

**Breed**

*Precursor*



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by  
**Jake McStravick**

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The author of this book dedicates it to his amazing friends Erin and Ben, who have spent countless hours talking to him about the process of writing this book and were the very first to read it. They also may have been the inspiration for some parts of it and definitely influenced the outlooks on life that the characters had ;-P

Congratulations, Jake! You spent four years working on school and on this book. May it be the first of many printed books you write!



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March 9<sup>th</sup>, 2000  
London, England  
1:02:41 A.M.

Flashing lights and the sounds of traffic, crowds, and pulsating dance music filled the streets as the young and restless headed out for the start of the night's partying. Groups of college-age men and women strolled the sidewalks, talking excitedly and moving with much better coordination than they would have only hours from now. Like most days, the weather had been "rather British"; a steady drizzle had pounded the cement and asphalt all day. It had always been at a pace so constant that it made travel just a tad more miserable than normal, but not heavy enough to justify staying indoors all day. The rain had finally let up as night fell, leaving the gleaming asphalt to remind everyone just how soggy of a day it had really been.

A single, unmarked, black sedan rolled through the streets, moving slowly and carefully to avoid the odd person stepping unexpectedly into the street. The man behind the wheel sat with his right elbow resting on the door, his hand curled into a half-fist and his propped upon it. He took a left down a street and finally cleared the "party" district. The streets opened up, and traffic was able to resume its normal pace.

After ten or so more minutes of driving through the city, the car took a right into a parking garage and stopped at the security booth just before a lowered barricade. A man in a white shirt, navy slacks, and a navy baseball hat stepped out of the booth and walked toward the driver's side window as it descended.

"Good evening, sir; may I please see your identification?" the guard asked.

The man in the car handed the guard something that looked like a passport and the guard opened it. He pulled out a small flashlight and flicked it on, quickly shining it on the documents before turning it off and replacing it in his pocket. He handed the documents back to the man in the car and gave a small salute.

"Thank you Detective Marshall," he said and walked back to the booth.

With the push of a button, the barricade lifted and the car

pulled through as the window rolled back up. The sedan cruised through the garage for a little while before pulling into a reserved space just near the exit. The lights shut off as the engine came to a stop and the door popped open. Marshall stepped out of the vehicle and glanced around, sighing before closing the door and walking toward the exit. He aimed the small key fob attached to his key ring over his shoulder and locked the car behind him.

He reached the exit door and pulled it open, stepping into the hallway beyond. Harsh, fluorescent lights lit the carpeted hallway and white walls; Marshall had occasionally thought that it seemed the perfect place to film a horror movie, if the director ever wanted to use the plainest environment he could find. He kept walking until he reached the end and stopped just outside a larger fire door. A small device was set into the wall just off to the right, and Marshall quickly placed his thumb on a small black surface on it. After a few seconds, the device emitted an electronic beep and the sound of the door's lock sliding back could be heard. Marshall quickly opened the door and stepped through, letting it swing closed behind him.

A similar hallway greeted him on the opposite side, although it was much shorter, and an elevator sat at the far end. He quickly walked to it and pressed the call button. The doors slid open instantly and he stepped inside. The doors closed behind him as he jabbed the button marked "4" and waited. With a quiet whirring, the elevator began to ascend quickly. After only about fifteen seconds, it came to a stop and the doors slid open to the sound of a quiet ding. Marshall stepped from the elevator into the busy room beyond.

Cubicle-like offices filled most of the center of the room, with individual glass offices lined up along the outside edge. Marshall took a left and headed past all of the cubicles and down another short hallway before reaching yet another locked door. He checked both of his pants' pockets before removing an ID card from the right one and swiping it through a card reader. The small light at the top of it turned green and a buzzing sounded. Marshall pulled the door open and stepped through, letting it swing closed behind him.

This hallway was much darker than the rest, and every

surface seemed to be made of concrete. Marshall's shoes clicked softly on the floor as he walked forward, the echoes reverberated up and down the entire length of the space, amplifying the sound in the process. After passing two sets of two black doors on the right, he finally stopped at the first one in the third set and swiped his keycard again. With a quiet beep, the door popped open slightly and he stepped through, closing it behind him.

A man with short, dark hair and dark eyes with glasses was leaning against a table in the center of the room, his arms crossed across his chest. He was staring at something through the one-way glass to the left, seemingly oblivious to Marshall's entrance. The man was not particularly tall, most likely around 5'7", and had an average build. He was wearing an un-tucked, blue-and-white striped dress shirt with jeans and a pair of black sneakers.

"What've we got now, Jim?" Marshall asked, walking up and standing beside the other man.

"Just pulled her out of the Thames thirty minutes ago," he replied, nodding toward the one-way glass. "She hasn't said a word since."

Marshall turned his attention to the one-way glass now before him. What he saw was not entirely what he was expecting. A girl, most likely around nineteen or twenty years old, with long, dark brown hair was seated at the interrogation table, a white towel wrapped around her shoulders. She was looking down at the surface in front of her, so it was hard for Marshall to make out any other features about her.

"What the bloody hell was a girl like that doing in the Thames at nine-thirty at night?" Marshall asked.

Jim shrugged.

"Not the foggiest," he replied and turned around, grabbing a manila folder off the table and handing it to Marshall. "That's where you come in."

Marshall glanced at the folder before taking it and grumbling something inaudible and heading back over to the door.

"Let me see if I can find out what, evidently, you can't," he jabbed.

"You're the specialist at this, not me," Jim replied, grinning.

“Shut it,” Marshall muttered and pulled open the door, stepping back out into the hallway.

He took a few steps to the right and stopped before the second door in the set. He glanced up to his right at a small camera mounted to the wall. After a moment or two, a loud buzzing sounded and he twisted the handle, pushing the door open and taking two steps in before pushing it closed behind him. Marshall stepped over to the table in the center of the room and dropped the folder on it. The chair let out a loud moan in protest as he pulled it back across the concrete floor. With a heavy sigh, he took his seat and opened the folder to find a sparingly filled-out profile and incident report. He dropped it back on the table and looked up at the girl before him.

She was still staring down at the table, but now he could make out her face better. She had grey eyes that seemed clouded, like she was thinking about something. Her face was generally narrow, but also seemed to be rounded to a degree. Nothing about her physical appearance gave away any information that could help him figure out what had happened, so he took a deep breath and prepared to begin his interrogation.

“What’s your name?” he asked calmly, folding his hands on the table in front of him.

The girl remained fixated on the table, not saying anything.

“I asked what your name is,” he repeated a little more forcefully.

She still didn’t respond, so he tried again.

“I asked you a question, now you better bloody well answer it!” he snapped.

The girl’s eyes finally flicked up from the table, but she only moved her head a bit.

“What is your name?” Marshall repeated, slowly and purposefully.

The girl remained silent for a few seconds before finally speaking.

“Amaryss,” she replied, her voice sounding slightly cracked and gravelly.

“Well, Amaryss... mind telling me what you were doing in the Thames?”

She remained silent, but stared straight at Marshall.

“Did you just decide to go for a little night swim?” he asked, leaning back. “What?”

She glanced off to the side for a second before returning her gaze to Marshall, remaining silent. He sighed and leaned forward against the table.

“One for few words, eh?” he said, yet she remained silent.

Marshall shifted again and crossed his arms on the table before him.

“Listen, they called me back in here after my shift was over because of your soggy arse,” he said, “so you better give me a damn good reason for being here.”

Amaryss remained silent, staring vacantly at the center of the table between the two of them. Marshall slammed his fist down roughly where her gaze lay, but she didn’t even jump or show a sign of surprise. Her eyes simply flicked up from the table to stare at him.

“I sense I don’t have your attention,” he said. “Listening?”

Her silent stare was beginning to aggravate Marshall, as well as raise the hair on the back of his neck. He had a good reputation for getting people to talk, and he was determined to not let this girl break his streak. He closed the manila folder and stood up, the metal chair scraping across the cement floor. His footsteps echoed within the small room as he walked back to the door and waited for the buzzing sound to indicate that it was unlocked.

The heavy door slid open as he stepped through and pulled it closed behind him, the heavy electronic lock re-engaging with a loud clunk. He made the short walk back to the control room and pulled the door open, stepping inside. Jim was still leaning back against the table in the center of the room, but a bemused smirk had found its way onto his face.

“Don’t you get that look,” Marshall threatened.

“Come on John,” Jim said, “you can’t even get a girl to talk now. I think you’re losing your touch.”

“I could get her to talk... if they let me use some actually effective techniques,” he replied.

“For Christ’s sake, John, she isn’t a terrorist!” Jim replied, shooting him a look. “We don’t need to beat a confession out of

her!”

“Well, the only thing we know about her is that her name is Amaryss,” Marshall shot back. “We don’t know anything about her background, or why the hell she was in the Thames at all, especially after dark.”

Jim simply shrugged and turned back to the one-way glass.

“Maybe I should try,” he said, surprising Marshall.

“You want to take an interrogation?” he asked.

“Yeah, might as well,” he replied, standing up straight and walking toward the door, grabbing the manila folder from Marshall’s hand as he went.

Marshall just watched him exit the room before shaking his head. He laughed quietly and moved over to the control board below the one-way glass and glanced up at one of the small TV monitors in the bank to his right. Jim was at the door, gripping the handle and looking up at the camera. He nodded and Marshall pressed the button to open the door.

Jim stepped through and pulled it closed behind him before walking over to the table and dropping the folder on it. He remained standing and looked down at Amaryss, who seemed to not have even acknowledged his presence.

“Hello Amaryss, my name is Detective Jim Carlson,” he began. “We’re not here to press any charges; we’re simply trying to find out what happened.”

She remained silent, still staring down at the table. Jim sighed and tugged at the collar to his shirt slightly before walking around behind the girl.

“How are you feeling?” he asked. “We figured you’d be cold... is the blanket helping?”

Amaryss’s eyes finally flicked to the side in the general direction of Jim. Marshall almost thought she would say something, but she remained silent.

“Listen, we can’t help you if you don’t—”

“I don’t need your help,” she finally said, her voice sounding far more normal than it had before.

“With what?” Jim asked, hoping to possibly keep her talking, it seemed, but she didn’t bite.

She remained silent, her eyes now following Jim as he

walked around the table. He stopped at the side to her left, leaning forward and resting his hands on it to support himself.

“Okay, we won’t try to interfere with... whatever it is that you’re doing, but you have to give us something.”

Amaryss continued to stare at him, but remained silent. Suddenly, her lips moved, but Marshall couldn’t hear what she had said. He leaned forward, closer to the speakers, and watched as Jim did something similar.

“What was that?” he asked.

“Do you believe in monsters?” she asked.

Jim looked confused, but answered regardless.

“Sometimes maybe, but not particularly,” he replied.

Amaryss laughed dryly and looked back down at the table again for a few seconds before looking up at the one-way glass, straight at Marshall. His heart began to instinctually pound faster, even though he knew she couldn’t see through the one-way glass. She *shouldn’t* be able to see through it. When she finally spoke, he felt like it was directed right at him.

“I think you should.”

**Part 1**  
*Players and Pawns*

**1**  
**Independent Project**

June 6<sup>th</sup>, 1981  
4:24:23 P.M.  
Meecham Medical Research Laboratories  
Near Denver, Colorado

Dr. Henry Meecham was not an exceedingly patient man, especially on Friday afternoons. He sat at the head of the conference table, idly tapping his pen on a notepad as he stared down the length of the fake dark wood table at a young man giving a presentation. His thin, black wire-rimmed glasses sat halfway down his wide nose, slowly inching dangerously close to sliding off onto the table below. His eyes drifted to the clock on the wall to the left and he found himself watching the second hand tick by in a sort of hypnotic trance.

For how long he watched the small red hand tick its sixty clicks around the white face, he couldn't remember, but he was brought back to the presentation by the sudden shuffling and murmuring of his colleagues around the table. He turned back to the man at the other end of the table and cleared his throat slightly, shifting the position he had been sitting in for some time now. The man was looking down the table directly at Dr. Meecham, as if waiting for him.

“May I proceed, sir?” he asked.

Meecham nodded and waved his hand in a vague gesture of consent.

“Yes, yes... proceed Mr. Broker,” he muttered.

The man looked as if he were about to say something, but decided not to and walked over to a light switch on the wall. Once the room had fallen dark, he powered up a projector placed in the middle of the conference table. After a few seconds an image



appeared on the white, hanging screen behind him.

“Now, these figures are normal human data,” he began. “It’s nothing we haven’t seen: chromosomes, testosterone, glucose, so on and so forth. Now these...”

He hit the button on the small clicker in his hand and the slide advanced, revealing the same chart, but with vastly different numbers.

“...are the data predicted by the research done by a few colleagues and myself.”

Everyone gathered at the table leaned forward, staring at the collection of data on the screen.

“What exactly are we looking at?” a man in a grey suit halfway down the left side of the table asked.

“These numbers tell a story... one that is almost so incredible, that it becomes unbelievable,” the presenter said. “What you’re looking at here are numbers telling us that, through our procedures, we could increase strength, stamina, speed, and other such physical qualities in a human being. An advanced species.”

A general hum of voices arose in the room, and the presenter simply waited for either another question or for the hum to subside. The question came first.

“How did you obtain this data?”

“We did a few small-scale experiments with animal testing, mice and such, and studied the effects in those, and simply applied and scaled them to the numbers of a human.”

“You technically have no proof that these are, in fact, consistent in reality,” Dr. Meecham cut in, his voice carrying throughout the room and immediately silencing everyone else.

“Well... no, sir, that would require human testing and...”

“That’s illegal, correct,” he finished, nodding. “So, how can we know this is actually safe for humans?”

The presenter appeared at a loss for words as he stumbled to find an answer.

“Well... uh... we could...”

“Were there any ‘unsavory’ side effects in the animal trials?” Dr. Meecham asked, staring over his glasses at the young man.

“Well, uh... there were a few in the beginning... but they became less frequent the farther along we got,” he replied.

“What were some of the most recent, then?”

“Uh... potential cardiac arrhythmia, minor respiratory problems...”

“How can we pitch this to a committee about trial-testing for humans if it could possibly cause a heart arrhythmia, or God knows even a heart attack, in a human being?” Dr. Meecham asked, staring straight at the young man with a look in his eyes that seemed to fall somewhere between amusement and annoyance.

“Well, uh... I can see the problems with that...”

“Then I’d say the case is settled,” Dr. Meecham interrupted, leaning forward and placing his hands on the arms of the chair in preparation of standing. “Thank you for your time, Mr. Broker, but I’m afraid you’ll have to do some more refining first. Now, it’s late on a Friday afternoon, so I say, why don’t we all just call it a week, huh?”

Everyone seated at the table rose and began to slowly exit the room. The presenter sighed as he turned off the projector and hit the lights, bathing the room in their harsh fluorescence once again. After pulling the slides out of the projector, unplugging it, and placing it all back in its case, he picked up his portfolio on the project off the table and began to move toward the door, himself. Just before he reached it, however, he was stopped by a man in a black suit, white shirt, and gray tie.

“That was a quite a presentation there, son,” he remarked.

“Oh, well thank you,” the young man replied, nodding slightly and started to move past him.

“So you think this... whatever it is you’re working on could do all those things you say it could?”

“I believe there’s a strong possibility, yes,” he said. “The latest animal trials are looking very promising, and I’m hoping to collect some more concrete data soon.”

The man in the suit nodded and appeared to be lost in thought for a second before extending his hand to the young man.

“I admire your gumption, son, keep at it,” he said.

“Oh, well thank you, Mr...” the young man began, trailing off.

“Kersov, Michael Kersov,” the man replied.

“Well thank you, Mr. Kersov.”

“It’s Broder, right?” he asked.

The young man laughed slightly and glanced toward the head of the conference table.

“Dr. Meecham is a brilliant scientist, but he can fall a little short when it comes to such things as remembering names,” the young man replied.

“Well, what’s your name, then, son?”

“Broder,” he replied. “Jared Broder.”

The door slammed open and banged against a metal table just behind it as Jared stormed into the lab, the carrying case for the projector still in his hand. A man with dark brown hair and olive skin sitting behind a microscope at a lab counter jumped and spun his head to look toward the sound of the noise, relaxing slightly once he saw Jared.

“I take it the meeting didn’t go well.”

Jared dropped the projector next to a desk covered in papers, pencils and pens strewn across the surface.

“No, it did not,” he replied, turning around and walking up to the opposite side of the lab bench where the other scientist had been working.

“What part finally got them? The arrhythmia? The migraines? The excessive disorientation?”

“Can it, Jonathan,” Jared snapped, glaring across the bench at him.

Jonathan grinned as he pushed his stool back and stood up, removing a slide from under the microscope and replacing it in a Styrofoam container before returning the white package to a refrigerator across the lab. Jared sighed and ran both hands over his face and back through his brown hair, staring down at the bench in front of him.

“You have to admit,” Jonathan began, walking back toward him, “it was a pretty long shot that he’d approve it at this stage.”

“Well, you’ll never get anywhere unless you try,” Jared said, still staring down at the bench in front of him.

Just then, a set of metal double doors opened and a man appeared from behind them. He was dressed in a white lab coat like Jonathan, and had short, dirty blonde hair.

“That’s true,” he said, pointing to Jared from across the room, “and today is an excellent example of that.”

Both Jared and Jonathan turned to look at him.

“How so, James?” Jared asked.

The man finally reached the lab bench the other two were standing by and stopped, the beginning of a grin forming on his lips as he looked between the two of them.

“You didn’t...” Jonathan began, his eyes beginning to widen.

“I ran the last batch... and the results are looking promising.”

“So... it worked?” Jared asked, unable to think in his normally professional manner.

James nodded and he suddenly let out a shout and jumped into the air. James simply grinned as he watched his reaction to the news.

“No side-effects?”

“None that I can find.”

“But still all of the intended results?”

“Looking as promising as ever.”

Jared nodded and looked between the two other men.

“Gentlemen... we’ve done it,” he said.

James and he burst out laughing and cheering, exchanging high-fives before taking seats around the main lab bench in the center of the room.

“We have to get this into human trials,” Jared said, speaking quickly. “Now we have full confirmation of the effects and how the procedure will work...”

“Hold on a second, Jared,” Jonathan said, frowning as he held up one hand toward him. “You’re forgetting that Meecham just shot us down, remember?”

Jared paused for a second and his face fell. He slouched his shoulders and sighed.

“Damn,” he muttered, tapping his fingers on the edge of the wooden bench as he appeared to become lost in thought.

“I told you that it may have been jumping the gun a bit on that meeting—”

Suddenly, his fingers stopped moving, but he continued to stare at them, his eyes glazed over as if he were not actually seeing what was before him.

“What if we cut the middle-man...?”

The other two looked at him with total confusion etched into their faces.

“What do you mean?”

Jared finally looked up at the other two, but otherwise remained perfectly still.

“Meecham isn’t going to back us... so let’s do it off the books.”

“Jared, are you suggesting that we just... strike out on our own, here?” Jonathan asked, shifting slightly on his stool as he glanced over at James.

“Precisely!” Jared said, leaning forward against the bench as he gestured animatedly. “This is could possibly be the discovery of a lifetime... of multiple lifetimes! We can’t let it go to waste just sitting in a lab tied up in red tape. We all know getting approval to begin human trials is a hugely lengthy process, and time is working against us. If we do this *our* way, on *our* terms, with *our* rules... Just think about it.”

James and Jonathan exchanged looks before James sighed and turned back toward Jared.

“How do you propose we do that, then?”

Jared grinned.

“Glad to hear you’re onboard,” he said. “Now, what’s the first thing we need for this endeavor?”

“A subject,” Jonathan replied, sounding nowhere near as enthusiastic as Jared.

“Exactly,” he said. “Now, as we’ve noticed through the research, it seems far more preferable that we start young, because if the modifications are introduced early, the body will grow with them as if they should have been there the entire time.”

“Hopefully,” Jonathan added, and Jared gave him a look.

“You heard James just a minute ago!” he said. “We’ve found a way to remove the side-effects, so there shouldn’t be any

unforeseen problems.”

“That was on mice, Jared,” Jonathan argued. “We’re talking about a human being, here. A human body is far more complex than a mouse; we don’t know exactly what to expect.”

Jared shifted his position against the bench and gave Jonathan a look.

“We’ll never know unless we try.”

Jonathan appeared conflicted as he bit his lip and looked off into a far corner of the lab, his gaze distant as he seemed to think the situation over. Finally, he sighed and nodded.

“I mean... you’re right... we’d have to have to find out for ourselves,” he said.

“Correct... now, where could we find a young person whom we could perform the... *procedures* on?” Jared asked, leaning away from the bench again.

The three men all fell silent as they fell deep into thought. Jared tapped his fingers absentmindedly on the bench, creating the only sound in the otherwise silent room. James finally cleared his throat and spoke up, breaking the absolute silence between them.

“I know a guy at a local hospital... they sometimes get mothers who have their children and... want to give them up,” he said.

The other two remained silent, but their attention was now directed toward James.

“I could talk to him and see if we could ‘adopt’ one of them...”

Silence fell over the three of them again. After only a few seconds, Jonathan spoke up.

“Something deep down tells me that most of this plan is just plain wrong... but I can’t see any other way,” he said.

The three of them nodded in agreement and James let out a heavy sigh.

“I’ll go give him a call.”

September 15<sup>th</sup>, 1981

12:35:28 A.M.

Avista Adventist Hospital

Louisville, Colorado

“Hispanic female, approximately seventeen years old, with child. Reportedly went into labor several hours ago, but got bad enough they called an ambulance approximately fifteen to twenty minutes ago.”

The EMT driver helped lower the gurney with the visibly distraught and swearing young woman to the ground and lock the wheels into place. Her hair was a wild mess around her head on the single, white pillow, while the phrases coming from her mouth could have put a sailor to shame.

“All right, let’s get her in,” the doctor said, nodding as he eyed the woman warily.

The EMT that had ridden in the back of the ambulance followed the doctors inside while the driver stayed with the vehicle, wiping his forehead on his jacket sleeve with a heavy sigh. After he watched the others disappear through the automatic sliding doors, he returned to the cab, killed the engine, and locked all the doors. After a tug on the rear doors’ handles to make sure they were secure, he turned and walked through the glass doors, as well, but took a left, heading toward a line of public pay phones on the wall. He pulled a few coins out of his pocket and dropped them in the slot, waited for a dial tone, and quickly punched in a number. After only a few rings, the person on the other end answered.

“Hello?”

“It’s Jameson,” he said.

“This better be good news,” the other person, a man, replied, not even acknowledging that they knew him.

“We just brought in a pretty good candidate for what you’re looking for,” he said. “Seventeen, in labor now, most likely won’t want to keep the child.”

“Sounds like a pretty good fit so far,” the other man said. “She’s not a drug addict or something, is she?”

“Naw, not that we know of,” Jameson said. “She didn’t show any signs of large-scale, long-term substance abuse, and she didn’t appear to be on anything when we picked her up.”

“Brilliant,” the other man replied. “Where are you now?”

“Avista Adventist Hospital in Louisville,” he said. “You know where that is?”

“Yes, we’ll handle our end from here. Be ready for the dropoff.”

“All right, but you better come through with your end of the deal,” Jameson said.

“Don’t worry; it won’t be a problem.”

September 15, 1981

3:02:24 A.M.

Avista Adventist Hospital

Louisville, Colorado

The sounds of machines beeping quietly and hurried footsteps slowly began to penetrate the darkness, until the young woman found herself regaining consciousness. She slowly blinked her eyes open, looking around the room in confusion for a few seconds before she remembered how she had ended up in the middle of a hospital recovery room. She rolled her head to one side and saw the heart monitor and IV drip standing beside the bed, the soft beeps of the machine keeping a kind of beat.

She tried to lift her head and only managed an inch or two above the pillow, but it was enough to see the various pieces of equipment hooked up to her arms. Footsteps began to approach her bed and she let her head fall back against the pillow. A man in a white coat appeared around the curtain blocking the view from her bed to the one next to it. The man had short, graying hair and glasses that hung around his neck. He grabbed a clipboard hanging from the end of the woman’s bed and walked toward the head, looking over something on the clipboard.

“Well, Miss Torres... how are you feeling, first of all?”

“Like hell,” she replied in a cracked, gravelly tone.

“Well, I’d say after what you’ve just been through...”

“Where’s my kid?”

The doctor faltered slightly and glanced down at his clipboard, clearing his throat quietly. The girl stared the doctor down until he finally caved, cleared his throat, and began to speak



again.

“The child... didn’t make it. There were... complications.”

The girl’s hands clenched into fists and she sucked in a deep breath before pressing her lips tightly together and turning her head to one side. The sounds of the doctor awkwardly shuffling the papers on the clipboard could be heard from just off to her right, but the girl wasn’t paying any real attention to him. Finally, she composed herself enough to turn back toward him and cleared her throat.

“Was it... a boy or girl?” she asked.

The doctor remained silent for a few seconds, staring down at the papers before him before letting out a heavy sigh and looking down at her.

“Girl.”

Hot tears began to roll down the girl’s face as the doctor glanced back toward the end of the bed. A nurse in light green scrubs was standing by the edge of the curtain between the woman’s bed and the one next to hers, patiently waiting for them to finish.

“Dr. Mattison, you’re needed down the hall,” she said quietly and began to walk away.

“Excuse me Miss Torres, but I will be back,” the doctor said, gently placing a hand on her shoulder, but she squirmed enough that he quickly pulled it away, slowly returning his grip to the clipboard. “I’m truly sorry for your loss... it’s... hard to tell a young mother...”

He hesitated a moment longer before turning and hanging the clipboard at the end of the bed, once again. With one last glance toward the young woman, he turned and quickly walked off, disappearing behind the curtain as his footsteps quickly faded into the general sound of the hospital. Once he had gone, the girl slammed her fist down on the bed, causing one of the machines to begin beeping frantically for a few seconds before it returned to its normal process. She stared up at the ceiling as she tried to hold the tears back, her fingers curled tightly into fists.

After about ten minutes, she heard the sound of footsteps approaching again, and then someone appeared at the end of her bed. She lowered her head to get a better look at them and

immediately recognized both of her parents, guided by a nurse. As soon as she saw them, she broke down again and their faces fell. They moved up on either side of her as she leaned forward and hugged her mother tightly, her father running one hand across the back of her shoulders reassuringly.

“She didn’t make it... she never made it...”

September 15, 1981

3:45:24 A.M.

Near Denver, Colorado

Jameson awoke with a pounding headache and barely able to move. He groaned and put one hand to his head, but quickly pulled it away as needles of pain shot across his skull; it definitely seemed to be fractured. He managed to open his eyes, but everything seemed incredibly blurry. He blinked a few times and managed to clear most of the haze. He could feel something warm trickling down the back of his neck, and didn’t need to check to know that it was blood. He glanced around and realized that he was seated in the cab of the ambulance again, but he couldn’t remember how he had gotten there.

He tried to unclip his seatbelt, but it wouldn’t release. His tugging became more insistent, but for whatever reason it refused to budge. Applying more strength did nothing, so he began to pull at the cloth strap, but it seemed rather firmly locked in place.

Suddenly, his memories all came rushing back to him: pulling into Meecham Medical Research Laboratories, the guard questioning them, pulling up to a set of doors in the back, bringing the newborn to the waiting man in a dress shirt...

“Broder...”

“I’m assuming this is what we’re looking for?”

The man, younger than Jameson had expected, had pointed to the newborn in his partner’s arms.

“Let’s get a look at her.”

“The mother’s last name is Torres,” Jameson had said, swallowing nervously under the look of the man from inside the

lab as he carefully took hold of the newborn. “Just... I don’t know, in case it was important.”

The smile he had given him—small, yet not reaching his eyes—had been enough to set off several alarm bells, but apparently not enough.

“It may be, thank you... thank you both, gentlemen. Your work has been for a good cause. One day, this will all pay off.”

A swift, heavy hit to the side of the head later, and everything went dark until moments ago in the driver’s seat of the ambulance, although one final phrase was left floating about his head.

“We need to clean that up. Don’t need any questions.”

“Fuck!” Jameson screamed, punching the top of the steering wheel, despite the head-splitting amount of pain both the exclamation and the motion caused.

Suddenly, the vehicle seemed to lurch and he put one hand on the dashboard in an attempt to steady himself. He turned to his left to look out the window and found that he could barely see more than twenty feet away due to the rain. The vehicle lurched again and he swore that he could feel it tipping forward, as well. He struggled to remove the seatbelt, once again, but still to no avail, so he began to frantically pull on the cloth in an attempt to yank it free. The vehicle lurched again, but this time it definitely tipped forward a bit, and he thought he heard the sound of metal scraping against something.

That was when he realized that the forward motion of the ambulance hadn’t stopped, and it was beginning to slide faster. With a loud grinding sound, the ambulance’s front end pitched sharply forward and Jameson felt the forward movement begin to accelerate.

“Shit!” he exclaimed and began to tug on the seatbelt even more frantically.

The vehicle began to roll faster, and he tried to grab the wheel to control it, but there was little he could do, it jumped and bounced underneath his hands with little regard to whatever he tried to do. As he stared out the windshield, his fate slowly beginning to take hold, his vision of whatever lay before him became clearer, until the ambulance ran head-on into the water.

He was thrown forward into the seatbelt, but it held him tightly in his seat, still refusing to give way. After a few seconds, the unmistakable feeling that the ambulance was sinking began to take hold of Jameson, and he redoubled his efforts to get loose. Water was beginning to seep in from around the doors and fill the floor space of the cab. Jameson twisted around to look into the back, searching for something that could aid his escape. He spotted a pair of scissors typically used to cut the clothing off patients when the EMTs needed to get to their wounds, and he desperately reached for them. After a few seconds, it became apparent that, no matter how hard he tried, Jameson would never be able to reach them.

The water had reached his knees, and was now beginning to trickle in through the vents in the dashboard. He pulled on the belt with even greater urgency, but whatever his assailant had done to tamper with it combined with the freezing water numbing his fingers made him completely incapable of removing himself from its grasp. The only thing he could think to do now was simply pound on the driver's window and scream, hoping someone would hear him.

Each shout sent new waves of pain shooting across his skull, but he knew that in a few minutes it wouldn't matter, unless he could attract someone's help. Out of desperation, he tried flipping on the ambulance's lights and siren, but they refused to work; the water must have shorted out the battery.

It took only about a minute for the water to reach his neck, and the icy temperature forced whatever air he could suck in with each gasp out of his lungs. Finally, he took one last breath before his head slipped underwater. He could only watch as the ambulance sank farther into the lake, the cab now completely filled with water. With his final act of resignation, Jameson closed his eyes and exhaled before sucking in the icy lake water.

After only minutes, his consciousness faded, and he drifted off into a darkness devoid of light, sound, or feeling as the ambulance continued its descent to the bottom.

September 15, 1981

3:38:29 A.M.

Meecham Medical Research Laboratories  
Near Denver, Colorado

The steady beeping of a cardiograph filled the room as Jared and Jonathan stood over a small steel table, staring intently at what lay on its surface. The newborn girl lay on a small white cloth spread across the table, her tiny arms and legs moving as she let out small noises somewhere between whimpering and crying. Jared and Jonathan were clothed in blue lab clothes, similar to doctors' scrubs, with white latex gloves and masks over their mouths and noses.

Jared was preparing a syringe from a bottle marked with scrawling handwriting in black permanent marker. After withdrawing an exact amount, he removed the needle from the bottle and looked back down at the girl, placing the glass container on the steel table as he did. He glanced up at Jonathan and nodded. Taking a deep breath, Jared prepared the syringe and began to move toward the newborn. Jonathan gently rolled her onto her side as Jared carefully positioned the needle just above her back. He inhaled deeply before letting out a deep sigh, focusing intently on the head of the needle.

With intense care and precision, he inserted the needle right next to her tiny spine, quickly and carefully draining the syringe of its contents. The newborn began to cry and scream as he quickly pulled the needle out and placed it on the table. Jonathan gently returned her to her original position as Jared prepared another needle from another bottle.

"What are you doing?" Jonathan asked.

"Humans are larger and vastly more complex than rodents, Jonathan," he said, calmly.

"So you're going to pump more of that into her?" he asked incredulously.

"I've done the work," Jared replied, withdrawing the needle from the bottle. "I know exactly how much is needed in ratio to the rats and mice."

Jonathan bit his lip under his mask, but decided not to say anything. Jared turned back to the tiny girl on the table before

them and carefully lifted one of her arms. She tried to squirm away, but he held her just tightly enough that she couldn't. He carefully inserted the very tip of the needle into her arm and emptied its contents. Removing the needle, he let her arm fall back by her side as her squabbling began anew. Jared sighed and pulled the mask down away from his face, grinning slightly.

"I'll take care of these," Jonathan said, taking the needles and bringing them over to the "biological waste disposal" container.

They removed their lab clothes and tossed them in a hamper across the room before returning to the table and looking down at the infant. They watched her in silence for a few seconds before Jonathan cleared his throat.

"She needs a name," he said. "A real one, not some test subject number."

Jared nodded, still staring down at her.

"The driver said her mother's last name was Torres," he offered.

Jonathan thought for a second before responding.

"I've got it."

After a few seconds of silence, Jared glanced over at him.

"Please, do share."

Jonathan shook his head slightly and blinked a few times before wiping one eye with his hand.

"Amaryss."

Jared nodded slowly, thinking it over in his head. Finally, he grinned and gently picked her up, holding her before him almost how a proud father might.

"Amaryss Torres... a special name for a special girl."

## 2

# A Special Girl

March 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1993  
6:25:36 A.M.  
Silver Springs, Nevada

The sounds of the old, wood house shifting in the silver of near-dawn echoed down the long, empty hallways, the heat already rising as the first telltale hints of light lit the sky. Scarcely any pictures adorned the walls and a lone ornamental rug lay in the center of the living room floor. A wall-hung clock near a set of stairs in the center of the structure ticked steadily into the early morning. The mixture of moon and sunlight filtering through drawn shades cast the second floor hallway in a faintly illuminated, blue-silver glow.

A doorknob slowly turning broke the silence of the building as the second door from the very end of the hallway slowly drifted open. A head adorned with long, dark hair peeked out from the darkness before quickly disappearing again. The girl it belonged to quickly slipped out of the same doorway a moment later and silently pulled the door closed behind her. She turned to face toward the stairs and silently began to creep forward. Upon reaching them, she quickly began to descend, taking care not to make too much noise as she did.

The main entryway at the bottom of the stairs was almost entirely too dark to see, but she made her way to the front door and slowly undid the deadbolt lock by memory alone before turning the handle and pulling it open just a crack. A gust of cool wind and a sliver of pale light immediately came through the narrow opening, causing her to close it quickly and glance back nervously, holding her breath. After several silent seconds where no other footsteps approached, the girl opened the door just wide enough for her to slip through and pulled it closed behind her.

It was almost a full moon, and so combined with the rising glow from the sunrise to the east everything was relatively well-

illuminated. The girl took a few steps forward and stopped at the edge of the porch, grabbing a post with one hand while she leaned against it, placing most of her weight on one leg as she rubbed the opposite foot against her shin. Her grey eyes slowly scanned the open expanse before her, taking in every ounce of detail as her fingers drummed slowly on her wooden support.

Releasing the post, she moved down the short set of stairs and stepped off onto the sandy ground below. The small rocks stung her feet slightly, but she cast them off as nothing more than mild annoyances. A gust of wind picked up across the open ground again, blowing into, and seemingly through, the girl. A shiver wracked her slender frame and she rubbed her upper arms subconsciously, suddenly rethinking her decision to step outside in nothing more than the athletic shorts and T-shirt she had worn to bed.

Despite these thoughts, she made her way over to a wooden fence that ran from the house to a separate wooden shed where a silver sedan could be seen sticking out from one of the bays. The girl quickly scaled it and took a seat atop the rough wooden beam, relaxing her shoulders slightly as she stared out at the open expanse of desert before her. She remained there for several minutes, simply watching the shadows of the rocky outcroppings in the distance grow longer across the silver-tinged sand between her and them. A soft wind gust lifted her long brown hair ever so slightly as she closed her eyes and let the feeling wash over her, the shivering from before less severe.

“Amaryss, what are you doing?”

She jumped in surprise and almost fell off the fence, but caught herself at the last second as her eyes shot open and she spun around to face the voice.

A man with short-cut dark hair and dark green eyes was standing just outside the open door to the house, already dressed in a light-colored Polo and somewhat darker chinos. A small bag was slung over one shoulder as his free hand played with a ring of keys.

“What are you doing up so early?” Amaryss asked, remaining where she was on the fence.

“I have to meet someone in Reno,” he replied, “but I could ask you the same thing. I was surprised when I heard you



marching off down the hall.”

Amaryss scoffed.

“I was very quiet!”

“Not enough, apparently.”

She sighed and spun so she was facing in the general direction of the house.

“So Jared, what’s so wrong about me being out here, anyway?”

“Well, it’s still dark, and you never know what kind of snakes or other *critters* could be out around here,” he replied.

Amaryss rolled her eyes and sighed.

“I’m not going to get bitten,” she said. “Snakes don’t even come out until the sun’s up.”

“You never know...” Jared said, “there could be some special... *Nocte Serpens* out here.”

Amaryss gave him a look and he grinned slightly.

“Come on, just get back inside,” he said, gesturing to the open door.

“But I like it out here...” she protested.

“Amaryss...”

She sighed and nodded as he let his hand fall to his side.

With one last look over her shoulder at the desert behind her, Amaryss hopped off the fence and hurried back to the door, suddenly feeling self-conscious about the possibility of something biting her exposed feet and legs. She hurried onto the porch and came to a stop in front of Jared.

“I’m surprised to see *you* up so early,” he commented, looking down at her, although it was beginning to lose its intimidation power as she grew ever closer to his height.

“It’s not like I was doing anything bad,” she pouted, placing her hands on her hips as she glowered up at him. “You saw me: I was just sitting there!”

“But like I also said...”

Amaryss blew her breath through her lips as she waved dismissively, looking down at her feet as she began to pace in slow, narrow figure-eight patterns in front of the front door, moving as if to unheard music in her head. Jared’s lips drew into a thin line for a moment as his jaw worked slowly behind them.

Finally, he sighed, shaking the keys in his hand slightly, which drew Amaryss's attention, once again, although her pacing continued.

"Like I said, I have to visit someone. I should be back by later this afternoon, though."

He jabbed the tip of his car key at her pointedly as he raised his eyebrows.

"Don't wander too far."

Amaryss made a noncommittal sound as she looked back down at her feet, now lifting her arms slightly on either side as she walked as if on a tightrope, one foot directly in front of the other.

"There are plenty of things to do around here in the meantime."

She gave him a dubious look as he smirked.

"You just have to discover them."

Amaryss rolled her eyes as she stopped moving, finally, and let her arms fall to her sides.

"Yeah, just like every other day..."

Jared sighed deeply through his nose at her grumbling before gesturing to the open front door, once again.

"There's some of that cereal you like in the kitchen, and... stuff in the fridge, too."

Amaryss nodded and mumbled something unintelligible as she folded her arms over her chest and began to move toward the open door. Jared opened his mouth to say something else, but she had stepped into the front hallway and kicked the door closed behind her with a slam before he could utter a sound.

Amaryss stood in the center of the hallway, glaring down it toward the dark living room at the far end before her eyes switched to the door to the kitchen. A frown tugged at her lips before she instead turned and headed back upstairs, trudging into the bedroom she had snuck out of minutes ago.

She slowly made her way across the dark room to her bed and fell onto it, arms sprawled out to either side of her, to a loud creak in protest from the bedsprings. Her eyes glazed over as she stared up at the ceiling, her mind far too active to even think about sleeping again. Instead, she tried to let it take its course and see where that trail led.

She instantly found her mind returning to a familiar topic, one which she had given much thought to previously. Ever since Amaryss could remember, her world had largely consisted of only Jared and her; they had moved several times over the years, and he occasionally had visits from other adults who he seemed to know in some way or another, but there had never really been anyone else significant in her life. She had never had any real *friends*.

With another heavy sigh, Amaryss rolled onto her side and reached over the edge of the bed, feeling around a shelf in a small nightstand until her fingers finally brushed up against something with a smooth, glossy surface and slightly rougher edges. She grabbed the notebook and pulled it out, dropping it on the bed beside her before retrieving a flashlight from the drawer in the nightstand and rolling onto her back.

She placed the flashlight on her chest and pinned it in place with her chin as she flipped through the pages covered in messy handwriting and crude doodles until she found the correct one. The words, “My Friend” were scrawled across the top in large, shaky handwriting, followed by many lines varying from a single word to short sentences describing traits and characteristics of said fabled best friend.

The words were practically ingrained in her mind by now, but she read them anyway:

- my height (*maybe taller, but not much shorter*)
- brown hair (*blonde maybe*)
- pretty green eyes (*or a dark blue*)
- happy (*smiles a lot!*)
- likes to have adventures

The list went on in a similar fashion from there. Amaryss had attempted to draw a picture at one point, but it had been scratched out as she felt it was absolutely horrible and refused to acknowledge it as an “accurate” depiction.

After re-reading the page for what felt like the millionth time, Amaryss sighed and closed the notebook, letting it fall flat on her chest. She lazily moved the beam of the flashlight about the ceiling as she tapped the fingers of her free hand on the hard,

glossy cover of the small, black book.

She could feel her heels near the edge of the mattress and attempted to stretch out further to see if she was actually taller than her twin bed. The answer seemed to be: not quite. The top of her head came up to Jared's chin, now, which amused her greatly as she found herself no longer looking up at him as if he were some imposing figure, anymore; he still had quite a bit of size on her, though. Jared had always called her "wiry," but she had really only begun to notice, or care, lately. Still, the memory of how badly sunburnt he had gotten on a hiking trip recently while she looked as if she had barely been outside brought a smirk to her lips before her motions with the flashlight came to a sudden stop.

"He'd never know..."

Her smirk turned into a full-on grin as she jabbed the power button and shoved the flashlight back into her nightstand, carefully placing the notebook on the shelf below it, as well. Within a minute or two, she was fully dressed in a pair of jeans with well-worn scuff marks on the knees and frayed seams at the ends and an old, red T-shirt with some TV show character she barely knew and dropping onto her knees beside her bed with a slight grimace. After several moments of searching, she pulled her sneakers from their hiding place and quickly donned them, tying the laces as quickly as she could without them immediately coming undone.

Amaryss jumped to her feet, looking around her room for anything she thought she might need, but ended up shrugging and hurrying out of the room. She flew down the stairs, hopping the last three steps and skidding unsteadily to a halt before she slammed into the front door. With the spare set of keys to the house in hand, she threw open the front door and slipped outside.

The brilliant reds, golds, and pinks of the sunrise immediately confronted her and she squinted slightly, turning away to close the door behind her and locking it. The keys slid into her right front pocket as she turned back to face the front of the porch, the sunlight seeming less harsh this time. She stood at the top of the short set of stairs for several seconds, her hands on her hips as she surveyed the open land stretching out for miles in each direction. Her gaze finally fell on the open, flat expanse off to her left and she hopped over the steps before her and began

walking along the side of the house until she reached the fence she had been sitting on when Jared had found her. She carefully slipped through the center between the two wooden beams and looked around, as if he hadn't actually left and was waiting to pop out, again.

The bright, focused sunlight from the East caused her to raise one hand to shade her eyes, quickly making her wish that she had grabbed a pair of sunglasses before leaving, but she told herself that it was too late now.

Amaryss had heard rumor of a small ravine that ran along the desert roughly a mile or so behind the house, but she had never been there. In fact, she had strictly been forbidden from visiting it. With a smirk, she set off walking in the general direction she believed it to be from the back of the house, since said rumors didn't give an exact location.

As she walked, the brilliant colors in the sky began to turn a harsh gold as the sun quickly warmed the rocks and sand around her. The ground and the horizon began to fade together in a hazy blur off in the distance, obscuring the line where the ground ended and the sky began. Amaryss couldn't help but grin as she kept walking, eyes focused on this strange in-between zone.

March 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1993  
5:34:25 P.M.  
Silver Springs, Nevada

Amaryss's eyes flicked toward the hallway at the sound of the front door opening, her position on the couch shifting slightly as she wiped the clammy feeling in the palms of her hands on the cushions beside her. Footsteps drew closer and closer as she forced herself to stare ahead at the TV, the hosts of the local news station talking about some robbery at a jewelry store. A moment later, Jared appeared in the doorway, the same bag from that morning slung over one shoulder as he twirled the ring of keys on his index finger.

"I hope you didn't sit in that exact position all day."

Amaryss cleared her throat as she continued to stare straight ahead.

“What else was I supposed to do?”

After several moments of silence, she spared a glance over at the man in the doorway. His eyebrows were raised slightly as he stared back at her.

“Did those scrapes come from an exciting episode of General Hospital, then?”

Amaryss looked confused for a second before glancing down at her arm and groaning. A large, red patch that was still somewhat shiny from the antiseptic ointment was clearly visible just below her elbow.

“Now, I think I remember telling you to just hang out here and ‘not go far’ while I was gone, correct?”

“But I didn’t go far!” she shot back, throwing her hands into the air and revealing the raw skin on her palms, as well.

“Jesus, Amaryss...”

Jared crossed the room and took a seat on the couch beside her, grabbing her left arm and flipping it over to look at the red, sensitive skin that ran from the heel of her palm almost all the way to her fingertips. She frowned as she tried to pull away, but he held her firmly by her wrist.

“Where were you all day, then?”

“Not all day...”

“Really? Because it looks like you just put Neosporin on this.”

Amaryss’s teeth ground as she glared over at Jared.

“I was just out there,” she nodded in the general direction behind her. “I guess I just lost track of time.”

“Doing what? Grabbing cacti?”

She remained silent, staring down at her palm, a slight stinging sensation building in it as her attention fell on the raw skin.

“I told you not to go to that ravine, before.”

She shook some hair out of her face as she looked over at him, once again, the tips of her ears growing hot as fought to control her tongue.

“Did you fall?”

“No!”

He stared pointedly at her as she sighed and looked off to her right.

“It’s a good thing you weren’t seriously injured, otherwise what would you have done if you couldn’t climb back out?”

Her face began to heat up, as well, as she remained silent, her jaw clenching tighter and tighter.

“Amaryss... how *did* you manage to get back out?”

“I climbed,” she snapped, finally looking back over at him.

He stared back at her for several long moments in silence before clearing his throat.

“Amaryss, I’m trying to prevent you from getting yourself hurt or killed out there,” he continued, shaking her arm slightly for emphasis, “and this just goes toward proving my point.”

“I’m not going to get killed!” she spat, suddenly yanking her arm from his grasp with a sharp, jerking motion that nearly threw her sideways across the couch.

Jared looked surprised by her sudden display of strength, but before he could recover, she had leapt to her feet, grimacing slightly as she bent her left knee slowly.

“It’s just some scrapes. I didn’t break my arm or anything,” she continued, glaring down at him. “I’m twelve years old. I don’t need to be treated like a little kid anymore!”

With that, she spun on her heel, causing a small squeak between her skin and the wood floor, and quickly strode toward the hallway. By the time she reached the bottom of the stairs she didn’t feel hands grabbing her shoulders to hold her back, but she rushed up them, just to be safe. The lock engaged on her door with a loud click before she threw herself onto her bed, staring up at the ceiling.

Several seconds of silence passed before she slowly held her raw hands up before her, staring at them against the white backdrop of her ceiling. Her fingers curled into fists as a burning sensation radiated from her palms, but she ignored it. Something felt different when she did... something was present that hadn’t been before. It flowed through her veins, coursing down her arms and through her fingers, the sensation rather alien to her.

It felt like power.

It had reared its head at the bottom of the ravine, as Amaryss had laid on her back, staring up at the sliver of blue sky between the stop rock walls that she had fallen from moments before. She thought her footing had been secure, but as her full weight had come to rest on the small ledge six or seven feet from the sandy floor, the rocky surface had given way, leaving her weightless as she fell away from the wall.

It was only as she was lying on her back, once again, but this time at the top of the ravine, she had begun to truly question this new feeling. The ascent had been much easier than the descent, which shouldn't have made any sense, she reasoned. Neither did her ability to make the several-foot leap to the first handhold from the bottom of the ravine.

Amaryss let out a heavy sigh as she relaxed her hands and let her arms fall onto the bed at her sides, but her eyes remained fixed on the ceiling. After a few seconds, she forced herself to look away and she turned her head to look over at her nightstand, her thoughts returned to the black notebook stored within its shelves. Pushing herself closer to the opposite edge of her bed, she extended one arm toward it, fingers outstretched toward the familiar black cover.

Suddenly, intense pain shot through her body, as if borne along her spine. Amaryss let out a scream and arched her back, her head instantly snapping around to look up at the ceiling once again as everything faded to black around her.



### 3

## First of a Kind

August 29<sup>th</sup>, 1999  
4:28:36 A.M.  
Redding, California

I instantly awoke to the sound of myself screaming, my back arched as if in pain. I fell onto my side as I stared blankly ahead, sweat running down my back and forehead, breathing heavily. After a few seconds, I forced myself to hold my breath for a moment or two and slowly let it out. Looking down at my hand in front of me, I noticed how I was clutching the sheets in a death-grip, so I carefully relaxed my fingers and began to push myself into a sitting position. My eyes travelled about the dark interior of the room as I waited for my hammering heart to return to a normal pulse.

Running my hand back through my hair, I could feel how wet it was and grimaced. I let my arm fall to my side as my gaze came to rest in the center of the wall across from the foot of my bed, the shape of some piece of furniture hazy and undefined as I stared blankly ahead. Finally, I blinked a few times and shoved the covers off me, turning to the side and putting my feet on the floor. It felt cold to my bare skin, but I preferred it to the oven from moments ago. I twisted around so I could see the clock on the opposite side of my bed, staring at the faintly-lit numbers for a few seconds without comprehending what they meant.

“Four-thirty?” I mumbled, rubbing my eyes tiredly.

I got to my feet and padded around the bed to the door set into the same wall that ran behind the head. A quick glance into the hallway beyond revealed that all of the lights were still out, so it was almost pitch-black; it appeared almost as if there was nothing but a void beyond my door. I slipped out through the smallest space I allowed myself and silently closed the door behind me. Sneaking as quickly as I could, I made my way to a door about five feet down the hallway and on the opposite side, easily finding the handle and opening it from the instinct built by making

this trip hundreds of times.

I slipped inside and closed the door before reaching for the light switch, but paused as I glanced around the room and realized that someone had plugged a small air freshener that doubled as a night-light into the socket beside the sink, so I left the lights off. Moving over to the sink, I turned it on and collected water in my cupped hands, quickly drinking as much of it as I could before it drained through my fingers. I took three more cups to drink before splashing the fourth one over my face. I reached to the right and felt around for a few seconds until I located the hand towel and pulled it off its rack. After wiping my face with it, I placed it on the countertop around the sink and stared at my reflection in the mirror.

“What’s your deal, Amaryss?” I muttered.

My grey eyes looked incredibly red and bloodshot in the mirror, matching how tired I felt. My long, dark brown hair looked rather wet, whether from the water I had just splashed on myself or from sweat I couldn’t tell, but I was leaning toward the latter. I could see the skin on my chest exposed by the neckline of my black T-shirt glistening in the faint light and wrinkled my nose slightly, scrunching my lips mostly to the left.

It shouldn’t have even been that hot in my room, or anywhere in this house. I was only wearing a pair of black gym shorts and a t-shirt, to boot. A sigh forced its way out of me as I turned away from the mirror and put the hand towel back on its rack.

I knew the reason I had woken up looking like such a wreck, but I thought that maybe refusing to acknowledge it would help. It was something I had been trying for years, but obviously it wasn’t working. Every so often, I would relive the same events in the ravine where my life seemed to become different than every other normal person I had met on this planet... the afternoon in the ravine when I began to realize what had been done to me.

I silently made my way back to my room and slipped inside, closing the door before shuffling over to my bed and falling onto it. That day had been the first time I had felt that strength... that hint of something more lurking beneath my skin. I could still feel it, but I had grown used to it, almost accepted it. As the years

went by, I pieced the puzzle together until I had reached a conclusion that seemed reasonable enough: Jared was the cause of whatever was happening to me.

I couldn't say it was entirely bad, though: I had near the strength and agility of an Olympic athlete without having to do anywhere near as much work. Some of the other benefits of that weren't worth complaining about, either; "wiry" Amaryss was no more. I grinned slightly and sighed at myself before rolling onto my side and facing the wall, still remaining on top of the covers.

