sign of the cross over them, as if he's trying to protect them from what's ahead. And then, before anyone has the chance to tell him about Sierra, he walks up the stairs and vanishes into the night.

Once upstairs, they put the artifacts back on the mantlepiece. Matt wants to smash the useless things against the ground, but he knows better.

"At least we know what we have to do," says Joey. "Four more owners."

Matt laughs bitterly. "Don't even read the book! It doesn't matter. We killed off all of our friends just to get the four artifacts, and then we find out we need to do more, just so we can kill off even more
people to *hopefully* get out of the house!"

It's over. He's done. The frog thing was right. There's no point. They're fighting a losing battle.

"This is never going to end, and we are all going to die."

Chapter End Notes

RIP Sierra. To the one person in the comments who was hoping she'd make it through, I'm so sorry. I feel like *such* a dream-crusher.
Next chapter: Matt has crossed the Despair Event Horizon, and there's no going back. Also, the gang says hi to the world's freakiest mermaid.
Mermaid Tales

Chapter Summary

The second owner is a mermaid with a murderous past. Our heroes set out to save her. Except for Matt, who gives up on everything.

Chapter Notes

So...I've been debating with myself...should I novelize Season 2 once it comes out? Or should I wrap up this story and make it a standalone? After all, I'm going to college next year, and I'm not sure I'll have time for another novelization. What do you guys think?

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Matt slumps against a chair, his heart hurting, Sierra's tears embedded into his soul. "Do you not see a pattern here? Do you guys get where I'm coming from?"

"Okay, but we can't just, like, give up!" Joey retorts. "Otherwise, we're as good as dead!"

You don't get it, Joey. We're as good as dead already. We died the minute we accepted your invitation. "I just don't see the light at the end of the tunnel," Matt mutters, shaking his head.

Joey picks up the priest's journal. "Well," he snaps defiantly, "why don't we just try finding the next owner so that we can free it and get on with our lives?"

"Yeah," Eva agrees.

Before Oli has the chance to ponder why Matt is acting so strangely, Joey opens the journal and reads its contents aloud.

Madison developed a taste for men, and soon the pool was filled with her victims. In time, her conscience began to whisper, and the guilt weakened her. The house moved on to another owner, keeping her trapped in the house.

"Madison," as it turns out, is a mermaid, according to the sketch on the opposite page. Lele is visibly surprised at this, but Oli shrugs it off as just another weird thing that this house has decided to throw at them.

The key to her room rests on the first floor and can only be found by breaking open the world.

"The world!" shouts Eva triumphantly, pointing at a nearby globe.

Oli smiles. This is easy. The globe's right there. The evil must've decided to give them a break for once.
Everyone rushes for the globe. Eva gets there first, punching it out of its frame with an almost frightening ease. Joey proceeds to pick it up and raise it over his head.

"You got this!"

"Go, Joey!"

"You think we gotta break it?"

"Yeah! Do it! Do it!"

Joey throws the globe against the table. Much to Oli's surprise, it stays intact.

"I think we should step on it," Eva suggests.

Oli snatches up the globe. For the second time in one night, he's got an overpowering need to break something, and if it's going to get them out of here, so much the better. *I hate this house I hate this house I hate this—*

*Oli! SMASH!*

He busts the globe in two with a single well-placed kick, sending the two halves flailing against the floor. The group crowds around his mess, expecting to find their next clue, but both halves are disappointingly empty.

Eva's mouth twitches into a frown. "There's nothing *in* it?"

"Okay, that's not the world," says Joey with a sigh.

*It isn't?* Oli's shoulders slump. *Then what the hell—*

"I found another one!" It's Lele, a stubborn scowl on her face, clutching a second globe between her gloved hands. "Can I break it?"

Oli shrugs. "Yeah. Go ahead."

"Just *do* it!" Eva shouts.

To say that Lele "just does it" would be an understatement. She holds it high, channels the ferocity of a fifty-ton wrecking ball, and smashes the hapless globe against the table.

"Bloody hell!" Oli does *not* want to get on Lele Pons's bad side.

Tim cheers. Lele looks extremely proud of herself.

There's nothing in that one, either. "We're doing this wrong," frets Oli, flipping through the pages of the priest's worn-out journal. "The key to the room is on the *first* floor."

Joey looks confused. "This is the first floor!"

"This is the *ground* floor," Oli explains.

"No!" Eva slams her hands against the table, frustration flickering across her face. "We're not in London!"

"Stop talking crazy English talk!" says Tim dismissively.
Matt, who's spent the last several minutes doing absolutely nothing, makes a barely-audible suggestion about "other rooms." The group follows him, but not before Tim mutters "poppycock" under his breath.

Does the token Brit usually die in horror movies? Oli has no clue.

Five minutes later, they've smashed two more globes, ripped apart a map of the world, and still haven't found the key. Tim's beginning to get a bit antsy about all this property damage.

"We just made that demon extra angry," he remarks as Joey throws the ruined map aside. "We broke some, like, really nice globes."

"There's so many," moans Joey.

"There's so many worlds!" Eva complains.

Tim scratches his nose. He doesn't know much about supernatural shit, but he's pretty sure you're not supposed to trash the haunted house. Even if it is Joey's. "The spirit's gonna be pissed."

And it's not just the possibility of vengeful ghost housekeepers that's messing with his mind. There's also Matt. Since Sierra died, the Professor's been moping around the parlor, going on and on about how they're all screwed, and putting the least possible amount of effort into their search for the key. Whatever happened down there must've really screwed him up.

Maybe it was inevitable. After all, he did have a mini-breakdown after watching Tim get tortured, not to mention his paranoid vendetta against Lele. Maybe it was only a matter of time before the poor guy reached his breaking point.

But Tim's still gonna try his damnedest to fix him.

Speaking of which, where is he?

Oh. He's over there, examining a statuette, a questioning look on his face. And the statuette—wait.

"Is that...?"

It's a guy with bulging biceps, holding up what appears to be the world. An overexcited Tim rushes to Matt's side, puts his sweaty hands on their newly acquired prize, and begins to shake it. This is it. It has to be.

"I don't know," murmurs Eva. "That looks dangerous."

Matt clutches the statuette's base for dear life. "It looks like he's holding—"

Before he can finish, the world falls apart. The upper half topples into Tim's hand, revealing a gaping hole in the center. And inside that hole is the key they're looking for.

"Oh!"

Tim snatches up the key, grinning like a madman, glad they don't have to wreck any more globes. Matt, too, has managed to slap on a smile, which is a good sign. Give us a few more victories, and he'll be himself again in no time flat.

The number two is engraved on the side of the key. "Second floor," Tim assumes.
The survivors practically stampede their way up the steps. Especially Lele, whose high heels somehow survive her frenzied sprint. Matt, on the other hand, is trudging along at the back of the pack, so Tim figures now would be a good time to give him a good old-fashioned pep talk.

"Hey." He turns to face his friend. "Lighten up, will you?"

"Tim—"

"I know. It sucks. We've all lost people. And it gets kinda depressing after a while. But you can't shut down on us. Not now. We need you."

Matt shakes his head. "It's no use, Tim. This house...I'm doomed. We all are. I know you're still trying to find a bright side, because you're Tim and that's what you do, but maybe it would be better if we just...y'know...let go."

"Don't talk like that, you psychopath!" shouts Eva from upstairs.

They try the key on the first door they find, and sure enough, it lets them right in. "It's foggy," Tim complains, trying to shoo the mist away from his eyes.

And then—a noise, like a snarling snake, coming from a nearby glass cage. Everyone screams. Tim turns to face the cage, and he immediately forgets about Matt because damn.

It's the mermaid chick. At least, he thinks so. But she's scary, and she's all chained up, and her mouth looks like it's been sliced open, and she's got gill titties. Really nice gill titties, but still...is he turned on? Is he scared? Is he both?

He's both.

"Please help me!" The mermaid (Madison, Joey reminds himself) screams out a sob, her words barely intelligible thanks to her shark-like teeth. "The house...it lied to me...it said I would be free...but now I am in chains...I hated my husband...I killed him...it's true..."

The house lied to all of us, Joey almost responds, but he manages to bite back the painful statement. "What happened to you?"

"He was a very, very bad man!" she wails.

She looks terrifying. Her hair is black and stringy, her skin is ghostly white, and her humongous lips are dotted with blood. But at the same time, the pain in her voice and the tears staining her skin make Joey feel incredibly sorry for her.

He wants to help her. Even if it means another death.

First of all, the way Madison talks freaks Lele out. Big lips, pointy teeth, ffffffjjjjj...what the hell you saying?

Second of all, she's not sure she buys this mermaid chick's sob story. Even if she could understand it.

"But the worst part is...I lost my daughter too!" sobs Madison. "And the only way I can be with her again is if I find her favorite doll, and then I make things right with those I have killed. You...you..." Her finger trembles at the group. "Can you help me do those things?"
Lele backs away. "No. There's a reason why you're there." She knows her Greek mythology. She's heard stories of mermaids singing and then eating the men. She's not about to put the group in danger for the ten thousandth time.

"That depends," says Tim, because Tim's an idiot.

"Wait! Hold on!" Joey looks like he just realized something. "You're one of the previous owners, right?"

"Yes," Madison whispers. "I am...please help me...I will tell you how to go about it...please...get the doll..."

"How do we know we can trust you?" Oli wants to know.

Madison's gaze lands on his chest. When she speaks again, there's a whispery sort of hunger in her voice. "You can look at me. You...you can trust me."

"You don't look very trustworthy," Matt pipes up.

But Joey nods, and Oli's frightened eyes dart to the floor, and everyone seems resigned to the inevitable. They're going to help Madison the mermaid, whether they like it or not. And Lele doesn't like it. Not at all.

"Listen to me." Madison's voice has deepened. Danger leaks from her hideous mouth. "I wrote the names of the men I murdered in my diary on the counter. Those names...they need to be measured by the letter in coin."

Lele snatches up the journal, trying not to look at Madison's deformed breasts. Letter in coin? The hell is that supposed to mean?

She's still talking. "My husband..." She giggles. "My husband kept his stash of golden coins in the dining room. There must be enough to pay for them! All you need to do is...you have to retrieve three bodies of the innocent men...they are chained to the bottom of the pool...but the pool is guarded by my wicked sisters, and anyone...any one of you who dares to enter that pool will be torn into shreds!" She chuckles again, as if she finds the idea of people being torn apart by evil mermaids funny. Which, to be fair, she probably does.

Tim's eyes widen. Eva's mouth drops open. Even Matt "Why Bother, We're All Goners Anyway" Haag looks worried.

"But they can be lured away by a very special song," Madison reassures the rattled group.

Joey bites his lip. "What do we have to do?"

"You have to find it. And after that, you will be shown where to find the doll!"

"Okay." Oli snaps out of his stupor and springs into action. "Guys. We need to go."

They flee Madison's room and storm back down the stairs. Lele tries to make some sense of whatever the hell she just saw, but all that comes out is a shellshocked "What the balls. Is this real life? What's happening to us?"

Matt's still in his mopey phase. "I don't know why we're doing this."

"Of course you don't," Eva snorts.
"Shut up!" snaps Joey.

Finally. Something Lele can get behind. Matt *should* shut up. Forever.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: Coins, combinations, and records (oh my!). Also, Lele's a sin, Tim's always right, and the spirit board makes an intriguing return.
Chapter Summary

The gang attempts to solve the mermaid's puzzle. In the process, each of them has a chance to ponder the possibility of death.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Eva has had it up to here with Matthew "Nadeshot" Haag.

Yeah, she gets it, he doesn't like what's going on, but none of them do. That's the point. They're fighting for their lives, and people are dying, and the only way to stay alive is to think. Work through the puzzles. Keep it together. Don't step aside and broadcast your death wish to everyone else in the group.

Besides, Matt killed Sierra. Accident or no accident, he was the one who put the rosary on her head. If he thinks his "boo-hoo-hoo" routine is going to make her forget that, he's got another think coming.

They enter the dining room. "Look!" shouts Oli. "A chest!" He power-walks his way to the box, then stops to examine it further. "There's a lock on it. We need three numbers."

"Again? Whatever. Another code. They've got this.

"There's a symbol over here," mumbles Matt from the other side of the room. "It's a...tab card counter?"

It's a coin counter. And there's a note on the side, which Eva takes the opportunity to read.

_The weight of sin will open the door to a song._

"Sixty-nine pounds?" jokes Tim.

Eva ignores him. "Didn't she say that we need the weight of the coins?"

"Yeah, but what does that have to do with the weight of sin?" Joey asks.

"Just keep looking." Eva has no idea where the gold is, but she _does_ know that it's their best bet to solve this puzzle. And that's all that matters. "It should be here somewhere."

"Let's see..." Matt wanders around, not really paying attention to the proceedings, resisting the urge to collapse into a blob of jelly. "Sin...the weight of sin..."

"Alcohol?" Joey suggests.

Matt lights up. "Yes! Alcohol is a sin!" He needs a drink. He could _really_ use a goddamn drink right now.
Eva points to a nearby platter of booze. "There's alcohol over there."

"You think we're supposed to weigh that?" asks Oli incredulously.

They do. "Try six-twenty," Joey orders Oli and Eva, who scramble to insert the combination. Matt, meanwhile, forces a smile against his cheeks. It's almost over. Live or die, tonight is almost over.

Oli shakes his head. "It's not six-twenty."

The group scatters, looking for sins, and Matt takes the opportunity to pour himself a drink. No one notices. He downs it in one go. The alcohol sears his throat, but otherwise does nothing to change his mood.

Dying. What's it like? Does it hurt, or is it like falling asleep? If something happens to him...if I should die...

"Sarah." He's in the hallway now. He doesn't know how he got there, but he approaches the mysterious maid as if she's an old friend. "Do you know anything about the weight of sin? Sinning in this house? Sin at all?"

She doesn't answer.

"Matt, go! Go! I have her! Tell me when to start!"


He squeezes the air, pretending that it's Sierra's trembling hand, and whispers a quiet "I'm sorry" to her. He hopes that she can hear him.

"This isn't working." Lele still has no clue why they're helping the weird mermaid lady, but whatever. They're doing it, and they've got no freakin' idea what they're doing, and this wild goose chase is beginning to piss her off. "What the hell kind of sin are we supposed to put on the scale?"

"Maybe we should put you on it," says Joey, pointing at her.

She raises an eyebrow. "Why am I a sin?"

Joey snickers. Eva snorts. Tim lets out a loud "daaaaamn."

It takes a moment, but Lele catches on. "Yo, you are deep." Of course. Why not? She's Lele Pons, the Hustler, the resident drama queen, the crazy blonde bitch who hurts herself and calls it comedy. She's sin incarnate. No wonder Matt keeps trying to get her killed.

Unfortunately, she doesn't have much time to meditate on her sinfulness, because Joey stops the search in its tracks with one simple proposal. "Lele's right. This isn't working. Let's go ask the spirit board."

Oh, yeah. The spirit board. That's still a thing.

They gather around it. Joey recites the incantation at breakneck speeds, as if he's a high schooler rushing his way through a presentation he didn't prepare for. "Greetings, spirits. Speak to us." He gulps. "Okay. Give us...um..."

"A sign," interjects Lele. "Where it could be."
"Where is the weight of sin?"

The F lights up. Then the L. Then the O. Then the O again. The spirit board finishes off with an R before it goes silent.

"Floor." The word leaves Lele's mouth like a mouse scampering out of its hole. Okay. So it's on the floor somewhere. Under the floorboards, maybe?

They search the floor, and Eva Gutowski once again proves herself to be the only one here who knows what she's doing. "Wait a second." She kneels down in front of a grated vent. "This can be removed. Hold on..."

She carefully removes the grate, reaches into the vent, and pulls out a box.

"Omigosh!" shrieks Joey.

"Wow." Matt's voice is a flattened parody of itself. "The floor."

Inside the box is a bag of coins, which prompts another round of cheers from the group. Oli shouts "We got the gold!" with the same amount of gusto that Lele would expect from a football player who just scored a touchdown. As for Lele, she's just glad they're finally getting somewhere.

*Thanks, board.*

Joey smiles. "Awesome. Let's put it on the scale."

They put the whole bag on there. "Three thirty-four," Tim tells the group, his fingers crossed like strings behind his back. *Come on, we've almost got it, this better work...*

It doesn't.

"Wait." Oli wrinkles his forehead. "What did she say? She said something else."

The butler, for once in his goddamn life, says something helpful. "I think it was 'measured by the letter in coin.'"

"The letter in coin." Tim shoots a bewildered glance in Arthur's general direction. He's pretty sure that the mermaid chick has a few screws loose, but why the hell couldn't she have given them a clue that made some sense?

Joey, meanwhile, thumbs his way through Madison's diary. "Maybe it has something to do with the three names that she's..." He winces. "...killed."

Tim peeks over his shoulder. The page Joey's staring at is crammed with names, but three of them—Darren Swenson, Michael Harrison, and Steven Wellington—are circled in black ink. Tim can only assume that those are Madison's three victims.

"I'm not gonna lie to you guys," sighs Matt. "I'm a little burned out after I killed Sierra, so my brain isn't...you know..."

*Dude.* Tim rolls his eyes, trying to ignore the twinge of concern twisting around his heart. *Chill out. And stop bringing up the Sierra thing. It's only going to make things worse for you.*

Whatever. He'll worry about Matt later. Back to the stupid clue.
The letter in coin... It hits him like a gunshot. "Count the letters in the names."

Oli's already on it. "Forty-three." he reports.

"Okay." *I'm right. I'm right. I've got to be." So let's put forty-three coins in the bag and weigh that."

"I don't think we have forty-three coins," says Eva, shaking her head.

"Just try it!"

So they try it. Eva's wrong (for once): there are forty-three coins. More than that, actually, but they only need forty-three. Eva weighs them. "Try two hundred and sixty."

"Try two hundred and sixty!" Tim shouts.

Joey tries two hundred and sixty, and sure enough, the lock snaps open. "It worked!" he practically squeals. "How did you do that?"

Tim doesn't answer. Instead, he crosses his arms, smirking at his bewildered friends. He did it. He figured it out. They don't understand how smart he is in this game. He's right. *He's right.*

Most of the time.

Inside the box is a record, accompanied by a note.

*Play this record to lure the mermaids out of the water. Once they've come to the source of the song, you must find a way to keep them there.*

Joey sighs. He doesn't know what horrors await them outside, but whatever it is, he's not looking forward to it. Hey, at least it won't be as bad as watching Justine die...right?

"This is never going to end, and we are all going to—"

*Shut up, Matt.*

He can't give up. He won't give up. He *has* to find his way home.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: Joey and Lele go swimming. Also, Matt *might* be a pervert.
Chapter Summary

In order to retrieve the dead bodies from the pool, Lele and Joey must channel their inner Dory and just keep swimming...just keep swimming...just keep swimming...NO SINGING.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Joey follows the others to the pool. His pool. The same pool he and Daniel had a splash fight in four days ago. There weren't any creepy mermaids in there then.

But there are now.

There are two of them, each with the same pale skin, misshapen breasts, and swollen lips that Madison had. And, just like Madison, they're freakin' terrifying.

"Omigod!"

The mermaids hiss at the group, their twisted mouths turned up into furious snarls. One of them swipes her claws at Eva's skirt. She jumps back, nearly flattening an openmouthed Matt in the process.

"Augh!" screams Tim.

"Bloody hell..." murmurs Oli.

Only Lele seems unfazed. "They're prettier than the girl from upstairs."

"Listen." Joey's lungs feel like they're being crushed by an invisible hand, but he somehow manages to keep his composure. "Split up. Look for a record player out here."

Finding a record player is easy. Oli remembers the giant golden gramophone in the ballroom, and it takes him all of three seconds to find it again. "Wherever this plays," he says once everyone's joined him next to it, "that's where the mermaids are going to be attracted to."

"Not inside the house," Joey insists. "I don't want them in here."

Tim nods. "Yeah. They're going to get, like, wet all over the carpet. It's a really nice carpet."

Carpet or no carpet, luring dangerous creatures inside this enormous house is not an idea that Oli's willing to try. They need someplace small. Someplace where the mermaids can be easily trapped.

The poolhouse.

"I've got it." His voice shakes. "I know what we have to do."
Thank God for Oli's muscles, because that goddamn phonograph looks way too heavy for anyone else to carry. Especially Tim. Tim's not used to heavy lifting. He's a YouTuber/rapper/comedian, not a fitness guru.

To be fair, Oli isn't a fitness guru, either, yet here he is lifting that shit like it's nothing. Maybe that says more about me than it does about him.

They enter the poolhouse. Oli puts the record player on the floor, then starts it up. A haunting tune begins to echo its way into their ears; its soft melody slows Tim's heartbeat, kinda-sorta making him want to stay here and jam till the mermaids come for him.

"Guys." Eva's voice breaks through the haze. "Come on. We gotta go."

Tim snaps back to reality. So does everyone else, blinking their way out of the song-induced stupor. In a flash, they've all jumped into action, stampeding their way out the door, pushing and shoving each other in an effort to escape. Even Matt has enough common sense left to get the hell out of there.

Once they're out of there, they hide behind the poolhouse. Tim, who's stuck at the back of the pack, can't see past the back of Oli's head, but he can hear the gasps and whispers of his awestruck friends.

"They look terrifying," Joey whimpers.

Eva shrugs. "They're hot. Awesome body."

That's all Tim needs to hear. He pushes his way past Matt and Oli, peeking over Lele's shoulder in an effort to get a good look at these mermaid ladies.

Yeah. Eva's right. They are kinda hot. Sure, their mouths are all sliced up, and their skin is pale, and they've got menacing twinkles in their eyes, but...those legs, though. Damn. And they've got big butts, and their boobs are nice despite the gills, and—yeah, I'd hit that.

Why do they have legs, though? Mermaids aren't supposed to...ah, whatever, not like he cares.

The mermaids move like zombies, plodding their way across the lawn and into the poolhouse. Once they're inside, the six surviving YouTubers sneak up behind them and lock them in.

That's when all hell breaks loose.

The music stops. Furious hands pound against the door, accompanied by a freaky snarl-hiss mixture of sounds. Everyone, including Tim, screams and sprints for the pool.

"Ahhh!" Joey runs like a pony that just got stung by a bee. "Go!"

Run. Don't stop. The pool...we gotta...almost there...don't die...

Oli gets there first. He skids to a halt and surveys the pool in front of them. It's surrounded by tiny ceramic turtles, which is nice, but the three half-rotten corpses chained to its concrete floor are kinda killing the mood. "All right." He cringes. "We, um, we have the three dead bodies in here, so, uh, who's going in?"

"Guys." Eva's voice is almost hoarse. "The mermaids are coming, so...hurry."

Dammit. Tim almost forgot. Someone's gonna have to go in there and fish the bodies out of Joey's
pool. But who?

It won't be him. He knows that much. He doesn't usually go in water past his nipples, because he knows he'll drown. And that's under normal circumstances—circumstances that don't involve killer mermaids after his ass.

"I'll go in." If Lele's going to survive, she has to prove herself to the group. They can't get rid of her if she pulls her weight. "I'm a good swimmer."

Matt grins. "All right, Lele. I like that. You get in the pool."

Pervert. "You know you wanna see me," she snarls, rolling her eyes.

"I'll go, too," says Joey.

"But—"

"No buts, Tim. I'm not gonna let Lele go in there alone. Not after..."

He falls silent. The memory of Justine darkens his face. Lele knows she should be flattered—it's nice to know that Joey hasn't forgotten about their mannequin-induced connection—but she doesn't want him to think of her as a cheap Justine knockoff. If you wanna be all protective over me, fine. Whatever. But do it for me, not to make things right with a dead girl.

They strip. Lele, who's never been one to take things slow, claws her way through her fancy 1920s outfit. By the time Joey's coat comes off, she's wearing nothing but her black bra and matching panties.

Matt, being the sick-minded freak that he is, claps like a patron at a strip club. "Yes, guys, take it off," he whistles through his teeth. "This is my kind of dinner party."

"You're sick," sighs Eva.

He laughs. Lele can feel his eyes inch their way across her skin, and she's this close to slapping that stupid smirk off his face. The only thing that stops her is a vindictive sense of satisfaction. He's looking at me. He hates me, but he's looking at me anyway.

Joey finishes undressing (if you can call it that—he's still in his white shirt and now-rolled-up black pants) and turns to face the others. "Lele and I are gonna jump in, and we're gonna bring the bodies up to you guys. You guys gather them together and start looking in their pockets. The mermaid said there's something in them. Okay? They have secrets of their own."

