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Erased

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SENIOR THESIS APPROVAL

This Honors thesis entitled

“Erased”

written by

Raley Howard

and submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for completion of
the Carl Goodson Honors Program
meets the criteria for acceptance
and has been approved by the undersigned readers.

Dr. Amy Sonheim, thesis director

Eric Phillips, second reader

Dr. Sara Hubbard, third reader

Dr. Barbara Pemberton, Honors Program director

April 15, 2013

Erased

By Raley Howard

Dedicated to
My mom, dad, and brother – you always believed in me.
&
Dr. Sonheim – without you none of this would have been possible.
Thank you!

"Sometimes you wake up. Sometimes the fall kills you.
And sometimes, when you fall, You fly."

-- "Fear of Falling" from *The Sandman* by Neil Gaiman

Prologue

My brother was my favorite person growing up. Even though I was ten years younger than him, he was my best friend. He never yelled at me to stop messing with his stuff, never pushed me or hit me or told me to shut up. When I had nightmares and came running into his room at three in the morning, he never complained, just moved over so I could sleep with him. He let me hang out with his friends when they came over, and played tea parties and dress-up when they left. When he got a new car for his sixteenth birthday, I was the first to ride in it with him, even before his girlfriend. He was the best big brother in the entire world.

The day after his seventeenth birthday my brother disappeared.

I was seven years old.

I was the last to see him. I snuck into his room after Mom had gone to sleep so I could give him his present: an ashtray I had made in art class. It was supposed to be a turtle, his favorite animal, but it looked more like a glob of snot and I didn't think he'd like it. He just laughed and told me it'd make a fantastic bookend, winking and reminding me to keep it *our little secret* (Mom didn't know he smoked). He ruffled my hair and told me to go to bed. I said goodnight and closed the door, no idea that'd be the last time I'd see him.

I repeated the same story to the four cops and two detectives who handled my brother's case, and when I finished each one asked the same questions: "Did you notice anything strange about your brother? Was he acting differently?" I didn't have an answer for them. My seven-year-old self hadn't noticed anything out of the ordinary. For years I

racked my brain, reliving that night over and over again, certain I had missed something crucial, the key to the puzzle that could bring my brother back.

When I was seven years old, my brother disappeared.

Ten years later, I disappeared too.

1: The Significance of Tuesday

I was a perfectly normal teenager until Tuesday.

That day, I slipped on a wet sidewalk at school and slid across the concrete, scraping the side of my leg up pretty bad. A younger girl who'd been next to me when it happened helped me limp to the nurse's office. I waited in a chair with wad of paper towels over my leg to staunch the bleeding until the nurse was free—apparently rainy days turned everyone into klutzes. When the nurse finally made her way over to me, she pulled back the paper towel and just stared for a long time, until I finally asked her what was wrong. She went off on me for trying to skip class and refused to sign a late pass. It wasn't until she walked off to help someone else that I was able to look down at my leg—but there wasn't a huge concrete burn or even a scab. My leg was as smooth and intact as it had been that morning. I spent so long sitting in the chair staring at my leg—like trying to solve a Rubik's cube with my eyes closed—that I missed the bell and had to race to class to avoid getting a detention.

Although my leg miraculously healing might seem like a big deal, I was a senior in high school, which meant I had a lot more important things to think about, like college acceptance letters and prom. Technically, I had already received a few acceptance letters to the universities in my state, but I was still holding my breath for a letter from my top choice: Bellvard. A week had already passed from the date I was supposed to find out, and I'd yet to be rejected or accepted. Mom told me not to worry, but honestly, this was my future at stake here.

Speaking of futures, there was another area of life hanging in the balance this week: my social status. Or, I guess, lack there of. This weekend was my seventeenth

birthday, and Mom was planning the party to end all parties, despite my begging her not to do anything. I hadn't delivered any invites or mentioned it to anyone, but the details had spread throughout the school anyway. People I didn't even know were stopping me in the hall to tell me how excited they were for my party.

There was no way this could end well.

2: Party Crashers

“No, Mom, I will not stuff my bra.”

“Oh, come on, Sweetie. This is your big night. Don’t you wanna turn heads?”

I wanted to lock myself in the bathroom. “I can’t wear those, Mom. They’re like grapefruits! Everyone’ll know they’re fake!”

“That’s not true. Just say you were hiding them.”

Hiding them where—in my backpack? “No. You already talked me into wearing that ridiculously poufy dress and shoes with heels taller than I am. I’m not gonna let you stuff me up like some middle-school beauty queen.”

She took a step back. “Oh, Honey, that’s not what I meant—I just wanted you to feel confident—”

So much for all those You’re-Perfect-Just-The-Way-You-Are talks. “Mom, I’m fine, really.”

“Oh, Millie—”

“I told you,” I snapped, arms rising from my sides, “to call me Cami.” I dropped them, fight gone. “Please, just let me get dressed. I’ll be down in a sec.” I turned around, looking through my closet for a dress we both knew was hanging on the door behind us. Mom shuffled her feet then sighed, retreating.

When I turned back around, she was gone.

#

Parties weren’t my scene—especially ones where I was the Guest of Honor—but Mom had always loved them. She’d made it her mission to throw me the most spectacular parties in all of Scarborough, and I suffered through them to make her happy.

I had known my seventeenth birthday party would be one for the record books, but I was still surprised when I went out to the backyard. The patio had been turned into a giant dance floor, all the chairs and tables pushed off to the side. Christmas lights were strung through the trees, around the patio, on the fence. With so many lights my backyard was probably visible from space. Music blasted from speakers hidden behind huge potted plants. By the time I got downstairs, after stalling as long as possible fixing my bangs, the party was already in full swing, the dance floor covered in sweaty bodies. Mom and her Bunco crew were making small talk in the garden, not paying a lick of attention to the hormonal teenagers grinding all over our patio.

I spotted some familiar faces on the other side of the yard: my soccer teammates. I started towards them but was stopped by an arm shooting out in front of me. A body followed, and I backed up, bumping into someone who nudged me forward.

“Hey, baby.”

Trapped, I looked up at the guy. He was a typical football jock: tall, muscled, with the kind of jaw girls probably drooled over. I didn’t recognize him, but my school was so big I didn’t know half the people who attended it anyway. The fact that he was talking to me, however, set off an immediate flare. I didn’t exactly have the looks or personality guys like this usually went after. It had to be a joke.

I tried to push past him, but he grabbed my forearms tightly, holding me in place as he started dancing on me.

“Let go.”

His grip tightened. I imagined bruises forming where his fingers were.

I did my best impersonation of a board, rigidly fixed in place, but he didn't seem to mind. I think I served him better as a pole.

I tried a different tactic. "Do you know who I am?"

"Course." Unnaturally straight white teeth leered down at me. "This is your shindig, right?"

"Right," I said through gritted teeth, "it's my *shindig*. And that man over there at the grill that keeps glancing this way? That's my uncle. He's a cop." *He volunteered on our Neighborhood Watch.* "And he's packing." *Packing pepper right now, but what this guy didn't know wouldn't hurt me.*

He backed off a bit, eyes twitching, obviously trying not to look over to the grill. "Look, I'm just trying to help you out. You seem a little tense." He released his grip, his hands stroking down my arms like he was petting a cat. I shuddered.

"The only thing making me tense right now is you."

"Oh, come on, baby—"

"I'm not your baby."

"Then who are you?"

This was getting beyond annoying. I wished the dancers would slack off so I could get away. "I thought you said you knew me."

The guy moved toward me again. "I'd like to get to know you." His sweaty hand slid down my back, under the fabric of my dress. I knocked it away and his eyes flashed. "That's not very nice. I don't think you really wanna mess with me."

"I'm not *messing* with you. I'm trying to get *away* from you."

I shoved past him quickly, forcing my way in between bodies.

“You’re making a big mistake,” the guy called after me. I froze, but when I turned around, he’d already vanished into the crowd.

#

Long after the party had ended and all the guests had finally been kicked out of our yard, I told my mom goodnight and wandered up the stairs. My feet were killing me after being in those stupid heels all night. I kicked my shoes off in the middle of the hallway, figuring it’d just give Mom something else to yell at me about tomorrow. I shivered a bit when my bare feet touched the cold wood, but the change was nice compared to the heat from outside.

Some hairstylist had spent a good hour shaping and twisting and pinning my hair into an elaborate design she’d guaranteed would “turn heads.” *What was it with grown-ups and that phrase?* I made people’s heads turn all the time, though it usually required me tripping down the stairs or banging into an open locker.

The stylist had been worried the hairstyle would fall apart if I danced too crazily, so she’d all but glued it in place with an inch-thick coat of hairspray and a whole pack of bobby pins. I carefully began tugging the pins out of my hair as I made it to my bedroom door and ducked inside. I dropped a handful of bobby pins on the corner of my dresser and shook my head, but not a strand moved, the style hardened in place despite nothing holding it up. Rolling my eyes, I reached up and tugged at it a bit, running my fingers through the strands until I had worked my hair back into something resembling the usual.

Much faster than it had taken to put on, I pulled off my party dress and threw it onto my bed. I slipped on a long t-shirt and a pair of jeggings. My face was still covered in makeup—thick mascara and purple eye shadow to “accentuate my blue eyes”—but

there was so much it might take hours to remove so I'd just have to do it later. I shook my head again, long brown hair falling over my face, and felt more like myself than I had all night.

It was my birthday, and that meant there was one place I needed to go before I went to sleep. I pulled on some ballet flats and left my room, continuing down the hallway to a door I rarely opened. I carefully turned the knob to my brother's room, opening a door my mom wished would always stay closed. She seemed to feel that as long as the door stayed closed she could pretend Arthur was away at camp or college and not just gone. I didn't have the same desire, and that's why once a year every year on my birthday I would sneak inside.

The interior of the room hadn't changed at all since he'd disappeared ten years ago. The sheets hadn't been washed, the shelves hadn't been dusted—everything exactly as he'd left it that night.

When I was little I had heard a story about how holding onto things that belonged to people who had died would keep their spirits tied to the earth, unable to enter Heaven. I had been so scared that had happened to Arthur that I had run into his room and started ripping books off the shelves, tearing off his bed covers, trying to destroy any connection that might be keeping Arthur trapped in this room. Mom had been so furious she'd grounded me for two months, and she'd spent the whole night resetting his room to exactly how it had been. Maybe she had heard the story too, but unlike me she was determined to hang onto him for as long possible.

Shoved in a cardboard box under Arthur's bed was the ashtray I had given him on his seventeenth birthday—the night he'd disappeared—along with a half-empty pack of

cigarettes and an old lighter. I had made the ashtray during a ceramics lesson in second grade—it was supposed to be a turtle, his favorite animal, but it had ended up more like a glob of snot and I hadn't thought he'd like it. He just laughed and told me it'd make a fantastic bookend, winking and reminding me it was *our little secret*. The first thing I did after the police left the first day was take the ashtray and cigarettes and hide them in my room. I only snuck them back inside after Mom shut the door firmly one night and told me we wouldn't be going into the room again until Arthur came back.

Mom stayed away, but I didn't.

I opened up the window and set the ashtray on the sill. I lit a cigarette and dropped it into the ashtray, then watched the smoke drifting lazily up and out the window.

3: Lost & More Lost

I woke up slowly, head pounding. My eyes stayed closed as I reached across my bed to smack the alarm that had suddenly come to life, blaring loud enough to wake up everyone in the house.

My hand hit air.

I shifted closer and swung my arm wildly through the space where my nightstand should have been, but nothing was there. Panic had just started to set in when I remembered the obvious: I had fallen asleep in Arthur's room. And where was Arthur's nightstand? On the left. Rolling over, I reached hesitantly out with my right hand until I found the alarm clock and hit Snooze. Silence washed over the room and I sighed in relief, relaxing back into the mattress—

My eyes shot open. My heart raced. Arthur's room had been unused for ten years, so why was the alarm clock going off?

I couldn't see anything but the ceiling from my position, so I slowly sat up and looked around at the room I was in. I had no idea where I was. There was a big window to my right; the curtains so thin they barely blocked any light. In front of the window was a chair in a gaudy print. On the wall across from the bed was a giant wooden dresser with a television on top of it, and next to that was a wooden desk with a black rolling chair. There were two doors on the wall to my left.

It looks just like a hotel.

"Oh My God!" I screamed then smacked my hand over my mouth, frozen. I waited anxiously, but no one appeared. Was I alone?

Slowly I got off the bed and inched over to the window, glancing all around just in case someone was hiding in the bathroom waiting to catch me off guard. Making it to the window unharmed, I pulled the curtains back.

A parking lot.

Great.

I plopped down on the bed. It had been silly to think I could figure out where I was anyway. What were the odds that whoever kidnapped me would put me in a room with a view of a street sign or some landmarks?