I didn't want to look at the clock on my nightstand just so it could tell me that it was still too early in the morning to be awake. It was better not knowing. I let out a heavy sigh and closed my eyes, trying to just calm down and fall back asleep.

After a few minutes, I must have drifted off, because the next thing I knew a voice was shouting in my ear at maximum volume.

"Amaryss!"

I awoke with a start, looking around wildly for a few seconds before my vision settled on a pair of eyes inches from mine. Someone was crouched beside the bed, their hands resting on the very edge of it.

"Christ, what does it take to wake you up?"

I groaned and rolled over as I heard a heavy sigh from behind me.

"Usually the alarm is enough," I muttered, staring at the clock and waiting for my vision to finally focus on the numbers. "It's 8:45 in the morning, what are *you* doing up, Kailyn?"

The figure at my bedside was a girl about my age with short, brown hair and blue-green eyes. She was a little shorter than me, but not by a lot, she was maybe 5'5" where I was 5'7". She appeared relatively thin with a more hourglass-like physique, which she went back and forth on pretending like she didn't have by wearing generic, loose clothing, or seemingly flaunting it with tight-fitting jeans and slimming dresses. Today she had gone with a brown-and-cream colored sweater and a pair of relatively slim dark jeans, I noticed.

"Well, apparently my voice isn't as strong as your alarm," Kailyn remarked, standing up and walking around the end of my

bed to lean against my bureau.

“I guess it depends on what you said,” I replied, giving her a coy look.

Kailyn raised one eyebrow and dipped her head slightly, pushing her rectangular, black-rimmed glasses back up her nose.

“I assure you it was only the sweetest nothings.”

I grinned and slid to the edge of the bed, placing my feet on the floor as I stretched my arms over my head and arched my back slightly, a yawn escaping me at the same time. Done stretching, I got to my feet and walked toward the bureau where Kailyn was standing.

“Excusez-moi,” I said and Kailyn pushed herself off the dresser. “So what did you wake me up for, anyway?”

“I just couldn’t let you waste the day away,” she replied in a falsely sincere tone.

I made a sound halfway between a snort and a laugh as I pulled out a red T-shirt and a pair of jeans that I assumed had been washed somewhat recently. Turning around, I leaned back against the bureau, my clothes held draped over my arms before me. I gave Kailyn a questioning look until she finally gave in and explained further.

“Jared’s all... ‘atwitter,’” she said, “so I don’t know about you, but I think either something interesting is happening, or something is going wrong again.”

“Bet you it’s the latter,” I said. “Something is always ‘going wrong’ in his world.”

“And then consequently in ours,” Kailyn added.

I nodded, both of us falling into a heavy silence.

“Well, I’m going to shower, so I’ll be back in a few minutes,” I sighed, breaking the stillness.

“By ‘a few’ do you mean thirty?”

“No, I mean, like, ten,” I shot back.

“I’ll believe that when I see it,” Kailyn responded.

I stuck my tongue out at her before making my way back to the bathroom, closing and locking the door behind me. My clothes fell in an unceremonious heap on the floor beneath two towels hanging from racks on the wall as I let out a heavy sigh. Moments later, I had stripped down and turned the water on, stepping into

the shower before fully checking the temperature. I stood there for at least a minute or two, letting the lukewarm water run over me as it grew warmer; the constant drumming on my back from the steady stream felt good, almost like a massage.

Once it was sufficiently warm, I decided that I had been standing still too long and began to actually commence with my shower. As I went through the typical motions, my mind began to wander. If Kailyn was right when she said that something had Jared all worked up, nothing good could be coming of it. Whenever he began acting like that, something bad had either just happened, or would happen.

Sometimes it meant moving again. I couldn't even remember how many places I had lived by now. The house in Nevada was... number two or three. I couldn't remember. After that house we moved to the one in Colorado. I hadn't minded that one too much; I actually kind of liked it up there in the mountains. Most importantly, though, the Colorado house was when Kailyn joined us. We picked her up on the way from Nevada in another one of these mysterious facilities Jared kept stopping by with me, and now the two of us. Whoever he met there tended to know him well and seemed reasonably excited and interested to see us, particularly Kailyn and me, which was more than a little uncomfortable, typically.

Two years ago, though, Jared told us we were packing up and heading out again, and so we ended up here in California.

It was a good thing that Kailyn's and my personalities seemed to agree enough to let us get along without wanting to kill each other very often, otherwise the past four or five years would have been pretty rough. It wasn't like we had lots of other options, though, as we were the only two people our age with whom we had contact. Just like best friends, I guess.

I turned the water off and pushed some of the wet clumps of hair out of my face before pulling the shower curtain back and reaching for one of the faded blue towels hanging on the rack. I quickly dried off and dressed, pulling my hair out from under my collar and shaking my head slightly. My attempt to brush it was essentially worthless, but I didn't feel the need to really care how I looked today; something told me we'd be spending at least a little

bit of time in a car.

I dropped the brush back in a small basket where Kailyn and I kept ours, although I always teased her about the need for her to actually have one at all.

“It’s short enough, why don’t you kinda just run your hands through it and call it ‘good enough?’”

“Hey, what I do in regards to my personal style is my business. Don’t even get me started on tips for you.”

Grinning slightly at the thought of our usual argument, I grabbed my pajamas off the floor and opened the door, heading back to my room. Not finding Kailyn inside, I simply dropped the clothes on the bed and walked out, pulling the door closed behind me. With the usual creaks and groans from the wood steps, I descended the stairs and took a right, passing through the living room on the way to the kitchen. I found Kailyn taking a seat on one of the bar stools at the island in the center of the room, spoon in hand and a red bowl of cereal before her.

“One of those days, huh?” she asked, looking over at me.

“If you’re talking about how I look right now: shut up.”

Kailyn laughed as I made a face at her and walked around the opposite side of the island to the cupboards in search of something for breakfast.

“Where’d Jared go?” I asked, not turning around.

“He stormed out about five minutes ago saying something about a car...” Kailyn replied, her voice muffled by the cereal in it.

“I said I was going to start the car.”

I glanced over my shoulder at the gagging sound from Kailyn to see Jared walking in from the door to the garage, eyeing her warily as she pounded her chest with one fist. Something about his general demeanor told me that he was angry, and I had a good feeling about what he was going to say next.

“We don’t have time to eat right now, we have to get going. Kailyn... finish what you can, I guess, and Amaryss, we’ll see if there’s something on the way.”

I sighed and closed the cabinets I was currently searching, turning around to face the other two.

“Pack your bags. We leave in five minutes, girls,” he said and walked off toward his office.

As soon as he was out of the kitchen, I gave Kailyn a look, but she only grimaced and coughed before attempting to eat a few more bites of her cereal. Seemingly deciding she was done with, she got up to dump it in the sink. I knew almost too well that I would probably not be eating until much later that day, so I began a quick and desperate scramble to find any kind of snack food I could potentially take with me.

A little over five minutes later, and armed with my duffel bag of clean and dirty laundry along with five granola bars that had been in the cabinet for a questionably long time, I took a seat alongside Kailyn in the back of Jared's grey sedan. He quickly backed out of the garage and down the short driveway, pausing only to press the button to close the garage door before shooting into the street and slamming on the brakes. A second later, he had shifted into drive and we were rocketing away down the quiet residential street at least ten miles per hour above the speed limit.

Unwrapping the first of my granola bars, I looked at it for a few seconds, trying to decide whether it was going to be decent or stale. Finally, I shrugged and took a bite of it. My teeth ached instantly after my first bite into the rather hard bar. My discomfort must have showed, because I heard a snicker and glanced over to see Kailyn watching me with amusement.

"Shut up," I said through a mouthful of stale granola and fake chocolate drizzle.

Her only response was to laugh even louder, which was when I sighed and turned away, looking out the window instead. Our house was at the end of a quiet cul-de-sac full of primarily older residents. Most of the houses on this street were newer, built within the past ten years or so, and seemed to be rather expensive. We passed a "For Sale" sign in one of the front lawns, and I noticed that the asking price was around \$400,000.

For a long time, I had been wondering where Jared seemed to get all this money for the houses, cars, and such, or if perhaps these things were not quite legal. It made some sense that Jared would have money to spend around, seeing as he seemed to be associated with so many scientists, and I believed he was one himself, but he never really seemed to have a regular job he attended every day; usually it was just every once in a while, and

he was gone for three days at the most.

I sighed as I watched the houses give way to tall evergreens outside my window, settling in for the, most likely, long car ride ahead of us. It seemed that whenever Jared packed Kailyn and me into the car in a hurry and took off like this, it usually involved a three-hour car ride, sometimes even longer. It was simply standard procedure by now.

“You know,” Kailyn said, leaning in close to me and whispering in my ear, “we’re old enough that you’d think he could just leave us at the house.”

I nodded and leaned back toward her.

“You’d think, but somehow I doubt whatever we’re going to see involves only him.”

Kailyn nodded and slid down in her seat slightly, resting her elbow on the door and propping her head up with her fist. I leaned my head back and stared up at the ceiling, vaguely aware of the scenery whipping by outside the windows. The gentle vibration of the car on the road, combined with the sound of the tires on the asphalt, helped create a trance-like state as I just stared up at the grey upholstery above me.

I rolled my head to look out the window and toward the expanses of green stretching toward the horizon. After a few seconds, I realized that my eyes were closed, and I let out a heavy sigh, sliding lower in my seat and folding my arms across my chest.

August 29<sup>th</sup>, 1999

11:32:58 A.M.

Near Etna, California

The sound of a car door slamming jolted me awake. My eyes shot open and I looked around. I felt something pushing against my right arm and I spun my head toward it. Kailyn was grinning as she shoved me again.

“Arise, sleeping beauty,” she said, reaching back to open her door.

I muttered something unintelligible as I undid my seatbelt



and shoved my door open with my knee. My momentum continued as I rolled out of the car and onto my feet, using the door to help push myself into a standing position.

A large, two-story house seemingly built mostly out of wood sat before us, multiple large windows facing out toward the driveway. A glance behind us revealed a long, dirt driveway leading through the woods. I shut the door and glanced across the top of the car toward Kailyn, who was also looking back down the driveway. She returned the look a moment later and raised both her eyebrows. I sighed and turned back toward the house to find Jared standing a few feet from the front door, his hands in his pockets. The gravel crunched underneath my shoes as I began to walk toward him and the house, Kailyn assumedly following suit.

As I was about halfway to the door, it opened and Jared began to greet someone just inside it. They exchanged handshakes and Jared put on his best smile, but I knew it had to be an act. As I drew within the last ten feet, he turned toward us and gestured with his hand, causing me to instantly stop where I was. A man in a light blue Polo and khaki pants appeared just inside the doorway.

“Come here, come here!” Jared called, waving insistently toward me.

I glanced back to see Kailyn just behind me, an obvious feeling of unease in her eyes. We reluctantly trudged forward, coming to a stop at the bottom of the short steps leading up to the front door, my hands firmly placed in my back pockets.

“Bob, these are my charges, Amaryss and Kailyn,” Jared said, grinning as he spoke.

I nodded slightly, but kept my hands where they were.

“I’ve heard so much,” the man, Bob, replied, also grinning. “Little Amaryss... well, not so little, now.”

The hair on the back of my neck began to stand up as I fought the urge not to squirm in place.

“Well, come inside then, let’s not just bum around out here on the stoop,” Bob said, stepping away from the door.

Jared entered, motioning for Kailyn and me to follow him inside. I glanced to my side to find she had moved up right beside me.

“Why’s it always you that gets the attention?” she

muttered.

“You want it? Be my guest.”

“You know...” Kailyn said, glancing up toward the door before looking back at me, “I’ll let you take this one.”

Immediately upon entering the house, I was struck by how natural everything seemed to be. Stained wood was everywhere, from the stairs leading up to the second story to the doorframes to the floor. The second thing that occurred to me was just how expensive it all must have been. I glanced back at Kailyn, who was also looking around at the décor. She turned her gaze to me after she must have felt me looking at her, one corner of my mouth pulling back into a slight smirk.

“A real modest one this Bob is,” I remarked quietly.

Kailyn grinned and let the screen door swing closed behind her, closing the main storm door, as well. I wasn’t sure if I should take my shoes off to avoid damaging the wood floors, but I didn’t see any others by the door, so I assumed it was safe. The first large doorway on the right revealed a lavish living room straight from a rich person’s idea of a log cabin, complete with Bob and Jared just settling into two armchairs near a massive stone fireplace.

“Come in girls, come in!” Bob called, motioning toward us.

I slowly walked farther into the room, glancing around as I did. The walls were adorned with various mounted trophies that I questioned whether Bob had actually killed or not. A few logs sat in the fireplace, but, seeing as it was August, there was no fire going.

The overly-enthusiastic Bob gestured to a dark-green couch with thick cushions that sat across from the two armchairs. Without a word, I moved over to it and slowly took a seat, glancing over at Kailyn again as she settled in beside me. I could tell that we both shared the same feeling of unease by her hunched shoulders and hands clasped tightly between her knees.

“*At least we’re in the same boat, there.*”

“Amaryss... she was the first, correct?” Bob asked, looking over toward Jared.

“Was I the first what?” I cut in before he could answer.

Bob and Jared exchanged unreadable looks before he

turned back to me, a large smile on his face. It reminded me of someone's overly-nice uncle that they only saw during the holidays, and gave me kind of a creepy vibe.

"You were the first one of... Jared's charges," he said, laughing at the joke Jared had made earlier.

"Yeah, I guess," I replied, lacing my fingers together and placing my clasped hands between my knees to prevent them from playing with my jeans.

"I remember hearing about you and seeing pictures when you were just a little girl, no more than six or seven, I'd say."

I was more than a little curious how and why he had seen pictures of me when I was so young, but I held my questions in case it turned into some kind of interrogation.

"The good old days," I replied.

Bob laughed heartily and clapped his hand on his knee, looking over at Jared.

"To be young..." he remarked, finally calming down.

I could practically feel the awkwardness exuding from Kailyn and me, but we remained silent and composed, at least as best as I felt able.

"And may I ask who this lovely young lady is?" Bob asked, turning his attention to Kailyn.

"Kailyn Massey," she replied, smiling politely.

"Ah, very Irish... So you two are not sisters, no?"

We shook our heads and Bob laughed again.

"I figured as much, but couldn't hurt to ask," he remarked before turning his attention to Jared. "So, let us get down to the matter you called me about this morning."

"Yes," Jared said, clearly thankful that things were now getting back on track, "let's talk about that. How is Jeremy?"

The atmosphere instantly changed, all of the previous frivolity and light-heartedness disappearing. Bob shifted in his seat and pulled on his shirt collar slightly.

"You know, you girls must be hungry o-or thirsty if Jared got you up so early. There should be some coffee or—something—in the kitchen."

Both men glanced toward Kailyn and me, but didn't have to say a single word for us to understand the request.

“Yeah, sounds good,” Kailyn said and we quickly jumped to our feet and walked out of the room.

As soon as we had cleared the doorway, we both breathed sighs of relief and stopped. I ran one hand back through my hair as Kailyn leaned back against the wall.

“I don’t think I’ve ever been in a situation more awkward than that in my entire life,” Kailyn whispered, her eyes flicking over to look at me.

I nodded as I glanced down the hallway ahead of us. There were two more doors off of it: one a little ways down on the right, and the other at the very end. The door at the end was open, and I could see countertops and what seemed to be a knife block through it. Kailyn followed my gaze before looking back at me with a quizzical expression on her face.

“Do you think he was lying about the coffee?” she asked, nodding toward the door.

I shrugged but we began to move toward the doorway, trying to cause as little noise with our shoes on the wood floors as possible. When we were about five feet away, I suddenly heard a noise and instantly froze, grabbing Kailyn’s arm to stop her. She jumped slightly and spun her head to look at me.

“What’s the matter?” she whispered.

I put a finger to my lips to silence her and listened closely. It sounded something like labored breathing, punctuated by the occasional quiet gasp. I let go of Kailyn and silently began to creep toward the door. When I reached it, I leaned around the corner until I could just see into the room and stopped.

A boy with short, dark hair stood across the kitchen, focused intensely on something he was doing in front of him with his back to the door. I looked back at Kailyn and indicated for her to follow me into the room. We slowly moved in, but Kailyn jumped when she saw the boy, apparently making a noise loud enough for him to hear, because he instantly stopped what he was doing and froze. I held my breath as we all seemed to wait for whoever was going to make the next move.

Finally, he slowly began to turn around, revealing what he had been doing. A short, sharp knife was held in his right hand while blood ran from a gaping wound in the palm of his left hand.

Even my breathing stopped as fear paralyzed my body.

“Who are you?” he asked quietly, glaring at us with dark eyes. “What are you doing here?”

Neither Kailyn nor I answered. I didn’t think either of us was capable of speaking at that moment.

“What are you doing here?” he repeated more emphatically, causing us to jump.

“W-we’re just here with a friend of Bob’s,” I said, trying to control my voice as best I could. “Are y-you Jeremy?”

“How do you know me? Who are you?” he questioned, moving closer and becoming more agitated.

“I’m—” Kailyn began to respond, but he cut her off.

“Get out!” he shouted, waving the knife at us.

Both of us held up our hands as we began to move slowly toward the door.

“It’s okay, we’re not gonna do anything. See? We’re just leaving...”

“Don’t you fucking patronize me!” the boy, Jeremy I presumed, screamed and suddenly came at us with the knife.

Kailyn jumped to the left, toward the door, and I went to the right, farther into the kitchen. He was reaching across an island set in the center of the room, waving the bloodied knife at us with what seemed to be genuine malice in his eyes.

“Take it easy, kid!” Kailyn said, which only aggravated him further.

“Shut up!” he screeched, waving the knife at her.

“Hey, let’s just take a few seconds here!” I interrupted, drawing his attention to me.

“I’m gonna leave you for last, cause you’re the pretty one,” he growled, a demented smirk appearing on his face.

“*Excuse me?*” Kailyn remarked, actually sounding offended.

“Shut up, shut up!” he shouted, putting his hands to his head and shaking it rather violently.

I didn’t dare take my eyes off him for a second, lest he try to pull a fast one and stick the knife in my chest while I wasn’t looking. He staggered backwards a few steps and looked up at us, breathing heavily.

“I can feel it...” he muttered, a genuinely terrifying look in his eyes. “I can feel it... fucking burning under my s-s-skin.”

He looked down at the gaping wound in his palm and then over at the knife. I cringed, bracing for what would most likely come next.

“What’s burning?” Kailyn asked, effectively distracting him.

He blinked a few times and looked up at her.

“I don’t fucking know!” he said, his voice rising in pitch and volume with each word.

“Is that why you cut your hand?” I asked, trying to keep him occupied on anything except waving the knife at us, again.

I noticed that Kailyn was moving slowly closer out of the corner of my eye, but I made no move to actually look over at her in case Jeremy picked up on it. He lifted the knife before him and looked it over for a few seconds, as if pondering exactly what it was. Blood still ran down the blade from where he had dug it into his palm earlier.

“I just want it to stop...”

Just then, Kailyn made her move. She lunged forward and went for the knife, but he must have seen her coming because he jumped back, swinging the knife wildly over her head. Kailyn was left exposed, though, as she fell onto the island for support. His face contorted in anger as he raised the knife, beginning to move toward her again.

Just as Jeremy went to make a go at her, he suddenly pitched forward and grabbed the island for support. Kailyn quickly pushed off it and staggered a step or two back. Jeremy’s face was turning red and I could see the veins beginning to pop on his forehead, like he was exerting some kind of extreme force, or in extreme pain. He feebly attempted to lunge toward Kailyn again, but his legs gave out and he fell to the ground, dropping the knife with a clatter to the fake-stone floor.

He rolled onto his back, beginning to convulse as white foam appeared at the corners of his mouth. Kailyn and I exchanged wide-eyed, helpless expressions before turning our attention back to the boy. We were so in shock that neither of us could think to call for help or anything; we simply watched as he

continued to convulse and thrash about on the floor.

Just then, I heard footsteps running down the hallway and a second later Bob and Jared appeared in the doorway. I heard Bob mutter something that sounded like “Jesus” and moved over to Jeremy. After Bob had only spent a few seconds trying to determine what was wrong with the boy, the convulsions stopped and he went limp, his eyes rolling back in his head to reveal nothing but the whites.

Silence filled the room for a few seconds before Jared sighed and ran one hand over his face. He extended one hand toward Kailyn and I while gesturing to the hallway behind him with the other.

“Girls, why don’t you go wait in the living room until I come and get you, okay?”

Kailyn and I slowly walked out of the room, taking one last look at the boy’s body before exiting and heading back toward the living room. Our footsteps seemed to echo in the now almost completely silent house, adding to the eerie feeling that hung in the air. We took seats on opposite ends of the couch, almost as if in a trance, neither of us speaking. After a period of silence, I realized that I was staring at the coffee table, but I wasn’t really paying attention to what I was seeing. I blinked a few times and looked over at Kailyn, who seemed to be in a similar daze.

I opened my mouth to say something, but I heard Jared’s and Bob’s footsteps coming down the hallway toward us, and closed it, deciding that whatever I had been about to say should wait until later. The two of them appeared in the doorway, conversing quietly but tensely; I couldn’t make out any distinct words, but I knew that whatever they were talking about was not good. They didn’t enter the room, but also didn’t acknowledge our presence. Finally, Jared glanced over and sighed.

“We need to clean this up. I’ll be in touch later to figure this out.”

Bob appeared to be about to ask a question, but seemed to think better of it and simply nodded. Jared turned toward us and gestured for us to follow him.

“Girls, let’s go.”

## 4

# So Why Are We Here?

August 29<sup>th</sup>, 1999

7:25:48 P.M.

Somewhere in Northern California

It had been another excruciatingly long drive to the next place Jared had taken us: the middle of nowhere. We had spent at least an hour driving up long winding roads, heading deeper and deeper into the forest, before we finally ran into what seemed to be the only building for miles around. It happened to also look like some kind of secret military installation, complete with a keypad and intercom Jared had to use to give some kind of password to even get through the front gates.

The whole building, itself, seemed to be two stories at its highest, although this only seemed to be a narrow section in the center. Several cars and what looked like delivery trucks were parked in the small lot where Jared brought us to a stop.

As we got out of the car, I was aware how much cooler it felt than at the kind-of-cabin earlier. We must have been decently higher up in order for it to feel like this. Either that or I just couldn't recognize the difference and was making a big deal out of nothing, which was also very likely.

"Where are we?" Kailyn asked, looking around the open, deserted lot surrounding the building and the densely wooded forest beyond the chain-link fence as she yawned and rubbed at her ears.

"Just a little venture I run jointly with some colleagues," Jared said dismissively. "Come on, let's head inside."

Kailyn and I exchanged glances before closing the car doors and reluctantly following Jared toward a plain, grey door set into the wall before us. Upon reaching it, Jared pulled something out of his pocket and swiped it through a reader to the right of the door. A buzzing sound followed, and he quickly pulled the door open, glancing back toward us.

"Girls, please try to hurry up."



I rolled my eyes and walked faster, reaching the door a few seconds later and taking it from him. I held it for Kailyn before following after Jared. The first thing I noticed was just how dingy the interior felt; the walls, floor, and ceiling were various shades of off-white, almost like a hospital. Only about half of the lights were on, which created a “horror movie” feeling to the place.

“Oh Jason, where are you...?” Kailyn muttered softly in a sing-song tone, nudging me with her elbow as she grinned.

“If he comes after me, I’m pretty sure I can run faster than you.”

Kailyn shoved me slightly as I laughed and began walking down the dimly-lit hallway after Jared. Each one we passed had a similar atmosphere, while a few were entirely dark; the facility certainly didn’t feel used. Blank name plates next to the doors provided little context as to their use, either previously or presently.

As I pulled away from yet another darkened window into an empty room, I found that I was standing alone in the hallway and began to look around in confusion. Suddenly, a loud whistle sounded from off to my left and I spun down the side hallway to find Kailyn walking backward away from me, waving her arms over her head.

“What the hell are you waiting for?” she called.

“Nothing, just... brain wasn’t working properly for a second there,” I replied, beginning to move toward her.

“When does it ever?”

I started running at Kailyn, who spun around and took off down the hallway, trying to get away. Within moments, I had gained on her and pushed her up against the wall, laughing as she tried to twist away. Kailyn was panting from the hundred-foot dash, but I barely felt affected by it.

“Christ...” she wheezed, laughing.

I glanced to the right and saw that Jared had stopped in the middle of the hallway and was looking back toward us. I waved and he made a face as if he were thinking about something before turning and continuing on down the hallway.

“What’s his problem?” Kailyn muttered as I stepped away from her and we began walking down the hallway again.

A smart-ass reply didn't occur to me quick enough, so I simply shrugged and offered an "iunno." Up ahead, Jared had stopped and was looking back toward Kailyn and me, obviously waiting for us. After about another thirty seconds or so, as we were in no particular hurry, we came to a stop before him.

"Girls, I want to... explain a bit, I guess," he said.

"Okay..." Kailyn replied, shifting her stance as she folded her arms before her.

"This, as you can probably gather, is a scientific research facility," he began. "It is co-owned and used by myself and a few colleagues. We may have to be here for a brief period of time, most likely a couple of days."

Kailyn and I exchanged glances, the feeling that something was different here obviously mutual. Usually these visits were day trips, essentially, sometimes spilling over into an overnight stay, but we had never been gone for a few days on one of Jared's "excursions." The fact that we had no choice didn't help the unease, either.

"However," Jared continued, "you two will not be cooped up here alone with just a couple of guys like me."

I raised one eyebrow and folded my arms, as well, actually interested in whom or what might be here that would be different than Jared and his science-friends. My guesses ranged anywhere from a dog to some more people like Jeremy. If those were my options, I hoped to God that there was a border collie named Rover waiting to play fetch.

With that, he swiped a card through some kind of reader next to the door we were standing beside and I heard a loud electronic beep, followed by the heavy clunk of a lock sliding open. Jared grasped the handle and shouldered the door open, gesturing for Kailyn and me to go first. We both hesitated, so Jared sighed and stepped through first, himself.

"Come on girls, we don't have all day."

The other side of the door was a completely different world. The room beyond was both well-lit and looked like someone had actually been there in the past few years. A few bulky plastic cubes with glass windows which I vaguely recognized as something called "computers" sat on countertops

pushed up against the walls on either side of us. Tables covered in papers and what looked like various forms of lab equipment took up the center of the room. So far, though, there were still no signs of life.

Jared glanced around the room, frowned, and began to walk toward the far side. We followed him toward a door with a large, round window set in the top third. As we approached, Jared glanced through it and nodded, letting out an “ah-hah” before shouldering this one open, as well.

The room beyond was fuller than the first, with multitudes of machines with blank screens lining the walls of the room and more complex and interesting lab instruments littered about multiple work benches in the center. The major difference, though, was the two men in white coats poring over something on one of them, muttering quietly and pointing to various things on what appeared to be a piece of large paper spread out over the counter surface. At the sound of the door opening, they looked up from their work and pulled double takes before dropping their work and moving around the bench toward us.

“I should have figured I’d find you two back here,” Jared said, grinning.

“Mr. Broder, how nice of you to return,” one of the men replied, laughing and shaking his hand. “How’re you doing, Jared?”

“I’m good, thanks,” Jared replied, returning the handshake and turning to the other man.

“It’s been a while since we’ve seen you around these parts,” he said good-naturedly, shaking Jared’s hand.

“Well these two have been keeping me quite busy,” Jared replied, turning back toward the door. “Amaryss and Kailyn, this is Chuck and Phil.”

I gave a small wave before folding my arms across my chest and waiting for the awkward encounter to end.

“Now, if I remember correctly, there are two young’uns like these two around here, correct?”

My eyebrows raised slightly at that, the reaction clearly noticed as the two men Jared had talked to grinned.

“Why don’t we go meet them?”

They turned to lead the way, but Kailyn and I hesitated, exchanging glances. Memories of a boy with a knife were clearly at the front of our minds as she slowly raised her hand to gesture toward the door Chuck was holding open for us.

“After you.”

The short trek came through the well-lit portion of the facility came to a stop just outside a wooden door with the simple marking of “break room” on it. Chuck turned around to face us and cleared his throat, clapping his hands together before him.

“Let’s go see if they’re in their favorite hideout, shall we?”

With that, he turned and opened the door, leaning in through the gap to look around the room first. He seemed to have found what he was looking for because he let out an “ah” and opened the door fully.

“Hey guys, look what just rolled in,” he said, gesturing back toward Kailyn and me as he entered the room, clearly expecting us to follow.

Once again, Kailyn waited for me to go first, and as I stepped through the doorway I saw two teens about our age turn to look at us. A boy with dark skin and darker eyes sat up on a couch pushed up against the wall to the left, his short, curly hair flattened on one side, where he had obviously been lying on it just a few seconds ago. He seemed tall, seeing as he took up almost the entire length of the furniture.

The other teen was a girl with wavy, sandy blonde hair that featured lighter blonde highlights and pale green eyes who was doing something above a counter at the far end of the room. She glanced back at the sound of Chuck’s voice and looked Kailyn and I over once or twice before putting down whatever she was holding and crossing the room, stopping a few feet away from us.

“This is—” Chuck began, but the girl cut him off.

“Alexis Roth,” she said, remaining where she had stopped, her arms crossed. “You can call me Lexi.”

“Well... yes, this is Lexi,” Chuck said, his grin faltering slightly, but it returned as he turned to the side slightly, gesturing to the boy on the couch, “and this is—”

“Chase Morgan,” he interrupted, getting to his feet and approaching us, hand starting to extend, but pausing at the last

second and instead rubbing it against the side of his basketball shorts.

Chuck stood there for a second or two, hand outstretched toward Chase before he nodded and let it fall to his side.

“Well, here they are.”

“Why don’t you all get to know each other a bit while we go have a little conversation, okay?” Jared said before turning and walking out of the room, apparently just expecting Chuck to follow him.

With a curt, awkward nod toward Kailyn and me, Chuck hurried out of the room after Jared and it grew silent again. After a few seconds of standing completely still, I sighed and rubbed one eye with my hand.

“So, you’re getting dumped here, too?” Lexi asked, unfolding her arms and walking back over to what she had been doing at the counter across the room.

“Were you two?” I replied.

“You could say that,” Chase sighed, sitting back down on the couch and leaning back.

“What’s the story, then?” I pressed, turning toward him and shoving my hands in my back pockets as I rested my weight on my right leg.

“You don’t have to act all like that,” he said, laughing as he gestured to what seemed to be a few old armchairs set across from the couch. “Why don’t you come take a seat and we’ll all talk this over normally, sound good?”

I glanced over at Kailyn, who simply shrugged and began walking toward the chairs. Things were certainly going differently than that morning. I followed suit and took the one more or less across from Chase as Kailyn fell into the one to my right, crossing one leg so that her right ankle rested on her knee as she relaxed into the worn cushioning on the back.

“I can’t quite speak for Lexi, but I was dropped off here about... maybe five years ago,” Chase explained. “Before then I was at another place kind of like this, but then one day the guys there told me, ‘get your shit and get in the car.’ They didn’t tell me where we were going, or why, but then we showed up here, and they basically said, ‘you’re staying here forever, have a nice life’

and disappeared.”

“Wow... that royally sucks,” Kailyn remarked.

Chase laughed slightly and nodded.

“Tell me about it.”

“Or you could be me,” Lexi said, suddenly appearing from over by the counter and taking a seat on the opposite side of the couch from Chase.

“What’s your story?” I asked.

“I’ve been here pretty much my whole life,” she remarked, balancing a plate with a sandwich on it in her lap.

“Really?” Kailyn replied.

“Yep, all eight years that I can remember!”

Both of us fell silent as Lexi took a bite of her sandwich and put it back down on the plate before her.

“I’m assuming that you’re stunned silence means you’re waiting for an explanation,” she said. “See... I may have been somewhere before this, but I have literally no memories before about the age of ten.”

“So... did they somehow, like, wipe your mind or something?” Kailyn asked.

Lexi shrugged.

“Maybe you’re actually only eight years old,” I offered.

Lexi pointed toward me as she nodded, just taking a bite of her sandwich.

“That’s one of the leading theories Chase and I have,” she managed through her mouthful of food.

“Leading?”

“Yeah... need some kind of conversation to break up the depression around here sometimes,” Chase replied.

“Well... shit,” Kailyn said, glancing over at me.

Silence fell over the room again as Lexi finished off her sandwich and brushed her hands together.

“So are you two stuck here now, too?” she asked.

“No idea,” I replied. “I guess we’ll see tomorrow.”

The four of us nodded and fell into silence again as Lexi tipped the plate back and forth slightly on her thigh.

“So what are your stories?” Chase asked, breaking off the silence.

Kailyn and I glanced at each other and she gestured to me.

“You first.”

I sighed and turned back toward Chase and Lexi, slouching a little lower in my chair.

“Well, I’ve been living with that guy, Jared, for as long as I can remember. We’ve moved around several times, but the first place I remember well was out in Nevada. Then we moved to Colorado, which is where we picked up Kailyn, here.”

Kailyn smiled and waved slightly, clearly in a sarcastic way.

“I just realized something,” Chase said, looking back over at me, “we never got your names.”

“Well, I’m Kailyn Massey, as she just said,” she replied, putting a hand to her chest.

“And I’m Amaryss Torres,” I replied, nodding slightly, unsure of what to do.

“Amaryss...” Chase repeated slowly, seeming to think about it, “that’s not a common name, is it?”

I shrugged.

“Haven’t found it on a magnet at a gas station, so I guess not.”

We laughed as I noticed Kailyn shaking her head, but the room quickly fell into silence, once again. It only lasted for a few seconds before I heard the sound of the door handle turning and quickly spun around in my seat. Jared appeared in the doorway, leaning against the frame.

“We’re going to be spending the night, so you might as well figure out sleeping arrangements now,” he said.

“Just the night?” Kailyn asked casually enough, but I knew what she was thinking.

Jared paused for a second, staring down at something on the floor before looking back up at us.

“For now.”

With that, he left the room, leaving the door slightly ajar. I turned back toward the others as Lexi sighed finally holding her plate still.

“So it begins,” she muttered, getting to her feet and walking toward the counter across the room.

I heard the sound of a sink running as I simply stared straight ahead, my vision blurred slightly as I disappeared into thought. Of course, it was highly coincidental that Jared said that right after what Lexi and Chase had just been talking about, but they spoke some semblance of truth, to me.

*“So if he’s going to leave us here... what does that mean about Kailyn and me?”* I thought.

I looked down at my right hand as I slowly clenched it into a fist and relaxed it a few times. That same feeling from back in the ravine was there, even if just an inkling of it at any given time... beneath my skin, deep in my muscles.

“Hey!”

I snapped out of my daze with a start and looked up from my hand. Chase was giving me a curious look, so I clenched and unclenched my fist one more time before placing my arm casually on the arm of the chair.

“What?”

“You were just... staring down at your hand,” he said. “Everything okay?”

I nodded, self-consciously running the same hand back through my hair. Kailyn’s gaze caught my attention out of the corner of my eye, as well, but I didn’t acknowledge it. I shifted my position before looking down at my knees and slouching lower in the chair.

“Well, kiddos,” Lexi said, appearing between Kailyn and me and clapping her hands, “let’s show you around the place, *bueno?*”

August 30<sup>th</sup>, 1999

12:45:23 A.M.

Somewhere in Northern California

The tour was pitifully and short and to the point. There were two “bedrooms” that were somewhat larger than a normal hotel room, each complete with a double bed, a couch, and a somewhat large, free-standing cabinet for clothes. They also each



sported some of the most dilapidated looking TVs I had ever seen, with one even having its screen held on with duct tape.

“What do you think?” Lexi asked.

“Cozy,” I replied, also noting the white walls, tiled floor, and white plaster ceiling that also brought the word “sterile” to mind, but I didn’t voice it aloud.

“Well, good enough for its purpose, whatever that may be...”

I gave her a skeptical look as she winked playfully and nudged me with her elbow. After I hadn’t responded in any way, she laughed and waved dismissively.

“Don’t worry, I don’t swing that way,” she said, grabbing some clothes off the floor and tossing them in a plastic hamper I hadn’t noticed before.

“Swing what way?”

Lexi looked back at me with one eyebrow raised.

“Really?”

I shrugged, unsure of what else to do.

“I... have no idea what you mean.”

Lexi sighed dramatically as she placed her hands on her hips.

“Girls—Amaryss—I don’t like girls... that way. I’m what you call ‘heterosexual.’”

“Oh... uh... yeah... me, too.”

Lexi laughed, clapping me on the shoulder as before gesturing back into the hallway behind me.

“Come on, there’s more!”

“More” turned out to be a single-use bathroom with a shower and a sink. To be honest, I had feared worse; the room appeared utilitarian, but it at least didn’t look as if I would contract a flesh-eating disease from stepping on the floor barefoot.

After a brief trip to a door to the fenced-in area around the building, we had come to a stop at the break room, once again.

“Thus concludes the tour. Make sure to tip your guide appropriately.”

I raised my eyebrows slightly at her and she made a snorting sound.

“I don’t know if that look will get old.”

Lexi treated both Kailyn and me to a dinner of turkey sandwiches and room temperature water before offering her room to us to share while she split the other with Chase.

“We’ve known each other for years, now, and trust me: there’s *no* problem of something happening,” she chimed in, shooting Chase a pointed look.

He made a show of putting his hand over his heart and staggering backwards a few steps before she rolled her eyes and attempted to hit him playfully as he held his arms up defensively.

“You two have changes of clothes?”

Kailyn and I nodded, holding up the duffel bags we had retrieved from the car.

“Good, because the other option was to go naked, so...”

I felt the tips of my ears grow hot as Lexi simply laughed.

“Relax, I’m sure I’d be willing to offer some of my luxurious wardrobe, if needed. You look about my size, Amaryss.”

I was fairly certain that I was at least an inch or so taller than her, but I wasn’t really going to argue the point.

“Well, kids, I’m beat. Feel free to enjoy the deluxe public cable offerings on the TV, or I’m sure Chuckles and Phyllis might have some tapes for your... enjoyment.”

As soon as we had bid goodnight to the other two and entered the room, Kailyn turned from the door, grinning.

“I like her, already.”

“Of course you do.”

I sighed as I dropped my bag on the bed and unzipped it, quickly changing into my athletic shorts and old T-shirt I had worn the night before. Kailyn donned her similar apparel, although opting for a white cami top instead of a T-shirt, before slipping back out into the hallway.

The TV hummed somewhat dangerously as I fell back onto the old couch, tucking one leg tightly against me as I wrapped my arm around my knee. As the screen came into focus, I stared blankly at the show about criminals running away from the cops in elaborate chases before inevitably being caught. I had seen this series countless times in the middle of the afternoon, when nothing else was on. My chin came to rest on one my knee as I continued

to space out in the general direction of the TV. Just then, I heard the sound of the door opening and glanced over to the left with only my eyes.

Kailyn yawned as she pulled the door closed behind her and padded to the foot of the bed before falling backwards onto it. She simply stared up at the ceiling for a little bit as the sound from the TV quietly droned on in the background.

“Earlier today...” she said, suddenly breaking the silence.

I blinked and looked up from the glowing screen of the TV toward her.

“That kid in that house...” she continued.

“Do we really have to talk about that?” I sighed.

“We can’t just ignore it, Amaryss!” she said, sitting up and pulling one leg in, crossing it under the other.

“Fine, but—”

“But what?” she interrupted. “Haven’t you been thinking about it, too?”

“I was trying to forget about it, really,” I replied, leaning forward and turning the TV off.

“It’s been going through my mind all day,” Kailyn said, spinning her hands in a circular manner as she spoke. “It’s just... just...”

“What about it’s got you all hung up like this?” I asked.

“Aside from the fact that we saw a kid die?”

A chill ran down my spine and I shivered. I hadn’t really thought about it that way, honestly.

“I guess it’s just... the implications.”

I looked at Kailyn curiously, as she let her hands fall into her lap. She stared off to my left for a little bit before finally turning her attention back to me.

“Do you realize what that whole thing could mean?” she asked quietly.

I shook my head, remaining silent as I waited for her to inevitably tell me.

“Amaryss... that’s us.”

I felt my gut instinctually tighten, and I forced myself to swallow nervously before speaking.

“How so?” I replied, my tone harsher than I had intended.

“Don’t you see it?” she asked, sliding closer to the end of the bed and leaning in closer to me.

I simply stared at her, waiting for her to continue with whatever she was about to tell me.

“Those guys,” she said, gesturing toward the door, “Jared and all the Chucks and Phils out there, they did something to that kid. What else do you think caused him to snap like that? I mean... he was cutting his hand up and he didn’t seem to care or feel any pain.”

“Yeah, but... I just thought he was—I don’t know—messed up in the head,” I replied.

“Maybe a little, but how do you think he got that way?”

“Genetics?”

“Not the natural kind, though,” Kailyn said, raising one finger, as if to stop me and emphasize her point at the same time.

“What do you mean by ‘natural kind?’” I replied.

“C’mon Amaryss... don’t play that game with me,” she said. “You and I know both know that we aren’t strictly-speaking ‘normal.’”

My jaw instinctually clenched, but I remained silent, still staring at Kailyn.

“Jared is keeping us around because he and his friends out there did something to us, and he wants to see how it plays out. You’ve told me about that incident in Nevada... I’d say that’s pretty damning evidence.”

“Okay, fine, so they did something. We still don’t know what, though.”

“True, we don’t know what exactly they did to us, or what they’re hoping to achieve, but we know they at least did *something*,” Kailyn said, clearly becoming a little annoyed with my persistence to avoid the topic. “So what happens if it does that to us? Do we just go psycho and self-destruct, too?”

“Who’s to say anything remotely like that happens to us?” I shot back. “What if whatever they did to us doesn’t do any harm?”

Kailyn let out one short, dry laugh.

“That seems unlikely.”

“How so?”

“We’re the first generation of these experiments, as far as

we know,” she explained, “that means they don’t really know what they’re doing, one-hundred-percent. We fall into the ‘guess and check’ category and—after that little incident—I’m not too trusting of their guesswork.”

Without saying another word, I let go of my legs and stood up, moving toward the door, not looking at Kailyn.

“Where are you going?” she asked.

“I need... I just need some time to... myself,” I muttered before stepping outside, pulling the door closed firmly behind me.

I walked down the hallway toward the bathroom and found the door open and the light off. The fluorescent panel buzzed softly as I flicked it on and stepped inside, locking the door behind me. I leaned against the cold wood of the door for a little while, staring along the opposite tile wall without really seeing anything. Finally, I pushed myself off the door and stood in front of the sink, focusing on my reflection in the mirror. The surface was scratched, a little dirty around the edges, and the center image was slightly blurry, but I figured that it at least matched the “unused” feel of this whole wing of the building.

I leaned against the sink as I stared at the slightly blurry reflection of myself. It looked like a picture taken with a camera that was just slightly out of focus. My mind was spinning after what Kailyn had said earlier. At the time, it had sounded completely unrealistic, but now it was beginning to sound more plausible, however much my mind didn’t want to believe it. I absentmindedly rubbed at my chest, immediately imagining going crazy and having some kind of seizure like that kid had. I closed my eyes tightly and tried to block the idea out of my head.

*“I’m different,”* I told myself, *“I’m not like him. I’ve made it this far without any problems.”*

Instantly, the memory of the ravine in Nevada popped into my head and I quickly blocked it out. That had been a one-time incident, and nothing else had really happened since. I took a deep breath and slowly let it out through my nose, trying to remove all thoughts of having some kind of cataclysmic self-destruction.

Suddenly, intense pain exploded in my abdomen and I bent forward slightly, instantly moving my hand from my chest to my stomach. It felt something like an extremely intense cramp, but

my mind instantly jumped to the conclusion that I was about to die. My breath came in short, shallow gasps as I closed my eyes tightly and pressed my hand firmly against my stomach.

My muscles felt tight, almost as if I was clenching them, but I was reasonably certain I was doing no such thing. Just then, something *moved*. My eyes shot open and I found myself staring at the off-white porcelain sink. It wasn't like an alien trying to bust through my chest or anything, but it was subtle... something I couldn't explain. The next thing I noticed was how the pain had instantly dissipated. I quickly pulled up the bottom of my shirt to look at my stomach, but there didn't seem to be anything noticeably different.

It was right about then that I put two and two together.

Whatever Jared had done to me, what had appeared in the ravine all those years ago, was progressing. I looked up at myself in the mirror as I let my shirt fall back down to its normal position.

*"It can't be all bad, right? I'm stronger and faster than a lot of other people, it's not like that's a bad thing,"* I argued in my head. *"But where does it end?"*

I closed my eyes and backed up until I hit the door, leaning my head back against the wood as I took slow, deep breaths. When my eyes finally opened, once again, I found my hands clenched into fists at my sides, so I forced them to relax, placing my palms flat against the sides of my legs.

*"This is who I am,"* I thought, staring at the reflection of myself in the mirror, *"and I will control my life, not them."*

## 5 Formation

August 30<sup>th</sup>, 1999

8:34:29 P.M.

Somewhere in Northern California

I leaned back in my seat as I grinned slightly, crossing my legs before me. Lexi was giving Chase a look after he had just swept her in poker for the second time. Kailyn dropped her cards into the center of the coffee table in defeat and leaned back in her armchair. Chase's victory hadn't been much of a challenge, though, since Kailyn and I had only been taught the rules two minutes before we started playing.

"You cheated, I'm calling it," Lexi said.

"How could I cheat?" Chase replied, gesturing to the cards on the table. "You dealt, and I got two random cards! It's not my fault if you can't read my stone-cold poker face."

Lexi glared at him for a few seconds before standing up and stretching her arms above her head, groaning slightly as she did so.

"Anyone else hungry?"

"No, we just ate," Kailyn replied.

Lexi simply shrugged and walked across the room to the refrigerator. The thought that I had no idea where a girl of her size and frame put all of that food and was able to retain said shape crossed my mind as I leaned toward Chase slightly.

"Does she ever stop eating?" I whispered.

"Now that I think about it... not really, no," he said.

The three of us laughed and Lexi looked back at us with narrowed eyes.

"I can sense that you're laughing at me."

"You can join in and then we'd be laughing with you," I offered.

Lexi made a noise that was obviously supposed to be mocking me, but didn't sound like any real words, before turning

her attention back to the refrigerator. I grinned slightly before leaning in toward Chase, once again, and whispering in his ear.

“Does she do anything *but* eat?”

He appeared to consider her for a few seconds as she rummaged through God-knows-what in the refrigerator.

“Sleep.”

I laughed louder than I had intended, which caused Lexi to stand up and look back over at us again.

“You know what? Suddenly I’m not hungry anymore,” she said, pushing the door shut and walking back over to us, stopping behind the armchair she had been sitting in previously and leaning against the back of it, arms crossed before her.

“So, what now?” Kailyn asked, sitting up straight and bringing her open palms down on her thighs with a loud slapping noise, drawing everyone’s attention.

Chase, Lexi, and I all exchanged looks before shrugging.

“I don’t know, I’ve been here as long as you,” I said, turning to the other two.

“This is pretty much it...” Lexi said, frowning slightly.

“God, how have you not killed yourself here?” Kailyn asked, standing up and stretching her arms above her head.

“Lack of the ability to,” she replied, shrugging.

“I wasn’t serious,” Kailyn replied, twisting her torso back and forth slightly. “It’s just... so depressing and boring.”

Chase laughed dryly.

“Home sweet home,” he said, sarcasm dripping from his voice.

Just then, I heard something and tried to listen in, but the other three’s voices made it almost impossible to hear whatever was going on. I stood up and walked toward the door, trying to listen past the sound of their lively debate behind me. Even right at the door itself, I couldn’t make out what I was hearing outside, though. Finally, I spun around and let out a loud hiss in an attempt to hush them, placing one finger to my lips. The other three instantly fell silent as I turned back to face the door. With my ear pressed against the glass and my eyes closed, I could just make out what had originally drawn my attention: voices. Specifically, men’s voices.



They sounded heated, so I could only assume that it must be an argument between Jared, Chuck, and Phil. At first, it simply sounded like indiscriminate shouting, but as I focused more intently, words began to appear out of the mess.

“You’ve spent years here... what have you been doing?!”

That had to be Jared.

“This is not a simple, fast process, Broder!” one of the other two replied, confirming it. “It takes lots of time and careful, painstaking attention to tiny details. This is not something we could bang out in a few months!”

“Others have gotten much farther than you in half the time,” Jared replied, slightly quieter than before. “So tell me... have you been using our money wisely, or pissing it away fucking around in this laboratory?!”

The sound of something crashing to the floor followed Jared’s outburst, the three voices falling silent for several moments afterward.

“We’ve been getting some results,” whoever had not spoken yet finally pitched in, “but nothing has been consistent.”

A few more moments of silence followed. Something suddenly touched my shoulder and I jumped, eyes snapping open as I spun to see what it was. Kailyn was standing right behind me and jumped as I did, taking a cautious step away.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“I’m trying to hear something,” I hissed, quickly placing my ear back to the door and trying to tune into the conversation again.

“...you’re not the only ones working on this project, and I’ve heard far more inspiring things from our colleagues elsewhere,” Jared was saying, although I wished I knew what the first part of his argument was.

“May I ask where this is supposedly coming from?” one of the other two asked.

“The first that comes to mind is Arizona.”

A brief silence followed before one of the other men cleared his throat.

“We will begin moving ahead more aggressively, if you would like.”

“You can if you so choose, but you will have to do so without those two here.”

“How the hell do you expect us to do any research without our only two specimens?!” one of the other two blurted.

“I guess you’ll have to figure that out yourselves.”

After a few seconds of silence, I heard the sound of a door slamming and I quickly backed away from the door, almost running into Kailyn. Her face conveyed her confusion as she watched me.

“What the hell are you doing?” she asked.

“I’ll tell you in a second,” I said, insistently pulling her back toward the chairs and the couch.

“What’s gotten into you, Amaryss?” she shot back, trying to pull her arm free from my grasp.

Just then, the door opened and we both immediately spun around and froze in place. Jared stood in the doorway, looking incredibly tired with bloodshot eyes and his sleeves rolled up to his elbows, but also somewhat surprised as he leaned against the doorframe, contemplating our reaction for a few moments. I finally let go of Kailyn and she pulled her arm away from me, giving me a dirty look.

“Tomorrow... we’re leaving,” he said. “Be ready.”

“All four of us?” I asked quickly.

“All four. Chase and Lexi, too.”

With that, he left as suddenly as he had appeared, pulling the door closed behind him. We remained still and silent for a few seconds before Kailyn and I finally turned around to face the other two. They were still staring at the door with the same amount of confusion as I noticed on Kailyn’s face.

“When the hell did this come about?” Lexi asked, pointing toward the door but turning her attention to the two of us.

“Just now,” Kailyn replied, shrugging.

“Where the hell are we leaving for, exactly?” Chase asked, appearing just as dazed and confused as Lexi.

“Arizona, probably,” I replied.

“Arizona? How do you know that?”

“I heard him talking—well, arguing—with Chuck and Phil,” I said.

“Is that why you suddenly went all crazy and were standing with your head against the door for a minute or two?” Lexi asked.

“I could hear them talking...” I said, looking around at the other three. “Could you?”

They all slowly shook their heads, and a feeling of embarrassment suddenly began to roll over me.

“Oh...”

My cheeks grew hot as I tried not to look at them. I could only guess what they were thinking; it was probably the same thing that was running through my head.

*“What kind of freak thing is that?”*

I turned on my heel and quickly walked toward the door, wrenching it open and stalking off without even attempting to close it behind me.

I had no idea how long I sat against the wall just inside the bedroom door, but it could have been anywhere between five minutes and five hours, for all I knew. My muscles were starting to protest with soreness from sitting with my legs pulled in close and my face buried in my knees, so I slowly began to stretch them out before me. The sound of footsteps approaching brought me out of thoughts about what exactly had just happened with eavesdropping on Jared’s argument and how it related to the—*incident*—in the bathroom the night before. I glanced up just as the door cracked open, revealing Kailyn as she leaned through the narrow opening, but didn’t fully enter the room.

“Are you okay?” she asked, remaining with her hand on the doorknob as she swung it back and forth ever so slightly, her other hand braced against the doorframe to hold her in place.