"Okay," says Oli.

Lele jumps. The water hits her like a frozen punch. She takes a minute to get used to it, then grabs the nearest body and begins to untangle it from the mess of chains it's trapped in. Nearby, Joey's doing the same thing with a different corpse.

Oil's British voice is loud enough to be heard from underwater. "Don't drown!"

It's hard. The more she works, the harder it is for her to breathe, so she has to stop every few minutes to get some air. By the time she finally forces the first corpse to the surface, her muscles are screaming for mercy.
"Great job." Matt smiles. "I love it, Lele. Let's get him out."

So the others pull the body out of the water, splashing their fancy coats in the process. Lele glances over at Joey (who's still struggling with the second corpse), takes a deep breath, and gets back to work.

Matt admits it. He underestimated Lele Pons.

He's spent all night despising her. He's tried so hard to get her killed. And here she is, stepping up to the plate, jumping into the water, and he's encouraging her.

After all, none of them have much time left to live, so why waste energy wishing Lele dead?

They're inspecting the first corpse, fumbling their way through chains and clothing. "Man," mutters Tim. "It looks like—"

"I got it!"

It's Joey, and he has the second corpse. "Nice job, Joey," says Matt, forcing an ounce of positivity into his otherwise weak voice.

"Wait!" Oli narrows his eyes. "There's something in this guy's pocket."

It's a pocket watch.

Odd.

As the others examine the watch, Matt drifts away, keeping his eyes fixed on Joey and Lele's efforts to retrieve the final corpse. "You guys are doing great!" Then, to Tim, "Lele's really stepping up."

"I know," says Tim with a smirk. "She's killing the game right now."

Matt bites his lip. "I'm not gonna lie...y'know...I was a little worried about her earlier tonight, but..." He remembers the time he almost stabbed her and winces. "She's kind of proving me wrong."

Too late. You've done your damage. She'll never forgive you now.

"The mermaids are coming!" Eva practically screams.

Right. Joey's losing strength, but he and Lele somehow manage to free the final body from its chains. He gasps out a quick "we did it" before they drag it out of the pool.

Once they're out, Matt's mouth springs into action. "Joey, Lele, while you guys were in the pool, we found something in the first body you brought us." It sounds like the information is charging its way out of his lungs and through his lips, but there's still a pessimistic whine to his voice.

"Guys!" Eva points. "It looks like there's something at the end of the pool. Do you see it?"

Joey sees it. It's black, and it's shiny, and it's lurking at the bottom of his otherwise empty pool. Another clue?

Only one way to find out.
Despite his body's cries of *don't, I'm tired, let it go*, he follows Lele back into the pool,

"It looks like they found something," Tim remarks.

That's true. Joey and Lele have, in fact, found something. They're hoisting up whatever-it-is, and all of Eva's molecules scream *clue, clue, clue* in perfect unison. "It looks like a treasure chest."

"Joey!" shouts Matt. "What is that?"

Joey and Lele resurface. "There's a chest!" Joey gasps, looking like he just tried to do a thousand-meter swim without any proper training. "But it's locked!"

Eva shrugs. "We'll figure it out." *We keep losing people, but at least we've gotten good at unlocking things."

"Bring it over here," says Oli.

They do. The lock (of course) requires a combination to open, and (of course) there's a note on the back.

*The moon commands the water and tells it what direction to flow from new moon to full moon.*

"The moon works with the earth to control things," explains Matt (probably in a last-ditch attempt to be useful), "cause the...gravitational pull..."

Meanwhile, Joey picks up the pocket watch and begins to fiddle with its various knobs. "So we need to twist it until it gets to the full moon?" he mumbles to himself. "Does it switch behind?"

Matt's still talking. "Maybe we add up the time it takes to go from the crescent moon to the full moon."

"Which is what?" Tim asks.

"Uh..." And just like that, Matt reverts back to Asshole Mode. "Like I said, astrophysics is complicated. Probably a little bit over your head."

Eva's *this close* to punching the Professor square in the nose, but she holds it together. *Ignore him. He's a douchebag, and he's given up, and he's not even pulling his weight anymore. He's dead already. You, on the other hand, have got to stay alive.*

"Something past one?" murmurs Joey. "Ten past one?"

Oli scans the pool, his eyebrows arched in confusion. "Is there something we're missing?"

"It has something to do with the water," Joey insists.

And then, as if someone flipped a switch in her brain, Eva understands. "The turtles." *Turtles, surrounding the pool, they're not for decoration, they mean something.* "Check the turtles."

Oli does. "There's something on the turtles!"

*The moon commands the water..."

"Wait! Hold on! There's a black circle here!"
"Yeah," gasps Eva, her voice low and breathy. "That was never there."

In no time at all, Oli gets to work, examining each turtle separately. "There's another moon here, another moon there, another moon there, another moon there, and another moon there."

"We gotta count them up," says Matt, as if the whole turtle thing was his idea. "What kind of moons are they?"

"There's a full moon over here!" Tim exclaims.

Matt nods. "We got a full moon there. Does it have a number on the turtle or anything?"

"Wait!" Oli, as always, is way ahead of the game. "There are two little turtles here, and there are three little turtles there."

As it turns out, every turtle has a few baby turtles nearby. Two turtles for the new moon, three turtles for the crescent, and so on. The combination is very easy to figure out after that.

Sure enough, it works.

"Whoever figured that out," Matt remarks, "you guys are very smart people. I appreciate every single one of you." He puts an arm around Oli's shoulder, then tries to put the other arm around Eva's. She squirms away. "Listen. I checked out. I killed Sierra. It's over. We're all going to die."

"Who says that?!?"

Okay. That's it. That is it. Matt's giving up? Matt's not helping out? Matt says they're going to die? Fine. If he wants to die so badly, she'll grant his goddamn wish. Hell, she'll kill him herself if she has to.

He deserves it.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: Things aren't looking too good for a certain Professor, whose defeatist attitude isn't doing him any favors. Oh, and Eva wants him dead, because of course she does.
Turncoat

Chapter Summary

Matt Haag has suddenly become Public Enemy Number #1, just in time for another round of voting.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

There's a tablet inside the chest. Joey reads it, and Eva pulls herself out of her Matt-induced rage long enough to listen.

_The doll dwells inside a wicked little house, which waits in the north corner on the third floor. Two guests, selected by vote, must place this tablet on the mantle outside the room and the door will be opened in a moment, but what lies inside will haunt them forever._

Tim groans. So does Oli. Eva, on the other hand, feels a rush of vindictive satisfaction. Finally. Another vote. _The bastard's going down._

"Yeah...see..." Matt, _of course_, can't keep his goddamn mouth shut. "Let's take a vote..."

His wishy-washy tone only strengthens Eva's decision. "Yeah," she snarls. "Let's definitely take a vote, because I know _exactly_ who I'm voting for."

"It's about time." A smug smile snakes its way across Lele's flushed face.

Eva jabs a finger at Matt. "It's time for Matt to go!"

Matt frowns. "This just seems a little irrational—"

"No!"

"Who votes Matt?"

Eva, Lele, Oli, and Joey raise their hands. Tim keeps his down at first, but a well-timed shove from Lele sends it scrambling into the air as well.

"We didn't even _vote_!" Matt protests.

"Matt!" Why is he defending himself? Wasn't he the one who spent the last hour insisting that they're all doomed? "You made it very clear that you wanted to die earlier today!" _This is what you wanted. We're putting you out of your misery. Don't complain._

"But I still get a vote, though," he insists. "I still get a vote."

"Okay, let him do his job," says Tim defensively.

Oli grabs the tablet. "We need to take this with us."

But Eva isn't listening. She storms off, a scowl on her face, red-hot fury tightening its grip around her
heart. "I hope it's Matt and Matt that gets pulled!" she shouts over her shoulder.

"Wow." Matt shakes his head. "That's a little aggressive, don't you think?"

No. No, it's not. Not when you're an egocentric Sierra-killing asshole who hasn't done shit since she died. You don't deserve to be here. You don't want to be here. We'd be better off without you weighing us down.

She's not the type of girl to wish death on people, but...God, she wants him gone.

"...telling you, Matt's a psychopath..."

They're back inside, and Eva's glaring at Matt like he's on trial and she's the prosecution. Lele, on the other hand, doesn't even look his way; as much as she hates him, she's too exhausted to scream at him right now. She'll let Eva take over the Matt Must Die department for a change.

She sits next to Joey. Her blonde side bun has completely unraveled, leaving her hair a stringy, unkempt mess. The blue towel around her shoulders is all that's keeping her from freezing to death right here on the couch.

Joey breaks the silence. "Well. That got interesting out there."

"Yeah," says Matt with a defensive shrug. "You guys are just a little too turned up here."

Eva's eyes narrow. "Turned up?" she growls. "Is that the correct word for right now? Do we wanna party with DJ Snake right now?" She stands up, her face purple with rage, her hands curled into fists. "I don't think so."

"I don't have to say anything," Lele points out. "She's saying it all for me. Thank God.

"You stand to the side," Eva continues, doing just that, "and say 'I'm gonna let you guys take care of this one.'" She sits back down. "So let's take care of you."

"That was a good impression," Tim admits.

Matt scowls. Another challenge, another chance to die, and everyone's turning against him. Again. Why? Because he gets it now? Because he realizes just how hopeless their circumstances are? "You guys suck."

"Let's put it to a vote," says Arthur. "It's time."

"I vote that they all suck."

The exorcism...Sierra's death...it changed him. He's different. He knows he's going to die, and he's made his peace with it, but that doesn't excuse the aggressive behavior of his so-called friends. They want him to die. And that, more than anything, is what reignites his will to live.

Arthur holds out the pen. "Matt. It's your turn. Go first."

He votes. He votes for Lele. Any goodwill he felt for her during the pool challenge has been obliterated by her current behavior. If he's going down, he's going to make sure that she goes down with him.
"I hate this," moans Oli.

"I love this." Eva's voice is a low, snakelike hiss. "I want him out."

The rest of the voting process is a blur to Matt. Before he knows it, it's over, and Arthur has chosen the first name.

"Matt."

"Of course it is," scoffs Lele.

Of course. Of course. Of course.

"And the second name..."

Tim squirms in his seat. Is he the only one not a member of the Matt Must Die club? He loves the guy. They're friends. They're friends. Dude has his issues, but he doesn't deserve—

"...is Tim."

Shit.

"I'm okay!" Lele cheers.

Matt shakes his head. "I was not expecting that."

Neither was Tim. But hey, it's cool. It's cool. Death challenge. No biggie. He aced it once. He can ace it again.

"Let's get this done, man," sighs Oli.

Tim smiles. Breathe. It's fine. I got this. "And we might not die."

"Nah," says Lele flippantly. "You guys are going to die."

"He's gonna die," snarls Eva, pointing at Matt. "If he comes back alive..." Her voice drops several octaves. "If he come back alive, we're gonna kill him."

Damn. She's scary.

They're wrong. They're making a mistake. They'll miss him when he's gone.

"Matt!"

"Come back, Timothy!"

"Saint Michael!"

"I'm so sorry..."

This is never going to end.

She's screaming why is she screaming make her stop screaming make her stop—
Next chapter: Matt and Tim play with dolls. Poison is involved. I do not predict a happy ending.
Chapter Summary

It's Tim vs Matt, and both their lives depend on...nursery rhymes?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Despite Tim's desperate barrage of stupid jokes ("Hey, Matt, why did the orange stop in the middle of the road? It ran out of juice! Get it? Orange? Juice? Ran out of juice? Hello?")), Matt stays depressingly silent for most of the way upstairs. It isn't until they reach the third floor that he finally opens his eyes, takes a deep breath, and forces out a sentence.

"They hate me."

"No, they don't." They do, of course, but there's no way in hell Tim's gonna admit it. "They're stressed, that's all. It's been a rough night. They'll—"

"Don't bullshit me, Tim. They want me gone. Lele. Eva. All of them. They hate me, they're out to get me, and I don't care anymore."

He's a wreck. His voice, once calm and businesslike, is now a broken mess of sounds. It's like whatever killed Sierra killed Matt as well, and he's been replaced by a shitty knockoff from the Great Value section of the supermarket.

Tim still wants to fix him, to resurrect the Matt he used to be, but he's also got his own life to worry about. "Just focus on the challenge, okay? We got this."

Matt shakes his head.

They arrive at the north corner, where a closed door and an empty mantle wait for them. Tim slides the tablet onto the mantle, and the door swings open to reveal...dolls. Lots and lots of dolls, piled up on two identical couches, staring at Tim and Matt like they're fresh meat.

"Omigod," moans Matt. "Dude...I don't like dolls."

Normally, Tim would find this ridiculous. Dolls? Pfft. Whatever. But these dolls creep him out—some are disfigured, some have burnt faces, a few of them are covered in what looks suspiciously like blood, and one in particular looks like a goddamn ghoul. Tim doesn't know what he was expecting, but this sure as hell ain't it.

Also, there are two dollhouses set up in the middle of the room, each with a book next to it, and there's a table smack dab in between said dollhouses. On the table are two glasses of wine, an hourglass, and a note.

*Both of you take a drink if you want to know more.*

Tim raises an eyebrow. "What?" He's been to the club. You're not supposed to take a drink unless you saw the bartender make it. Someone could've slipped something in there.
Whatever. It's not like he has a choice. Besides, at least he gets free alcohol.

They each grab a glass. Tim sniffs his, then immediately regrets his decision. "Ugh." He frowns. "What is it?"

"Is it blood?" Matt cringes, then clinks his glass against Tim's. "Cheers."

"Let's do this."

They hook arms, as if to protect each other from whatever might be in there, and drink. Tim downs his in one go (it's way too bitter for his liking), but Matt only manages to empty a quarter of his glass.

"All the way, bro."

"No—" Matt coughs. "It's just—"

"All the way!"

"It says take a drink! I took a drink!"

Tim shrugs. "Okay, fine." The words are barely out of his mouth before another note appears from under the door. "Oh! A note!"

"I wanna read it," says Matt.

You just drank poison.

Great. Tim slams his hand against the table, unable to keep his frustration out of his voice. "Are you serious?" He knew it, he freakin' knew it, there was something up with that drink, but no, he was a dumbass, and he drank it, and now he's poisoned. He's going to die. They're both going to die.

No. They're not. There's more to it. They'll survive. They will.

Sorry about that, but it was quite funny from where I'm standing.

Matt knew it. In a way, he knew it as soon as the wine passed his lips. It's poisoned. They'll die of poison, just like Shane did, and Matt just hopes he dies first, because he doesn't want to watch Tim cough up blood. Especially after—

Wait. There's more.

There is only one portion of the antidote, and the only way to retrieve it is to search your side of the room for three dolls that best reflect the rhymes in your storybook and place them in their proper setting in the house. When you think you have positioned the dolls correctly, slam your storybook against the table.

Whoever completes the dollhouse first will receive a vial. If you have positioned your dolls correctly, the vial will contain the antidote, and you will be able to save yourself from the poison in your veins. However, if you get it wrong, the vial will contain another dose of poison, and you will die immediately after you drink it.

You have thirty minutes to complete this puzzle before the poison takes effect.

Puzzles. It always ends up being another goddamn puzzle. Solve this. Do that. Figure it out, or else
you're a dead man walking.

For a split second, Matt considers ignoring the challenge. Why bother? Why not just sit down, have a pleasant conversation with his one remaining friend, and wait for death's imminent arrival?

But then he sees the fire in Tim's eyes, and he realizes: *He's going to fight. And I can't let him face this house alone.*

"Thirty minutes."

Matt turns over the hourglass, picks up his storybook, and begins to read his rhymes.

*Little General Monk*

*Sat upon a trunk*

*Eating a crust of bread;*

*There fell a hot coal*

*And burnt into his clothes a hole,*

*Now little General Monk is dead.*

*Keep always from the fire,*

*If it catch your attire*

*You too, like General Monk, will be dead.*

Matt feels sick. He knows he's going to die; he doesn't need a nursery rhyme to remind him. Besides, he doesn't have the slightest clue what doll he's supposed to use, or where he's supposed to put it in the dollhouse. There are too many dolls. Too many disfigured, skeleton-like doll corpses, scattered around his side of the room like the aftermath of a plastic massacre.

One of them looks like Sierra. He grabs her by the neck and hides her underneath the couch cushions.

Okay. *General monk.* He doesn't see a monk, so he'll come back to that one later. What's next?

*I married my wife on Sunday,*

*Beat her well on Monday,*

*Bad was she on Tuesday,*

*Middling was she on Wednesday,*

*Worse was she on Thursday,*

*Dead was she on Friday;*

*Glad was I on Saturday night*

*To bury my wife on Sunday."

"What the hell..."

Forget it. Forget the creepiness, the abusive subtext, *all of it.* He just needs to recreate the scene, and maybe, just maybe, he'll live.

He picks up a blue-faced bride doll and gets to work.

*Lizzie Borden took an axe*

*And gave her mother forty whacks,*

*And when she saw what she had done,*

*She gave her father forty-one.*
Tim recoils. He can't believe people used to read these nursery rhymes to their kids. Like, damn, scare the shit out of them, why don't you?

Whatever. Doesn't matter. He knows this one. There's two blood-soaked dolls—the parents—which he can put together in the study. Add a girl with an axe looming over them, and boom. Done. Moving on.

*Old Father Longlegs*

*Can't say his prayers:*

*Take him by the left leg*

*And throw him down the stairs.*

*And when he's at the bottom,*

*Before he long has lain,*

*Take him by the right leg*

*And throw him up again.*

One doll is about ten inches taller than the others, and he has really long legs, so Tim assumes that he must be Old Father Longlegs. He grabs him by the left leg and stuffs him down the tiny dollhouse stairwell.

*When he's at the bottom...*

"Yo." Matt's voice barges its way into his thoughts. "Where did you put your first thing?"

"Don't worry about it, dude." Tim wants to help him, honest he does, but he can't. Too risky. This is a death challenge, and if Matt gets the antidote, it's game over—unless, of course, he lets Tim have a sip.

Which he probably won't.

Tim picks up Old Father Longlegs by his right leg and forces him back up the stairwell. He has to survive. He has to get home. He has to get that antidote. And if Matt goes down in the process...

"Don't think about it.

Matt's got two of his rhymes done (there was one really long one about Napoleon being a baby-killer; he sorted that out with a doll riding on a horse outside the house), but that damn "General Monk" rhyme is still tripping him up.

It's a general monk. Okay. And it died because its clothes caught fire. So he's looking for a doll that's been burned in some way, but he's having a bit of trouble finding it.

"Or else I'll beat you black and blue," mutters Tim from the other side of the room, sorting through his dolls as he does so. "Black and blue. Yeah! Black and blue!"

A lightbulb goes off in Matt's head. "Are these all, like, community dolls?"

"I'm not sure," Tim replies.

"Let's see..." As Tim rereads the note, Matt sneaks over to his side of the room and grabs a few dolls. "I dunno..."

"No. Search your side of the room."
"Goddamn it."

Tim glares at Matt, a whiff of fright in his otherwise demanding voice. "Put my dolls down, dude!"

_It's me or Timothy._ The realization feels like smoke in Matt's lungs. _He's the only one I have left in this hell, but...if I live, he has to die._

Matt isn't sure he can take losing yet another friend.

On the bright side, he's finally found a burnt doll. "General Monk is dead." He picks it up gently, studying it like a tarnished work of art. "Keep always from the fire, if it catch your attire, you, too..." He frowns. "Where do I put him, though?"

"I don't know if these are the daughters," Tim frets, fidgeting with the scene in front of him. "Is that it?"

He's spent the last several minutes second-guessing himself, switching out dolls, changing their positions, moving them from room to room like he's a wishy-washy interior decorator. Every time he thinks he got it right, he'll spot another problem, and then it's back to work for another four minutes. Perfectionist? Maybe. But he _has_ to get this right. If it's wrong, he's drinking poison again.

"I think I have what I need," Matt remarks. "How close are you?"

"I feel like I'm on the last one, but I could be—"

"I feel like I'm on the last one, too...you wanna help each other with these? Like, y'know, some Romeo and Juliet type thing?"

_I wish._ Tim laughs. "I don't think we can do that."

"All right." Matt shrugs. "It was a thought." Then, after an uneasy pause, "I think I've got mine right. I really do."

"You gotta be missing something. _I'm_ missing something."

"I think I got it." Matt takes off, racing toward the table, storybook in hand.

"No!" Tim sprints after him. "I think _I_ got it!"

Too late. Matt gets there first. He slams his book against the table, and a drawer opens right next to him. Inside is a small vial of vomit-green liquid.

Matt picks it up, uncorks it, and turns to face Tim. "Dude..."

Tim's shaking. "If you're wrong, you die!" _And if you're right...oh God, I don't want this, maybe you're right and we're all gonna die but I'm still not goddamn ready to goddamn go!_

"I think..." Matt smiles sadly. "I'm almost positive I'm right. I'm sorry if it's you, but..."

He drinks.
The moment he swallows, Matt knows he's chosen wrong.

He tries to cough the poison back up, but it's already burning his lungs like a particularly corrosive type of acid. His legs collapse from under him. Tim's shocked face dissolves into a flurry of spots.

"Matt!"

"Sierra. It's okay. We're gonna be okay. Sierra. Look at me."

"I don't wanna do this...Matt...make it stop...please...I'm gonna die..."

His mother smiles down at him.

Jenna slips her hand into his.

Sierra screams his name.

And then...nothing.

Matt falls against the couch (knocking his dollhouse over on the way down), gasps for air, convulses, and then goes still.

Tim's first instinct is to shout a triumphant "Yes!" to the heavens. "Omigod!" He did it. He's alive. He's gonna get the antidote, and he's gonna find the doll, and he's gonna survive, he's gonna live, he's —

Then he remembers.

Matt.

"Are you okay?"

Of course he isn't, you idiot. He's dead. Gone. Kicked the bucket. Deceased. Passed away. Shuffled off this mortal coil and joined the choir invisible.

Matt Haag lies belly-up on a couch crammed with dolls, traces of green poison still present on his otherwise dry lips. The sight of his body adds another crack to Tim's already-breaking heart. Yeah, the guy kind of gave up near the end, but he was still Tim's friend. And now he's gone. Just like Sierra. Just like Andrea.

How many more friends is Tim gonna have to lose before he can finally get out of here?

Another note.

The antidote is attached to the back of the drawer.

Okay. Okay. Tim yanks himself out of his post-Matt grief spiral and checks the back of the drawer. Sure enough, there's a second vial, this one filled with a yellowish liquid. It kinda looks like pee, because why not.

His stomach hurts. He can't tell if it's because of Matt's death or because the poison's starting to take effect, but either way, he'd better hurry up before he joins Matt in heaven. Or hell. Or wherever.

He drinks the antidote. It slides down his throat like a comforting plate of JellO. "Ah," he moans,
feeling it ease the poison out of his body. "Yes."

*Thump.*

"What was that?"

It's the doll. The one that once belonged to the mermaid's daughter. It's a pretty little thing, with golden hair and a red dress and big blue eyes, and it looks out of place in this frightening sea of disfigured, dismembered ghoul-dolls.

Tim grabs it, takes a deep breath, and runs for the door. He doesn't look back.

Lele has never been happier to see Timothy DeLaGhetto's face in her life.

He walks in, and everyone cheers. Oli's mouth drops open, Eva's expression twists itself into a shit-eating grin, and Joey shouts "Yes!" while pumping both his fists in the air. For once, they're all overjoyed with the results of the challenge.

Especially Lele. "Timothy!" she squeals, her heart soaring through the clouds like a fighter jet. *He's dead, he can't kill me, I'm safe, I'm gonna make it, I'm gonna be okay..."

"What happened?" Joey asks.

"Timothy." There's a triumphant air to Eva's voice. "Tell us everything."

Tim's got a dirty-faced doll in his hands, and he shows it to the group as he speaks. "We went in there, and they poisoned us both, and..." He shrugs. "I got the antidote. And this is the doll that we need for the mermaid lady's little girl."

"That looks disgusting," says Eva.

Joey stands up. "Well, let's go give it to her, guys. Come on. Let's go."

A part of Lele *really* doesn't want to go, considering she's still drying off from her dip in the pool. But then again, so is Joey, and he's willing to go, so she might as well suck it up and get it over with.