Kidnapped? Had I been kidnapped? That didn't make sense. I was seventeen. Didn't they normally take younger kids? Well, okay, maybe I did get mistaken for a junior high student a lot, but still, I was practically an adult. Adults don't get kidnapped.

Stupid. I smacked my head, then winced, rubbing it. This was probably just some really weird birthday prank, like one of those role-playing games where you all pretend to be detectives and solve a mystery. I just needed to go along with it until someone jumped out and yelled, "Got you!"

I looked around again, trying to think of something that could help me out. There was a phone on the nightstand. I rolled over the bed to the other side and picked up the receiver, punching the Reception button. A cheery female voice responded, "Check-In Desk. What can I do for you?"

Hello, I'm Cami. I'm a little worried that I've been kidnapped, and I was wondering if you could help me. Of course I couldn't actually say that. They'd think I was crazy. Or worse, they'd call the police. When my brother disappeared, Mom was convinced he'd been kidnapped, but the police who'd handled his case had decided from

the beginning that he'd run away and barely bothered to investigate. Since then, whenever they had to deal with my mom and me—like for a noise complaint or when our dog dug up the neighbor's yard—they always acted like it had something to do with Arthur, like his disappearance inspired us to be bad people. If they found out about this, the first thing they'd ask me would be, "What made you run away? Wanted to be like your brother?" Needless to say, I didn't trust them. No, it would be better to handle this on my own. It was probably some warped joke anyway, no need to make Mom panic for nothing. Beeping reminded me I was still holding the phone, though the other end had hung up, so I dropped it back on the stand with a sigh.

Okay, Cami, you've been in hotels before. What do you need to get into a room? I looked around and noticed something on the desk. "Keycard!"

I ran over and snatched it up. The keycard read Queen's Inn. I wasn't familiar with the chain, but hotels were similar enough in process that I didn't care. If I had a room key, it meant someone had paid for this room. And if someone had paid for this room, then they had to have left contact info. I just needed to ask the front desk for that information.

I looked around for my heels but couldn't find them. Then I remembered: I had taken them off before going into Arthur's room last night and switched them for flats. The heels were probably still in the hallway waiting for someone to pick them up. I needed to hurry up and get home, before Mom tripped over them and grounded me for a month.

I located my flats at the end of the bed and slipped them on. Thank goodness I had picked shoes with rubber soles.

Keycard in hand, I pulled the door open and went to find the Front Desk.

#

The lobby was right down the hall from my room. The Front Desk was on the left near the entrance, 'Welcome to Our Home' scrawled whimsically on a board hanging above it.

"Can I help you?" the teen behind the counter asked as I came to stand in front of her. She was dressed primly in the hotel uniform, with her nametag positioned for easy viewing: Annie.

"Hi, Annie, yes, um, I'm in room," I glanced at my keycard, but the number wasn't on it, "uh...It's down there," I pointed down the hallway I'd come up. "Anyway," I leaned over the counter, lowering my voice, "I was wondering if there was any way you could tell me when I checked in last night?"

Annie's face took on a telling expression, like she'd been through this kind of thing so many times she could write a book on it. "Hold on while I get the log book." She wandered off into the back room.

I twiddled my thumbs until she came back with a thick spiral bound book labeled CHECK-IN. "Name?"

"Cami?" I asked, not sure what name I might be registered under.

She gave me another look. "Are you sure?"

"Yes," I said, as close to confident as I could manage at this point. "It's Cami."

She opened to the most recent page and scanned backwards through the names with her finger. "Here we go. Cami Johnson, Room 127. Checked in a little after

midnight. Paid cash.” She turned the book around on the counter and slid it over so I could confirm. My signature was even at the end.

So what does this mean? I checked myself in? “Uh, Annie, so you’re certain it was me who wrote this? No one filled it in for me?”

The space between Annie’s eyebrows crinkled in annoyance. She collected the book and went back into the EMPLOYEES ONLY room. I wasn’t sure if she was coming back or not, then the door swung open again. This time it was an older woman: Gretchen. She came towards me.

“Cami? Yes, I remember you dear. I worked the late shift last night, filling in for Peter—poor dear, stomach flu—anyway, I checked you in.”

“Oh!” I said, a little too excitedly, but Gretchen didn’t seem fazed. “Do you remember if there was anyone with me? Maybe a tall stocky guy or—”

“Nope. You came in all by yourself, and just stood by the counter. I asked if you wanted a room and you nodded, so I filled out the sheet. You paid the exact amount for one night’s stay in cash. I told you where your room was and you went. I remember,” she ducked down to dig for something under the counter, “because you left these behind accidentally.” She placed a set of car keys and a cell phone on the counter. I reached for them warily. “If that’s all, dear?” Gretchen smiled.

I nodded, feeling like I had fallen into some cheesy mystery novel, and turned to the double doors leading into the parking lot. I dazedly made my way out of the hotel, through the sliding doors covered in frosted glass, with ‘Hope you enjoyed your stay!’ etched into them.

#

There weren't many cars in the parking lot, and a few clicks of the lock button were all I needed to find the right one. It was a white Nissan. It looked like it'd never been driven, and when I sat down in the driver's seat the interior still had that new car smell.

This didn't make any sense. There was no way this was my mom's doing—she was not the pranking kind—and besides, we had discussed it and decided I didn't need a new car since the one I had was still in good shape.

It couldn't have been my friends either. I didn't have that many close friends, and the ones I had were quiet and reserved, like myself. Last year they'd given me a Chia pet and an old issue of *Nineteen Magazine*. This sort of elaborate mind game was way out of their league.

So who was it?

I growled in frustration and banged the steering wheel as hard as I could, suddenly feeling the need to punch something. As I did, the glove box popped open, startling a pathetic shriek out of me. I was way too jumpy, my fingers tingling with adrenaline. I held my hand over my heart as I waited for it to calm before turning towards the glove box.

There wasn't anything unusual in the compartment, so I shut the door. Only then did I notice a small strip of paper lying on the floor.

I picked up the paper, about the size of a fortune cookie fortune, and unfolded it.

525-963-7718

A phone number? Was it one of my friends? The cell phone I'd been given didn't have any contacts saved in it, so there was no way to know unless I called it. I couldn't

even call my friends to ask them because I'd never bothered to memorize their numbers when they were in my phone.

I cautiously pulled out the cell I'd been given and punched in the numbers. The phone rang seven times, and I was just about to hang up when a male voice finally answered.

"Hello?"

"Is this you, Taylor? This is a stupid joke."

"Joke? Where did you get this number?"

"Like you don't know."

A long pause. I opened my mouth thinking I'd caught him then—"*Something's happened to you, hasn't it? Something that doesn't make sense.*"

"What are you talking about?"

"*Are you in a car right now?*"

I gasped, jerking around to look out the car windows.

"*Get out.*"

"What? Why?" I asked, freaked out. "If you want money, I don't have any! You should just let me go!"

"*I don't want your money. Now get out of the car. We don't have much time.*"

I probably looked like a jittery squirrel, glancing left then right then left again as I slowly got out of the car. At the sound of the door shutting, he continued. "*The car's bugged. That's how they track you.*"

"They---What?"

"*Calm down. What city are you in?*"

He was crazy if he thought I was going to tell him.

"I'm not crazy, okay? I didn't kidnap you and this isn't a joke. I know you're scared, but you have to trust me. My name's Bryce. You?"

I glanced around the parking lot, suddenly feeling very alone. "Cami."

"OK, Cami, just tell me where you are so I can meet you. I'll explain everything."

I couldn't believe the words coming out of my mouth. "I'm in Lebon, South Carolina. Near the Interstate."

"I can be there in a few hours. Until then you should go somewhere public with lots of people and wait for me. The hotel will be the first place they check."

He chimed in with one last piece of advice before hanging up.

"Whatever you do, don't go home."

4: Home

I pulled into the driveway, more than relieved to be back to normal, finally.

I hopped out of the car, bounded up the front steps of my house and twisted the doorknob. Locked.

Undeterred, I rang the doorbell, already working on an excuse for my absence. The door unlocked and pulled open—

Standing in the doorway of my house was a woman I had never seen before, with amazingly orange hair that I definitely would have remembered. It wasn't one of mom's friends. I'd met all of my aunts and cousins, and I hadn't heard about anyone new moving into the neighborhood, so I had no idea who this could be. She stared at me just as incredulously.

"Can I help you?" she asked.

"Uhh..." I was so shocked I just stared at her.

She looked confused. "Are you looking for someone?"

"Um, sorry, it's nice to meet you and all, but I really need to talk to my mom so..." I brushed past her and headed towards the kitchen, leaving her standing in the doorway.

"Mom?" I peeked into the kitchen and then the living room. Nada. "Mom!" I called, backtracking down the hall to the stairs. The woman had disappeared. Just before I turned to go up the stairs, I stopped and backed slowly down the hallway. My mom was kind of a freak about decorating, and she had covered the entire wall under the stairs with family photos and school photos and baby photos (*it was basically a wall of photos I was too embarrassed to look at normally*). But that time I did look, because the pictures

hanging up were not the usual ones. The family in them wasn't mine. Stark orange hair stood out in every picture.

Startled, I ran up the stairs. Mom had spent a whole week painting blue and white stripes down the hallway, but now the walls were straight cream. I went into my room and stared in disbelief. There was a ridiculously girly comforter on my bed, and everything was covered in pink and fur. I hurried away from there into Arthur's room. It was obvious a teenage boy was living there: clothes piled up in every corner, bed unmade, pictures of bikini models on the walls. I walked over to the window and found a little comfort that the view was the same, but not much. That's when I noticed something sticking out from under the nightstand. I bent to pick it up—Arthur's lighter. After ten years I would recognize it anywhere.

But if everything else was different, why was Arthur's lighter still there?

I shook my head—I'd have to sort through my thoughts later—then pocketed the lighter and headed back down the stairs. The woman and her rather tall husband were waiting for me. I managed to slip out without getting beaten up or arrested, though probably just barely.

I jumped in my car and drove off, so wrapped up in all the craziness that I didn't even know where I was going. It was the weekend so school was closed. My soccer teammates were probably home, but I had no idea where they lived, and it might freak them out if I suddenly called and wanted to come over. Not that I could call anyway, since I didn't have their numbers. I ended up just driving aimlessly around town. I drove the square around the courthouse where my mom worked, but her car wasn't in any of the

parking spots. It was two in the afternoon—surely she'd be back from lunch by now. Maybe she'd noticed I was missing and was out looking for me?

I was driving aimlessly, not paying much attention to my speed, and before I knew it lights were flashing behind me and I was forced to pull over onto the side of the road.

As I waited, I turned the lighter over in my hands, noting with alarm that it was quickly becoming the only piece of my life I had left.

#

A hard tap on the window pulled me out of my thoughts.

"License and registration," the officer requested as soon as the window was down.

Great.

"License and registration," he repeated.

I put on my best Totally-Innocent face. "Officer, funny story. This is actually my friend's car. See I'm just driving it around while she's at the mall—"

"Ma'am," he cut me off, "I'm gonna need you to step out of the car."

"O...okay...." I hesitantly turned off the car and opened the door. Once out I was instructed to stand against the car with my hands in plain sight.

"Did you know that this car is registered as stolen?"

"Stolen?"

"Yes, ma'am. I'm gonna need you to turn around and put your hands behind your back. We're gonna have to take you down to the station for some questions."

Numb from shock, I did as ordered. After handcuffing me, the officer put me in the backseat of the police car. I couldn't believe it was really happening, even as he drove

off. Before today I had never had detention, much less done anything bad enough to warrant getting arrested.

One thing was for sure: I would never be able to explain this to my mother.

5: The Slammer

"Try it again."

"I've already tried it three times. Are you sure you spelled it correctly?"

"I've lived there my whole life!" I cried, nearly springing out of my seat. "I think I learned how to spell my own address!" The poor police secretary had the decency to look pitifully at me, instead of ringing my neck at my rudeness.

"Sorry," I said, taking a deep breath and releasing it slowly. It wasn't her fault this was taking so long. I was just tired and grumpy. You wouldn't believe how slowly things got done in a police station. I had been there three hours and so far all they'd done was read me my rights and take my phone and keys. Plus this lady and I had been trying to get my name, address, phone number, social security number, or anything at all about me to register in a national database for like thirty minutes.

She glanced at me suspiciously. "It's very strange," she started, as if she had much more to say and was just warming up, but she dropped it and went back to typing.

"What happens now?"

"Well, normally minors on their first offense would be released into their parents' custody after locating them in the system, but none of your information is registering, which means we can't release you without a parent or guardian to claim you. So until they show up or we receive the correct information, you'll be spending the night here."