I bit my lip for a second before replying in a quiet, tremulous voice.

“No.”

“What set you off so badly back there?” she asked, still not moving to actually enter the room.

I sighed and rubbed my legs as the pins and needles feeling began to spread upward from my feet.

“Just... I could hear what was going on out there pretty well, and no one else could,” I said. “How is that?”

Kailyn shrugged.

“I don’t know; you just kinda stood up and told us all to shut up and started standing there with your head against the door, so we were kinda confused.”

“Exactly!” I said. “So why the hell couldn’t any of you guys hear it?”

“I don’t know,” Kailyn shrugged, stepping inside the room, finally, and crouching down in front of me. “C’mon Amaryss, there’s something you’re thinking and you’re holding it back... I can tell.”

I sighed and looked down at my hands in my lap.

“Why am I the only freak here?”

Kailyn remained silent, matching my stare, although I could tell she wanted to look away. Finally, she sighed and moved to take a seat on the end of the bed, placing her hands between her knees and leaning forward slightly.

“You’re not, Amaryss,” she said.

“Not what? A freak or the only one?” I shot back.

“Both.”

I froze for a second before slowly lifting my head to look up at Kailyn, brushing some of my hair back behind one ear to get it out of my way. She was staring down at her knees, but I knew she could feel me looking at her.

“Kailyn...” I began, but she cut me off.

“I already kinda told you, but... yeah, Amaryss, he did something to me, too,” she said. “Well, someone along the way did, if not Jared himself.”

I tried to think of something somewhat intelligent to say, but nothing came to me, so I said the first coherent thing that came to mind.

“What... what, uh... what’s your... thing?”

Kailyn looked over at me with a raised eyebrow.

“That’s the best you could come up with?” she teased.

I rolled my eyes and sighed.

“I didn’t know I was being judged.”

We laughed quietly before a silence fell over us for a few seconds. Finally, Kailyn cleared her throat.

“Something... something to do with my mind, I think,” she said, tapping her left temple as she spoke.

“Like what kind of ‘something’?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” she replied, shrugging. “It’s just like... sometimes I swear it’s like I can... never mind.”

“No, no, tell me,” I said. “I shared my crisis with you, now it’s your turn.”

Kailyn laughed slightly before sighing and looking around the room for something. Her gaze finally settled on the couch across from us and I tried to follow her gaze, but I couldn’t really tell what she was looking at, specifically, so I watched the general area to see if something was going to happen. After a few seconds of awkward stillness, Kailyn raised her left arm and extended her hand toward the couch. After a few seconds, I realized that the TV remote was shaking slightly. I stared at it curiously for a moment or two before it suddenly lurched forward and fell off the couch... all by itself.

Kailyn exhaled heavily, like she had been holding it in. I stared at the remote on the floor for a few seconds before looking over at her. She was still staring at it on the floor.

“You did that?” I asked quietly.

“I guess,” Kailyn replied, nodding slowly.

After a few seconds, I pushed myself off the floor and slowly took a seat next to her on the bed. My mouth felt dry as I nervously bit my lip, but eventually leaned in toward her and wrapped one arm around her shoulders, forcing a smile.

“Well, at least we’re in this together, right buddy?” I quipped, trying to make a joke.

Kailyn and I laughed half-heartedly and I removed my arm from around her and yawned. We remained still and silent for several long moments before she finally sighed, bringing my attention back to her.

“Yay, show and tell.”

Our moods finally cracked as we both laughed and I shoved her shoulder playfully. It was Kailyn’s turn to yawn as she rubbed at her eyes vigorously.

“It’s not even late.”

“It’s okay, I won’t judge.”

She gave me an admonishing look as I grinned, but began to rise to my feet.

“I’ll even give you peace and quiet... for a bit.”

Kailyn rolled her eyes but flopped backward onto the bed, her arms splayed to either side of her as I slipped back into the hallway and closed the door behind me.

August 30<sup>th</sup>, 1999

9:41:24 P.M.

Somewhere in Northern California

The sound of the wind in the leaves provided a constant drone of background noise that seemed to fill the nighttime air. The sound of insects seemed oddly missing from the symphony of sounds I was used to hearing in nature, but as long as there were no mosquitoes around, I could live with that. I had already walked a fair distance from the door Lexi had shown me previously, but I figured it wouldn’t be too hard to find my way back, even in the dark.

I ran my hand across the chain-link fence as I strolled by, my feet carrying me aimlessly along it. Suddenly, the sound of footsteps approaching caught my attention and I came to a stop, fingers tightening around the metal fencing. My first instinct was to be afraid that either Jared, Chuck, or Phil had found me, and my heart began to pound. They hadn’t specifically told us not to wander around outside, but it didn’t seem like something they’d necessarily condone, either.

After another moment or two, the footsteps growing louder and louder, I finally glanced over my shoulder, a list of excuses already on the tip of my tongue. The figure outlined by the nearest exterior light didn’t seem to be any of the three older men, however, and I found myself relaxing, a sigh of relief escaping me.

Chase gave a slight wave and I returned it, letting my arm fall to my side again as he stopped in front of me, his hands shoved in his pockets.

“Can’t sleep?”

“It’s not late,” I argued, mirroring Kailyn’s comment from earlier, “but I couldn’t if I wanted to.”

He nodded in response, eyes scanning the darkened woods behind me for a moment before he cleared his throat.

“Out for a little night run?”

I snorted, letting my hand fall from the fence as I folded my arms over my chest.

“I’m not exactly a ‘pro-active’ person.”

“Really? Somehow I doubt someone like you just lies around all day.”

“Someone like me?” I shot back. “Who is ‘someone like me?’”

“You know... you look way too—athletic—to just lounge around all day.”

I laughed, but was instantly afraid it came across as fake as the memory of the bathroom the night before came racing back. Apparently I wasn’t as good of an actress as I hoped, though, because his expression immediately turned unreadable. We fell into silence for several moments as I nervously fidgeted with the end of one of my T-shirt’s sleeves, trying to hold eye contact with Chase while every part of me begged to look away. Finally, he broke the tension as he cleared his throat, licking his lips quickly before nodding off to my left.

“Wanna see a little secret?”

I raised my eyebrows slightly and he broke into a grin, while nodding in the direction farther along the fence, once again.

“Nothing scary.”

“I’ll be the judge of that.”

Despite my initial reaction, I fell in step beside him as we continued farther away from the front of the building. As we drew near a corner of the fence, he stepped ahead of me and I came to a halt, nearly running into him. He pushed against a section of the fence and I heard it twang in protest for a moment before I noticed how it appeared to have parted.

“After you.”

I shot him a smirk before slipping through the opening in the fence, taking care not to get my clothing or my hair caught on the cut edges of the metal wire. A moment later, he had followed suit, stepping free of the fence and glancing back toward the

building. When no one else came running, Chase turned back to me and grinned.

“See, nothing scary.”

“I don’t know, leading a poor, confused, defenseless girl into the woods at night...”

“Something tells me you’re anything but defenseless.”

A strange twinge ran through my chest as I found myself swallowing against a lump in my throat.

“So just poor and confused, then.”

He shook his head but gestured toward the darkened trees ahead behind me. We continued between the darkened trunks for several minutes in silence, my fingers lazily running against the bark of almost every tree I passed. I had to give Chase credit: it was rather nice out here. It reminded me of Colorado in the summertime, a bit.

At that moment, we came upon a clearing and I glanced up at the sky. My feet came to a stop, but I heard Chase continue on for a few more steps before apparently realizing I was no longer with him. He approached me, once again, and came to a stop a foot or two in front of me, remaining silent for a few seconds before clearing his throat.

“What are you looking at, Amaryss?” he asked.

“The stars,” I replied, not looking down at him.

After another brief silence, he spoke again.

“Have you ever seen them like this?”

It was my turn to remain silent for a few seconds before replying this time.

“I’ve never really lived in or near a big city, so I’ve always been able to see them,” I said. “For some reason, though... I don’t know, that last time I remember them looking like this was in Nevada.”

“They looked different in other places?”

“Oh yeah,” I replied, beginning to slowly amble about the clearing, still looking up at the sky. “In Colorado, we were a lot closer to them... at least it felt that way to me. It was almost like... I had a better connection to them.”

“Are you some kind of secret hippie, Amaryss?” Chase jabbed, laughing softly.



I finally looked down at him, stopping where I was, several feet away from him.

“What makes you ask?”

“Talking about being closer to the stars, having connection, all that,” he said.

I shrugged.

“I don’t think so,” I said. “I like taking showers too much.”

Chase laughed and I suddenly realized that he had moved closer to me, and we were now only a foot or two apart.

“And I hate flowers,” I added, looking at him for a few more seconds before looking back up at the sky.

“Okay, so maybe you’re not quite a true hippie, then,” he said.

A second or two later, I glanced back over at Chase and saw him watching me rather closely.

“Looking for something?” I asked.

He blinked a few times and stared at me for a second before saying anything.

“What?”

I laughed and brushed some of my hair back out of my face.

“I asked if you were looking for something,” I repeated. “You were staring pretty intensely at me.”

He laughed slightly and shifted on his feet, scratching at his left temple slightly with one finger.

“No, I wasn’t looking for anything,” he said.

I grinned slightly and turned to look around the woods around the edge of the clearing.

“I was just observing.”

I stopped examining the trees around us and turned back to face him. Something about that last line had sparked something in my mind, along with the same, strange twinge in my chest, but I couldn’t think of what either could be.

“Must be hard in the dark, then.”

He laughed softly, but I noticed how he appeared to be looking just about anywhere but at me, now. Several seconds of silence fell over us before I cleared my throat, bringing his eyes back to me, for a moment.

“Have you ever thought about what Chuck, Phil, Jared, and all the other guys like them are doing?”

“What do you mean?” he asked, kicking a pinecone away into the darkened woods.

“Like... there have to be more people than just us,” I said.

“What makes you say that?”

“Well, originally I thought it might just be me, but then Jared brought Kailyn in, and then we came here and found you and Lexi, so there seems to be a supply of mistreated kids somewhere,” I explained, leaning up against a tree and crossing my arms, feeling the goose bumps running up and down them in the cool night air.

“Okay,” Chase said, laughing slightly, “so there could be other people somewhere else. What about them?”

“Aren’t you at all curious exactly what they’re all doing?” I asked, pushing off the tree and beginning to pace slowly.

“What do you mean?”

I stopped where I was and sighed before turning to face Chase.

“Have you noticed anything... different or... strange about yourself... lately, especially?”

Chase remained silent for a few seconds, his gaze now locked onto mine.

“Does this have anything to with the whole eavesdropping thing earlier?” he asked.

I let out a growl of frustration and ran my hands through my hair.

“A little, yes,” I finally answered, my voice laced with irritation, “but I’m not talking about just me. I’m talking about you, too.”

After a few more seconds of silence, Chase finally seemed to find the ability to speak again.

“Yeah, I guess there are some things I’ve noticed that I don’t remember being able to do before,” he said. “So what?”

“You never wonder why?” I said, moving closer to him. “You never think that maybe those guys have something to do with it?”

“I don’t know, maybe a little, but—why are you asking me, Amaryss?” he said.

“Because I want to know what the fuck is going on, that’s why,” I said fiercely, my tone quiet but no less intense.

He looked as if he wanted to argue something for several moments before he threw his arms up in defeat, sighing heavily.

“So what do you propose we do, then?”

I began to pace again as I thought about an answer. A straight-up interrogation of Jared, Chuck, or Phil would most likely get us nowhere, and we’d be in deep shit immediately afterward. If we could get a look at information or data within the compound, we could maybe be more discreet...

“Of course,” I said under my breath, instantly freezing where I was before spinning around on one heel to face Chase again. “The computers.”

“What about them?” he said, confusion etched into his face.

“They probably have at least some of that information on the computers,” I said.

“Okay, but we can’t just really go on any of the ones in the lab without anyone wondering why.”

“That’s why we do it at night,” I said quickly.

After a few seconds, Chase looked over at me, a strange smile forming on his lips.

“I’m assuming you’re thinking tonight.”

The left corner of my lips drew back in a smirk in response to Chase’s as he sighed, shaking his head.

“They’re probably asleep right now,” I said. “Let’s go find out what’s going on.”

August 31<sup>st</sup>, 1999

12:17:28 A.M.

Somewhere in Northern California

The hallways somehow seemed even creepier at night than they did during the day. Absolutely no light entered some of them, save the single beam of light from the flashlight in Chase’s hand. We had begun our search in the simplest and most obvious way: by heading right to the door to the lab. For some reason, however, one of the three men had locked it, and we didn’t really need to go

about kicking it in at this hour, so we were searching for an alternate entrance.

“I’ve never been down this part,” I whispered, glancing over toward where I assumed Chase was based on where the small beam of light was originating from.

“I can’t really recognize it in this light, either,” he replied, just as quietly.

I sighed and ran one hand through my hair.

“Okay, so how are we getting in there?”

I heard Chase’s footsteps stop so I did, too.

“I think we should double back and keep looking around the main door, again,” he said.

“Sounds good enough to me.”

An initial search around the door yielded nothing, so I tried the handle one more time, but it was still locked.

“It was worth a shot,” I said, shrugging.

I turned to see Chase shining the light all around the section of the hallway we were standing in. I watched him for a few seconds before I said anything.

“What are you doing?” I whispered.

Finally, the beam of his flashlight came to rest on something in the ceiling and he grinned.

“Looking for that,” he replied and nodded toward whatever the flashlight was trained on.

I followed the beam until I saw a small metal vent set in the ceiling.

“Let me guess, you want to climb up in there and use that to get around?” I asked, looking back down at Chase.

“Think I saw it in a movie, once,” he replied, grinning as he looked back down at me, “but I don’t think I could fit up in there. Plus, you’re probably better fitted for what happens after one of us climbs through there.”

“And what might that be?”

“Well, whoever goes up there has to drop down inside and come unlock the door.”

I sighed.

“I had a feeling you would say that.”

“So is that your way of volunteering?” he asked, grinning.

“I don’t see another way, so I guess I’ll go up. Just give me a boost.”

We moved directly underneath the vent and he flicked the flashlight off before shoving it in his back pocket. Chase crouched down slightly and cupped his hands into a cradle for my foot as I took a deep breath and stepped forward. Luckily, since I was already somewhat tall, I was able to reach the vent without Chase having to lift me all that high. I pushed on the grate and felt it easily lift into the vent, so I carefully slid it aside.

I grabbed the edge of the hole in the ceiling before looking down at Chase, who was staring up at me, his lips pulled into a thin line. We both nodded and I turned back to the opening above me. I bounced on my right leg slightly before pushing off toward the ceiling as Chase lifted my leg up at the same moment. A good portion of myself managed to get up into the vent on the first try, so I quickly braced my hands on either side and proceeded to hoist the rest of my body up and through the somewhat narrow opening with only a short battle.

I twisted my head slightly so I could see ahead of me in the vent, but found that it was almost completely black, so I sighed and carefully began to move forward, using my hands to pull me along and my feet to help push simultaneously. After what felt like several minutes of struggling through the metal vent and making all kinds of noise that probably could have woken a hibernating bear, I reached another metal vent. Looking down through it, I saw the lab below me and knew that I had gone as far as I needed. I hooked my fingers under some of the bars in the grate and pulled on it. As before, the grate easily came free and I slid it into the vent ahead of me.

With a deep breath, I moved past the opening a bit before dropping my legs down through the hole. I carefully lowered myself until I could see where I was going. Unfortunately, there wasn’t a table, desk, or anything to catch me except the hard floor. With a low growl in the back of my throat, I shifted my arms slightly in the vent as I prepared to lower myself even further, when I felt myself sliding.

I had lost my grip and was now sliding back through the opening as I scrambled to grab onto something, but found nothing

but smooth metal everywhere I reached. Finally, I tilted my head back slightly to avoid smashing my nose on the lip of the vent as I fell through the opening. Everything seemed to slow down for several long moments and I was able to contort myself in mid-air so I ended up landing with hardly any sound in a crouched position on the floor. I remained there for several more seconds, panting slightly before blinking rapidly and hopping to a standing position.

I opened the door to the hallway for Chase, who jumped in surprise before quickly taking it and slipping through as I stepped back.

“That was fast,” he remarked, grinning at me as he quietly closed the door behind himself.

“Yeah, but... yeah,” I replied, shrugging.

He gave me a strange look, but let it go. I flipped some of my hair back over one shoulder and looked around the lab.

“So where do we start?”

A quick crash course in using the hulking, grey box of a computer later, including what Chase told me were the keyboard and mouse, and I was searching through what he called the “documents folder.” It seemed to be nothing but a long list of file names that didn’t make much sense to me, and after five minutes of scrolling through the wall of text, I let out a growl of frustration and rubbed my eyes tiredly.

“There’s nothing here,” I said. “Nothing I can understand, anyway.”

“These are the only computers they use to store everything, so there has to be something here,” Chase replied, also rubbing his eyes as he looked down from the glowing screen before him.

I sighed again and turned back to the screen, grabbing my hair as if to pull it into a ponytail before simply pulling it to one side and slowly releasing it from between my fingers. After a few more minutes of scrolling and reading titles that I could barely understand, I was just about to call it quits.

“Holy shit, do you see this?”

Chase’s tone sounded excited, so I turned away from my computer and walked up beside him, leaning down to look at the screen, too. He was currently looking at a list of about twenty or so names, but none of them seemed familiar.

“What is this?”

He clicked on something, and suddenly a bunch of smaller windows began to pop up on the screen. They all had pictures of people who seemed to be about our age, along with a list of information and data I couldn't quite understand.

“These are all people Chuck, Phil, Jared, and those guys have been working on... like us.”

I stared at the screen for a few more seconds as my fingers began to grip the countertop with more force, the tips turning white.

“You mean... more people who they've...”

“Done something to ‘enhance’ them? Yes,” Chase finished for me.

My jaw clenched involuntarily as I looked over the rather long list of names. Chase began clicking through the various smaller windows showing each individual's information. Some of the names in the files were just kids, only thirteen or fourteen years old, and every time I saw one that young, I felt a flash of both anger and sadness.

“Are we in here?” I asked, the thought suddenly occurring to me.

Chase went back to the list of names and scrolled through them quickly.

“Lexi and I are, but I don't see you or Kailyn,” he said.

Silence fell over us for a few seconds as the cursor hovered over his own name. I glanced over at him and saw what looked like apprehension on his face.

“Are you going to look?” I asked. “You could finally know exactly what's going on—”

“I don't think I want to,” he interrupted, moving the cursor away. “Not yet, at least.”

*“I would,”* I thought, but I kept it to myself.

“Okay, so now that we've found these kids... is this what we're looking for?” I asked instead.

“From what we've seen so far, this is the closest,” he replied.

Chase had left one window open at the forefront of the others, so I began to glance over what was written on it. A small

picture sat at the top left of the page, showing a young girl, probably around thirteen or fourteen, with long blonde hair who looked like she was either scared or possibly in pain. To the right of the picture appeared to be generic information about her: height, weight, eye color, etc. Below that was a bunch of writing and terms that I didn't understand whatsoever, so I skimmed over it quickly. Finally, a short paragraph that appeared to be describing how whatever process had just been detailed was going.

“Subject response to treatment is minimal so far, with very small improvements to reflexive and physical abilities. Small bruise-like spots regularly appear on her arms and legs, although they do not seem to be due to any kind of physical injury. EDIT 3/15/99: Subject experienced a bad reaction to the procedures. She began convulsing and a large bruise-like discoloration quickly appeared across her chest before quickly appearing on her abdomen, as well. Twenty minutes after episode began, the subject went into cardiac arrest and attempts to revive her were unsuccessful.”

I immediately stopped reading and turned away, taking a step back from the computer and Chase. She had died, but the writing in the file was so... cold. Detached. Scientific. I ran my shaking hands through my hair as I began to pace about the area near the computers. We both remained silent for what must have been a full minute before Chase finally spoke up.

“We should take all of this information with us... just in case,” he said quietly.

“Just in case of what?” I replied, stopping where I was and spinning on my heel to look at him.

“Just in case we need it,” he said, clicking a few things on the computer screen before turning to look back at me.

I chewed the inside of my cheek for a few moments, but eventually nodded in response. He finally hit one more key on the keyboard and a machine to my right instantly turned on and began to whir into motion. A few seconds later, a piece of paper slid out of a small opening on the top of the machine and I grabbed it. The list of names was written in black ink on one side, in a perfectly neat, computerized style.



“Well, here we go,” I said, holding up the paper to show Chase.

“And with that, I think it’s time we make our exit,” he said, closing the various files on both of our computer screens before pressing the button on the front of the monitors to turn them off.

As we walked toward the door, I suddenly heard something and stopped where I was, putting an arm out to stop Chase, too. He looked over at me with a confused look on his face but I held one finger up to my lips to silence him before he could say anything. Footsteps were approaching in the hallway, although I had no idea how close they actually were. My eyes opened wide as I looked over at Chase.

“Someone’s coming.”

He instantly tensed and looked toward the door as I scanned about the room. My gaze finally settled on a door in the back corner and I tapped his shoulder insistently, pointing toward it.

“Over there,” I whispered.

We quickly slunk to the second door and Chase tried the handle. Unlike the first door from the hallway, this one opened immediately, and he threw it wide. Unfortunately, it revealed a large storage closet.

“Shit...”

Just then, I heard the footsteps drawing incredibly close to the door and I whipped around toward them. I bit my lower lip slightly before suddenly turning and slipping the pieces of paper into Chase’s back pocket and shoving him inside. He almost immediately tripped and fell forward, but avoided knocking everything off the shelves on either side of him. Before I could take a step forward, however, the sound of the handle on the door to the hallway jiggling caused me to freeze. Chase rose to a kneeling position as he stared back at me, eyes wide. Finally, with a heavy sigh, I turned away from the open doorway and faced across the lab.

Jared stood on the other side of the glass window in the door, staring at me for a few seconds as if he were having trouble comprehending the fact that I was standing before him. He slowly reached for his keys as my heart began to pound in my ears. A

moment later, he opened the door, the light from the hallway immediately spilling across the lab benches and equipment between us.

“Amaryss...?” he said.

I didn’t say anything, remaining still with my palms flat against the sides of my legs.

“What are you doing in here?” he asked, flicking the lights on and causing me to grimace slightly. “How did you get in here?”

“I was curious,” I replied, my tone completely even.

“That doesn’t answer how you got in here,” Jared said, crossing his arms, “but you shouldn’t be in here, regardless. Now tell me how.”

“The door, how else?” I replied.

“It was locked.”

“Wasn’t when I got here.”

Jared stared at me, searching my eyes for some kind of hint, but by now I had perfected my steely-eyed look, my “poker face” as Chase had said, and I was reasonably sure that he wouldn’t be able to get anything from me. At least I hoped so. He finally sighed and rubbed his eyes with one hand.

“Amaryss... what have you learned from going exploring in places when you’re told not to?” he asked.

I remained silent for a few seconds after he spoke, a quiet hum from something in the room suddenly coming to my attention.

“It’s exhilarating,” I replied.

Jared sighed and stepped into the room, moving toward me.

“Amaryss, despite what you seem to believe, I’m only trying to look out for you. Back in Nevada, I didn’t want you wandering off and getting bitten by a snake or falling down a hole somewhere... and you still did one of those things.”

“You never specifically said I couldn’t come in here,” I pointed out.

I could see Jared’s jaw working as I grinned inwardly, reveling in my small victory in that comeback.

“I guess I didn’t,” he replied, his tone forced. “From now on, please don’t come in here, Amaryss.”

“Okay then,” I said, sparing a casual glance toward the storage closet to find Chase no longer crouched just inside before

moving toward the door, but Jared blocked my way. “Can I go to bed now?”

Jared looked down at me for a few seconds as if he wanted to say something, but he seemed to think better of it and moved out of my way. I slipped past him and into the hallway without another word. Instead of heading to the left, however, I took a right and tried to remain as casual as possible. As I reached the first hallway on my right, I spared a glance down it to find Chase just closing a door, crouching down in front of it. I changed course and immediately headed toward him as he rose to his feet and began to turn in my direction. As his eyes caught sight of me, he jumped, but quickly recovered as a smirk tugged at his features.

“Come on,” I hissed under my breath and spun him around to continue in the same general I was heading.

We eventually wound our way through dark, back hallways until we finally found ourselves turning the corner into the one outside the sleeping quarters and we came to a stop. I couldn’t help it as a Cheshire Cat grin spread across my face, while Chase shook his head, laughing quietly.

“You’re crazy,” he said. “I seriously think there’s something wrong with you.”

I laughed a little bit, as well.

“That wasn’t me being crazy back there; that was just sass.”

He raised one eyebrow at me.

“Don’t you underestimate it,” I said, jabbing a finger at him “You still have the papers?”

He nodded, patting his back pocket to the sound of crinkling paper.

“Good, ‘cause if that was all for nothing, I’d be pissed.”

## 6

### Pack It Up, Move It On

August 31<sup>st</sup>, 1999

10:28:34 A.M.

Somewhere in Northern California

I was awakened by the sensation of rocking back and forth at a somewhat constant and violent rate. I opened my eyes just in time to watch myself roll off the edge of the bed and fall straight down to the floor, pulling the sheets with me. After about ten or fifteen seconds of twisting and flailing, I managed to escape their hold and sat up, looking to see what had caused my accident. Kailyn was standing with one knee on the bed, leaning across it to look down at me, a look of amusement on her face.

“Christ, you really don’t wake up for anything,” she remarked.

“Would you care to explain why you just shoved me out of bed?” I shot back, getting to my feet and gathering the sheets into one large bunch.

“Jared told me to,” she said, shrugging.

“Did he say why?”

“Nope, just that I should go wake you up and tell you that everyone is going to be meeting in the ‘Big Conference Room’ at 10:30... which is in about a minute.”

I glanced over at the clock beside the bed and swore, quickly grabbing my shoes and pulling them on without even tying them. I stood up straight and looked over at Kailyn.

“Okay, let’s go,” I said.

She eyed my gym shorts and cami top with a raised eyebrow for a moment before smirking.

“Okay then...” Kailyn said in a sing-song tone of voice before leading the way into the hallway.

The winding, dimly-lit hallways began to blur together in my head until I was reasonably sure I would not be able to find my way back without some help, and I was really beginning to wonder how Kailyn even knew where she was going... or maybe *if* she

knew where she was going.

“I didn’t realize this room was on the other side of the state” I quipped, glancing through the window in one of the doors lining the hallway to find it empty, like the ones I had first seen when we had arrived.

“Stop complaining, we’re practically there,” Kailyn sighed and took a left down a hallway with light coming from it.

Taking the corner, I found two heavy wooden doors blocking our path about twenty feet ahead. Kailyn walked right up to them and grabbed the handle on one, glancing back.

“You coming?”

I’m not sure what I was expecting to be behind those doors, after all that walking, but a generic conference room was not it. The walls were all painted an off-white color, illuminated by harsh fluorescent lighting which made my eyes hurt slightly. A long, stained-wood table sat in the center with many chairs set around it, yet only a few were occupied. Jared, Chuck, and Phil sat at the far end, while Chase and Lexi sat along the right side closer to Kailyn and me.

“Good morning, Amaryss,” Jared said, straightening up slightly and eying me with a similar expression as Kailyn from minutes ago. “I see Kailyn was successful in getting you out of bed, at least.”

Suddenly my decision to not change my clothes seemed like a bad one, but there wasn’t exactly anything I could do about it now. I simply folded my arms over my chest and took a seat beside Lexi, sinking somewhat lower in it than necessary.

“What did you pull us out of our slumbers for?” she asked turning her amused look from me to the three men at the head of the table.

“Well...” Chuck said, clearly trying to think of a way to begin whatever he was about to say.

“We’re relocating,” Jared said, cutting Chuck off before he could finish his thought.

“And you called us all to this random meeting room because...?” Lexi prodded, leaning forward slightly.

“Listen... we figured that there’s not much use keeping everything so—secret—any more,” Phil said, nervously shuffling

the papers in front of him and seemingly unable to meet anyone's eyes.

Somehow I felt "we" constituted mostly of Jared.

"Like, how open?" Kailyn asked, leaning forward and propping herself up with her elbow on the table as she raised both eyebrows.

"Well, it's no use trying to convince you four that you are just average, ordinary teenagers, now is it?" Chuck said, laughing slightly, but his remark was met with silence.

"We are working toward a common goal here, and you are the first generation to see these ideas brought to fruition," Jared said, leaning forward slightly. "When future generations look back to see where everything started, they will be able to point to right now... to *you*."

All four of us seemed to shift uncomfortably as the silence only seemed to give more weight to his statement.

"What is this 'everything' that's starting?" Lexi finally asked.

Jared stared down at his folded hands in front of him for a good few seconds before his eyes flicked up to glance between each of us, seemingly settling on me for a moment longer than the others before speaking.

"You are the next step of the human race."

I could almost hear the needle come off the record as the room fell dead silent. Even the ambient sounds of the lights humming overhead and some kind of ventilation fan seemed to have been sucked away, leaving only my pulse pounding in my ears.

"Come again?" Chase said, leaning forward as well.

"We are looking to advance the human race as we know it," Jared explained. "Let's face it: we are a fragile species. Yet, our grasp of technology and innovation allows us to keep moving forward and stay at the top of the food chain. Now, we are trying to take that one step further."

"And you're not at all worried about creating a new group of people who are supposed to be stronger, faster, and smarter than you?" Kailyn interjected. "I don't know about you, but that's usually how the plot of a sci-fi horror movie starts. The scientists

try to create some kind of miracle beings, and then they inevitably turn on their creators as they suddenly realize, ‘maybe that wasn’t such a good idea.’”

“We are not just taking a shot in the dark, here,” Jared shot back, irritation lacing his tone. “This isn’t some half-assed thesis written on a caffeine-fueled all-nighter; this is a carefully organized and painstaking process with years of planning that we are keeping contained. Growth with limits: that’s how nature has always worked.”

I was tempted to say something along the lines of, “no, it hasn’t,” but he was on a roll, so I didn’t want to stop him now. Once the silence had stretched to an even more uncomfortable length, and it was clear none of us were going to make the next move, Jared sighed and leaned back in his chair, rubbing his left temple with two fingers.

“Anyway, we’re relocating,” he reiterated.

“But you guys just got here...” Lexi said, a strange childish tone to her voice.

“You’re coming, too. I told you last night. You are all part of this, so you are all coming,” he said.

“Where to?” I asked, cutting him off.

Jared turned his attention to me, a look somewhere between annoyance and fatigue in his eyes.

“You will find out soon enough,” he said and rose from his seat, closing the folder before him and looking over at the four of us again. “We leave at noon. That means asses in seats at twelve o’clock sharp, not just wandering out of the building.”

With that, he quickly maneuvered around the table and threw one of the doors wide, letting it swing closed with a bang behind him. A few moments of tense silence followed his exit before I finally turned to look back at Lexi and Chase behind me. They were both fixated on the doors, as well, and therefore didn’t notice Chuck and Phil beginning to collect their things and get to their feet. The shuffling drew all four sets of eyes to them and they each gave awkward, curt nods before departing, as well, leaving us four teenagers alone in the conference room.

“So...” Kailyn said, turning to look back toward the three of us across from her.

“Well, looks like we’re all definitely in this shit now,” Lexi said, drumming her fingers on the table’s surface.

“Isn’t this kind of what we wanted?” Chase asked quietly, turning his attention to me.

“How so?” I replied.

“We wanted out of here... and now we have it,” he said, shifting his gaze around to the other two quickly, as well.

“This isn’t entirely what I had in mind,” Lexi quipped, leaning forward onto the table so she could see Chase past me. “I don’t know about you guys, but when I said I wanted to get out of here, I meant of my own will and on my own, not stuck in a car heading to—I don’t know—probably somewhere else like this.”

She shoved her chair back as she shot to her feet and began to pace toward the head of the table, her hands clasped behind her head. I looked between Chase and Kailyn and found each of them giving me almost identical looks.

“We could work with that,” I said.

“How so?” Kailyn asked.

“What’s to say we can’t run away right now?” I suggested. “We just pack our bags and head out the back door when no one’s looking.”

“The fact that we’re miles into the woods in the middle of nowhere, that’s what,” Lexi said from the opposite side of the table. “There’s nothing but wilderness for at least twenty or thirty miles, and the nearest main road is still five miles away.”

“Okay, so how about on the ride there?” Chase supplied.

“What do you mean?” Kailyn asked.

“Overpower Jared on the drive, take the car, and go wherever we want,” he said, hitting his palm on the table as he finished. “Over and done.”

“Except for the part where ‘overpowering’ him probably involves becoming involved in a major car accident,” she argued. “I don’t know about you, but I don’t think we’d get very far with a car totaled in a ditch and several wounded people.”

Everyone fell silent again as I leaned back in my chair, clasping my hands over my stomach and staring absentmindedly at the table before me. After what felt like an eternity without any ideas, I finally cleared my throat, causing Chase and Kailyn to



jump.

“So we just go wherever he wants us to, and then we figure it out there,” I said, shrugging.

“On what fucking planet does that sound like a good idea?” Kailyn scoffed, looking at me as if I had just suggested we build a rocket and escape to the moon. “We have no way of knowing what it’s like there, or if we’d have as much freedom as here. For all we know we’ll be locked up in cells, only let out so they can do... whatever the hell it is they’re going to do.”

“I think we’re past the phase of them sticking needles in our arms and pumping shit into us, don’t you?” I shot back, turning to look at her.

Kailyn looked like she wanted to say something, but closed her mouth instead and crossed her arms, sulking in her chair slightly.

“I just think we’re fucked here. There’s no way out of it.”

“Let’s just play this by ear,” I said. “As Lexi said, there’s no great way out of here, right now, and unless we find a very opportune moment on the trip to just take the car, or whatever, we’re not going to be able to steal that, either. It looks to me like going along for now is our only choice.”

The room fell silent again as the reality began to sink in on everyone. Finally, Kailyn let out a sound somewhere between a laugh and a sigh of exasperation, throwing her hands into the air.

“Or suicide. That could be a good choice.”

My jaw clenched as I saw Lexi shoot her an unreadable look, just out of her sight. Not wanting to linger on that thought for too long, it seemed, Chase cleared his throat, lightly hitting his palms on the table before him.

“So... who wants to take bets on where we’re going?”

“Did they say?” Lexi asked. “I can’t remember.”

“I was too distracted by the whole ‘you are the next step of the human race’ thing,” Kailyn quipped.

“Don’t think so,” Chase replied, ignoring her comment.

“I’m still betting Arizona,” I offered.

“Because of whatever you heard last night?”

“Well... yeah.”

“What about Area 51?” Lexi suggested, letting out a short,

dry laugh.

“Somehow I doubt Jared, Chuck, or Phil have *those* kinds of connections,” I shot back, smirking.

“Who knows, these guys seem to be everywhere.”

“What do you mean?” Kailyn asked, suddenly looking interested as she turned her chair toward Lexi.

“They all have, like, a network of all these other scientist people like them across the country,” she explained. “At least Chuck and Phil do, so I assume Jared’s part of it, too. They collaborate occasionally, it seems, or at least one or two of them visit at a time. We pretty much don’t get to go anywhere, though.”

“Didn’t we go to Nevada once?” Chase asked.

Lexi looked up at the ceiling for a second, her lips pulled to one side of her mouth, as she appeared to think about it.

“Oh yeah, we did, like... three years ago?”

“Shit, it’s been that long?” he asked incredulously.

“Feels like a goddamn decade,” she replied, nodding.

I glanced over at Kailyn, who also gave me the same look. Their story was starting to sound a little too familiar to both of us. On the other hand, it was making me realize how different ours was, and how fortunate we had been, despite how much we had complained in the past years. At the very least, there had been a change of scenery every once in a while.

“So you two have been *here* for five and... however many years you can remember?” I asked, looking between Chase and Lexi.

“Pretty much,” she said, shrugging. “Who knows, maybe this will be an adventure.”

Kailyn snorted and the three of us looked over at her.

“Oh, I’m sure it will be,” she said dryly.

“What do you mean?” Lexi asked.

“To die will be an awfully great adventure.”

The room fell silent for a few seconds as Lexi looked over at Kailyn as if weighing what she had just said.

“Well, if that isn’t pessimistic—”

“It’s realistic,” Kailyn interrupted, giving me a hard look, “and I don’t think we can really afford to keep living in this suspended reality anymore, where everything is ‘pretty much

okay' and we'll all be fine."

I fell silent, still staring at Kailyn as I tried to figure out how to react to what she had just said. On one hand, I wanted to slap her for saying it, but on the other, I agreed with her. Unable to make a decision, I shook my head and sighed, rising from my seat, as well, and began to pace at the opposite end of the table from Lexi.

"I mean, what the hell? Who's to say we're going to live much longer, anyway?" Kailyn continued, clearly waiting for some kind of agreement or argument, but I couldn't quite tell which.

I refused to look over at her, though, as I stared at the ground a few inches in front of my feet and continued my pacing.

"It's kind of exciting, isn't it?" Kailyn continued a moment later, her smirk practically audible.

Judging by the long silence that followed, though, I guessed that Lexi and Chase didn't understand or agree with the statement, either.

"Lexi might have been right, it's all like... some kind of adventure," she continued. "We don't know what happens tomorrow. We're just set out and we see what the hell happens."

"I'm not sure I'm all for the whole, 'we could die tomorrow' mentality..." Chase replied and I heard the squeak of his chair as I presumed he shifted uncomfortably in it.

"You just don't understand fun, that's all," Kailyn replied.

Silence fell over the room for several long moments before I sighed and finally turned to look at the other three, the sudden noise apparently drawing their attention.

"So... we're all piling into the back of the car at noon?"

"Well, that sounds like the option out of our three big ones that we're all in agreement on, so..." Kailyn replied, shrugging.

I stared back at her blankly for several moments before shaking my head and turning toward the double doors behind me. I needed to step away for a minute before I actually slapped her, this time.

"Where are you going?" Chase asked.

"I don't know, just out of this room," I replied, shoving the door open and stepping outside, not caring to make sure it closed behind me.

I quickly began to stalk down the hallway, running one hand over my face, mostly in an attempt to somehow wipe away the fatigue and irritation that seemed to be plaguing me at the moment. I had only gone about thirty feet before intense pain suddenly shot up my right leg and I fell against the wall, sucking a breath through my clenched teeth. As soon as my back hit the concrete, the pain started in my left leg, as well, prompting me to slide down the wall, my eyes closed and my hands clenched into fists as I no longer felt able to hold my own weight. Once I was sitting on the ground with my back against the wall, I furiously began to rub my legs, as if they had merely gone to sleep and the blood was now trying to return to them.

After what must have only been a minute or so of intense, burning pain, it quickly began to fade. A few more seconds later, it was almost as if it had never been there in the first place.

I opened my eyes and looked down at my legs, almost as if I expected something to be visibly different, but they looked exactly the same as before. As I carefully began to get to my feet, I found that only a slight soreness remained, but it was nothing crippling. I ran my right hand down my thigh as I paced to remove the last hints of soreness, almost wondering if I'd be able to feel whatever had just happened, but everything felt the same as always. Granted, "the same" still seemed better than it probably should have been, since I didn't go out of my way to do any form of exercise.

It seemed I had to chalk it up to whatever strangeness had been happening lately, but the thought didn't particularly provide any comfort. I swallowed with some difficulty before taking a deep breath and sighing heavily.

"Hey there."

I almost jumped a foot in the air as I spun around to see who had just spoken. It took me a few seconds to realize that it wasn't exactly the first person I wanted to see at that moment. Kailyn was leaning one shoulder against the wall several feet away, hands shoved in the back pockets of her jeans. My heart was still pounding as I cleared my throat and tried to compose myself slightly.

"Hey," I said, although I still sounded somewhat out of

breath.

“Whatcha doing out here?” she asked, moving to cross her arms casually.

“Just... couldn’t keep talking,” I replied. “Felt like I needed to move a bit, you know?”

Kailyn shrugged, still remaining against the wall.

“I suppose,” she replied. “I thought I saw you sitting down against the wall, though.”

I swallowed nervously, although I couldn’t quite place why I was so nervous of Kailyn’s inquisitions.

“What of it?” I asked defensively.

“Nothing, really,” she replied, “I was just curious.”

After a few seconds of silence, Kailyn sighed and pushed herself off the wall. She began to idly walk toward me, her arms still crossed and her steps lazy and swerving back and forth almost drunkenly. I found myself tensing up as she drew closer, although I had no idea why.

“Where were you walking to?” she asked as she drew nearer.

“I dunno,” I shrugged, but she didn’t look impressed.

“Nowhere in particular, I suppose.”

“Let’s take a walk this way, then,” Kailyn said, nodding to indicate the hallway ahead of us.

I began to fall in step beside her as she resumed a normal walking speed and style.

“We ended up deciding the ‘trip to Grandmother’s house’ approach probably isn’t going to work out, by the way.”

Her voice surprised me and I jumped slightly, which evidently didn’t go unnoticed by Kailyn, who smirked.

“Oh?”

“Chase brought up the all-important topic of food and Lexi changed her mind, yet again.”

I nodded slowly, brushing some of my hair back behind one ear as I stared blankly at the ground a few feet in front of us. The biggest problem of this escape plan seemed to be coming to agreement on it, rather than the actual execution, at this point.

We fell into silence until we reached the turn in the hallway and rounded the corner to our left. Suddenly, Kailyn grabbed the

sleeve to my shirt and pulled on it, causing me to stop and spin around.

“What?” I said quickly, finding myself in a somewhat defensive stance.

“Why so excited all the sudden?” Kailyn said, raising one eyebrow.

“...What?” I said again, this time more hesitantly. “Excited?”

“Haven’t you been thinking about our impending mortality?” she asked, seemingly ignoring my response.

“What the hell do you even mean by that?”

“Not even a little?” she replied, still ignoring whatever I said. “Well, to each their own, I suppose. I, on the other hand, have been making a list... you know, one of those, ‘things to do before you die’ types of things.”

I found myself slowly trying to back away from Kailyn, but she matched me step for step, staying the exact same distance away.

“Kailyn...” I said, although I had no idea what kind of response I expected from her.

“I’ve been thinking lately... we’ve known each other for a while, right?” she continued as if I had said nothing, which I should have expected.

Something about the tone of her voice and her body language told me that I wouldn’t like wherever she was taking... whatever this was. Suddenly, Kailyn stepped forward and grabbed my upper arms, pulling me closer in one swift motion. Before I could even register what was happening, I felt something pressed against my face.

It took me a second or two to realize that Kailyn’s lips were now firmly planted against mine.

I found myself frozen in shock as I tried to grasp just what exactly was happening, but finally, my brain seemed to sort itself out and adrenaline shot through my body. I tried to turn my head away as I pushed against Kailyn, but her grip on my arms was tighter than I had expected. A second later, she released me, anyway, and I staggered backward, my chest heaving and my heart beating at a thousand miles per hour.

I could only stare at Kailyn with widened eyes as she appeared to ponder me for a few seconds with a somewhat amused expression on her face, but my vocal cords finally seemed to come under my control again and I managed to gasp out a few words.

“What the fuck?!”

Kailyn’s lips pulled back into a smile as she took a few steps back, hugging her arms tightly around her chest. Her smile immediately felt unnerving, but I only found myself able to stare back at her with a bewildered look on my face.

“Well...” she said quietly, the smile still on her face.

“What are you doing?” I demanded.

“I’m just standing here!” Kailyn replied, twirling around and almost—giggling.

“You know damn well what I meant!” I hissed, taking a step toward her.

Kailyn immediately moved closer to me, sliding almost like a dancer across the floor.

“Back for another round?” she asked quietly, raising one eyebrow.

I reached out and grabbed her upper arms in one lightning-fast motion before pinning her to the wall. Kailyn glanced down at my hands before looking back up at me.

“Well, someone’s feisty,” she said.

“What the hell has gotten into you?” I hissed, making sure to remain close, but not too close. “You were f—well your normal self, like, yesterday, and now you’re talking about running away, death, and... whatever *this* is.”

Kailyn’s head suddenly snapped up to look at me, the look in her eyes changing. Something dark had appeared on her features.

“What are you saying then, Amaryss?” she asked, her voice quiet and even.

“I’m saying this isn’t like you,” I replied, my voice quiet, as well, but with a sense of urgency to it.

“I’m me, Amaryss,” she replied, still just as quietly.

“I never said you weren’t.”

“It was in the subtext.”

“What has gotten into you?” I shot back, frustration

creeping into my voice. “You’ve never acted all like this.”

“What’s *this*, Amaryss?” Kailyn asked, shifting against my grip on her arms.

I let out a growl of frustration and eased the pressure off her arms for just a second. The next thing I knew, I had been spun around and slammed against the wall, Kailyn standing in front of me pointing one finger in my face like a scolding parent.

“Listen,” she began, “You’re not the only one with weird shit going on, lately. I’m confused—and you’re confused. So don’t you go and act like I’m suddenly some new person... I’m not. I’m just me.”

With that, she appeared to hesitate for a moment, her eyes flicking down, before she met my gaze with one last harsh glare and stalked away. I watched her go for a few seconds, my heart still pounding from the adrenaline rush caused by Kailyn slamming me against the wall, before I absentmindedly began to rub at my upper arms. Suddenly, something strange dawned on me: Kailyn hadn’t been using her hands to hold me against the wall. One of them she had been using to point her finger in my face, and the other had been at her side, yet I had distinctly felt the pressure of her pushing my arms back against the wall.

This was a little different than just nudging a TV remote off the couch.

August 31<sup>st</sup>, 1999

11:48:42 A.M.

Somewhere in Northern California

My hair fell between my shoulder blades with a wet smack as I bowed my head slightly, letting the warm water of the shower flow across my neck and down my back. After a few seconds, I sighed and lifted my head again, turning to face the handle and shutting it off. The water instantly ceased, but my hand remained resting on the shower handle for several seconds before I finally let it slide off and fall by my side. I pulled one side of the curtain back slightly and glanced out; seeing no one, as it should have



been, I grabbed the towel I had left hanging from a peg attached to the wall on my right and pushed the curtain fully aside.

No longer dripping wet, I wrapped the towel around myself and was about to reach for the clothes I had left hanging from a hook on the back of the door when I happened to catch my reflection out of the corner of my eye. I stopped, one hand still outstretched, and turned my head fully toward the glass.

The rest of my body slowly turned after it until I faced the mirror, using my outstretched hand to wipe the condensation away. The image facing me was no different than any other time I had seen it: the same brown hair, a little darker and damper from the shower, and grey eyes faced me from within the reflective glass. Maybe I was a little different physically than years past, but that was just par for the course when it came to “growing up,” at least I was pretty sure.

I slowly ran one hand down the upper part of the opposite arm, squeezing it slightly in an attempt to see if I could feel a difference. The only problem was that I had no idea what “normal” was supposed to feel like, but I had a feeling it wasn’t quite what lay under my grasp. It wasn’t like you could see my biceps clearly defined like some kind of body-builder, but they definitely felt tight and... “toned” is perhaps the best word.

*“Something tells me that normal people who do as little as I do don’t look like that,”* I thought, letting my arm fall to my side again.

I quickly dropped the towel from around myself and pulled on my clothes, pulling my damp hair out from underneath the collar of my T-shirt before turning to the mirror again, leaning forward on the sink slightly. My hand ran across my stomach absentmindedly, memories returning of the incident... two days ago? Yesterday? I couldn’t remember how long ago it was anymore.

I frowned slightly and was about to turn away to grab my towel when I felt an intense burning in my eyes. I closed them tightly and pressed the heels of my hands into them, as if it would help somehow. After a minute or two, the burning sensation disappeared and I slowly took my hands away, blinking rapidly. I looked back over at the mirror, half-expecting to see that I now had

yellow eyes or something, but nothing of the sort had happened. I moved closer, staring directly into my irises for signs of something different.

*“Still the same and grey to me,”* I thought, leaning away from the mirror.

I shivered slightly, grabbed my towel and clothes I had been sleeping in and opened the door, hitting the light as I walked out. The floor was freezing beneath my bare feet as I hurried back to the room Kailyn and I were sharing. I accidentally slammed the door harder than I had intended behind me and winced slightly. Kailyn glanced over at the noise, but otherwise didn’t look particularly troubled as she remained with her feet up on the small table beneath the TV. We stared at each other in silence for a few moments before I swallowed somewhat nervously.

“Anything interesting?” I asked, throwing my clothes in a pile on the opposite side of the bed.

“Just shitty daytime TV,” she replied. “Nothing but fake people with overly dramatic lives, and soap operas.”

I grinned slightly, taking a seat on the end of the bed with a heavy sigh. Kailyn looked around the TV slightly to see me, but otherwise didn’t move from her seat.

“The reality of how much all this sucks just setting in?” she asked.

“No, that set in a long time ago,” I replied, “before I even knew you.”

“Maybe you should see a counselor for that kind of thing,” she replied, grinning.

I laughed dryly and rolled my eyes, falling backwards onto the bed, my arms stretched above me.

“I might actually pay to see what a shrink thinks of my mind,” I replied, staring up at the ceiling.

“I’m not sure I like the idea of people probing that deeply into my head,” Kailyn replied, yawning.

After that, we fell into silence for what must have been a good minute or two, the sound of whatever show Kailyn was watching filling the empty void of the room. I could hear people’s voices, but I wasn’t paying enough attention to distinguish what they were saying. I finally let out a heavy sigh and pushed myself

into a sitting position.

“I think I’m gonna start heading out,” I said.

“It’s not noon, and I don’t plan on being in that car until *exactly* when Jared said.”

I shrugged, picking up my clothes and shoving them in my bag before zipping the top and throwing the strap over my head.

“Suit yourself.”

“That and I’m kinda invested in ‘who’s the baby daddy.’”

I shook my head with a sigh as Kailyn smirked, but turned her attention back to the TV.

“Well, at least he can yell at you instead of me, this time.”

“I’ll deal.”

I meandered through the hallways until I came to the door that led to the parking lot, pushing it open with my back and stepping into the warm sunlight beyond. I squinted my eyes against the sudden brightness, but headed to the right, where I remembered the car from when we had arrived. As I half-expected, the doors were locked, so I dropped my bag on the ground behind the trunk and sighed, running my hands through my hair.

A moment later, I became aware of something behind me and tensed, although I immediately hoped that whoever or whatever was behind me hadn’t noticed. Suddenly, I spun around, crouching down as I did, before launching myself forward, all before even realizing what I was doing.

I vaguely saw something red before I slammed into whatever was following me and both I and it fell to the ground. I grunted slightly as I hit, the collision with the ground knocking some of the breath out of my lungs. I quickly pushed myself off whatever I had hit and into a crouching position a foot or two away, panting slightly. After a few seconds, I came to realize that the thing I had just viciously tackled was Chase.

He was lying on his back, his arms splayed to either side of him as he stared up at the sky, his chest rising and falling as he wheezed slightly. I bit my lip, but remained silent and crouching a foot or two away. Finally, he coughed and lifted his head up, blinking rapidly before wiping one hand across his eyes. He pushed himself into a seated position and looked around for a few

seconds before he seemed to actually see me. I smiled sheepishly and waved.

“Hell...?” he said breathlessly, seemingly unable to form a truly cohesive sentence.

“Sorry, I guess I overreacted...” I said, brushing some strands of hair out my face.

“I’ll say...” he said, coughing slightly as he slowly got to his feet.

I rose to mine, as well, wiping the palms of my hands on my jeans to get the dust off them. Chase rubbed his chest slowly, most likely in the spot where I had rammed into him a few seconds ago.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” I asked, taking a tentative step forward.

“I’m fine, really,” he said, laughing. “Guess I know better than to sneak up on you, though.”

I smiled slightly, dragging one foot through the dirt in front of me.

“Look at this, a new side to Amaryss,” Chase remarked and I instantly looked up at him, confusion etched into my face.

“What?” I said, unable to think of anything else to say.

“You’re blushing and acting all embarrassed...” he remarked, grinning, “I didn’t know you had a cute side.”

“Shut up,” I said, shoving him slightly as he laughed.

What I didn’t want to admit to him was that something about what he said actually felt... good. It was kind of endearing that he thought I had “cute” side, regardless of whether I thought I did or not. I glanced up from my feet and jumped slightly as I found him standing next to me, just beginning to put his bag on the ground beside mine.

“Still?” he said, smirking.