*Dios, muchas gracias por matar a Matt. Puedo vivir ahora. Puedo vivir.*

They return to the mermaid's room. "We got your doll," says Tim, handing it to a sobbing Madison. She takes it, cuddles it close to her chest, and fades away.

Joey can't help but smile. "She can be free now." As traumatizing as tonight has been, the thought of Madison reuniting with her daughter brings a glimmer of light to his otherwise dark heart.

"Now what?" asks Tim.

Eva shrugs. "I guess we just find the next owner."

Three more owners. Joey hopes against hope that Matt's death will be the last, but he knows in his gut that this house isn't done whittling down their ranks. They started with eleven. Now they have five. How many more?
RIP Matt. People either loved you or they hated you, but either way, a series of bad decisions brought you down.

Next chapter: The third owner is Colin, a World War I veteran. Eva and Lele want to jump his bones. Tim takes the opportunity to tell a stupid joke about gold-digging.
The group moves on to owner number three: Colin, a former soldier with Scrooge-like habits. And he's hot. They can help him. Can't they?

Random thought of the day: I really want to do more stories with the EtN characters/universe (especially some shippy stuff). Would you guys be interested?

Once they're back upstairs, Tim calls for a two-minute break "to get our shit together." Joey seconds the idea, citing the need to dry off, and the five surviving YouTubers go their separate ways.

Ten seconds later, Lele's in the bathroom, hastily putting her clothes back on, wondering what the hell is wrong with this place.

I got a new house, he said. It's amazing, he said. Come to this stupid dinner party, it'll be fun, he said. I shouldn't have listened. I should've stayed home. I had a bunch of videos to film anyway. Now six people are dead, I'm stuck in a horror movie, and I hate every goddamn second of it.

The happiness she felt when Matt died has worn off, replaced with a grim resignation. Yeah, he's dead, so she has a better chance of surviving than she did before, but she still has to stay on her guard. She's not safe. She won't be safe until she gets out of this hellhouse and returns to 2016.

Several pearl necklaces later, she's done dressing. She doesn't have time to force her hair back into its bun, so she styles it into a single blonde braid and dangles it down her left shoulder.

There. That should do it.

Break's over.

Back to insanity.

"All right," says Tim once they've all settled down. "So who's the next owner?"

Oli bites his lip, watching nervously as Joey opens the priest's journal. Please be human. Please be human. The Guardian almost killed us, and Madison kept looking at me like she wanted to eat me alive. I think I've had quite enough creepy creatures for one night.

Joey finds the right page, clears his throat, and reads.

His name is Colin Wentworth. He's from New Haven, Connecticut, and he fought in the Great War.
He has the power to leave the house at any time, but he refuses to go out without the stash of German gold he recovered during the war.

Great. So he's a miser. The man's entire existence revolves around a forgotten treasure chest, to the point where he'll gladly send a group of frightened YouTubers into harm's way just to get it back. Oli hates him already.

Colin liked to move the gold daily, and one of his hiding spots was in a lockbox. He kept the combination hidden in riddles, which he wrote down in a notebook. Something to do with the number of letters in the answer.

Tim's voice is a slow, sharp mix of frustration and bitterness. "Why does everyone in the 1920s love riddles so much?"

"I hate riddles," sighs Oli.

"And letters." Eva rolls her eyes. "Ugh."

Looking at it now, Oli understands why Matt threw in the towel. Their efforts to escape the night have become monotonous—solve some riddles, find some clues, kill someone, wash, rinse, repeat. And with three more owners left to free, 2016 seems farther away than ever. It would be easy for Oli to give up and let himself die.

But those he left behind—his parents, his brother, his friends—tug at his suspenders, urging him to keep fighting. To breathe. To live.

"Let's do this."

He scans the room, and bang, there's the safe, hiding under a nearby desk. He picks it up and places it on the table.

"How many numbers are there?" Tim asks.

Oli checks the lock. "Three."

"Okay." Tim nods. "Now we need the notebook. That's gonna give us what we need for the combination."

"The notebook..." Oli's staring at a bookshelf, squinting at stacks of leather-bound volumes. "It's not gonna be any of them," he mutters. "They don't look like notebooks."

"Keep looking!" shouts Joey.

Here we go again.

"Ugh!" They've turned this damn house upside down in their search for the notebook, and Eva's patience is beginning to wear thin. "It could be anywhere!"

But then, she realizes: there's one room they haven't checked.

"In the study," she breathes.

Joey snaps his fingers. "Of course! Why didn't we..."
“I would have a notebook in the study.”

So they check the study. And sure enough, there's Colin's notebook, a pad of paper held together by some rusty spirals. Eva snatches it up, her fingers trembling with nervous anticipation.

"Guys!" shouts Joey. "We found it!"

Hooray. Notebook found. Tim's so freakin' happy. Except no, he isn't, because now there's three riddles that they have to solve, and he never wants to solve another riddle again for as long as he lives.

Whatever. Let's get this over with.

*It can be dropped from the tallest of buildings and survive, but drop it from the smallest ship and it won't.*

Tim shrugs. Easy. "I say paper, cause—"

"No, I say!" Damn, Lele's interrupting voice is scary. "I say paper or feather."


"I say paper," Tim insists, trying his best to make himself heard, "cause when you put—"

But Lele cuts him off again. "Okay! So let's use that one!"

*Well, someone's in a hurry.* "Chill," he tells her, putting a hand on her shoulder. *It's fine. We're fine. We'll be okay. You don't need to get all freaked out about everything.*


*What is so delicate that even mentioning it breaks it?*

Joey blinks, not sure what to make of this one. "That's really confusing."

"Love?" murmurs Eva halfheartedly.

*No, that's not it.* Joey frowns. "So delicate..." He tosses the riddle around in his brain for a few minutes. "Like.. a blanket? That's delicate."

Eva shakes her head. "You wouldn't break a blanket."

"That's true," *Even mentioning it breaks it.* "...mentioning...talking..."

It's Eva Gutowski, of course, who finally puts two and two together. "...breaks the silence?"


Joey tries to spell out the word on his fingers, but Tim's an overexcited mess, flapping his arms around until he's allowed to do the honors. "S-I-L-E-N-C-E. Seven."
If you give me food, I live. If you give me water, I die.

Well, shit. That's the last riddle? That's the easiest riddle Lele's ever heard in her life. She stinks at riddles, and yet it takes her approximately half a second to solve this one. "Fire."

"No," sighs Eva.

No my ass. I'm right. It's fire. I'm right.

Thankfully, Joey's there to back her up. "Yes! You're right!" He counts it out. "F-I-R-E. Four. The last number is four."

Lele enters five-seven-four into the combination lock, and the lock snaps open. "Oh!" She did it. They did it. They can move on now.

"Wow," says Oli frankly. "That was good."

Inside the box is a bar of gold and a note. Lele's magpie instincts come out at exactly the wrong moment, and she lunges for the gold as soon as its shine catches her eye. When Joey tries to stop her, she slaps his hand away.

"Ow!" Joey winces. "Gold-digger over here!"

"I'm not saying she's a gold-digger," Tim pipes up, that devil-may-care grin back on his face, "but she ain't messing with no Olis." He jabs a thumb at the Hunter. "You know what I'm saying?"

Lele tries to be offended, but it's no use. She laughs herself silly.

"This is ostrich," Oli retorts, showing off his fancy jacket, but Lele's already moved on to the note.

Dad: I'm sorry that I haven't visited since returning from the war. I have been trying to help the men; they are struggling with the shock of coming home. I've been so consumed with helping them. I feel like I've never left the top floor of the estate.

Oli's eyes light up. "He's never left." The words leave his mouth like sniper's bullets. "Top floor. That's...that's where we need to go."

Everyone runs for the staircase. Joey grabs the bar of gold before Lele can pick it up again, but she's too busy freaking out to care. Another ghost. They're meeting another ghost. This goddamn house just keeps piling on the scary shit.

Hey, at least she got the riddle right.

For once.

As they climb up the stairs, a parade of thoughts march through Eva's frazzled mind. Okay. So we're gonna meet this Colin guy, this old war vet...what's he gonna look like? Which eye is he gonna be missing? Left or right?

She expects the worst.

They reach the top floor. Joey calls Colin's name. Goosebumps dance across Eva's arms. And then, before anyone has time to catch their breath, they find themselves staring down the barrel of a World War One pistol.
"Omigod!" screams Eva. "There's a gun there's a gun there's a gun!"

Oli's voice trembles. "Stop. Put the gun down."

"Where did you get that?" The man wielding the gun—Colin, Eva assumes—has a buttery tone to his voice. Eva isn't looking at him, mainly because she's too focused on the pistol aimed at her head, but he sounds considerably younger than she was expecting.

"The safe," Tim explains. "We got it from the safe."

"Are you trying to steal my gold?"

"No! We're here to help you!"

As Tim tries to reason with Colin, Eva pulls herself together long enough to get a good look at him...and holy crap, this guy is not an ugly old zombie war vet. "Side note," she blurts out, her body suddenly unable to control itself. "Why are you so attractive?"

Colin Wentworth is the hottest ghost that Lele's ever seen.

He's got a perfectly chiseled face, piercing brown eyes, broad shoulders, toned arms, and muscles. Not to mention his rock-hard six-pack, which Lele can't help but stare at. Damn...those abs...if I was a man, I'd be getting the biggest boner right now.

"Let me see it," he insists, reaching for the gold bar in Joey's hand.

"Put the gun down!" shouts Oli.

Personally, Lele doesn't give two shits about the gun, especially when Colin's the one behind the trigger. He can point whatever he wants at me, if you know what I mean.

"I'm gonna put this away," says Colin, shoving the pistol into its holster. "Just let me see it."

"Those muscles," Eva breathes.

I feel you, girl.

Joey hands over the gold. Colin takes it, studying it like a scientist at a microscope. A smile spreads its way across his face. "It's all coming back to me now."

"What?" asks Joey.

"Can you help us?" Oli knows he can. He's their mission, after all, and freeing him means that they're one step closer to leaving this house alive. But he hopes that Colin will provide more aid than just a mission summary.

"You want me to help you?"

Eva—the stoic, street-smart brunette who's kept Oli sane throughout this nightmare—squeals in delight like a lovestruck high schooler. "Yes! Please!"

What the hell...
"Okay." Colin pulls off his pack and offers it to the group. "If we're gonna get out of here, we're gonna need some gear, okay? Here's my rucksack. If you need anything along the way, just let me know."

*Along the way...* they're going somewhere. Knowing this house, it's probably going to be somewhere dangerous, and Oli isn't sure he's ready. Especially since Eva's clearly lost her mind.

"I'm scared," says Lele, her voice a cutesy come-hither.

Colin ignores her. "The other thing we gotta do is, we gotta get outside. We gotta get to my two-way and radio my CO. He's gonna give us our mission objective, and he's gonna tell us where to go from there, all right?"

"I wouldn't mind being stuck for a hundred years with *this* guy," whispers Lele to Eva. The latter nods in agreement, her face a deep pink.

Oli's had it. "Would you two *stop*?"

"He's *so* hot..."

"Shhh!"

This is ridiculous. Here they are, about to follow a perfect stranger to God-knows-where, and all the girls are worried about is how to get this guy's *flipping* trousers off. *Eva! Lele! You're better than this! What's gotten into you?*

Colin, unaware of his popularity with the female YouTubers, has switched out his pistol for a full-on musket. He smiles. "Follow me, boys and girls."

He starts down the stairs. Evan and Lele are right behind him, cooing "I'm scared" and "Can you hug me?" into his ear. Oli has a sudden urge to throw up.

"*Wow,*" is all Tim has to say about it.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: The house becomes a war zone. Also, more monsters, Tim's a real G, and Eva nearly gets her hand blown off.
All Out War

Chapter Summary

The five surviving YouTubers get their first taste of combat. Some do better than others.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Eva follows Colin onto the porch, her mind preoccupied by *dat ass*, but the sound of gunshots force her back to the all-too-dangerous present. "Omigod." Her voice is a series of short gasps. "What are we about to see? I feel like I'm in *Call of Duty.*"

"Are we in a war?" Lele asks.

Joey shakes his head. "There's nothing out here—"

But then Colin pulls out his gun and fires off a few bullets. Lele screams. Oli's eyes grow wide. Even Timothy DeLaGhetto is clearly on edge.

"Omigod!" Joey's freaking out. "What did you just shoot?!?"

"Whoa." Eva bites back her panic, trying not to think about what she's gotten herself into. "It is not that serious."

Colin ignores her. "We need to get on the radio. They think I'm a deserter."

As if on cue, more gunshots echo through Eva's eardrums, and she realizes: *This is a war zone.* Joey's 1920s estate has somehow turned into a honest-to-God battlefield, complete with actual soldiers shooting at each other. And here they are, a bunch of Internet personalities with no combat experience whatsoever, caught in the crossfire.

*We are so dead.*

The radio itself is easy to find—it's on the porch, stuck between various rucksacks. Eva picks it up, her hands shaking, her heart going a mile a minute. "Hello? Is anyone there?"

"Where the hell have you been, soldier?" snaps the radio. "We're getting killed out here!"

"I—"

"Now listen up. There's a small rotunda on the south side of the estate. Inside are top-secret documents we need badly."


"However, it's guarded by a vicious sniper with a wicked eye who shoots at anything that moves."

"Any..." Eva's heart stops dead in its tracks. "Omigosh. That's us. We move. *We move!*"

"If I were in your boots, I would circle around to the far side of the estate and frag that dirty Jerry
with a grenade through the window."

At this point, Eva's given up on the whole "stay calm" idea. "A grenade?" she squeals, her stomach churning at the thought. "Through the window?"

"Yes. A grenade. Are you deaf?"

"Yes!" Hot tears sting her cheeks. "I'm super scared! I'm a YouTuber!"

More gunshots.

"The documents inside should give you the next step. Good luck, soldier."

Once the radio goes silent, Eva turns to face her shellshocked friends. "Guys, we can't do this. I upload...I sit at my computer...I sleep until two PM..." This isn't my life. I'm not supposed to be here. Everyone starts talking at once.

"There's a sniper?"

"He said we have to..."

"I'm in heels! I know I'm going down!"

"Hey!" Colin shuts them all up with the world's sexiest glare. "We're moving."

Despite the sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach, Eva can't bring herself to say no to Colin "Sex Bomb" Wentworth. "Okay. Let's go." She stands up, her knees shaking, clutching the bar of gold Joey dropped. "I'll bludgeon them with my gold."

Maybe it's because of all the friends he's lost to this place, or maybe it's just the adrenaline talking, but Tim's got a weird itch to shoot some fools. And since the demons have decided to throw a freakin' war at them, he might get a chance to scratch that itch after all.

Sweet.

They're following Colin onto the lawn, and Oli's still complaining. "This is crazy...I'm not ready for war..."

"Guys, be quiet!" hisses Joey. "There's a freakin' sniper out here!"

Tim points at a nearby soldier. "Colin, he's a redcoat. Is that a problem?"

"Yes," Oli sighs. "That is a problem." He sounds like he's explaining basic concepts to a two-year-old. Tim doesn't appreciate being talked down to, and he's kind of mad at Oli now, but he (somehow) manages to hold his tongue.

Colin presses forward. The others do the same, because what the hell else are they supposed to do?

"Where are we going?" Joey wants to know.

Eva shakes her head. "I don't know," she stammers. "We're just following him. I don't know. We're just following him. I don't—"
All of a sudden, bullets start flying everywhere. Everyone screams, then runs like idiots (*like you can run from bullets*), while Tim hits the ground. Of course he does. That's what he's *supposed* to do. He read up on guns before he got here, because character-building and shit, and he knows he'll have a better chance of not dying if he gets down.

It's fine. He's got this. He's a Mobster. He's a G.

"Who's shooting at us?" screams Joey. "What the hell *was* that?"

"Leave us alone!" Oli practically sobs.

By some miracle, no one gets hit, and the group collectively ducks behind a tree. Colin's gun is at the ready, while Lele and Eva are practically breathing down his neck. *Jeez. Give the guy some room, why don't ya?*

"You see him?" Colin uses his gun to point at the nearby rotunda. "Right there?"

"No!" exclaims Joey.

"The sniper. He's right there. In the rotunda."

Tim looks, and sure enough, there's a scary-looking war dude pointing his rifle out the window. Joey goes "Oh!" and Eva shouts "I see him!" and Oli looks like he's about to pee his pants.

Colin gets up, his gun still aiming straight ahead of him. "We're going to walk around the other side of the house. Stay on my tail."

"I'm on your ass!" shouts Lele happily.

And just like that, they're moving again. Colin's in the lead (because of course he is), Lele's on his ass as promised, Eva's behind her, then Joey, then Tim, and Oli brings up the rear.

"I'm on Tim's tail," says Oli to no one in particular.

Tim smirks. "Oh, yeah." He can't stay mad at Oli. Not when Oli keeps being unintentionally hilarious.

They're in position, and Colin pulls a grenade out of his rucksack. "All right," he says. "We're gonna take this grenade. I need you (he points at Eva, much to her horror) to run a B-line up to the rotunda, and I need you to throw it through the window. All right?"

"Me?" Eva squeaks. "I don't even know what to—"

But then the grenade is in her hand, and Colin pulls out the pin, and *oh God this is it this is where I die.*

She runs. Her mind's glazed over with terror. She can't hear the gunshots, or her friends' voices, or even her own screams. The grenade sizzles in her hand, and it's gonna blow it's about to blow throw it throw it—

She throws it. She barely has time to run for cover before it goes off, bathing the window in a sea of fire.

"Omigod!" gasps Oli.
Eva blinks, then takes a moment to absorb her situation. She's alive. She has her limbs. She made it. She made it. Of course she did. There was no way she wasn't going to make that shot. Not with her life (and, to a lesser extent, Colin's opinion of her) on the line.

"Let's move!" shouts Colin, his voice warm and husky, and Eva isn't scared anymore.

They approach the rotunda. Eva flings the door open, and there's a sleeping (or dead?) man on the floor with a briefcase next to him. The top-secret documents. They have to be. But...

Colin shrugs. "Someone has to go in there and grab the briefcase."

Eva, desperate for another chance to impress him, enters the rotunda and snatches up the briefcase. The sleeping soldier wakes up and lunges for her, clonking his head against the doorframe in the process. She screams (again) and slams the door in his now-unconscious face.

"I think he's dead now," mumbles Oli.

Eva struggles to catch her breath. "I got the briefcase," she gasps, tracing her finger over the inscription on its front.

Joey's by her side within seconds. "What does it say?"

*Operation: Heatwave. Burn before reading.*

"Colin?" Oli's eyes are wide with an inquisitive sort of fear. "What should we do?"

Colin doesn't answer. Instead, he lights a cigarette, his expression betraying a total lack of interest in their plight.

This sets Eva off. "I just risked my life," she snaps, "and he's smoking a cigarette." Colin, come on. You're really hot, and you were heroic at one point, but now you're just being a douchebag. Fix yourself. We could've had a thing here.

"Colin!" Joey seems equally annoyed. "Do you know the combination to this?"

Still no answer.

Oli sighs, shrugs at Eva as if to apologize for Colin's douchey ways, and turns his attention back to the briefcase. "It says burn before reading..."

"He has a lighter," Joey points out.

Colin flicks his lighter for emphasis.

And then, Joey's eyes light up, and Eva can tell he's had a breakthrough moment. "Wait! I think I know! Give me the lighter! Give me your lighter! Please."

Colin hands it over.

"Thank you."

"What are you about to do?" Oli wonders aloud.

Joey's mouth flickers into a smile. "I'm about to burn the briefcase."
First of all, it's a metal briefcase, so Oli has no idea how the hell they're going to get it to burn. And whatever Joey's doing with the lighter doesn't seem to be working.

"Come on," mutters Joey. "Come on!"

Oli shakes his head. "I don't think that's right."

"Why not?"

"Cause I don't think that's right!"

"We look stupid," Lele complains.

She's right. Despite their efforts, the briefcase isn't on fire. "What about the guy that's dead?" Oli asks, forcing his frustration back down his throat. "Does he have a key or something?" He opens the rotunda door. "Hello?"

The dead body does not reply.

"The combination?" Joey snaps. "Do you know it?"

Lele's got that lovestruck smile on her face again. "God, he's a hot one," she practically moans.

"Excuse me?" Tim pipes up. "Mr. Dead German Man?"

"Guys." Oli's had enough of this crap. "He's dead. Leave him alone." There has to be a better way to burn up this briefcase. They're missing something.

But what?

"We need to burn something!" Joey insists.

Tim, in a surprising move, lights one of Colin's cigarettes. Oli frowns. "I don't think smoking a cigarette is going to help us."

"Maybe it'll burn the paper?" Joey suggests.

Colin steps forward. "Actually, I think it just might."

He takes the cigarette, and Oli thinks finally, maybe he's gonna start helping us now, only to be immediately disappointed when their oh-so-awesome guide starts smoking again.

"Oh, okay," says Tim with a shrug. "He just wants a cigarette."

Oli rolls his eyes. "Well, that's great. Seriously, Eva, what the hell do you see in this guy?"

"Maybe the smoke will turn into numbers and that'll be it," suggests Joey.

"You mean like Harry Potter?"

"Yeah."

At this point, Oli's facepalming internally. "Yeah, no," he says dismissively. "That's not gonna work."

Lele snorts.
Just when Joey's beginning to lose hope, they notice something: a black strip on the side of the briefcase.

"The side!" Lele exclaims. "Burn the side!"

Joey raises an eyebrow. "Burn the sides?"

"Yeah! Go! Go! Go!"

They do it, and sure enough, the code is revealed. "277200," Joey recites, glad they've got another puzzle out of the way. He punches it in, and the briefcase swings open to reveal the secret documents.

Joey grabs them, clears his throat, and begins to read them aloud.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: Tim gets a gun for Christmas, while Joey and Oli become temporary scientists.
Chapter Notes

So the teaser trailer for Escape the Night Season 2 is out, and its appearance has given me more than enough motivation to finish the Season 1 novelization! (Yeah, we still have a ways to go, but it'll be done by August. I promise.)

Before this chapter begins, here are my Season 2 predictions:

1. Just like last season with Shane, one of the more famous ones (like Tyler or Jesse) will go first.

2. Tana will almost die a bunch, but she'll survive everything they throw at her...until near the end, and then her luck will run out. If she DOES go out early, then Liza or Gabbie will take that role instead.

3. Andrea's Mystic character supposedly knows everything that is going to happen. As such, she will die early on. People named Andrea do NOT have a good track record as far as EtN is concerned.

4. Either Lauren or Alex will die for sure, and the other one will probably have to watch, because this show is cruel.

5. There will be only one or two survivors. Place your bets now...

Okay! Back to the story!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

OPERATION: HEATWAVE is centered around Experiment 2772, a mutation serum that will transform a common soldier into a monstrous killing machine. However, the experiment's subject got loose and killed the scientist. The operation was never able to recover the doctor's private records, which contain valuable information. Your mission is to enter the lab and retrieve the records.

So now they've got to face off against some mutant monster thing. At this point, Tim's not even surprised anymore.

"Well, let's go find them," says Colin nonchalantly, as if this is just your average Sunday morning. (Which, for him, it probably is.) He shoves the documents at Lele. "Hold on to that."

The blonde's resulting smile is the cringiest shit Tim's ever seen in his life.
"It says find the documents!" Eva squeals, clearly trying to calm herself down. "Not the mutants!"

"Colin, can I borrow one of your guns?" Oli wants to know.

Colin ignores him.

"Okay. I guess not."

Tim winces. The poor guy sounds like he genuinely doesn't care anymore. *I better keep an eye on him. The last thing I need is another breakdown on my hands.*

They follow Colin through the woods, and they don't stop until they're standing outside a small white building. Tim assumes that this must be where the documents (and the mutants, but he's not gonna think about *that* part) are kept.

Eva's regained her composure, but there's still a hint of anxiety in her voice. "I feel like something is about to go down," she announces to no one in particular.

Joey bites his lip. "There's...there's the lab."

"We have to get in there," Eva gasps.

"All right." Colin forces his rifle into Tim's hands. "Take this."

*Sick. Colin's gun. Colin's actual real life World War gun. This thing's probably worth a ton in 2016...and Colin, somehow, trusts Tim enough to let him have a crack at it."

Maybe ol' Ghosty Studmuffin isn't so bad after all.

Okay. *Okay.* So when Oli asks for a gun, Colin acts like he doesn't exist, but flipping *Timothy* can have whatever weapon he wants. Because *that* makes sense.