So basically they think I'm a lying car thief. Great.

"Do I at least get a phone call?"

#

Apparently you can make as many phone calls to as many people as you want in a police station, not just one like they say on TV. Of course, you'd have to know the numbers to call them, which I did not, because who memorizes numbers these days? The only number I knew for sure besides my own was my mom's, so I dialed it, but before it could even ring an automatic voice clicked on, "*The number you have dialed is not available.*"

I must have punched it in wrong.

I tried again, but the same message played.

I was sure it was the right number. I had called it just a couple days ago to let her know soccer practice was running long. Surely she hadn't decided to change it today of all days.

Frustrated, I slammed the phone back on the receiver to the stern looks of twelve police officers. I bowed my head shyly in apology. When I turned around, a particularly stern and burly officer was waiting to lead me down to the holding cells. It was actually just one big cell, with a bunch of cots, a sink and a toilet in it. There weren't any other people in the cell—small blessings—so the guard just stuck me in it and left.

I stood there for a minute, picturing my mom coming through the door and demanding I be released, saying this was all a misunderstanding. But no one came. I walked over to the sink to wash my face and was forced to look at myself in the mirror. It was not a pretty sight. My hair was all crinkled and frizzy from the elaborate hairstyle I'd had the day before, and my eye makeup was so smudged from sleep that I looked like a raccoon. I really wished I had a change of clothes, or at least a toothbrush.

Worn out from the day's craziness, I stretched out on the cot and pulled the thin sheet over myself. I was just wondering how I was supposed to sleep with all the lights on when there was a loud click and everything went dark.

6: Strangers

Jail sucks.

Just in case you were planning a visit or something. Don't.

Not only do they not let you shower or change your clothes or brush your teeth, but they don't even have the decency to warn you before they turn all the lights on.

Abrupt awakenings were not my forte, especially when they involved bright light burning through my eyelids. I woke up with a groan, my eyes shooting open, only to have my retinas seared because I was sleeping on my back and the light was right above me. I rolled away in shock and literally fell off the cot.

All in all, a wonderful start to any day.

As I looked around disoriented, eyes seeing little except spots, I heard the sound of a lock rattling.

"You're being released. Someone's come to claim you," the guard told me.

Hallelujah! I rose to my feet and shuffled my way to the open cell door, vision slowly coming back. They had finally gotten ahold of my mom, who was freaking out because her only beloved daughter was missing, and she rushed over here to get me. Finally this crazy nightmare of a day was going to be over. I was so relieved I didn't even care about how long I was going to be grounded. I just wanted to go home.

#

By the time we made it to the station lobby I could see just fine, fine enough to notice that my mom was not in the room. Instead, there was a short man I had never seen before, dressed sort of like a sportscaster, brown jacket over a plaid button-up shirt and

slacks. The collar on the button-up was sticking up, making him look neck-less. He was talking to the officer who had brought me in.

"Her uncle actually. Her parents died a few years ago and she's been sort of passed around the family. It's no wonder she's acting out."

He turned and his dark eyes locked on me. "There you are. No worse for wear, eh?" He started forward, smiling like I really was a niece he hadn't seen in a few days. "Don't worry, we got everything sorted out." He motioned between him and the police officer.

"You didn't tell your uncle you were taking the car, so when he found it'd disappeared he reported it stolen. You're free to go, just be more careful from now on."

I panicked and took a step back. "Maybe I should stay a bit longer. I don't really feel like I've learned my lesson yet." I made eye contact with the officer, trying to scream 'I'm potentially in danger!' with my eyes, but he just smiled and waved me off.

The man clapped his hand on my shoulder, squeezing tightly. "There's no need for that," he said forcefully.

"Ah...yeah."

"That's my girl." The man wrapped his arm around my shoulders and started leading me out of the building, looking back to see if the officers were watching still.

As soon as we were clear of the doors, the grip on my shoulders tightened. The man tugged sharply, and I nearly stumbled over my feet. He led me to a black van parked on the side of the parking lot. Opening the door, he shoved me forward, and a pair of bulky arms grabbed my wrists from the inside and pulled me in. I heard the man get in and felt the van start moving, but I was way too confused to register it. The van was one

with an empty back, so I was just sitting on the ridged floor, sandwiched between two bodyguard-type men. If this was a movie, I would have laughed at the sight of them—classic muscled chests, tight black shirts, and sunglasses so dark I was surprised they could even see me. I don't know who these people thought I was that they'd need force, but they were going to be supremely disappointed.

"Now, I guess you're wondering what's going on," the short man spoke up from his seat on the backward-facing seat beside me.

I turned to face him, glancing back quickly to make sure the guards weren't trying any sneaky moves.

He smiled and it stretched his face out at an odd angle. "How about we start with introductions. I'm Dr. Fausley." He motioned to himself. "And you are?"

"Cami," I said hesitantly.

"Well, Cami, you seem to be having a rather crazy day. Care to tell me about it?"

For a guy who just pretended to be my uncle and sort of kidnapped me, he seems nice enough.

"Uh...well...I don't really know, I—I'm a little confused," I admitted.

"Ah, yes," he smiled again, lips pulling back to reveal yellow teeth, "that's perfectly understandable. Perhaps I should start. You see, Cami, I am a scientist. A geneticist actually. I run a prominent research facility a few cities over."

"Okay...?"

"My facility works specifically on the modification of human genes. We have a select number of live test subjects, and this allows us to experiment with how gene mutations affect humans over an extended period of time. All of the patients are kept in

chemically-induced comas, alive but not conscious. Their bodies are still, but their minds are extremely active.”

Okay, so maybe not so nice.

“This is my fault. I wanted to see if it was possible to influence someone via their dreams. I created replicas, if you will, of perfectly normal lives and weaved them into the dreams of my patients using electrical pulses—like Morse Code to the brain.

“Of course, I never could have imagined how advanced the brain was in regards to the imagination—that it could take a few pieces of electrical pulse and turn them into entire lives.” He met my eyes. “That it could make your dreams so lifelike that you think they’re real when you wake up.”

“What are you—?”

“Everything you think you experienced, all those memories that feel so real, none of those actually happened. I created them. Of course what I gave you was very basic, your brain has had years to expound on them, but the reality is the same: Cami, your life is not real.”

Life should really include a warning when you’re about to wake up the star of a Bourne movie. Or at least a consolation prize.

“So you’re saying I’m one of your experiments? That’s—that’s crazy.”

“If you just think about it for a second, you’ll realize that it’s not. You know how in dreams things happen that you can’t explain? They make sense in the dream but when you wake up you realize how unrealistic they were. Or you wake up and don’t remember the dream; the details are fuzzy. Think about your life, Cami. Your memories—do they make sense?”

I didn't want to, I wanted to deny everything, but unwillingly my brain started backtracking through my memories. There wasn't anything about my life that felt fake or like a dream. Sure, I never really knew what happened to my dad—I just knew I didn't have one—but I'd always figured my mom just didn't want to talk about it. And, okay, maybe my brother had suddenly disappeared for some unexplained reason—but that wasn't totally off-kilter either. People disappeared all the time. Plus, I'd always wondered why I couldn't make any close friends...

Okay, so, maybe there was a lot of my life that didn't make sense. That didn't mean it wasn't real.

Dr. Fausley was smirking like he could read my mind. "It's strange, isn't it?"

My brain stuttered to a stop. "Wh—I—Well it's just—I mean—" There had to be something, something to prove that my life wasn't a lie. I latched onto the first thing I could come up with. "Then—then how did I escape?" My resolve strengthened with each sentence. "If I was really locked up in some facility, unconscious, how did I get out? And why don't I remember any of that, but I can remember the last seventeen years?"

His mouth straightened. I noticed the guards sit up straighter out of the corner of my eye.

"Your escape was the result of one worker's insubordination. She felt remorse and decided to release you. No doubt she was very proud of herself, getting you out of the facility, helping you steal a car so you could go joyriding around and get arrested, however, it is you who will ultimately suffer because of her actions.

“Your body has been in a catatonic state for many years, taking in food and water intravenously, quarantined from every form of disease. I am afraid it won’t take long for disease to cripple your weak immune system.”

He leaned back a bit, smiling again. “It would be best if you came with me.”

I smiled too, but for a different reason.

I had noticed upon entering the van that behind the guards was the rear-view exit of the van. It had a latch release handle that opened outward like a door. I had also noticed, while Dr. Fausley had been wrapping up his speech, that we were coming up rather quickly on an intersection, and the driver wasn’t slowing down. I knew this intersection—it’s where Highways 160 and 72 converged. I had witnessed multiple accidents here, because the stoplights stayed yellow for about half a second. At the speed the driver was going he’d have to slam on his brakes to compensate, and that’s what I was counting on.

I stretched my hands out in front of me at the same time the light switched to red and the driver slammed the brakes. Everyone was thrown forward, but I was prepared and caught myself with my hands, using the momentum to push myself backwards off a seat and slip between the two guards as they crashed into Dr. Fausley and the seats. I lifted the latch as fast as I could. The door flung open, but before I could follow it a thick hand latched around my leg, making me stumble back. The doctor had somehow gotten his bearings enough to crawl over to me, blood dripping from his nose.

The van shot forward at an incredible speed and the door swung as if to close. It was my last chance. I lifted my free leg without hesitation and stomped the doctor’s arm as hard as I could. He loosened his grip instantly, and I threw myself out the back.

7: Days Like This

When I had originally concocted this plan in the van, I had imagined safely catching my fall in a roll and just standing right up like I had seen people do in movies, but it turns out those sorts of things are harder to pull-off in real-life situations than you'd think. As it was, I sort of roll-skidded across the pavement and then spent a few minutes after I stopped just lying on the ground and appreciating air. Luckily, it was ridiculously early in the morning, so the road was empty.

Finally my heart slowed enough for me to catch my breath and I was able to stand, stiff and shaky. I glanced around anxiously, but I couldn't see or hear the van anymore. Why hadn't it turned around? Didn't they want to catch me?

I reached for the phone in my back pocket but stopped, remembering I'd never gotten it back from the police. That Dr. Fausley guy must have taken it. My best bet, then, was to head back toward town and find a phone.

I catalogued my injuries quickly. They basically fell into two categories: scrapes and bruises. My jeggings were ripped up pretty bad, and I might have been missing a layer of skin on my knees and elbows, but I still had my nose, hair, and all of my teeth, which I had been a little worried about right before I hit the ground. Satisfied, I sucked in a deep breath, prayed for adrenaline to keep numbing my wounds, and started limp-running toward town.

#

It took less time than I'd expected to get back to town—it had felt like I was in the van a long time. I dragged my battered self up to a gas station, and went inside to borrow

some change for the phone. I must have been a sight, because the cashier didn't even question me, she just shoved some quarters in my hand and motioned for me to leave.

The phone was outside by the bathrooms. I dropped the money into the slot and held the receiver to my ear, fingers poised over the buttons. I stopped. I had tried to call my mom's cell at the station and that hadn't worked. If I called now would I get through? I didn't want to waste the money on a call that wouldn't connect. But, other than my mom, who could I call? I didn't know any other numbers.

I waited, phone against my face, like the answer might fall from the sky, but the only things that fell were the quarters dispensing out of the machine into a holding tray.

I scooped up the coins and went to put them in my pocket, and that's when I felt it: the slip of paper that had fallen out of the glove box earlier. I pulled it out and reexamined it. Just a phone number; no name or identifying marks. That guy was probably a freak just like the doctor, but he *had* seemed to know what was going on, and he had somehow known that my home wouldn't be *my* home. It wouldn't hurt to at least find out what he knew. Maybe this really was one of those crazy adventure games and I'd somehow gotten pegged as the main character. It would at least explain things.

The coins jingled as I dropped them through the slot. I balanced the phone between my ear and shoulder, holding the paper in one hand and punching numbers with the other. Seven rings just like before, and then a click.

"Hello?"

"Um, it's me, from before. I, well, I'm a little—"

"Where are you?"

I looked around, but didn't recognize much. "An Exxon. In Bealeux. Near the Interstate. It's across the street from a Wendy's."

"Wait inside Wendy's. I'll be there in forty-five minutes. Don't wander off."

8: First Impressions

I waited in Wendy's, feeling a bit like a jerk because I didn't have any money for food and the workers kept staring at me. I spent a lot of the time in the bathroom, pretending to be washing my hands anytime someone came in. I tried pulling the tangles out of my hair with my fingers, and I washed what makeup was left off my face.

Finally I noticed a guy pull up on the far side of the parking lot on a motorcycle, and instead of coming in he just sat on the bike and stared at the building.

Creeper? Check.

I stood up slowly, walked out of the restaurant, and headed over to the guy.