“Stop smiling, creep,” I shot back, but couldn’t help smiling in return.

Neither of us said anything for several seconds while I tried to figure out what to do with my hands, switching between picking at the seams on the sides of my jeans, pulling at the hem of my T-shirt, or pinning them to my sides by folding my arms over my chest. Once I had done this cycle several times, I noticed Chase

leaning against the back of the car, still smirking at me.

“So... ready to head into the great unknown?” he finally asked.

I shrugged, shoving my hands in my pockets.

“The mere thought has left you speechless?” he teased, grinning.

“No,” I replied, laughing slightly, “it’s just... not really a good thought. I mean, I’ve been moved around by Jared so many times, it’s not entirely new to me, but... something about this time just feels different.”

Chase nodded slowly, saying nothing. I sighed and began to pace back and forth slowly, staring down at the small rocks and twigs I was kicking around with my feet. After what felt like quite a while of silence, Chase spoke up again, breaking the awkward feeling that had fallen over us.

“So, Jared’s been dragging you around with him for a while?”

I nodded, stopping where I was and looking over at Chase again.

“Ever since I can remember.”

“Was Kailyn there, too?”

“Only after I was about... thirteen?” I said, screwing up my face in thought as I tried to remember.

“And how old are you now?”

“Almost eighteen,” I said, suddenly realizing that I had only assumed Chase was the same age, as well. “How old are you?”

“Nineteen... I think,” he said, shrugging. “What year is it again?”

We both laughed for a few seconds before it slowly died off.

“No, seriously, what year is it?”

I grinned slightly, unsure whether he was still joking or not, but responded anyway.

“1999...”

He appeared to think something over for a moment before nodding.

“Okay, then I’m nineteen,” he said, letting out a short

laugh.

“I always thought you were more like my age,” I said.

“Well it’s not like you’re all that much younger than me,” he said, shrugging. “Besides, I assumed you might have been, like, twenty-four or something.”

“Me? Twenty-four?” I said, slightly surprised.

“Yeah, you just seem rather... mature, I guess,” I said.

“Are you calling me old?”

“What? No, not at all!” he said, laughing.

I grinned in reply, glancing down at my feet and kicking a small rock. It amused me that Chase had thought I was older than I actually was, but as I thought about it more, it really shouldn’t have been all that surprising. I mean, I was kind of tall, and it’s not like there’s a huge difference between twenty-somethings and almost-eighteen-year-olds, at least physically. I think. Then again, I wouldn’t particularly know, since I had never met any... well, that I knew of, apparently.

When I realized that I had been quiet for entirely too long, and that I was fidgeting with my clothing, again, I cleared my throat and blinked several times to bring my attention back to Chase.

“Why don’t you know how old you are?” I asked, finally.

He shrugged, shifting his stance against the trunk slightly.

“They’re not too keen on celebrating birthdays around here, but I’ve heard them make a few references to my age when something happened, so I just kind of tried to figure out how long ago that event was and work backwards from that, or do the math from whatever year. I kept seeing 1980 on things for me, so I figure that must be my birthday,” he explained. “They’re not too keen on birthday parties around here, either.”

We both laughed quietly for a few seconds before it slowly died down and we fell into silence again. I finally let out a sigh and glanced around, running a hand across the back of my neck.

“Does it feel hot out here to you?” I asked, feeling the gross, wet sheen come away as my hand fell by my side.

Chase shrugged, grinning.

“Maybe.”

I rolled my eyes, letting out a huff as I leaned against the

trunk of the car beside him. Almost immediately, I heard the sound of the building's door opening and we both glanced back toward it to find Jared stepping outside. When he caught sight of us, he jumped in surprise, but quickly tried to compose himself.

"I didn't expect any of you to be here early," he commented, glancing back toward the door and muttering something that clearly wasn't meant for us to hear, "or on time."

"Surprise," I shot back, folding my arms over my chest.

Jared dropped his bag near ours and moved to start the car without saying another word. The entire vehicle shook as the engine came to life, a distinct rattling sound discernable from where we stood.

"That sounds good..." Chase muttered, glancing down at the car over his shoulder.

"Maybe we'll end up stranded in the middle of nowhere, regardless," I commented, smirking.

He let out a single, short laugh in response before Jared appeared beside me, once again.

"Excuse me, you two," he said, motioning for us to move away from the trunk.

As we stepped away, he popped it open, lifting his bag into it and unzipping it to root around for a moment or two before closing it, once again, and glancing back at us.

"Put your stuff in the back and pick your seats."

"Shotgun!"

I glanced over my shoulder to see Kailyn walking across the space between the building and the car, her hand raised in the air. Jared glanced over at her quickly before turning back to Chase and me.

"Well, that leaves three open seats, then," he said before walking off back toward the building.

I lifted my bag into the trunk just as Kailyn reached the car and swung hers into the back, as well, cutting Chase off before he gave her a look and tossed his in, as well.

"I'm gonna go check on Lexi."

I nodded in response, watching him head back toward the door and disappear inside the building, once again. Letting out a sigh, I turned around and sat on the rear fender of the car, folding

my arms over my chest and sticking my legs out in front of me, crossing them at the ankles. Kailyn stood to my right, her hands on her hips as she glanced around, her eyes squinted against the harsh midday sunlight.

“So about that time, huh?” I said, looking up and over at her.

“Yep, moving day,” she replied, nodding slowly.

“Getting all nostalgic?” I joked, one corner of my mouth pulled back in a smirk.

“I don’t know how I’m going to carry on,” she replied, turning to look back at me and raising one hand to shield her eyes from the sun to her left.

“It’s okay, we’ll make it through this somehow,” I replied, feigning a comforting tone.

Kailyn cracked a grin, as well, and I realized that it was the first time I had seen her behave like she used to since... well, almost since we had come here.

“Scoot,” she said, gesturing for me to move over.

I slid over a foot or so on the fender and she sat down next to me, placing her hands on either side of her and slouching forward slightly, letting out a heavy sigh.

“Listen, Amaryss, I didn’t mean to snap at you earlier,” she said quietly, still looking straight ahead. “It’s just been... a little stressful lately.”

“It’s been shitty for all of us,” I replied, glancing over at her.

Kailyn happened to turn to look at me at the same time, and after a rather long awkward look, she smiled slightly and looked around with just her eyes.

“What?” she said.

“I just turned this way and you started staring at me,” I replied. “I was wondering if you wanted something.”

Kailyn put one hand on my right leg and looked me right in the eyes, leaning slightly closer to me.

“Only you,” she said quietly.

I held her stare for a few more seconds before she had to try to conceal a laugh and broke her eye contact. We both started laughing as she took her hand away and I shoved her slightly.



“You’re such a little shit, you know that?” I said.

Kailyn just smiled and turned back toward the building as the sound of the door opening came from off to our left. I leaned forward slightly to see Lexi and Chase walking across the open lot toward us, Chase now carrying a backpack over one shoulder. As they reached the car, I shook some of my hair back over my shoulder and looked up at them.

“Good morning, sunshine,” I said, smirking slightly.

Lexi gave me a cold look as she came to a stop in front of me.

“Out of my way, girl,” she said, moving to put her bag in the trunk.

I leaned to my left to avoid being hit in the head as I laughed.

“Is that everything?” Chase asked, glancing behind me at the contents of the trunk.

“Everything of ours, at least,” Kailyn replied, standing up and taking a few steps away from the back of the car. “We’re just waiting on Jared.”

Chase nodded slowly, shoving his hands in his pockets.

“Shotgun,” Lexi said, holding up one hand.

“Too late, I called it,” Kailyn replied.

“It’s true,” I supplied.

Lexi made a “humph” noise, like an annoyed child, and crossed her arms.

“She’s really not a morning person,” Chase said, leaning in toward me and speaking in a loud whisper.

“Well no shit I’m not, Chase!” Lexi snapped, turning to him. “I’ve been up for a few hours, now, and didn’t eat breakfast, so don’t try me.”

Before he could come up with a response, Jared appeared from within the building, walking toward the car.

“Are you four all set?” he asked, squinting his eyes against the sunlight.

“Yeah, I think so,” I replied.

“Okay, good, now everyone pile in,” he said, gesturing toward the car as he approached the driver’s side and slid into the seat, nearly slamming the door behind him.

I glanced at Kailyn and she raised one eyebrow at me. We both knew: something was off. Jared had been acting irritable all morning... more so than normal. Logging that thought in the back of my mind, I hopped to my feet and closed the trunk before following Lexi into the back seat of the car. I ended up sitting in the middle of the three of us in the back, with Lexi on my left, and Chase on my right.

Jared glanced in the rearview mirror at us before backing out of the parking space and moving toward the exit to the compound. The car came to a rather short stop in front of the gate and he quickly rolled the window down. Jared grabbed a small, plastic keycard attached to a lanyard from the center column between the two front seats and swiped it quickly through the small reader. An electronic beep sounded and a light beside the card reader turned from red to green before Jared quickly entered a five-digit code into a keypad just beside the reader. As he turned back to the steering wheel, dropping the card back into the small storage bin in the column between the two seats, the gate began to slide aside. I tried to read what the small screen above the card reader said, but we passed it too quickly for me to make out the small text.

After we had cleared the gate and turned onto the road, Lexi turned toward me, a puzzled look on her face. I raised one eyebrow and she held up one finger toward me.

“Does anyone have, like, a pen?” she asked, reaching for the backpack at Chase’s feet.

“What for?” Jared replied, glancing at her quickly in the mirror.

“I just like to doodle if I’m bored or whatever, and it’s gonna be a long ride,” she said.

“I think there’s one in there,” he said, pointing to a small recessed space in the dashboard of the car, just below the stereo console.

Kailyn leaned forward and reached around inside it for a few seconds before she produced a blue pen and handed it back to Lexi.

“Thank you,” Lexi said, flipping open a spiral-bound notebook and turning to a blank page.

As she flipped through the book I saw that there were, indeed, pages full of random doodles and sketches. When she reached a mostly blank page, she pulled the cap off and shoved it onto the opposite end of the pen before placing the tip to the paper. She began to scrawl something out across the page in large, looping script, throwing many of my guesses as to what she was doing out the window, but just before I had completely given up trying, she stopped writing and rested her hand on the paper, one finger pointing toward the script a little more so than the others. I glanced over at the page and saw that she had actually written a short phrase in stylized writing, most likely so that it would look like she was actually doodling. I highly doubted Jared would want us to know what Lexi had just seen and written down in her notebook:

*Emergency protocol 4A active: Removal Commencing*

I looked up at her and we shared a knowing glance. I had always known Jared to be an odd, rather serious person, but I had never totally imagined him to be quite so cutthroat, just quickly eradicating something, and someone, like that.

Our entire situation suddenly felt much darker.

## 7 On the Road

August 31<sup>st</sup>, 1999

1:43:24 P.M.

Somewhere in Northern California

Everyone remained silent as the car drove farther and farther away from the compound until we finally got on a major highway and headed south. The trees and scenery whipped by the car in a blur, each individual tree and sign even less pronounced than the last. I felt like I was in some weird stage between zoned out and aware; my mind was running a thousand miles per hour, but I wasn't consciously focusing on any particular thought or process.

I felt surprised when I realized that we were pulling into a rest station off the highway. It seemed like we had only been driving for about thirty minutes, but when I glanced at the clock in the dashboard, I saw that it had been around two hours.

"Okay, rest stop break," Jared said, turning the car off. "Use the bathroom, stretch your legs... we have quite a bit more to go."

"How much more?" Kailyn asked.

"Probably at least another three hours," Jared said, shrugging and stepping out of the car.

The rest of us got out, as well, but remained by the car, watching Jared walk into the main building before turning to face each other again. I could immediately tell that everyone had the same mix of dismay and fear about the next three hours. On one hand, sitting in the car for that long sounded like hell, but on the other, I wasn't too anxious to find out what was waiting at the end of them.

"What the hell is three hours away from here?" Kailyn asked.

I shrugged, as did Chase. The three of us turned to look at Lexi, who was staring over the roofs of the cars parked next to us, her eyes glazed as if lost in thought. After several seconds and she

hadn't acknowledged us at all, I cleared my throat. She blinked a few times but didn't turn to face us.

"Stockton is about that far," she finally said.

"How the hell do you know that?" Kailyn asked.

"I think more importantly, what's in Stockton?" I said, cutting Kailyn off.

Lexi simply shrugged, turning to look at us.

"I just retain stuff really well, I guess," she said, answering Kailyn's question, "and as far as what's in Stockton... well, there's an airport there..."

I ran my hands through my hair as silence fell over the car again. After no one had spoken for a bit, I decided to keep our little discussion going.

"So it looks like we might be going somewhere a little farther than a drive," I said.

"Well, it's either that or he plans to use us in a gang war somehow," Chase replied, laughing slightly, "because there's not much else in Stockton."

Kailyn gave him an exasperated look and Chase laughed.

"What?"

"Okay, either way, we're sitting for a while, so can we walk around a bit?" I said. "I'm going to start going crazy if I'm just stuck being still for several hours non-stop."

Chase grinned as I sighed and stretched my arms above my head, leaning backward slightly as the sigh turned into a groan. I glanced at Chase and saw him watching me, and I couldn't help but grin. He suddenly looked rather embarrassed and tried to turn away, but didn't do a very good job of it.

"What are you looking at, kid, huh?" I teased, letting my arms fall to my sides and standing straight, again.

"Nothing," he said, laughing.

"Yeah, that's what I thought," I shot back, lightly punching him in the shoulder before pulling the bottom of my shirt down a bit and walking toward the main visitor building.

Kailyn fell in step beside me as we made our way along the short asphalt walkway toward the front door to the drab, brown building. Many of the groups we passed seemed to be families: several screaming, running kids with two tired-looking parents,

either with forced smiles or looks of frustration on their faces. Two kids, a boy and a girl probably no more than six or seven years old, suddenly tore past us as I stepped aside to avoid being knocked over. They charged out into the parking lot as a woman in a pink T-shirt and jean capris rushed past, pushing her large sunglasses back up her nose with one hand as she waved the other in the air, as if it would help attract the children's attention while their backs were to her.

"Jesse! Sarah!" she called. "Don't run into the parking—*Jesse!*"

I jumped at the sudden shriek the woman uttered; it was something like the sound I imagined a velociraptor would make. I glanced back once again to see the woman chasing the young, blonde boy in between two parked cars in the parking lot.

As I turned back to Kailyn I found a look of amusement on her face. She seemed to realize I was looking at her because she finally glanced over at me, moving just her eyes.

"What?" she said.

"I don't think I was ever such a little shit," I remarked, grinning. "What about you?"

Kailyn sighed and appeared to think about it for a second before responding.

"I feel like I most definitely had to be that kind of child," she said.

"Really?" I shot back, attempting to raise one eyebrow.

"Don't try that look, Amaryss," Kailyn said with an exasperated tone, "you just make yourself look like an idiot."

I laughed and reached for the handle to the door to the rest stop visitor center, holding it open for the other three to enter. After Chase had passed through the door, I followed the group. The main area just inside the doors seemed rather dimly-lit, but it easily could have just been the drastic difference between the harsh sunlight outside that was making it hard for my eyes to adjust. A general smell of industrial cleaner filled the air, most likely spilling out from the public restrooms just off to our right. A small convenience store was to our left, fully stocked with all manner of magazines and brightly-colored candy wrappers.

"Wanna take a look around?" Lexi asked, nodding toward

the store.

“Why not?” I replied, shrugging. “It’s not like we have anything else to do.”

“Plus, it’s always fun to keep Jared waiting,” Kailyn said, spinning around to walk backwards toward the doors to the store and immediately running right into a man in a blue windbreaker with what I assumed was some sports team’s logo on the chest.

Kailyn stumbled and quickly spun around, holding out her hands seemingly to balance herself, but I felt also to hold back whomever she had just collided with in case he tried to take a swing at her.

“Watch where you’re going, bitch,” he spat and quickly walked off, exiting out the front doors and back out toward the parking lot.

“Rude,” Kailyn said, narrowing her eyes after him.

“Such is the way of the world,” Chase said, walking past Kailyn and into the convenience store.

The rest of us followed shortly after him. I was immediately overwhelmed by all of the sights around us and the slightly suffocating nature of the narrow aisles between overcrowded shelves of cheap snack food and trashy magazines. A slight grin forced its way onto my face as I scanned over the headlines on the front of many of the covers on the one particular shelf nearest to me. So many of them were about who was divorcing who, or who had slept with who, or who had just entered rehab... None of it seemed like any kind of important news, but then again, these magazines weren’t particularly known for their Pulitzer-winning reporting.

As I came to the end of the aisle, I found Chase holding a magazine, casually flipping through the pages, seemingly reading a few lines here and there before moving on. I leaned forward slightly so I could see the cover and had to suppress a laugh. He glanced up at me and a confused look quickly appeared on his face.

“What’s so funny?” he asked.

“Are you, uh... looking for how to please your man?” I asked, still trying to not to laugh too hard.

“What?” he said, looking even more confused.

“It seems you’ve got the latest *Cosmo*, there,” I said, and when he still seemed confused, I explained a little more. “It’s typically a magazine for women.”

He looked instantly embarrassed, but tried to cover it up.

“Yeah, I knew that,” he said, “I just... wanted to see what was in this shit, you know?”

He quickly put the magazine back as I finally let out the laughter I had been holding in. Chase shoved his hands in his pockets and began to shuffle away, trying not to make eye contact with me. I grabbed his arm to stop him, attempting to bring my laughter under control.

“Chase, Chase... hey, I’m just teasing,” I said, sounding slightly out of breath. “I just didn’t realize that you didn’t know... that’s it.”

“That’s not a whole lot better...” he grumbled, and I guessed that was about as good of a response as I was going to get at the moment.

Just then I noticed that he wasn’t looking me in the eyes, but seemed to be looking rather intently at something. I followed his gaze and realized that he was staring at my hand on his arm.

“Oh, sorry,” I said, quickly releasing him from my grip and shoving my hands into my jeans’ pockets.

“No, it’s okay,” he muttered before quickly walking off, heading toward a section of shelves filled with all kinds of candy.

I watched him go for a seconds, thinking over that short exchange. He had almost seemed embarrassed again after I had apologized for holding his arm in a vice grip. Why the hell would that be something for him to feel bad about? I frowned slightly and spun on my heel before walking over to Lexi, who was scanning a section of shelves filled with more serious magazines like *Time* and *National Geographic*.

“Looking for some light reading?” I asked, stopping beside her and looking at all of the covers, as well.

“Eh... I like the pictures,” she replied, grabbing a copy of *National Geographic* and flipping it open to somewhere in the middle.

The first picture I saw was of two or three lionesses taking down a wildebeest in Africa somewhere. You could see the red



marks in the animal's fur where the lions' sharp claws had already raked across it, and one of them had its jaws clamped around the wildebeest's neck.

"Some pictures, huh?" I said, still staring down at the magazine.

"This is nature," Lexi said, jabbing one finger onto the page on the image of the lioness taking a taste of the wildebeest's neck, "and it's still a rather impressive photo."

She quickly flipped through what must have been about fifteen or twenty pages before stopping and holding the magazine at a slight angle to show me whatever she had just found. It was a picture of a steep cliff rising above a forest below. The white rock almost seemed to shine a gold color in the light of the sunset just above the horizon in the background of the photo.

"That's pretty... where is that?" I asked.

"Yosemite, it says," Lexi replied, reading the small text on the left side of the page.

"It looks peaceful there..." I said.

"It's basically a lot like where we just were, just with fewer fences," she replied, closing the magazine and leaning forward to put it back on the shelf.

As she did, she let out a quiet cry of pain and put one hand on her back, quickly putting the other out to hold her up against the shelf. I felt like I should do something, but I didn't know what to do, so I gingerly placed a hand on the back of her shoulder.

"Are you okay?" I asked, glancing around quickly, seeing that a few people nearby were watching us, now.

"Yeah it's just my... my damn back," she said. "It's been bothering me... but it's... it's nothing; don't worry."

I quickly pulled my hand away in fear of hurting her more, but she didn't seem to react and after a few more seconds, Lexi stood up straight and took a deep breath, bending backwards slightly in an attempt to stretch. She exhaled heavily and let her arms fall to her sides.

"Are you sure you're okay?" I asked, moving close to her and speaking softly.

Lexi nodded, waving me off as if it were nothing. Just then, I felt a tap on my shoulder and turned to see Chase standing

behind me on my other side.

“I just saw Jared walk out the front doors, so it’s probably best we start heading back,” he said.

“Why?” Kailyn asked, suddenly appearing on the other side of Lexi.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Why do we have to go back to Jared now?” she said. “We said we were going to run away and all that... why not just disappear now?”

Her words did hold a bit of merit and I found myself agreeing with them to a degree, but something else made me hesitate to fully jump onboard with Kailyn’s plan. Something told me that we should hold out just a bit longer. Of course, convincing the others of that could be slightly difficult.

“I don’t know... something tells me that we might want to stick this out just a bit longer,” Lexi said, putting her hands on her hips.

Or not.

“Yeah, I kind of agree with that,” I piped up.

“You ‘kind of agree’?” Kailyn asked, raising one eyebrow at me; I only sort of secretly hated that she could actually do that.

“I agree,” I said exasperatedly, shooting her a look.

“Well, that’s two out of four,” she said before turning to look at Chase. “It looks like you’re the tie-breaker.”

Chase shifted slightly, looking at least somewhat uncomfortable. I noticed that he glanced over at me for a split second before looking back at Kailyn and responding.

“I think we might want to stick it out for just a bit longer,” he said, shrugging.

Kailyn let out a heavy sigh and slumped her shoulders, jamming her hands in her pockets.

“Fine... but if I end up being stuck like a fucking prisoner because of this... I swear to God that I will kill all of you.”

With that, she turned on her heel and walked back toward the exit into the main lobby area. The three of us watched her go in silence, the other two, like me, presumably trying to process whether she was being serious or not. I looked over at Lexi and then at Chase before gesturing toward the door. Without a word,

we followed Kailyn out of the convenience store and back into the main lobby area of the visitor center. Once we entered, I immediately noticed that she was nowhere to be seen. It was entirely possible that she had run off, like she had suggested we all do, but even though she may have been angry and possibly a little off-balance, I didn't think she was the kind of person who would abandon us with Jared. Speaking of the devil, he suddenly entered through the front doors, glancing around until he spotted us.

"Find anything good in there?" he asked as he approached, but he continued glancing around the open area as he spoke, never once actually looking at Chase, Lexi, or me after he had initially spotted us.

"Not really," I said, "plus we have no money."

"True..." he muttered, still looking around. "Where's Kailyn?"

"She walked off a second ago... I assumed she was heading back to the car."

"You don't know where she was going and didn't see where she went?" he asked, looking at the three of us for the first time in this conversation, a look of what seemed like fear or nervousness in his eyes.

"No... she said something about leaving and then just walked off," I said, only partially lying.

"Christ, we need to find her before we leave..." he said, spinning around in place, as if that would help him survey the room better than before.

"I'm not some six year old kid."

I jumped slightly and immediately snapped my head around to the right to find Kailyn coming to a stop about two feet away from me, running the back of her hand across her mouth. She glanced around at what I assumed were everyone else's surprised looks before letting her arm fall to her side and sighing heavily.

"Guys, I just went to get a drink of water, for Christ's sake."

Jared let out a heavy sigh and walked past me, stopping just before Kailyn, looking down at her.

"Next time, make sure everyone else knows where you are before you go walking off; otherwise, people begin to panic," he

hissed, his voice standing out to me amidst the other sounds in the noisy lobby even though his tone sounded no stronger than a whisper.

“People like you?” she shot back, steadily matching his gaze.

After a few more seconds of intense, awkward stillness, Jared finally brushed past Kailyn and walked toward the exit. Kailyn kept her feet rooted where they were, but turned the rest of her body somewhat to follow him. Once Jared was beyond the doors, she let out a growl of frustration and spun back around, swinging one arm out to the side as she did. Suddenly, a spinning rack of postcards fell forward and crashed to the ground, scattering its contents across the floor. It didn't seem like a coincidence, since no one else was near it, but it was at least ten feet away from Kailyn.

A large crowd of people around us, and in the store, jumped in surprise at the sudden flurry of motion and sound. I glanced back at Lexi and Chase and saw that he was staring at the rack and the spilled cards on the floor, while she was watching Kailyn.

“We should probably go,” Lexi said, shifting her attention to the people coming closer to investigate the haunted souvenir rack.

Chase and I just nodded and he began to move through the crowd toward the doors, but I happened to glance down at my feet and saw one of the postcards had landed just in front of me. I crouched down and picked it up off the floor, looking down at the impressive redwood tree trunk standing in the foreground. The terrain seemed to drop off just feet beyond it to reveal a valley filled with more redwood trees, the sunset shining off an enormous white-rock cliff in the background of the photo, turning the rock shades of orange and gold. I glanced back up at the fallen rack and the several people helping one of the store clerks pick up the mess, tapping the postcard against the fingers of the opposite hand lightly. Finally, I checked to make sure no one was paying any special attention to me before quickly stuffing it down the collar of my shirt and into my bra for safe-keeping.

Without a second glance, I turned and hurried through the

crowd toward the doors, pushing them open and making my way back to the car.

## 8

### Tumbleweed Central

August 31<sup>st</sup>, 1999  
4:43:28 P.M.  
Stockton, California

To be totally honest, Chase had pretty much been correct in saying that there was little else of interest to us in Stockton aside from the airport. Jared got off at the exit with the sign announcing the airport and only had to drive about five blocks before the buildings around us cleared and a long, chain link fence appeared to our left. The razor wire atop the fence provided a clue that it wasn't just a random field, though. Sure enough, a small, single-prop plane descended out of the sky and touched down seemingly out in the middle of said field.

After a short interaction with a guard at a small hut, who referred to Jared as "Mr. Butler," he gave a small wave and we drove forward, turning to the right just inside the gate. We passed two hangars before we came upon one with its main doors open, and Jared turned inside it. A white, private jet was sitting in the center of the space, its stairs lowered and waiting. We came to a stop off to the right, and Jared shut off the engine.

"All right, everyone out," he said, popping the trunk and opening his door without looking to see if we were following.

"Well, he's certainly not messing around," Lexi remarked before opening her door and stepping outside.

I nodded slightly in agreement as I did the same on my side, stepping out into the warm afternoon air. A nice breeze blew into the hangar from across the open runways, which helped reduce the sticky feeling of the high humidity, at least. I glanced back as I heard Chase shut the door behind us and he grinned, fanning his shirt.

"Nice and hot out today, huh Amaryss?" he remarked.

"Yeah, I'd say," I replied, following him to the trunk and grabbing my duffel bag, slinging the strap over one shoulder.

I hung around the back of the car with everyone else until

Kailyn had finally retrieved her bag. Lexi shut it with a resounding thud and shifted the backpack over her shoulder before we began to make our way toward the airplane.

The houses and the facilities were one thing, but now said plane and the “Mr. Butler” from the security guard were beginning to paint a bit of a different image of Jared. Originally, Kailyn and I had assumed that Jared was primarily alone; perhaps his family was wealthy, or he had invented something amazing and we just hadn’t known about it. Now, however, I wasn’t so sure.

“Come on, guys, let’s not waste any time,” he called from the top of the stairs to the plane, looking impatient. “We’re already behind.”

“Behind what?” Lexi shouted back. “I didn’t realize we were on a schedule.”

“It’s a ‘the sooner the better’ timeline,” Jared barked before disappearing inside the plane.

“What’s up his ass, now?” Kailyn muttered, glancing back at me.

“There’s always something up his ass,” I replied, “it just varies in size and depth.”

Lexi snorted and I saw grins on Kailyn’s and Chase’s faces, but no one really laughed; perhaps it was the heat, or perhaps it was the wish to not have Jared inevitably ask us why we were laughing if we did. I followed the other three up the steps to the plane and ducked my head slightly as I entered.

Once inside, I glanced to the left and saw Jared talking to a pilot. I couldn’t really hear what they were saying, and he quickly glanced back at me, so I turned to the right and began to head toward the back. The inside of the plane seemed to have a general theme of beige: the seats and the carpet were almost the same shade, and the off-white walls only seemed to take on a similar hue. Kailyn and Lexi had taken the two seats in the second row back on the left, with Jared’s bags occupying the first row. Chase was standing by the second row on the right, looking back at me.

“You going to sit with me, or by yourself back there?” he asked, gesturing over his shoulder.

I sighed and pretended to act exasperated.

“I guess I’ll have to sit with you then,” I huffed.

Chase laughed and I noticed that Kailyn was giving me an interested look, but I didn't have the time or the energy to acknowledge her.

"I want the window, though," I said, walking toward him.

"That's fine with me," he said, "I think I'd prefer to not be able to see how high up we are."

"Afraid of heights, are we?" I asked, glancing back at him before sliding past him and falling into the window seat, placing my bag on my feet and kicking it under the seat in front of me.

He let out one dry laugh as he took his seat.

"Let's not go there."

I grinned and leaned back in my seat, turning my head to look out the window. A man in a gray jumpsuit was getting into the driver's seat of the car outside and quickly drove it farther into the hangar behind us.

"*Well, not like we can take it with us,*" I thought before turning my attention back to my three companions.

Kailyn seemed to be antagonizing Lexi about something, and Chase was simply staring straight ahead at the back of the seat in front of him.

"You don't have to be so nervous now," I said quietly, leaning in toward him, "we're not in the air yet."

He gave a quick glance over at me before attempting to relax, but I could tell he was still very nervous. I smiled slightly, but I didn't know what else to do, so I leaned forward slightly to see around him and watch whatever Kailyn and Lexi were doing.

"Do I need to separate you two?" I called across to them.

"I swear to God, if you try to cuddle up to me during this flight—" Lexi was saying, but she was cut off by Jared.

"Quiet, you two," he said shortly, and they instantly fell silent. "We're almost ready to get under way. The flight isn't going to be incredibly long, but it's still about an hour and a half, so get comfortable... sleep if you didn't last night, I suppose."

"Like hell I'm going to be able to sleep on this thing," Chase muttered, shifting slightly in his seat.

I could see that his jaw was clenched tightly, and he was constantly wringing his hands, twisting them in new patterns over and over. Nothing I could say would make him feel better, but I



couldn't think of anything else that I could do to help, so I remained silent.

A second later, I heard the sound of the engines starting. The sound grew louder until I thought they must be going fast enough for us to rocket forward at any second, yet we remained stationary. With a slight jerk, the plane began to slowly roll forward and out of the hangar. I watched the grey, metal wall slide away until I could see down the entire stretch of the open runway area. Another small private jet was just landing as we rolled toward the opposite end; it had slowed to a much more reasonable speed by the time it reached us, and was turning off the runway past us as we rolled by. A few men in black suits were visible through the windows as we rolled by, all seemingly engaged in some kind of conversation, probably about some high-end business deal or a lawsuit case or whatever else men in suits talked about.

In a few seconds, though, our plane had turned and I could only see the back end of the other jet as it headed for the hangars. We came to the center of the runway and instead of immediately gunning it for take-off, we came to a stop. I began to feel a little antsy that perhaps we would be hit by another landing plane, yet we seemed in no hurry to move.

"We're cleared for take-off. Sit back and we'll be underway," the pilot called back from the cockpit.

The engines began to spin up again, louder this time than before, and we began to roll forward, picking up steam as we moved. The hangars alongside the runway began to slide by faster and faster, until they were almost a blur. The idea of roaring by at over one hundred miles per hour actually caused a bit of an adrenaline rush in me. It was... thrilling. I imagined it was a similar feeling to being on a rollercoaster; of course, I had never been on any before, only seen them on TV, but now I found that I rather wanted to try one.

Suddenly, the front of the plane lifted and the world outside tilted at an angle. Finally, I felt the rear tires lift off the ground, and we were in the air. It was an interesting experience... almost as if we were floating.

"*Or flying,*" I thought and laughed slightly.

After suddenly realizing that I had actually made a sound

out loud, I glanced over at Chase, who was giving me a strange look. I smiled sheepishly and quickly turned to look back out the window, brushing some of my hair back behind one ear and out of my face.

The ground was moving farther and farther away, the houses shrinking to smaller than toys. The cars on the roads looked like ants, busily scurrying along their winding, grey trails across the land. A few seconds later, a white, wispy mist appeared outside the window, and I leaned back from the window slightly.

“Clouds, Amaryss,” Jared called from his seat across the plane.

I jumped slightly and looked over at him. He was grinning and watching me with a look in his eyes that was the closest I had ever seen him to appearing “fatherly.”

“Oh,” I said, nodding, and turned back to the window.

After only a few seconds, we had cleared the clouds and were now heading even higher into the sky. My ears had been steadily popping during the entire ascent, and I was just beginning to get a sense of how high up we were. I was about to try to get Chase’s attention and tell him to look out the window when I thought better of it and glanced back over at him to find him still staring at the back of the seat directly ahead. After taking one last glance out the window at the serenity of looking down on the Earth and the clouds from 10,000 feet up, I pulled the shade over the window, obscuring the view outside. I couldn’t help glancing over at Chase one more time, and found that he had now turned his head slightly, most likely so that he could look at me.

“You can keep looking out the window, if you’d like,” he said quietly.

“Naw, it’s okay,” I replied. “You really didn’t look comfortable, so I didn’t want to freak you out any more.”

Chase looked like he wanted to say something else, but he remained silent, nodding slightly. After a few more minutes, he didn’t seem any less relaxed, and something made me feel like I should try to do something. After a minute or so of brainstorming, I finally repositioned myself so that my legs were curled underneath me and I leaned to my right, resting my head against Chase’s shoulder. I felt him jump slightly and he must have turned

to look at me, but I didn't look up at him.

"Are you... okay?" he asked quietly.

"Yeah, just tired," I replied, "plus you looked like you needed some company... to chill out."

"If you say so," he replied.

I grinned slightly, still staring straight ahead at the seats in front of us. Truth be told, it was actually quite comfortable on Chase's shoulder. Something about it seemed rather relaxing... and also made my pulse jump. I tried to ignore the second reaction and simply relax. We still had over an hour left of the flight, after all.

August 31<sup>st</sup>, 1999

7:45:23 P.M.

Somewhere over the United States

"All right, everyone off."

I blinked rapidly as I tried to clear away the fatigue from the nap I hadn't even realized I had taken, my vision clearing just in time to see Jared throw his bag over his shoulder and stalk toward the cockpit. Motion directly beside me caused me to look over, only to realize that I was still leaning on Chase's shoulder. We made eye contact and I grinned sheepishly before sitting up, stretching my neck and shoulder slightly. I caught sight of Kailyn rising from her seat across the aisle, an impish grin on her face, and I sighed deeply.

"Everything all right?" Chase asked, clearing his throat.

"Yeah, just... nevermind."

We gathered our things and he offered a hand to help me out of the seats, which I took with a grin. Once I was standing fully upright, I threw my bag over my shoulders and followed the others toward the front of the plane, where I could see the brightly lit opening that must have been the stairs to the tarmac below.

As Lexi stepped into the patch of light, she made a face of disgust and fanned her shirt.

"Shit, it's hot."

"Seems like the desert," Kailyn commented, glancing out

the doorway past her.

“Good, I was just beginning to miss it,” I quipped, smirking as Kailyn shot me a withering look in response.

“I’ll never understand you...”

A few short seconds later, Chase and I were standing in the open doorway, squinting against the bright lights of the hangar at the other three below us. Jared was standing by the open rear hatch to some kind of Jeep-looking vehicle, while Lexi and Kailyn made their way toward him in no particular hurry. I glanced over at Chase to see him fanning the neck of his shirt, as well, for a moment, before he met my gaze and stopped.

“Well, shall we?” I gestured down the stairs before us and he yawned.

“You first.”

I rolled my eyes and stepped forward, starting down the stairs of the plane. Immediately, the heat seemed to fill in the space around me, enveloping me like a cloud. It wrapped around my back and pressed in on me, as if someone had put their hand in the small of my back. I shivered slightly, despite the temperature, as I finally reached the bottom of the stairs and took the final step onto the tarmac. The heat was even noticeable through the soles of my sneakers.

Almost immediately, I heard Jared calling my name and I glanced across the tarmac to see him waving agitatedly toward me from the driver’s door of the vehicle, the annoyed expression easily visible, even from here. I shot a quick glance behind me to see Chase just stepping off the stairs to the plane, raising his eyebrows at me.

I led the way across the open ground to the vehicle, approaching it just as a man in a reflective vest and with a pair of protective earmuffs hanging around his neck reached Jared. They began to converse as quietly as they could, but as I passed it seemed they were only talking about what to do with the plane. The man who presumably worked at the airport shot me a strange glance before turning back to Jared and nodding. They shook hands and the unknown man hurried off, placing his earmuffs in place, once again.

“Throw your stuff in the back quickly, please,” Jared

called, even as I was already rounding the back of the vehicle.

I leaned around the side to shoot him a look and roll my eyes dramatically, but he was already sliding into the driver's seat and didn't notice my gesture. Once Chase and I had tossed our bags on top of the others and closed the hatch, I caught the logo just below the rear window.

"Nice wheels," I commented, pointing to it and glancing over at Chase.

"Land Rover?"

I nodded.

"Expensive."

Chase made a "huh" sound, but my attention was already on the license plate below the logo. It was multi-colored, with the light blue at the top fading into a white behind the actual plate markings, before finally fading into what looked like a dusky sky behind a purple landscape featuring multiple cacti before a small mountain range. The main point of interest for me, however, was the state name at the top.

"Arizona."

"Think that's where we are?"

I glanced over at Chase.

"Well, it would make sense, yeah?"

He made a gesture that was like an awkward combination between a nod and a shrug as he shoved his hands in his pockets.

"Y-yeah, it would, I guess..."

I laughed softly, shoving his shoulder playfully.

"I'm just teasing."

He didn't seem to know how to react, so I shook my head and began to move around the side of the car toward the open door to the back. As I approached, I found Kailyn already seated in it, her head tilted back against the seat behind her.

"It's too hot in here without the A/C on, yet," she said, glancing over at me. "You can have the front with Captain Grumpy."

I rolled my eyes but moved around the open door to take the front passenger seat. To her point, the inside of the car was quite stifflingly warm, and I left my door open, as well, even as I slid into the seat.

The sound of shuffling in the backseat came for several seconds before I glanced back to see Lexi triumphantly shoving Chase ahead of her so that he took the center of the bench seat. Kailyn frowned slightly as Lexi slid in and firmly squeezed the taller boy between the two of them.

“Is everyone finally in?” Jared asked, glancing over his shoulder.

“Like sardines,” Kailyn replied, her tone as dry as the air outside.

“Well, close the doors and buckle up. Should only be forty-five minutes, assuming I don’t get us lost.”

“Where are we, exactly?” Lexi asked as she pulled her door closed.

The Land Rover started with a rather throaty rumble as Kailyn and I finally closed our doors, but quickly rolled the windows down.

“Arizona,” I answered over my shoulder, prompting a look of surprise from Jared. “It’s on the license plate...”

He nodded in response before clearing his throat and glancing in the rearview mirror.

“Yes, Arizona.”

“Huh... never been.”

The rest of us chuckled softly as Jared’s lips pulled into a thin line and he shifted the car into drive. With a slight kick, we began rolling forward and out of the hangar. Another security booth, much like the one at the entrance to the airport in Stockton, blocked our way out, but Jared simply showed the guard a small slip of paper and he let us pass with no further questions. The airport we had landed at appeared to be in a smallish city, so we only saw about three blocks’ worth before we took a right that led us to a state highway.

The SUV coasted along through the gold and pink twilight and sand at a quick, yet steady, pace, but it was hard to judge exactly how fast we were going, or how much progress we were making, since there weren’t really any significant landmarks in the desert around us. The wind whipping through the open window felt somewhat warm, although not as bad as when we were standing still. This felt comforting, like a soft, warm blanket in the

winter, or a lazy summer breeze through an open window at night, rather than the initial blast from opening an oven. I grinned at my attempts to be poetic and closed my eyes, letting the wind blow through my hair, causing it to whip wildly behind my head.

August 31<sup>st</sup>, 1999

8:30:24 P.M.

Somewhere past the sign for Flagstaff, Arizona

I opened my eyes as I felt the car jerk to a stop and I was thrown forward slightly. My right hand quickly shot out and gripped the door to stop myself as I glanced around quickly, looking for why we had stopped so suddenly. I could quickly make out a metal gate of some sort in front of the car, but why there was a gate out in the middle of nowhere was a mystery to me.

“Hey Mack, it’s me.”

I glanced over to the left and saw Jared leaning out his window, talking into some kind of intercom. A yawn from behind me drew my attention to the backseat to find Kailyn looking around, blinking rather rapidly and looking dazed, as well. A voice crackling out of the intercom speaker brought me back to what was happening in the front seat beside me.

“I was beginning to wonder if you’d ever show up,” a deep man’s voice said, followed by laughter.

“Yeah, sorry the plane couldn’t go any faster. I told the guy to step on it.”

Both Jared and the man on the other side of the intercom laughed as I turned to look back out the windshield, hoping to discover what I had missed beyond the gate when I first woke up. One large, dark building sat a little ways down a winding dirt trail that served as a driveway, while a rather large, wooden house with light spilling from its windows sat across the roadway from it. A chain-link fence topped with razor wire ran out from either side of the gate for as far as I could see, eventually wrapping around the building, I assumed.

“Alright, get your ass in here, then,” the man said, and the gate began to swing open.

Jared leaned back inside the car and we began rolling down the dusty path. After a short, slow drive, we came to a stop between the two buildings I had seen from the gate. The house seemed to be a remodeled ranch house, while the other, almost entirely metal building was some kind of warehouse, but I doubted whoever the guy Jared had just been talking to was into storing food or anything of the normal variety.

Jared killed the engine before glancing over at me and then back at the other three behind us.

“Well, here we are.”

The door slammed behind him as he hopped out and moved toward the back of the vehicle. After a few seconds of silence where the four of us stared blankly at each other, Jared opened the back hatch and started taking his bag out. When he realized that none of us had moved, he brought his hand down on the top of the backseat, making a loud noise and causing Lexi to jump and let out a small shriek in surprise.

“C’mon guys, let’s get moving,” he said, and remained standing there until Kailyn and I finally opened our doors.

As soon as I stepped out of the car, I became even more aware of the sweltering heat that was only just beginning to blow away with the nighttime breeze. I closed the door behind me and headed to the back of the vehicle, grabbing the strap to my duffel bag and pulling it out from underneath Chase’s. With a sigh, I slipped the strap over my head as I turned to survey the strange “compound” around us.

Other than the house and the large warehouse building, there seemed to be practically nothing else in every direction. The dirt and small shrubs common to the more arid areas like this stretched all the way to the fence and well beyond it.

“*Nowhere to run*,” I thought grimly as I turned back to the rest of the group, who were just closing the back door of the Land Rover and moving after Jared toward the front door of the house.

As we approached the steps, the door swung open and a man emerged from inside. A smile spread across his face as he approached the edge of the porch, followed shortly by laughter.

“Well holy shit, Jared Broder,” he said, his baritone voice projecting across the open space between him and us. “How long



has it been since the last time I saw you?”

“Probably going on about ten or eleven years, now,” Jared, said, grinning slightly as he reached the bottom of the steps and came to a stop.

“A decade? Now that’s far too long,” the man replied, laughing again. “What are you doing just standing there? Come on up here!”

Jared shook his head, yet obliged. As soon as he reached the top step, the man threw his arms around him, while Jared returned the gesture with less gusto and with only one arm. After the man let go of him, he glanced over in our general direction before pulling a double take.

“Well, these must be your charges, eh?”

“You could say that, I suppose,” Jared replied.

“Well let’s get to meeting all of you,” he said, descending a few steps before stopping as he snapped his fingers. “Wouldn’t you know, I almost forgot to introduce myself. This whole time I bet you’ve just been standing there like, ‘who’s this old guy?’”

He laughed again, but none of us replied, or even seemed to smile; we were all a little too apprehensive about this new person in this new place. The man cleared his throat, recovering quickly from the resounding silence that had greeted him.

“My name is Mack Kennessy, and I’m a rather old... work acquaintance of Jared’s.”

Now that he was closer to us, I could tell just how tall he was: probably a little over six feet. Short, light brown hair and dark eyes contrasted with the ruddiness of his face, although whether that was from the heat or from other reasons, I wasn’t sure. He was a big man, although I would hesitate to call him obese; he was definitely packing a few pounds that were not muscle, though. When he spoke, I saw that some of his teeth looked dark, possibly from chewing tobacco, if I had to take a guess. He seemed nice enough, but any “associate” of Jared’s made me wary.

After a short period of uncomfortable silence, he laughed and banged his hand on the railing along the side of the steps.

“Oh come on now, what’re your names? I promise I don’t bite,” Mack said, laughing.

After another few seconds of silence, I finally decided that I was going to end this awkward standoff before it drove me crazy.

"I'm Amaryss," I said, "Amaryss Torres."

"Well thank you, Miss Torres," Mack said, nodding. "It's a pleasure to meet you... If I remember correctly, Jared was telling me about you when you were only maybe eight years old. How old are you now? Twenty? Twenty-one?"

"Seventeen," I replied. "Almost eighteen."

"You're shitting me!" Mack exclaimed and let out another one of his hearty laughs. "All right, now that Amaryss has spilled the beans, what about the rest of you?"

The others quickly answered, as well, but he didn't seem as familiar with them by name as he had with me.

"Well, it's a pleasure to meet you Amaryss, Kailyn, Lexi, and Chase," he said. "Now what do you say we all head inside?"

The four of us exchanged glances before I began to follow Mack and Jared inside. Before I could even take a second step, Kailyn grabbed my arm, prompting me to stop and turn to look at her.

"Hold on a second," she whispered, glancing up toward the door.

Jared and Mack were too engrossed in conversation as they entered the building, so neither of them made sure we were actually following them. Once they disappeared from view, I turned around to face the rest of the group.

"Why don't we just make a break for it now?" Kailyn asked quietly.

"Where would we go?" Chase shot back. "There's nothing but open ground for miles."

"There's a car right there..." Kailyn said, gesturing to the Land Rover to our right.

"With no keys in it," I reminded her. "Unless you magically learned how to hotwire a car at some point, we're not getting anywhere in it right now."

"Well, we could at least try some—"

"Are you going to come inside or what?"

We all jumped and I spun around to find Jared standing in the doorway to the house, looking somewhat annoyed. Evidently

our absence had not gone unnoticed for long.

“Sorry, we were just enjoying the weather a bit,” Kailyn replied, shifting the strap to her bag on her shoulder and nudging me toward the steps to the porch.

I gave her a look before leading the way, trudging up the steps in no real hurry. The closer we got to the top, the stronger the strange feeling in my chest seemed to become. It was almost like somewhere between despair and desperation; there was a sense of finality in walking in the doors of that house. Finally, I reached the top and stood at the threshold. I could feel the air conditioning wafting out from within, and vaguely had a thought about how much money Mack must be wasting. Just then, I felt a slight shove from behind and I staggered across the doorstep and into the house.

“We don’t have all day for your dramatic moment, Amaryss,” Kailyn quipped, smirking as she stepped through the doorway and walked past me.

I rolled my eyes and shifted my bag’s strap on my shoulder before following Kailyn farther inside. The inside of the house was almost as large and spacious as the outside had seemed, with high ceilings and wood tones and textures everywhere. Warm lighting from the various lamps about the room and overhead completed the aesthetic. The first room upon entering appeared to be a large parlor or living room of some kind, while a set of wooden stairs to our right led up to a landing with a railing that looked over the open area just inside the door. I heard a click behind me and glanced back to see Lexi closing the door. Apparently all three of us had looked back, because she looked around with a slightly confused expression.

“I just figured I’d keep the cool air in here and the hot out there,” she said quietly, taking her hand off the door handle and walking a few steps toward the rest of us.

I heard Kailyn laugh dryly from behind me and I just shook my head as I turned around to head farther into the house. Jared’s and Mack’s voices were coming from a little ways down the hallway ahead of us, so I began walking that way. Everything about the house screamed “Southern Ranch,” and I was already starting to wonder how long I could stand being there. I reached

the end of the hallway and pushed open the slightly ajar door.

Jared was standing on the opposite side of a rather large island in the center of the kitchen, leaning forward on the stone countertop with his hands clasped in front of him. Mack was pouring two drinks on the side of the island closest to me while finishing up some story and laughing. Jared glanced toward me as I stopped a few feet into the room, the others filing in behind me. Mack glanced back at us, following Jared's gaze, and grinned.

"Hello again," he said. "Come in, come in... make yourselves at home."

*"That's what I was afraid to do,"* I thought, but said nothing and walked farther into the room, dropping my duffle bag by a small table on the other side of the island.

The others followed suit, as I moved up to the island and leaned forward slightly so that my waist was resting up against the counter. Mack handed Jared one of the glasses before taking a drink from his own.

"A little fire to start off the dinner hour, I say," he said, laughing.

Jared took a sip and his eyes widened for a split second, but he quickly brought himself under control. He put the glass down and cleared his throat slightly.

"There should be some more young'uns like you around here," Mack said, looking around at us. "They'll probably show up soon... food tends to bring them out."

Several seconds of awkward silence followed as everyone seemed to wait for someone else to speak. Mack took another drink from his glass and let out a heavy sigh after.

"Well now, isn't this just a lively party?" he said, laughing. "Let's strike up a conversation, what do you say?"

No one said anything.

"All right... where did y'all come from?"

"We just came from the facility up in Northern—" Jared began to say, but Mack cut him off.

"No, no, no... I know that," he said, shaking his head. "I mean, where did y'all come from originally?"

I thought about it for a second and suddenly realized that I didn't exactly know the answer to that question. Based on the

expressions on the others' faces, I assumed they were thinking the same thing. Before we entirely lapsed into another long, awkward, silence I supplied an answer.

“Silver Springs, Nevada,” I said.

“Nevada?” Mack repeated, clearly happy that at least someone had spoken. “Mighty hot there in the summers, I tell you... Well, the heat here shouldn't be a problem for you at all then.”

He laughed as I glanced over at Kailyn, who was standing more or less beside me. She gave me a look that completely conveyed how uncomfortable she was, as well, her lips pulled into a thin line and her eyebrows slightly raised.

The others began to answer, as well, but I felt pain beginning to form in my right leg, and I shifted slightly to try to make myself more comfortable, my attention entirely drawn to it and not on their answers. The pain didn't begin to fade, however, but suddenly shot up from my leg into my back, instead. I winced and must have made some kind of audible indication since everyone suddenly turned and looked at me.

“Are you okay there, Amaryss?” Mack asked.

My jaw was clenched shut so tightly I couldn't speak, so I simply nodded and tried to calmly brush some hair back out of my face. Mack resumed his attempts at small talk as the pain slowly began to subside, fading to more of a dull ache or a sore muscle. I sighed and shifted slightly again, almost immediately becoming aware of Kailyn's stare boring into the side of my head. I spared a glance over at her, and saw that she was regarding me with a curious look on her face. With a weak half-smile, I turned away and resumed leaning forward against the counter.

Mack suddenly laughed at something Jared and he had been talking about, and I jumped in surprise, which caused him to laugh even more. Thankfully, he didn't comment on it, but instead looked down at his watch.

“It's getting to be about that time, isn't it?” he said, finishing off the drink in his glass.

“What time is that?” Chase asked from behind me somewhere.

“Suppertime, my boy,” Mack said as he turned on the

faucet and washed his glass out in the sink. “I presume y’all didn’t eat since you were on the plane about then?”

He had a point, and I tried to hide how I subconsciously rubbed at my stomach. Jared took one last sip of his drink, made a similar face to the first time he had drank it, and handed it to Mack. He glanced down at the half-full glass as he took it and laughed.

“Been a while, eh?”

“You know I’ve never been a whiskey kind of guy, Mack,” Jared replied, laughing.

“Well, it’s a shame to let good Jameson go to waste...” he said, looking down at the glass for a second before his eyes flicked up to look at the four of us. “Anyone care to take a taste?”

“Mack, I don’t think that’s appropriate—” Jared began to protest.

“Oh, calm down, Broder,” Mack interrupted, waving him off with one hand, “they all look to be rather mature ladies and a gentleman. I know Amaryss here is seventeen; what are you all, about the same?”

Kailyn shrugged and Lexi and Chase both nodded.

“See? They can handle a taste, Jared,” Mack said, grinning as he handed me the glass.