Oli's not mad. Not really. He's just disappointed.

"Ready?" Colin asks.

Lele nods. Oli shakes his head, but no one seems to notice.

Colin ignores them both and grabs a shovel. "This is the old Army key," he remarks offhandedly before using the shovel to pry open the door. "All right. There it is. Let's go."

Joey enters the lab. Oli's a little hesitant, but another "let's go" from Colin is all it takes for him to follow Joey inside.

It's a strange little room. There's a large table, crammed with various scientific-looking objects, as well as a few smaller tables off to the side. Nothing particularly suspicious...and yet, the words "monstrous killing machine" still pick at Oli's brain. "There's no one in here," he says in an attempt to reassure himself, but his trembling body will not be reassured.

"Wait." Joey heads directly for the table. "There's documents over here."

But then, before Colin or anyone else can join Joey and Oli in the lab, the door slams shut behind them. Oli turns around, ready to scream at Colin to *open the door again dammit*...but then he sees what they're up against, and the words die on his lips.
It's a massive mutant zombie, chained to the wall, roaring loud enough to wake up the entire country. And Joey and Oli are trapped in here with it.

Oh, God...we're doomed...

Colin grabs his "Army key" and tries to reopen the door. No luck. "Go around," he orders the others. "Look for another way inside."

The braver (stupider?) part of Eva wants to kick down the door and get Joey and Oli out of there. They don't deserve this. I can't lose them. I can't lose anyone else. Especially not to a stupid man-made monster.

Someone's screaming.

Oli?

Oli...

"Keep your eyes peeled," Colin warns them as they walk. "There's things hiding in the bushes."

Lele nods. Tim grips his gun. Eva tries not to cry.

The monster snarls through rotting teeth, battling its chain, its beady eyes examining Joey and Oli like they're a pair of shiny new playthings. Its claws slice the air like a set of butcher's knives, and Joey can't bring himself to look at the twisted expression on its face.

"Help!" Oli's voice is almost hoarse from screaming. "Let us out!"

"Omigosh," Joey whimpers.

"What do we need to do?"

It's hard for Joey to talk through the lump in his voice, but he manages to force out a panicked "I don't know!"

"Get the papers," gasps Oli, pointing to a small folder on the main table. "I can't move."

Joey snatches up the folder and hands it off to Oli, muttering "omigod" repeatedly under his breath.

"We need to make something!" Oli shuffles through the papers, his hands shaking. "Okay. Right. Instructions for the serum. Right. Okay."

I've been developing an antidote that will reverse the effects of the rage virus. In order to create it, you must find three small vials, each filled with a different solution.

"Three small vials." As Oli repeats the words, he gestures haphazardly to the scientific equipment littering the table. "They're here. They're here."

Then, once you have combined the solutions together in the metal tray provided...

This time, it's Joey's turn to parrot the note's command. "Metal dish!" he shouts, grabbing the dish in question and placing it on the table. "Metal dish!"
...you must inject the antidote into the subject. This will turn him back into a human.

Inject... "Oh hell no," Joey scoffs, trying and failing to hide his rising panic. They're supposed to inject that thing? What is this? Another death challenge? Is this going to end with someone's brain in pieces on the floor?

No. It's not. There wasn't a vote. It won't happen. I won't let it.

The group's quest to rescue Joey and Oli has somehow devolved into a game of Duck Hunt.

"Omigosh, shoot them, shoot them, shoot!" screams Eva, her cool-girl calm all but gone by now. Tim and Colin obey, and one by one, the attacking Germans fall like zombie dominoes.

Tim's a Mobster. He's used to guns. Killing comes naturally.

No, it doesn't.

Despite his earlier bloodlust, he's not a Mobster. Not really. It's just a stupid character. Eva was right, of course she was, he's just a guy with a YouTube channel, he doesn't know what the hell he's doing, and this is the first time he's ever killed someone. Yeah, the "someones" are soldier ghosts, but still.

He doesn't like it.

But he does it anyway. He fires bullet after bullet, picking the soldiers off like sitting ducks, all the while wondering how on earth he's gonna explain this to Chia when he gets home.

Okay. Joey tries to relax. First things first. Where on earth are those three vials we need?

He catches sight of a wooden chest, and his mind immediately jumps to conclusions. "In that chest." He points to it, his voice a series of tight gasps. "There. Right there."

Oli opens the chest, looks, then shakes his head. "No. There's nothing in here."

"There's nothing in there?!!"

"There's nothing in here at all!"

Their monstrous roommate swipes at Joey, missing his coat by inches. At this point, Joey can hear his heart pound out patterns against his throat, but he pulls himself together long enough to help Oli search the drawers.

"What am I looking at?" Oli wants to know. "What am I looking for? Is there anything?"

Joey has no idea.

So they just got attacked by a bunch of enemy soldiers, but Lele isn't scared. Not this time. Why would she be, when she has a hottie like Colin to protect her?

One of the Germans (who somehow survived the barrage of bullets from Colin and Tim) pulls
himself to his feet and lunges for Eva. She runs, her shouts of "Omigod!" echoing through the air, and Colin immediately leaps to her defense. Lele barely has time to be jealous before he empties another round of bullets into his opponent's body.

The enemy falls. But Colin isn't done yet.

Suddenly, he's on top of the man's bloody corpse, using his hatchet to beat the everloving shit out of it. There's a maniacal but still oddly hot gleam in his eyes, as if the sight of death increases his power.

"He's bludgeoning him!" There's a heavy dose of shock in Eva's voice. "Omigod, he is dead, you don't need to do that, oh God."

Christ. Lele should not be turned on by this. It's violent, and it's brutal, and if she had any sense she'd probably run away screaming. But...damn. Colin. He's a good soldier. And she's kinda-sorta hoping that he'll grab her and kiss her with those perfect, bloodstained lips.

"There's nothing in here," Oli mutters, fumbling his way through several drawers. He's trying to focus on the task at hand, but it's kind of hard to focus when there's a monster in the corner. Especially when said monster is a few broken chains away from getting its claws on them.

"Oli, Oli. Oli."

He looks up.

Joey's blue eyes are burning with a stubborn sort of hope. "Something's back there." He points to a mini-table near the back of the room.

Oli checks, and he finds the first vial in a pot full of cotton balls. "Wait! I've got something!"

From there, their search (thankfully) gets easier. The second vial is found within a brown, murky solution, and the third one turns out to be hiding in the corner.

"Okay," Joey gasps. "We got them."

"Put them in the metal dish!" The words rush out of Oli's mouth like a terrified mouse running from a cat.

Joey does so. Once that's done, he turns his attention back to the note. "The syringe is under the table." He peeks underneath it, then exclaims "Wait! There's a box thing!"

"What?"

"Look." Joey pulls out a box and opens it. "This."

And there it is. There's the syringe. "Oh, well done," Oli sighs, watching as Joey uses the syringe to suck up the solution they've created. "So that's it. That's the thing we need."

Now for the dangerous part.

"Do you want me to take over the gun?" Eva asks Colin.

"No."
*Dammit.* Eva *hates* being useless. She's spent all night trying to help the group in whatever way she can—solving puzzles, finding clues, cracking combinations—and she can't *stand* the thought of sitting on the sidelines while everyone else keeps fighting. *Especially* when her friends might need her help.

At this point, she'd rather be inside the lab with Joey and Oli. Monster or no monster, at least it's something to *do*.

Fortunately for her, there's a window nearby, so she crosses her fingers behind her back and takes a quick peek inside the lab. Joey and Oli are still alive. Thank God.

"What's happening in there?" Tim wants to know.

Eva squints. There's a monster in there. Joey's sneaking up on it with what appears to be a hypodermic needle, while Oli's standing as far away from it as he possibly can. "He has to..." She struggles to find the right words. "...*bludgeon* it with the syringe!"

"Shhh."

Joey's needle is inches away from the creature's back; he can feel its growls rumbling their way through his stomach. He swallows. One chance. If he screws this up, he's as good as dead already.

He closes his eyes, mutters a silent goodbye to Daniel just in case, and stabs.

The syringe sinks into the monster's neck like a knife into wet clay. Its unearthly roar slowly transforms into a simple human sigh, and it—no, *he*, he's human now—falls to his knees, his head in his hands. Joey and Oli breathe a sigh of relief.

There's a box behind the man, and it has the now-familiar symbol on it.

"Grab it!" Joey can hear Eva's voice, shouting at them from outside. "Grab it before he comes back! *Grab it!*

They do.

"Okay!" barks Lele, who's joined Eva at the window. "They're coming out!"

Tim smiles. *See? It's fine. They're okay.* He isn't gonna admit it, but he *was* getting worried there for a bit.

Oli's out first. Joey's right on his heels, clutching a giant box to his chest, gasping "We got something..." as if they hadn't already noticed. He places the box on the ground with a satisfying *plunk.* "Let's open it."

"Omigod," is all Oli has to say.

They open the box and are immediately confronted with a barrage of steam. Tim frowns. "What *is* this?"

"It's dry ice," Eva explains.

Oh. Okay. So *now* Tim's back in chemistry, listening to his teacher drone on about frozen carbon
dioxide. "Don't touch it!" she'd snap. "It's dangerous. It'll burn your skin clean off. And I'd rather not pay anyone's hospital bills."

Lele—crazy Lele—grabs Colin's shovel and starts whacking the ice like a goddamn lumberjack. Eva screams. Joey jumps back. Tim *almost* makes a sarcastic remark, but then decides that pissing off Lele Pons when she's in full smash mode is *not* a good idea.

Once she's smashed the dry ice away, they find a key and a note. Lele reads the latter aloud to the group.

*It's going to be a brutal war to get the gold. The two best soldiers must be selected by the vote of the group to go inside the east side guest house and battle for glory. Good luck.*

Colin's mouth bursts into an almost scary smile. "That's it!" he cheers. "That's where the gold is! It's in the house!"

"What are you talking about?" asks Joey.

"My gold. It's in the east side guest house."

So it's come to this. Of course it has. Two of them will be "sent into battle," whatever the hell *that* means, and Tim's pretty sure that someone is going to die. Because, *clearly*, they can't catch a goddamn break.

"Oh, no," moans Joey, his posture drooping, an overtone of panicked desperation in his voice. "Guys...I don't wanna *do* this anymore!"

Eva sighs. "Colin. Listen. Six of us are already dead. Can't we just—"

"No."

*Look on the bright side,* Tim tells himself, trying not to think about everyone he's lost. *At least we'll be one step closer to 2016.*

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: It's time to vote, which is gonna be tricky, since there's no one left for them to hate. Also, Joey has a plan, Lele misses Matt, and Oli must decide where his loyalties lie.
Chapter Summary

Once again, the group must choose two among them to march into battle. Who will it be this time?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

They're back in the living room, and Arthur, as usual, takes charge. "So." He purses his lips. "We are going to vote on the two people who are going to fight in the Great War."

Eva pushes aside all thoughts of not again and takes the seat next to Lele. "Timothy and Oli have gone up against each other," she hisses, "and Oli..." An image of Oli disappearing into the dunk tank bolts across her mind, and she swallows down her nervous tears before they can form. No. Not again. He's going to live. "Oli didn't really hold his own. But I'm kind of sketched out by Timothy still." That's a lie. She likes Tim. But she can't save everyone.

Can she?

Lele nods. "Okay. So I think Timothy is one of them."

"What about Joey?" asks Eva. "Do you think he's involved in all of this? Like...the house?"

"He wants the deed," Lele points out.

"I know."

It's Joey's house. He killed GloZell, and his vote almost killed Oli, so of course he's at the top of Eva's suspect list. But Eva's still not fully committed to voting for him just yet...because, despite everything, he's still her friend.

They're all her friends.

"I wish..." She sighs. "I'm tired of this game."

"We've all been in that position," Joey whispers, trying and failing to hide the pain in his voice. "Eva hasn't."

"That's true," says Tim.

Oli bites his lip. "Are you saying we should—"

"Yes." Of course. Joey's done it. Oli's done it. Tim and Lele have both done it twice. But Eva...she's never risked her life. She's coasted through this nightmare, watching the others struggle to survive, and not once has she gone through what they've gone through.

It's her time.
"I'm gonna go have a chat with the girls," Oli mutters over his shoulder.

Oli sits down next to Eva, and Lele can tell by the look in his eyes that he wants to talk to the Journalist alone. So she excuses herself ("I wanna go see what the other guys are talking about") and heads off to join Tim and Joey in the corner.

"Lele would be a good soldier," she overhears Tim say, and at this point, she's not even surprised anymore. "I mean...she's crazy..." He notices her arrival. "...in a good way..."

"Uh oh," Joey snickers.

She grins, shrugs, and pushes Tim in the face. "So." Her voice is dangerously chipper. "What are we talking about? Me?"

"I was saying that Eva is crazy, in a good way, and that she'd be a good soldier," Tim explains.

It's a blatant lie, of course, but it gets Lele thinking. "I mean...she did throw the grenade..."

"That's true!" says Joey with a smile. "She would be a good soldier. And she hasn't gone into an elimination."

On one hand, he's right. She hasn't. And she's Eva freakin' Gutowski—she's almost guaranteed to survive whatever this house throws at her. On the other hand, she's also one of Lele's closest friends, and she rescued her from the ungodly machine not too long ago. What kind of ungrateful bitch would Lele be if she voted for her? "Thanks for saving my life, here's a fifty-fifty chance of getting you brains blown out!"

She sighs. She never thought she'd say it, but she misses Matt. These votes were so much easier when he was still alive.

"I'm going to tell you straight up. Joey wants you to go in."

"Really?"

"Yeah." Oli knows he's being a bit of a backstabber right now, but he doesn't care. He has to tell Eva. He likes her too much to let her get tossed into a war zone without so much as a heads-up. "He wants you to go in, cause...he feels you haven't done..."

She nods.

He can't lose her. If Eva dies, they're all as good as dead.

"Oli." Her voice is depressingly soft. "I'm not...I don't want to..."

"You're not. Listen. I'm voting for Joey. He voted for me to go into the circus, so—"

"I know." She smiles. "I'm gonna vote for Joey, too."

There's so much more he wants to say (stay alive, I need you, don't leave me), but Arthur's voice cuts through his thoughts like a pair of razor-sharp scissors. "Ladies and gentlemen, it is time to vote!"
Joey's freaking out. "I just want to say," he stammers, his hands shaking, "that...like...I feel like...we've gone through so much together...and I really like you guys...and..." Don't vote for me please God don't vote for me.

"Yeah," Lele agrees. "All the hate was on Matt. I like you guys. I just hated Matt."

"It sucks that we have to do this," Joey sighs.

It's his turn at the hat. He's pretty sure that he was successful in convincing Tim and Lele to vote for Eva, and he knows he probably ought to do the same. But...does Eva know? Did she vote for me? Did Oli?

He can't risk it.

He hurriedly scratches out Tim's name on the piece of paper provided, shoves it into the hat, and sprint-walks back to his seat.

The tension in the room is too thick for even a knife to cut.

Joey cringes. Lele squirms. Oli's got his head in his hands. Tim's clutching Colin's gun like it's a one-way ticket to safety. And Eva...Eva stares straight ahead, her heart between her lips, her brain attempting to calm her frightened muscles.

"Don't forget," says Oli morosely, "someone's gonna die."

"Or not," Tim retorts.

"Or they are."

As Arthur picks a name, Eva's mind wanders back to Oli's warning. In a way, Joey's decision to go for her makes sense; after all, her life has yet to be on the line. She's only helped other people whose lives were on the line. So, really, it was only a matter of time before—

Eva. Stop. Logic isn't going to take the sting away.

"It's Eva."

"What?" snaps Oli.

Something inside Eva breaks, and a flood of anger and determination washes away her fear. There's no way I'm losing this, snarls her mind. It's not going to happen. I'm not going to die just because Joey Graceffa thinks I'm expendable.

"The second person..."

Tim takes a deep breath. It's fine. It's fine. No way they're throwing him in there again. Not after he just risked his neck on the last one. Not after Matt. He needs a break. It's someone else's turn.

"Timothy."

"Son of a bitch!"
He slams Colin's gun against the ground, not giving a shit if it breaks. Goddamn it. God \textit{freakin'} damn it. He's \textit{never} going home, is he?

(He wants to kick himself for thinking that.)

Oli shouts "Who voted for Eva?" and Lele stares at the floor, trying not to draw attention to herself. \textit{Me jodí.}

"I can't fight!" complains Eva.

"You threw a \textit{grenade}!" Joey insists, as if it takes a super soldier to throw a \textit{freakin'} grenade. "You're gonna do great."

That's all Eva needs to hear. "I \textit{know} you voted for me, Joey."

Lele bites her bottom lip so hard it almost bleeds. \textit{Okay, Eva. I admit it. I voted for you. Not because I hate you, or because I want you dead, but...} She sighs. \textit{...because I believe in you.}

\textit{You're the smartest one here. You can beat Timothy. You can beat anyone.}

\textit{You're gonna survive.}

\textit{You'd better.}

Oli feels sick. So either they're going to lose Eva Gutowski, the girl with a knack for getting them out of puzzling situations, or they're going to lose perpetual optimist Timothy DeLaGhetto. Neither option sounds appealing.

"Do you think these are soldier arms?" Eva snarls, showing off her biceps.

Joey nods, and Oli tries not to unload a barrage of righteous fury on him. \textit{You voted for her. And now you're just going to act like everything's fine? Like you didn't just force my friend onto a flipping battlefield?}

\textit{If she dies, it's on you.}

"Those are quite nice, actually," is all Tim has to say about it.

"I'm gonna do this." Eva slips back into her jacket, a layer of venom underneath her disturbingly quiet voice. "And I'm gonna come out alive. And then I'm gonna come for \textit{you}, Joey."

\textbf{Chapter End Notes}

Next chapter: Eva and Tim play a classic game with a disturbing twist. Then, one of them makes a deadly decision, and the other suffers the consequences.
Chapter Summary

Tim and Eva head straight into a massacre. There will be casualties.

Chapter Notes

Before we're all forced to watch Eva or Tim get his or her brains blown out, here's a link to the Escape the Night Season 2 Official Trailer! Any predictions? I know I've got some...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

One last chance. I have one last chance to save myself and Tim.

You'll listen to me. You'll understand. You have to.

Colin's waiting outside the parlor, an impatient look on his chiseled face. "Come on." His voice is surprisingly rough. "Let's get this over with."

Tim scowls. "Damn, dude. You don't have to be so—"

"Colin!" The name practically explodes out of Eva's mouth, mixing together with a series of breathless gasps. "Listen. Please. There's another way. The journal..." She doesn't cry. She won't cry in front of Colin. "The journal said you can leave the house at any time. You just don't want to, because of your gold and all, but..." Her voice is a quivering mess. "Please. Just. Leave."

"Leave?" Colin wrinkles his nose. "And why would I do that?"

"Cause if you don't, one of us might die," Tim explains.

"So?"

Eva can't believe what she's hearing. "So?!? What do you mean, so?!?"

"I've waited years to see my gold again," says Colin matter-of-factly, as if that's supposed to make everything better. "The things I've done..." He shakes his head. "I need it."

"Colin, please." Eva wants to scream, to slap him, to make him understand what he's putting them through. "Don't do this. Tim and I...we've got families. Friends. Lives. We have to go home. Please...we'll die if you don't..."

"Then die. I don't care. I'm not leaving without my gold."

"Wow," snaps Tim. "You're an asshole."

"Colin, please..."
But Colin keeps walking, and Eva's heart breaks for the millionth time tonight.

Before Tim gets the chance to give Colin Wentworth a well-deserved kick in the balls, they arrive at the east side guest house, and it's time to go to war.

Tim and Eva step inside. (Colin doesn't, because Colin's a grade-A douchebag who's basically leaving them here to die, but whatever. It's not like Tim expected anything more from him.) There's not much here. Just a table, two chairs, and a briefcase at each place. Oh, and also a goddamn revolver at the center of the table, but who gives a shit about that when there's war games to play?

"All right, soldiers," a gruff-sounding voice crackles over the loudspeaker. "Listen up. Take a seat, and touch nothing."

Eva, who's clearly struggling to hold herself together, sits down. Tim follows suit. He tries to smile his whatever, it's cool, it's cool smile at her, but the DeLaGhetto magic has clearly worn off.

"Now this is all-out war, and you two are caught in the middle. Despite your best efforts, there will be a casualty tonight."

Tim sighs. Great. Just great. Thanks for that, Mr. General Voice Guy. It's Eva or me. As if this party wasn't shitty enough.

"Open the box in front of you. Do not show the other soldier what's inside. Do not touch the revolver until told to do so."

Inside the briefcase is...well, it's basically Battleship, except with toy soldiers instead of toy boats. Tim blinks. This house sure loves risking his life on childhood toys. At least there's no creepy dolls this time around.

"First off, each player must place their soldiers on the battlefield in the most strategic positions. On your turn, announce a pair of coordinates. Now, if the opposing player does not have a soldier on that space, you must put a peg there so that you don't call it again."

Yeah, whatever. He knows how Battleship works. Where's the deadly twist?

"If the opposing player has a soldier on that space, they must pick up the revolver, place it to the side of their head, and pull the trigger. The battle will end when one of you puts a bullet through your skull."

There it is.

"Any funny business—anything at all—and our trained sniper will shoot you both on the spot."

"Sniper?" Eva's voice trembles. "But...we killed the sniper..."

"Different sniper."

"Oh."

And that's when Tim notices: there is a sniper rifle, poking out at them from one of the many windows. It's right behind Eva. It's aimed directly at the back of her head.

He tries not to look at it.
The gold. It's there. It's right there, behind Tim, neatly tucked away inside a treasure chest. She wants to grab it. She wants to get out of here.

But she can't.

Instead, she's being forced to play this twisted love child of Battleship and Russian roulette. She's going to die, or Tim's going to die, and Colin could've saved them, but...no. Don't think about Colin. He doesn't deserve your tears.

Eva sets up her soldiers. She makes sure to place them in the most strategic way possible; there are certain coordinates that are impossible for anyone to guess without a good twenty minutes of gameplay. Something tells her that this game won't last that long.

"Ready," she breathes.

"I'm good," Tim replies, placing his last soldier. "Here goes nothing."

Tim, I'm so sorry, I misjudged you, it's not fair, I wish it didn't have to end this way...

His voice breaks through her goodbye speech. "B-4."

"No. G-8."

"No. F-3."

"No."

It goes on like that for a while, and Eva falls into the game's oddly comforting rhythm. Keep missing. Keep missing. She closes her eyes, and they're back in 2016, playing a normal game of Battleship together. Tim's telling some stupid, dirty joke, and she's smiling. They're okay. They'll be okay.

But then, when she chooses G-6, Tim says "hit" and everything falls apart.

Tim picks up the gun. It feels cold in his hands, like a block of metallic ice, and it feels even colder when it's up against his head.

He breathes. "Okay."

"I can't watch," Eva moans, hiding behind her hands.

Russian roulette. Okay. The bastards probably want to drag it out for as long as possible, so no way they're putting the bullet in the very first chamber. He's fine. He'll be fine. His hands aren't shaking. He's got this. He's not scared.

He pulls the trigger.

Click.

The "whew!" that comes out of his mouth is a strange combination of excitement and relief. See? It's okay. I made it. I'm not... He's too happy to finish that sentence.

He puts the gun back where it was, pulls out the soldier that Eva shot down, and rubs his hands
together. "C-7."

"No. E-2."

"No." He pulls his coat off. It's getting hot in here all of a sudden. "B-1."

"No. E-10."

"No."

"I'm gonna die," says Eva matter-of-factly.

Tim can't bring himself to look at her. "Someone's gonna die."

There's a part of Eva that still believes that she can save them both. But there's another part, a larger part, that's already given up...and that's the part she wishes she could kill.

"D-4," Tim guesses.

"No."

"Dude, are you cheating? How am I not hitting anything yet?"

She doesn't reply.

"If I shoot myself," Tim jokes, "and I come back in spirit, and I see that you cheated, I'm gonna, like, haunt you forever."

"I'm not cheating."

"This is never going to end," Matt whispers. She ignores him.

"A-6."

"No. H-3."

She checks. She double-checks. She checks at least three more times before she can finally bring herself to admit it. "Hit."

Tim frowns.

Eva grits her teeth. Don't cry, she orders herself, struggling to keep a stoic expression on her face. You're not gonna cry. If this is the end, you might as well face death with dignity.