"Bryce?" I called when I was still close enough to the building to run inside if I needed to.

"Cami?" he asked back, already knowing the answer.

I walked the rest of the way over, then stood by the bike uncertainly. He hadn't gotten off, legs long enough to touch the ground while seated.

"We can't talk here," he said, like that clarified everything. He pointed to the back of the bike, and I noticed an extra helmet strapped to a backpack. I pulled on the helmet and tightened the strap, then climbed onto the back half of the bike seat—praying my mother would never hear about me getting on a motorcycle with a random boy. There wasn't anywhere for me to hold onto, so I grabbed the sides of Bryce's jacket and leaned forward.

#

Maybe this wasn't a good idea.

Of course, I only decided that *after* Bryce revved the engine, and before I could tell him I'd changed my mind we were off, zipping and zooming down the Interstate. Bryce maneuvered his bike between cars like he was in a video game, only I was fairly certain this level had no re-starts, and the asphalt whizzing by under us looked pretty deadly.

"Comfortable?"

I tried opening my mouth to answer, but every time I did the wind whipped my loose hair into it. Holding my hair out of the way would require the use of my hands, both of which were much too busy death-gripping Bryce's jacket to be of any help. I resigned myself to silence, figuring no amount of whining could possibly express how *not comfortable* I was anyway.

Somehow, Bryce seemed to understand. "Sorry. I'm just trying to put as much distance between those guys and us as possible. I'm not gonna kill us. Promise."

I wasn't totally convinced, but I relaxed my grip slightly.

#

Throughout the ride I could feel the adrenaline slowly fading away, being replaced by gradually increasing pain. It was similar to the feeling of anesthesia wearing off, or that numbing stuff dentists put on your mouth when you're getting a cavity filled.

Though the scrapes and bruises were barely noticeable anymore, I was extremely shaky. I hadn't eaten anything since the party the night before, and after expending all that energy earlier I was seriously running on nothing. My head was loopy and there was nothing in my stomach to ground it. I was staying upright on sheer force of will.

Thankfully, we came to a long red light, and while we were stopped Bryce finally seemed to notice my condition—shaking so hard I could barely keep a hold of his jacket. There was a Benny's diner across the street and he zipped over, claiming he needed to stretch his legs, and parked his bike in front of the restaurant.

I managed to get off the bike without falling, but the helmet buckle easily overpowered me. Bryce reached over wordlessly and unbuckled it. I mumbled thanks as I hung it up on the bike handle. Once I did, Bryce grabbed my shoulders and led me inside, plunking me down at a booth while he went to order. It felt so nice to sit on something that wasn't vibrating or moving.

It was chilly in the diner, and I rubbed my arms together, wishing I had put on something warmer the night before.

"Cold?" Bryce asked, appearing next to me with two glasses of orange juice.

I nodded, taking the juice.

He set his own drink down on the table and pulled off his jacket, handing it to me.

"Here."

I pulled the jacket on. The sleeves were so long they covered my hands completely, but I could feel myself warming up quickly. "Thanks."

Bryce took a seat on the bench across from me and shrugged, taking a sip of his juice.

We sat in silence for a little bit, Bryce staring out the window and me staring at him. I just couldn't figure him out. He acted so well I almost believed he thought all this was real. *But it's so obviously a game. Real life could never be this crazy.*

Finally the waitress arrived with our food. She was definitely giving Bryce the flirty eyes as she asked if he needed anything else, but he just waved her off.

I looked down at the tray. Biscuits, eggs, toast, hash browns, and bacon. Heaven.

I downed a strip of bacon in one go. Bryce picked at a piece of toast and slowly sipped his orange juice as he watched me devour the food. It was probably a bit like watching a starved dog that had stumbled upon food for the first time. Definitely not a good impression.

Once I'd eaten enough that my head had settled down, I took a sip of juice and then wiped my mouth with a napkin.

"So, what kind of game is this exactly?"

Bryce rolled his shoulders. "What do you mean?"

"Look," I leaned forward slightly, "I know this is one of those Real Life Adventure things where everyone pretends they're in a video game and acts out some kind of mission. What I don't know is what kind of mission this is. Something with spies maybe?"

Bryce gave me a hard look. "This *isn't* a game."

"Okay, fine," I conceded, leaning further over the table, "this isn't a game. It's *real*," I smirked. "Are there any rules I should know about? Surely you can tell me that. It won't spoil anything."

Bryce leaned forward. "You wanna know the rules?"

I nodded.

Bryce motioned with two fingers for me to come closer, so I leaned in until our foreheads were almost touching. He whispered one word, "Run."

I pulled back. "What?"

Bryce leaned back against the bench, arms crossed. "The people who did this to you—they won't stop until they catch you. They'll keep chasing and chasing. And if they do catch you they'll lock you away in their lab and no one will ever see you again. Fun game, right?"

"Uhh..." My brain seemed to have stopped processing.

Bryce drained the rest of his juice and stood up. I instinctively reached out and grabbed the bottom of his shirt, shaken. "Wait. I—I mean..."

Bryce sighed and sat back down.

"Those guys—" My thoughts were too jumbled to fit together. "Who—who are they?"

"Scientists. They work at some kind of underground genetics lab."

"And Dr. Fausley, he's with them?"

"He runs the place." Bryce looked at me like he was facing a complicated math problem. "You met him? Usually he hides in his lab and sends his lackeys to do his work instead."

"He picked me up from the police station. Shoved me into a van with a couple bodyguard-like guys—"

"Gorillas."

"What?"

"That's what we call their lackeys, 'cause they're big and stupid. They're strong, but they aren't fast, so you just have to outrun them. Do that and you'll stay safe."

I guess it wouldn't be good to have the people playing the game get beaten up or injured. They might sue.

"What about you?"

Bryce looked confused. "What *about* me?"

"Do you work for them? Are you a bad guy?"

Bryce laughed. "There aren't any good guys or bad guys. I'm not working for the scientists—it'd be a little weird if I was since I'm one of the ones they're after. I was erased, just like you."

"Erased?"

"Your social security number doesn't register. Your phone number doesn't work. That's what they do—they make it so you don't exist."

How did he—? "Dr. Fausley—when he took me he said...this was all some sort of trick, like, my life was. But—that's crazy right? Just part of the game?"

"This isn't a game." Bryce must have been getting paid per use of that line.

He was so serious I didn't know how to respond, so I just sat there, thinking over everything that had happened. *How had so much changed in just 24 hours?*

Then something struck me—a piece of the puzzle that didn't match up. "Your number was in my car." *Like I was supposed to call you.* "You knew what was going on, didn't you?"

"Not at first," Bryce said defensively. "Only a few people know my number, and I have to change it constantly. I have no idea how you got it. I was just as surprised as you when you called. But when you live this way for so long, you get pretty good at recognizing when others are going through it."

I rubbed my temples. "Stop, just stop. If I hear any more craziness I'm going to throw up." I put my hands on the table and pushed myself out of the booth. "Let's just play the game, okay?"

Bryce looked up at me and repeated, "This isn't a game."

9: Base

We drove for a long time, until the billboard ads stopped looking familiar and the landscape changed from farm to coast to city, only stopping briefly to fill up with gas a few times before moving on. Bryce said he was trying to put as much distance between the scientist freaks and us as he could, so I didn't complain.

However, being on a motorcycle for an extended period of time is hard on just about everything—hips, legs, back, arms—so I was more than happy when Bryce hit the off-ramp.

Bryce had said bigger cities were better for hiding out because of all the people, but I hadn't expected we'd end up somewhere like Brighton. Brighton was one of the largest cities in the country. Mom had talked about taking me there over summer vacation as a graduation present.

The city was larger than any I'd been in before, buildings as far as I could see on both sides. Even though it was night, the streets were alive and packed with people and cars, but Bryce maneuvered his bike through the crowds like he'd done it a million times.

#

We parked in an alley. Bryce led me to a side door and glanced around curiously, as if he was expecting someone to be waiting, then pulled the door open, pushing me through. The door swung shut behind him, plunging us into darkness. I reached out, eyes wide, trying to grasp onto something to get my bearings, and nearly smacked into a wall. Bryce grabbed my shoulders again and I stumbled along with him as he navigated us through the hallway.

He pushed open a door and led me into an area with enough dim light for me to see. It was a small room, empty except for a couple blankets scattered around. Bryce whistled loudly and the blankets—and the people who had been sleeping in them—shot up like Roman candles. There were five of them, one girl and four guys.

A younger guy near me looked around frantically until he spotted Bryce and relief washed over his face. He smiled big and bounded over to stand in front of us as the other four slowly made their way over.

“Bryce, you’re back! I was so worried but Di kept telling me I was stupid and you’d definitely come back and not to slack off on my chores and then earlier—“

“Griffin,” Bryce called, stopping the boy’s rant. He ruffled the boy’s brown hair then knocked his head lightly with his fist. “You talk too much.” Which seemed like Bryce-speak for, ‘it’s good to see you too.’

Once the group made it over, a couple boys still wrapped in their blankets and looking half asleep, Bryce started introductions.

“Guys, this—” he clapped his hand on my back and pushed me forward slightly, “—is Cami. She’s seventeen.”

I felt like I was back at summer camp, awkwardly introducing myself to people who wouldn’t even remember me in three months. I went with a simple hi and small wave, then stepped back in line with Bryce, who locked eyes with someone in the group and signaled them to start.

The girl smiled at me, showing her braces. Her voice was very soft. “My name’s Sarah. I’m sixteen.”

Next to her was a really young-looking boy, a head shorter than everyone else in the line. "I'm Max! I'm thirteen."

Next to him was an older boy with an earring and a Philadelphia accent. "Name's Robby. I'm sixteen."

Beside him was a really tall guy, probably taller than Bryce. "I'm Jack. I'm seventeen."

Once they'd introduced themselves, the guys all wandered back to their sleeping spots, leaving just Bryce, Sarah and me.

"There's one other girl—Di," Sarah said, glancing at a door opposite where we'd come in. "She's on watch."

I looked to Bryce for instruction, but he was staring at the door. "Sarah," he said, "could you get Cami settled?" He moved off without seeing Sarah nod. I was watching him cross the room when Sarah grabbed my sleeve.

"Come on. There's some space by me." She led me around the boys towards a back corner.

"What is this place?" I asked. I couldn't tell much in the dark.

"I'm not sure. Maybe it used to be an office? It's been gutted, whatever it was." Sarah sat down in her spot and pulled her blanket over her lap. I sat across from her, but she spoke so softly I had to lean in to hear. "The building's empty, but the other floors are practically falling down, so we just keep to this area."

Sarah yawned wide, lying down on her back. I followed suit.

"Why do you stay here? Why don't you go somewhere nicer?"

"Where are we gonna go?" Sarah was staring at the ceiling, so I could only see the outline of her face. "They're watching everything. They'd know the second we checked into a hotel, and they'd come running if they heard the police found a bunch of kids hanging out somewhere. All we can do is stay hidden, stay invisible. It's the only way we stay safe."

"But who are they? Who's after you?" I waited, but Sarah didn't say anything. Her breathing had evened out, and slowly her head fell slightly sideways.

Asleep.

I rolled over onto my side, wondering what I'd gotten myself into.

#

I was just dozing off into an uncomfortable sleep when I heard someone come back into the room. I sat up to see Bryce making his way over to me.

"Everything okay?" I asked, remembering how tense he'd been earlier.

"Yeah, just checking on stuff," he said as he squatted down beside me. He glanced at his hand and seemed to remember he was holding something. "Ah, here." He shoved a blanket into my arms. "It's not much."

"Thanks," I said, taking it.

Bryce didn't move.

"You sure you're okay?"

I reached out, but he jumped up quickly, clearing his throat. "It's late," he said, staring over me at the wall. "You should sleep. Tomorrow we'll find you some clothes. There should be enough extras lying around to find something you can wear." He turned stiffly, walked to the other side of the room, and laid down.

Exhausted, I took off Bryce's jacket, wrapping the blanket over myself instead. It was thin, but the room was warm enough so I didn't need much cover. I folded the jacket up into a makeshift pillow and laid my head on it. The jacket had a really nice scent, like that Hollistitch cologne I loved. Something about the scent was comforting and familiar, and I drifted easily to sleep.

10: Advice

Everyone else was already awake and moving when I woke up. Sarah had gathered up a spare pair of jeans, a shirt, and some sneakers for me. She showed me a small connecting room—that had probably once been a bathroom, a big hole right in the middle of the floor—where I could change. The jeans were just a little long, so I only had to roll up the ends and they fit fine. The shirt was obviously a guy's; long and baggy, with some band I'd never heard of on the front. The shoes were worn and holey, but at least I didn't have to wear those ballet flats anymore.