I took it from him and looked down at the golden-brown liquid in the bottom. Raising it to my face, I caught a quick whiff of it and wrinkled my nose, prompting Mack to laugh. The last thing I wanted to do again was make him laugh by something I had done, so I raised the glass to my lips and took a quick sip.

The instant the liquid touched my tongue, it was like my mouth was on fire. The taste was strong and bitter, and burned ever so slightly. I swallowed quickly and the feeling spread to the back of my tongue. As soon as it had left my mouth, I coughed uncontrollably, putting the glass down on the counter so that I didn’t drop it accidentally. A strange taste lingered in my mouth, like a ghost of the original flavor, but the burning had subsided to just a warm feeling. I glanced back and saw that Kailyn was the next closest person to me, so I handed the glass off to her.

Lexi’s and her reactions were about the same as mine, but when the glass finally reached Chase and he took a drink from it, he barely seemed phased by it. In fact, after he had taken a taste,

there was still a bit left in the bottom, so he quickly finished it off.

“Jesus, boy!” Mack said, laughing as he took the glass from him. “You’ve got the look of someone who’s done this before.”

Chase shook his head, but remained silent. Mack simply chuckled and washed out the glass, placing it upside down on the countertop next to the other.

“Now, what do you say it’s time to make some food?” he said, clapping his hands together once.

“Sounds fine by me,” Lexi said.

“Somehow, that does not surprise me,” Chase said, grinning.

Lexi scowled at him and attempted to repeatedly punch him on the arm as he flinched slightly and laughed. Mack was watching the two of them with amusement, and didn’t seem to notice as someone walked into the room. The sudden burst of noise and movement must have been quite a surprise, because she stopped on the way to the refrigerator to turn and look at the two squabbling teenagers on the other side of the room. Mack saw me staring, so he glanced behind him and let out an “ah!” before turning around fully and motioning for the girl to come closer.

“Hey, you two, quiet down for a second there!” he said, turning back to face us as his clearly confused charge approached the center island. “Here’s one of the young’uns I was telling you about earlier! Everyone, this is Maya.”

The girl barely raised her hand above the level of the countertop to give a slight wave, but her dark blue eyes were constantly moving behind her medium-thick framed glasses between the five of us on the other side of the counter. She seemed to be about our age, as well, and was probably a little shorter than me. Her short blonde hair seemed as if she had let it grow out for a little while, somewhat like Kailyn’s haircut. She had a rather rounded face, and a surprisingly pale complexion for living out in the desert, although the unzipped, red sweatshirt she was wearing told me that she probably didn’t spend a lot of time outdoors. I could just make out a dark blue t-shirt with some kind of logo on it underneath the sweatshirt, while the island’s countertop blocked her from the waist down, although I vaguely recalled her wearing jeans from a moment ago.

“She’s not much for words when getting used to people, I have to say,” Mack said, laughing as he clapped one hand on her shoulder and causing her to jump slightly. “This lot is going to be staying with us for a bit, so now’s probably a good time to get to know them, right?”

I had a suspicion that she wasn’t particularly fond of the way Mack was just wheeling her out in front of us, by the way she seemed to shrink away from our gazes.

“Well, for starters, this fine sport over here is Jared Broder,” Mack said, gesturing to him as he gave Mack a look, before turning to point toward me, “and this lovely lady over here—”

“I’m Amaryss,” I said, cutting him off, “Amaryss Torres.”

Mack looked slightly surprised by my sudden intrusion, but quickly regained his composure.

“I’m Kailyn Massey,” she said, raising one hand as she spoke.

“Chase Morgan.”

“Alexis Roth, call me Lexi, though.”

Silence filled the room for a second or two after Lexi had spoken. The look of discomfort on Mack’s face was barely noticeable, and only present for a few fleeting seconds, but I saw it, and it made me smirk slightly.

“Maya Edwards,” she said, speaking for the first time; much like I had expected, her voice was rather quiet, although lower in pitch than I imagined.

“Well, now that we’ve had introductions all around,” Mack said, clearing his throat, “let’s get started on that chow, shall we? How does some grilling sound to y’all?”

August 31<sup>st</sup>, 1999

9:05:28 P.M.

Mack’s House, somewhere in Arizona

The smell of cooking meat filled the air, along with the sizzling of the juices over the open flames. It dawned on me



suddenly how long it had been since I had had any decent food of this variety; at the facility in California, we had mostly eaten sandwiches and chips, now that I thought about it. I hadn't complained then, but the growling sounds my stomach was making now would almost lead one to believe that I had barely eaten anything at all in the past week. I hung around one edge of the patio area behind Mack's house, Kailyn standing beside me. The heat seemed less harsh and suffocating now that the sun was almost entirely below the horizon. It was almost nice now. Vague childhood memories of Nevada began to come back to me as I took a deep breath through my nose and let it out in a heavy sigh. Kailyn eyed me with a strange look on her face.

"What's that for?" I asked.

"What?"

"That look."

"Just admiring your normal strangeness," she replied, grinning.

I rolled my eyes and shoved her slightly. I glanced around at the others on the patio and noticed that Maya was sitting by herself at the wooden table under the small, covered shelter set up to provide shade. It seemed like we should at least try to get to know her, but before I could debate with myself whether to talk to her any further, the back door to the house opened and someone appeared from within.

"Hey, thanks for telling me!" he called, smirking as he hopped down the two short steps to the patio.

"Well, well, well, he emerges!" Mack said, turning around to look at the boy who had just arrived. "Why don't you introduce yourself to our guests?"

"Shawn Hale," he said, giving a slight salute. "Nice to meet you all."

He was a decently tall boy with short, seemingly spiky brown hair and dark green eyes. Unlike Maya, he seemed to have a pretty decent tan going, although small patches of sunburnt red stretched along his cheekbones. His face was overall rather narrow, with well-defined features. His red sleeveless shirt, dark brown cargo shorts, and sandals were just missing a pair of dark sunglasses perched on top of his head and he'd be a perfect fit in a

gym or on some sports team.

“I’d love to chat right away, but, I don’t know about you guys, my stomach’s growling pretty good. What do you say we talk over some food, huh?” he said, clapping his hands together.

“You’d think these two would have eaten me out of house and home by now,” Mack said, elbowing Jared and laughing before glancing back at Shawn. “Well, you have good timing then. Food’s up!”

I moved around Kailyn and started toward the grill, not particularly waiting to see if she was keeping up with me. The smell as I approached only grew stronger and I swore I actually began to salivate a little. Just before I reached it, though, Shawn slid in front of me, paper plate already in hand somehow, causing me to stop short in surprise.

“Sorry there, miss,” he said, winking at me before turning toward Mack and holding his plate out.

I rolled my eyes and sighed; a few seconds later, though, he got his food and stepped out of the way, moving over toward the table, which allowed me to step up next before anyone else tried a similar maneuver. Mack slid the stainless-steel spatula-thing under one of the lumps of meat and turned toward me.

“Here you go, Amaryss,” he said, grinning as he placed it on a paper plate and handed it to me.

I nodded in thanks, already turning to walk away. With a heavy sigh, I took a seat at the table in the chair next to where Maya had been sitting a minute or so ago. I tried to keep any saliva from actually escaping my mouth as I quickly grabbed a bun and placed the burger inside. After applying a slice of cheese and a rather generous portion of ketchup onto my sandwich, and upon slapping the top bun atop it all, my dinner was complete, so I grabbed it and immediately took a rather large bite.

The explosion of flavor within my mouth was heavenly. I could already feel the saliva welling up, but I was careful not to make myself look like some kind of barbaric idiot at dinner by drooling everywhere while wolfing down food. The rest of the cheeseburger went down without incident, and I let out a sigh when I was done, sitting back slightly. It was at this point that I realized that almost everyone was looking at me. I looked around

at them, an expression of confusion creasing my face.

“What?” I said.

Just then, Mack laughed and I jumped in surprise, prompting a quiet snort from Kailyn beside me.

“My god, girl,” he said, “the last time I saw food disappear that fast, I think it was to a starving dog.”

I felt like that should be some sort of insult, but I couldn’t think of a good enough comeback, so I made a motion somewhat like a shrug and sunk lower in my seat, suddenly debating whether I should reach for the bag of chips just ahead of me. Before I could debate any more serious life decisions, Shawn spoke up and drew everyone’s attention away from me.

“So, who are all of you?” he said, wiping his hands together after having just finished his cheeseburger.

Mack gestured to Jared on his right and we all introduced ourselves in turn. After everyone, excluding Maya and Mack, had introduced themselves, he nodded and pointed to me.

“Amaryss...” he said, then moved his finger to point at the next person, “Kailyn... Lexi... Chase.”

After he had finished, he nodded and sat back in his chair.

“Well, as you know already, I’m Shawn. It’s a pleasure to meet all of you.”

“These folks are going to be staying with us for a little while,” Mack said, now leaning forward with his elbows on the table. “As such, I think it would be a good idea to set-up sleeping arrangements shortly, so that everyone is all set in case anyone feels like hitting the hay early.”

With that, we cleared the table and brought everything back inside, returning the condiments to the refrigerator and throwing the paper plates away. I let out a sigh and leaned back against the countertop of the island, running my hands through my hair as Kailyn moved up beside me, also leaning back against the countertop.

“Who wants to bet on how long ‘a while’ is this time?” she muttered to me, careful that Jared or Mack couldn’t hear.

I smirked and let out a single, quiet laugh, my lips never opening.

“Four days?” she offered.

“A year?” I countered, looking over at her.

“Maybe that’s how long Jared would like it to be,” she said and leaned in close to my ear so that I was definitely the only one who could hear her, “but not how long *we’re* planning to be.”

I didn’t say anything, I just kept staring straight ahead toward the two men as they began to lead everyone back down the hallway toward the front door. After they had taken only a few steps, I nodded and turned to look at Kailyn for the first time in the conversation.

“Not another month.”

## 9 Fire Water

August 31<sup>st</sup>, 1999

9:31:28 P.M.

Mack's house, somewhere in Arizona

My duffel bag hit the floor with a solid thud as I turned on the toes of one foot and fell onto the bed. The room I had been set up in seemed to be bigger than any one I had ever lived in before. The walls were a dark brown color, possibly even reddish, with dark green drapes on the window set into the far wall from the door. Luckily, the room had two beds in it, already fully made up with brown-and-green comforters; Kailyn's and my friendship was close, but not quite on that level. Kailyn was still standing inside the door, looking around the room as I bounced on the bed slightly.

"Satisfied?" I asked, clasping my hands between my knees.

"Definitely pretty nice," she said, nodding as she walked around the bed I was sitting on and dropped her bag on the other one.

"Pretty nice?" I repeated, falling back onto the bed and tilting my head so I was looking at her upside down. "This is like the Ritz compared to what we're used to."

Kailyn smirked as she took a seat on her bed and I rolled over so I was lying on my stomach.

"Fine, it's the nicest bedroom I've ever spent eight hours a night in," she said.

We both laughed as Kailyn leaned back, putting her arms out behind her to brace herself. After a few moments, the laughter had died down and we sat there in silence, both of us staring off into space. Finally, Kailyn cleared her throat and I snapped out of my reverie to look at her.

"So now the plan becomes more complicated, no?" she said.

"How so?" I replied, tilting my head to one side slightly.

"Well, there are two more people now," she said, "unless you were planning on leaving them behind."

“Well that would be quite a dick move,” I said, brushing some of my hair out of my face. “We just met them, but they’re in the same boat as us.”

“So we think,” Kailyn said. “We don’t know if maybe they like it here...”

I gave her a look, raising my eyebrows.

“Well, look around, Amaryss!” Kailyn said, gesturing to the room. “This isn’t some sterile complex like in California. Like you said: it’s practically a four-star hotel. Unless there’s a secret dark side we haven’t seen, it’s not such a bad place.”

I narrowed my eyes slightly at her.

“If I didn’t know better, I’d say you almost want to stay here, yourself.”

Kailyn snorted and shook her head. Before she could say anything, however, there was a knock on our door and I jumped, spinning around so that I was lying on my back. The door began to open slowly as I propped myself up with one arm, hurriedly brushing aside the hair that had fallen in my face during my brief moment of panic. Chase’s head poked around the edge of the door and I let out a sigh, instantly relaxing.

“Oh, hey you two,” he said.

“Were you expecting someone else?” Kailyn asked from behind me.

“No, no...” he said, shaking his head, “I just wasn’t sure if you’d both be here.”

“Were you hoping that Amaryss would be here... *alone*?” Kailyn asked, her tone suddenly mocking.

I spun to give her a dirty look as I heard Chase falter slightly and accidentally knock on the door. Kailyn was simply grinning at me, a knowing look in her eyes. She pushed herself to her feet and stretched her arms above her head.

“I’ll go see how Lexi’s doing, then,” she said.

I wanted to say something smart and sassy back to her, but no words came to mind fast enough, so I simply watched as she walked around the end of my bed. Chase opened the door the rest of the way and flattened himself against it so that Kailyn could pass. Without another word, she slipped out the door and started off to the right, but not before glancing back and giving me a wink.

With that, she disappeared from sight, leaving Chase awkwardly standing in the doorway. After several seconds of silence and he still hadn't moved, I cleared my throat, causing him to jump.

"You can come in," I said, "so you aren't just standing there. I don't bite, you know."

"I think I have some bruises that would seem to say differently," he said, grinning as he stepped inside and closed the door behind him.

A look of confusion crossed my face as I looked up at him. Clearly, I couldn't remember whatever event he was talking about.

"You don't remember the time you threw me to the ground out in California?" he said. "You went all kung fu ninja on me?"

Now I remembered.

"Oh... right..." I said and laughed nervously. "Sorry about that."

He waved it off as he leaned back against the door.

"It's my fault I didn't say something so it didn't seem like some random person was creeping up on you," he said.

"Why didn't you say anything?" I asked, suddenly curious.

His body language instantly changed. Previously, he had seemed rather calm and relaxed, like he usually was; now, he had become much more rigid and tense, almost like I had struck some kind of nerve. What that would be, I had no idea.

"I was... uh..." he said, sliding one foot back and forth across the floor slightly, "don't worry about it."

I tried to raise one eyebrow at him, but failed miserably yet again. He laughed quietly, looking down at his feet again.

"That is one of the least useful phrases," I said. "It always makes the other person worry about it a lot more. Also, I wasn't *worried* before, but now I'm thinking I should be..."

He laughed yet again, this time slightly louder, and looked back up at me, his dark eyes shining slightly with amusement.

"You're thinking about it too much," he said.

I made a "pfft" sound and rolled my eyes.

"Aren't I always?"

He laughed, quietly again this time, and rubbed the back of his neck with one hand.

"All right, you want to know why? I was nervous," he said

suddenly.

It took a second or two for that to register in my head. Confusion hit me instantly, and it must have showed in my expression, because Chase suddenly began avoiding eye contact with me. I decided that if this conversation were to go anywhere from here, I was going to have to continue it.

“Nervous? I hadn’t even hit you yet. Why were you nervous?” I asked.

We both laughed slightly, but Chase remained silent after it had died down. He obviously did not really want to answer that question, and I wasn’t particularly in the mood to conduct an interrogation. As such, I tried to find a way to change the subject.

“You still have that list we printed out, right?” I asked.

“Huh? Oh, yeah, I do,” he said, nodding.

“Here, why don’t you take a seat?” I said, patting the open spot on the end of my bed with one hand. “You’re kind of making me nervous just standing there.”

Chase laughed and slowly moved forward, finally taking a seat on the end of the bed as I turned myself so that I was facing him, one leg hanging off the side. Perhaps it was just my imagination, but he almost seemed more nervous now that he was sitting down. I decided that I was, in fact, imagining it and cleared my throat.

“It might be a little more difficult now with a group of six, rather than four,” I said.

“What will be?”

“You know... our little trip?”

He suddenly seemed to realize what I was talking about and his mouth opened slightly as he let out an “oh” sound and nodded.

“Perhaps, yeah,” he said.

Yet again, we fell into silence. After a second or two, I became aware of the quiet tapping sound of Chase’s foot on the floor, the only sound in the otherwise silent room. It was almost hypnotic, and I found myself staring off into space, mentally counting along to the beat he was providing. We stayed that way for what was either about a half hour or a minute, I couldn’t tell which, when I suddenly heard Chase clear his throat and I blinked a few times, clearing my vision.



Evidently, while I had been tuned out this whole time, I had actually seemed to be staring right at him.

My cheeks began to grow hot as I undoubtedly started to blush and I quickly looked down at the comforter directly in front of me, too embarrassed to look up or speak. It took another thirty seconds or so before either of us dared to say or do anything again.

“So... is there a plan for tonight?” Chase asked.

“Like what do you mean?” I asked, finally looking back up at him.

“I don’t know, like... a ‘get to know people’ thing or something,” he said. “Just kind of hanging out or whatever... kind of like what we did when you and Kailyn first showed up.”

“I thought I went to sleep,” I said and we both laughed.

“That wouldn’t surprise me too much,” he said. “You do seem to love it.”

“I feel like that’s a thinly-veiled insult there, Chase,” I said, narrowing my eyes at him.

“I never said there’s anything wrong with it!” he said quickly. “Unless, you know, we’re trying to do something before noon most days.”

I hit him in the shoulder, attempting to be playful, but his reaction told me that I had hit him harder than I had intended. He leaned away from me, holding his right arm with the opposite hand, a look I couldn’t explain on his face.

“I’m sorry,” I said quickly, holding one hand out toward him, “I didn’t mean to hit you so hard.”

Just then, he lunged forward and tried to hit me back, which caused me to shriek slightly. It quickly turned to laughter as I leaned back, trying to move away from his swinging hands. We ended up slapping each other on the arms quite a bit, but no serious blows landed on either of us. Finally, we stopped, both of us panting slightly, and I became aware of our current situation.

I was leaning back against the pillows on my bed, my head and shoulders resting against the wall behind it, while Chase braced himself on his hands and knees so that he was mostly over me. We remained there, slowly catching our breath, as I found myself staring directly into his eyes. The nervousness that I had noticed in him earlier seemed to be completely gone, as he held my

gaze. I had noticed that his eyes were dark before, but I had never really seen them up close; they were actually a very dark shade of brown that had a certain warmth in the very depths of them. They almost matched his skin, but they were a few shades darker, except for a small ring around the very center, near the iris, where they faded to a lighter brown.

I suddenly became aware that we were much closer together than I had noticed before, and I finally broke eye contact, looking down slightly, a faint smile pulling the corners of my lips back. Chase suddenly rolled onto his side, taking up half of my bed, as he let out a heavy sigh.

“You know, Amaryss, you might be onto something with the whole sleep thing,” he said, placing his hands behind his head, his fingers intertwined.

“Don’t you dare try to fall asleep on *my* bed,” I said sternly, giving him a look.

“Hmm... maybe you’ll have to learn to share,” he muttered, his eyes actually closed.

I began to push him, which caused his eyes to crack open and I saw them flick toward me. He was beginning to open his mouth to say something to me when a look of panic crossed his face, his eyes went wide, and he began to flail his arms and legs as he slipped over the edge of the mattress and fell to the floor with a heavy thud. I began to laugh uncontrollably as he lay there on the floor, staring up at me with an expression somewhat like shock. It crossed my mind that I should probably ask him if we was actually all right, so I tried to stop my laughter.

“Are—are you all right?” I asked, slowly bringing my breathing and my voice under control.

“My god, girl,” he said, the same expression still on his face. “I see how it is, then.”

“How what is?” I asked innocently, trying my best to make some form of puppy eyes, but knowing my usual grace, it probably came out terrifying.

Before he could answer, I heard the door open and I instantly turned to look at it. Kailyn stood in the doorway, one hand on the knob and the other on the frame.

“Hey, you two,” she said, “do you think you can tear

yourselves away from your playdate for a little while?"

"Why?" I asked, turning so my legs hung over the edge of the bed.

"Because we are extending a very cordial invitation to a little 'get-to-know-you gathering,'" Shawn said, suddenly appearing behind Kailyn, causing her to jump in surprise.

"Everyone's going, you know."

"Everyone?" I replied, sarcasm dripping from my voice.

"I've got loads of connections," he replied, winking at me.

I rolled my eyes as I heard Chase pulling himself off the floor behind me. The look of amusement in Kailyn's eyes said more than she could have physically spoken. I could only glare daggers back at her as Chase walked around the end of the bed and stood on the side closest to the door.

"Why not?" he said rather casually. "I mean, what else are we going to do?"

Kailyn opened her mouth to speak, but I cut her off.

"Yeah, there's not much to do just sitting here by ourselves, anyway," I said, still meeting her gaze.

She closed her mouth but smirked and backed away slightly, so that Shawn was now in full view.

"What time?" she asked.

"Let's say..." he trailed off, looking up at the ceiling for a moment, "about eleven o'clock?"

"Sounds good," I said, standing up and stretching.

"Good, meet on the back patio then."

With that, he quickly walked away, disappearing from sight. Kailyn looked back over toward Chase and me, the spark of amusement still in her eyes.

"Shall I come back later?" she asked.

"Actually, I was just thinking of going for a quick walk," I said, moving briskly toward the door, pausing just beside Kailyn and turning to look at her again. "Care to join me?"

She glanced off to her left before looking back at me, the same amused look still in her eyes.

"I think I know someone who would," she replied, whispering so that only I could hear.

I let out a growl of annoyance and stalked away, moving

quickly down the stairs and pausing for a moment in the center of the front room. My gaze lingered on the front door before turning away and I headed toward the back of the house. As I moved down the hallway connected to the kitchen, I heard voices coming from up ahead, so I immediately slowed and listened intently. They were too muffled to make out any clear words at this point, but they were definitely men's voices. Seeing as Chase and Shawn were both upstairs, it was rather safe to assume that they were Jared and Mack. I took another step forward, but my sneakers were still too loud on the wood floors. Reaching down, I quickly slipped them off and held them in my hand as I slid across the floor in my socks.

The voices grew louder as I approached the kitchen, but not loud enough to indicate they were actually in it, so I silently crept inside, glancing around to confirm it was empty as I did. They seemed to be coming from off to my right somewhere, so I began to move along that wall. When I reached the end of it, I found a short hallway, probably only about six feet long or so, leading to a large wooden door. Large glass panes lined the wall to the left, overlooking the back patio and "yard" in general; they looked somewhat like doors, but the retractable shades at the tops of them gave them away as merely large windows. Once I had reached the end of the short hallway, I slowly placed my ear against the door and listened.

"...it's incredible. No one else has seen these kind of results before," one of them, most likely Jared, was saying.

"They *could* be incredible," the other man replied and I could tell that it was definitely Mack.

"What are you trying to say?" Jared responded, something dark and accusatory creeping into his voice.

"I'm saying that you don't actually have hard, physical evidence of these results," Mack said. "You haven't had a way to collect any data, nor have you really seemed to try, yet."

I didn't think Jared worked for anyone, but the way this conversation was going, it almost seemed as if Mack might somehow be a superior to him.

"What of yourself, then?" Jared shot back. "I don't see any envelopes full of data on what you've observed."

“These things take time, Jared,” Mack said, irritation lacing his voice.

“Precisely, so don’t go accusing me of falling behind in my work when you can’t show that you are any more ahead of me,” he said, something about his tone sending shivers down my spine. “Also, you seem to forget who invented these procedures.”

“I haven’t forgotten,” Mack snapped. “You had two other aids, from what I remember.”

So far, Jared and Mack had not divulged any really useful information, yet they had certainly piqued my curiosity. I shifted slightly, careful to not accidentally bump into the door or make any noise.

“Yes, James, Jonathan, and I developed everything, originally,” Jared said, somewhat answering one of my questions, “and they are both actively working on projects similar to ours as we speak. Jonathan has two ‘charges’ right now, and James already helped out with one not so long ago. Speaking of which...”

Jared trailed off for a second and I heard a soft clinking sound, followed by what sounded like something hard being placed on a wooden surface.

“I most likely have to head out there to oversee said charge and how our operations abroad are doing.”

Mack was silent for a few seconds, so I assumed he must have made some sort of physical gesture, such as nodding.

“Where is James now, anyway?”

“London. Visiting. Jonathan’s in New York.”

“Well, that’s quite the spread,” Mack remarked. “I didn’t realize the club was reaching so far.”

“Soon to be reaching farther,” Jared replied. “London is a big one, internationally, but we’ve got a good prospect in Venice.”

“Sounds like vacation planning rather than locations for facilities,” Mack said, laughing.

I heard Jared laugh, but he didn’t say anything more. Just then, I heard the sound of feet on the wood floor behind me and I instantly dropped into a crouch as I spun to look back. A figure stopped near the end of the hallway, clearly surprised by my sudden burst of motion. It took me a second or two more to realize

that it was Lexi, her dirty blonde hair pulled back in a ponytail, and I let out the breath I didn't realize that I had been holding. She cocked her head to one side slightly as I rose to a standing position and carefully glided across the floor until I reached her. Grabbing her arm gently, I led her back into the kitchen and hopefully out of hearing range of Jared and Mack.

"Why were you eavesdropping on that door with your shoes in your hand?" Lexi finally asked, her voice just barely louder than a whisper.

"Jared and Mack are in there," I replied, my volume matching hers.

"Oh?" she said, looking more interested.

"I heard them talking about us, a little," I began, "but not much of it was new or interesting. However, I did hear something useful at least for our plan."

Lexi didn't say anything, simply raising one eyebrow.

"Jared said something about possibly having to leave soon to go visit someone to check on their 'progress,'" I explained.

"Progress on what?" she replied.

"I have no idea, but I feel like it's something like what he's doing with us."

"Okay... so that means that it's definitely more than the six of us here," she said, chewing the inside of her cheek.

"Well, Chase and I broke into one of the labs back in California and managed to steal a list from one of the computers there," I said, placing my shoes on the floor and slipping my feet back inside them. "We found a whole huge list of kids like us, we presume."

Lexi made a "huh" noise and folded her arms over her chest, moving on to biting her lower lip, instead. I glanced back toward the hallway where Lexi had found me, but Jared and Mack still seemed to be in the room at the end of it.

"So... are we going to go around and try to help all these people?" she asked, bringing my attention back to her.

"I don't know," I said, sighing. "I think that's a decision we all need to make as a group."

She nodded, not saying anything in return. After we had stood there in silence for longer than I was entirely comfortable, I

cleared my throat and leaned back against the counter of the center island.

“So are you going to his little shindig tonight?” I asked.

Lexi raised one eyebrow at me again.

“This ‘shindig’? Really Amaryss?”

I laughed as she unfolded her arms and leaned against the island, as well.

“Yeah, why not, you know... what the hell?”

I glanced back at the clock on the microwave on the counter behind us and saw that it was already 9:58. It was later than I expected, but that still left us with a little over an hour until Shawn said we were supposed to meet. I let out a sigh and leaned my head back, running my hands through my hair. Something made me look over toward the doors onto the back patio-like area, one hand still holding onto my hair.

“Wanna wait outside?” I asked, looking back over at Lexi.

She shrugged.

“Sure, might as well. What else am I going to do?”

“I’m sorry I’m your only option apparently,” I said, grinning.

“No, it’s just... Oh, just can it,” she said, waving dismissively.

The instant I opened the back door, a wave of heat hit me. Oddly enough, it didn’t feel that bad; it was comforting in a way. Stepping outside, it seemed to envelope me, wrapping around my body like a warm blanket. I took another step or two out onto the tiles and glanced back to see if Lexi was actually following. She was just closing the door behind us as I looked back; she didn’t seem to appreciate the weather as much as I did.

She fanned her shirt slightly as she turned from the door, the corners of her mouth pulled back in a slight frown.

“It’s nice out, right?” I said, grinning.

“You’re crazy.”

I laughed as I lifted my arms out to either side of me and began to spin in circles. After I had completed a few revolutions, I stopped, staggering slightly, and looked back at Lexi, an uncontrollable grin on my face. She just shook her head, jamming her hands in her back pockets and looking off into the distance

over my shoulder. I followed her gaze, but all I saw was wide open desert, scraggly brownish shrubbery stretching across the land for pretty much as far as I could see.

“It’s like I could just reach out and touch it... you know?” she said, suddenly appearing beside me.

“The sand?” I replied, confusion creasing my face as I turned back to her.

“No,” Lexi said, laughing. “Well, I suppose in a way, yes. I was talking about the just... open freedom out there. We can see it all from here, you know, see miles in any direction really, but we can’t really touch it, can we?”

I nodded slowly, looking out at the open ground as what she said began to really sink in.

“Soon, maybe,” I whispered, leaning in close enough for her to hear me.

We took seats in one of the chairs at the table from earlier and I let out a sigh. Lexi slouched down in the chair beside me so that her legs stuck out quite a bit in front of her, crossing them at the ankles. It suddenly dawned on me how long they seemed and how tall she actually was. We were about the same height, which made me wonder if perhaps that’s how I looked, too.

“Am I going to be able to hang out here, or am I going to be too distracting for you?”

I looked at her, a confused look on my face as she laughed.

“You were staring,” she said. “It was rather odd.”

“Oh, sorry...” I said, “just tired I guess.”

“Okay then...” Lexi replied, snickering slightly.

“What is that for?” I said, spinning the chair to face her.

“Nothing,” she teased. “Don’t worry about it.”

I rolled my eyes and turned the chair so that I was facing out toward the open ground again. We sat there in silence for roughly a minute or so before it began to feel rather strange to me and I really wanted to break it. Luckily, I didn’t have to, because Lexi spoke first.

“Well, I’m not as interesting to talk to in a ‘get to know you’ way, I think,” she began, “seeing as I can’t remember anything from more than eight years ago—”

“You’ve said that before.”



“Mhm,” she hummed, “so if you want to get to know me, be my guest, but let me know what you find out, because I’d like to know, too.”

We fell silent for a few seconds as what she said rolled over me. Finally, after I had shaken off what she said, I cleared my throat and began again.

“Well, that doesn’t mean there isn’t anything to learn about,” I said. “For instance... do you have a favorite type of music?”

Lexi laughed slightly, shifting in her chair as she stared off into the distance, seemingly thinking about the question.

“I guess...” she began, “you could say some kind of rock stuff. Phil had some tapes of old bands... stuff like The Who and AC/DC.”

“See, there’s a start,” I said, grinning.

“Okay then, what about you?” she asked, looking over at me.

“Hmm... I’d say maybe some more pop music type stuff. Listening to music hasn’t really been big for Jared. I used to have my own radio at the place back in Nevada, and I’d occasionally be able to catch some signals from a nearby station, but we were kind of out in the middle of nowhere, so it was grainy and shit quality.”

Lexi laughed as I grinned. Almost immediately, I noticed that our postures had grown much more relaxed.

“Oh, you know who I actually remember? Alanis Morissette. I feel like she was pretty good.”

August 31<sup>st</sup>, 1999

10:42:24 P.M.

Mack’s House, somewhere in Arizona

Just as Lexi and I finished whatever particular thought we were discussing at the moment, I heard the sound of the patio door open and I quickly glanced over to the right. Shawn stepped outside, already looking toward the sound of voices. He had a backpack slung over one shoulder for some reason, and a smirk

already set onto his face as he approached.

“I thought I was going to be the first one out here, but it looks like you girls beat me to it,” he said.

“Very astute, Captain Obvious,” Lexi remarked.

“I was going to offer you first dibs, but not after that comment,” he said, shifting the backpack slightly as a clinking sound emanated from within.

The two of us looked at him curiously and he just sighed, glancing back toward the door for a second before looking back at us.

“You two are so naïve, it’s almost endearing,” he said.

“You could stop beating around the bush and just tell us what’s in the bag,” I said, looking up at him.

“You’ll find out soon enough...” he trailed off, staring at me blankly.

“Amaryss, I think is what you’re looking for,” I offered.

“Right, Amaryss... is that supposed to be like the actual word ‘amorous’?” he asked.

I shrugged.

“I don’t know, I’m not the one who came up with it. How do you know such a sophisticated word, anyway?”

“Because I’m a sophisticated kind of guy,” he said, grinning. “I was just curious if you lived up to the name.”

I rolled my eyes and gave him a hard look.

“Not for you, that’s for sure,” I said.

“That wasn’t what I was going for!” he said, holding up one hand toward me in a “stop” gesture. “I was just wondering since it’s such an odd name, I wasn’t sure if it was a nickname you had earned.”

“Nope,” I replied. “It’s spelled different, too.”

He appeared to think that over in his head before shrugging.

“Well, I guess that just makes you your own special snowflake, right?” he said, grinning.

I sighed and pushed myself a little higher in the chair. Lexi was now leaning against the left armrest of her chair, her left ankle propped on the opposite knee, a look of amusement adorning her face as she watched Shawn’s and my banter. I was about to say

something rather sarcastic to her when the sound of people opening the back door interrupted me. We all turned to look and saw the other three stepping outside.

“Oh, I see how it is, starting without us, then,” Kailyn called as she made her way toward us. “Don’t worry, the life of the party has arrived so now we can actually begin.”

“And who would this ‘life of the party’ be exactly?” I asked.

“Who else could it be?” she scoffed, feigning disgust.

“I never knew Chase referred to himself that way,” I shot back, grinning.

Kailyn rolled her eyes as she placed her hands on her hips and sighed.

“You are impossible, Amaryss.”

“Thanks, I try.”

“If your children are done, you can all follow me,” Shawn interrupted, shifting the backpack again.

“You’re one to talk...” Maya muttered under her breath, but he didn’t seem to notice.

The rest of us followed after him as we left the patio and the house behind, moving across the sandy ground deeper and deeper into the night. After a minute or so, I began to wonder if Shawn actually knew where he was going.

“Are all we almost there for Christ’s sake?” Kailyn called, irritation lacing her voice.

“Yes, my dear,” Shawn replied over his shoulder.

“Are we going where I think we are?” Maya asked from beside me.

“Probably...” he said coyly.

Moments later, he came to a stop and signaled for everyone to crowd around him. As I approached, I noticed a circle made of rocks in the middle of the open ground. It took me a few more seconds to realize what it was: a fire pit. Shawn placed the backpack on the ground and walked toward the edge of the clear, sandy area to a stack of something dark. He pulled a small tarp back to reveal a short stack of firewood, quickly grabbing a few pieces and bringing them back to drop into the pit. He knelt down beside them, unzipping the backpack and reaching inside. A

second later, he produced a box of matches and took one out.

“Aren’t you forgetting something?” Maya asked, standing across the pit from him.

“Am I?”

She sighed and turned around, walking over to a dry, scraggly bush a few feet away, ripping some twigs off and walking back to the pile of wood. With motions like she had done this before, Maya collected the small bundle on a larger piece of wood and held it over the pit so that Shawn could reach it.

“Now light it.”

He struck the match, but it didn’t catch on the first try. It took him two more tries before he finally managed to produce a flame, which he quickly brought down to the pile of twigs and waited. It slowly began to catch fire, and once it was burning sufficiently, Maya placed it under the other pieces of firewood. We all sat and watched the small glowing light from under the pieces of wood for about thirty seconds before I began to see flames rising up from underneath.

“There we go,” Shawn said, replacing the box of matches in the backpack and falling back into a sitting position on the ground. “Everyone take a seat... relax.”

I took a seat between Chase and Maya, crossing my legs in front of me and resting my hands on my knees to wait for whatever was supposed to happen. Shawn reached into the backpack once more and pulled out a clear glass bottle, placing it on the ground beside him. Two more bottles came out of the backpack before he placed it behind him and away from the fire.

“What are those?” Lexi asked, tilting her head slightly to try to read one of the labels.

“These, *mademoiselle*, are what I like to refer to as ‘fire water,’” he said, smirking.

“Alcohol?” Kailyn said, raising one eyebrow.

“Yes, if you want to be all simple and boring about it,” he sighed.

My interest was suddenly piqued and I leaned forward, looking more closely at the bottles. One contained a vaguely gold-looking liquid with what looked like Spanish written on the outside, while another was completely clear with a red label that

said “Smirnoff” on one side. The third was lying on its side behind the stones lining the fire pit, so I couldn’t see what it was from my seat.

“Pilfering from Mack yet again, I see,” Maya said quietly, yet with a hint in her tone at chastising Shawn.

“Has he noticed before?”

“Doesn’t mean he won’t.”

“Live a little.”

Maya rolled her eyes and leaned back, propping her arms out behind herself. Kailyn clapped her hands together and turned to Shawn, a look something like a combination of excitement and amusement in her eyes.

“So, are we doing this straight out of the bottle, or in glasses, or... what?”

“Well, you could do straight out of the bottle, if you’d really like to,” Shawn said, twisting around to reach for the backpack yet again, “but I also brought some more refined chalices.”

At first I had wondered if this was simply how Shawn talked, but I was beginning to think it was more of an act. He was an entertainer, and he was putting on a show for us. At least, I liked to believe that, since his appearance and mannerisms did not seem to quite suit the way he was speaking.

I realized that I had been staring off into space, so I shook my head and blinked a few times, bringing myself back to the moment at hand. Shawn was just handing Kailyn a small drinking glass which I vaguely recognized as a “shot glass” from some of the stuff on TV I had seen before.

“Where would you like to start?” he asked.

Kailyn considered the three bottles for a moment before shrugging.

“Pick your favorite.”

She held her glass out toward him as he grabbed the bottle with the somewhat-gold liquid inside it. With a quick twist, he cracked the top of the bottle and started to spin it with one hand, but it quickly almost spun right off the top, so he had to grab it before it landed in the sand. He carefully poured the liquid just shy of the top so that it wouldn’t spill over. Before Shawn could say

anything, though, Kailyn brought it to her lips and emptied the contents, swallowing all of it in only a second or two. She grimaced slightly and coughed a few times as Shawn laughed.

“I was going to ask if this was your first time, but I think I have my answer,” he said.

“How so?” Kailyn asked, her voice slightly strained.

“The coughing,” he said, “but you didn’t make the rookie mistake of trying to keep the alcohol in your mouth before swallowing.”

“Why the hell would you? It tastes like shit,” Kailyn said, clasping her hands so that her glass was held between them.

I couldn’t help grinning slightly, even though that didn’t sound like a reason to want to try any of it, however, something still compelled me to try like Kailyn had, although I had no idea why. Before I could second-guess myself, I cleared my throat and looked over at Shawn.

“Let me have a shot of that.”

Shawn raised one eyebrow and looked over at me, pointing to the bottle still held in his hand. I nodded and he laughed quietly, grabbing another one of the small glasses from the ground, quickly filling it without spilling a drop, like he had done this hundreds of times before. To be honest, I wouldn’t put that idea past him. The glass was delicately balanced between his thumb and index finger as he reached over the fire and handed it to me. The first thing I did upon taking it from him was smell it, which proved to be a mistake. I immediately wrinkled my nose at the harsh scent, prompting some soft giggles and laughter from the group. Before anyone could speak up to mock me, however, I put the glass to my lips and opened my mouth as I tilted my head back.

My tongue began to burn slightly as the liquid made contact with it. I quickly remembered Shawn’s comment about not keeping it in your mouth, so I tried to funnel it down my throat as quickly as possible. As soon as I swallowed it, a feeling of warmth seemed to spread outward from my mouth and throat. Before I had a chance to say anything, though, I started coughing, much to Shawn’s amusement.

“I thought you might be the chosen one,” he said, grinning, “but apparently I was mistaken.”

“The chosen one?” I asked, my voice raspy as I looked over at him.

“The one to take her liquor well on the first try,” he explained, “but alas, that girl still eludes me.”

“Yes, because you’ve known so many,” Maya jabbed, her voice loaded with sarcasm.

Shawn just made a face at her before turning his attention back to the rest of the group.

“So, who’s next?”

Kailyn and I both held our glasses out toward him, which prompted everyone else to laugh. My cheeks suddenly felt hot, but I wasn’t sure if it was from embarrassment or from the alcohol. I slowly began to retract my arm, but Shawn reached over and began to pour me some more. Once he had filled Kailyn’s, we faced each other and held up our glasses.

“A toast to my close friend, one might even call ‘sister,’ Amaryss,” Kailyn said, smirking.

“Back at ya,” I replied, raising my glass slightly.

We both downed our glasses at the same time. The alcohol went down a little smoother, and it didn’t burn nearly as much; the taste, on the other hand, remained just as strong. I let out a sigh and rested my glass on my right knee as I looked around at the others.

“Okay, I feel weird being one of the only ones doing this,” Kailyn said, also looking around at everyone.

“Drink up!” I urged, the corners of my mouth pulling back in a slight smile.

I looked over to my left at Chase, who was leaning back with a grin on his face. The fire cast a faint glow on him, but for the most part his dark skin seemed somewhat lost in the darkness that had set over us while I wasn’t paying attention. He must have felt my stare because he looked over at me, his expression turning to confusion.

“You take a turn,” I said, smiling and holding out my glass.

“You sure?” he asked, smiling nervously.

“It’s nothing,” I said, shrugging, “hell, I did it.”

He laughed and gently took the glass from my hand. Shawn held up the bottle slightly, as if asking him if he really

wanted to do it. Chase appeared to consider the idea for a second or two before holding out the glass.

“Hell, why not?”

September 1<sup>st</sup>, 1999

1:15:23 A.M.

Mack’s House, somewhere in Arizona

Laughing seemed to come quick and easy, almost like breathing. At least all of the sudden it had. It was about as easy as my head felt heavy. Any small motion had the feeling of falling through the air, which only amused me further. It wasn’t just my head, though: my whole body felt heavy. Perhaps that was why I had found a way to prop myself up so that I didn’t have to support myself. As I turned my head to the left, I realized that the “something” I was using was actually Chase; my head was resting against the right side of his chest and my legs were curled under me. Something deep down told me that this position was a bit strange, but I couldn’t really figure out why at the moment.

Kailyn was lying on her stomach across the fire from me, her arms bent at the elbows and propping her head up with her hands. It dawned on me that she had been talking a lot this whole time, but I had barely noticed. I, on the other hand, hadn’t spoken in a while... at least so I thought. Maya was sitting to my right with her arms wrapped around her legs. Lexi was next to Kailyn, sitting cross-legged and leaning back and forth ever so slightly, always in constant motion. Shawn seemed to be having a good time, but was not as affected as the rest of us.

“What time is it?” I asked, my voice sounding slow and slightly muted, as if something were in my ears.

I felt Chase shift as he looked at his watch for a good ten seconds.

“One... fifteen,” he said.

“Shit, I am tired,” Kailyn suddenly said, wiping her face with one hand.

“It’s getting a little late,” Shawn agreed, stretching his arms above his head and yawning.



“That’s a shock to hear from you,” Maya jabbed, smirking.

He made a face at her and I couldn’t help myself as I laughed louder than I probably should have. I sensed Chase’s questioning gaze without even looking up at him, so I just hit him on the shoulder slightly.

“Oh, knock it off,” I said, my voice sounding drawn out and slow.

I barely remembered getting to my feet, watching someone put out the fire, and walking back to the house. The next thing I really remembered clearly was stumbling up the stairs toward the bedrooms, holding onto Chase for support as we both laughed. I reached out to my left and my hand finally found the banister, so I grabbed on tightly and used it to steady us. Reaching the top of the stairs felt like reaching the peak of Everest to me, and I let out a slight cheer, to which Chase quickly shushed me by putting one finger to his lips, but we both began to laugh. I didn’t know why, but it seemed so easy now, and it wasn’t necessarily a bad thing.

We lurched our way down the hall until we reached a door and I stopped, putting one hand against the frame to steady myself. Chase twisted the knob and pushed the door open, almost falling through after it and pulling me with him. We stumbled into the room and I almost ran straight into a bed, but I managed to get one hand beneath me and stop myself. My arm slid from around Chase’s shoulders and I pitched forward onto it, rolling so I was lying in a more normal direction.

“Hey... wha’ you think you doin’?” Chase muttered.

“Close the door before you start shouting like that,” I said, gesturing toward it.

He looked back and lifted one foot, aiming carefully before kicking it closed with a rather loud bang. I cringed at the noise, which he apparently found funny because he began to laugh.

“Don’t be so high-strung,” he said.

“High-strung? Me?” I repeated, putting one hand to my chest.

“Yeah, you... Who else would it be?” he replied, swaying slightly on his feet as he spoke.

“Since when am I high-strung?”

He made a noise and rubbed his chin as if he were thinking

for a few seconds.

“Let’s see... most of the time?” he replied.

I scoffed, or at least attempted to, and tried to look shocked. My motions must have been far more extreme than I imagined, because Chase began to laugh again.

“I’m not tha’ bad,” I said, seemingly unable to form some syllables, but I didn’t particularly care.

“Oh really?” he shot back, his words rather drawn out.

“I am super fun, thank you!” I said, jabbing out with one foot and hitting him in the leg.

Apparently he was rather unsteady on his feet, because he staggered and fell forward onto the bed. More accurately, he fell on top of me. I let out a slight shriek as he laughed, trying to cover his mouth with one hand in order to be quiet, but it wasn’t working so well.

“Wha’ was that for?” he asked, slapping me on the side of my leg.

“Don’tchu hit me for you bein’ clumsy!” I said, jabbing one finger at the image that I was pretty sure was him.

“I call bullshit...!” he said, and tried to move up to hit me again.

I let out another shriek and tried to bat his hands away, and it quickly turned into a mini-struggle against each other, each of us hitting the other’s hands in an attempt to thwart the attacks. After what could have been a solid minute or so of this, we slowly came to a stop, both of us breathing heavily. Chase was suddenly much closer than I remembered him being before, and he was staring straight down at me. I felt a strange twinge in my stomach and I swallowed, hoping that it wasn’t nausea. Seconds later it was revealed that sickness was not the case.

I leaned forward and pressed my lips against Chase’s. Surprise on his part was somewhat of an expectation of mine, but he barely registered any, if at all. Instead, I felt him pushing back against me, as if trying to get closer. I felt something on my cheek and realized that it was his fingers, gently turning my head to the left slightly. A second later, it felt like everything had just clicked.

The warm feeling inside me quickly disappeared as I felt a spike of nervousness shoot through me. I realized that I had no

idea what to do after that initial gesture. My face was just kind of pressed up against his, and I had a feeling there was something else that was supposed to happen, but for the life of me I had no idea what. Before my panic could completely take hold of me, I felt Chase beginning to move.

His lips began to move against mine slightly, and I tried to imitate him to some extent. We could have stayed like that for hours, as far as I knew, but eventually we pulled apart. Neither of us spoke; I liked it that way. My eyes were half-closed as I looked up at Chase. Every part of my body felt heavy, and it seemed a struggle to remain awake. I went to ask him something, but it came out as mumbled nonsense and I just turned onto my side and laid down. Chase was still propped up on his elbow in front of me, but he soon laid down, as well. He was on his back, staring up at the ceiling as I closed my eyes, letting out a heavy sigh.

Finally, I was able to give in to the temptation of sleep that had been pulling at me for so long now.

## 10 Flew the Coop

September 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1999

8:04:28 A.M.

Mack's House, somewhere in Arizona

I was only vaguely aware of my slow return to consciousness. The heaviness still seemed settled into my limbs, but as I began to move them I realized that it was beginning to evaporate. My eyes were still closed, but I saw a pale red color, which told me that the sun was probably shining directly on me, so I turned my head to the right before even attempting to open them. Once I had, everything seemed blurry. I blinked several times and my eyesight returned to about its normal level.

For a few seconds after regaining my vision I didn't recognize anything about the room I was in, so I began to panic slightly. Finally, I remembered that we had arrived at Mack's the day before, so it was just my new room. I let out a heavy sigh and ran my right hand over my face and yawned. I let my head fall back onto the pillow and looked straight ahead. Rather than seeing Kailyn in the other bed across from me, like I expected, I saw the side of Chase's head inches from mine.

My eyes went wide and my heart rate shot up as I began to wriggle backward slightly. Apparently I accidentally woke him up, because his eyes opened and he groaned slightly, rubbing them with one hand. I remained motionless as he turned his head and stared at me for a few seconds, his face registering no expression. Suddenly, confusion creased his brow, and then his eyes widened like mine.

"So... I didn't imagine that," I said quietly, my voice barely louder than a breath.

"Guess not..." he said slowly, his voice almost as quiet as mine.

I took a deep breath before exhaling slowly, sitting up and running one hand through my hair. It felt slightly greasy to the touch and I squirmed inwardly. Chase propped himself up on one

elbow as he yawned.

“Nothing... like, *really bad* happened... right?” he said.

“I don’t remember it...” I said.

“Any of it?”

“No, I do; I just don’t remember anything... well, like what you said.”

He nodded slowly, as I became aware that I was biting my lower lip slightly and forced myself to stop. It dawned on me that Chase looked really embarrassed by all of this, and I felt like I should feel similarly, but... something wouldn’t let me. Deep down, it didn’t bother me as much as it should have. I had no idea what to do with that.

“Don’t look... like that,” I said, my words escaping me at the moment. “If I remember correctly... I was the one who started it.”

He looked up at me quickly, his eyes still glazed over slightly, as if lost in thought, and nodded slowly. Whatever Shawn had given me last night must have had some pretty long-lasting effects, because I felt like it was still encouraging me. I shifted a little closer to Chase again and paused.

“*What am I doing?*” I asked myself, looking at him as he remained staring off over my right shoulder, barely paying attention to what I was doing. “*Last night was one thing, but now...*”

I decided I liked the devil Amaryss on my shoulder better.

I leaned forward toward Chase and before I knew it, I had planted my lips on him once again. He jumped slightly at first, but then didn’t make any move to pull away. I disengaged my lips from his, but didn’t pull away drastically. This felt different than last night, like I had more control. It also didn’t feel as... sloppy, I suppose.

I moved forward ever so slightly again, our lips just barely brushing. Something touched my chin and I backed away, possibly a little too quickly. Chase had placed one finger on me in order to push me back slightly. He was looking directly into my eyes, all hints of being unaware and lost in thought gone.

“Amaryss... are you sure about this?” he asked quietly.

I remained silent for a few seconds, staring back at him.

The internal struggle raging inside me felt so strong that it might just accidentally spill out at any moment, but I managed to contain myself, or at least I thought I did. The proverbial “angel” on one shoulder was telling me that this would only make things complicated with everyone, and I didn’t want to draw that kind of attention to myself. The “devil,” on the other hand, was telling me the simple truth: there was a feeling there, in my gut, that I couldn’t deny, so why was I fighting so hard to repress my apparent instinctual reaction? Before I knew it, I found myself grinning.

“Only if you don’t let the others know,” I whispered.

“I’ve been known to keep a secret or two,” he replied.

I moved in and planted another quick kiss on his lips before backing away again, the same mischievous grin on my face.

“I’ll consider that your signature,” I said.

He laughed quietly as I twisted around and stood up, stretching my arms above my head and groaning slightly. My footsteps seemed unnecessarily loud as I padded across the room to the door, opening it a crack and peeking out first. The hallway seemed still and silent outside, so I turned to look back at Chase, who was now sitting on the edge of the bed, his hands clasped between his knees.

“Now comes the tricky part...” I muttered, flashing one more smile at him before slipping out the door and closing it silently behind me.

My feet slid rather easily across the wood floor of the hallway, so I used that to my advantage. It took until I had reached the door of my room to realize that the reason I was sliding so well was that I had left my shoes in Chase’s room. I cursed inwardly as I wrapped my hand around the doorknob and slowly turned it. The door barely made a noise as I pushed it open just far enough for me to slip through. Once I had made it into the room, I closed the door as quietly and slowly as possible. After I was satisfied it was shut, I let go of the knob and turned around...

“Long night?”

...Just in time to see Kailyn sitting up in her bed, one side of her mouth pulled back in a smirk. I let out a heavy sigh and fell back against the door, feeling like a criminal who had just been

caught in the act.

“So where’d you end up?” she asked, pulling herself up further into a sitting position and crossing her legs.

“Asleep,” I replied, gliding over to my bed and falling onto it.

“Well, at some point, maybe,” she said, nodding, “but I feel like there was something exciting before that.”

I remained silent, staring up at the ceiling.

“My... Amaryss has been struck speechless,” Kailyn said, obviously feigning shock. “This must be an *amazing* story, then.”

“No, it’s not,” I said, turning my head to look at her. “It’s one full of tragedy with an unreliable narrator.”

Kailyn made a face that implied she was impressed by something I had just said.

“Using that vocabulary, I see,” she said.

I let out a sigh of frustration and rolled onto my side so that I was facing away from her.

“Amaryss...!” Kailyn called as I heard her throw her sheets aside and stand up.