She places the gun between her brown curls, tries to ignore the tears threatening to escape her eyes, and pulls the trigger.

Click.

"Oh, thank God."

She's alive. She's still alive.
Being trapped in a game of Russian Battleship is bad enough. But being forced to watch Eva shoot herself...seeing the tortured look in her eyes as she pulls the trigger...Tim can't do it. Not after Matt. Not after everything.

She shoves the gun back into place, and Tim makes up his mind.

*I'm ready.*

"H-8," she whimpers.

He doesn't even look at his battlefield to see if she's right. "Hit."

"Hit?"

"Yeah."

As he picks up the revolver, he thinks of Andrea, the friend he lost a thousand hours ago. She's smiling. So are Sierra and Matt. They're fine. He'll see them soon.

Eva buries her face in her hands.

A series of friends and family parade across Tim's mind. Chia. Rick. His parents. Even Nick Cannon, who for some reason looks like he's trying to hold in a fart. *Hey, guys.* He tightens his grip on the gun. *I know you'd want me to make it, but...I can't.*

*I'm sorry.*

He takes a deep breath, squeezes his eyes shut, and pulls the trigger.

This time, a shot rings out.

Eva screams for about two seconds, then collapses back into her hands. *Oh God.* She feels sick. *It happened. He's...he's...*

She bursts into tears.

She spends a good two minutes sobbing out all the emotions that have accumulated within her heart. She cries for Shane, the boy who died despite her efforts to save him, and Andrea, the girl she wasn't allowed to save. She cries for Justine, GloZell, and Sierra, none of whom deserved their terrible fates, and she cries for the four YouTubers (including herself) who are still trapped in this awful, awful house. She even cries for Matt. He might've been a douchebag, but she doesn't have any anger left for him.

But most of all, she cries for Timothy DeLaGhetto, who kept them all smiling throughout this nightmare, whose witty comebacks and huge heart were both the stuff of legend. Timothy, who's now slumped against the table, blood oozing from his skull.

For a few moments, she wishes she was dead.

*"You made it through, Private,"* booms the loudspeaker, snapping her out of her tear-stained thoughts. *"Now get that gold over there and get out of here."*

Eva obeys. She stumbles her way to the chest of gold, picks it up, and runs for the door.
Once outside, she drops the chest on the stairs in front of Colin. "Take it!" she screams. "It's all there! Was it worth it?"

Colin opens the chest. "Yes." He examines the bars of gold as if they're priceless artifacts, a disturbingly joyful smile on his face. "It was worth it."

And with that, he picks up the chest and disappears into the night.

Eva wraps herself in her coat, trying unsuccessfully to hold off another round of tears. How dare he. How dare he claim that his stupid gold is worth Tim's life. What an asshole. She can't believe she ever thought he was cute.

This is too much. It's all too much. She came here for a dinner party. She did not come here to lose her goddamn mind.

Eva reenters the parlor, clutching a single gold bar between her hands, looking like she's about to have a mental breakdown. She marches to the mantelpiece and places the gold next to the artifacts. No one has the heart to ask her what happened.

She turns to face her friends, tears watering her dark brown eyes. "Guys...I can't take any more of this."

"Look." Oli, much to Joey's relief, attempts to talk sense into their normally sensible friend. "There's two more owners we need to find."

"Who's gonna die next?" Eva cries.

"We don't know!"

"Don't think about it," is Lele's advice.

Joey tries to smile. "Maybe we're all gonna make it." If they can work together...if they can become a team...maybe no one else will have to die. Maybe all four of them will be able to escape this horrible night.

"Exactly!" shouts Oli.

"I doubt it," mutters Lele, "but okay."

It's Oli, of course, who brings their grief-fueled argument to a close. "We need two more owners." He takes a deep breath. "Let's go get them."

Chapter End Notes

RIP Tim. You were one of the more interesting characters, and you could've developed into a stone-cold badass if you'd had a little more time.

Next chapter: The four survivors meet a lunatic, and Eva is close to going crazy herself.
The Insanity of Vincent Wells

Chapter Summary

Morning is coming. Our four surviving heroes need to hurry up and get out of here before it's too late. Fortunately for them, there's a crazy person who needs their help. (And no, it isn't Lele.)

Chapter Notes

That awkward moment when you realize you misquoted a line of dialogue from twenty chapters ago. Isn't revision fun?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Oli’s efforts to get the group moving again have already fallen apart.

They sit silently in the dining room, their eyes empty, their hearts broken, none of them in the mood to continue their quest. Joey bites his lip. Lele fiddles with her gloves. Oli flips through the priest’s journal, his mind too overwhelmed with grief to comprehend the words in front of him. And Eva…she’s got the same lifeless expression on her face that Matt acquired after Sierra’s death.

Has she given up?

She can’t. She'll recover. She has to.

Joey breaks the silence. "And then there were four of us."

"Guys." Lele points to a nearby window. "The light is coming in. It's almost morning. You know what that means."

"It means we're all gonna die," Eva moans.

"We're not." Oli looks her square in the eye, doing his best to shine mental beams of hope in her direction. "We need to work faster, and we just need to get this over and done with. Okay?"

She nods.

He turns his attention to the journal in his hands, leafing through it until he's finally found the right page. "We need to look at this book and figure out what we need to do."

"Who is it this time?" Joey wants to know.

Vincent Wells is a madman.

Eva whimpers. Lele rolls her eyes.

He sees impossible things—horrifying things. He would stare endlessly at lightbulbs. I never knew
what he saw, but it seemed like he was trying to burn holes into his eyes.

Burn holes in his eyes? squeaks Oli's mind. Who does that? That's psychotic.

His sanity may be gone, but his heart is good. He hid something in the dining room, but I was never able to find it.

Oli sighs and shoves the book aside. "He sounds like a psycho." A psycho needs their help. Because that is what their lives have now become. Yeah, his heart is good, according to the journal, so he'll be nicer than Colin, but Oli's still not looking forward to meeting him.

Is this what Matt felt?

Your fault. Your fault. He's dead because of you.

Eva grits her teeth, trying to block the voices from her brain. She doesn't need this. She has to pull herself together if she's going to get out of here alive.

Get out alive? You? You don't deserve it. Not after what you did to Timothy. You could've saved him. Why didn't you save him?

Oli stands up and begins to search the shelves. "We need to find something."

"What else did it say?" asks Joey. "Anything?"

Oli's too engrossed in his search to acknowledge Joey's question. "Oh!" He grabs a strange little box from a nearby desk. "What's this?"

"It has the symbol," Lele points out.

They gather around the box. It's locked, as usual, behind a combination. "There's four numbers," mutters Oli under his breath.

"Look, look!" Joey points. "There's colors. Black, grey, green, and yellow. I don't know what that means, but—"

"That's blue!" Lele snaps.

Puzzles. Yes. This is what Eva is good at. Solving puzzles. Finding clues. Anything to take her mind off of her Tim-related failures. Now...how to solve this color scheme?

Lightbulbs. Of course! Vincent likes lightbulbs. They come in many different colors. There's got to be some lightbulbs around here.

"The lightbulbs." The words come out as a sort of strangled cry. "Check the lightbulbs."

They do as Eva says. They search for lightbulbs, and at first, nothing comes of it. But just as Joey's about to give up on the idea altogether, he hears Oli's voice from the parlor. "Guys?"

"What?"

"This lightbulb isn't on." Oli sounds genuinely shocked. "And I swear this was always on."
Sure enough, the lightbulb in question has mysteriously gone dark.

As Joey, Eva, and Lele look on, Oli unscrews the bulb from its lamp. "Oh!" He holds it up. It's yellow, and there's a giant 1 burned into its glass. "Yes. Yellow."

"We should find more of those," says Lele, a sense of urgency lacing her otherwise calm voice.

"Yeah," Oli agrees. "We need to find more lightbulbs."

Before Joey knows it, Lele's found the second lightbulb. "I got the black one!" she shouts, holding it above her head like a war trophy. "It says 5."

"Oh!" Joey's heart skips a beat. "There's one over here, too!" He runs to it, unscrews it, and checks it to make sure he's on the right track. He is. "It's the blue!" The number 2 stares back at him.

"One more," sighs Oli.

Eva wanders over to a lamp with four lightbulbs. Only three bulbs still burn. "This?"

"Yes!" Lele shouts.

After a bit of unscrewing, Eva yanks the lightbulb free. "Black," she murmurs. Her voice sounds like it's a million miles away.

"I have the black one!" Lele protests.

"What number is it?" asks Oli.

"I have..." Lele's examining her lightbulb. "I have grey. Never mind."

Eva places her lightbulb on the table next to the box. "It's a 1."

"So black is 1," says Lele matter-of-factly.

Since the order of the color on the box is black, grey, blue, and yellow, they enter the numbers in that order. 1. 5. 2. 1. Click. The box pops open.

"Stupid locks," Joey mutters to himself, relieved that they're making progress.

Inside the box is a key to a room on the second floor. Joey doesn't want to go upstairs and face yet another ghost, but he knows he has no choice. "Let's go."

As Lele follows the others upstairs, she wonders what this Vincent dude will be like. Sure, he's a lunatic, and that's going to be a pain in the ass to deal with, but maybe he's hot? Colin was hot. A douchebag, yeah, but still hot. Maybe Vincent will be a similar case?

But then they enter Vincent's room, and nope. Not hot. Dammit.

He's a slightly bulky man with pitch-black hair, a beard, and wild brown eyes, and he looks like he hasn't had a good night's sleep in weeks. He's in a white straitjacket. He stares at a mirror in the corner, ignoring the four YouTubers in his room.

"Vincent?" Oli gulps.
Lele's got this. "I know how to talk to him." She approaches the lunatic, sweetening her voice with comfort and understanding. "Listen...honey..."

"Don't go near him!" Joey hisses. "I know you've probably been in a straitjacket, but—"

She ignores him. "We're not here to hurt you." She has to be gentle with him. If she makes him understand that they're not a threat, he'll be a lot less likely to go all psychotic on them.

"We like lightbulbs," is Eva's contribution to the conversation.

Vincent screams. Everyone jumps back, and for one awful moment, Lele thinks she's failed.

But then, he speaks. "Who are you?" His voice is like a hysterical earthquake. "How long have you been there?"

Joey bites his lip. "We just got here."

"Did the doctor send you? Please, I told him everything I know, every last vision, please!"

"No, no, no." Lele suddenly wants to give this guy a hug. "We're not here for that! We're not here for that. We're here to help."

"We're good guys," says Joey calmly. "We're here to help you. Can you help us, though?"

Vincent takes a deep, shuddering breath. When he speaks again, his voice has regained some level of sanity. "Be careful of this house." He winces. "When I first came here, I thought it was gonna be like the home I never had. I thought I would show the world that what I see is real. But this house..." He looks like he's about to cry. "This house has become a dark, unfriendly place that has locked me in this straitjacket...so I never leave it."

Lele stares at the floor. So he's a crazy person who wanted a decent life, and now he's trapped in this hellhouse. Just like me.

"Tell them about the keys, Vincent," the madman orders himself, and for a few seconds, he has a conversation with no one. "I know, give me a moment, tell them about the keys! Okay! I will!"

"Where are the keys?" asks Oli.

"There are three keys that are needed to unlock this jacket." Vincent's voice comes out in a series of breathless bursts. "But...you're gonna have to dive inside my hallucinations to find them. If you go to the landing, there's an ink blot card. It'll show you to my most vivid hallucinations. Please..."

"We will," Lele whispers, trying not to cry. "We will."

Vincent tenses up. "You have to go now, go now; I'm getting a vision, you don't want to be here for much longer, go, please, go!"

Everyone runs for the door. Lele follows, but she makes sure to shout a few last words of encouragement over her shoulder. "We'll be back, okay? We'll find the keys! We'll get you out of here!"

She's not sure, but she thinks she hears Vincent murmur "thank you" as she leaves.

Chapter End Notes
Next chapter: Plants! Zombies! Plant zombies?!? Also, Eva manages to snap herself out of her Tim-induced funk, and Oli swears off gardening for good.
In order to retrieve the first key, the group must head to the greenhouse...and what they see will sour their opinion of greenhouses forever.

As they run down the hallway, Joey's talking a mile a minute, trying to process Vincent's confusing instructions. "Landing? What's the landing? What was he talking about? What landing? Down there? Up here?"

"I don't know," Eva stammers. "An airplane landing? Do we have airplanes here?"

But then, a shout of "Hey!" from Lele directs their attention to a small desk against the wall. Sitting on the desk is a reddish-brown box, which Lele proceeds to pry open.

"That's it," Oli breathes.

Lele takes out a piece of paper with strange markings on it. Joey's never seen anything like it before, but he can only assume that the markings are the "ink blots" that Victor was talking about.

"What does it say?" asks Oli.

The Hustler does not reply. Instead, she unfolds the paper to reveal...

"Is that a map?"

It is.

"Okay." Lele's voice is a bit huskier than usual, but it's still got the fiery streak of determination that Joey has come to expect from her. "It says here that the first hallucination is at..." She points. "Here. The greenhouse."

Oli looks like he's going to cry. "Not outside again!"

"Let's go." Joey's already heading for the door. "I'll take you there. I know where it is." Get it done. Get it done, and then you can go home. "Come on."

As they head outside, Eva's trying her best to block all of tonight's trauma from her mind. You can do this. Don't wallow in despair. Just focus on the puzzles. Breathe. Survive.

But then, of course, Joey has to ruin it with "You know, as much as I want us all to get through this, I feel like one of us still could be with the evil."

"Yeah," Lele agrees.
Dammit. Eva forgot about that possibility. Sure, the traitor is probably dead by now, considering the odds, but still. There's a chance. There's always a chance. What if Lele...or Oli...

She won't believe it. She loves them both too much.

Joey, though...

Her internal monologue is interrupted by their arrival at the greenhouse. "What do you think's in here?" Joey asks, fiddling with his collar as he talks.

Eva bites her lip nervously. If there's anything that Pretty Little Liars has taught her over the years, it's that nothing good ever happens in greenhouses. Clearly, something's about to go down, and she's not sure if she's ready.

Joey grabs the doorknob. "Ready?"

"I'm excited," says Lele, because Lele's a nutcase.

Just before Joey turns the handle, Eva closes her eyes, attempting to prepare herself for whatever lies in store for them. But all she sees is Tim's still body lying against the table, so she immediately opens them again.

The door swings open to reveal...a normal-looking greenhouse. "Oh." Eva blinks, relieved. "There's nothing in here."

Nothing, that is, except for an interesting variety of plants, growing like vibrant weeds all over the place. As the four survivors walk through the greenhouse, it takes all of Eva's concentration not to accidentally step on anything.

"Wait!" shouts Joey from near the back of the greenhouse. "Look over here, guys! There's, like, a thing." He holds up the "thing," which is actually a bunch of papers bundled together, and begins to examine it. "Aloe vera..."

"Yeah," Eva remarks. "That's a plant."

Joey's eyes widen. "Oh. This is just, like, explaining the different plants."

"I know what aloe vera is," says Eva with a smile. She knows that Joey probably doesn't care if she knows what it is or not, but she wants to go back to being useful again. She doesn't want to give up. Not now. Not ever.

"Look for a clue," Joey's rifling through the leaves of a nearby plant. "Look for something that...like..." And then, just as he pulls a strange object out of the leaves, he pales. "Holy crap!" He drops his prize. "There's a freakin' skull!"

So there is. Eva shrugs it off. She doesn't have the energy to be scared anymore.

"Hold on!" shouts Oli from the other side of the greenhouse. "I've got something!"

Lele's muttering under her breath. All Eva can make out are the words "so much tonight," delivered with an exasperated snarl. Clearly, the blonde is beginning to get antsy.

"Come back." Oli's clutching a small book in his hands, trying his best to get the group's attention. This is a clue. It must be a clue. It—
And then, all of a sudden, his train of thought is derailed by the most disgusting hand he's ever seen. It punches through the greenhouse wall, ripping through the thin fabric with ease, its rotting fingers reaching for Oli's suspenders. The face it belongs to is also visible, and it's impossible for anyone to look at its deformed hideousness without feeling the urge to piss their pants.

Oli screams "What the flipping hell?!?" and backs away from the monster. *Is...is that...oh God...*

"Right...uh..." Oli's freaking out, but he somehow manages to turn his attention back to his clue. "Listen. Listen!"

*I believe there is a way to merge plants and flesh to create an entirely new species: a swamp man. I made a mistake with my first subject and created an abomination, which I must soon destroy before it destroys me. I've devised a new method for burying the flesh so it merges with the root system of the plants. In order for this method to work, one must unearth the body parts that are scattered around this garden, then proceed to bury them in the compost that is on the side of the greenhouse.*

At first, Oli's a bit unnerved by the whole "buried body parts" bit, but the garden zombie's earthshaking roar is enough to convince him not to worry about it. He starts digging through the plants. Eva and Lele, who are on the other side of the greenhouse, do the same.

Joey, meanwhile, is consulting his plant guide. "We need Romulus." He scans each plant's nameplate before he finally finds what he's looking for. "Romulus is over here! Okay. We have one of them."

"There's something over here," Eva reports.

Seconds later, a scream pierces the air. It's Lele's. "A hand!" she screeches, waving it around like the world's most disgusting trophy.

"You've got a hand?"

"Yeah."

"Okay." Oli quickly takes stock of what they have so far. "We've got the head..."

"Let's put all the pieces together," Joey suggests.

So they put the hand with its corresponding head, and Oli can still hear the zombie trying to punch its way through the greenhouse wall. He bites his lip, tries to ignore it, and keeps his eyes fixed on the plants in front of him.

He's grown sick of the sight of anything green.

Searching through the plants trying to find the body parts is the most disgusting thing Joey's *ever* had to do. Having to touch them...digging through the dirt...in all honesty, he's pretty sure that he preferred the mannequin makeout sessions to *this* messy task.

"I need a shovel!" he complains aloud. "My hands are dirty. Are there any more shovels over—"

But then Oli's screaming "Oh! We found a hand! We found a hand!" and the pile of body parts grows in size. "We've got three parts."
"Joey, what's next?" asks Eva.

"Okay." Joey starts scanning through the plant guide again. "Check it out."

Before he can figure out what to do next, the zombie attacks the wall again, growling like a feral animal. "He's getting angry!" Oli cries, and everyone starts screaming at once.

"Omigod!" shrieks Eva.

"Piss off!" Oli shouts in the zombie's direction, as if that's going to do them any good.

It dawns on Joey: they're stuck in here. Even if they do find the key, how are they going to get outside when there's a zombie at their door?

Eva's on her hands and knees, excavating the ground like a frantic bulldozer. "I'm digging!"

"Yes," says Joey. "Dig in here."

After a few more minutes of digging, Joey and Oli find something. "We got it!" Joey shouts, yanking whatever-it-is out of the plant before he has the chance to look at it.

"Oh, well done!" Oli cheers. "All right, we got a foot..."

A foot? "A foot!" Joey drops it on the pile in disgust. "Ewww!"

"Have you got anything?" Oli asks Lele.

She shakes her head. "What else do we need?"

Joey's trying to read the guidebook, but the plant names are becoming increasingly difficult for him to understand. "Abtenia Cortofolia?" He wrinkles his nose. "What is this language?"

"Ugh, my shoes," Lele moans.

"I hate plants!" Oli's investigating a nearby clump of bushes, but he looks like he'd rather be pulling teeth. "I didn't even think you could hate plants, but I hate plants."

The zombie roars again, and Joey loses his patience. "You know what?" He flings the guidebook aside. "Screw the freakin' plant! Just dig wherever you can! Destroy this freakin' greenhouse!"

With that, he grabs a potted plant and throws it.

"Ow!" Oli howls. "That landed on my head!"

"I'm sorry! I'm just trying to freakin' hurry up!"

Oli grimaces, then goes back to digging through the plants. "I am never helping my mum garden again."

Finally, Joey finds the last body part ("It's a freakin' hip bone! Ew!"), and the group buries their findings in the compost heap. Lele smiles. She's glad that's over. Maybe that stupid zombie will go away now.

"Right," Oli breathes. "We've done it."
"Is that all?" wonders Joey.

Before anyone has a chance to answer his question, the compost pile lights up, and...is it groaning? "Wait!" shouts Lele. "Guys!" What the hell? Can't this house let them do one goddamn thing without shoving scary shit down their throats?

"What's happening?" Joey asks nervously.

And then an actual swamp monster comes out of the compost pile, and it's at this point that Lele starts wondering if someone spiked her drink earlier. This situation has become way too weird to be real. She's on drugs. She's tripping out. She has to be. Right?

(Hallucinations, Vincent said.)

Everyone screams. Oli shouts "Holy shit!" and immediately runs for the exit. The others follow him, knocking over countless plants on their way out, no longer caring about the zombie waiting outside.

Joey, especially, is in hysterics. "Get out of here! Get the hell out!"

Lele agrees. Real or not real, she is not going to get killed by a goddamn swamp monster of all things.

"Shit!" Oli moans. "He's coming!"

"You're not leading us to a way we can go!" Eva fires back.

At this point, they're a good five feet away from the greenhouse, but the swamp monster is still lumbering in their direction. Lele's heels are stabbing into her feet, so not sure how much farther she can run before something goes wrong. Leave us alone go away go away—

All of a sudden, the zombie throws itself at the swamp man's chest.

Joey blinks. "What is happening?"

"What the hell?" mutters Oli. "It's like...bloody...zombie versus Yeti!"

The zombie attempts to tackle the swamp man, but one quick punch from the latter's massive fist sends it sprawling onto the ground. Then, just for good measure, the newer monster picks up his challenger and tosses it around like a rag doll.

"Oh, shit!" Lele never thought she'd be cheering for a freakin' swamp monster, but...maybe they misjudged him. Maybe he's on their side after all. "Omigod! Yes!"

The swamp monster grabs the zombie and punches him in the face a few times.

"He's helping us!" Joey gasps.

"Yeah," says Lele with a shrug. "I mean...we created him. Basically."

By now, their creation has achieved his first KO, and the zombie is a lifeless heap on the ground. The swamp man smirks, scoops up his fallen foe, flings it over his shoulder, and stomps away.

"WWE!" Oli cheers. "John Cena!"

"Where's he taking him?" Joey wants to know.
Lele wrinkles her nose. "Is he gonna eat it?" Whatever. Doesn't matter. It was trying to kill us anyway. "Wait. We need a key, right?"

Joey nods. "Let's go see what he did."

"Wait." Eva hunches over a strange clump of dirt, struggling to catch her breath. "Guys. Guys!"

They gather around her. "Oh, wow," Oli murmurs, examining the object in Eva's hand. He lights up. "The key!"

"The key." Lele breathes a sigh of relief. One down. Two to go.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: The group meets the strangest person any of them have ever met, which is saying something, considering everyone they've met so far. Also, Oli panics, Joey doesn't think things through, Lele has several questions, and Eva's the only sane one.
For their next challenge, the group must confront a woman with no mouth. And that's not even the weirdest thing about her.

Eva's exhausted. She just spent the better part of fifteen minutes running from zombies, screaming her lungs out, and digging around in the dirt. Now, she just wants a relaxing shower and a nice hot cup of coffee...but she knows she's not going to get *either* of those things anytime soon.

"All right," says Oli. "Let's go. Where do we need to go now?"

"We need to go to the second location," Joey replies.

"The second..." Lele frowns. "Wait a second. Where's the map?"

As soon as the words are out of her mouth, all of the color drains from Oli's cheeks. "I left the map!"

He takes off running. "Omigod!"

Before anyone can stop him, he disappears back into the greenhouse, and Eva's heart sinks into her stomach. *No.* Not Oli. He can't go back in there. What if it's a trap? *What if...* Much to her relief, Oli reappears two minutes later, map in hand. "I got—"

Whereupon he trips over his own feet and falls flat on the ground.

Lele snickers into her sleeve. Joey chortles. Even Eva, as much as she hates herself for it, breaks into a smile. Then, of course, she realizes that this is the first time she's smiled since Tim's death, and she immediately feels a rush of affection for Oli.

"Oli, you okay?" Joey asks.


Oli scrambles to his feet, brushing the dust from his overalls. "I got it!"

"Are you all right?"

"Yes! Let's go!"

They start running once again. Joey and Lele take the lead, while Eva sticks like glue to Oli's side. "Seriously?" she chides him. "You've got to be more careful! You can't just go charging into dangerous places, Oli, you freakin' scared me!"