After changing, I went back to the room. Sarah was digging through a sack off to the side, so I walked over to her.

"Hey, Sarah." She looked up. "What do I do with...?" I held out my old clothes.

"Oh, ugh, just put 'em somewhere." She wrinkled her nose. "One of the guys can take them to the dumpster later."

"K." I dumped them next to me against the wall. "What's in the sack?"

"Lunch!" She held the plastic sack open. Inside it were a couple granola bars, some small chip bags, and a few pieces of fruit. "Well," she smiled, "breakfast for you I guess." She reached in and tossed me a granola bar. Chocolate.

I took a few bites as I wandered around the room. There were two windows on the far wall, both boarded up, but the sunlight streaming in through the cracks let in enough light so I could finally see the room I'd spent the night in. It really did look like a gutted office space, cubicle outlines in the carpeted floor.

I wandered over to the corner I'd slept in. The blanket I'd used had been folded up neatly, with Bryce's jacket on top of it. The room was significantly chillier without the extra bodies in it, so I slipped on the jacket, material comfortable against my skin.

It was weird Bryce hadn't grabbed the jacket for himself, and I was going to ask him about it, but when I looked around I didn't see him. In fact, there wasn't anyone else in the room except Sarah and me, though I'd passed Max in the hallway when I was coming back from changing.

Where'd all the boys go?

Just then a tall girl with olive skin and super curly brown hair entered, looking like a model even in her ripped jeans and combat boots. She gave the room a quick scan and landed right on me.

"New girl." She held up her pointer finger at me and jerked it in her direction.

There was something so confident about her gaze that I couldn't do anything but walk towards her. The girl was at least a head taller than me, so when I stood in front of her I had to lean back to see her face.

She looked me up and down like she was trying to decide if I was a threat. The smile she gave after made it extremely clear I wasn't.

"I'm Di."

"Cami," I said, anxiously messing with the jacket zipper. It was enough to catch Di's attention, and, when she noticed whose jacket I was wearing, a slight look of shock passed over her face. But it was quickly stifled.

"A word of advice," she said, leaning down till we were face-to-face. "Stay outta my way."

11: Shaken But Not Stirred

It didn't take long to figure out how things worked. During the day, the boys would scope out the city for Gorillas (they called it Gorilla Hunting), coming back periodically with bits of food they stole from this shop or that shop. It horrified me at first, until I got hungry enough to realize that no one could get hired without a social security number—which none of us had. Basically it was steal or starve. At night the older boys (Bryce, Jack and Robby) and Di alternated watch shifts while the rest of us slept.

I got so used to the setup, in fact, that after just a few days I could already notice when someone wasn't there. Griffin, who didn't usually go Gorilla Hunting with the others, tended to talk my ears off all day. However, this day it seemed a lot quieter than normal, and that was when I realized Griffin wasn't in the room. Jack and Robby were also gone. I asked Sarah about it, but she wasn't worried—"They've probably just gone to get more food"—so I decided it must not be important. When Jack came in a few hours later I didn't pay much attention, except to notice that he looked a little anxious. He went right to Bryce and said something to him. Whatever it was caused Bryce to jump up from where he'd been sitting and rush out the door.

I glanced around and realized Sarah had also paused what she was doing and was staring at the door, waiting. Soon we heard a strange set of off-beat footsteps, then Bryce appeared through the doorway, he and Jack all but carrying Griffin, the chatterbox, between them. He wasn't talking now. From my spot across the room I couldn't tell what was wrong with him, except that it looked like he had blood on his face. *Maybe he was squeamish and passed out?* That had happened to a girl at my school one time during P.E. She got hit in the face by a dodge ball, and her nose had started bleeding. When she wiped her nose and saw the blood on her hand she just fainted right there.

Jack and Bryce helped Griffin over to the side of the room where the lighting was better and gently laid him down on the floor.

I followed the rest of the group over to see what had happened, but I was not expecting what I saw when I got there. There was blood on Griffin's face, but it wasn't from his nose. It was from a huge gash on the side of his head.

"We were just doing scouting," Jack started explaining to Bryce. "We thought we saw some Gorillas so we circled back, but we ran right into another set. They trapped us. We fought them, but Griffin..." He trailed off.

I looked at Jack to see if he was going to say anything else, but he was staring at the other side of Griffin's body. I followed his eyes and gasped. Griffin had been wearing shorts so it was easy to see that his left ankle was all bruised and swelling.

"Oh my God!" I screamed, because nobody else had. I looked at Bryce who was staring down at Griffin. "We have to take him to the hospital!"

"We can't," he said, still looking down.

"What do you mean we can't? Look at his foot!"

Bryce finally looked up, but his expression was hard. "We only survive the way we do because the Gorillas don't know where we are. They did this. They know he's hurt. They'll be monitoring every hospital in the area. We can't risk it."

I couldn't believe what he was saying. I looked around to see who else thought he was crazy, but their faces were all blank and almost...guilty. Ashamed. *Did they all agree with Bryce? They were willing to let someone suffer to save their own skins?*

“What is this? He’s your friend isn’t he? He’s in pain!” I cried, motioning to Griffin, whose face was twisted into a grimace even while unconscious. “Are you really all—Is no one going to—What kind of people are you?”

I couldn’t take it. I backed away and ran out the door, scraping against the walls as I tried to navigate down the pitch-black hallway before bursting out into the alley. I waited, wiping tear-streaks off my face, but I couldn’t hear anyone following.

If I wandered off I would never be able to find my way back, but that was fine, because I had absolutely no desire to go back into that place ever again. I took a deep breath, blinking back the last of the tears, then started down the alley.

12: Paranoia

I guess after you see someone hurt really bad you instinctively become more paranoid hoping you won't get hurt the same way. That's what happened to me anyway. I jumped every time I saw a man in black shirt or shades, thinking about the guys who had been waiting for me in the van before. I couldn't believe the same kind of guys I escaped from before had injured Griffin like that. There was no way I was that strong—*Had they been playing with me?* I was so shaky by the time I made it to an outdoor café that I sank into a chair without even thinking about needing to order something.

The waiter was probably college age, and I could tell he was cute even with one eye scanning the crowd for danger. He seemed to sense the atmosphere when he came over, because I started to get up and leave, apologizing, but he pushed me back down into the chair and told me to wait. He came back a few minutes later with a cup of hot tea.

"This should help you relax a little."

I reached for the cup then hesitated. "I don't have any money."

"That's cool," he said, flipping his hair out of his face. He smiled, all white straight teeth, and pushed the cup towards my hands. "It's on me."

I thanked him and picked up the cup. He sent me another smile as he wandered off to tend to other tables. The tea was nice, and after drinking some I did feel calmer, though I don't think that had much to do with the tea.

I started to set the cup down on the napkin it had come with when I noticed something written on the napkin. I set the cup down beside it and picked the napkin up.

Scrawled in the middle was a short message:

Any time you feel stressed!

525-496-1767

-- Derek

I looked up in surprise and found the waiter, Derek, leaning against the counter talking to the guy working the register. He turned around as if sensing my stare and caught my eyes again, smiling. He gave me a short wave, hand up by his head, and I waved back shyly, only to realize I was holding the napkin in my hand. Embarrassed, I jerked my hand behind my back and ducked my face, almost planting it in my cup.

I peered out of the tops of my eyes and saw Derek and his friend laughing. I took one last sip of the tea and stood up, turning my head away from the counter and looking down as I walked out of the café area back onto the street, hoping they wouldn't be able to see the huge blush I could feel burning my cheeks.

I didn't look up again until I was a block and a corner away, and only then did I realize I was still holding the napkin I'd been given. I balled it up, frustrated at myself for acting like an idiot, and started to drop it into a nearby trashcan, but I held myself back.

It was probably really stupid, but it *was* the first time I'd been hit on like that.

I smoothed the napkin out, then folded it into a small square and stuck it in the back pocket of my jeans.

#

I wandered around for a while more and was just starting to think how silly I was being all paranoid before when I looked up and realized there was a hefty man in a black shirt and sunglasses just like the ones from the van sitting on a bench in front of me. All of my instincts screamed that he was a—*What had Bryce called them? Gorillas?*

I froze, just as the Gorilla rose up from the bench. A beat passed and I had this fleeting thought that maybe he hadn't seen me—which was stupid because he was staring right at me—and then he started towards me, speaking into some device on his wrist.

Eyes darted back and forth as I tried to formulate an escape plan, when suddenly another Gorilla ran out of an alley and stopped, ten steps away from me. He was smiling.

What happened next was straight from a video game.

We moved at the same time. My left foot stepped back as his right foot stepped forward, both hesitating a moment, trying to predict the other's next move. I was a beat faster—I'd always been a quick thinker—which gave me enough time to turn and start sprinting the opposite way down the street before the man could catch up.

I was rounding a corner at top speed when a hand suddenly latched onto my arm. I probably looked a lot like a car going 50 miles an hour getting shifted into park suddenly, as my upper-half stopped but my lower-half kept going, my arms pin wheeling to avoid falling backwards. Before I had fully righted myself, I was pulled through a doorway. The door closed just as the Gorillas stampeded past.

#

Once my eyes adjusted to the light, I saw it was Bryce who had rescued me. He grabbed my forearm and led me through the building. We went out a side door into a different alley and started walking back to Base. I hadn't realized how far I had run, but absolutely nothing looked familiar.

"How'd you find me?" I wondered.

"I knew where you were."

"You *knew* where I was?" I stopped. "Were you *following* me?"

Bryce turned to me and rolled his eyes. "No."

"Then how—"

"I don't know exactly." Bryce started walking and I had to run to catch up. "I can just sense people. Where they are. The longer I've known them, the farther away they can be." He smirked. "How else do you think I was able to track you down when the only clue I had was Wendy's?"

"So you're like a GPS," I grinned.

"Not really." Bryce shrugged. "We all have things like that. Things that make us different. It has something to do with why they're after us."

"You can all track people?"

"No. We've all got different abilities."

"Ah." I thought about it. "Does that mean I've got a special power too?"

Bryce glanced at me out of the corner of his eyes. "Probably."

I looked down at my hands, but they were the same as they'd always been: thin fingers with the nails chewed to stubs. The only difference was the chipped purple polish from the party. Had it really only been a few days since all this started?

"What about my mom?"

Bryce stopped. Turned.

It was too late to correct my slip. "I went home," I admitted, but Bryce just nodded knowingly.

"My house was there, but it wasn't my house anymore. It was...I don't know...it was like someone else lived there. Had been living there. And there was this woman..."

"They're gone," Bryce said, cutting me off.

"Gone?"

"It's part of the erasing. Make sure no one goes looking for us, I guess. I don't know how they do it."

"Yours too?"

"What?"

"Your parents. Did they disappear too?"

Bryce paused. Kicked a can that was lying in his path. Started walking again. "I don't know."

"What do you mean, you don't know? Didn't you look for them?"

"No."

I grabbed Bryce's wrist, stopping him. He looked at me. There was a depth in his eyes I couldn't figure out.

"My parents left me a long time before I was erased."

His words were so bitter that I stepped back, releasing him, and when I met his eyes again the depth was gone.

#

As we walked, a shop window caught my eye and I stopped. It was a clothing store, and through the glass I could see a woman and a young girl browsing the racks. How many stores had my mother dragged me to growing up? And I had whined about every single one.

"So, this is for real?"

I turned to look at Bryce, who'd stopped walking a little past me. He nodded.

Back in the store, the woman was holding up a fancy dress and the girl was smiling so big.

"This is—"

"Crazy?"

I turned to Bryce. "I was gonna graduate and go to Bellvard and have an awesome life." My eyes were misting. "What am I gonna do now?"

Bryce's face softened. "You're not the only one. We all got caught in the middle of our lives. None of us wanted this to happen."

"That doesn't really make it better," I choked out, rubbing the trails of water that had managed to escape down my cheeks.

"I know," Bryce said, moving closer to me. He hesitated slightly, then I felt an arm wrap around my shoulders. He probably meant to stop the comfort there, but before he could move back I latched onto the front of his shirt and buried my head in my chest.

I could feel his arms hovering in the air around me uncertainly. A beat later, hands rested lightly on the back of my shoulder blades. It was the closest thing I'd had to a hug in days.

13: After Effects

Life had been pretty slow-paced since the day I ran away. After Bryce brought me back, he explained that they had taken Griffin to a vet he knew who was sympathetic to them. Bryce didn't go into all the details, but I heard later from Sarah that the woman had found and treated Bryce a few years ago and she'd been helping him ever since.

Bryce had been erased when he was 15, before anyone else in the group had. He was all on his own for a while, constantly on the run. After he'd been running for a year, he'd randomly stumbled upon another person who'd been erased—Di—and the two of them started traveling together. It was easier to stay safe that way, having someone to rely on, someone who could have your back. It also explained why Di was so attached to Bryce, since he'd been the first one to help her, and she'd only had him to depend on for a while. I guess I was lucky in that way, because I had a whole group of people to talk to and hang out with.