She suddenly appeared before me, crouching down beside my bed so that her blue-green eyes were level with mine.

“Amaryss...” she said again, her voice muffled by my bed, since only about her nose and up was visible above the edge.

After a second or two of silence, I sighed and decided to play along with her, somewhat.

“What?”

“I’m proud of you.”

I gave her a look, but I could tell she was smiling by her eyes.

“You don’t even know what happened,” I said, giving her what I thought was a condescending look.

“It sounds like you’re hiding quite the story from me...” Kailyn said, raising one eyebrow. “I love stories, you know.”

I sighed, rubbing my eyes with one hand as I thought about whether I should tell Kailyn anything at all. There was always the possibility of trying to mislead her, but I didn’t have enough faith in my ability to lie convincingly. Part of the story could at least satisfy her for now...

“I might be able to give you some snippets...”

“Story time!” Kailyn said and suddenly jumped up, hopping on my bed and crossing her legs as she clasped her hands together and leaned forward slightly.

I was immediately beginning to regret my decision. Although Kailyn probably liked having inside information on people, I wasn’t exactly sure if or how she would use it later. Up until recently it had just been the two of us, so it didn’t matter what we said, really; there was no one else to tell. Well, I suppose there was Jared, but like hell either of us was going to tell him anything. I became aware that I was biting my lower lip again and I forced myself to stop. It seemed to be a nervous habit, although I didn’t remember doing it until today.

“Come on...!” Kailyn goaded, still leaning toward me slightly.

“Well... how much do you remember of last night?” I asked.

She looked up at a spot somewhere above me as she appeared to think back, trying to remember the past twelve hours or so, I imagined.

“Most of it,” she replied. “Right near the end things get a little hazy. I remember taking... five shots, and then we all just kind of lounged around the fire for a while.”

“After that?”

“Do *you* not remember?” she asked, raising one eyebrow.

This was my chance: I could lie and say “yes,” thus avoiding responsibility and the need to explain anything that actually happened last night.

“Not really, I guess...”

I took it.

“Did you have more than me?” she asked, looking slightly surprised.

I thought back to last night and counted how many drinks I had taken on my fingers.

“Six, I think,” I said.

Kailyn scoffed and leaned back, looking slightly shocked and hurt.

“You got ahead of me? Amaryss!”



I couldn't help but laugh slightly as Kailyn shook her head and waved dismissively.

"I'll let that little quarrel pass for now," she said. "So after that you can't remember anything?"

"Not to any degree of accuracy," I replied, shaking my head.

"Hmm..." she looked off into space as she tapped her chin with one finger. "I feel like I remember you pretty much lying on Chase at one point."

My cheeks flushed and I looked down at my hands clasped in front of me. The bed shook slightly and I glanced up at Kailyn; she was bouncing up and down slightly, looking excited.

"I hit something good!" she said, clapping her hands down on her knees and leaning forward. "Does Amaryss have... *feelings?*"

"No, of course not," I shot back, sarcasm obviously laced into my tone.

"So you do have some for him?"

"What? No, that's now what I was talking about," I said quickly. "I was just making a joke in general..."

Kailyn was giving me a hard look and I swallowed nervously, my sentence trailing off into silence. We remained staring at each in other silence for a rather uncomfortably long amount of time before Kailyn suddenly hopped up and off my bed.

"I just hit something juicy here!" she said, laughing. "Amaryss likes Chase!"

"Shut up!" I hissed, glancing over at the door as I felt the tips of my ears growing hot.

"You're blushing! Ah ha!" she said, pointing at me.

I buried my head in my hands, refusing to look up at her. After a second or two, I felt Kailyn sit on the bed next to me and then her arms wrapped around me and something heavy came to rest on my shoulder. I cracked my fingers ever so slightly to turn and see that Kailyn had also laid her head upon my shoulder. Her eyes were closed, so she couldn't see me looking at her... at least I believed so.

"What are you doing?" I asked, my voice muffled by my hands.

“I’m just so proud of you...” she said quietly, finally opening her eyes and looking up at me. “My Amaryss is growing up so fast.”

“Okay, cut it out,” I said, pushing against her as she grinned and removed her arms from around me and her head from my shoulder.

Kailyn yawned deeply and got to her feet, stretching her arms above her head. A quiet groan escaped her lips as she bent backwards slightly before standing up straight and walking across the room to her duffel bag. Crouching down beside it, she began to dig through it until she finally pulled several things from within and looked them over. With a “humph” sound, she threw them back on top of the bag and walked over to her bed, falling onto it once again with a heavy sigh.

“I was going to just take a shower and start my day,” she said, “since I feel *disgusting*... but it’s too goddamn early.”

I laughed quietly, staring down at the spot on the bed directly in front of me. After a few seconds of silence, I felt something hit me from behind and I jumped, instantly spinning to look over toward Kailyn. I expected to see her standing beside me, possibly holding something, but she was still lying flat on her back on her bed, a grin lighting up her face. My face contorted in confusion and I turned around to look behind me, but all I found was the pillow to my bed.

“Huh?” I said, the only sound I could vocalize at that moment.

“That was easier than I thought...” Kailyn said, sounding somewhat distracted.

“What was?”

She suddenly shook her head and turned her gaze to me; previously she had been staring at the pillow behind me. By now, I was genuinely confused and really hoping that she would explain, because my brain seemed incapable of figuring any of this out.

“Come on, I gave you story time,” I said, turning sideways and crossing my legs in front of me, “now you owe me one.”

Kailyn sighed, but didn’t move from her position flat on her back.

“Remember what I showed you back in California?”

I stared at her for a few seconds as I thought back, trying to remember what she may have shown me. The realization that it couldn't have been more than a few days ago made me feel even worse, since nothing was coming to mind at the moment.

"Okay, clearly you don't," she said, continuing on with whatever she was about to say. "I showed you the thing with the remote... when I made it move without touching it."

"Oh yeah," I muttered, the memory suddenly coming back to me through the haze.

"Well... it's been getting... stronger," she said, "or at least I'm getting better at it. For instance: take what just happened."

"What *did* just happen?" I said, still feeling confused, but it was starting to make slightly more sense.

Just then, something hit me in the side with the same force as before, and I jumped, my muscles instantly tense as I spun to see what had done it. The only thing beside me was the pillow, although it was now resting just beside me, rather than against the headboard, like it had been before.

"Did you...?" I said, pointing to the pillow.

Kailyn didn't say anything, but it suddenly lifted up and hovered just above me for a second or two before it flew at my head and I fell back on the bed, trying to put my arms up to defend myself. I grabbed the pillow and quickly sat up, looking over at Kailyn as she laughed.

"So... you can do that?" I asked.

"It would seem so," she said, a look on her face somewhere between amusement and gloating.

"That's..." I trailed off, trying to think of the right word for it, "kind of cool, to be honest."

The relatively happy look on Kailyn's face instantly disappeared and she pushed herself into a sitting position, propping her arms out behind her to support her torso. I didn't think I had said anything wrong, but she had not reacted as well as I thought she would.

"What's the matter?" I asked, holding the pillow in my lap as I watched Kailyn.

She remained staring down at knees for a little while, not saying anything. I was about to throw the pillow at her in order to

break the stillness when she finally spoke.

“I feel like I’m losing my fucking mind.”

The look on her face when she finally turned to face me seemed strange and foreign on Kailyn. It was a mixture of fear and... something like sadness, I suppose. It was the look of someone on the verge of just breaking down. I stood up and walked around her bed, taking a seat beside her.

“Hey... talk to me,” I said quietly, looking over at her even though she wasn’t looking back at me.

She sighed, staring down at her knees again.

“It’s like... Things aren’t... the same. They don’t line up correctly... in my head.”

I stared at the side of her head, trying to make sense of what she had just said. She had been acting noticeably different lately, but I had simply chalked that up to the recent whirlwind of events. What she was saying now implied something deeper than that. Finally, she turned to look at me, the same look on her face, except now I noticed that her eyes were becoming redder and redder.

“I mean... just... What the fuck? I don’t know...” she said, her voice quiet and strained.

I leaned in and wrapped my arms around her. Kailyn returned the embrace far quicker and stronger than I had expected. I liked to think that we were decently close, but we never really acted like siblings, nor were we the kind of girls who would sit there giving each other hugs and acting very emotional. Something about Kailyn’s grip seemed almost desperate, like she was trying to hold onto something she felt was slipping away or somehow reassure herself that everything was still the same. The part that shocked me the most was when a wet sob suddenly escaped her lips. We pulled away and I saw actual tears running down her face now. She tried to wipe them away with the backs of her hands, but new ones instantly replaced them. I wanted to say something comforting and inspiring, but I was panicking; I had never been in a situation like this, and I didn’t know how to respond.

“Shit...” she said, laughing slightly, “I didn’t mean to be such a hot mess.”

“Happens to the best of us,” I said, trying to smile slightly.

Kailyn laughed quietly, wiping her eyes again and taking a deep breath before slowly letting it out.

“You’d think I had just told you I was pregnant, you know?” she said, laughing slightly as she spoke.

I grinned and nodded slowly, brushing some of my hair back out of my face.

“That isn’t what’s coming next?” I joked, feigning surprise.

Kailyn laughed and shoved me lightly, already beginning to look at least somewhat better. She got to her feet once more and stretched her arms above her head as she yawned. I watched as she crossed over to her bag and grabbed the clothes she had picked out before and moved toward the door.

“Shower?” I asked.

She nodded, opening the door and glancing back toward me.

“Be back in ten minutes or so.”

With that, she disappeared out the door, leaving me in silence. I crossed back over to my bed and fell onto it, staring up at the ceiling. It seemed to be painted with some kind of rough texture that left small bumps and ridges along it. My eyes traced some of them as I tried to avoid thinking about what was gnawing at the back of my mind. So I had spent the entire night at Chase’s... why did that seem so hard to wrap my head around? I guess it was because I had never really thought about him in any capacity like that; not that I was aware of, at least.

*“I mean... I guess I thought he had some handsome-like qualities before...”* I reasoned with myself, although I quickly wondered if it was simply my mind trying to justify my actions somehow.

Suddenly, another thought hit me: where was Lexi? Chase and she were supposed to be sharing a room, I thought, yet she wasn’t there when I woke up this morning. Instantly my mind began to race to the image of her walking into the room, seeing Chase and me, and then leaving. If that were the case, I was terrified; I felt like I could trust Kailyn to not really say or do anything, but I didn’t know Lexi as well. We had a somewhat heart-to-heart conversation last night, but it wasn’t like we had

pried incredibly deeply into each other's lives. I half-expected her to just straight-up say something about it to me the next time we saw each other. A groan escaped my lips as I put my hands over my face and shook my head.

“Shit...” I finally muttered, my voice muffled by hands.

I took them away from my face and sat up, looking around the room and rubbing my eyes tiredly.

“Just... shit.”

September 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1999

8:31:24 A.M.

Mack's house, somewhere in Arizona

Kailyn twisted the knob in the shower to the “off” position and left her hand on it for several seconds after the water had stopped. It finally slid off as she turned and pulled back the edge of the curtain, reaching for the towel she had left out for herself on top of the closed toilet lid. Once she had a hold of it, she pulled it inside the shower and quickly dried off. Wrapping the towel around herself, she pushed the curtain aside and stepped out of the shower onto the fuzzy bathmat. She took another step or two until she was standing in front of the sink and the mirror.

As she looked at her reflection, she ran one hand back through her hair, letting it stick up once she had taken her hand away. It looked like some sort of sad Mohawk with her hair sticking up somewhat in a line down the center of her head. She made a face and smoothed it back down again. With a heavy sigh, she put her hands on the edge of the sink counter and leaned forward slightly, still looking at herself in the mirror.

The others didn't seem to have noticed, but she hadn't been wearing her glasses as often lately. Even then, as she stood looking at her reflection, everything seemed to be noticeably clearer than it had been before. She tilted her head to one side for a second before tilting it the other way.

“I guess that's not such a bad deal, right...?” she muttered, tapping her fingers on the white stone sink.

She turned away for a second to reach for her clothes when

something made her stop.

“No, it isn’t.”

Kailyn froze, one hand outstretched toward the clothes on the floor behind her, her knees beginning to bend into a crouch. She slowly stood up and turned to look back at the mirror. Her reflection was there, like before, but it wasn’t a mirror image of her. The reflection was standing in a different position and appeared to be looking at her with a far different expression than the one that adorned her face; it appeared almost amused and somewhat... malevolent at the same time. Kailyn opened her mouth to speak, but no words came out.

“Speechless?” her reflection said, raising one eyebrow. “I can’t blame you, talking to such a stunning lady.”

The reflection glanced down at herself and made some kind of sound that seemed to imply approval.

“Damn girl, you should capitalize on this more.”

“This isn’t possible,” Kailyn muttered, her eyes still glued to the mirror. “It’s just in my head... for some reason.”

“You’re right there,” the reflection said, looking back up at her, “it is in your head. However, it’s not quite as simple as that sounds. This is no hallucination.”

“I’ve lost it... I’ve lost it...!” Kailyn said quietly, a laugh escaping her lips.

“You are quite perfectly sane, my dear,” she said. “Or perhaps you’re perfectly mad...”

Kailyn just shook her head and went to grab her clothes again, hoping that it would go away when she turned back.

“I’m not done, yet,” she heard from behind her, the sound of her own voice causing the hair on the back of her neck to stand on end and goose bumps to shoot down her arms. “It’s rude to just turn your back on someone when they’re talking to you.”

Kailyn spun around and moved up to the sink, leaning against it again and standing relatively close to the mirror.

“Then what do you want?” she said. “Clearly you’re some part of my mind that’s all fucked up by whatever Jared and his friends have done.”

Suddenly, her reflection’s hand shot out of the mirror and grabbed her by the throat. Kailyn’s eyes widened and she began to

gasp for air as the fingers constricted her airway. She reached up to try to pull the hand away, and felt what seemed to be an actual human hand there, albeit much colder than a normal person.

“I don’t appreciate being insulted, thank you very much,” her reflection growled, suddenly releasing her and pulling her arm back inside the mirror.

Kailyn was panting, each breath rasping on the way in and out as she grabbed her throat, the feeling of where her reflection’s fingers had been gripping her still lingering. She rubbed her neck slightly as she looked down at the sink, not feeling like she could speak at the moment. Finally, she regained her breath and her ability to speak. When she looked up at the mirror again, however, her reflection had returned to normal. She leaned in close to the mirror, moving slowly as she waited to make sure it wouldn’t attack her again. Red lines ran across the skin on her neck, outlining where fingers had wrapped around it moments ago.

“So it was real...” she whispered, backing away from the mirror. “What the fuck...?”

Kailyn quickly slipped out of the towel and into her clothes, hanging the towel up on a rack set into the wall behind her. She turned around and stood in front of the sink for a moment, combing her hair with her fingers. After she was satisfied, she took a step back and was about to turn and walk away when her reflection suddenly snapped her fingers and pointed at her, winking one eye as she did. Kailyn turned her head away, ignoring it as she yanked the door to the bathroom open and walked out.

September 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1999

12:45:32 P.M.

Mack’s House, somewhere in Arizona

I hadn’t really seen Kailyn all morning since she had left to take a shower. She had only returned to our room momentarily to drop her old clothes off before immediately disappearing back out the door for several hours. Shortly after she had left, I had fallen asleep on my bed; it would seem I hadn’t slept so well last night,



after all. After I had awoken from my three-hour nap, I had taken a quick shower, throwing on the other pair of jeans I had and a black T-shirt.

I could feel my hair across my upper back, still one large, semi-wet mass; I had brushed it, although I had no way to dry it, so it still looked somewhat ragged. The sound of voices echoing down the main hallway could be heard from the top of the stairs near the bedrooms as I began to make my way down them, turning right at the bottom. My bare feet slid across the wood floor slightly as I walked and I had to resist the urge to start “skating.”

When I reached the kitchen, I found most of our group was already there. Lexi was standing at the stove beside Shawn as they appeared to be bickering, rather good-naturedly, about something. A spatula was in her right hand, so I assumed it had something to do with food. Mack was standing off to the side of the island, an amused expression on his face. Finally, I saw Chase sitting on one of the bar stools, his elbows resting on the counter as he watched the two at the stove. He glanced over when I entered and I saw a quick spark of something in his eyes before he flashed a smile at me and looked back over at the other two. An awkward half-smile formed on my lips, but I quickly tried to repress it, moving across the room and taking a seat on the stool next to him.

“Just let me— I got this!” Lexi said, smacking Shawn’s hand away.

“I would if you actually seemed to know what you were doing!” he shot back, still trying to reach for something.

“I can at least cook eggs, okay?” she said, jabbing the spatula at him.

“Why don’t you use *this*,” he said, suddenly swiping it from her hands, “for the food, rather than brandishing it at me like a weapon.”

“Give it!” she shrieked, reaching for the plastic utensil, but he simply held it over his head, a decent amount out of her reach. “Oh, come on!”

I found myself grinning and had to suppress a laugh as Lexi and Shawn began to move about the room while he played “keep away” with the spatula. It seemed as if cooking was momentarily forgotten.

“I just hope the food doesn’t get ruined because of this,” I said, glancing over at Chase.

“I’m sure someone will swoop in at the last second to save the day,” he said, shrugging. “Plus I think they barely used any...”

I nodded and leaned forward to avoid being backhanded by Shawn as he moved away from Lexi, who was still jumping and reaching for the spatula.

“You gotta lend it to them: they’re quite entertaining,” Chase remarked, still looking over at the terrible twosome.

I nodded as he turned to look back in my general direction. After a second or two, I felt something bump into my right leg and I looked down. It only took a moment to realize that it was Chase; he had nudged the side of my leg with his. I looked up at him, noticing that he had a smile somewhere between “nervous” and “happy” on his face.

“How you doing, there?” he asked.

Before I could think, a genuine, almost contented smile spread across my lips as I looked back at him.

“Good,” I said quietly.

He nodded slightly, the nervousness beginning to fade from his expression.

“I took an extra nap this morning, which felt great,” I continued, trying to create something like a conversation.

“I wish I could have,” he replied, laughing. “Sun was too bright.”

I nodded, the headache seemingly building up behind my eyes allowing me to sympathize with him. Just then, someone must have won the war between Shawn and Lexi, because I heard a loud bang and a triumphant shout. Turning to look off to the right, I saw Shawn holding the spatula, still, with Lexi on the ground near his feet.

“An admirable foe, I must admit,” he said, stepping over her, “but now I must return to my original task.”

Lexi made a face at him as she got to her feet and shuffled across the room, falling onto the bar stool next to mine. I looked over at her as her eyes turned toward me, looking rather bloodshot.

“Not a good morning, I take it,” I commented.

“You can fucking say that again...” she muttered, closing

her eyes and rubbing them the heels of her hands.

I just grinned as I turned to look back at Shawn, who had now resumed whatever cooking he and Lexi had started before I had arrived and witnessed their argument. After five more minutes or so, he finished and was beginning to dish out the food onto plates for everyone. It turns out he had been making eggs for breakfast sandwiches, which consisted of the eggs and a slice of cheese on an English muffin. It wasn't anything fancy, but it tasted amazing to me in my still-mildly-feeling-terrible state. Once we had all finished and were dropping the plates off in the sink, it dawned on me that some people were still missing from our party... namely Kailyn.

"Hey, Lexi," I said, putting a hand on her shoulder to get her attention. "Have you seen Kailyn this morning?"

"Um... I think I might have seen her walking by at some point... but I don't really remember when or where she was going," she replied, shrugging. "Why?"

"Because she just kinda disappeared a while ago and I was wondering if she had run off or something, you know," I said and laughed, but quickly glanced back to make sure that Mack wasn't too close and hadn't heard me.

"Well, I tell you what," Lexi said, leaning in close to me and dropping her voice to a whisper, "if she did without me, I'm going to be pretty damn pissed."

One corner of my mouth pulled back into a smirk as Lexi turned and started back down the hallway to the front of the house. I turned back to see if Chase was still in the kitchen, but the only person who remained was Mack, who was just putting the last of the recently-cleaned dishes on a rack beside the sink. He wiped his hands with the towel he was using and turned around, a grin beginning to spread across face. I sensed he was about to try to start a conversation, so I tried to begin moving out of the room, but it was already too late.

"Sometimes it's still hard to believe how much time has gone by," he began, sighing and leaning against the counter beside him. "I heard so much about you from Jared... years ago now."

"Did you?" I asked, trying not to seem too impolite, even though I had absolutely no desire to engage in conversation with

him.

Mack nodded, shoving his left hand in his pocket.

“He spoke very highly of you,” he continued. “You were like his first miracle story... He was excited over every little detail, every little triumph or event.”

He laughed as I tried to smile slightly, this information about Jared making me feel somewhat uneasy, for whatever reason.

“You know, he really reminded me of someone with their first kid...”

He instantly stopped what he was saying as the feeling of unease hit me completely. It wasn't like I had thought Jared was my actual father this whole time; I had known better. We didn't share a last name or look anything alike. He didn't make any effort to create that illusion, either. However, hearing from Mack about how he apparently spoke of me almost as a daughter instantly changed my idea of him. Somehow, I had the feeling that he wasn't observing all these things like an excited parent, but more like a scientist watching a bug under a lens.

The conversation with Mack had come to a stop, it seemed, but I couldn't find a smooth way to exit it. Finally, I cleared my throat and shifted my weight on my feet slightly, causing Mack to jump.

“I never would have pegged him for that kind of person,” I replied, beginning to turn away.

“Yeah, me neither...”

I turned and began walking toward the doors to the back patio area. The instant I stepped through them, the heat hit me. This happened almost every time I stepped outside here, but it still surprised me slightly. I closed the sliding door behind me and began to walk across the patio, moving without really any thought or attention. I ended up walking past the edge of the tiled area and moving into the sandy area beyond.

After a minute or two of aimless wandering, I realized that I was walking up an incline. I glanced around and found that I was at the base of what was either a small hill or a sand dune. Sparse, dry vegetation littered the side of it, but nothing seemed to be truly growing or surviving. Something compelled me to keep moving

up the side of whatever I was on, so I kept going. As I drew nearer to the top, I saw something up ahead. At first I thought it was just some sort of large rock, but it quickly began to take on more defined features. In fact, it was partially a large rock, but someone was sitting on top of it.

“What brings you out here?” I called as I drew within twenty feet or so.

Maya jumped and whipped her head around to look at me. I couldn’t see her eyes behind a pair of sunglasses, but I could tell that she was surprised to see me.

“Usually no one else comes out here,” she replied, watching me as I drew up beside the rock and stopped, resting my hands on my hips.

“Well, this was kind of an accident,” I replied, shrugging.

“You just sort of started walking and... wound up here?” she asked.

“Looks that way.”

She made a “huh” sound, but moved over slightly so there was more room beside her. I took a seat and let out a sigh, running my hands back through my hair. Now that I was closer, I realized that Maya’s sunglasses were actually over her regular glasses, which I imagined was not incredibly comfortable.

“So this begs the question: what are *you* doing way out here?” I asked.

She sighed and looked around the open scenery before us for a second or two.

“Just kind of... thinking, I guess,” she said. “It’s not as stuffy here and there’s no one around to distract you... usually.”

“Sorry to ruin your moment of tranquility, then,” I said.

We laughed and then fell silent yet again. I had already gathered that Maya wasn’t much for words, but then again, I wasn’t either. After another period of silence, a thought suddenly popped into my head and I turned toward her again.

“Do you like it here?” I asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Do you like it here... with Mack... in this house?”

Her brow furrowed slightly as she seemed to think about it. Finally, she shrugged.

“I haven’t really known anything else,” she said, looking over at me again. “So I guess I don’t have anything to compare it to.”

“You’ve never wondered what the rest of the world is like out there?” I prodded, leaning forward so my elbows were resting on my knees.

“I mean... yeah, I guess,” she said, shrugging. “I just...”

She fell silent again, seemingly trying to think of what to say next. Finally, she sighed and looked over at me.

“Can I show you something?”

I looked at her questioningly.

“Depends on what that ‘something’ is I suppose,” I replied.

She laughed quietly, pushing her glasses back up slightly.

“Nothing in the way that you seem to be afraid of.”

September 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1999

2:30:28 P.M.

Mack’s estate, somewhere in Arizona

Maya stopped beside an unmarked, grey door on the outside edge of the warehouse just beside Mack’s house. She glanced around and then made sure that I was right behind her. Before heading over here, she had told me that I wasn’t allowed to speak or make any sounds, since we were technically breaking in; those had been her words, almost exactly. Once she seemed satisfied that no one else was around, she gripped the handle on the door.

“We have only a few seconds once I turn this,” she said.

I nodded and before I could brace myself, she had turned the handle and yanked the door open. She slipped inside and I slid through the small crack she had left. Maya instantly pulled the door shut and we stood completely still and silent for a few moments before she let out a heavy sigh and took her hand off the door. With a small wave, she motioned for me to follow her deeper into the building.

Something about this place was already making me uneasy. It felt... menacing, almost. We moved farther into the relatively

dark building until we came upon another door. Maya rested her hand on the handle and looked back at me.

“So I was thinking about what you asked...” she said quietly, “and this is why I hate this place.”

She opened the door and beckoned for me to enter. I glanced at her and cautiously took a step or two forward. The room beyond wasn’t exactly what I expected. Rows of what seemed to be lab benches stretched along the length of the room with various pieces of equipment strewn about them. I didn’t know what any of it was for, but it reminded me greatly of the lab in California. I glanced back toward Maya, who was beginning to step into the room, herself.

“Were you here... before?” I asked quietly.

She nodded, crossing her arms and looking around the room.

“This is where I spent... quite a lot of my childhood,” she said.

Now it was all beginning to make sense. I had pretty much already figured out that Mack was doing similar things as Jared, and I could only have assumed that Maya and Shawn were part of that, but somehow it just seemed much more real now. Now that one question had been answered, it only raised another.

“What... what did he do?” I asked, immediately wishing that I hadn’t asked. “I’m sorry, you don’t have to—”

“It’s fine,” Maya interrupted, “I kind of expected that to come next, actually.”

I jammed my hands in my pockets and glanced around the room once again. The lights seemed to be set to imply that the lab area was closed for now, but there was just enough to see.

“I’m not entirely sure,” she finally said. “I mean... I’ve noticed some things that seem... different than they used to. I’m not shooting fire out of my hands or anything, though.”

I laughed quietly at that, looking down at my feet for a second before looking back up at her.

“Different how?”

“Like... well, I’d show you, but it’s a little too dark in here for me to do it.”

“It’s not that dark...” I said, looking around again.

Maya just let out a short laugh.

“I can barely see shit.”

“Oh... so I guess it’s just me then...”

I was quickly thankful that it was actually dark in the room because I felt my cheeks and the tips of my ears growing hot.

“So that’s yours, huh?” Maya asked. “Night vision?”

“Not entirely,” I replied. “Just part of the package, I suppose.”

“What’s the full package?”

“I’d show you... but I don’t know how, and it’s too dark for you,” I said.

I saw Maya smirk slightly before trying to walk forward, uncrossing her arms and holding them out in front of her slightly in order to feel for anything in her way. Turning around, I noticed a few rather solid-looking doors across the room, so I began to walk toward them, my curiosity instantly piqued.

“*Like a cat,*” I thought in my head and mentally slapped myself.

Upon reaching one of the doors, I grabbed the handle and tried pulling on it, but it was locked. I frowned slightly and moved on to the next one, which turned out to also be locked. I tried the last two in the row and found them all to be locked. With a sigh I turned around to see Maya standing at the end of the row of lab benches, her right hand firmly clutching onto the edge of it.

“There was a place sort of like this where we came from just before here,” I said, causing her to jump slightly in surprise. “Chase and I broke into it one night and stole some information from one of their... computers, I suppose.”

I saw Maya smirk slightly, but she quickly tried to hide it, obviously just remembering that I could actually see her.

“It was probably a computer, yes,” she said. “What kind of information?”

“A list of everyone like us,” I said, walking back toward her. “All of the people Jared and his friends have experimented on in some way.”

“Were Shawn and I on there?”

“I don’t remember; we didn’t look at the list that closely,” I replied, stopping right near Maya.



She nodded and tried to look in my general direction, which made me grin. Suddenly, I slipped around to the side, moving my feet quickly while remaining mostly on my toes so that I barely made a sound. I quickly circled around one lab bench and came up behind Maya, tapping her on the shoulder. With a rather loud shout, she jumped and spun halfway around, looking somewhat in my direction as I grinned.

“That was too easy,” I said.

“You just try that when I can see,” she shot back. “You wouldn’t be able to get close.”

“Oh?”

“Come on, you’ve shown off your special ‘talents’ enough.”

With that, we moved back to the door we had entered from and quickly made our way outside. Once we had slipped out of the external door, I had to almost close my eyes against the harsh sunlight. I put one hand up to try to protect them, which prompted Maya to laugh.

“Payback is so sweet,” she said.

“Shut up,” I replied, blinking rapidly as my vision adjusted to the harsh afternoon sun.

Once everything was back to normal, Maya and I began to walk away from the building, although we didn’t go in any specific direction. After we had taken ten steps or so, she suddenly stopped and picked something up off the ground. She tossed it into the air before catching it again and holding it out for me to see: it was just a small rock.

“Bet you I can throw this off the side of the building and ring it off that light above the door,” she said.

I glanced back toward the building as I pondered her challenge. After a second or two I turned back to her.

“Try it.”

Maya grinned and, without hesitation, turned and threw the small rock. It ricocheted off the metal side of the building with a quiet ding before hitting the light above the door and shattering the bulb. We both jumped slightly and quickly ran away from the scene of the crime. Once we had put what seemed to be a safe distance between us and the broken bulb, we came to a stop and I

was finally able to take stock of what Maya had just done.

“That was... either incredibly lucky... or incredibly impressive,” I said.

“Oh, it wasn’t luck,” she said, quickly crouching down and picking up two more rocks and handing one to me. “Throw this into the air away from you.”

I gave her a skeptical look but threw the rock into the air with an underhand toss. Instantly, Maya loosed the rock from her hand and it hit the other out of the air precisely at the top of its curve. The look on my face must have conveyed my impressed shock as I turned to look at her again, because she grinned slightly.

“I noticed that I kind of had... like, heightened reflexes, I guess,” she said. “I was able to see things better somehow, too. Like, I can kind of just focus and everything seems to be slow and under control for me.”

“Well, I’m not sure how much better you can ‘see’ things, still,” I said, gesturing to her glasses.

She gave me a look as her shoulders slouched slightly and I laughed.

“Don’t you even start with me.”

After my laughter had died down and we stood there in silence for a moment or two, I cleared my throat and looked back over at her.

“So where does your position stand on this place?”

Maya remained silent for another second or two before speaking up again.

“If I could get away from here, I would, no question.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” I said, “because here’s a one-time offer for you.”

She looked over at me, her brow furrowed in confusion.

“There’s a plan afoot to escape at some point in the very near future, and I wanted to see if you were in on it.”

Maya’s eyes widened slightly in surprise, but she also seemed rather happy.

“What about Shawn?”

“I haven’t had a chance to ask him, but he’s also on our list.”

She nodded slowly as a grin spread across her lips and she

looked back up at me.

“When are we busting out of this joint?”

# 11

## In the Dead of Night

September 13<sup>th</sup>, 1999

12:34:31 A.M.

Mack's house, somewhere in Arizona

I cracked one eye open to look at the clock on the nightstand between Kailyn's bed and mine. The glowing numbers told me that it was almost time, so I opened my eyes completely and sat up, throwing my sheets aside. I quickly slipped out of my shorts and old, ratty T-shirt I used to sleep in and into jeans and a black T-shirt. After shoving my pajamas into my duffel bag, I picked it up and slung the strap across my shoulders. Turning around, I slid across the floor in my socks to Kailyn's bed. I was just about to reach down and wake her up when I noticed that the bed was empty. My face instantly contorted in confusion as I froze where I was, hands partially outstretched toward where she should have been.

"Kailyn?" I whispered, looking around the room.

I didn't see any sign of her, but her bag was still on the floor, so I figured that she hadn't taken off early for some reason. Before investigating any further, I grabbed my shoes and slid across to the door, silently opening it and slipping into the hallway. Just as I was leaving my room, I saw Lexi and Chase exiting theirs. Lexi saw me and nodded as Chase closed the door behind them. They moved quickly but silently down the hall to me and stopped.

"Where's Kailyn?" Lexi whispered.

"I don't know. I woke up a minute or two ago and just found out that she's gone," I replied.

"Gone? Gone where?" Chase asked.

"I don't know!" I hissed, raising my hands above my head in a defeated, confused gesture. "All of her stuff is still here, so I assume she didn't take off without us."

Just then, a loud bang came from downstairs, followed by the sound of breaking glass and a man's voice shouting. We all exchanged looks before quickly moving down the stairs and

leaning over the banister to see down the hallway. I saw Mack on the ground in front of the refrigerator, beginning to push himself back into a sitting position. Just then, someone appeared in front of him and stood over him, holding one hand out toward his head, it seemed. Mack began to make choked sounds as he grabbed at his neck, but I couldn't see anything actually touching him. Suddenly, he let out a sound somewhere between a cough and a choke as blood began to pool from between his lips. The next moment, he pitched sideways and hit the floor with a loud thud.

My heart was pounding as I finally turned my attention to the figure before him. It only took a second for me to realize who it was, and my blood instantly turned cold.

“Kailyn?!”

September 12<sup>th</sup>, 1999

11:55:28 P.M.

Mack's house, somewhere in Arizona

Kailyn stood before the mirror in the bathroom, her hands firmly placed against the edge of the countertop surrounding the sink. Her fingers clenched and unclenched into fist-like shapes in a steady pattern. Her breathing was heavy and labored, almost like she was exerting some kind of great physical force. Sweat rolled down the sides of her face and the back of her neck as she stared down into the sink. Slowly, and seemingly with great deliberation, she raised her head until she was looking at her reflection in the mirror. Her eyes were red and bloodshot, like she hadn't slept, but they also seemed to contain something like raw anger.

She clenched her teeth, closing her eyes tightly for a second before opening them and looking back up at her reflection. Almost instantly, she tilted her head back and staggered a step or two away from the sink, her hands flying to her face and covering her eyes. Her mouth opened in a silent scream as she ran her hands up her face and then back through her hair, pressing them firmly against her skull as she did. Finally, she let go of her head and slowly lowered it until she was looking at the mirror again, except it wasn't her reflection in it anymore. Jared appeared to be standing

there, silently watching her. She took a few steps forward until she was pressed up against the counter to the sink, only a foot or so away from the image of Jared in the mirror.

“You... you did this...” she growled, raising one finger to point at him. “You did this... You did this!”

Without warning, she slammed her fist into the glass, causing it to crack into a hundred different shards, but the pieces didn't fall out of the frame. One hundred different images of herself stared back from the various shards, Jared's image now gone. One of the shards suddenly broke loose from the rest and floated through the air, hovering before her. Kailyn plucked it from the air, turning it over a few times as she seemed to ponder it. Finally, she gripped it securely and looked back up at the broken mirror.

“I'm gonna kill him.”

Kailyn turned toward the door and threw it open, walking calmly out of the room, carefully hiding the broken shard of glass behind her back under the waistband of her shorts, covering it with her shirt. She could feel the edges of it digging into her skin slightly, but she didn't think it was severe enough to draw blood. Moving silently past the first two bedrooms in the hall, she came to a stop at the one just before the corner which led down to the rooms she, Amaryss, Lexi, and Chase occupied. She pressed her ear against the door and listened closely for a second or two, but heard nothing. With slow, careful motions, she wrapped her hand around the doorknob and twisted, slowly pushing the door open as she reached for the shard of glass with her other hand.

The room was dark and silent, so she quickly slipped inside and closed the door, careful to make almost no sound. Once she was in, she slid the shard from under her waistband, shivering slightly at the feeling of the cold glass sliding against her skin. She gripped it firmly in her right hand as she crept across the room to where she could just make out the outline of the bed. Once she reached it, she leaned forward slightly to get a better look at it. With a frown, she stood up straight, letting the arm holding the shard fall to her side; the bed was empty.

She hid the glass once more and silently slipped back out of the room and into the hallway. After closing the door, she resisted

the urge to let out a growl of frustration, but her hands did clench into tight fists, her knuckles turning white.

“Where did you go...?” she breathed, looking down the hallway ahead of her and to the right.

Just then, she heard a bang from downstairs, seemingly in the kitchen area. Kailyn quickly moved down the hall and slunk down the stairs, turning to look down the hallway to the kitchen once she had reached the bottom. The lights were on at the end of the hallway and she could hear hushed voices. They may have been quiet, but whoever was speaking seemed to be in a rather heated argument. Kailyn silently walked down the hallway, drawing closer and closer to the voices, her hand itching to reach for the jagged shard of glass behind her back, but she resisted the urge. The moment had to be absolutely right.

Stopping just before she reached the kitchen, Kailyn pressed her back up against the wall and listened intently to what the two voices were saying.

“I designed this project from the ground up,” one of them, probably Jared, hissed. “I’ve been driving it since day one. *Everything* is under my control!”

Just then, Kailyn seized the moment to step into the doorway of the room, instantly taking stock of Jared and Mack standing in the middle of the kitchen, facing each other on the opposite side of the island, both of them with rather intense, angry expressions on their faces.

“That’s where you’re wrong.”

The two men jumped in surprise, instantly whirling around to see who had spoken. Kailyn remained where she was, a smirk pulling back one corner of her lips as she took in their surprised, helpless expressions.

“You’ve lost control... and I’m making sure of that.”

Just then, Kailyn reached behind her, grabbing the shard of glass from under her waistband and pulling it out in one swift motion; she could feel one edge of it cut into her skin, but it was the least of her concerns at that moment. She ran forward before Jared had a chance to realize what was happening, brandishing the shard like a bad version of a murderer in a film. Everything seemed to be in slow motion as she swung the knife-like shard, but

Jared seemed to have collected himself enough to move out of the way at the last second. The shard grazed his right arm, drawing blood but not inflicting any serious injury. Kailyn staggered slightly since she had thrown most of her weight into the swing, causing her to pitch forward as the blow missed. She managed to recover somewhat quickly and spun to her right. Jared was backing away from her, as was Mack.

With a growl, Kailyn launched forward toward them, swinging the shard of glass in an attempt to hit Jared. At the last second she registered something else in his hand, and the next second she felt the weight disappear from her right hand. Tiny pieces of glass rained down across the island and the floor in front of her as Jared tightly gripped the frying pan he had swung just in time to smash the shard in her hand. It took Kailyn a second to register what had happened, which gave enough time for Jared to begin to swing at her. She tossed the part of the shard still in her hand aside and leaned backwards, the pan flying just past her. Jared staggered forward slightly and Kailyn saw her opportunity.

Without wasting a beat, she lunged forward and wrapped both hands around his neck. Jared's eyes grew wide at the surprise of Kailyn's iron grip, but he quickly tried to fight back. He swung the pan and managed to hit her in the side, but it was not strong enough to cause her to lessen her grip. She could tell his motions were becoming more and more desperate as a grin began to spread across her lips. Her maniacal joy was short-lived, however, when something smashed into the side of her head. Spots of black and blue blossomed before her eyes as she involuntarily let go of Jared and staggered against the island. Mack's general shape and appearance were just barely visible through the spots she was seeing; he had obviously hit her with something, but she had no idea what it could have been.

A second later, Kailyn realized that Mack was coming at her again with whatever weapon he had used previously. Without thinking, she raised one hand in front of her; Mack seemed to falter slightly and then trip and become off-balance. As he staggered off to the side, Kailyn grit her teeth and shut her eyes tightly for a second or two. When she reopened them, she found that the world seemed slightly clearer and it was easier to think. Mack was



holding what seemed to be a metal baseball bat, which he was using almost like a cane at the moment to recover from his failed swing a moment ago.

“How in the hell...?” he said, looking over at Kailyn with wide eyes.

She looked back at him for a few more seconds before quickly raising her left hand. The baseball bat flew from under Mack and through the air, ending up in Kailyn’s hand as Mack pitched forward and fell onto the floor. Kailyn transferred the bat into her right hand as Mack began to rise off the floor, but not of his own volition. It looked almost like some invisible puppet master was pulling him up by a set of strings. She began to walk toward him as he stared down at her with a look of surprise on his face.

“Now you see what you... *people* have done,” Kailyn spat.

Suddenly, she raised the bat and swung it at him, clocking him squarely in the right side of the head. The bat resonated violently in her hands, stinging them slightly. She kept a firm grip on it, though, and took several more swings at him. When she had finished, most of his face was covered in dark purple bruises while blood ran from one of his lips and out of his nose. With a flick of her hand, Mack flew across the room and crashed into the refrigerator, falling to the floor as a few mugs slid off the top and smashed on the floor. He managed to let out a strangled cry of pain, but she guessed that speaking would be difficult for him.

Kailyn maneuvered around the island and stood before Mack, holding her free hand out toward him, as if she were gripping his neck. He began to make choked sounds as he grasped at the invisible hands cutting off his air supply. After a few more seconds, Kailyn increased her pressure for an instant before releasing him. He let out a choked coughing sound before his eyes rolled back into his head and he fell sideways, blood coming from between his lips and spraying onto the floor before him. She stood over him for another second or two, breathing heavily as she stared down at the crumpled heap that was Mack. Just before she turned away, a new voice broke through the haze that seemed to have settled over her, causing her to instantly snap back to reality.

“Kailyn?!”

It could only be one person. She knew the voice exactly.  
“Amaryss...”

September 12<sup>th</sup>, 1999

11:45:23 P.M.

Mack’s house, somewhere in Arizona

Jared set his glass down with more force than he had anticipated, although he was still at no risk of shattering it. The golden amber liquid inside swished violently and came precariously close to spilling over the top, but just managed to remain safely within the glass walls. Mack was standing across the island from him, holding his glass in a cradle created by the fingers of his right hand.

“Oh, come off it!” Jared said, waving dismissively toward Mack. “You wouldn’t know two shits about the level of work we’re getting done.”

“So you’re intentionally keeping me out of the loop, then?” he shot back, raising one eyebrow.

“No, it’s more like by accident. There’s a lot of people... a lot of links in the chain. Sometimes we miss one.”

Mack just rolled his eyes and took another sip of his drink.

“Well, while we’re on the topic, why don’t you fill me in on just what exactly has been going on with the other ‘links,’” he jeered. “I noticed you brought four kids with you... I doubt you’re just babysitting them for friends.”

“No, I’m not,” Jared said, taking a drink from his glass, the whiskey burning his throat slightly. “They’re part of the experiments.”

“Well, then why don’t you start with them?”

He sighed and placed his drink back on the counter, far more gently than the last time. The bar stool let out a groaning sound as Jared dragged it back away from the island. A sigh escaped his lips as he took a seat and rubbed his eyes with one hand.

“So you’ve heard about Amaryss before,” he began, looking over at Mack.

“A long time ago, when you didn’t know if anything was even working.”

“Yes, well, it is,” Jared said. “Around the age of twelve or so she seemed to experience a sudden surge in physical abilities: she seemed to become stronger, her reflexes became faster... Hell, that girl does practically nothing but eat and sit around all day and she has the physical prowess of a professional athlete!”

Mack grinned and took another sip from his glass.

“Kailyn, on the other hand...” Jared began, “I don’t know what, if any, effects have taken hold.”

“Which project is she a part of?”

“She is one of the first candidates in the program to increase the strength of her mental processes. The end goal is to try to boost the individual’s mental abilities to the point of near-telepathy, however, Kailyn has not shown any particular signs of this occurring. To be honest, I’m a little worried about the end result for her.”

“Why’s that?”

“Previous attempts at this project have resulted in extreme mental breakdowns of the individuals,” Jared explained. “Some experienced brain hemorrhaging, others displayed symptoms almost on a schizophrenic level. We understood that there was the potential for these side effects when dealing with the mind, but we didn’t expect them to be as severe or as frequent as they were. However, we have managed to refine the process so it is a little safer for the subjects... unfortunately this came around after the process with Kailyn began.”

“So there are more subjects you’re testing this ‘safer’ version out on right now?” Mack asked.

“Yeah, there’s one particularly promising one over in Italy right now. We managed to get ahold of him directly from the parents in New York. After running the procedure, we set him up with a pair of ‘foster parents’ to keep track of him, but they’ve reported no signs of anything, yet,” Jared said rather dismissively, as if the information were not that important to him.

“So you’re worried that Kailyn could suffer from some sort of complete mental breakdown, like the others,” Mack supplied, raising one eyebrow at Jared.

“There’s certainly a possibility of such an event,” he replied, shrugging. “I don’t know of a way to predict such things, unfortunately.”

Mack just shook his head as Jared clenched his jaw and stared right at him.

“What’s that about?”

“You’ve got all of these experiments running, but you’re not really heavily involved in many of them...”

After a few moments of silence, Mack continued when it became apparent Jared was not going to say anything.

“Aren’t you worried that you’re spreading yourself a little thin?”

“Are you saying that I don’t know what’s going on with my own experiments?” Jared asked quietly, but his voice was already beginning to raise in volume. “I should remind you that I was one of the original members who designed all of this!”

Now Mack’s jaw was set as he remained silent, glaring back at Jared.

“I’ve known you for years, Mack,” he continued, “but do you think you can just waltz in here and tell me that I’m doing my own project wrong?”

“I’m just saying that with such a large operation, having only one man as the primary head might lead to some loss of attention and control...”

“I designed this project from the ground up,” Jared hissed, getting off the bar stool and moving up against the island’s countertop slightly. “I’ve been driving it since day one. *Everything* is under my control!”

Mack opened his mouth to retort, taking a step forward, but he was cut off before he could speak.

“That’s where you’re wrong.”

Both of them jumped in surprise as they whirled to face the voice that had suddenly come from the doorway leading to the hallway which cut through the center of the house. It took Jared a second or two to recognize that the figure standing before them was Kailyn, a smirk beginning to pull at the corner of her lips.

“You’ve lost control... and I’m making sure of that.”

September 13<sup>th</sup>, 1999

12:40:49 A.M.

Mack's house, somewhere in Arizona

Kailyn appeared to freeze for an instant after I called her name, staring blankly ahead. Finally, I saw her lips move and she turned to look in my direction. The expression on her face seemed to convey confusion as I moved around the end of the banister and stood in the middle of the hallway to the back part of the house.

“What happened?” I asked, glancing down at Mack.

I couldn't tell if he was dead or just unconscious, but he didn't look good either way.

Kailyn opened her mouth to speak, but she wasn't able to because something bashed her over the head from behind and she was sent forward into the fridge. She careened off it and fell to the floor, grasping for some kind of handhold, but finding none. The next second, Jared appeared from behind the wall, a heavy pan held tightly in his hands. He glanced down at Kailyn for a second before turning to look back toward me.

“Amaryss, you came just in time,” he said. “Kailyn's acting unstable. She tried to kill me and Mack already.”

I just stared at him, my face communicating the level of disbelief that I felt... or at least I thought it did; it wasn't like I could actually see how I looked. Just then, he seemed to notice the duffel bag slung across my shoulders and the shoes in my hand and his face creased in confusion.

“What are those things for, Amaryss?”

Before I could properly think about what I was doing, I dropped my shoes and burst forward, grabbing the pan and wrenching it from Jared's hands before he could even react. The heel of my hand drove firmly into his chest and he staggered backwards, gasping for air as his eyes grew wide. Before he could say or do anything else, I leapt forward and hit him upside the head with the pan. His body fell to the floor with a loud thud as I remained where I was, my feet spread slightly and the pan held tightly in my right hand. My heart was pounding as I looked down at Jared's unconscious form, each pulse resonating firmly in my

ears.

After a second or two, I snapped out of my reverie and turned around, moving around the island to check on Kailyn. She was beginning to push herself to her feet as I appeared, one hand pressed against the back of her head.

“Fucker got me good,” she remarked with a grimace.

Once she was back on her feet, she groaned and stretched slightly, wincing every time she had to move her head.

“What the hell was going on in here?” I demanded, looking around at the scene in the kitchen.

Tiny shards of what seemed to be broken glass were scattered across the room while one or two of the bar stools were on their sides on the floor. Mack was against the refrigerator to my right, possibly alive and possibly dead, and Jared was unconscious to my left.

“Did you put him down?” Kailyn asked, ignoring me and pointing toward Jared.

“He’s unconscious, I think,” I said.

“Now’s the chance,” she said, looking around the room and moving toward the island.

“For what, Kailyn?” I asked more forcefully, moving after her. “I woke up and you were just gone, and then I come down here and find... whatever the hell this is. What is going on?”

Kailyn stopped a little ways along the back side of the island and glanced back at me.

“We wanted Jared out of the way, right?” she said. “This is our chance, while he can’t do anything about it.”

Suddenly, everything before me became clear. This was all Kailyn’s doing. She had somehow beaten Mack into a bloody pulp, and was going to do the same to Jared, but I had distracted her. Now she wanted to finish what I presumed that she had come here to do: kill Jared. I glanced down at his body once again, my heart rate beginning to accelerate. Even though I was not particularly fond of Jared in any capacity, and we had just been about to run away from him in the middle of the night, killing him did not seem like the entirely correct response to me. Kailyn suddenly let out a cry of success and my head quickly snapped up to look at her; she was now holding a rather large knife, which she

had just pulled from a block on the counter beside the stove.

“Kailyn, stop.”

She didn’t seem to hear me as she began to move around the island toward Jared, adjusting her grip on the knife as she did.

“Kailyn, stop!”

That got her attention. She instantly froze and looked over at me, a look I couldn’t read on her face.

“I get wanting to escape and get away from all of this...” I said, moving toward Jared and her around the opposite side of the island, “but *murder*... It just doesn’t feel right.”

Kailyn remained silent for a few seconds as I drew closer to Jared’s body, the sweat on my palms causing the pan to feel slippery as my fingers clenched around the metal handle.

“Are you saying... that we should just... *let him go*?!” she said, anger and disbelief beginning to creep into her voice.

“We can get far away from here before he even wakes up,” I tried to reason with her. “By the time he’s up and thinking straight again, we could probably have a good several-hour head start.”

“After which he would come at us with all of his buddies,” she snapped back at me. “In case you didn’t notice, we’re kind of low on friends and high on enemies at this point.”

“But that would just make it harder for them!” I argued. “We’re a small group in a vast world... It’s like trying to find a needle in a haystack.”

Kailyn remained silent, her eyes still locked on me as her chest rose and fell rather quickly. Finally, she took a deep breath and began speaking very quietly.

“You know perfectly well what he’s done... to me, to you, to all of us... He took us, and decided he wanted to play God. Even though you don’t want to admit it, you know he did *something* to you.”

I remained silent, my jaw firmly set as I tried to restrain myself from saying or doing anything.

“Don’t think other people don’t notice,” she continued. “No one just sits around like you do and looks like *that*.”

She seemed to gesture to all of me, but I already knew what she was talking about. There was no way I should have been able

to move that fast or hit that hard a moment ago against Jared with the amount of lounging around that I did.

“So after all that... after *all* that he’s done to make sure you didn’t get to experience the life you should have had... you want to keep him *alive?!?*”

My teeth ground together slightly as I inhaled through my nose in an attempt to calm myself before speaking again.

“I am not a murderer.”

Kailyn nodded slowly, still looking right at me.

“Well... then, Amaryss, after I’ve known you all these years... I’m sorry.”

With that, she leapt over Jared, knife raised, and came after me.

Instinctually, my right hand flew up in front of me and I heard the sound of metal hitting against metal the second before I felt a sharp pain appear in my upper right arm. Kailyn staggered to my right slightly as I felt the pan vibrating harshly in my hand; apparently I had used it to deflect her knife. I took the moment I had while she was trying to steady herself to glance at my arm. A red line ran across the outside part of my upper arm, blood already beginning to leak out of the wound. The pain was noticeable, but not unbearable, so I was able to kind of block it out for the moment.

I looked back up a second before Kailyn swung the knife in my direction once again, causing me to hop backward to miss it. The blade came inches from my chest, but I could feel the breeze generated by the swing. I quickly swung the pan out to the right and back toward Kailyn in a wide arc. The flat bottom of the pan struck Kailyn in the side of the head, much like how I had hit Jared. She reeled to the side as I tried to maintain my grip on the vibrating handle. The knife fell from Kailyn’s hand and clattered across the floor. I was about to reach for it when it suddenly seemed to float off the floor and point toward me. To say I was surprised would have been a rather basic description of how I felt in that moment; it was in that very moment that I suddenly remembered the new abilities Kailyn had shown me. It also explained how she was able to put Mack in such a state as he was in now.