"Sorry." He shrugs. " Doesn't matter now. We gotta get to where we're going."

"That was insane, guys," gasps Joey from up ahead.
Eva surveys the group. There are Oli and Lele, her two closest friends since the beginning, and Joey, who's spent all evening being either extremely helpful or unbelievably sketchy. All three have proven their worth to the group over and over again, and all three have been tough enough to withstand everything they've been through so far. Maybe...just maybe...they have a chance after all.

"Guys!" A brand-new dream lights up her heart. "If we work together, I think we can all make it out alive!" She knows that it's foolish to hope for the best possible scenario, but just this once, she lets herself believe.

One minute, they're running to the next hallucination, pride and happiness surging like blood through their veins. The next minute...

"Wait!"

"Hold up!"

"What's going on?"

"Is that..." Lele scowls. "Is that Cleopatra?"

They're staring at a circle of giant boulders, each one covered with masks of various colors and shapes. A woman with a spiky, faceless mask on stands at the center of the circle, holding a samurai sword, and in hindsight, she doesn't really look like Cleopatra. She looks like a creepy warrior goddess who wants to kill everyone.

_Because that's exactly what we need_, thinks Lele bitterly. _Yet another creep who wants us dead._

There's a bunch of sacks pinned to the nearest boulder, along with a note. Joey reads it.

_The face is really the mask and the mask is really the person. Unravel the five identities hidden behind the masks. One will lead to the next, and the order must be perfect, or else you will disturb the butcher of flesh._

_If an incorrect mask is taken from the wall, she will come for blood. To protect yourself from her deadly blade, you must be wearing a burlap sack._

"This?" Oli whines, yanking a sack from the boulder.

"Yes," Joey replies. "Everyone grab one."

"This bloody thing?"

_She will then take one and return to her station. When the next mistake happens, there will be one less sack for protection, and the guest without one will be violently removed from the hallucination._

_Begin with the demon who is dreaming._

Um. Well, shoot. Lele has _several_ questions. How are these sacks supposed to protect them? Why does the samurai chick care so much about a bunch of stupid masks? And...wait a minute..."violently" removed from the hallucination?!?

She hopes to God it doesn't mean what she thinks it means.
What kind of sick game is this? Who thinks of this? Who hallucinates this? What, exactly, is wrong with Vincent's brain?

Whatever. Doesn't matter. Eva takes a sack, puts her thinking cap on, and begins to examine the circle of masks around her. Demon who's dreaming...begin with the demon who's dreaming...

"This looks like a demon," says Joey, pointing to a random mask, "but I don't know if he's sleeping. Or dreaming."

"When I think of dreams, I think of, like, a lot of colors," mutters Eva. She glances at Joey's mask, immediately decides against it, and wanders over to the other side of the circle.

"Let's just try it," Joey insists. "We have to try something."

No. No, we don't. Not yet.

Moments later, Eva figures it out. "This one's a moon," she realizes aloud, pointing to a grey mask that looks suspiciously like the moon emoji. "Guys. This is it. This is what we're looking for."

Lele shakes her head. "How do you know it's dreaming? That's not a demon. That looks like a really nice person."

"Or that one." Joey's completely ignoring her. "I think it could be that one, actually."

"Really?" asks Lele.

Eva sighs. "My guess is the moon one." Trust me, guys. I'm right. Please...don't...

"I guess..." Lele points to the mask that Joey chose. "This one."

Joey nods. "Okay. Fine. I'm going to do it."

"Put the mask on," Lele reminds them, but Eva's already got the burlap sack over her head. They're not listening. No one's listening. Someone is going to die.

In one quick motion, Joey grabs his mask and rips it off the boulder.

"Shit."

"Oh, for God's sake," grumbles Oli, slipping the bag over his head. "Oh, great." They messed up. They messed up, and now the swordswoman is going to come for their blood. If only they'd listened to Eva...

The "butcher of flesh" approaches them. She examines them carefully, as if she's trying to decide which flavor of ice cream to get. Then, much to Oli's horror, she stops in front of him.

"Perfect," he says sarcastically.

She grabs his sack, pulls it off his head in one fluid motion, and returns to the center of the circle.

Oli sighs. "Great." He's in danger now. One more mistake, and he'll be "violently removed" from this hallucination. And since he has no idea what that's supposed to mean, he could flipping die here for all he knows.
Once they're out of danger, Joey takes off his own sack and throws it on the ground. "Shoot!"

"You know what?" Lele offers her sack to Oli. "I'm going to be a nice person. I'm going to give you this."

He shakes his head. "No, no. It's fine." He wants to accept her offer, but he doesn't think he could live with himself if Lele takes his place. "It's fine. You stay in."

Joey is currently kicking himself. Of course his mask was wrong. And now, because of his stupidity, they're down a sack, and Oli's life is in danger. Congratulations, Graceffa. You're a moron.

"All right," says Lele with a shrug. "Let's try Eva's."

Oli bites his lip. Now that he's sackless, he looks dangerously pale. "I really, really, really, really hope you're right, Eva. Please."

"Wait." Eva's already examining her mask. "There's something..."

"You got it?"

"We got it!" Joey cheers, his heart soaring. "We got it, guys!"

"Yes," Oli sighs.

Eva reads the inscription on the second mask aloud.

Music plays, the dancers pose, and the liar's nose grows.

Joey jumps into action. "I know it!" He snatches up a long-nosed mask. "It's this one!" He's right this time. He has to be.

"You sure?" asks Oli nervously.

"This one has musical notes and a long nose," Joey explains, trying not to think about what's going to happen if he's wrong. He checks the back of it. "Yes! Okay! It has one!"

Forged in hate, I am the vessel of your nightmares, the protector of your fears.

Joey talks as he thinks. "Protector. Think of protection. Like...think of something...armor. I feel like that one could be it." He points at a Skrull-shaped mask. "Look at it. It's like...very..."

Lele grabs the mask before he even finishes talking. "Yes!" she shouts, a note of triumph in her voice.

"Omigod." A shaky smile haunts Oli's face. "Well done."

Well done, indeed. Joey's on a roll. And he intends to keep it that way.

As you burn in the depths of hell, demons will spread your ashes.

Eva heads straight for the answer. "This one looks burnt," she says, pointing to a black mask that looks like the aftermath of a forest fire. "Look. Like a tree that's burnt."
"That one looks burnt," Lele retorts, showing off a different mask.

"I was thinking..." Oli's eyes roam from Eva's mask to Lele's and back again, and Eva can tell that he's having trouble deciding between them. "Either of those two."

But before Eva gets the chance to convince the Big Game Hunter that her mask is the correct one, Joey, of course, hijacks the conversation. "That one." He approaches a blackish-brownish mask. "It's that one. That's a burn victim if I've ever seen one."

You haven't, is what Eva wants to say, but she bites her tongue.

"Yeah," says Lele, shrugging at Eva's mask dismissively. "That's an octopus."

They're all idiots. Her mask is right, she knows her mask is right, don't they understand what's at stake if they get this wrong? But no. It's an octopus. It's not burned. Of course not. Shut up, Eva.

"That's the one," Joey insists. "Pull it."

"Guys, I don't have a mask!" Oli wails.

Against her better judgement, Eva picks up Joey's mask. Please be right, please let Joey be right for once in his life, I don't want...please...let him be right...

It's wrong.

Of course it is.

"No!"

The samurai advances on Oli, sword in hand, and he starts panicking. "Omigod." Is this it? Is he going to die? "Oh God...no...please..."

Eva's voice breaks through his frantic thoughts. "Oli, you'll be fine."

"Yeah," Lele agrees. "It doesn't mean you're gonna die."

"She's just taking you out of the hallucination," Eva insists, but it's hard to listen to her when there's a woman with a sword standing right in front of him, about to cut him down.

"No, no, no, no, no!"

The sword swings toward him. He screams.

And then, all of a sudden, he's back on the front porch, still (more or less) in one piece. He leans against the door and breathes a sigh of relief.

Oli disappears in a shower of gold sparks, and Lele has no idea what she just saw. Where did he go? Is he coming back? Is he dead?

"Guys." Eva looks seriously pissed. "I know which one it is."

"Oh, now you know which one it is," Joey snaps.
"I knew which one it was the whole time!" she screams at him, grabbing the octopus-looking mask and shoving it in his face. "I said 'this is what happens when it burns.' Maybe if you just listened to me—"

Lele decides to stop this right now before Eva murders someone. "Is that it?"

"Yes."

"What does it say?"

*I'll be your second skin, but of dark and wild nature...*

"I'll be your second skin?" Joey scouts around for a bit before stopping in front of a smiling white mask. "What about her?"

Lele shakes her head. "She's not wild. Look how happy she is."

"She could be wild! You don't know her!"

At this point, Lele is seriously considering banning Joey from mask-finding duty. They already lost Oli because of his screw-ups. If they lose anyone else...

Fortunately, Joey's attention turns to a different, wilder mask. "There's, like, a wolf one up here!" he exclaims, practically tripping over himself in an effort to get to it. "Wild? Like a werewolf?" He takes it. "Yes! We got it!"

"Omigod," sighs Lele, glad that Joey's gotten himself back on track. *One more. We need one more.*

*I hear with no ears. I see with no eyes. I taste with no tongue. I kiss with no lips.*

Joey raises an eyebrow. "That's, like, a faceless mask. What the hell?"

"Like that?" asks Eva, pointing.

"Like what?"

"Like her mask!"

*Oh, no.* That does it. Eva Gutowski has officially gone off the deep end. Is she seriously suggesting that the creepy chick's mask is the answer to the last clue? Does she want to get shanked?

"Think about it," Eva insists. "All of the masks have eyes and mouths and whatnot. The only one that doesn't..."

Joey nods. "I think you're right, Eva. I think that might be the last mask. Let's do it."

Okay. Fine. Eva's been right on all the other ones so far; odds are she's right on this one too. But Lele's still putting her sack on, just in case.

Joey slides the samurai's mask off her head...

"Oh, shit!"

"Oh, God!"

"Oh, hell no!"
She has no mouth. She has no *freakin'* mouth. There's just an empty patch of skin where her mouth is supposed to be.

Lele backs away from the mouthless wonder, trying to ignore the waves of nausea splashing through her stomach. "We got it right." She's done. She's *done*. She is *not* willing to put up with this crap.

Even without a mouth, the woman looks pissed. She marches towards the three YouTubers, sword at the ready, fury illuminating her dark eyes.

"Where's the key?" Joey squeaks.

Eva gulps. "I think we need to run."

Before Lele has the chance to process what's happening, the samurai charges at her, rips off her sack, and slices.

Next thing she knows, she's on the front porch.

"You too, huh?"

She turns around, and there's Oli, still alive. "Thank God." She hugs him. "Listen. Eva and Joey...they've got it all done. Sword chick has no mouth. They're getting the key. They're almost out of there."

"She has no what?"

"I'll explain later. Come on. We need to find the others."

The samurai's sword cuts right through Lele, disintegrating her, and Joey's heart skips a beat. She's okay. She's going to be okay. Right?

"Joey, *run!*"

"Omigod!" His legs carry him out of the hallucination and back to the house in about two minutes flat. Once there, he comes to a halt next to Eva, breathing heavily. "Omigod! That was so crazy!"

She nods.

"What do you think happened to Lele and—"

"They should survive, right?" Eva's trying to sound calm, but there's a hint of worry in her tone. "I mean..."

"Yeah. It was just the hallucination."

"Yeah."

As if on cue, Lele and Oli arrive, and Joey can breathe again.

So, from the looks of it, can Eva. "There you are," she gasps, relief replacing the worry in her voice. "Omigosh."

"You did it!" Oli cheers.
"Yeah," Joey agrees. "Crazy."

Oli high-fives Eva, while Lele turns her attention to the mask in Joey's hands. "Does it have anything inside?"

"I don't know," mutters Joey, turning it over. "Is there a key in there?"

There is.

"Whoa! Okay." Joey's grinning from ear to ear as Lele pulls out the key. This is it. One more key left, and then their job will be done.

Bring it on.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: It's that time again, ladies and gentlemen—time to choose who's going on the chopping block. Except this time, Lele refuses to play by the rules.
Sacrifice

Chapter Summary

Are you ready for another vote? Cause I'm not.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The second key comes with yet another note.

The final hallucination is buried in the darkest part of Vincent's psyche. Unlike the others, the consequence for failure now is pain and death.

Lele sighs. She's pretty much numb to pain and death by now, but there's still a part of her that forgets how to breathe every time a new deadly challenge is introduced. This time is no different. Goddamn it. God freakin' dammit.

Two of you must be selected by vote to sit in the chairs of a madman. Then, those two must select a partner of the opposite gender to aid them. You will find the hallucination waiting for you in the basement.

Joey's eyes are lifeless. "I don't want to choose anyone."

"You know what?" Something inside Lele snaps. That's it. She's done. She's not going to play this screwed-up game anymore. "I don't have anything against you guys. I'm going to vote for myself."

"What?"

"You heard me."

They've come this far. She's hated on a lot of people. Seven of their friends, good and bad alike, have suffered terrible fates. It's about time that they just stick together and stop throwing each other under the bus.

Joey, thank goodness, latches on to her idea. "What if we all put our own name in and...we just..."

"Let the house vote," Lele finishes.

Joey nods.

"Yeah," agrees Oli.

Eva smiles. "I like that."

The vote goes by in a flash. As Lele writes her name down, she can't help but feel like she's shooting herself in the foot, but she's too fed up with the system to care anymore. At least she won't get any more blood on her hands.

The first name is drawn.
"Lele."

*Motherf—*

Memories of the ungodly machine overwhelm her like the world's worst tidal wave, and it occurs to her that she might die in the basement after all. She shudders. "I hate that basement."

Lele's trying to put on a brave face, but Oli can tell that the poor girl's terrified. He doesn't blame her. If *he* was in her shoes—

"Oli."

Never mind.

He should've seen this coming. He voted for himself, so there was a twenty-five percent chance that he'd end up on death row. (He assumes, for the sake of his own sanity, that everyone followed Lele's plan.) The odds weren't in his favor.

"They hate us tonight," says Lele with a sigh.

Oli bites back his panic, trying to convince himself that it's going to be okay. He won't die. He doesn't *want* to die. He wants to *live*, he wants to go home, he wants to see his family again, he wants...

Lele's still talking. "Now I have to choose an opposite-sex—"

"Yes." Arthur nods. "Pick a partner."

Hope returns to Oli's heart. There's only one person in this room who can save him from the madman's chair. And she's sitting right next to him, deep in thought, staring at her hands.

He points at Eva. (It always comes back to her, doesn't it?)

"Obviously, I choose..." Lele sighs and points to the only non-Oli guy in the room. "Joey."

She doesn't want Joey.

He's great. He's a good friend. She likes hanging with him. But putting her *life* in Joey Graceffa's kinda-careless hands...she's honestly not too sure that he's the man for the job.

Eva, on the other hand...well, she's *Eva*. The genius, the Journalist, the Russian roulette survivor, the girl who saved Lele from the ungodly machine. If Lele had any choice in the matter, she'd pick Eva Gutowski without batting an eye.

But *nope*. She's stuck with Joey. Joey, whose major achievements include humping a mannequin, swimming a few laps, and getting GloZell killed.

Hooray.

"Well, I would *think* that I was a boy," says Joey with a grin, as if this is just a normal conversation,
as if no one's in danger of death. "So thank you for choosing me."

Lele smiles. Her smile illuminates her face like a lantern lighting up a dark passageway. Joey wants to freeze time, to keep that smile on her face forever, but it only lasts a second before fading away.

*It'll come back. It always does.*

Of course he's going to save her. He promised himself that he wouldn't let her become another Justine. No matter what, she will leave this house alive.

And if that means he has to let Oli die…so be it.

Eva feels sick. She knew she shouldn't have gotten her hopes up. Here she was, thinking that maybe they'd all escape alive, and now someone is going to die again. And to make matters worse, her two closest friends are the ones whose lives are at stake.

Lele and Oli.

"Guys..." Oli's trying to be strong, but Eva can detect an undertone of fear in his voice. "I'm just gonna say...whatever happens...you know...you've been good."

They head to the basement. Eva touches Oli's shoulder in an effort to calm him down, and he responds by taking her other hand and squeezing it. She squeezes back, reminding herself that she has a job to do, that it's her responsibility to get Oli White out of that basement alive.

If she fails, she'll lose a friend. If she succeeds, she'll still lose a friend.

So, really, it's a lose-lose either way.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: Lele and Oli must suffer through the most painful challenge yet. Also, heartbreak!
Aftershock

Chapter Summary

Oli and Lele become test subjects for a terrifying "learning chair," and their fates are in the hands of Eva and Joey respectively. I'm so sorry.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The walk from the living room to the basement still feels like a walk to the guillotine, and this time around, Lele doesn't even bother with the pep talks. I could die, she tells herself. I might not make it. This...this could be it.

She's escaped death twice. Hopefully, the third time won't be the charm.

Finally, they reach their destination. "What's down here?" Eva asks, a nervous twitch in her otherwise stoic expression. Arthur opens the door. Lele braces herself and enters the room...

...only to be confronted with a pair of electric chairs.

Her hand covers her open mouth, and she barely manages to bite back a scream. The chairs of a madman. Electroshock therapy. Is this what Vincent went through? Are she and Oli going to be shocked into insanity?

"Oh, look," she whimpers, pointing to their customary note.

Joey massages her shoulders, his hands trying their hardest to calm her frightened nerves. "What does it say?"

My name is Dr. Price, and I have developed a unique treatment for overcoming hallucinations.

Bullshit, Lele almost shouts.

Each voted-for guest needs to take a seat in their respective learning chair. Their partner must then lock them into the chair by securing the straps. Located across from the learning chairs are crates containing metal rings. Each of you must stand across from your partner, behind the chalk mark on the floor, and toss the rings into the five electrical rods. Missed rings will give their partner a little shock.

Lele's eyes widen. So she was right. They're going to be electrocuted. And knowing this house, those "little shocks" will feel like an electric collar on full blast. She's not looking forward to it. Not at all.

The first guest to have three rings around any of the electrical rods will complete the circuit and cure their partner's hallucinations. However, the guest who failed to learn will suffer a severe shock, which will end their life.

You have thirty minutes before the chairs short-circuit on their own, killing both guests. The timer will start as soon as both guests are securely fastened into their chairs. Good luck.
"Yeah, sure," mutters Lele sarcastically. "Good luck."

Joey hears her. "Lele. Listen to me. Nothing is going to happen to you. I'll get you out of here in one piece. I promise."

_Oh, you promise? Like you promised iJustine that nothing was going to happen to her? Joey, I love you, but your promises aren't worth crap._

"You're _not_ gonna die," Eva hisses through clenched teeth as she locks Oli into his learning chair. "Hold on, okay? Stay with me. Don't..."

"I won't." The words feel hollow on Oli's lips, but he forces himself to say them anyway.

She nods, rolls up his sleeves, and secures the final strap.

As she and Joey take their places behind the chalk mark, Oli prepares himself for the worst. _Don't scream. Don't cry. You gotta be brave, no matter what they do to you. Be brave, and trust Eva, and maybe you'll survive._

The timer starts.

Joey throws his first ring. It bounces off the rod, which causes Lele to scream a string of profanities. Then, it's Eva's turn, and Oli has _just_ enough time to squeeze out a quick "you got this" before she misses the rod by a good six inches.

_Oh God._ White-hot pain shoots through his body, and a scream escapes his lips despite himself. _I was—that hurt—that honestly hurt—don't miss again Eva please don't miss again—_

She misses again. And it hurts. So. Much.

Joey keeps missing, and Lele keeps screaming, and it gets to the point where she can't even recognize her own screams anymore. Her world is nothing but _fear_ and _pain_ and _shocks_ and _Joey, get me out of here, please, it hurts, I don't want to die I don't want to die hurry up and save me!_

"You got this!" shouts Oli from the other chair. "Come on! You can do this!"

"Omigod, how do I _do_ this?" Joey frets.

Lele opens her mouth to give him what-for, but then another shock pulverizes her system, and she's temporarily unable to form any coherent thoughts beyond _it hurts make it stop make it stop make it stop..._

Ring toss has never been Eva's game in the first place, but this...this isn't even the ring toss she knows. This is a twisted, sick, demented version of a classic childhood game, and it's eating away at what's left of her soul.

Lele's in hysterics, crying and screaming and pleading for her life all at once. Oli, on the other hand, still manages to keep some level of composure (that is, when he's not screaming). "You got this!" he tells her through gritted teeth. "Come on!"
"Oh, come on!" shrieks Lele between sobs.

Eva carefully lines up her next shot, promises herself that she's *not* going to miss, and throws.

It's a ringer.

"Yes!" Oli cheers. "Yes! Come on!" His voice is remarkably hopeful for someone who's in danger of being electrocuted. "Come on, Eva! Keep going! Keep going! You got this!"

*I got this,* Eva repeats to herself, preparing her next throw.

"Come on, Joey!" Lele wails.

Joey blinks back tears. He *can't* lose. He *can't.* He's already being haunted by Justine's final screams; he *won't* allow Lele to suffer a similar fate. He can save her. *He will save her.* There's no alternative.

Both he and Eva throw another ring. Eva misses. "Oh, so close," Oli sighs, but then the electricity kicks in and he's screaming again.

Joey, however, succeeds.

"I got one!" he shouts over the roar of the machines. "Lele! I got one! I got one!"

She shrieks an incomprehensible jumble of words back at him, and somehow, that's all he needs to hear. She's *Lele freakin' Pons.* Of *course* she's going to make it. Girls like her don't die from things like this.

*Two more,* his mind reminds him. *Two more, and she'll live, and both of you can leave this awful place.*

Concentration is key. But it's hard for Eva to concentrate when a) electric shocks keep going off every two seconds, and b) there are two people being tortured right in front of her, begging for their lives.

"Oh..." Oli struggles to catch his breath after another round of shock therapy. "Come on, Eva, you can do this, you can do this!"

"I'm *trying!*"

She can feel her heart breaking, but she fights on anyway.

"Come on!" Lele shouts, her voice almost hoarse, her body an aching mess of limbs and organs. "Just win!" Because, really, that's all there is to it. If Joey wins, she lives. She wants to live. Therefore, Joey has to—

*oh shit oh God oh no stop I can't breathe it hurts make it stop Joey get me out of here I'm going to die*

When she comes back down from her torturous high, it's to the sound of Joey screaming her name. "Lele!" He pumps his fist in the air. "I got a second one!"
"Did you?"

"Yes!"

They're ahead they're ahead she might not die after all oh no it's back pain agony it hurts duele hazlo parar estoy muerto...

Joey and Lele are ahead by one ring, and Oli's stress levels are at an all-time high. "Come on!" She can do it. He knows she can. So why are they falling behind? What if he no not again stop it hurts no no no—

Just as his brain regains control of his body, Eva makes another ringer.

"Yes!" Hope flows like blood through his veins, temporarily blocking out the pain of the chair.
"Come on! Quickly, Eva! One more one more one more!"

Joey grits his teeth. He's made two rings so far, but so has Eva, and all they need is one ring each. The pressure is on.

Lele screams again.

"Okay." Joey stares at the electrical rod, trying to ignore the frantic snarl that scars his partner's face. One more. He can do this. She won't die. She won't.

"Come on, Eva!" Oli shouts.

Ring toss is tiring. When you're bent in that position, going so fast before the time runs out, it's exhausting. And right now, Eva is ready to collapse from a soul-sapping combination of fatigue and fear.

Oli’s shouts of encouragement are all that keep her going at this point.

Oli wants to be brave. He really does. He's trying his best not to let the constant shocks get to him, but...to be honest...they're beginning to get to him.

"Ouch!"

It hurts too much. It hurts even when he's not being shocked. The torture has embedded itself into his DNA, and all the cells in his body feel like they're about to combust. You're going to die, the chair taunts. Eva can't save you. No one can save you now.

"Come on!" He keeps his eyes fixed on Eva and grits his teeth against the pain, but the sixty-third shock proves too much for him to bear. "Come on! Please!" The last of his strength leaves him, and he's a sobbing mess in the chair. "Please don't let me die!"

"Joey, please!" Lele's getting super pissed at Joey. "Try!"
"I'm trying!"

_Bullshit. "You're not trying!" He's literally throwing them on her feet. How the hell is he supposed to make another ringer when he can't even get within ten miles of the rod?_

"Yes, I am!"