Griffin's foot wasn't broken, but it was badly sprained. The vet had had to wrap it, and he'd have to be on crutches for a little while. It would be hard for him to stay with us like that, so the vet had suggested sending him to her sister's house in the country where he could stay safe until he recovered. There hadn't really been another option, and Griffin had chosen to go.

Bryce was especially touchy on the subject of Griffin after the incident. He refused to talk about it, and I think it was his way of showing his hurt at Griffin getting hurt—like it was all his fault. He probably also felt bad about Griffin having to make the choice to leave, especially since Bryce and the others had been his family for almost a year.

The only positive of the whole thing was that the care I'd shown for Griffin and the others had broken what was left of the awkwardness, and the guys started talking to me and trusting me more. It felt like I'd been accepted into a kind of jumbled family. Di still looked at me like a bug she wanted to step on, but one miracle at a time.

#

There was no legitimate reason for anyone to be up before the sun, but my brain was restless and I couldn't put a finger on why.

Base was dark and quiet, save some light snoring coming from across the room. I sat up, waiting for my eyes to adjust, then slowly stood and stepped gingerly over sleeping bodies as I made my way to the doorway. I wanted some fresh air and was almost to the door when a hand grabbed my arm. I barely muffled a scream.

"It's just me," Bryce whispered.

My heart was in hyper-drive. "You—I—I thought you were a Gorilla!" I hissed, bending over to focus on my breathing.

Bryce didn't comment, just started up a set of stairs I hadn't ever noticed. "You coming?" he called back without turning around. I sighed, following.

By the time I made it to the roof, moving slower than usual on shaky legs, Bryce was already settled against a rail. I positioned myself near him, leaning my arms against the rail, but I wasn't staring at the dark city—I was watching Bryce's face.

"What are you thinking about?"

Bryce didn't answer. Eventually I stopped staring and started trying to identify familiar buildings by their light patterns. I was trying to find the café where the waiter had given me his number when Bryce finally spoke.

“You ever wonder what would happen if you fell?”

There it was, tiny lights twinkling in the distance. On the ground the café had seemed so far away from this place, like it was a whole different world, but from this height I could tell it was just a couple blocks away.

“You mean off the building?”

We were three stories up. Bushes, a few parked cars, and concrete were all I could make out below.

“Falling must be a lot like flying. At least for a little while.”

Heart thumping, I turned to look at Bryce. He was stretched out, bending over the railing as far as his long arms would let him, and in the moonlight he looked like a hawk I had seen once at a park. A ranger had been holding it in his hands so the kids could touch it, but it just kept stretching its neck out to the sky, its whole body tensed to fly. I wanted to reach out, to hold Bryce down so he couldn't fly away, but my hands just gripped the railing tighter.

14: Attack

We tried to be extremely careful about coming in and out of the hideout unseen, but we all knew it wasn't going to last forever. So it wasn't that big a surprise to anyone really when one day a bunch of Gorillas finally located our hideout. They came in from the alley and ambushed us. Bryce had explained it all to me after the deal with Griffin, how the Gorillas were ordered to capture us alive, so the scientists could study us, which is why they broke legs instead of shooting at us. That knowledge didn't make me any less scared when a particularly gruff Gorilla grabbed Max's arms and started dragging him towards an exit. I started to scream or run or do something to help him when Max, little Max, suddenly flipped the guy over his back and slammed him into the ground like he was a pro wrestler. The Gorilla and I both froze in sheer disbelief that this little boy could be that strong.

While I was struggling to comprehend Max's feat of strength, the battle kept going on around me, and the next thing I knew I was running across the room with a hefty Gorilla on my tail, especially fast for a man his size. I was headed outside, but another Gorilla cut off my path, so I made a sharp right and ran up the stairs Bryce had shown me. I knew I'd be trapped on the roof, so I planned to get off on the second floor and find a way to lose my tail. The door to the second floor was closed, but it practically fell off its hinges when I pushed through it. The floor was covered in trash and broken boards and a thick layer of dust that burst into the air with every step I took. I ran across the room to the door on the far side, but it was jammed. Something heavy was on the other side preventing me from opening it.

I turned around.

The Gorilla was smiling creepily—knowing he'd caught me. He took a step closer and the floorboards creaked in resistance. Through the door behind me I heard boards shifting. *Was that what was blocking the door? The ceiling had fallen in?* I glanced up and saw obvious gaps where boards had already fallen down.

The guy took another step forward, and this time I could literally see the floor buckling under his weight.

"Wait!" I cried, holding my hands up. "Don't move!"

He took a third step, and then a fourth, thinking I was trying to trick him.

"I'm not playing you! Really! You have to stop moving or this whole thing's gonna—"

The fifth step never met ground. It went right through the weak boards, pulling most of the floor and myself down with it.

#

I could barely breathe with all the dust our fall stirred up. I coughed and coughed, lungs raw, and waved my hand until the dust cleared enough so I could see. We'd landed on the first floor right in the middle of Base Camp. I could see the Gorilla, boards covering him and blood running down his head. He wouldn't be getting up again for a while.

There were boards on me, too, so I pushed them off and put my hands on the ground to push myself up.

Ow! I fell back down, my left arm giving out under my weight. I had to wipe all the dust off it with my shirt before I could see the problem: there was a huge gash running the length of my arm. It must have gotten cut by the boards when I fell. It didn't

feel broken, but blood was slowly seeping out of the cut, and it would definitely need to be cleaned soon or it was going to get infected.

I got up slowly, staggering as I regained my balance, then someone shoved me hard from behind and everything snapped into focus.

Di was beside me, blowing her bangs out of her face like she did when she was frustrated, and then I realized there were four Gorillas coming towards us. I was holding my arm as tight as I could with my other hand, blood already dribbling through my fingers, so I would be even less help than usual in this fight—not that I thought Di would ask for my assistance.

I didn't have a chance to find out if she could take them herself, because, at the exact moment the Gorillas charged, a familiar hand grabbed my forearm and pulled me out of the ring. Bryce dragged me across the room, through the alley exit, and far down the street, away from the commotion.

When he finally slowed down, I jerked my arm out of his hold. "I can't believe you just left her like that!" I screamed. "You should have helped her!"

Bryce opened his mouth (*probably to argue with me*) when a voice called out way too sweetly, "Aw, were you worried about me?"

Di was making her way towards us, looking so much like a supermodel and so little like a girl who'd just taken on four grown men with her bare hands that it was frustrating.

Within the next few minutes the rest of the group showed up. Miraculously, we had all made it out safely. Bryce had just started talking about recon and other really important things when I suddenly felt the need to sit down, hard. Robby, who was

standing next to me, tried to grab me, but only managed to steady my descent to the ground. Bryce knelt in front of me, turning my head back and forth to look at my eyes. Then his hand grabbed my arm and I sucked in a pained breath. My grip had done little to slow the bleeding. My hand was slick with blood.

And that's when Max started screaming. I don't think any of the others had noticed my arm before then, but all eyes were on it then.

Even Bryce froze for a second, hand hanging in the air where he'd jerked it away from my arm. He snapped out of it fast and took off his jacket, wrapping it tightly around my cut.

I wanted to tell him it wasn't my fault, but he cut me off, abruptly picking me up bridal style and walking quickly down the street. I wanted to ask where he was going, but the movement made me dizzy and the world slipped away.

15: New Powers

I realized three things when I woke up.

First, my head hurt. A tragic after-effect of blood loss and passing out.

Second, I had no idea where I was. I was in what looked like someone's guest bedroom, but how I had gotten there or why was a mystery.

And third, my cut was gone.

That was impossible. Eight hours ago my arm was covered in blood, and now my skin was completely smooth, not even a scar to show that I'd been hurt.

"It's not possible," I told Bryce the second I ran into him in the hallway where I'd been wandering around, hoping to find someone I knew.

"Uh...good morning to you, too." He smiled drowsily, rubbing the side of his head. I had to wait for him to yawn before trying again.

"The cut. On my arm." I waved it in front of his face.

"What cut?"

"Exactly."

A light bulb went off and he grabbed my arm, pulling it closer, then ran his fingers over the skin as if making sure it wasn't a trick.

"Yah!" I smacked him with my free hand. "That tickles!"

Smile met serious.

"Oh, chill out, Bryce. I'm sure there's an explanation. Maybe it wasn't as bad as it seemed?" I tried.

Bryce shook his head. "You were unconscious when we brought you here, but I wasn't. There was so much blood and Max was crying like you were—" He stopped. Collected. "It was bad."

My mouth opened reflexively to reassure, but there was nothing to say. Bryce grabbed my elbow and started leading me down the hallway.

"Where are we going?"

"We have to show Angie your arm."

"Who's Angie?"

"The vet I told you about. That's where we are—Angie's house. She let you stay here to rest while the others scouted out a new Base." Bryce tugged on my elbow again.

"My arm's fine."

"It looks fine, but maybe it's just a cover, like the skin grew over the wound—"

"Bryce."

"—but it's still bleeding on the inside and what if it cut a nerve or a bone you could lose your hand if you don't—"

"Bryce!" Finally he stopped rambling and looked at me. I softened my voice. "A vet?"

"What?" The smile was back; the one that meant I was going to cave to whatever he wanted and he knew it. "Don't tell me you're afraid of needles."

#

I was a little afraid of needles. Afraid enough that I made pleading eyes at Angie when I saw them on the tray, but she told me they were for heartworms and that I probably wouldn't need them.

Angie must have seen plenty of strange things over the last few years, because she wasn't even fazed when I showed her my arm—despite the fact that she herself had checked it out the night before. She inspected the area, took an x-ray, and pronounced my arm perfect. It wasn't so much healed, as it had been totally restructured back to its original construction—like I had never been injured at all.

16: Reactions

It felt like I was the only person in this group who ever had a reaction to anything. Bad guys and blood and people chasing them? No problem. Horrible wounds healing overnight? Doesn't faze them, not even Max. I guess it's because I hadn't been away from home that long, hadn't experienced as much as they had, but it was still kind of lame. It was like I had returned from a battle unscathed when everyone else died, and they didn't even care.

Well, that may be exaggerating a little. The group was surprised enough to see Bryce and I coming through the door of the new Base they'd secured. Jack and Robby had somehow tracked down a two-bedroom apartment on the outskirts of the city that had been vacated but never re-occupied. It was a fancy setup, actually, complete with dishes, running water and a couch (though the couch had seen better days). There weren't any beds, but we were used to sleeping on the floor so it was no big deal.

The surprise was more at my not being dead than the actual miracle itself.

"So it just, like, healed? By itself?" Max was staring at me like I was a science fair project. "Are you, like, a cyborg?"

"What? No."

"An alien?"

"No."

Then Robby joined in and the two started messing around, poking my arm and trying to figure out which sci-fi movie I'd stepped out of. I looked around desperately for someone to save me. I finally locked eyes with Sarah by the kitchen and she started laughing.

"Hey, guys, leave Cami alone, huh? You can bug her later."

Grumbles of "Aww, Mo~~~~m" followed them as they wandered off into other rooms.

I mouthed 'thank you' as big as I could.

Sarah saw and motioned for me to come into the kitchen. She handed me a banana when I caught up to her.

"Thanks."

We stood silently in the kitchen until the bananas were gone, then Sarah held out her hand for my peel.

"Thanks," I said again, as she dropped them into the trash.

Sarah looked at me seriously. "You're not weird, you know."

"Ugh..." I would have stepped back, but I was against the sink. "Okay."

"I mean the healing. It's not weird. We don't think it's weird."

"Uh-huh," I nodded slowly, trying to figure out where she was going with this.

"That's good, then."

She took a step towards me. "Don't you wanna know why?"

"Honestly, Sarah," I put my hands out to stop her from coming closer, "You're kinda freaking me out. A lot."

She laughed at that, and finally she looked like herself again. Serious really didn't suit her face. "Sorry, I was trying to create the right mood."

We both laughed at her confession, tension gone.

Once she got her breath back and straightened up, Sarah looked at me again, smiling this time. "I meant what I said though. It really isn't weird. We've all done strange things."

"Strange things?"

"Like jump over cars. Or run super fast."

She said it so nonchalantly that it took me a second to realize how crazy those things were. "You did *what?! How?!?*"

She just shrugged. "I don't know. We know it's strange. We can just...do things."

I thought about Bryce saying he could track people. "And Max, he's got like...super strength?"

"How'd you know?"

"When the Gorillas raided us. He took one on single-handedly. But it was like some crazy adrenaline or something. It wasn't like a super power."