“One last chance...” Kailyn said, her breathing heavy as she leaned against the counter of the island for support.

My jaw was set tight, my lips pulled into a thin line. Kailyn simply shrugged and the knife began to shoot forward. Everything seemed to go into slow motion as I dropped down onto one knee, sliding forward as I did, and quickly knocked Kailyn’s feet out from under her. With a shout of surprise, she fell to the floor as I hopped back up, planting one foot firmly on her throat. I could see Kailyn’s eyes widen slightly as she tried to breath, but I was putting too much pressure on her windpipe for that to be possible.

I stared down into her eyes as I found myself panting slightly from the adrenaline rush. It almost didn’t seem possible that I was now in this position, fighting for my life against someone who I had considered practically a sister for all these years. Lately she had been acting strangely, but I never would have guessed that she would suddenly develop such homicidal tendencies. The thought suddenly occurred to me that she could still possibly bring that knife flying back toward me at any moment, so I was forced to make a hard decision in only a split-second.

“I’m sorry,” I said, my voice quiet, but just loud enough that she had definitely heard me.

With that, I removed my foot from her throat, only to bring it back and deliver a punishing kick to the side of her head. I heard it hit the bottom cabinet on the island with a loud thud, and she remained still and motionless afterward. My legs felt weak as I staggered backwards, reaching behind me and gripping the counter for support. If I hadn’t been breathing heavily before, I was now. All I could seem to focus on was Kailyn’s unconscious body lying sprawled on the floor, only a foot or two from Jared. My jaw clenched shut tightly as I closed my eyes, trying to force the hot tears to stop before they left my eyes. One made its way past my eyelids and I felt it rolling down my right cheek. I quickly raised one hand and wiped it away as I opened my eyes and took a deep breath.

“Jesus...”

My head quickly snapped around to the right at the sound

of someone's voice. I wasn't sure who I was expecting to be standing there, but for some reason seeing the entire rest of our group seemed like a surprise. Lexi was the one who had spoken, and who was currently surveying the three unconscious bodies on the floor.

"Did she do this?" she asked, gesturing to Mack, who was almost right beside her.

I nodded, taking another deep breath and pushing myself away from the counter, the pain in my arm from the cut flaring up slightly, but I was able to ignore it.

"And she got Jared, too?" Chase asked, moving a little farther into the room.

"No, I did," I replied, looking back at him. "He hit Kailyn with a pan, so I took it from him and... well, you can see."

"Damn, girl..." Lexi said, moving farther into the room, herself.

Maya and Shawn stood in the doorway, apparently still shocked by the sight before them. On one hand, I could understand and feel bad for them; they had never seen any kind of violence, or the results of it, like this before. I was only guessing, though, based on their expressions.

"So... does this mean we tear ass out of here before they wake up?" Lexi asked, looking over at me.

"Well, we don't exactly have to sneak anymore..." I said.

"Sure makes it slightly easier," Chase said, shrugging. "I say we grab our shit and get the hell out of here."

I looked over toward the other two in the doorway, both still silent.

"Are you guys still in?"

Finally, Shawn blinked a few times and looked up at me, as if coming out of some sort of sleep-like state.

"There's no way in hell I'm staying here," he said resolutely.

Maya just nodded, but didn't say anything, so I assumed that she agreed.

"Okay then, it's settled. Get all of your stuff together, and meet outside on the front porch in a minute or so," I said, clapping my hands together a little more loudly than I had intended, which

caused everyone else to jump.

As they all began to file out of the room, I grabbed Chase's arm and pulled on it slightly, indicating for him to wait. He stopped and turned around, glancing back at the other three for a second before turning to face me.

"I don't want to leave Kailyn right here," I said.

"Why?"

"If Jared wakes up first... I don't want her to be so easy for him to find."

Chase just nodded and began to move toward her. He wrapped his hands under her ankles as I grabbed her by the armpits. We hoisted her off the floor and began carrying her back down the hallway toward the front of the house. Everything about this felt so incredibly wrong, but deep down I knew there was nothing I could have done to avoid it, at this point. Kailyn had initiated this. I was not a murderer.

We managed to get her up the stairs and into one of the unused bedrooms down the hall. The bed let out a soft creak as we lay her down upon it. I could tell she wasn't dead by the rise and fall of her chest, but I could already see where a nasty bruise was forming on her right temple. A heavy feeling settled in my chest as I lay one hand against the side of her face, brushing some of her hair back slightly. My other hand curled into a fist as I fought to keep control of my emotions in front of Chase. I felt his hand on my shoulder and I looked back at him. Without saying a word, he just wrapped his arms around me. Normally, I would have become entirely rigid and awkward if someone gave me a hug without warning, but I found myself willfully returning it. I buried my face in his shoulder as I tried to stop the tears once again.

"This isn't what was supposed to happen..." I said, my voice muffled by his shirt.

"Life is unpredictable," he said, his chest vibrating against my cheek as he spoke. "It's all about how we deal with what happens that makes us the people we are."

I pulled away from him as I felt him release his embrace. The wet spots just below my eyes suddenly felt shameful, so I quickly tried to wipe them away with the backs of my hands. We didn't say another word, he just led me back across the room to the

door and into the hallway beyond. Just before he pulled the door closed behind us, Chase reached back and locked it from the inside.

The pressure to be quiet no longer existing now that Jared and Mack were both unconscious, we tore through the house looking for anything we thought might be useful to us. Lexi and I entered Mack's study, the same place where I had heard him and Jared conversing the night we had all drank around the fire, in the hopes of finding either money or something about the various projects that we could use. The room was almost exactly as I had expected it, yet it still awed me slightly. All of the furniture, from the desk to the chairs to the bookshelves, was dark wood. A large, red rug sat in the middle of the room, while the rest of the room was open hardwood floor. The whole place had an air of an old-time gentleman's study, which must have been what Mack was going for when he designed it. I idly scanned some of the book titles as I walked past, barely recognizing any of them.

*"Perhaps I should start reading more..."* I thought as I turned away from the shelves and moved around behind the desk.

I started opening drawers and scanning through their contents. Most of them were full of what seemed like useless bits of paper and information. Some of it seemed to be just generic stuff relating to the estate, bills and the like. I pulled open the top right drawer and found something that immediately made me stop. Lexi let out a sigh as she closed the bottom drawer on a filing cabinet across the room and stood up, turning to face me.

"Find anything good?"

I remained silent as I reached into the drawer and wrapped my hand around the cold metal within. The revolver felt heavier than I expected, which somehow made it seem even more lethal. Lexi let out a low gasp and I heard her walk over to the desk, but I didn't look up from the gun. It was all black with a wooden handle, but it was all cold. I examined the ring where the bullets were loaded and found that it was empty. Upon a little closer inspection, I found a box of bullets in the same drawer; it was about half-full, but I had a feeling the rest were not missing due to any gunfights Mack had been in. He struck me more as the type to set up his own target practice out in the desert of a backyard he

had, rather than some kind of gun-toting criminal or vigilante.

“We’re taking that, right?”

I jumped slightly as Lexi’s voice broke through my thoughts and I looked up at her. One of her eyebrows was raised slightly in question as she looked between the gun in my hand and my face.

“It would be useful...” I said, “but how are we going to get into any public place with it?”

“Easy: you hide it.”

I just rolled my eyes as she laughed quietly.

“You know what...?” I said, looking up at her again as I closed my hand around the revolver. “Screw it, let’s take it.”

With that, I grabbed the box of bullets and threw it in the backpack slung over my shoulder. We scanned the rest of the room quickly, but we didn’t find anything else we considered useful, so we headed back into the main section of the house. Jared and Mack were still unconscious on the floor of the kitchen, right where we had left them. I had checked Mack earlier to make sure he was actually still alive and had felt a pulse, so I assumed he would be okay in the end. The fact that Jared was still out cold surprised me; I didn’t realize I could hit that hard, and it both excited and scared me. On one hand, it made me feel kind of powerful and a bit better about some of the strange things that had been happening to me if this was the result, but on the other hand, it definitely meant something was more than just a little bit “off” about me.

Lexi and I met up with the rest of the group in the living room area of the house by the front door. Maya, Shawn, and Chase were all standing by our bags, idly talking amongst themselves. As we approached, they slowly stopped talking and turned to face us.

“Find anything useful?” I asked, looking around at the group of them.

“Some stuff, but not a whole lot,” Shawn replied, shrugging.

“We’ve got enough canned noodles and shit to last us for quite a while, though,” Chase said, lifting up the backpack at his feet to the sound of many metal cans clanking together.

“Sounds like quite the haul,” Lexi said, nodding her approval.

“Okay, well if that’s everything... I say we get the hell out of here.”

“Who’s got the keys?” Shawn asked, looking around at the rest of us.

Everyone gave him a look that seemed to say “are you serious?” His face broke out into a smirk as he pulled them out of his back pocket and jingled them slightly.

“It was a joke, calm down,” he said, laughing.

I grabbed them from his hand before he could notice and picked up my duffel bag with one fluid motion. It took him a second to even realize that the keys were no longer in his hand.

“Hey, what the hell?!” he said, turning around.

“I figured it should be up to someone who’s more mature to drive,” I said, smirking as I glanced back at him.

He just made a face and said something in an incomprehensible, mocking tone, but grabbed his stuff with the rest of us and headed out the front door. The Land Rover we had arrived in had been moved into a small garage just to the left of the metal warehouse-looking building across from the front door of Mack’s house. Luckily, the doors were almost always open, so we were able to simply walk right up and get in the car. We managed to fit all of our bags in the trunk before Chase closed it with a rather loud slam. I stared down at the keys in my hand for a second or two before letting out a heavy sigh and wrapping my fingers around them.

“You going to be okay?” Chase asked, putting a hand on my shoulder.

“Yeah, I’m fine, why?” I asked more quickly than I had intended.

“You look scared, that’s why,” he replied, grinning slightly.

I laughed, but it came out more nervous than I had hoped. With a sigh, I ran one hand over my face and straightened up.

“I got this.”

Chase gave me a strange look, but began to walk around to the passenger side of the vehicle, regardless. As I approached the driver’s side door, something made me look over toward the metal

warehouse-like building to our left. Maya had shown me inside before, but I had never explored it to any significant extent. Something about it seemed to be calling to me, though. I closed my hand into a fist around the car keys and shoved them into my pocket as I began to move toward the front door.

“Amaryss! Where are you going?” I heard Lexi call from the car behind me.

I didn’t respond to her question, my path still firmly set on getting inside the building. The sound of the others calling my name from behind me vaguely registered in the back of my mind as I reached the door and stopped in front of it. When Maya had shown me inside, the door had been unlocked, but set up with an alarm. This door, however, I had a feeling would be locked. Before I could overthink what I was doing, I gripped the handle and tried to turn it. Unsurprisingly, the handle didn’t budge; it was locked. I let out a growl of frustration and stomped my foot slightly just before I felt something on my shoulder and I jumped, spinning to my left to face whatever had touched me. Chase was standing beside me, eyes widened slightly at my sudden motion, his hand still outstretched in the empty air where my shoulder had been moments ago.

“Amaryss, what the hell are you doing?” he asked. “We’ve been shouting at you but you just kept walking.”

“I want to know what’s inside there,” I said bluntly, gesturing to the building.

“Why?”

“I... I don’t know,” I said, looking down at the ground for a second, as if I were embarrassed by what I had done in some way. “Just... Maya showed me inside before and something about it... made me wonder.”

“Wonder what?” Lexi asked, appearing beside Chase. “Also, you’ve got some nerve to pretend like you suddenly went deaf, missy.”

I gave Lexi a contemptuous glance before looking over toward the door again.

“I feel like there’s something important in there that we need to see, but...”

“Well, it would seem the door is locked,” Shawn said,

appearing behind Lexi and Chase, followed closely by Maya, “seeing as you didn’t get inside by using the handle.”

“So how do you suggest we get in, then?” Lexi asked, turning around to face him and putting her hands on her hips.

“Can we get to that other door easily from here?” I asked, looking past everyone to Maya.

It took her a second to realize I was speaking to her and her eyes widened briefly as the others turned to look at her, as well.

“What?” she said, obviously not paying very close attention to what I had just been saying.

“Can we get to that other door you showed me before easily from here?” I asked again, but now everyone else was staring at her, too.

“Um... I think so,” she said, looking slightly uncomfortable as the center of attention in that moment.

“Come on, let’s try that,” I said, motioning for Maya to come with me as I turned and began to walk toward the adjacent side of the building, where I was pretty sure I remembered the door being.

A small hill sat against the side of the building, so we had to climb up it for a little ways before we finally reached the door. A few inches of sand had gathered at the foot of it, so I quickly kicked it away. My hand rested on the door handle as I turned to look back at the rest of the group. Chase was right behind me, followed by Maya, while the rest of the group slowly made their way up to us.

“You think we have to worry about the alarm?” I asked, looking toward Maya.

She just shrugged and I rolled my eyes slightly.

“That’s reassuring,” I said just as the other two reached us.

“This door is unlocked?” Shawn asked, looking over at it.

“It was before,” I replied, shrugging. “Maya seemed to know it was.”

He looked over at her with one eyebrow raised.

“What?” she shot back.

He just made a “hmm” noise but said something else. I decided I didn’t want to wait any longer, so I pulled the door open and stepped inside, holding it open for someone to follow me. For



several seconds, the hallway was dark and silent, like I remembered, but without warning, a loud buzzing began to sound from the doorway behind me. I glanced back to see Chase already through the door after me and Maya following after him, wincing at the sound of the alarm on the door. Lexi and Shawn followed quickly after and he pulled the door shut. The buzzing stopped and we were thrown into silence.

It was so dark in the hallway that I couldn't see anyone at the moment, but I could hear everyone's breathing and I had the vague impression that someone was close to me. After several seconds, however, my eyes began to adjust and I found that I could vaguely see everyone.

"Okay, we're in... now what?" Lexi asked carefully reaching out to feel for the wall beside her.

"Follow me," I said and began walking down the hallway toward the room Maya had shown me before.

"Easier said than done..." Lexi muttered.

"Follow the sound of footsteps," I sighed, glancing back toward her.

I saw her make a face, but she began to follow after me anyway. After roughly fifty feet or so, we entered the lab-like area Maya had shown me. The last time we had been here, we had remained in the darkness, but this time I decided it would be good to look for a light switch. I began to look along the wall to my right, but I didn't see one, so I turned to the other side and almost ran into Chase.

"Whoa!" he said and jumped back.

"Sorry, didn't see you there," I said, suddenly grateful that it was dark enough no one could see my face turning red.

I maneuvered around him and found that there was indeed a panel of light switches on the wall. I tried the first one closest to me and instantly shut my eyes against the harsh light that seemed to explode before me. After a second or two, I slowly opened my eyes and found that everything was still very bright, yet it was slowly getting better.

"Thanks for the warning..." Shawn said as I glanced over toward him and saw him rubbing his eyes.

"Sorry about that," I said and turned around to view the

room.

Everything looked much different under the light of the harsh fluorescents overhead. It looked somewhat... sterile. Several lab benches ran parallel to each other in the center of the room, stretching from near us to the far side of the room. Various pieces of equipment saw upon them, although none appeared to be in any kind of active use at the moment. It suddenly struck me as strange that Mack would have such a large space if it was only him working here, but I pushed the thought aside and focused my attention on the large, steel doors across the room from us.

I began to cross the lab space, not really paying attention if any of the others were following me. The sound of footsteps following quickly after me told me enough without having to turn around. Moments later, I reached the doors and walked up to the first one on the left. The metal felt cool to the touch as I placed my hand on the latch which seemed to serve to keep the door locked.

“What’s in there?” Chase asked, appearing beside me.

“I have no idea,” I said. “Maya showed me this place not too long ago and when I saw these doors I... felt like there was something important about them.”

“You want to come in here and waste our time on a feeling you have?” Shawn said from behind me.

My teeth ground together slightly as I turned around to face the group once again. Shawn was leaning against the end of one of the lab benches, an annoyed expression on his face. Lexi was still looking around the room, seemingly not paying attention to the argument that was occurring in front of her. Maya was silent, her eyes moving between Shawn and me as she obviously tried to stay out of it.

“Well, we’re here now, aren’t we?” I shot back, unable to think of a better retort.

Shawn appeared about to argue with me, so I spun on my heel and turned to face the door behind me. I gripped the cool metal once again and pulled on the lock to the door. Unsurprisingly, it didn’t budge; I had a feeling it wouldn’t be that easy, but I also didn’t know where to start looking for some kind of key. Finally, I cursed under my breath and turned to look at Chase, actively avoiding acknowledging Shawn.

“Do you have an idea of how we might be able to open this?” I asked, tapping my fingers on the metal latch impatiently.

He stared at the door for a few seconds, his face screwed up slightly as he pondered the situation before us. Finally, he sighed and shrugged, looking back at me.

“Beats me,” he said.

I let out a growl of frustration and pushed myself away from the door, turning to face the rest of the group once again. Shawn was leaning against the lab bench, watching me with some amount of amusement, it seemed. My attention passed quickly over him and landed on Maya, refusing to give him the satisfaction of turning to him for help.

“Do you know anything about these doors?” I asked her.

She glanced at the doors over my shoulder before frowning slightly.

“I feel like I do...” she finally said, “but I can’t remember anything specific about how to get them open... or what’s behind them.”

Maya shrugged and looked back at me.

“Sorry.”

I sighed and ran my hands back through my hair, trying to resist the urge to let out some kind of scream. After several seconds of fruitlessly running through scenarios in my head, I turned back to look at the doors and stared at them for several seconds. They must have had some clue as to how to get them open. As long as that way was not a key that Mack possessed, we still possibly had a chance.

Suddenly, something hit me about the doors that I hadn’t noticed earlier. Each had what appeared to be some kind of lever on them in the center which was currently pushed all the way to the right. I moved across the open space and stopped before the door I had tried to open earlier. This time I grabbed the lever in the center of the door and began attempting to pull it to the left. At first it didn’t move at all, so I redoubled my efforts. Just as I thought I was trying the impossible once again, it began to move. A second later, the lever jerked slightly and then flew all the way to the left, throwing me off balance slightly due to the sudden burst of motion.

Once I had regained my stable footing, I reached toward the latch which appeared to function like the handle to the door. My curiosity of what lay beyond the door was far too great to care how embarrassing what I had just done was. My hands closed around the latch and I pulled on it. This time it pulled out slightly and I felt the door begin to swing open toward me. The door swung open on its hinges with little to no noise, yet it was far too heavy for me to open it quickly. Once the opening was great enough that I could reasonably fit through it, I let go of the door and moved around it quickly. Now that I could see it from the side, I realized that the door was actually rather thick, and it immediately made me a bit more nervous about what may lie behind it.

For some reason I had expected the room to be dark, but harsh fluorescent light actually poured out of the space. I blinked rapidly until my eyes adjusted and then I examined the room a little more closely. It was a cell; or at least it looked a lot like one. At first glance it also seemed to be empty, but I quickly realized that the shape in the far corner was not actually some piece of furniture or a bag of some kind; it was a person.

I took another step or two closer, placing one hand on the frame of the door and stopping where I was. The figure appeared to be crouched down in the corner; the only thing that was visible was short, dark hair, pale skin, a white T-shirt, and white pants. I felt like I should say something, but my mind had gone blank. Finally, I swallowed nervously and took a deep breath.

“Hey.”

The figure jumped slightly but immediately lifted his head, revealing that it was a boy. His dark eyes seemed to ponder me for a second or two before confusion creased his face and he uncurled himself a bit more.

“Who are you?” he asked, his voice rough and low, almost as if he had just woken up, or hadn’t spoken in a while.

“I’m Amaryss,” I said.

“Amaryss...” he said, his eyes scanning over me. “You don’t look like one of them.”

Now it was my turn to be confused.

“Them?”

“The sadists who call themselves scientists,” he spat, getting to his feet. “Mack and all of his like.”

Something about the idea that Mack worked with other helpers only seemed to confirm my fear that we may not be alone in this building, but I pushed it aside.

“No, I’m not with them,” I said. “We’re against them, actually.”

“Against them?”

“I guess you could say we’re staging a bit of a jailbreak,” I replied, lifting one leg off the floor and relying on the arm propped against the doorframe to support my weight.

It took the boy a second or two to realize what I was implying. Once the realization hit him, his eyes widened slightly, and he took a hesitant step forward.

“So... you’re escaping?”

I shrugged.

“I suppose you could say that.”

I had no idea why I was being so vague about it since that was exactly what we were doing, but I felt like I was on a roll, so I let it go.

“Does that mean... you’re like me?” he asked, his voice dropping in the second half of his sentence so that I could barely hear him.

“Define ‘like you’...” I said.

Just then, I felt something on my shoulder and I jumped, letting out a shriek of surprise. I instinctually spun around, adopting a stance that would allow me to either attack whoever or whatever had touched me or quickly dodge out of the way. Chase recoiled slightly from my sudden motion, but he quickly recovered as I relaxed, letting out the breath I hadn’t realized I was holding.

“What did you find in here?” he asked.

“Not ‘what’... ‘who,’” I said, gesturing to the boy across from me.

Chase appeared to notice him for the first time and looked surprised for a few seconds before regaining his composure and scanning him up and down. It occurred to me in that moment that I had no idea what his name was, so I had no way of actually introducing him to Chase, and vice versa.

“What’s your name?” Chase asked, saving me from having to ask the awkward question myself.

The boy cleared his throat slightly, trying to compose himself in front of this new boy who had suddenly appeared out of nowhere and scared the strange girl he had just been speaking to for a minute or so.

“My name is Damien,” he said.

“Do you have a last name?”

“I’ve never really known it, since no one has told me directly so... no, I guess,” he replied, shrugging.

As he was talking, I was finally able to take in exactly what he looked like, since I had been a little too wrapped up in the surprise of finding a person in the room behind the heavy steel door to notice what he looked like beyond the dark hair and pale skin I had first noticed. Damien appeared to be around the same age range as the rest of our group. Ever since Chase had told me how old he was, I felt incredibly unsure in judging how old anyone else was, so I just kind of assumed anyone who seemed about my age to be about 18-20 to be safe. His eyes were dark, but I couldn’t make out exactly what color they were. The same went for his hair: it seemed to be dark brown, but for all I knew it could have been black.

Damien seemed to be rather thin, at least in comparison to Chase and Shawn. It suddenly struck me how “in shape” those two seemed to be, despite knowing that Chase didn’t really get a lot of exercise, or at least not that I had seen once Kailyn and I had entered his and Lexi’s lives. Damien, on the other hand, seemed to be much more “wiry.” He was dressed in a plain white T-shirt and white pants, but shoes were apparently not deemed important enough by Mack and the other scientists who ran the lab.

“So you guys are getting out of here?” he asked, looking between Chase and me expectantly.

Chase glanced over at me, a strange expression on his face, but he nodded slowly.

“Yeah...” he said, sounding distracted. “Amaryss, can I talk to you for a second...?”

He gently pulled on my arm, leading me out of Damien’s cell and back into the lab area. Lexi, Maya, and Chase were all

now standing at the end of the lab bench, watching the two of us in anticipation.

“What the hell did you find in there?” Lexi asked, seemingly unable to restrain herself.

“A boy named Damien,” I explained. “He’s being held here by Mack, and I think it would be a safe bet that he’s in the same boat as us.”

“Which boat would that be? The SS Shithole?” Shawn quipped, smirking.

I gave him a hard look before turning to the two girls.

“So the question is... can we trust him?” Chase asked, his voice quiet in an attempt to hide our conversation from Damien.

“Well, you said he’s in the same boat as us...” Lexi said, gesturing toward me.

“Well, I can only assume... but it’s a pretty strong assumption,” I said.

“Anyway,” Lexi said, shrugging, “I’d say why not?”

“Um...”

I suddenly spun around to see Damien standing in the open doorway to the cell.

“You do realize that I can hear you guys... and see you...”

It was quickly dawning on me how stupid the idea that we could walk ten feet away and assume that it would be a private conversation. Also, why should we have expected him to just sit in the cell while we stood out here and spoke? I sighed and turned to look at him.

“Yes, I suppose you can,” I said.

“I understand that you guys may not trust me,” he said, holding his hands up as if he were afraid we might physically attack him. “You just met me a minute ago... but it sounds like we have a common cause of sorts, here. Mack and his... partners... have kept me here pretty much my whole life. They’ve done things to me, but I don’t know what they are.”

He paused for a second, swallowing nervously before taking a deep breath and continuing.

“I’m just asking, please... don’t leave me here with them and all of... *that*,” he said, his voice cracking on the last few words.

The genuine fear and hurt in his eyes was clearly visible as he spoke, and something in my chest felt tight. I knew his situation. I had been him, once. Before my rational thinking could argue otherwise, I walked across the ten feet or so and stopped just before him. I considered embracing him, but my normal nature caught up with me and a hug seemed too foreign once again and I resorted to placing a hand on his shoulder.

“We all know where you’re coming from,” I said quietly, “we’ve all been there. Of course you’re coming with us.”

I could just picture Shawn rolling his eyes behind me, but I didn’t care to look back to check. Damien visibly relaxed as his eyes lit up, the faint hints of a smile beginning to tug at the corners of his lips.

“Thank you,” he said quietly.

He lifted his arms slightly, as if he were debating giving me a hug, but he instead seemed to settle for an awkward shoulder pat. I laughed at his reaction and suddenly stepped forward, wrapping my arms around him in a loose embrace. He must have been as surprised as me, because he simply stood there for a second or two before he awkwardly returned the gesture, and then I backed away.

“Come on, you’ve got to formally meet the rest of us.”

I stepped aside and gestured to the other four behind me. Most of them gave some form of wave, but Shawn simply nodded at him. I sighed and walked toward the group, leading Damien toward them.

“Come on, guys,” I said, glancing around at all of them.

“Use your words.”

Chase was the first to clear his throat and step up to speak.

“I’m Chase Morgan,” he said, giving a small wave to Damien.

One by one, the others slowly gave their names, and then we fell into silence once again. The only sound that filled the room for those few seconds was the low hum of the fluorescent lights overhead. Finally, I clapped my hands, causing everyone to jump.

“Okay, shall we return to our original plan, now?” I asked, looking around.

“I don’t know, is your curiosity satiated enough?” Shawn



asked. "What about all those other doors?"

He gestured to the three other steel doors behind me, his tone entirely mocking. I glanced back at the other doors, suddenly realizing that it did seem strange to only check one.

"There's nothing there," Damien said quickly, interrupting my thoughts.

"What do you mean?" Lexi asked, pushing herself off the lab bench so she was standing up straight.

"Those other doors," he explained, "there's nothing behind them."

Something about what he said seemed slightly suspicious to me, but the reminder that we were burning precious time standing here was beginning to rise up in the back of my mind. I forced myself to ignore my natural curiosity to test what he said, so I nodded and turned back to the rest of the group.

"We should get going."

Just then, I heard what sounded like a door opening and I instantly froze. The sound had come from across the room, but not from the hallway where we had entered the building. I looked around Chase and saw that a door on the other side of the lab bench he was standing by had opened. The next thing I noticed was the man with messy hair in a white jacket and glasses standing just inside it, staring at us with a look of confusion on his face.

Before I could think about it, I burst into motion, slipping around Chase and reaching for the man. His expression turned from one of confusion to one of surprise as I suddenly grabbed him by the lapel of his coat and dragged him away from the door. I used my momentum to swing him around, throwing him into the lab bench. He hit it with enough force that he let out a loud grunt and fell to the ground, gasping for air. Everything seemed to go into slow motion as I grabbed him by his coat once again, lifted him off the floor slightly, and then threw him sideways into the edge of the lab bench, his head colliding with the edge of the counter with a resounding slam. His eyes rolled back in his head and he went limp as I let go of him, letting his torso fall back to the floor.

I stood over him for a few more seconds, panting slightly as I became aware of the sound of my heartbeat pulsing loudly in my

ears. With a deep breath, I stepped away from him and turned around to face the group once again. They were all staring at me with looks ranging from surprise, to confusion, to something unreadable in Chase's expression.

"Damn, girl," Shawn said, grinning.

"What?" I snapped, brushing some of my hair out of my face.

Shawn just shook his head as he turned and began to walk toward the hallway leading out of the building.

"Well, I'd say we should definitely get going now, just in case someone heard that," he said.

I inhaled deeply and let it out slowly, forcing myself to calm down instead of snapping at Shawn yet again. That would give him too much satisfaction. I moved back around the bench and gestured for Damien to begin following the rest of the group.

"Shall we get going?" I asked.

He tried to smile and nodded, but he seemed obviously freaked out by what I had just done. As he began to walk toward the group, I suddenly thought of something and put a hand on his shoulder to stop him. He jumped slightly and spun to face me, causing me to recoil slightly from his sudden motion.

"Do you have anything that you want to take with you?" I asked.

He glanced back at the open door to the cell where we had found him. After a second or two, he slowly shook his head.

"There's nothing here I'd want to keep."

I nodded and he turned to keep following the group toward the hallway leading outside. Chase fell in step beside me as we began to follow everyone else. Something touched my back and I quickly glanced over at him. He had placed his hand on my upper back, running his hand across it gently. The corner of his lips pulled back in a slight smile as I found myself returning it. He suddenly winked at me as he ran his hand across my back one last time and I couldn't help but laugh. Lexi glanced back at me, but Chase had already taken his hand away, so she just looked confused.

"Inside joke," I said, waving dismissively toward her.

"You had to be there for it," Chase added, nodding.

She sighed and rolled her eyes before turning around and stepping through the door held open by Shawn.

“After you, m’lady,” he said, gesturing through the open doorway.

Lexi raised one hand and opened her mouth, as if she were about to retort, but she seemingly couldn’t think of one fast enough, so she simply pointed at him.

“No.”

The rest of us laughed as Shawn smirked, yet remained holding the door for the rest of us. I followed the others down the hallway to the exit door, the red sign glowing in the darkness around it. Lexi reached the door first and pushed it open, stepping outside and holding it for Maya behind her. We were no longer concerned with triggering any alarms, since we didn’t plan to be sticking around much longer, anyway.

Once we were all outside, we hurriedly made our way around the side of the laboratory building and back across the driveway area to the parked Land Rover. Although Damien had no possessions to throw in the back of the car, he did present a problem for us in the vehicle: making everyone fit. With only five people, we evenly fit into the front and back seats of the car; however, now that we had a sixth person, we didn’t have a seat for that extra body. After a minute or so of debate, it was decided that the extra person would either have to sit in the back cargo space, or ride in someone’s lap or the floor of the backseat. Seeing as Damien didn’t know us that well, and vice versa, he opted to take the back.

I felt kind of bad as Chase and I closed the trunk behind him, the latch locking firmly shut. My fingers closed around the keys in my pocket and I pulled them out once more. The nervous feeling began to return as I took a deep breath and closed my hand into a fist around them.

“Are you sure you’re going to be okay with this?” Chase asked quietly, turning to face me.

After a second or two, I let out a heavy sigh and looked up at him.

“Yeah, I’ll be fine,” I replied and tried to force a smile.

He smirked and began to walk around the side of the car

toward the passenger seat.

“I know a fake smile when I see one, Amaryss,” he called behind him.

I rolled my eyes and began walking around the side of the car, approaching the driver’s door. When I reached it, I forced myself to just grab the handle and open it without hesitation; if I wasted any longer drawing this out I would begin to doubt myself too much.

I quickly climbed into the driver’s seat and closed the door after me. The keys shook slightly in my hand as I pushed them into the ignition and took a deep breath. They clicked forward twice and the various lights on the dashboard lit up, telling me all kinds of things that I didn’t really understand. With one final bout of courage, I turned the key one click farther and the engine turned over and started with a deep rumble.

I had taken the keys from Shawn because something had told me that I wanted to be the one to drive us out of here, but now the reality that I didn’t actually know how to drive the car was beginning to hit me. My palms were already slick with sweat as I gripped the steering wheel and took a deep breath. I had seen people drive cars plenty of times before, but I had never really paid that close of attention. The pedal on the right was the gas, and the one to its left was the brake... or was it the other way around? I guess we would find out pretty quickly which it was.

Taking a quick glance around the front console area, I found the stick I remembered Jared used for shifting and grabbed it. A small button was attached to one side, so I pressed it in and began sliding it downward. The car suddenly began to roll forward, and I jumped slightly in surprise. My foot accidentally hit the gas pedal and the car suddenly jolted forward, raising several shouts from the backseat. I managed to contain myself enough to slam on the other pedal, which brought the car to a jerking halt. Groans and muttered complaints came from the backseat, but I ignored them as I took a deep breath and looked down at the shifter. It had come to rest next to the letter “D” on the side of the small track the shifter sat in, so I assumed that meant something along the lines of “Drive.”

“Okay, I think I have this now,” I said, gripping the wheel

with both hands and taking a deep breath.

I turned the wheel to the right and slowly eased off the brake. The car began to roll forward and turn to the right, just like I wanted. After we had successfully turned toward the road leading back to the main gate, I straightened the wheel out and we began to crawl toward the dirt path. The thought of pressing on the gas pedal again scared me a bit, but I knew I'd have to do it to actually get anywhere. With a deep breath, I gently began to push down on the pedal. The engine grew louder as the car began to gradually move faster, the sensation both familiar and foreign at the same time; I had ridden in plenty of cars before, but the sensation just seemed different when I was driving one.

Eventually, we made it most of the way up the dirt path to the main gate, and were rapidly approaching it. For a second I thought the only way out might be to ram it, but thankfully I quickly realized how bad of an idea that was and brought the car to a stop.

"Let me see if I can open it," Chase said, unbuckling from the passenger seat and opening his door.

He hopped out of the car and walked up to the metal gate in front of us. After a few seconds of his attempts to push on it, I began to think that it was a fruitless endeavor. Suddenly, the gate shifted and began to move aside. Everyone in the car just watched as Chase pushed the gate aside and walked back to the car, hopping inside and closing the door behind him.

"There you go," he said, as if nothing strange had happened, "we're all clear."

After a few seconds of silence, he looked around at all of us with a confused expression on his face. Finally, someone broke the stillness.

"Holy shit, dude," Shawn said.

"What?"

"That gate's pretty heavy... how the hell did you just move that thing?"

Chase suddenly seemed embarrassed as he turned around to face forward and slouched down in his seat slightly.

"I'd prefer not to talk about it."

I knew there was no use pressuring him further, so I simply

let off the brake and slowly drove through the now-open gateway. Within moments, we had reached the paved road, and I brought us to a rather sudden stop beside it.

“You have got to figure out the whole stopping thing,” Shawn groaned from the back.

“I second that,” Damien called from the back cargo area.

“That’s why I’m practicing,” I said, glancing both ways down the long stretch of asphalt before us. “Now... which way do we go?”

I waited for a response, but none came. Everyone was just as still and silent as when Chase had miraculously moved that gate moments ago. It was becoming clear that this was the one part of the plan that we had not thought through entirely. We had just thought about getting out of the house unnoticed and taking the car, but we had thought the moment would have been a little more pressing than it had been. Perhaps I had hoped that we wouldn’t have worried about which way to go once we hit the road, we would just go whichever way struck us in that split second. Sensing everyone was at a loss for an answer, I tried to remember which way we had come from with Jared, but I quickly remembered that I had been asleep when we had first arrived.

“Do you remember which way we came from, originally?” I asked, looking over at Chase.

He seemed to snap out of whatever trance he had been in and looked over at me for a few seconds before responding.

“I’m not sure... Maybe from that way?” he said, pointing to my left.

I glanced back at Lexi, who just shrugged.

“Seems good as far as I can remember,” she said.

“Do either of you know which way to go to get to the next major town?” I asked, directing the question to Maya and Shawn.

Maya just shrugged, but Shawn appeared to think about it for a few seconds. Finally, he pointed off to the left, as well.

“If my shaky memory of the few times I went there with Mack is correct... the direction Chase said,” he said.

“I’ve never been outside of the estate, as far as I really know,” Maya added, as if feeling the need to defend herself. “I’m kind of useless as far as actual experience with directions out

here.”

“Okay then,” I said, turning back to face forward as I turned the wheel to the left, “that’s the way we’ll go.”

With that, I let my foot off the brake and pressed on the gas, causing the car to shoot forward a little faster than I meant, but we quickly ended up on the right side of the road, the entrance to Mack’s estate and the two men who had been the largest antagonists in our lives quickly dwindling in the rear view mirror as we pressed on into the night. Oddly enough, it wasn’t fear that I felt, like I thought I might. My heart was pounding in my chest and adrenaline was coursing through my veins, but the emotion that seemed to permeate my mind was not one of crippling anxiety, nor did I feel entirely overwhelmed by what lay before us. I felt excited.

I felt free.

## **Part 2** **The Long Roads**

### **12** **Our New Beginning**

September 13<sup>th</sup>, 1999

6:28:54 AM

Mack's House, somewhere in Arizona

The first thing that hit Jared as he began to come to his senses was the splitting pain that shot through his skull, even as he just laid there on the floor. With a groan, he managed to open his eyes. All he could see before him was the wooden flooring and the bottom of the island in Mack's kitchen. He slowly began to push himself up, pain shooting across the top of his skull and down his spine as did. Somehow, he was able to power through it until he had gotten himself into a sitting position with his back propped up against the cabinets behind him.

It took him a few seconds to fully take in what he was seeing before him. His vision swam as he blinked rapidly, trying to focus through the haze and bright light before him. Memories of how he had wound up on the kitchen floor began to float back to him as he gingerly touched the spot on the side of his head where Amaryss had hit him with a frying pan. Small shards of glass littered the floor from the dagger of glass Kailyn had swung at him earlier. Specks of blood were strewn across the floor, along with one rather large trail leading to Mack's motionless body leaning against the refrigerator.

Jared began to push himself into a standing position, his head pounding as pain shot down his spine, causing him to grimace and grit his teeth against it. Once he was on his feet, he shakily made his way over to Mack and nudged him with one foot. It didn't look particularly good for him. One whole side of his face was dark purple and dried blood coated his lips and chin. Jared could just make out more bruises on his neck, almost like



something had been wrapped around it very tightly. With a great deal of effort and pain, he got down on one knee and put three of his fingers to Mack's neck. After a few seconds, he felt a pulse and let out a heavy sigh.

After he was able to breathe for a few seconds, the next thing that struck Jared was how silent the house was. He distinctly remembered Amaryss holding her shoes and bag when she had appeared in the doorway moments before she had knocked him unconscious. The only sound Jared could hear in the house was his own footsteps as he slowly made his way down the hallway to the front of the house. The stairs proved to be quite a challenge, but he pushed through the pounding headache until he reached the top. Once he had, he grabbed the railing for support, moving slowly down the second floor hallway before stopping at the first door, where Amaryss and Kailyn had been staying.

The door creaked slightly as he opened it and leaned in, hanging onto the doorframe and the doorknob for support. Both beds were empty, but one of the girls' bag and clothes were still on the floor over to the right. He moved on to the next room, Lexi and Chase's, which proved to be empty. Maya's and Shawn's rooms were also mostly empty, although they all looked like people had been there not too long ago. Moving as quickly as he dared, Jared hurried down the staircase and across the living area to the front door. Upon wrenching it open, he saw that his Land Rover was missing from the garage across the driveway.

"Goddammit!" he shouted and slammed his fist on the doorframe.

It didn't take a skilled detective to realize that the kids were gone. He made his way back into the kitchen area and looked around for a phone. When his search turned up empty, he moved on to Mack's study. A standard, black phone sat on the corner of his desk, which Jared grabbed and began to forcefully punch in a number. After it rang several times, the other line picked up.

"Hello?"

"This is Jared Broder," he began, "I'm down at the facility in Arizona with Mack. We have a situation here."

"What kind of situation would that be?" the other person, a man, asked, sounding curious, yet like he was already anticipating

what Jared's answer would be.

"The subjects have escaped."

"You said it yourself, it was only a matter of—"

"I know what I said, Jon!" Jared barked, wincing as pain shot through his head during his sudden outburst. "They are mobile and should be regarded with a high level of caution."

"How are they mobile? On foot?"

"They..." Jared sighed and looked down at the corner of the desk for a moment, "they stole my car."

There was a moment of silence on the other end of the line before the man let out a heavy sigh.

"Okay, they have a car they don't particularly know how to drive, and are on the move. Do you have any idea where?"

"No, that's why I think we may need to enlist some help."

"You want to go to the local authorities to file a missing person report?" the other man asked, sounding slightly shocked.

"No, I'm not stupid," Jared spat. "I'm not going to file a missing person report for children that I technically don't have custody over, and who are considered, at best, missing already."

A moment of silence followed Jared's rant.

"So what do you propose, then?"

"Do we still have contact with James' old friend?"

"Perhaps."

"I think it's time we gave him a call."

September 14<sup>th</sup>, 1999

1:18:25 A.M.

Western Texas

The continuous hum of the tires on the asphalt began to slow down as we pulled into a rest stop, coasting through the parking lot before making a rather wide turn into a parking space. We had switched drivers several times in the last twelve hours or so, and had ended up with Shawn behind the wheel at this point. He killed the engine and the headlights, but left the keys in the ignition. All of us remained silent as we began to perk up and look around.

“Where are we?” Lexi mumbled, sounding as if she had just woken up.

“Somewhere in Texas, I believe,” Shawn said, yawning.

“Wow, we got far,” Chase said, sitting up in the back cargo area and stretching his arms above his head slightly, pressing up against the roof of the car as he did.

Damien was seated in the window seat on the opposite side of the car from me with Lexi between us. Maya was just beginning to move in the passenger seat, yawning and rubbing her eyes tiredly.

“Surprisingly, yeah,” he replied, “seeing as we don’t have a whole lot of money and this car seems to just waste gas like there’s no tomorrow.”

“I guess it was a good idea to grab that money from the house, then,” Lexi said, running one hand back through her hair.

I just nodded, yawning as I turned to look out the window at where we had stopped. There were no other cars parked at this stop, only two semi-trailer cabs at the far end, which were dark and still. The building for the rest stop, itself, was still lit by faded, yellow fluorescent lights. I could see two vending machines in a small alcove just to the right of the door to the Men’s bathroom, and my stomach growled slightly. The last thing I had eaten had been a small, greasy burger at a fast food joint in a truck stop off the highway about eight or nine hours ago. We had thought of a lot of things about escaping, but apparently we had never considered how hard it would be to keep eating when we were on the move and had little money. Chase must have seen me staring longingly at the machine because he leaned back from the front seat and hit me on the shoulder slightly.

“Hey, Amaryss, come on,” he said and nodded in the general direction of the building before turning around and opening the back hatch of the vehicle and climbing out.

I turned to my door and pulled the handle, pushing it open in front of me. As I attempted to step out of the car, I was held back by something, which caused me to jump in surprise and I quickly looked down at myself. I immediately felt embarrassed as I pressed the button to release the seatbelt and it retracted back against the side of the seat. Now that I had been freed from my

restraints, I hopped out of the back seat before anyone had a chance to make fun of me.

The car door echoed across the empty space as I closed it behind me and moved around the front of the car to meet Chase. He was still wiping sleep from his eyes as he fell in beside me and we headed toward the vending machines.

“How you holding in there, big guy?” I asked, cracking a grin as I glanced sideways at him.

He gave me a look and I laughed quietly.

“I’m just surprised we’re still alive with all of you new drivers taking the wheel,” he said.

I shrugged.

“It’s not all that hard. Feels almost instinctual, actually.”

“I don’t know, it just seems a little too daunting for me,” he said, laughing.

“Only way to know is to try,” I chided.

Chase just shook his head, but we had reached the vending machine, so I stopped in front of it and began scanning the items behind the glass. There were rows of brightly-colored packages in a myriad of brands that I didn’t totally recognize. My eyes passed over the rows of candy bars near the bottom of the machine, but I decided that I wasn’t really looking for a sweet fix at this moment; I wanted something more substantial. A red-and-yellow bag of Cheez-Its caught my attention and I tapped the glass over it.

“Those have my name on them,” I said, glancing over at Chase.

He looked where I was pointing and smirked. I couldn’t tell if he was judging my choice or not, but I didn’t particularly care at that point. Those small, cheese-flavored crackers would be mine in mere moments, whether he liked it or not. Chase glanced around the area, as if looking for someone, before turning back to the machine.

“Stand back,” he said.

“What are you—” I began, but as he moved up to the machine, I quickly realized what he was going to do.

He took a step or two away from the front of the glass and wiped the palms of his hands on his jeans as he glanced around one more time. I was about to say something to stop him, but he

suddenly raised his foot and brought it down on the glass in a rather vicious kick. What followed was probably not anything like what he had expected. His foot hit the glass, but it merely flexed slightly before pushing back out. Chase immediately became imbalanced and started to fall backward as he wind-milled his arms. A moment later, he had hit the ground with a loud “oomph” and was staring up at the sky as I tried to restrain myself from laughing. After a second or two, it became impossible and I bent over slightly, laughing at him as his eyes moved from looking up at the stars to looking over at me.

“This is what I get for trying to do something nice for you, huh?” he said as he began to pull himself to his feet.

I tried to say something, but I could barely breathe, let alone talk. My face must have been rather red as I fell back against the rough cement wall of the building and put one hand over my mouth, as if it would hide the fact that I was laughing at this point. Chase narrowed his eyes at me as he dusted his back off from where he fell. He moved over toward me as I slowly began to calm down, watching him draw closer the entire time. His expression said he was mad, but his eyes told me he was laughing at least inwardly, too.

“Well, missy...” he said quietly, “do you have a better way?”

“Well...” I said, turning to look at the vending machine. “If you are really that determined to get inside without paying...”

My eyes scanned the machine, trying to size up where a weakness might be on the black box. The glass on the front was more like plastic than glass which, as Chase’s display had shown, was more apt to bend than break. After several seconds of surveying the vending machine, I did not see any easy way of getting inside it. I frowned slightly and put my hands on my hips as I heard Chase shuffle behind me.

“Looks like you’re stuck,” he said.

“No, I’m getting an idea...” I replied, stepping closer to the machine. “What if I just...?”

My sentence trailed off as I stepped up to the machine and put my hands against the side of it. A second later, I pushed against it with all of my strength and the machine began to tip

sideways, two of its “feet” lifting off the ground. Before I could think twice about what I was doing, the machine passed its tipping point and crashed to the ground on its side. I jumped back at the loud sound and glanced around, only thinking to check if there were other people now. Seeing no one, I turned back to the machine and saw that the glass on the front had not shattered, but there were several cracks in it.

I moved around to the front of it and brought my foot back. My jaw clenched in anticipation of what was about to happen, but I decided to follow through with it anyway. I swung my foot forward quickly and right into the glass in the front of the machine. It didn’t break, as I had hoped, but the cracks began to spread a bit more. The pain in my foot, however, told me that it was probably not a good idea to do that again. I gasped and hobbled back a step or two and cursed under my breath. Chase moved in from off to my left and looked down at the machine.

“You’re getting there,” he observed, still looking down at the cracked glass.

“More than what you did,” I managed to utter through clenched teeth.

He looked back at me, his brow furrowed in confusion slightly.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine after just smashing my toes into the glass of a vending machine,” I snapped, my voice dripping with sarcasm.

Chase just looked down at my foot for a second or two before looking back up at me.

“Well, what’d you do that for?”

I gave him a dirty look and he just grinned before turning back to the machine and bringing his foot back to kick it. He sprang into motion before I could warn him not to, but this time his foot managed to smash straight through the glass. Large shards fell to the ground, as well as some so fine that it looked like glass sand. I began to hobble forward, toward the machine, as Chase crouched down and reached inside. As I reached him, he stood up and turned around, holding something out to me. I looked down at his hand and saw three packages of Cheez-Its held in his grasp.

“There you go,” he said, smiling slightly.

I grinned and took them from him.

“Thank you very much,” I replied. “Now, if only you could work such a miracle on my foot.”

We both laughed as Chase moved beside me and slipped his arm around my shoulders. I looked at him questioningly and he grinned.

“I’m just helping you back to the car, calm down,” he said.

I laughed, but it sounded far more nervous than I had intended. Regardless, we made our way back to the car as quickly as we could with my foot throbbing in pain. When we reached it, Chase opened the back door for me and helped me up into the seat. He was about to close the door and head for the front seat when he noticed that Lexi was now sitting in it, her head up against the window and seemingly asleep.

“Goddammit, girl,” Chase muttered, shaking his head as he pushed me slightly. “Slide in; looks like I’m back here with you.”

I grinned and glanced over to my right. Maya had her head propped up on her fist, her elbow resting on the door, but she was awake and looking over at Chase and me; I assumed Damien must have ended up in the back once again. I pushed myself across the seat as best I could before Chase climbed into the car and closed the door behind him. Chase was pressed up against me rather closely, since he was a little larger than the three of us who had previously been in the backseat together. Even though I could feel that I wasn’t pressed up against Maya nearly as much as Chase was against me, I still turned to look over at her and check.

“Is this okay, or am I cramping in on you too much?” I asked.

“No, you’re fine,” she replied, a slight smirk tugging at one corner of her lips. “You can move a little more this way if you don’t want to be pressed together like sardines over there, though.”

I laughed, but it still sounded less than confident; I secretly cursed myself as I moved closer to Maya, the pressure on each side now relatively even, rather than Chase solely crushing me from the left. Shawn glanced at us from the driver’s seat.

“You all set back there Bonnie and Clyde?” he asked, grinning.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” I shot back, a little too defensively perhaps.

“Well, you just demolished a vending machine and stole food from it, so hopefully the cops won’t come chasing after us. Also, I thought it was your turn to drive,” he said, pointing to me.

“Well... I kind of hurt my foot back there, so driving might be a little too challenging...” my voice trailed off as I grinned sheepishly.

Shawn just rolled his eyes and turned to face forward once again. The car came to life with a quiet rumbling before he threw it into reverse and shot straight back out of the parking space. We jerked to a stop, causing Lexi to slide forward and almost hit her head on the door. She was instantly awake and looking around at what had caused the sudden motion.

“Holy shit, what the hell is going on?” she demanded.

I couldn’t resist laughing a little, which caused Lexi to immediately whip around and glare at me.

“It’s not funny, Amaryss,” she said. “I almost just smashed my forehead into the... this part of the door!”

She placed her hand on the doorframe just below the window, obviously unsure of what it was called. Now everyone began to laugh to some extent, which only caused Lexi to become more frustrated. She didn’t try arguing or yelling anymore, though, she simply crossed her arms, made a “humph” noise, and faced forward once again.

Shortly after, we were back on the road and flying down the highway. There wasn’t much to see in the middle of nowhere in the early hours of the morning, so the landscape seemed to mostly be a dark, foreboding void. In a way, it seemed fitting. We had no idea where we were going, really; we had simply set out with the idea of getting away from Jared, but no real plan of where to go after that. Chase and I had the list of people like us and the locations, but we hadn’t set a plan to stage a rescue attempt or anything that drastic.

I leaned my head back against the headrest and closed my eyes for a second. The next thing I knew, it was daylight and we were coming to a stop in a gas station. Lexi put the car into “park” with some amount of effort before killing the engine and letting



out a heavy sigh, running her hands back through her hair.

“Where are we?” I asked, my voice sounding far groggier than I expected.

“Beats me,” she replied, glancing in the rearview mirror. “You two have been out for quite a while back there.”

I glanced over to my left and saw that Chase had fallen asleep as well, and he was leaning in my general direction. The last thing I wanted was to look embarrassed in front of Lexi right now, but I had a feeling I was not succeeding at that. Unable to think of a snappy verbal comeback, I settled on elbowing Chase in the ribs. He woke with a start, sitting up and looking around, confusion instantly creasing his face.

“Rise and shine,” I said. “You’re kinda on top of me there and I want to get out.”

He remained silent, yet unbuckled his seatbelt and reached for the door handle, missing it several times before finally getting it open. His movements were generally rather lethargic, which seemed almost amusing to me, but I knew that I wouldn’t be much better. I had never been a morning person; Kailyn, on the other hand, had seemed able to wake up and function at a “normal” hour most days. At the thought of her, a tight feeling arose in my chest as something sank in my stomach. I forced myself to push past the feeling and climb out of the car after Chase.