Next to her, Oli's repeating "you can do this" over and over again. Eva, meanwhile, looks like she's going to burst a blood vessel.

_Pathetic, the chair sneers. Look how incompetent your dear friend Joey turned out to be. How do you expect to survive with a partner like that?_

She's hallucinating she's hallucinating this isn't real oh mierda no not again stop it stop it Joey I need you if you've ever been my friend save me please don't let me die please don't please don't no no no no

Joey's losing strength. His head hurts, he's out of breath, and his back is killing him. To top it all off, he's only got nine minutes left before Lele and Oli are lost to him forever.

"Lele, I'm sorry!"

He's not sure if he can save her anymore.

Oli's beginning to wish that he had just died in the dunk tank like he was supposed to. Anything's better than _oh God not again Eva make it stop make it stop make it—_

"Please, Eva." The world is a haze of colors and blurred lines, but he still tries his best to focus on the vaguely Eva-shaped blob in front of him. "Oh, please, I can't stand any more of this." He means it. He can _feel_ himself dying. "I can't stand any more of this, Eva, please...please..."

Wait.

Did she just...?

She did, _she did_, she made the final ringer, he's safe now, he's okay. "Yes!" He curls his hands into fists. "Yes!"

Then it hits him.

_Lele...oh God...Lele's going to..._

Seconds before she's electrocuted to death by Dr. Price's so-called "learning chair," a few last thoughts barrel their way through Lele's half-conscious mind.

She thinks, _dammit._

She thinks, _well, Matt, I guess you got your way after all._

She thinks, _I'm sorry, Joey. It's not your fault. If anything, it's my fault for being such an idiot. Stay_
alive, okay? Survive. For me.

She thinks, Eva, Oli, that goes for you too. Live. Get out of here. Looks like I won’t be able to... looks like...

And then, electricity overpowers her, and she never thinks again.

Joey watches through a curtain of tears as waves of electricity attack Lele Pons's body. She collapses against the back of her chair, screams once more, and finally goes limp.

It's like watching a beautiful she-lion succumb to her hunters’ bullets.

I failed. The horrifying realization almost stops his heart. I couldn't save her. She died, just like Justine, and I lost her and she was screaming for me and I failed I broke my promise I'm a terrible friend I let Lele die oh God...

Both Eva and Oli are also crying. She's hiding behind her hands, and he's slumped over in his learning chair. When he looks up, Joey sees the tear-stained face of a man who has been through hell.

Lele... Justine... I'm so sorry...

As if on cue, a nearby jar lights up. Inside is a brain and, more importantly, a key. The key.

"You see that, right?" Eva whimpers.


Eva sounds like she's out of breath. "Get the key! I'm gonna get Oli out." She's by his side in seconds, struggling to free him from the chair he almost died in. "Oli..."

While Eva fusses over Oli, Joey goes to examine the disgusting jar. "What is this? What the hell?" He fishes the key out, pushing his fingers past the brain in the process. "Ew... ugh... ew..."

A sad smile flutters across Eva's face. "That's the last key."

"Let's go." Joey can't stay here anymore. Not with Lele's dead body staring at him. "Come on."

"Oli," Eva moans, helping the shellshocked Brit out of the room.

It's my fault. "Come on, Oli. Let's go." I'm the reason Lele's dead.

The three surviving YouTubers leave the basement. Once they're gone, a final round of electricity strikes the lifeless corpse of Lele Pons. It's like one last "screw you" to the girl who fought so hard to stay alive.

There's only one hour left until dawn.
RIP Lele. You were one of my favorite characters to write POVs for. I'm going to miss being inside your crazy yet hilarious head. In fact, I'm going to miss everything about you. *You were so close.*

Next chapter: We finally find out who's been working with the evil this whole time.
Revelation

Chapter Summary

Lele's gone, but never mind that, because it's PLOT TWIST TIME!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They're all broken.

Oli can't take a step forward without wincing. Eva's eyes are a sea of hollow emptiness. And Joey...he feels like this house has sucked every speck of light out of him, leaving only darkness in its place.

"Nothing is going to happen to you. I'll get you out of here in one piece. I promise."

"It's not gonna happen! You're not going in there!"

His fault. All his fault. Stupid, stupid, stupid.

They enter Vincent's room. "Where is he?" Joey murmurs, more to himself than anyone else. Then, he sees the madman, and he tries to smile. "We got the keys. Come on."

"Please," moans Vincent. "Please don't tease me."

"No," Eva assures him.

Each YouTuber takes a key and gets to work on one of the locks. Joey can hear himself say "I got the bottom one," but his mind is hundreds of miles away from his task. Only when he hears the lock click open does he snap back into reality. "There we go. Thank God."

And with that, the straitjacket falls off, and Vincent turns to face them.

"I'm free." Vincent's voice is a mixture of joy and bewilderment. "My hallucinations are gone."

Oli smiles. He's still smarting from the shocks, and his heart is in tatters from Lele's death, but he's glad that there's still a grain of hope to be found in this situation. At least Vincent is free. At least the group is one step closer to home.

But then, Vincent notices something behind Eva, and his eyes grow cold. "You."

"Eva?" Joey squeaks.

Vincent shakes his head. "I don't envy the road that lies ahead of you. The owner of this house...is a monster." An angry snarl permeates his tone. "You can have it all. The house...the hallucinations...the madness..."

Arthur pushes his way past Eva. "That will be all, Vincent!"
But Vincent stands his ground. "You don't control me anymore," he snaps, staring the butler dead in the eye. Then, to the others, "I tried to warn you, but you didn't listen."

Oli wrinkles his forehead. *Wait...tried to warn?...*

Then he remembers.

*You've been warned. One among you is in league with the evil of the house.*

Suddenly, all of the missing puzzle pieces fall into place. *Vincent...he's the one who warned us...someone's with the evil...and that person...that person...*

"If I were you," says Vincent to the group, "I'd run."

...*is Arthur.*

"Run!" he screams, pushing Joey and Eva ahead of him. "Go! Run!"

They do.

They don't get very far.

Eva barely makes it down the stairs before the maid grabs her, pressing a knife to her throat. *Sarah.* She should've known. Of course she'd want her revenge, of course she'd want to kill the last remaining witness...

"Run." Her voice is a strangled cry. "I'll be fine, just run, just go!"

But Oli, being Oli, tries to save her ("*Let her go!*"), and he's immediately captured for his trouble. By the time Joey comes down the stairs, Marvin has a gun to the Big Game Hunter's head.

"Surrender," Sarah sneers. "Or watch your little friends die horribly."

Much to Eva's chagrin, Joey chooses the first option.

Arthur appears. Betrayal and fury roar like a fire in Eva's heart. *Arthur? Why? We trusted you. And now...oh dammit, I should've seen this coming, if Sarah's in league with the evil, it's not that much of a stretch to assume...*

"It's me." The butler's face twists itself into a grin. "I admit it. I needed the artifacts, and the previous owner's gone, so...I could have this house..."

"You played us," Joey snaps.

Arthur responds by fishing a piece of parchment out of his pocket and tossing it to the side.

"What is that?" asks Joey.

"That's the ritual."

Oli's voice is a defiant shout. *"We did the ritual!"*

"You did the wrong one." Arthur touches Oli's cheek, then turns his attention to Joey. "Good night."

Before Eva can react, the traitorous butler shoves a napkin onto Joey's face, covering his nose and
mouth completely. Joey struggles for a few moments, tries to scream, and finally collapses onto the floor.

"Joey, no!" Oli cries.

*Is he dead?* Eva's thoughts are out of control. Arthur poisoned Shane, of course he did, and who knows what kind of deadly chemicals could be on that napkin? *Omigod...he just killed Joey Graceffa. Right in front of us.*

As if things couldn't *possibly* get any worse, the groundskeeper whips out a similar napkin.

"*Oli!*"

It's too late. The napkin's on his face...he's fighting it...he's gone.

*I'm alone.* It hits Eva like a freight train, crushing her lungs with its sorrowful reality. *Oli's dead. I tried so hard to save him...and Joey too...that's it, isn't it? It's only me now. I'm the last survivor. All my friends are dead.*

When Sarah's napkin smothers her, it's almost a relief.

Chapter End Notes

That's right, folks. The house staff were working with the evil all along. Raise your hand if you're surprised. No hands? Okay. Moving on.

Next chapter: Our three remaining YouTube heroes are trapped in yet another precarious situation. Also, Joey has trust issues, Eva has a headache, and Oli has a full-blown panic attack.
Betrayed

Chapter Summary

Good news: Eva was wrong, and the three survivors are still alive. Bad news: they're now trapped in a dungeon. There's no way out. Or is there?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I'm not dead.

Whatever was in that napkin must've only knocked her out, and now, she's chained to a post in the dungeon. Also, this house has a dungeon. Will the surprises ever end?

Eva looks around. There's Joey and Oli, both still unconscious (unless you've been locked in here with their corpses, snickers the darkest part of her bewildered mind), chained to similar posts. And in the corner, there's a bald lunatic laughing at them.

Joey's eyes fly open. "Guys?"

"We're here," Eva responds, her voice lower and huskier than usual. "It's okay. We're going to get out of here, and we're going to go back to 2016. Right, Oli?"

But Oli doesn't respond, and for an awful moment, Eva wonders if he's—

No. He's not. Shut up.


He wakes with a start, sucking in a deep breath and straightening up against his post. "Omigod." His frightened face reminds Eva of a gazelle about to be devoured. "Omigod!"

Their insane companion laughs at their fear, and Eva wants to punch him in the nose.

"Guys..." Oli examines the shackles on his wrist, panic inflaming his eyes. "We're...we're chained..."

Joey, thank God, has regained his composure. "Look! I have a box!"

"All dressed up and nowhere to go!" sneers the lunatic.

"How do I open it?" Joey shouts. "Eva!"

Stay calm. Stay calm. There has to be a way to get herself and the others out of here. There's always a way. No matter what, no puzzle is unsolvable.

She has a box, too. So does Oli. These boxes...maybe they're the answer.

Eva points to a long, skinny object near Joey's right hand. "Joey, what is that? What is that next to you? It's like...it's like a poker..."
"Welcome to my house!"

_Shut up._

He's overwhelmed with memories.

*no stop please it hurts make it stop Eva help me I'm dead I'll die here I'm going to die oh God oh God oh God*

Technically, Oli is no longer in danger of being electrocuted. But one look at the chains on his wrists and he's right the hell back in that flipping chair again, his body trying its best to withstand the pain. "Joey, get it," he begs, tears in his eyes. "Open the box."

Joey picks up the poker and tries to open his box. "It doesn't fit."

"Welcome!" screeches the lunatic.

"Give it to Oli, then!" Eva demands. "Give it to Oli!"

Oli nods. "Give it to me. Give it to me." _Pull yourself together, Oli. You can't freak out. You've got to be brave. Be strong._

But then, he can't catch the poker, and it lands just out of his reach.

"No!" He tries to push it towards him with his foot, but it's hard to concentrate when his mind's a terrified mess. Not to mention the lunatic, who's started mimicking his screams. "Oh, shut up! Guys...I can't get it! I can't get it!"

It still hurts.

_There's no way out. I'm going to die down here._

Eva snatches up the poker and uses it to open her own box. "Guys, mine worked!" she shouts, relief permeating her voice. "Mine worked!"

Inside her box is a key, which she uses to free herself, and Oli envies her. _Get me out get me out of here I don't want to die I don't want to die I want to go home don't let me die please don't_

"Here!" Eva practically throws a second poker at Joey. "Use it. See if that works."

It does, and in no time at all, Joey's free.

They find a third poker, and Oli tries it on his box, but the damn thing won't fit into its hole. "Guys, it doesn't work!" He's beginning to hyperventilate, and his entire body is shaking with pure terror. "It doesn't work! Don't leave me!" The world is going blurry. Is it because of his tears, or because he's about to die? "Please don't leave me..."

Joey's out, and so is Eva, but Oli's still chained to the wall, and the poor guy looks like he's going to have a heart attack if he stays there any longer. Also, the lunatic is getting crazier by the minute. They have to hurry.

After a quick scan of the dungeon, Joey finds one last box, just out of reach of their crazy cellmate.
"There's a box there, too!" This has to be it.

"Get the key!" pleads Oli. "Get me out!"

"Joey, just grab the key from him!" Eva shouts.

So Joey kicks the lunatic's box across the floor, ignoring his mocking taunts of "Get away! Get away from me!" Then, he reaches above the lunatic's head and yanks a key off its perch.

"Oli!"

The Big Game Hunter's voice is a quiet whimper. "Get me out." His eyelids flutter, and for a moment, Joey's worried that he's actually going to die if they don't free him. "Get me out."

Fortunately for everyone, the key works.

"Yes!" Oli cheers.

"No!" snarls the lunatic. "No!"

Joey ignores him and turns his attention to the final box. "Wait. What is this?"

They open it. Inside is a pocket watch and a note. Eva, of course, reads the latter aloud.

Joey. Oli. Eva. I'm glad that you three were able to last this long. As a reward for your tenacity, you get to keep your lives, as long as you stay down here in my...shall we say...guest room.

No need to worry. I've injected you all with a special serum that I created myself. By the time the sun rises at six AM, you will be as complacent as well-trained animals and ready to join the house staff.

Eva's voice is a shellshocked jumble of sounds. "This is from the butler!"

Joey feels sick. So if they don't get out of here, they'll lose their free will, and they'll spend the rest of their lives as Arthur's mindless slaves? I'd rather die.

He checks the watch. "It's five-thirty."

"Omigod," Oli moans.

"We have half an hour." Joey's on his feet, scrambling for the door. "Let's go."

"Stay!" the lunatic hisses, but they leave anyway.

Eventually, they find themselves in Arthur's bedroom, and there are files everywhere. "Wow," Joey mutters. "This seems like the place where a crazy person would live."

"Yeah," Eva agrees. "All it needs is a corkboard, our photos, and some red...wait." She grabs something from the wall. "Guys. I found a key."

Joey blinks. "Wait, what? You found a key?"

"Yeah. On top of here."

"Wait!" shouts Oli from the other side of the room. "I found something. This is it. Look."

It's a file, left open on the desk, with a note attached.
"That's it," Eva breathes.

Joey's heart soars. Maybe, just maybe, they won't become Arthur's puppets after all. Maybe this file is the key to getting out of here.

*Brother, you have humiliated me, betrayed me, enchained me in a dark corner of your new estate. You brought me here to help you clean things up, but really, you needed to stab me in the back to show the wicked presence your loyalty. Someday, the key to my cell will be found, and when that day comes, I will repay this betrayal with blood. I know you've hidden it behind a trail of gems, the first of which lurks beneath the surface of a reflecting pool.*

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: Arthur and Company are out for blood. Also, everyone keeps getting separated every two seconds, which could lead to death if they're not careful.
Hunted

Chapter Summary

The chase begins! Who will survive the final battle?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

So, apparently, Arthur has a brother. The brother's locked up in the house somewhere, and he's been betrayed, and he wants to kill Arthur, and Oli has no idea what is happening anymore.

"Beneath the surface of a reflecting pool," he mutters to himself, trying to pull his brain back together.

Eva's eyes light up. "We have to go to the pool."

"Okay," sighs Joey. "How do we get out of here?"

Oli doesn't know, but at least they've got the file to help them out. "Let's take this with us." He's still a bit shaky from his earlier panic attack, so he moves cautiously, trying not to think too hard about what this new quest could mean for their futures.

"This key has to belong to something," Eva frets.

"This door." Joey points. "Right here."

They try it. Sure enough, the door swings open, and they are out of there.

"Guys, my nail broke," Eva remarks to no one in particular. A smile envelops Oli's face despite himself.

That smile disappears as soon as they get outside, because holy shit there are sirens going off and why the flipping hell are there sirens in this house?!? And oh God, there's Arthur, with Sarah and Marvin, standing together on the balcony.

Hide.

Just as the three YouTubers wriggle into their hiding places, Oli hears Arthur's angry snarl. "I don't know how they got out!"

"Oh, I don't know," Sarah snaps. "Maybe if you hadn't left them with boxes—"

"Enough! Sarah, you take the house. Marvin, you check the side. If you find them, gut them where they stand!" The butler looks his compatriots dead in the eye. "This game is over."

"Aw, come on, Arthur," Marvin pouts. "The girl's too hot to die. Can't I have some fun with her first?"

(Oli's hands clench into fists.)

"They will die," Sarah assures him, a knife clinched in her right hand, a steely look in her pitch-black eyes. "I promise you."

And with that, the staff begins their search.

_We're being hunted._ The thought slices its way through Oli's mind as he and the others sneak their way towards the pool. _Arthur and the others...they're after us, and if they find us, they're gonna kill us. Or worse. We can't let that happen._

"He's coming," Joey hisses, gesturing at Marvin's approaching figure. "Oli, this way. This way. Eva! This way! Come on!"

Oli _hates_ being chased. It's one of his worst fears. He's not a fan of tag, hide-and-seek, or anything similar, so to be placed in a situation where his life depends on what is essentially a giant game of hide-and-seek...this is terrifying. He's the Big Game Hunter. He's not supposed to be the Big Game Hunted.

As soon as Marvin's out of sight, the three survivors sprint for the pool. They get there without incident, but a quick once-over of the area reveals no gems.

"Dangit," sighs Joey.

"But it says..." Oli reexamines the note, squinting at its messy print. "It says it's beneath the surface of a reflecting pool...what are we missing?"

"Maybe the fountain?" Eva suggests.

Joey shrugs. "Sure. Let's try it. This way."

Then, they spot Arthur, and Oli rushes to catch up with Joey while still trying to stay out of sight. _You can do this,_ he tells himself. _Everything's gonna be fine. Just stick with Joey and Eva and you'll be—_

Wait.

Where's Eva?

Joey's next to Oli, whispering "Come this way!" but Eva appears to have vanished into thin air. And to make matters worse, both Arthur _and_ Marvin have shown up to investigate, so wherever she is, she's in _twice_ the amount of danger.

_Eva. Hide. Don't let them find you, please, oh God, don't let them..._

"Where's Eva?" Joey demands to know, pushing Oli into the house as he calls her name. "Eva!"

_If they find her..._

The more heroic part of Oli wants to run back out there and save her, but the more pragmatic part of him realizes the stupidity of that idea. Eva wouldn't want him to put himself in danger for her sake, especially when there are murderous butlers running about. No, it's better for him to hide and trust in her ability to think her way out of any situation.

She'll be all right. Won't she?
Eva's dead. She is so dead. She's come so far, she's done so much, and now she's going to be murdered at the hands of an evil butler and/or a perverted groundskeeper. It's only a matter of—

No.

She'll make it. She'll get out of this. This is not where she dies.

She hides in a giant bush next to the greenhouse, hyperventilating quietly as Arthur and Marvin patrol the grounds. Stay hidden, she orders herself. They'll never find you here. You're safe. Her heart pounds against her ribs. You're gonna be okay.

After what seems like an eternity, her pursuers turn away, and she hears Joey's sharp whisper. "Eva, come on! Get down here! Hurry!"

"Where are you?" she squeaks.

She climbs out of the bush, trying not to make too much noise, and runs. A few corners later, there are Joey and Oli, worry etched like a chisel into their features. "Marvin's over here," Joey hisses. "Marvin's over here."

I'm safe. Thank God. Now I gotta make sure that no one else dies tonight.

The reunited group collectively darts behind a tree, where they wait for Marvin to leave their line of sight. "Ready?" whispers Joey as the groundskeeper fades from view. "One...two...three!"

They run. Eva's lungs feel like they're going to give out any minute, but she ignores the pain and runs anyway.

Finally, they duck behind the fountain, using their flashlights to peer into its depths. Diamonds litter the floor, and Eva wonders which one is the gem they need.

"There's a gem in the water," Joey remarks.

Oli frowns. "There's a German?"

"No! A gem!"

"Oh."

Eva barely suppresses a chuckle.

"Look!" Joey grabs a nearby chest, then reads its inscription aloud.

Under the water are three invisible stones. Place them on my crown, and I will repay you tenfold.

Oli's already stirring up the water. Joey's more pragmatic, remarking that they should "look for something that can help grab it." He disappears briefly, comes back with a rake, and starts poking through the fountain.

"I'm nervous," Eva moans. Joey's making a lot of noise, and she can't shake the feeling that they're going to be caught. "I'm nervous."

Sure enough, not three minutes later, they hear Sarah's victorious shout. "I found them!"
"Joey!" Oli whimpers. "You're caught! She's in the window!"

Joey ducks behind the fountain again. "Who?"

"Arthur!" Sarah calls. "Marvin!"

"I got the diamonds," whispers Joey, showing them to Oli and Eva. Thank goodness. At least some good came out of that stunt.

He places them on the chest, and it pops open. But they don't have much time to celebrate, because Marvin reappears with a scowl. "Where?" he grunts.

Sarah points in the general direction of the fountain. "They were over there."

"Where?"

Joey snatches two rubies from the chest, and the three YouTubers hide behind a nearby clump of bushes. By the time Marvin and Sarah arrive to investigate, they're safely out of sight.

There's an angry look of confusion scarring Sarah's face. "They were just there!"

Joey breathes a sigh of relief and whispers the next clue.

*The spirits will speak words to help you restore my evil eyes, so I might guard the house with my wings.*

"Wings." Joey frowns, trying his best to puzzle out the clue in front of him. "Is there, like, a statue? A statue with wings?"

Eva nods. "Up there. See that?" She points to the top floor of the house, where a gargoyle stands like a silent sentinel. "Wings. That guards the house."

"The gargoyle!" Of course. They need to go back inside...where Sarah prowls the halls.

This should be fun.

They make their way to the back door. "Watch for Sarah," Eva whispers.

Joey nods. "Okay."

But then, Marvin returns, and he spots them before they can get inside. "I see them in the front!" he roars.

"Get in," Joey hisses.

He charges through the door, not even bothering to make sure that his friends are following him. When he finally stops to catch his breath, Eva's by his side, but...

"Where's Oli?"

"I don't know," Eva moans, clutching her flashlight between her trembling fingers. "I see Marvin. I see Marvin."

Joey shakes his head. "I don't know where he is." Then, as Marvin passes by without incident, "He
didn't see us. Get down."

They do so. Eva's muttering to herself, and her face has anxiety written all over it. As for Joey, he tries to calm himself down. Oli's not dead. He can't be. They would've heard a gunshot, or a scream, or something. He's okay.

But if he doesn't join them soon, then he's not going to be okay for much longer...

Oli doesn't know how, but he's gone and gotten himself separated from the group, and now he's alone. He can't even find the back door. Clearly, he stinks at this game.

Stay calm. Find the others. Brave. Be brave. Don't die.

But then, he turns a corner, and Arthur's twisted face stares back at him.

Oh, God.

"Right there!" Arthur shouts. "I found him!"

Oli runs. He can feel his body going into fight-or-flight mode, pumping panic and adrenaline through his veins. He's right behind me, moans the tiny bit of his brain that isn't devoted to keeping him alive. I gotta run...get out of here...please God don't let him get me...

He's the Big Game Hunter. He's not supposed to be scared of anything. And yet, here he is, completely and utterly goddamn terrified.

Much to his relief, he hears Joey's voice from behind a nearby door. "Oli! Get inside! Oli!"

The door is slightly ajar. Oli sneaks through it, and sure enough, he finds Joey and Eva waiting for him. He's never been happier to see them in his life.

"All right, listen," orders Joey once everyone's reunited. "Sarah's upstairs. She needs to come down here so we can go up—"

Oli shushes him.

It takes Joey a few seconds to understand why he's being shushed, but then he sees Sarah heading down the stairs. "She's coming." He's talking a mile a minute. "She's coming. She's coming. Get under the table. Get behind the table."

Oli hides under the table, while Joey and Eva cram themselves behind it. Joey can feel his heart attempting to pound its way out of his chest, and he can see Sarah's footsteps walking past them. Any minute, he frets. Any minute now, she's going to look down, and she's going to see us, and we'll all be dead.

Thankfully, Sarah leaves the room without finding anyone.

Once she's gone, the three YouTubers creep out from under the table, only to be greeted by Marvin's dangerously cheery voice. "Come out!" He's still outside, but he's getting closer. "Come out and play!"

Before he knows it, Joey's running up the stairs, and Sarah's after him. He barely makes it to the
second floor, only to find that Eva and Oli aren't with him anymore. "Quick!" He ducks into a tiny bedroom, then holds the door open in case they're behind him. "Get in here! Eva!"