"But Cami, you're just like us. It's the only thing to explain your arm."

"There are lots of explanations for my arm. Like...like..."

"Cami." Sarah gave me a hard look. "You know."

I know. But that doesn't make it okay.

17: Playing Tricks

There wasn't much opportunity to go outside of the Base, and even the larger apartment we'd secured this time got monotonous fast. So the second Jack asked for someone to accompany him on a grocery run I was up and ready, calling out my name before Sarah or Robby could take the spot.

I hadn't hung out with Jack alone much, so there wasn't really much for us to talk about as we walked to a nearby grocery store. 'Grocery shopping' was code for hitting up all the grocery stores in the area and stealing a couple things at each one, to avoid being too suspicious.

We were at our third grocery store, and I was in the process of sliding some granola bars into my pockets, when I saw him—Arthur. Well, that guy that looks like Arthur and always freaks me out. I was freaked out, in fact, to the point that I threw the bars into the air, and when they hit the ground everyone in the store, including the cash worker, started staring at me. I could literally feel Jack, who'd had to make an awkward transition away from stealing a box of honeybuns, glaring daggers into my head.

#

When I was seven, my older brother disappeared. He was seventeen. He just vanished in the middle of the night, and we never knew what happened to him—if he ran away or was kidnapped, if he was alive or dead. The police gave up hope, the neighbors gave up hope, and even I gave up hope.

When I was still too young to understand that Arthur wasn't coming back, I used to see my brother everywhere—I would think someone's back looked like his and run up to them, only to be disappointed. I kept doing it over and over, but it was never Arthur. I

haven't mistaken anyone for Arthur is a long time, so, why was I starting to see him again?

#

I was going crazy. I kept seeing Arthur whenever I went outside. There were suddenly a lot of guys in this town who looked just like my brother. Seeing him everywhere, like he was haunting me, made me really uncomfortable and skittish. I felt like his spirit was punishing me for something. I began fiddling with the lighter more and more often, my one connection to my brother.

#

"Where is it? Where is it?" How could I have been so careless? Of all the silly things to lose...

"Where's what?" Sarah asked groggily, sitting up. "Cami? What are you doing?"

I was in the middle of ripping my blankets off the floor and shaking them.

"Nothing, go back to sleep."

"What's going on?" Bryce called from the other room, and I could hear the rest of the group stirring, but I ignored them. It was too dark to see anything. Without thinking, I hit the light switch and Robby groaned loudly as light flooded the room. He called me some choice words as he rolled to the side, pulling his blankets over his face.

I jerked my jeans out of the laundry pile, but the pockets were empty.

"What the hell are you doing?" Di cried, storming into the room. "Some of us are trying to sleep, you know!"

She glared at me like she was trying to catch me on fire, and I felt laser beams on my back as I pushed past her in the doorway, headed for the living room.

"This kid," she cursed.

I heard a door slam, but I was already preoccupied stuffing my hand into the crevices in the couch. Loose change, gum wrappers, a moldy orange slice. Where was it?

I threw the last cushion back into place on the couch and mussed my hair. *Think. Just stop and think. Last time you had it was... yesterday. And the last thing you did yesterday before going to bed was...*

"Dishes!" I ran to the kitchen and started jerking open cabinets and pushing things around on the counter until, finally, I spotted something thin and silver hiding behind the paper towels.

"Oh, thank goodness," I muttered, clutching the lighter to my chest. "I thought I'd lost you."

"You know you're talking to yourself." I jumped and froze, turning slowly to see Bryce standing a few feet away, smiling. "Hey...Bryce...", I forced as I lowered my hands.

"You done tearing up the place?"

"Oh, uh, about that..."

Bryce chuckled as he came towards me. He held out his hand, and I cautiously put the lighter in it. He flicked it. "All this freak-out for a lighter that doesn't even work?"

"It's not just a lighter!" I snapped, surprising both of us as I jerked the lighter out of his hand. I lowered my head. "Sorry."

"Hey," Bryce started, lightly nudging my shoulder.

I kept my eyes on my feet, afraid to see Bryce's expression.

"Hey," he tried again, lifting my chin up with his hand. His face was soft, brows crinkled. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, fine." My gaze dropped back to my feet, but if he noticed he didn't say anything. He turned away to lean against the counter.

"Well, let's hear it."

I sighed and crossed my arms. "It was my brother's."

"Your brother?"

I nodded.

"He disappeared ten years ago."

There was nothing else to say. How could I possibly explain that that lighter was like a superstition; if I just held onto it long enough God would give me him back?

"You know the odds are--"

"I know!" I put my hand on my head. "I know...." I met Bryce's eyes. "I just don't want to give up. He was like...the perfect big brother, and, I don't know, I feel like I owe it to him to believe in him. He deserved that much."

Bryce pushed off the counter so he was standing before me again. His hands reached out and gently wiped small trails of tears from my cheeks, but instead of pulling away after, his hands stayed, cupping my face.

Breath caught. Heart raced. I wanted to pull away, to scream, to blink, but I couldn't do anything; his gaze held me. I could feel his breath heating my skin, and I was sure he could hear my heart hammering against my ribcage.

Then his hands dropped off like they'd been burnt, and he was stepping back, moving away from me, from us. He started to say something, but I had already turned to

the sink, turning on the water to wash a cup that was sitting on the counter, as if I hadn't just washed the same cup hours before.

I let the water drown out his voice and breathed in the quiet, drying the cup off and putting it into the cabinet with the others.

When I turned around, Bryce was gone. I picked the lighter up off the counter and flicked it, memory creating the flame that used to spark up when Arthur would light his cigarettes. The motion was so simple, calming.

For the first time in my life, I wished I smoked.

18: When the Dead Go Walking

After what happened the last time, it took a lot of convincing for me to be allowed out of the Base again. Jack said I was a liability—any more freak-outs and I'd start attracting Gorillas.

"But Sarah just needs help taking the trash out to the dumpster. It's like *right there*. I'm barely gonna walk five feet. What could happen?"

So, of course, something happened.

It started off fine. We took the trash bags and put them in the dumpster. But when we turned to go back, I caught a glimpse of an extremely familiar side-profile walking past the alley entrance. I don't know what I was thinking—nothing probably—but I took off down the alley, determined to catch up to that person. I could hear Sarah yelling at me, but I couldn't stop.

I couldn't explain it, but something in my gut told me that that guy I kept seeing was really Arthur. It didn't make sense, and I couldn't prove it, but even ten years later he still had the same face. That couldn't be a coincidence.

When I got to the street I couldn't see him, but I'd seen the direction he was heading so I just started off, pushing past people as I made my way down the sidewalk, checking in all the shops and alleys to make sure he hadn't turned. Then I spotted his back up ahead, crossing the street. I sped up and ran right across the street, cars slamming on their brakes and honking as the light had changed colors. I didn't care.

He walked into a building and I ran up the outside steps, pausing briefly on the doorstep to consider that this person could be a total stranger and I was just barging into his house, before I opened the door and walked in.

“Hey, Millie.”

It was him. Standing right in front of me. Ten years later and he had the same face, the same eyes, the same lilt when he said my name—the name he had given me that I’d let no one call me since he’d left—Millie.

It was Arthur.

If you had told me a week ago that I would be standing in front of my assumed-to-be-dead brother right now, I would have laughed at you. But here he was.

My brother was alive. He was alive and real and in front of me. How many times had I prayed to God to bring him back?

I ran forward and wrapped my arms around him, so happy I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. He started laughing and returned the hug. I knew he was smiling even though I couldn’t see with my head in his chest. He was so much shorter then I remembered—my forehead used to hit his belly button, but now I could rest my cheek against his shoulder.

I pulled back but didn’t let go. “How are you—You’re here and you’re—alive?” I tried, words jumbling. He understood anyway and nodded.

“But I thought—you disappeared—we didn’t—”

Arthur shook his head. “I’m sorry, Millie. You were probably really scared.”

I nodded and it was like I was seven again and my big brother was my whole world.

“Well, don’t worry, cause I’m back now and I won’t leave you again.”

He smiled. I smiled. My world was complete.

#

I was so excited and overwhelmed by my brother's not-being-dead-ness that I all but dragged him back to Base so I could show him off to the group. Everyone but Bryce and Di seemed to accept him instantly. Di, who never really seemed that excited about anything but fighting, just snubbed him and left the apartment. Bryce just got this look on his face that I knew meant he was going to talk to me about everything later. And once everyone else was asleep, and Arthur was sleeping on the couch, I met Bryce in the kitchen and prepared myself for an interrogation.

"Cami, this is silly. You don't know anything about this guy. How are you so sure he's your brother?"

"I lived with him for seven years. I'd recognize him anywhere."

"Exactly. Seven years. But he's been gone for ten years, right? Ten years is a long time. You don't know what kind of person he is now."

"He's the same!" I said. "The way he looks, the way he talks, its all exactly the same."

"How do you know? You were seven. You don't know what kind of person he was before. Besides, did you ever stop to think how coincidental it is that he shows up now, after all that's happened to you?"

"Why are you trying to ruin this for me? Just because you lost your family doesn't mean I can't find mine!"

Bryce punched the counter with his fist but I'd already stunned myself into silence. I couldn't believe I'd just said that.

"Bryce...I'm so sorry—I didn't mean—"

Bryce turned away, face twisted, but when he turned back it was eerily blank and even.

"I'm glad you're happy, Cami, I really am. I just hope you aren't getting your hopes up for nothing."

He stalked off to his bedroom, slamming the door behind himself.

I stood frozen in the kitchen. From the living room came light snoring. I didn't remember Arthur ever snoring before, but Bryce was right, ten years did change a person. I was nothing at all like the girl I was when I was seven. But I had changed for the better. Surely Arthur had too.

19: One Little Mistake

Arthur stayed with us for a while. When I asked where he'd been living before, he said just here and there. As for what he'd been doing, he said just whatever odd jobs he could find that didn't ask too many questions about who he was. The questions I really wanted to ask—why he'd never come back, why he hadn't said goodbye—I didn't. Every time I started to, the words changed coming out of my mouth.

I told Arthur all about what I'd been doing—being erased, the Gorillas, the group. He was really interested and asked lots of questions, but there was one thing he seemed most curious about.

"Why don't you guys just go with the scientists?" He asked one day while we were folding the blankets Sarah had washed. "Aren't they trying to help you guys?"

I shook my head. "That's what Dr. Fausley wanted me to think, but Bryce and the others don't think so."

Arthur thought about it. "How do you know Bryce and them are right? Have the scientists ever taken them? Maybe they're just trying to scare you."

I didn't think any of them had ever been captured. That was the whole point of how we lived. Scientists were evil and we were good. Well, at least according to us. Dr. Fausley had certainly thought he was right in what he was doing.

"Honestly it doesn't sound like the scientists are that bad. You said Dr. Fausley wanted you to come back to help you right? Cause he was worried about you."

"That wasn't really—it was more like—" *More like what?* "Well, then, how do you explain the Gorillas?"

"The guys the scientists send after you?"

I nodded.

“Well, it’s simple really. What do you do when you want something someone else has? You take it. That’s all they’re doing. If you just came willingly I bet the Gorillas would leave you guys alone. Plus, they don’t hurt you, right?”

I hadn’t told Arthur about Griffin. Bryce hadn’t said much to me after our fight, but he’d made it clear not to mention anything about Griffin or Angie just in case Arthur wasn’t all he seemed. I had faith in Arthur, but I’d always trusted Bryce.

#

Arthur had lots of conversations with me about the scientists and whether they were actually bad or if they just seemed bad because the group didn’t like them. At first I was adamant that they were wrong and we were right, but it didn’t take long for Arthur to wear down my defenses. Before I knew it I was analyzing everything anyone said about Gorillas or scientists to decide if it was true or not. After about a week of being torn between the two ideas, I finally decided to go with Arthur. He made good points, and we hadn’t ever tried to talk to the scientists, to hear their side of the story. Arthur thought it’d be a good idea for us to do that, but he didn’t think the others would go along with it, so we secretly arranged for Arthur to get a vehicle and drive us to a neutral ground where the scientists and us could talk it all through.

Unaware, the group piled into the old van Arthur had provided, but once we did we found ourselves locked in, being driven far away from the world we’d come to know.

Arthur sat up front in the passenger seat with the driver, with the seven of us in the back. This had to have been the stupidest thing ever. I felt worst out of everybody, obviously, considering trusting Arthur was my idea. I was so embarrassed I couldn’t even

look anyone in the eye. I just curled my knees up to my chest, wrapped my arms around them, and folded my head into them. *Stupid, stupid, stupid.*

20: The Lab

The vehicle stopped outside a rundown warehouse and the door slid open. Gorillas stood outside and grabbed us as we tried to get out, too many of them for us to escape—even Di couldn't get out of their grip.

They dragged us into the building, doors slamming shut behind them. The interior was white and had a chemical smell like a hospital. The Lab. There were stations all over with test tubes and chemicals and all sorts of things.

We stood, held in place, for a while. Then, as if he'd been waiting for just the right length of dramatic pause, Dr. Fausley finally waltzed over to our group.

"Here you are, then. Welcome to my lab. I'm the head of this place, Dr. Fausley."

If he expected us to be impressed, he was wrong.

Dr. Fausley congratulated us on finally making the right choice to come willingly. Then he instructed the Gorillas to put us in our cages—which were a lot like zoo exhibits: a large box of clear bulletproof Plexiglas, the height of the ceiling. There was one for each of us, and after shoving us inside they left.

I didn't particularly want to talk to anyone, still too ashamed of my trust in Arthur, but it wouldn't have mattered because the cages were soundproof. Jack tried talking to Bryce, but neither could hear each other. The glass even had a slight distorting effect, so reading lips was also hard.

We were forced to just sit and wait to find out what was going to happen to us.

#

The scientists knew all about us, about the things we could do, and started running us through drills to test our enhanced abilities. They were particularly interested in my

skill—healing—because it would be an extremely marketable skill on the black market if they could figure out how to harness it.

There were sections of testing that were geared towards physical fitness, such as running through rows of tires or performing obstacles courses, or doing a hundred push-ups and sit-ups and squats. Then there were sections tailored to our specific specialties. Bryce's involved having to locate people and objects from varied distances under various levels of stress or physical condition (such as while extremely tired or hungry or while under attack).

My sessions generally involved running trial operations to see how long I could last under different scenarios, all of which involved me being wounded in some manner or another. I think Dr. Fausley got some sort of sick pleasure out of torturing me, because every day he came up with new and interesting ways to injure me. Shallow cuts and bruises healed too quickly, meaning so far I had suffered through hundreds of lacerations, multiple broken bones, stab wounds, life-threatening cuts, and well over the recommended amount of concussions.

All in all, I woke up every morning dreading my personal sessions, and fell asleep sore and sometimes still bleeding every night, knowing I'd have to do it all over again.

21: Brother Mine

Arthur had been missing since he'd dropped us off, but one day on the way back from a session I ran into him in the hallway. He couldn't avoid me any more. The Gorilla leading me tugged at the cuffs on my wrist (how they kept us in line) but I wasn't budging.

"Arthur," I growled.

"Millie," he smiled.

"Don't you dare call me that!" I lashed forward, but the Gorilla held me back.

"Don't you ever call me that!"

Arthur chuckled. "Oh, *Millie*, you're really too gullible."

"Why did you do it?!"

"Don't you get it? I've been working for the scientists all along. I was just the bait to get you guys here willingly, and it worked."

"No," I said, still struggling. "Why did you leave? Mom and me—why did you leave us?"

Arthur's face darkened. "It doesn't matter." He started to leave.

"Of course it matters!" I cried. "Don't you know how much we missed you? How much Mom cried? You were alive for ten years and you didn't come back once!"

Arthur stopped, body turned so I could only see his back.

"Ten years. Has it really been that long?" His shoulders sank. "I wanted to come back, Millie, I really did. I thought if I left I could find myself. Then I met Dr. Fausley—he knew me because he'd been watching you—and he offered me a job and promised he'd keep you safe as long as I worked for him. And once I was in I just—I couldn't get

out.” He turned slightly so I could see the side profile of his face. “You wouldn’t understand.”

“Then help me! Help me understand.”

Arthur paused, considering, then he shook his head and walked away. I watched him till he disappeared around a corner, then my knees gave out and I sank down, only the Gorilla’s grip on the cuffs holding me up.

22: Escape

Time passed slowly in the lab. Days filled with running exercises and nights of being stuck with needles to see how our bodies reacted to certain chemicals.

I had a lot of time to think about everything, unable to sleep much in such a cold and unfamiliar place. I didn't have that many people to talk to, either, as they kept us separated and unable to communicate with each other—and I certainly didn't want to talk to any scientists.

One night, however, a few hours after I'd been dropped off in my cage for the night and everyone else was asleep, I noticed a strange person coming towards my cage. He was dressed like a scientist, and I was afraid he was going to take me for some last minute tests. He was slinking across the room like he was afraid of getting caught, which was certainly unusual, and when he came up to the door of my cage he glanced back and forth like he'd stolen something before unlocking it, opening the door, and slipping inside my cell. He stood by the door and looked at me.

"Cami?"

I kept quiet.

"My name's Sam. I'm a scientist, and I know you don't trust me, but I'm here to help you."

Sure.

He continued. "The day you were erased you got into a car and found a phone number, the number that hooked you up with them," he motioned to the others. "Didn't you?"

That was unexpected.

"I put that number there." He took a step forward, setting a piece of paper down on the ground. "I wanted you to be safe. I thought if you teamed up with them you'd have a better chance of avoiding us." There was a clatter outside the room and he stepped back again. "Wait ten seconds after I'm out of the room, then follow. Go left and don't stop running until you come to a door labeled STORAGE. Inside on the right is a small window."

He opened the door and stepped out.

"Wait!" I whispered, stretching out my hand. "Why are you doing this?"

"Because I don't want anyone else to suffer. This is all I can do." He shut the door—but didn't lock it—and walked across the room. Ten seconds, he'd said.

I picked up the paper on the ground.

One.

It was directions to a building in a different city.

Three.

I folded it up and stuck it in the pocket of my jeans.

Four.

I moved to the door and pushed it. It swung open and I stepped out.

Seven.

I checked to make sure the others were asleep and then crossed the floor. I stood beside the door, waiting.

Ten.

I moved out and went left, running full speed. The hall was empty but that could change any second. I made it to the door and rushed inside, closing it behind me. The

window was there, behind a clutter of junk. I had to climb onto a table, scattering yellowed papers as I pushed open the window and hefted myself out of it. I shut it behind me and turned. I was outside. I heard an alarm going off inside. Feeling for the folded paper in my pocket, I took off into the woods.

23: History

I ran until I had no strength left, through the forest and into a small town. I pulled out the directions and noticed I was just a few miles from where it wanted me to go. I sucked in a deep breath and ran again, past house after house, until finally I came to the right address. Exhausted, cold, and hungry, I climbed up the steps and banged my fist against the door. Exhaustion caught up to me and I slid down to the ground, banging weakly again on the bottom of the door. I was just losing consciousness when the door swung open and I fell through the doorway.

#

Many hours later, I awoke to the sound of a teakettle whistling. Disoriented, I sat up and found myself in yet another unfamiliar room. This was starting to become really annoying. An older man with graying hair came in, happy to see I was awake. He checked my eyes and told me I wasn't concussed, but I needed to rest a little longer and get my strength back. While I was resting, he decided to tell me a story. Not just any story, but the story we'd been searching for ourselves: how we came to be like we are.

"It seemed like an excellent thing at the time, you know. We weren't the first to have the idea, but we were the first to produce successful results. It was such a simple idea—invitro-fertilization was so costly and couldn't guarantee any form of success, but we figured out that by using bacterial DNA as a sort of coating agent around the eggs we could make them sticky, thus increasing the likelihood of a successful first treatment.

We had a 99% success rate of first-time usage pregnancies that had been unbelievable before. We had so many people come to our clinic, willing to pay whatever it took for such fast results. The papers called us the Gods of Life."

“What happened?”

“What usually happens: Our ideas for the future took two very different turns. You see, I was just a scientist, but Fausley was a genius. He allowed me to take credit, but the one who first thought to put bacteria to egg was Fausley. He was the mastermind behind the entire process, and I went along with it because it afforded me a much better life than I would have had otherwise. I was happy and comfortable, and then...”

“Then?”

“Then, a few years ago, this kid showed up. We were closed, but I was staying late to sort some paperwork. He started banging on the door, and he looked so young and sick I couldn’t help but let him in. I had gone to med school, so I gave him a quick check-up, but according to the charts he was perfectly healthy. Only, he wasn’t. Anyone could tell by looking at him—he was fifteen years old, perfectly healthy, and dying.

“Well, I didn’t expect you to recognize me. The last time you saw me I was nothing more than clumps of DNA floating inside an egg.” The boy motioned for me to sit and sat down stiffly himself. “My mother wasn’t able to get pregnant on her own, so she got some help, some very special help that’s only offered by one clinic in the entire country.”

When I asked him why he’d come all this way, he laughed.

“I’m dying. And it’s your fault.”

There was a side effect of the recombination that Fausley hadn’t told me about. The eggs actually absorbed the bacterial DNA, which caused the human genes to mutate just slightly. The effect wasn’t apparent immediately, because the mutation was in a hormone that only started producing once puberty started. The hormone reacted with

other chemicals to allow the body to produce a near constant stream of adrenaline, amplifying the person's physical and mental capabilities. Fausley had somehow known that would happen—it might have been his plan all along. A new generation of superior humans. Only there was another side effect even Fausley hadn't foreseen: The same mutation that amplified the boy's body was now destroying it.

Humans weren't designed to live on adrenaline 24/7. That's why after a great shock one always feels so lethargic. But the boy couldn't shut off his adrenaline like everyone else, and so his energy was constantly being drained. His arms could lift three times his own body weight, his legs could run faster than an express train, his brain could solve in ten seconds an equation that had taken a college professor days to figure out, but his heart couldn't handle bumping so much blood and oxygen so fast for so long. The boy's kidneys were failing and his blood was so starved for oxygen that normal bodily processes were shutting down.

I tried everything I could to save him, but I couldn't rewrite DNA (twice), and a few days later he died.

After the boy's death, I started panicking thinking of the hundreds of children who were going to grow up and suffer the same fate. I wanted to shut down the clinic indefinitely until we could get this mess sorted out, but Fausley wouldn't have that. He and his benefactors only saw the potential of that DNA mutation and how they could harness that to create a line of super humans. They were convinced the boy was a one-off.

I told Fausley I wouldn't work with him anymore; that he'd have to find a new partner. I secretly packed up as many important documents as I could—research and patient contact info—and did my best disappearing act. It worked, because that night

there was an explosion at the lab I spent most nights at, and the papers recorded me as one of the deceased. From that point on I went into hiding. I thought if I could contact the couples that had gone through treatment at my clinic, warn them, then we might be able to work together to find a solution. But by the time I was able to start tracking down families, Fausley and his crew had already started erasing the kids from their own list. I was too late."

24: The Plan

Dr. Hein had a plan in motion to destroy the research lab and prevent future kids from being experimented on, but in order to enact it he needed a body of people. Luckily for him, I knew exactly where to get such a body, but first they would need to be rescued.

#

I had broken out of the lab once, but breaking in would be a whole other situation. I had no way of contacting the guys inside to let them know I was coming for them, so I had to hope Bryce's radar senses would be alert and notice me.

I set out a little before dawn, arriving at the facility just as light began peeking over the horizon. I wouldn't have long to do this so I needed to hurry. The window was still unlocked, so I guess they hadn't noticed I'd escaped through it. I crawled back in and walked down the hall warily, dodging Gorillas along the way. Everyone was still sleeping, which made navigating the halls easy. It took no time at all to reach the cages but getting them out was going to be another story. I had to sneak into a scientist's office and steal a set of keys in order to unlock the cages. I went to Bryce's cage first and he was already up, standing by the door.

"I had a feeling," he joked, and it was so nice to be back.

We freed everyone and navigated them quietly towards the exit. By some miracle we made it out the window without sounding off any alarms, and by the time was shining clearly in the sky we were already back at Dr. Hein's place, going over last minute details.

#

The plan was simple: get close enough to the lab to plant diffuser bombs at each entrance. These would eradicate all computer/technical programs and information they have stored, leaving them significantly crippled and unable to conduct experiments for a good while.

Once we arrived near the lab, it was up to us kids to sneak in close enough to plant the bombs. The lab was alive with Gorillas patrolling the area, looking out for us since we'd escaped. Gorillas attacked us, but the kids did a solid job holding their own and managed to fight their way through them to the building itself. We worked fast to plant the bombs in the right places and then ran as fast as we could out of there. The bombs had built-in timers that didn't last very long, and even for just an electrical pulse bomb the force could have easily knocked out any human who was in the area.

Epilogue

A safe distance away, we listened for the explosion and watched as the whole thing caved in. By the time they recovered from that, the kids on their list would be old enough to take care of themselves.

And if they couldn't, we would be there.

I turned to Bryce as he turned to me, the unspoken question lingering between us.

What now?

Bryce slung his arm around my shoulder and smiled wide. "Back to normal." He tugged me over to the other kids who were currently celebrating.

END.