They don't come. Sarah does, though, and Joey slams the door in her face.

"Open the door!" Sarah's slamming her fists against the door, and she sounds downright furious. "Open the door!"

Eva's trying to be quiet, but it's hard to be quiet when your shoes make noise every time you take a step. These things were not made for this type of situation. At all. Unless she wants to die. Which she doesn't. And to top it all off, she's somehow ended up alone again.

It's not looking too good.

"Where is the other one?" Sarah snarls. "Eva?"

She pronounces it "ee-va," and Eva bristles. If you're going to kill me, at least pronounce my name right. Good grief.

Sarah growls and turns on her heel. "Probably up there," she mutters to herself, heading back upstairs and disappearing down the second-story hallway.

"Guys?" A soft whisper permeates the air. "Guys? Eva? Oli?"

Joey.

It's coming from upstairs. Eva sneaks up the staircase on careful feet, and she finds the Savant hiding in a small room. "Come on," he says as she joins him. Then, "Where's Oli? Oli?"

"I see them!" screams Marvin from downstairs, and Eva fears the worst.

Please...no...

But Oli reappears about ten seconds later, still in one piece. Eva can breathe again.

The group leaves their hiding place and attempts to access the room with the gargoyle, but it's not an easy room to get into. They have to take the bottom of the door and pull it up, which makes an ungodly amount of noise that sets Eva's nerves on end.

"They're upstairs!" Marvin announces to the rest of the staff.

"Why is it the gargoyle?" Joey asks as the YouTubers finally enter the room. He crouches down next to the gargoyle, rubies in hand. "I'm going to try putting them in."

One. Two. And the gargoyle's eyes have officially been restored.

"Okay," Joey breathes. "They're in. Now what?"

Chapter End Notes

Now what, indeed? You'll have to wait a while for the answer to that question, because
cliffhangers and stuff.
Next chapter: More running around in circles. Also, Marvin’s a pervert, Joey does something incredibly stupid, and death strikes the manor once more.
"Now what?" Oli asks.

"I don't know!" Joey hisses. They're getting somewhere, but he honestly has no clue where to go from here. "I don't know what the—"

Fortunately, Eva has the wherewithal to look around. "Omigod." She picks up a tiny chest and pries it open.

"What is it?" both boys want to know.

It's an emerald, accompanied by a note. Eva pockets the gem, takes a deep breath, and reads the note aloud.

_I overlook the back of the estate, and wait to feast on green. A met—_

"Guys, guys," Oli whimpers, pointing at the stairwell. "Here she comes." Sarah's heading back up the stairs, and she looks more malevolent than ever. "She's coming. Get down!"

They do so. Joey makes sure to slide the door down behind them, and they crouch out of Sarah's line of sight. Once they're safely hidden, Eva reads the note again.

_I overlook the back of the estate, and wait to feast on green. A metal spiral—_

She goes quiet, and Joey realizes that Sarah's peering through the glass window right above the door. Fortunately, their hiding place remains secure, and Sarah goes away after frowning at the gargoyle for several seconds.

"Did she see us?" Eva asks.

"No." Joey takes a deep breath, glad they're still alive. "Omigod. Okay."

Eva turns her attention back to the note.

_A metal spiral of pain will lead you to my table of blood._

"Spiral staircase," Eva murmurs, her hands shaking uncontrollably. "Back of the house. It must be. Let's...let's go."

Before they leave, Joey checks to make sure that Sarah isn't in sight. "She's gone," he reports. "Come on."

He lifts up the door, and they are out of there.
"I'm leaving the torch," says Oli.

It takes Joey a minute to realize that Oli is referring to his flashlight. "Okay." His heart is beating faster than a long-distance runner's, but he ignores it. "Let's go let's go let's go let's go. We have to be quiet."

"Go," Oli quietly echoes. "Go, go, go."

"Out the front door."

But then, as soon as Joey makes a run for the door, the worst-case scenario unfolds before him.

"Ha!"

It's Sarah. She's seen him. Joey bolts out the door, going as fast as his legs can carry him. He hears Sarah shout Marvin's name, and a feeling of dread creeps through his veins, freezing his blood into solid red ice. "Guys!" Where are they? Where are they? Oli? Eva? Anyone?

He's alone.

He's alone, and he's scared, and his entire body is screaming out for his friends, but all he can do is duck behind the fountain and worry. "Ugh!" He beats the ground with ineffectual fists. "I'm so freakin' upset!"

"Come on!" shouts Arthur in the distance. "This is insane! You guys are the worst searchers I've ever hired!"

Please come back, guys. Please...please be okay.

Eva's trapped. Again. This time, she has Oli with her, so it's slightly less frightening than it was when she was alone, but she can still feel her body quivering with fear.

They duck into the study. "Eva," Oli breathes, closing the door behind them. "Hide. Please. You need to hide. I can't...they won't find you. Okay?"

She nods and ducks underneath a nearby desk.

"Eeee-va?" The maid's voice echoes throughout the halls, sliming its way into their ears like a syrupy infection. "Are you still here? Eeeee-vaaaa..."

Oli crouches behind the door, his eyes wide with panic, while Eva curls herself into a ball. They'll never find us, she tells herself. We'll be all right. I'm going to get us out of here, and no one is going to die.

"Hello?" shouts Arthur from outside. "Oli?"

Quiet. Quiet.

"Eva, Marvin thinks you're cute!"

Eva nearly vomits. Does Arthur really think that telling her that a man twenty years her senior "thinks she's cute" is going to lure her outside to her death? Especially after said man was talking about how much he wanted to "have some fun with" her earlier?
Thanks, but no thanks. Screw you.

"You know what?" Joey mutters to himself. "Screw it. I'm going to the freakin' staircase by myself." He leaves the safety of the fountain and sneaks into a nearby clump of bushes. "Where are they??"

Where are Eva and Oli? Are they still alive?

He doesn't know.

"Guys!"

Terrifying images dance their way across Joey's brain—Oli on the grass with his throat slashed open, Eva with a kitchen knife lodged in her breast. Their open, glassy eyes. The blood. So much blood.

No.

They're all he's got. He can't—he won't—

"Guys, I'm in the backyard, where the hell are you?!!"

"Get him!" Sarah screams.

Oh, shit. Joey takes off running, cursing himself for that incredibly stupid move. Damnit. Why? Why did I do that? I'm going to die now, I know it, I'm going to die...

Arthur starts firing his pistol at him. The bullets whizz past his ears, and he barely makes it to the poolhouse in time.

Once he's inside, he closes the door and locks it behind him, ignoring Marvin's fists against the door. I'm safe, he reminds himself. I'm out of sight. I'm safe.

"Marvin?" calls Sarah.

"Come out," Marvin sneers. "Come out and play!"

"Marvin!"

And then, much to Joey's relief, Marvin leaves, presumably to see what Sarah wants. Once he's gone, Joey sneaks out of the poolhouse, hoping against hope that he can find Oli and Eva before the staff do.

Since the staff are currently preoccupied with Joey (who, for some reason, has decided to run around outside like an imbecile), Oli figures now would be a good time to find a way out of the study. And it doesn't take long for him and Eva to stumble across salvation.

"The window," Eva mutters, her fingers prying it open. "It opens in the study. I know it does. This is how we get out. Oli..." She smiles for the first time in ages. "Oli, we're going to live!"

Oli wishes he had her confidence.

As soon as they get the window open, an out-of-breath Joey Graceffa appears in front of them. "What the hell are you guys doing?" he snaps. "You're such stupid idiots! I ran out there, and you
guys left me!"

"No!" Oli retorts, reminding himself not to take his emotions out on Joey. "We got cornered by her!"

"We tried," insists Eva.

"No, you didn't try! I've been out here for so long..."

But Eva shushes him, sirens blaring in her eyes. "We need to stick together!"

"Hurry up!" Joey exclaims. "Let's go up the stairs!"

They sneak up the spiral staircase, and Oli isn't sure how much more of this he can take. He's tired of running. He's tired of hiding. He just wants to go home.

"Let's get up before they see us," Eva whimpers.

Joey still won't drop the subject of their earlier separation. "What were you guys doing?"

"We got cornered," Oli explains in hushed tones. "We got cut off."

At the top of the staircase, they find a huge metal bust with an open compartment in its chest. "Omigod," Joey mutters. "What is this?"

"This is it," says Eva.

Joey turns to her. "Do you still have the thing?"

She retrieves it from her pocket.

"God, I would have done this by myself," Joey complains, "but you guys had it."

Oli shakes his head. He really wishes that Joey would let it go, especially considering that they're still being hunted. "Joey, I'm sorry. We got cut off from you."

"Omigod," is Joey's response.

Meanwhile, below them, Marvin throws up his hands. "Am I fired?"

"No," Arthur replies. "No one else can do the pansies like you."

Eva feeds the gem into the bust's compartment, and it spits out their prize. "Okay," sighs Joey. "There we go. A key and a map."

While no one else is looking, Oli slides the key into his pocket. Then, he turns his attention to the map in Eva's hand, and he notices something. "Wait!" He points. "Look. That's the front door there. The way it's set up..."

"We're going back in the basement." Joey takes a deep breath, then straightens up and turns to stare at Oli and Eva. "Wait. Let's think about this. Let's actually have a plan and stick to it. Okay?"

"Okay." Oli wholeheartedly supports this idea. Maybe, if they stick to a plan, all three of them can make it. "Right. So what's the plan?"

But Joey's already on the move. "Wait. Let's go over here."

"What's the plan?"
"The plan is," says Joey after a few awkward seconds of suspense, "we're going down here, turning right, and going straight into the—"

Oli gets it. "Go, go, go, go!" he hisses, trying to force his friends down the staircase.

"No." Joey shakes his head and points. "Arthur's right there."

"He's right there?"

"Yes."


This is it, Eva tells herself as the three of them make their way to the basement. We can do this. We've made it this far. Come on. One more step.

"Is this it?" Joey wonders aloud as they approach the basement door.

Oli nods. "This is it."

"Sarah could come down here," Joey frets, but she doesn't, and the three of them tiptoe through the basement like terrified mice. They pass the ungodly machine, where Andrea's body is still clearly visible. They pass the exorcism room, where Matt's mistake cost Sierra her life. As they pass the room with the electric chairs, where Lele fought her final fight, Eva can see Oli wince.

So many deaths. So many tears. So many awful memories.

If they make it home, will they ever be able to leave the past behind?

Finally, after what seems like forever, they find a new door. "Is this it?" Joey whimpers. "Over there?"

Eva nods. "That's it. That's it. That's the—"


"I don't have the key!" The words explode out of Eva's mouth in a frenzy of fear, and her heart sinks into her stomach. No. Not now.

"What do you mean, you don't have the key?!!?"

"I was never given the key!"

"You got the key!" Joey insists. "You took it!"

Eva checks her pockets, and sure enough, she is keyless. "Guys." Tears return to her eyes like old friends knocking on her door. "You never gave me the key." Did we forget it? Did we—will we have to—

But then, all of a sudden, hope takes the form of Oli White's triumphant voice. "Oh! I've got the key! I've got the key."

Thank God. Thank God. Eva wants to hug the living daylights out of that boy, but she holds back. One thing at a time. They still have to get out of here.
They open the door, and inside, they find a man tied to the wall. *Arthur's brother.* He has a weathered look in his pitch-black eyes, and his clothes have long since been reduced to rags. He stares at them like he's a colorblind man seeing purple for the first time.

"Are you Arthur's brother?" Eva asks, despite the fact that she already knows the answer.

"Untie me," he responds, his voice an emotionless growl. "My brother's a dead man."

Joey nods. "Okay. Let's untie him."

They untie him. Once he's free, he straightens up, and Eva is shocked to see a black hook in his hand. *Oh no oh no. Did they do the right thing? What if—*

No. He won't hurt them. He's on their side. He *has* to be.

"He has a hook!" Joey shouts. "Holy crap! Omigod!"

*Arthur's* brother storms out of his cell, a vengeful snarl permeating his tone. "My brother's a dead man!"

Before Joey knows it, *Arthur's* brother is power-walking out of the basement, and the three YouTubers are right on his heels.

"Where are you going?" Oli asks.

"What are you doing?" Joey wants to know.

*Arthur's* brother ignores their questions and focuses his attention on Sarah the maid, who's creeping across the lawn. She sees him, and for the first time ever, genuine fear flashes across her face. He storms towards her.

"Up the stairs," Oli commands. "Go up the stairs."

They run up the stairs, and just as they reach the porch, *Arthur's* brother grabs Sarah and slices her throat open.

"Oh, shoot!" Joey can't believe what he's seeing. *Arthur's* brother just actually *murdered* Sarah the Creepy Maid, right in front of them. "Omigod!"

Marvin comes out of nowhere and charges at *Arthur's* brother, trying his best to punch him out, but the brother just flips him over and starts stabbing him with his hook. Before they know it, the groundskeeper has joined the maid in death, and *Arthur's* brother is ready for Round 3.

"Behind you!" Oli shouts.

*Arthur has arrived,* and he immediately shoots his brother in both shoulders. The group screams, and for an awful moment, Joey thinks that *Arthur's* won...but then, *Arthur's* brother pulls himself to his knees, grabs the gun (which *Arthur* somehow dropped in the confusion), and empties the bullets into *Arthur's* chest. The evil butler topples into the fountain, and he doesn't get up again.

"He's done it," Oli breathes.

A mixture of fear and relief dances across Eva's shellshocked face. "Can we go home?"
"This is over," sighs Oli, staring at Arthur's floating corpse with an empty look in his big brown eyes. "It's over."

Chapter End Notes

RIP Arthur, Marvin, and Sarah. I won't miss you guys at all. Next chapter: Time to do the ritual and get the heck out of here! Also, Joey does the wrong thing, but for the right reasons.
Ritual, Revisited

Chapter Summary

They're almost home.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Seconds after Arthur's brother has completed the murders of Arthur, Marvin, and Sarah, he turns on his heel and heads straight for the three survivors. Joey's mind stops rejoicing and goes back to panic mode. "He's coming after us."

"What are you doing?" Oli shouts, his voice shaking.

Eva blinks. "Wait, what?"

"What are you doing?" As Arthur's brother approaches them, Oli pulls the other two towards the door. "Get back inside!"

From there, it's a rush of pushing, shouting, and clawing at the door. Just when Joey's beginning to worry that this could be the end for them, Arthur's brother fades away into the night.

Thank you. Joey breathes a sigh of relief. I don't know who you are, or where you went, but thank you for ending our nightmare.

"Get in," Eva repeats over and over. "Get in, get in, get in." Oli's right. It's over. The end is in sight. But there is still one more thing they have to do before they can leave this awful place forever.

"What just happened?" Oli asks as the three of them enter the parlor.

"Guys." Eva points. "The sun's coming up." Arthur may be dead, but if they don't do the ritual and banish the evil before the sun rises, they'll end up just like him. And Eva can't have that. "We need to figure this out."

"The ritual," Joey murmurs, grabbing the instructions from the table. "Okay. This is the right ritual."

Oli's accent cuts through the last remaining traces of worry in his voice. "We need to make this. Right now."

Eva nods. "Okay." She jumps into action, clearing chairs and tables out of the way. "Let's clear...let's do it..."

"Get the sand!" orders Joey.

Memories of the previous ritual threaten Eva's brain, but she ignores them. "I think I saw Marvin's wheelbarrow outside."

"Oli, get the sand!" Joey shouts. "It's outside!"
"Sand! Right! I'll go get that!"

"Okay." As Oli runs for the door, Eva drops the chair she was holding. "I'll help." She follows Oli out the door.

Oli and Eva go to get the sand, leaving Joey alone in the parlor. As he waits for them to return, his eyes wander over to the table, and he is surprised to see a small piece of parchment waiting for him.

**Property Title and Deed.**

This is it. This is the deed he was supposed to sign tonight. He doesn't know what it's doing here, but...maybe it would be better if he took it with him. The last thing he wants is for it to fall into the wrong hands, especially considering the house's true nature.

He shoves it into his coat. Almost immediately, he feels sick to his stomach, but he decides against regretting his decision.

Oli and Eva come back with a bucket. "Right," says Oli, putting down the bucket and grabbing the last remaining chair. "I've got the sand. Let's move this out of the way."

"Yeah." Joey braces himself for what's to come. "Let's move it."

*Please let this be the end,* thinks Oli as the three of them set up the ritual. *Please. I don't want anyone else to die tonight.*

"Guys, we have to be quick," Joey reminds them. "We don't have much more time."

Oli and Eva are sitting outside the circle, while Joey sits in the middle with an artifact and the black cord. "Guys." Oli's holding the invocation, and his hands are sweating like crazy. "The sun is getting up. Are we ready?"

"Yeah! Let's go! Let's go!"

Oli takes a deep breath, murmurs a prayer, and begins to read the invocation. "With the thread of the crimes of your own design, I bind your evil three times. Seven times. I bind you from behind, I bind you from before, that you hurt my people nevermore."

Joey's wrapping the cord around the artifact. Eva squirms in her seat, a terrified expression on her face. Darkness is starting to take hold, but as Oli continues reading, his voice grows stronger and more confident. *Nevermore,* he mentally snarls at the spirits that are invading their ritual. *You won't hurt Eva. You won't hurt Joey. And you won't hurt me. We're never going to play your games again.*

"I bind you from the left. I bind you from the right. I bind you by day, and I bind you by night."

The artifacts shine with a ghostly red light, and Oli's not scared anymore. It's as if this ritual is converting his fear into power, adrenaline, and stone-cold determination. Or maybe his soul is just too shattered to care.

"I bind you from below. I bind you from above. I bind you with your own evil within. So let this magic unfold!" He's shouting now. "Goddess of the darkest night, bind the presence that haunts this home in thy sacred fires of eternity!"
With that, the glowing redness is sucked into Joey's artifact, and light returns to the room.

"Did it work?"

"Did we do it?"

Nothing happens. No demonic laughter, no monsters, no nothing.

"I think it worked," Oli breathes.

Eva springs to her feet. "We need to bury them!"

Together, they head outside, artifacts in hand, ready to finish what they've begun. And as Oli White walks through Joey's front door for the final time, he mentally promises himself that he will never go to a dinner party ever again.

Oli digs a hole in the ground, Joey puts the artifacts into a giant metal box, and Eva...she stands there, her whole body shaking with relief. The ritual worked. That's good. That's good. They're on the right track. All they need to do is bury the artifacts, and they'll finally be able to go home.

They're so close.

"Put it in!" Oli shouts, and together, they throw the box into the fresh hole in the ground.

The sun's almost up. There's still a possibility that they'll end up as slaves to the house, but Eva's not going to think about that right now. "Hurry, guys!" The words tremble in her mouth.

"Give me a shovel," says Joey.

Oli hands them both shovels. "Let's bury this!" he shouts, and the three of them bury the artifacts for good.

*I've changed*, Eva realizes as she works. *This house didn't kill me, but I'm not the same person I was before I got here. None of us are. We're gonna go home, and we're gonna keep living our lives, but...tonight's gonna stick with us forever.*

*Can we handle it?*

The pain will come. But for now, Eva Gutowski feels lucky to be alive.

Eleven YouTubers, happy and carefree, gathered here at this cursed mansion a mere ten hours ago. And now, only three walk back through the front gate, away from all the horrors they've been through.

Will anyone understand what happened here?

Joey is the last to leave. For a few moments, he feels a dark presence knocking against his brain, like a serial killer hunting down a victim. *There's no escape*, it hisses. *The demons will return. And when they do, you all will pay the price.*

He shrugs it off, dismisses it as his conscience plaguing him, and continues his journey towards freedom.
After some time, they come across a 1920s car, not unlike the one that brought them here. The driver introduces herself as "Meredith Caulfield, member of the Society Against Evil. Thank God you're alive. Get in. We have a lot to talk about."

Chapter End Notes

Next (and last) chapter: Tying up loose ends. Also, the Society pulls some strings, a Season 2 cast member makes a cameo appearance, and Joey...poor Joey...
Epilogue: Those You've Known

Chapter Summary

"Those you've known/And lost still walk behind you/All alone/Their song still seems to find you."
Or: the aftermath.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Once they arrive in 2016, Meredith drives the survivors straight to the nearest motel. "You need your rest," she insists. "It's been a long night."

"But Meredith—"

"No buts. You'll thank me later."

They check into the motel. There are only two beds in their room, and Joey immediately flops onto one of them and passes out. Somehow, his wild limbs manage to take up the whole bed, forcing Eva and Oli to double up.

It’s the first time Joey’s been able to sleep in ages.

The next morning, Oli turns on the TV, claiming he wants to catch the latest episode of his favorite TV show. What they see instead is a news report that chills them to the core.

"...and still no word on the whereabouts of the eleven prominent YouTubers who disappeared last June. Anyone with information is advised to call the authorities..."

"Last June..." Eva's voice is a strangled cry. "How long were we gone?"

"Three months," Joey murmurs.

Tears fill Oli's eyes. "My parents...my brother...they must be worried sick...we can't stay here! We...we...we have to go home!"

As he sobs into his pillow, eleven photographs flash across the screen. *Faces on a milk carton*, Joey thinks morosely. *That's all we are to these people. They probably think we were kidnapped or something. He winces. How are we supposed to tell them the truth?*

The pictures of Joey, Eva, and Oli look almost nothing like them. Eva's eyes are too bright. Oli's face is too smooth. Joey's hair is still its natural brown.

But the pictures of everyone else...

A sea of dead faces smile at them, and pain hits Joey like a thousand freight trains smashing into his chest.
Fortunately, it's at this point that Meredith Caulfield lets herself into their room. "Come on." There's an odd sort of tenderness to her tone, as if she's speaking to three orphaned children instead of three full-grown YouTubers. "Let's get you home."

They walk into the police station and are immediately confronted with eleven anxious families, each one waiting to see if their child/sibling/lover made it back alive. "We're here," Joey can hear himself say. "We're home."

For a few moments, all is still.

The silence is broken by one James White, who screams "Oli!" and practically tackles his brother in a hug. Oli hugs him back, sobbing apologies into his hair, and their parents are quick to join the celebration. Meanwhile, Eva is overwhelmed by her own equally thankful family.

"And the others?" asks a small voice from the back of the room.

Joey gulps. The words "I'm sorry" escape his lips, and he turns away from the eight heartbroken families. He can't bring himself to face the lives he's ruined.

"Joey?"

That's Daniel's voice.

"Joey! You're alive!"

Daniel throws himself against his boyfriend's chest, and Joey's parents and siblings pile on top of them, and for the first time in what seems like forever, Joey feels loved.

The official story, according to the Society Against Evil, is that Joey and the others were kidnapped by a sadistic murderer named Arthur Stewart. He locked them in his house, tortured them, and killed them one by one in a variety of horrible ways. He would've killed them all had the Society not brought down his evil empire for good, rescuing the last three survivors in the process.

They even have the bodies to "prove their story." Joey wonders offhand how they managed to recover eleven corpses from a mansion locked in time, but he decides not to ask.

Joey’s sick of funerals. He's attended so many, and they're all starting to blur together by now. Sure, some moments stand out—Eva comforting Tim's girlfriend, Oli throwing up all over Drew Monson's best pair of shoes, his own breakdown at Justine's coffin—but mostly, it's nothing but an endless stream of sadness and regret.

Now, the last of the funerals has just ended, and the family and friends of Lele Pons are tearfully filing out of the graveyard. But Joey stays. He wants to leave, but he's not ready to say goodbye.

He doubts he ever will be.

"Joey?"

He turns around, and there's Liza Koshy, looking serious for perhaps the first time in her life. "Liza." Don't let her see you cry. "What…what do you want?"
"I'm sorry." She stares at the grass beneath them. "For your loss…what you went through…all that. If you ever need someone to talk to…"

Joey shakes his head. As if Liza, the perpetually happy little brown girl, could ever understand his world of guilt. "Thanks."

Then David Dobrik calls Liza's name, and Liza runs over to see what he wants, and Joey's left alone next to Lele's grave.

_Lele...Justine...Shane...everyone...I'm sorry...I should've...I didn't want you to die...I didn't want any of this to happen..._

_Foolish boy. After all this time, you still do not understand. This is only the beginning. You may think you are safe, but in the end, you are under my power. You cannot escape the night. You never will._

Chapter End Notes

The end.
...or is it?
I'm taking a brief hiatus to sort my life out, and then...**Escape the Night: A Sequel**, coming soon to Archive Of Our Own!

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