As soon as my feet hit the ground, I was struck by how cold it felt. A breeze was blowing across the open ground of the gas station, causing me to shiver as what felt like a cold jolt of electricity shot up my spine. I ran my hands up and down my upper arms as I crossed them in front of me, the goose-bumps quickly forming on my skin easy to feel under my touch. The door slammed shut behind me, causing me to jump and shift my focus from just on how cold I felt to what was going on around me.

“Awfully jumpy this morning, Amaryss,” Chase said, cracking a grin at me.

“I’m barely awake,” I shot back. “Don’t test me.”

He laughed quietly as I walked around the back of the car and met up with Maya and Damien on the other side.

“We were thinking of buying some food for breakfast, wanna come with?” Maya asked, turning to look at me as I

approached.

“Sounds great,” I replied, nodding. “Onward.”

The three of us made our way across the fueling area and hopped the curb to the sidewalk around the small convenience store. Just as I was reaching for the door, it swung open and Lexi stepped out. We both jumped as we almost ran into each other before laughing and slipping by each other. I grabbed the door before it could swing closed and gestured for the other two to go ahead of me.

The store was rather dingy and poorly-lit as we stepped inside. A single man in a grubby red polo stood behind the counter, only casting a quick contemptuous gaze at us before turning back to the small TV set up next to the register. I could hear something that sounded like crowds cheering, but I was not particularly invested in what exactly he may have been watching.

The three of us began to peruse the racks of individually-wrapped snacks and treats. The aisle full of various forms of candy immediately drew my attention, but I forced myself to resist and move toward something a little more wholesome. The shelves in the center of the store did not provide much substantial food aside from some beef jerky and bags of chips and crackers. Some breakfast sandwiches sat in a warming box at the back of the store, but they seemed far more dubious than anything on the shelves.

“Well, this kind of sucks,” I said quietly as I moved up beside Damien, who was looking at a section of what appeared to be trail mix.

He jumped slightly and glanced over at me.

“This sucks?” he said. “Look at all of this stuff!”

I laughed quietly and patted him on the shoulder.

“Eat nothing but this stuff and your body will hate you, trust me,” I said.

He looked confused, but I had already begun to walk away. Maya was in the row behind us, a package of something already held in her hand while she contemplated various kinds of cookies and crackers on the shelves in front of her.

“What’d you get?” I asked, stopping beside her.

She held up the package to show me.

“Beef jerky?”

“Mhm,” she replied, still looking at the options on the shelves. “It’s about the only thing with any kind of substance here.”

“I’m beginning to notice that,” I sighed, glancing at the rows of food she seemed to be contemplating. “How much cash do we have?”

“Um...” Maya said, reaching into her pocket and pulling out the wad of bills. “Not a whole lot.”

I nodded slowly, the realization that we may not be able to get much farther on our own like this suddenly beginning to sink in for me. None of us had really stopped to consider how we would get around for any significant amount of time out in the “real world” once we had escaped. We didn’t even have much of a plan of where we were going or what we were trying to do. The thought of the list Chase and I had stolen from the facility in California seemed to call to me from the back of my mind, but now was not the precise time to bring that up with everyone.

Maya grabbed a package of some sort of crackers from the rack in front of her and glanced over at me.

“Are you going to get something?” she asked.

“Hmm... maybe,” I replied, glancing over the options in front of us.

“Well, you could also just not eat,” she suggested.

“When you present it that way...” I said and she laughed.

I grabbed a bag of some form of cheese-filled crackers before turning on my heel and beginning to walk around the shelves toward the beef jerky once again. As soon as I had grabbed it, I was about to turn to head toward the counter when I heard someone shouting. My heart immediately began pounding as I looked around, thinking that someone was yelling about me. I half expected to see Jared in the doorway, pointing at me and telling me to stay where I was. It was not Jared, however, it was the man behind the counter.

The door was just swinging closed as he quickly maneuvered out from behind the cash register and hurried toward the door. I glanced back at Maya, who was looking at me with a confused look on her face. As I scanned the store, my stomach immediately sank as I realized that Damien wasn’t anywhere to be

seen.

“Don’t tell me that boy—” I started to say, but a sudden burst of shouting from outside interrupted me.

I dropped the food I was holding and rushed toward the door, shoving it open as soon as I reached it. The store employee was confronting Damien in the middle of the parking lot, gesturing at what seemed to be his waist.

“I fucking saw you, kid!” he shouted. “Don’t you think you can just run off with that!”

“What are you talking about?” Damien asked, seemingly rather confused, but I was beginning to wonder if it was feigned.

His hands seemed to be held behind his back somewhat, and I instantly knew that my fear had been confirmed.

“You picked up that bag of chips and just strolled on out here,” the employee said. “Who the fuck do you think you are? Give that shit back or I’m calling the cops in here to deal with you.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t know...”

“Yeah, bullshit, give me that—!”

The employee reached for Damien’s hands, and in a split second I knew everything was about to go horribly wrong. Damien tried to twist away from the man, but he grabbed his arm and tried to pull it from behind his back. The next second, he dropped whatever he was holding and spun to the side. His fist collided with the man’s face before he could even realize what had happened. The employee staggered back a step or two, holding one hand against his cheek.

“Okay you little shit,” he said, “You’re coming with me.”

Before I could think about what I was doing, I ran forward and slipped between the two of them, putting my hands out to hold the employee back.

“Wait a minute!” I said as he stopped for a moment, looking rather surprised. “He doesn’t know any better, he’s a little... unadjusted.”

The man stared at me for a few seconds before shaking his head and taking a step back.

“What the hell are you saying, girl?” he said. “Is he some kind of retard?”

“What?” Damien said, sounding confused, yet indignant.

“No... not really,” I said, slightly unsure exactly what he meant by that, myself. “He’s... got a condition. He doesn’t like it when people... touch him, like that.”

“What the hell kind of horseshit is that?” the man shot back. “Listen, I’m calling the cops anyway. That little fuck thinks he can punch people and walk away? You know what, both of you stay right here.”

With that, he began to turn and walk away. My heart began to accelerate even faster as I glanced back at Damien, who was looking a little scared and confused. I ground my teeth as I turned back toward the man and began to run after him. My shoes squeaked on the asphalt slightly as I skid to a stop in front of him, blocking his progress to the door.

“Listen, please don’t call anyone,” I pleaded. “We’ll give it back and pay for it.”

“Well that’s real nice of you,” the man said, but I could clearly hear the sarcasm in his tone, “but I already told you what I’m gonna do. So if you’d get out of my way...”

I put my hands out and stopped him from moving around me, which caused him to glare angrily at me.

“I can’t let you do that,” I said quietly, staring right back at him.

“What are you going to do about—?”

Before he could finish his sentence, I drove the heel of my hand into his chest. The air burst from his lungs in one forceful explosion. He doubled over and staggered back a step or two, clutching the spot where I had hit him. Before he could say anything or move again, I directed a kick at the side of his left knee. His leg gave out from underneath him and he fell to the ground, landing on his hands and knees.

“You... you little... fucking...” he gasped, looking up at me.

Before he could finish, I drove my fist into the side of his head, sending him to the ground, unconscious. My heart was pounding in my chest as I looked up at Damien, anger flaring up within me. He was watching me with a look of amazement on his face, but it quickly turned to one of fear as I stepped over the

unconscious employee and stalked over to him, stopping only about a foot away from him.

“What were you thinking?!” I shouted, shoving him slightly.

“W-what?” he stammered, his dark eyes wide.

“You can’t just *take* things like that. It doesn’t belong to you!” I snapped. “I don’t want to have to do this everywhere we go!”

I stopped shouting at him as I waited for some kind of reaction, but it seemed that I had scared him into silence. After several seconds of such, I became aware that my breathing was coming in heavy gasps, so I took a deep breath or two to calm myself down before continuing.

“We can’t get caught by the police, or anyone, for that matter, okay?” I said. “Now, we’re going to have to get the hell out of here before they show up... okay?”

He nodded fearfully as I sighed and turned to see where Maya had ended up amidst all of the commotion. She was standing by the front end of the car, along with Shawn and Chase, with a look somewhere between impressed and scared on her face. I motioned for Damien to follow me and I hurried over to them.

“Time to go,” I said, glancing around at them.

“I’d say so,” Shawn replied, laughing dryly.

I began to move toward the driver’s seat, but Shawn slid in front of me, stopping me.

“Whoa, there,” he said, opening the door, “I think it’s best if someone else drives while you calm down for a minute.”

My right hand clenched into a fist and I resisted the urge to shout at him, too. I turned to Chase, hoping for some support, but he just shrugged sheepishly.

“I think he kind of has a point...”

I let out a growl of frustration and stalked around to the back of the vehicle.

“Well, since apparently I need a time-out,” I snapped, throwing open the trunk and climbing inside before reaching up and grabbing the handle on the inside.

The back door slammed shut as I threw myself against the backseat, sinking so that my head was not visible above the top

and crossing my arms. At this point, I didn't care that I actually looked like a six-year-old throwing a tantrum; my blood was boiling and I could still feel my heart pounding in my chest as rage seemed to fill every part of me.

The car rumbled to life and I felt it jerk into motion as we tore out of the gas station. Several seconds later I felt us accelerating even more and assumed that we were getting back on the highway. I leaned my head back and closed my eyes for a second or two, breathing slowly through my nose in an attempt to calm myself down. After I felt my heart rate begin to calm down once again, I opened my eyes and turned my head so that I was staring out the window to my left.

I could just barely see what I presumed were the tops of trees lining the highway flying by outside. Aside from the rapidly moving small green line running along the very bottom of the window, all I could see was the sky. It seemed particularly blue today, although I suppose I had never really stopped to look at it before. All of these things were working some kind of zen magic on me, because I found that I had calmed down dramatically already since we had left the gas station. With one more deep sigh, I turned around and pulled myself up and turned around so I could see over the back seat. Lexi was sitting to my right, Maya in the middle seat in front of me, and Chase was off to my left.

I folded my hands on the seat in front of me and rested my chin on top of them. Maya glanced back and then jumped slightly when she saw me so close to her.

"Jesus," she said, "I wasn't expecting you to be right there."

"I'm full of surprises," I replied, attempting to raise one eyebrow at her and failing to actually do so.

"So we've seen," Shawn called from the driver's seat, glancing in the rear view mirror at me.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" I said indignantly, a slight hint of aggression creeping into my tone.

"Well, in the past two days or so, we've seen you go from relatively normal to beating the shit out of people in about five seconds," he said. "I don't believe we've seen that from you before."

“No, I suppose you haven’t,” I shot back. “Doesn’t mean that I can’t be that way.”

“That time?”

It took me a second to realize that he was speaking to me, but even then I wasn’t quite sure what he was talking about.

“Excuse me?”

“That time... you know, of the month?” he explained.

“For Christ’s sake!” I said and rolled my eyes. “How about you shut up or you’re the next one getting punched out?”

I saw the three people in the backseat suppressing laughter as Shawn gave me a look in the mirror before returning his attention to the road.

September 13<sup>th</sup>, 1999

8:23:56 A.M.

Mack’s House, somewhere in Arizona

The silence seemed to have the most presence in the house, even as sun began to pour in through all of the windows. Kailyn’s eyes seemed to flick back and forth quickly behind her eyelids as she remained motionless on the bed. To her, it almost seemed as if she were asleep in a void. The bed she was upon could have been floating in the midst of an empty space, drifting along into nothing, lost and adrift in nowhere.

Suddenly, her eyes shot open and she sat bolt upright in the bed, looking around the room in a sort of panic as her chest heaved and each breath came in shallow gasps. After several seconds, however, she finally calmed herself and blinked rapidly, trying to clear her somewhat blurry vision. Her hand instinctually reached for her glasses off to the side of the bed, but she didn’t feel them on the nightstand. A second or two later, her vision cleared and she wiped her eyes with her hand.

“Oh, right,” she muttered and went to push the sheets off herself when she realized that there were none there.

She was still in her clothes, on top of the comforter of a bed that was definitely not in the room Amaryss and she had been sharing. Confusion clouded her mind for a second or two before



the events of the previous night started to come back to her. Her hand quickly shot up to the side of her head and she gingerly laid her fingers against the spot where Jared had hit her with the frying pan.

“Not Jared...” she said quietly, barely louder than a whisper. “Amaryss...”

Now the memory of the incident was coming back to her. She had gone down to take care of Jared and Mack... and then Amaryss had interrupted her. They had fought the two of them together and then...

“She refused...” Kailyn said, her voice growing louder as she began to feel more and more awake.

Amaryss had been the one who hit her in the side of the head with the frying pan. Amaryss had been the one who refused to kill Jared when they had the chance. Amaryss had been the one who fought back. Amaryss was the reason she was waking up in a strange bed with pounding pain in her head.

“Goddammit!” Kailyn shouted and slammed her fist down on the bed, immediately wincing and putting one hand to the opposite side of her head from where she had been hit as pain shot through her skull from her sudden outburst.

She turned to the slide and slowly rose to her feet. A slight throbbing appeared in her temples, but it quickly passed as she took several deep breaths. Now that she was a little more awake and alert, she surveyed the room she had found herself in. It appeared to be mostly empty of anything resembling personal possessions, so she felt it was safe to assume that it was not Jared’s or Mack’s room. Sunlight was beginning to come in through the window to the right of the bed, revealing dark green walls and dark wood floors, much like the room Amaryss and she had been sharing. A door was set into the wall ahead of her, and another was on the wall to her left. They seemed almost identical and, since she had not come into this room on her own, she had no way of really knowing where each door led.

Kailyn looked between the two doors for a few seconds before walking toward the one that was straight ahead of her. She gripped the handle and pulled the door open as soon as she reached it, only to find an empty closet space. She sighed and closed the

door, turning toward the other one.

“Second time’s the charm, I suppose,” she muttered to herself and quickly moved over to it.

Without hesitating, she grabbed the knob and twisted it. The metallic semi-orb refused to turn, however. She frowned and tried turning it once again, but the knob remained still. She let go of it and leaned back slightly and looked at it for a few seconds. A smaller knob seemed to be set into the front part of the doorknob, with a rectangular section raised in the center of it. Kailyn immediately rolled her eyes and mentally kicked herself for not realizing what was wrong. She turned the lock and attempted to twist the knob once again. This time, it twisted freely and she pulled the door open toward her.

The first thing she noticed upon stepping out of the bedroom was how silent it was in the house. She began to slowly move down the hallway, heading toward the stairs to the main parlor area near the front door. As she passed by the door to the room Amaryss and she had been sharing, she came to a stop and spun around so she was walking toward the door. She opened it and leaned in, hanging on the door and the frame for support.

The room seemed to be the same as it had been, but something struck her as off. After several seconds of scanning the room, she realized that Amaryss’s bag was gone. She pushed herself off the door and back into the hallway, spinning to her right and hurrying down the stairs. As she reached the bottom, she was struck again by how silent the house was. She was about to turn toward the hallway to the kitchen when she heard the sound of tires on the dirt driveway outside. Kailyn slipped across the room to one of the front windows and looked out it. An ambulance with its lights on, but siren off, was sitting in front of the house, the two front doors just opening as EMTs jumped out.

“Shit,” she whispered, glancing back down the hallway toward the kitchen.

Mack’s body was still leaning up against the refrigerator, so she figured it was safe to assume that Jared had called it for him. On one hand, Kailyn was disappointed that Mack had survived, but on the other she realized this provided her a good opportunity. She glanced around the room for somewhere to hide. Her eyes settled

on a large armoire on the far wall and she made the split second decision that it would be good enough to try.

She hurried across the room and threw open the doors. Several coats hung inside, while multiple pairs of boots and one or two pairs of shoes sat on the bottom. There appeared to be just enough room for her to fit, so she pulled herself up and in, closing the doors behind her. The interior was immediately plunged into almost total darkness, broken only by the faint strip of light coming through the gap in the doors.

Kailyn carefully positioned herself so she could see through this gap with one eye, waiting to see what would happen. A loud knocking came from the front door, the paramedics presumably finally having grabbed their equipment and made it up the front steps. A few seconds later Jared appeared, striding quickly across the room and opening the door.

“We got a call about a man severely injured in a domestic dispute,” one of the EMTs said.

“Yes, this way,” Jared replied, gesturing for them to follow him toward the kitchen.

They all hurried through the room and toward the hallway to Kailyn’s left. Once they were out of sight, she carefully slipped out of the armoire and closed the doors behind her. She crept toward the edge of the hallway and peaked around the corner to see the EMTs crouched on either side of Mack, attempting to treat him in some way. Now would be the perfect opportunity to finish what she had started, but something else was prodding her from the back of her mind. Kailyn turned to look back toward the front door, left open by the EMTs as they had entered.

It was becoming clear that the others had acted on their plan to escape, like they had been planning since they were in California, but Kailyn had no idea of where they were going or how they were getting there. With one last glance back toward the kitchen, Kailyn hurried up the stairs to the bedroom she and Amaryss had been sharing, slipping inside and moving over to her bag. She grabbed her shoes from beside it and sat on the end of her bed, hurriedly pulling them on. Once they were on and loosely tied, she glanced down at her things, debating whether she would be able to take them. Finally, she decided that she would; even if

she ended up needing to ditch the clothes, the bag itself could be useful. She quickly zipped it shut and threw the strap over her head so that it rested against her neck, the bag hanging off her back.

Moving quickly but quietly, she slipped back out of her room and headed toward the stairs. It was harder to move silently with her shoes on, but she still took special care to do so. As soon as she reached the top of the stairs, she heard the sound of heavy boots quickly moving down the hallway below her. She dropped into a crouch against the banister at the top of the stairs, hoping that whoever was coming toward her wouldn't look up. One of the EMTs crossed the parlor area and slipped out the front door, disappearing outside. Kailyn knew she only had a few seconds to figure out what to do in order to hide from him when he came back; he had been walking away from her when he left, so it was easy to miss her hiding in plain sight. When he came back, however, she would be straight in his line of sight when he walked into the room.

Her plans were immediately dashed when the EMT reappeared at the doors, holding some kind of plastic orange bed that looked like a rather unwieldy surfboard. The breath Kailyn had just taken froze in her chest as she gripped the banister tightly and waited for her inevitable discovery. The EMT made his way through the doors and moved quickly toward the hallway to the kitchen, seemingly not even glancing up at the stairs.

Once he was gone, Kailyn let out the breath she had been holding and relaxed slightly, looking down at her knees for a few seconds before inhaling deeply and rising to her feet. Her feet barely made any noise as she hurried down the stairs and moved over to the front door. She spared one last glance back toward the kitchen before slipping through the crack the EMT had left when he had rushed back into the house.

As soon as she was outside, Kailyn had to squint to see against the bright morning sunlight; it reflected off the ground all around the house and the building just across the driveway from it. The fact that the Land Rover was missing vaguely registered in her mind as she glanced around the landscape before her. The road Jared had brought them in from a few days ago was a decent ways

down the dirt path that served as Mack's driveway, and there was nothing to block her from sight between the house and the road. Also, she didn't particularly feel like making that walk under the hot sun at that particular moment. The next thing her eyes settled on was the ambulance sitting in front of her, its engine still running.

"Should I...?" she muttered to herself, glancing back toward the doors behind her before grinning and turning back to the vehicle. "Oh, I think I should."

With a slight skip in her step, Kailyn hurried down the front steps of the house and across the small amount of open ground between the house and the vehicle. As she moved around the back, she closed the rear doors and patted them slightly before hurrying around the side and throwing open the driver's door.

The climb up into the cab was a little higher than she expected, so she had to grab onto the edge of the doorframe, as well as the door, to help pull herself up and into the seat. Once there, she pulled the door closed behind her and lifted the strap to her bag over her shoulder, placing the whole thing in the passenger's seat. As soon as she had deposited the bag, she leaned a little farther across the seat and pressed down the door lock on the opposite side.

"Don't need any extra passengers," she muttered, smirking slightly as she sat up straight and faced the steering wheel.

It took her several seconds to get fully acquainted with the location of each control, but she was reasonably certain that she understood where the essential ones were and what they did. She reached for the plastic stick jutting out from the steering column and pulled it toward her before moving it down. A small slider on the dashboard, just below the speedometer, moved from the "P" to the "R." Immediately, a loud siren began to sound from somewhere outside the vehicle.

"Shit!" Kailyn cursed as she glanced over toward the house.

Apparently the ambulance had an indicator for reverse in order to warn other people or vehicles around it. It was already beginning to roll backwards slightly as she put her foot down on the pedal on the right, gripping the wheel tightly with both hands

as she did. The engine roared and the ambulance shot backwards, causing Kailyn to fly forward and almost smash her chest into the steering wheel. She immediately lifted her foot off the pedal and the vehicle slowed, but did not come to a stop. Her foot instinctually jumped to the pedal just to the left of the one she had just pressed and the ambulance jerked to a halt.

After a second or two to calm her nerves, Kailyn reached back and grabbed the seatbelt to her left, pulling it across herself and clicking it into place. As she was finishing that, she glanced up to see the two EMTs and Jared running out of the front doors to the house and coming to a halt on the porch, staring at the ambulance with confused and surprised looks on their faces.

“Well, boys, it’s been fun…” Kailyn muttered, easing her foot onto the gas pedal once again, but with less gusto this time.

The ambulance began to move backward, eventually bumping across the uneven terrain just off of the driveway. She brought the vehicle to a stop once again before moving the shift from “R” to “D.” By now, the EMTs were running toward the vehicle, so she quickly spun the wheel to her left and stepped on the gas. The tires spun in the loose dirt and sand slightly, but it began to roll forward and to the left. As it gained more traction, the ambulance picked up speed and began to maneuver slightly easier. Kailyn managed to guide it back onto the driveway, where it seemed to finally settle and race along the relatively even path.

Not long after, the main gates came into view, but they were still left open, presumably from when the ambulance had arrived. Without stopping, she spun the wheel to the left and slid onto the road. One car in the oncoming lane honked at her and swerved to avoid the reckless ambulance, but Kailyn managed to get it under control.

A grin spread across her lips as an elated feeling welled up inside her. Jared may have still been alive, but she would deal with him later. Now, she had to catch up with an old friend.

## 13

### Rest Stop

September 15<sup>th</sup>, 1999  
9:37:48 A.M.  
Western Texas

The morning breeze was cold, once again, but the warmth from the bright sunlight helped negate the chill. Wisps of my hair blew in front of my face, causing me to constantly brush it aside. The cement wall of the rest stop felt hard and cold against my back as I leaned against it, my arms crossed across my chest. Groups of people, most likely families on some sort of road trip or vacation, walked past me and into the building. Children ran in unruly herds around parents who looked like they wanted nothing more than several more hours of sleep.

One small girl suddenly stopped in front of me and stared up at me. She couldn't have been more than five or six years old, and she had the bluest eyes I had ever seen. I didn't know what to do, so I simply smiled at her, hoping that it didn't come across too creepy or strange. After a second or two, her mother seemed to realize that she no longer had her child with her and she appeared from off to my right.

"Come on, it's not nice to stare at strangers," she chided, glancing up at me. "Sorry, miss."

With that, she began to lead the child away by her arm while she tried to argue her case.

"But she was pretty mommy! I just wanted to say hi to the pretty girl!"

My face grew hot and my cheeks flushed as I looked down at my feet. It suddenly occurred to me that I had been wearing the same clothes for close to two and a half days at this point. Although they looked relatively fine, perhaps a bit wrinkled in places, I was not so convinced on the smell of them. Now that I thought about it, my hair was starting to feel a little greasy, as well. I shivered slightly at the sudden realization of my squalor as I looked up from my feet once again. Just as I did, Chase appeared

to my right and punched me lightly in the shoulder.

“You gotta pay more attention, girl,” he said, grinning. “If I was trying I could have just knocked you out.”

I let out a short laugh and gave him an unconvinced look.

“I guess it’s a good thing for both our sakes neither of us was really trying, huh?” I shot back.

Chase laughed and began to swing his arms back and forth, clapping them together in front of and behind him. It looked like he couldn’t sit still, although we had been trapped in a car for going on close to 57 hours. As I looked over at him, I felt a twinge of something in my gut and at first I was afraid it was another one of my random cramp-like episodes, but then I realized it was not any sort of physical pain... or any kind of pain at all, really.

I glanced around but saw that Chase was the only one of our group who had come out of the building, yet. It almost felt like I was watching someone else take control of my body as I took a step or two closer to Chase, causing him to turn to me, seemingly expecting me to say something. Instead of speaking, I suddenly leaned in and kissed him. He jumped slightly, but I held fast until he returned it. After a second or two, I finally pulled away, a giddy feeling forming in my chest. He immediately glanced around, his body language incredibly nervous.

“Is there anyone else around here...?” he said quietly, almost incomprehensible since he was turned away from me.

“Calm down, I already checked,” I said.

He turned back to face me and I couldn’t help smiling. I burst out laughing as he attempted to raise one eyebrow, but instead managed an expression that more closely resembled surprise.

“If I had the right mind, girl...” he began to say, but I suddenly stepped very close to him looking up at him.

“What would you do?” I interrupted, grinning as I seemed to wait for some kind of response.

Before he could give one, however, I quickly raised up on my toes slightly and kissed him again, this time for just a split second. He had seemed like he was about to speak, but now he just gave me a hard look and I laughed, taking a step away from him again.



“Well how am I supposed to do anything with you interrupting me like that?” he said.

“Eh... you wouldn’t hit a girl, anyway,” I said, waving dismissively.

“Don’t push your luck there, Ryss.”

I was about to say something else but I stopped, my mouth already half-open. He seemed to sense something was off because his energy seemed to change a bit, suddenly becoming a little more nervous once again.

“What did you call me?” I asked quietly, looking over at him.

Before he could answer, though, the doors to the rest area opened behind him and Lexi and Shawn appeared, gesturing wildly and seemingly in some form of argument. Chase heard the two arguing, so he glanced over his shoulder to see who it was, and then sighed once he saw.

“I’m just saying, I think a map wouldn’t hurt!” Lexi was saying as they approached Chase and me.

“I know where we’re going just fine!” Shawn retorted.

“How? You’ve never driven out here before!”

“Children!” I said, stepping between them and pushing them apart slightly. “Let’s just take a breath or two and talk like rational adults, all right?”

They both fell silent for a few seconds before Lexi pointed past me at Shawn.

“He started it.”

I let out a growl of frustration as the other three laughed. Just then, Maya and Damien appeared from within the rest stop building and approached us.

“What did I miss?” Maya asked, looking at the situation between Lexi, Shawn, and me. “Nothing exciting, I hope.”

“Lexi and Shawn were just ‘discussing’ the need for a map,” I explained, turning to glare at each of them in turn.

“Sounds like a good idea to me,” Maya replied, shrugging.

Shawn rolled his eyes and threw his hands into the air, taking a step or two away from us. With a smug look of victory, Lexi bounded off toward the doors to the building and disappeared back inside. We all waited for about a minute before she

reappeared, map in hand. She came to a stop by hopping in front of me, holding the map up.

“Got it,” she said.

“I can see,” I replied. “Let’s go back to the car and figure this out.”

We all migrated back to the Land Rover, where Lexi opened the map and spread it out on the hood and everyone gathered around it. A large picture of Texas adorned the paper, blue and red lines running everywhere, showing the roads and highways, but I had no idea what any of them really meant.

“Okay, so where are we?” Shawn asked, leaning over the map.

“Well...” I said, turning around to look back at the rest stop building. “According to that sign, we are in Eastland.”

“Okay that is...” Lexi trailed off, dragging her finger around the map.

“There,” Chase said, pointing to a spot a little ways west of Fort Worth.

“Wow, we’ve gone a long way,” Damien remarked, looking at the distance between Flagstaff and Eastland.

“Yeah, that’s what happens when you never stop driving for two and a half straight days,” Shawn said, something like sarcasm dripping from his voice.

“Enough,” I said, giving him a hard look before glancing over at Chase. “Should we...?”

His eyes widened slightly as a look of confusion and fear seemed to come over his face.

“What?” he managed, clearly unsure of what I was thinking.

“You still have that paper, right?”

After a second or two, it seemed to finally hit him what I was referring to and he nodded, reaching into the back pocket of his jeans. A second later, he had produced a several pieces of paper that had been folded neatly into a rectangle. The others looked confused as he unfolded them and held up the first page so everyone could see.

“What’s this?” Lexi asked, taking it from his hand.

“This is a list of everyone Jared, Mack, and all those guys

have been messing with... like us," he explained, his voice growing quieter at the end.

Everyone remained silent as Lexi scanned the page over before placing it on top of the map. Everyone else leaned in to look at the sheet for several seconds before anyone spoke again.

"So... are we going after these people?" Maya asked, looking around at all of us.

"There must be fifty people on this list," Chase said, shuffling through the other pages. "There's no way we could try to get to all of these people."

"Well, some of these are relatively close by," Maya remarked, spinning the paper toward her and scanning the list.

"Where?"

She pointed to a certain entry on the list and looked up at the rest of us.

"These two are just outside Longview, which is a little ways east of here," she said. "Well, 'little' might be a loose term, but it's not as far as going to the west side of the state."

"Well, that would also be backtracking," Shawn interjected, "so I'd say that would be a bad idea. We should keep moving away from Arizona."

"I agree," I said, nodding slowly. "We can go in any sort of direction, but I think we should avoid generally heading back that way."

"So eastward to Longview it is?" Damien asked, looking around at all of us expectantly.

I looked up at the others, and we all seemed to be echoing similar gestures: shrugging and glancing around at everyone else.

"Sure, why not?"

September 15<sup>th</sup>, 1999

1:15:23 P.M.

Somewhere near Fort Worth, TX

"Okay, I'm just saying that if I don't get food soon, someone's losing a hand."

Maya instantly leaned away from Lexi and into me,

pressing me up against the door. I tried to push her away, but she simply twisted around and threw her arms around me, like a child hiding against her mother.

“Christ!” I managed, finally able to push her off me enough to breathe comfortably once again. “Shawn, we’re pulling off at the next food stop we see.”

He glanced in the rearview mirror at the three of us in the backseat and grinned.

“I don’t know, this is quite entertaining from up here,” he said.

“Wanna come back here and be a part of the fun, then?” I shot back. “I’ll take over driving for you.”

“I think I prefer it as a spectator sport, thanks,” he replied.

I rolled my eyes as I turned around to look over the backseat. Chase was sitting in the cargo area, his back against the rear door, watching the back of the seat. He must have only really been able to see our heads, but it was clear that he was listening to what was going on by the grin on his face.

“How about you?” I asked.

“I’m good back here, thanks,” he replied.

“Are you hungry, too?” Lexi asked, also turning around to look back at him.

“A little, maybe,” he shrugged.

Lexi let out a growl of frustration and leaned back against the doorframe.

“Why is no one else feeling my struggle?”

“I’m kinda hungry…” Damien spoke up from the passenger seat, raising his hand slightly as he spoke.

“See, I’m not alone!” Lexi said, suddenly looking excited.

I suddenly became aware that we were turning off the highway and onto a ramp that appeared to be leading to another rest stop. The first thing I noticed about the building was the large golden “M” on the roof of one side of the building. Even with the limited access I had to TV while growing up with Jared, I recognized what it stood for.

“If you can last thirty more seconds, we’re here,” Shawn said, pulling the car into a parking space and bringing us to a jerking halt.

I was thrown forward slightly, but the seatbelt prevented me from flying out of my seat while my arms instinctually flew up in front of me to brace myself against the seat in front of me. There were general groans of annoyance and disapproval from everyone else as Shawn killed the engine and released his seatbelt.

“C’mon kids, lunchtime,” he said, glancing back at us and grinning before opening his door and hopping out of the vehicle.

I released my seatbelt and followed suit, holding the door for Maya to follow behind me. As I moved around to the back of the car, the door was already opening as Lexi had beaten me to it. Chase clambered out of the trunk and stretched his arms above his head, groaning.

“There may be a bit more legroom back there, but it sure as hell is not quite as comfortable,” he said, pulling his shirt down slightly as he stood normally once again.

“I find it slightly comforting back there, actually,” I said.

“Oh?”

“Yeah, I can lie down and take a nap or just kind of spread out, you know?”

Chase just laughed and shook his head as he began to turn to follow the others into the rest stop.

“If you say so...”

I narrowed my eyes at him, but he wasn’t looking to see me do it, so I gave up and fell in step beside him. Lexi was practically dragging Shawn into the rest stop behind her, while Damien and Maya followed a little ways behind, most likely out of fear of being manhandled by her. When Chase and I reached the door, he pulled it open and gestured for me to go ahead of him, so I quickly slipped inside and turned right to head toward the food court area. Just before we reached the entrance, a row of newspaper machines happened to catch my eye and I changed course to walk over to them.

“What are you doing?” Chase asked, following behind me.

“I’m just curious what the date is...” I said, crouching down in front of the metal box and looking at the paper pressed up against the glass.

It took me several seconds to find the date hiding in the upper right hand corner, just beneath the name of the paper itself.

“September 15<sup>th</sup>...” I muttered. “Why does that sound familiar?”

The date did seem to stand out to me for some reason, although I couldn’t quite figure out why. Suddenly, it hit me in a rush. Of course, it was the only date I would have possibly known or really had a reason to remember.

“Holy shit!” I said, standing up and taking a step or two backwards.

“What’s the matter?” Chase asked, looking down at the newspaper box with a concerned look on his face.

“It’s my birthday...”

He suddenly turned to look back at me as a smile began to spread across my face.

“I almost forgot it!” I said.

The reason why I was suddenly feeling so excited escaped me at the moment, but I quickly realized that I could care less. I began to laugh uncontrollably as Chase smiled, too. By now, the others had stopped and were staring back at us like we were crazy.

“Guys!” I shouted, hurrying toward them. “Do you know what today is?”

“Uh... no,” Shawn said. “Should I?”

“It’s my birthday!” I said excitedly, bouncing slightly with all of the energy that seemed to have come from nowhere.

“Really?” Lexi said.

“Yeah, September 15<sup>th</sup>, that means I’m... shit, what year is it?”

Chase walked over to the newspaper box and leaned down to look at the date once again.

“1999,” he called from across the room as he stood up and began to walk toward us.

“Okay, so I’m... eighteen!”

The others laughed slightly, but I didn’t care if they were laughing at me or with me at this point.

“Congratulations,” Lexi said, “welcome to the club.”

“You survived,” Shawn added, “good job.”

I rolled my eyes and waved them off.

“I don’t care what you guys think, I’m excited,” I said.

“We can tell,” Maya replied.

“Hey, you know what we should do?” Lexi said, obviously feigning excitement. “How about we celebrate with some food?”

The rest of us laughed as she smirked and spun on her heel, resuming her path to the food court. We slowly fell in behind her, making our way to the ordering line at the McDonald’s we had seen from outside. After several seconds of scanning the menu board in silence, Lexi turned to look down the line at the rest of us.

“How much cash do we have left?” she asked.

I reached into my back pocket and pulled out the few bills that remained from what he had managed to scrounge at Jared’s. The measly amount did not seem to bode well for our options, but I counted it anyway.

“Seven dollars,” I replied.

Everyone remained silent, looking around at each other. All of us knew that this was definitely not good for us, yet we had no way of getting any more money. It’s not like any of us had bank accounts or some kind of job to earn any. At least, we didn’t have any options for jobs that were legal or any of us would agree to doing.

“Guess it’s the dollar menu for us, huh?” Shawn said, laughing dryly.

Five minutes later, we all had our double cheeseburgers from the dollar menu and were sitting around two small tables pulled together in the middle of the food court seating area. Despite the depressing fact that this meant we had pretty much no money left, we all enjoyed the food to a reasonable degree. Once I had finished, I crumpled up the wrapper and threw it at Chase, who jumped slightly when it hit him in the chest. I laughed as he glared at me, grabbing the crumpled-up wrapper and throwing it back at me. Lexi gave each of us a stern look before she crumpled hers up and threw it at me, as well.

“Hey!” I shouted, feigning shock. “Why is everyone turning on me, now?”

“Because you’re the birthday girl,” she said. “These are our presents to you.”

With that, everyone else proceeded to throw their wrappers at me as I raised my arms to protect myself. Once they had stopped, I pretended to pout as I looked around at all of them.

They all laughed as I crossed my arms across my chest and leaned back in my seat, pulling my legs in under it, as well.

“So my question is... if we have no money left, how do we expect to keep driving the car?” Shawn asked, looking around at the rest of us.

The silence was telling: no one had a good answer to that. We had not thought too much about this part of our escape plan, and it was beginning to show. Money was one of the last things on our minds in regards to surviving once we had left the house in Arizona, but it was becoming apparent that the rest of the world did not operate on this same principle. The revolver stowed away in my backpack suddenly came to mind, but I was reasonably certain I did not want to involve it in any plan for getting money. We weren't quite that desperate, yet... I hoped.

“What if we go, all Bonnie and Clyde?” Lexi asked, voicing an idea somewhat similar to what I had just been thinking.

“Just how do you plan on doing that?” Shawn shot back. “It's a miracle the cops haven't followed us here from that incident back at the gas station a day or so ago.”

I glared at him, but otherwise remained silent. It was hard to believe that had only been a day ago, to me. Time seemed to be stretching out longer and longer out here.

“Getting arrested might put a little bit of a hindrance on our plans,” he continued.

“Would it?” Damien suddenly asked, surprising everyone slightly; when no one spoke, he started to explain. “We're looking to get away from Mack, that Jared guy you mentioned, and all those guys... being under police custody would be a pretty good way to make sure they couldn't get close to us.”

“Somehow the idea of going into another, smaller cell doesn't appeal to me,” Shawn spat, crossing his arms across his chest and leaning back in his seat.

“Plus, as Amaryss has reminded us, some of us are over eighteen,” Chase broke in. “If we got arrested, they wouldn't just try to call our parents and hold us overnight, they'd just straight-up arrest us.”

“Well, I guess... yeah...” Damien said quietly, looking defeated.



After another short period of silence, I cleared my throat and leaned forward slightly.

“I think our plan to investigate those other kids might have to be put on hold,” I said quietly.

The general mood of the group seemed to darken as everyone came to realize it, as well.

“Although, like Damien mentioned, I think we need to kind of lie low and disappear for a bit so Jared and all of his ‘friends’ can’t find us.”

Everyone slowly nodded in agreement, but still said nothing. Finally, after a rather extended period of tense, awkward silence, Lexi cleared her throat and spoke up.

“So, where do we want to go from here?”

I sighed, trying to think of an answer, but they all escaped me. My gaze began to wander around the room as we all waited for someone to offer a suggestion. Suddenly, something on the front page of a paper a man was reading a few tables away from us caught my eye. It was a picture of a man with somewhat short grey hair in a dark suit shaking hands with another man in a dark suit and above it was the headline, “Bush Visits New York on Campaign Trail.” Instantly, an idea appeared in my head and I grinned, turning to look back at the rest of the group.

“What about New York?”

The others stared at me for several seconds, and I had a distinct feeling that they were about to shoot down my idea.

“How the hell do you think we’re going to get there?” Shawn asked. “We just said the car can’t last forever...”

“There’s more than one way to get to New York.” I said.

“Like what?”

“There’s probably some trains...”

Shawn ran his hands through his hair, inhaling deeply. I could see his jaw clenching and unclenching and I could tell that he was ready to completely discredit my idea.

“This isn’t the 1920s, Amaryss,” he said quietly. “It’s not so easy to just... hop on a boxcar and ride it across the country. I think we need to look a little more locally.”

I took a deep breath to keep myself from shouting or throwing things at Shawn before turning to Chase.

“Can I see that list?”

He gave me a confused look but pulled the folded paper out of his pocket and handed it to me. I took it and unfolded the pages, laying them on the table in front of me and spreading them out.

“So I’ve looked these over a few times,” I said, looking for the specific pages I wanted, “and I’ve noticed that there seems to be a particular... concentration in certain places.”

“Let me guess, like in New York?” Shawn said, sounding tired.

“Yes, actually,” I replied, glaring at him, “and some in... a few other places.”

“Like what other places?”

“It’s not important!” I said, my voice rising much louder than I had intended.

The group fell silent after my last sudden outburst, everyone’s eyes on me. I sighed and ran my hand back through my hair, inwardly cringing at how greasy it felt. Finally, I shook my head and stood up.

“Never mind, forget I ever said anything,” I said, walking away from the table toward the doors leading to the parking lot.

I shouldered one open, not looking to see if anyone was in the way, and walked out onto the small patio-like area set up outside the main rest stop building. Small picnic tables were set up all around me with families eating and talking loudly at them; most people here seemed to be in decently good moods. I had to get away from all of these people for a minute, if only to not seem strange for being the unknown teenage girl standing around by herself.

I wandered a little ways away from the doors and found myself a little more alone than I had back near the picnic tables. A few people still sat at the tables near me, but they were nowhere near as loud and rambunctious as those I had just seen. I found an empty table and stopped beside it, debating whether I wanted to sit down or not. Too much energy was coursing through my body at that particular moment, so I decided to forgo taking a seat, opting for pacing back and forth slightly in an attempt to expend it.

The idea to go to New York had been a rather spur of a moment thing, yet it had already wormed its way deep inside my

mind. It was like something was compelling me... telling me that we *should* get there. Exactly why, I had no idea, but I figured that would be something I would figure out later. Something about one of the names on the list had got my attention, but I didn't know for sure, so I had said nothing to the group. I was keeping it in my back pocket, though, as a trump card.

Just then, my thoughts were interrupted by something gently touching my shoulder, but I still jumped almost a foot in the air. I spun to find Chase standing behind me, recoiling slightly in surprise. I immediately relaxed and shook my head, laughing slightly.

"You've got to stop doing that," I said, laughing slightly.

"Yeah, well, you'd think I'd at least be used to it by now," he replied. "At least this time you didn't throw me to the ground."

I immediately felt myself blushing as I turned away, laughing. After a second or two, I managed to calm myself and I took a deep breath, turning back to face Chase again. He was simply standing there, waiting for me to collect myself, an amused smirk on his face.

"You good?" he asked.

I grinned, nodding as I brushed some stray strands of hair back behind one ear.

"So... what's up with New York?" he asked.

"I... don't have a good answer for that," I replied, shrugging. "Just... a girl's intuition, I suppose."

He laughed, slowly taking a seat on the picnic bench beside us and letting out a sigh.

"So it's not because you heard about the bright lights and the glamor of the city?" he said.

"No," I said, "there's something more or less legitimate as a reason for it."

"Then what is it?"

I opened my mouth to speak, but found that no words were coming to mind. My mind raced to come up with something that sounded feasible, and before I knew it, I blurted out the one thing that had been on my mind about New York since I had looked over the list of names.

"Shawn's name is on the list in New York."

Chase pulled a double take before staring at me, an unreadable expression fixed upon his face. He slowly rose to his feet as I waited nervously, unsure of how he would respond.

“Are you sure?”

“Well, it says Shawn Hale on the list, and that’s him!” I said, gesturing vaguely toward the building.

“Okay, okay!” Chase said, raising his hands as if in an attempt to calm me down. “I just wanted to check. So what does his name mean on the list?”

“Well... for one, that he’s been... ‘altered,’” I said, tracing quotes in the air, “but we kind of already figured that.”

“Okay... so what else does it mean?”

“I’m assuming... that’s where he’s from,” I offered.

“What do you mean by that?” Chase asked, looking confused.

“Well, it’s obvious we all didn’t come from the same place,” I said. “I lived with Jared for eighteen years before I met you and Lexi, in a bunch of different locations. You said yourself that you had been somewhere else before California. I think it’s safe to assume that we all originally came from somewhere that wasn’t any of these places.”

Chase just nodded, rubbing his chin slowly as he stared vacantly off into space just over my right shoulder. Just before I was about to speak up to ask if he was still paying attention, he let out a heavy sigh and let his hand fall to his side.

“When are you going to tell him?”

The thought had occurred to me, but I had hoped that I would have a little more time to figure that part of the plan out. Of course I felt guilty about keeping Shawn from knowing, but I needed it as a last resort, if everything else I said failed.

“Eventually...” I finally mumbled, looking down at my feet and shoving my hands in my back pockets.

“Why would you keep that a secret?” Chase asked quietly, moving a step or two closer to me. “It’s not like he’s on Jared’s side... and we didn’t just meet him, like Damien.”

“I know, it’s just—”

“If you were in his place, wouldn’t you want to know?”

“Yes, but—”

“So why would you—”

“Because it was my idea, and he shot me down!” I finally snapped, shouting far louder than I had intended.

Both of us remained silent, staring at each other, as my chest heaved, my breaths coming in quick pants as my heart pounded in my ears.

“Because... I’m petty, I don’t know!”

I whirled around, burying my face in my hands as I tried to hold back a single, hot tear from escaping between the eyelids of my right eye. It finally rolled down my cheek, but I pressed my hand against my face a little more firmly, stopping it in its tracks. I could feel a ball of anger, rage, and frustration in my chest, like a basketball trying to force its way through my ribcage. I just wanted to scream and let it all out. I wanted, no *I needed*, to do something to free myself from this mental anguish for just a minute or two.

“Amaryss...” Chase’s voice came from right behind me, his low timbre soft to the point where it almost seemed soothing.

I felt his hands gently lay upon my shoulders and begin to turn me around. I slowly took my hands away from my face as I allowed him to maneuver me. He was standing no more than a foot away from me, his grip gentle yet just firm enough that he seemed to be holding me in place.

“You’re not petty,” he said quietly, “you’re just headstrong.”

“That’s not helping...” I said quietly, my voice far raspier than I had expected.

“You have been the entire time I’ve known you. It’s not a bad thing,” he said, his tone a little more urgent than before. “You know what you want, and you will damn sure try to make sure things turn out that way.”

I wasn’t sure how to respond to that, so I simply avoided looking into Chase’s eyes.

“And thank God someone acts like that, because if everyone was like me... well...” he paused, laughing quietly, “we’d get nowhere fast. You’re the one who came to us with the idea of escaping, and look where we are.”

“Stuck in a McDonald’s in the middle of Texas with no

idea where the hell to go?" I answered.

He shook his head and hung it slightly as I laughed.

Suddenly, he looked back up at me, raising his eyebrows slightly.

"There it is," he said.

"There what is?" I asked.

"That smile of yours," he replied. "I was hoping it would make a comeback soon."

I shoved him slightly as he laughed, letting go of my shoulders. It seemed strange, but I kind of wish he hadn't let go. His grip had almost been like a security blanket, shielding me from everything else around us. Now I found myself thrust back into the hot midday sun of central Texas with a bunch of screaming children and people moving about around the picnic area.

"So... are we going to tell him, now?" Chase asked, looking at me with a curious expression on his face.

I sighed, rubbing one temple with my fingers before nodding.

"Yeah, I'll tell him," I said.

"Good, now let's head back inside."

We made our way back through the crowds of people flooding into the building for a quick bathroom or lunch break, herding their unruly herds of children and, in some cases, adults. As soon as we entered the dining room area, I was struck by how much louder it seemed than before. The tables were beginning to fill up around our group, who seemed to still be deep in conversation. As we approached, I noticed that the paper with the names was still on the table in front of them. When we reached the table, the others glanced up at us, and I could see the irritation already forming on Shawn's face.

"Did you have a nice walk?" he asked, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

"Okay, listen," I said, trying to take command of the conversation before he could launch on some sort of tirade against me, "there's another.... reason why I suggested New York."

"Oh? Well, enlighten us," Shawn said, turning in his seat to face me.

I took a deep breath, trying to find a good way to phrase it, but eventually decided that simplicity was the key.

“Your name shows up on that list.”

His angry expression faltered slightly, but he quickly tried to recover.

“W-what do you mean?”

“Your name is on the list from New York,” I said.

I grabbed the stack of papers and flipped through them until I found the section from New York. Once I had it, I pulled the paper from the stack and scanned it for a few seconds before placing it on the table and pointing to a specific point on it. The rest of the group leaned in to see where I was pointing. After a second or two, Shawn leaned back in his seat, running his hands through his hair.

“So... what does this mean, exactly?” Lexi asked, looking up at me.

“The list tells about all of the people that Jared and his friends ‘worked on,’” I said, my voice cracking slightly on the last two words. “The cities are where everyone came from, as far as I can work out.”

“Is my name on that list?” Lexi asked, suddenly becoming excited.

“I think all of ours should be,” I replied, looking down at the stack of papers in my hand.

“So why do we have to go just where Shawn’s is?” she continued, looking somewhat agitated.

“Well, because I haven’t been able to find any of us on that list, other than Shawn,” I said.

“I thought you just said—”

“I said we *should* be,” I said. “I remember seeing our names at one point, but... I don’t know what happened to them.”

As I was speaking, Maya was scanning the page of names when suddenly she pointed to something on the page.

“Damien, you said you don’t know your last name, right?” she said, looking over at him.

“Yeah, as far as I know,” he said, looking a little surprised at her suddenly calling him out.

“Well... how sure are you that your name is Damien, too?”

“It’s my name, I know that,” he said. “Why do you ask?”

“Well, because there’s a name on here that looks a lot like

yours..." she said, frowning slightly.

"What is it? Let me see," he said, suddenly seeming rather interested.

She spun the paper around so he could read it, but kept her finger pointing to the same spot.

"Dominic Matteo?" he read aloud before looking up at Maya.

"I mean, it's kinda close to Damien..."

"Close enough that if someone wasn't sure it could be linked," Lexi said, giving Damien a probing look.

"I know my own name, okay?" he said, sounding rather defensive.

"It's okay, I wasn't accusing you of anything," she said, leaning away slightly and raising her hands up between them.

"So, guys," I said, cutting in before anyone could begin arguing again, "what's our vote now?"

Everyone fell silent, glancing around at each other, except for Shawn, he was staring vacantly off into space behind me, clearly lost in thought. Finally, he was the one to step up and speak first out of everyone else.

"I'm thinking New York all of the sudden..."

"Of course you are," Lexi huffed, rolling her eyes.

"What?" he shot back, snapping out of his trance-like state and spinning in his seat to look at her.

"You were all against it until suddenly your name pops up on a sheet relating to New York," she said. "What happened to 'staying local' because we didn't have a car?"

"You know what? I was wrong," he said. "Yeah, what Amaryss told us has me wondering why my name is on there, and what I'd find... but what else would we be doing? Right now, we just keep running eastward... but what's our end goal? We haven't seen anyone following us, so we can't argue that we're waiting until we feel like we've lost anyone potentially chasing us."

Lexi looked like she was about to argue back, but she simply sighed and slouched in her seat, looking somewhat deflated. No one else stepped up to say anything, so I nodded slowly and tapped my knuckle on the table slightly.



“All right, so New York it is?”

No one really answered in the affirmative, or at all, so I took that as the closest I was going to get to an agreement.

“Okay, then I think it’s time we get going,” I continued.

Everyone slowly nodded and got to their feet. Chase picked up the wrappers from the floor beside where I had been sitting earlier when they had all thrown them at me. As we headed out the doors onto the patio seating area, he threw them into a trash can before holding the door for me.

“After you, birthday girl,” he said, grinning.

I narrowed my eyes at him and slowed down as I went to pass him. Suddenly, I quickly poked him in the gut and he cringed slightly as I skipped out the door, laughing as I did. After a few steps, I felt him jab me in the back and I jumped slightly, taking a few quick steps forward as I arched my back. Chase appeared beside me a second later, grinning.

“Payback is sweet,” he said.

“It’s my birthday, you’re not supposed to torture me!”

“I don’t know, that seems like the perfect opportunity to,” he said. “It’ll make you feel more alive... you know, so you feel like you’ve earned those eighteen years.”

“Oh, believe me, I’ve earned them,” I said, tossing some of my hair back over my shoulder.

He just laughed and shook his head as we kept following the others. Once we reached the car, I skipped around to the driver’s seat, cutting Shawn off. He just raised one eyebrow at me as I held my hand out for the keys. Finally, he sighed and dropped them in my open palm. My hand quickly closed into a fist around them before I spun around and unlocked the door, opening it and pulling myself inside the car. I hit the button on the door to unlock all of the other doors in the car so everyone else could get in before slipping the key into the ignition and starting it.

The engine caught quickly and came to life with a rumble. I glanced down at the gas meter on the dashboard as I pulled my seatbelt on. The needle appeared to be just above three-quarters full. Now that I knew that this was our last tank of gas, it suddenly felt like we were wasting a great deal of it by just sitting here while everyone climbed in. My fingers began to instinctually drum on

the wheel as I waited for Lexi to climb in the trunk and pull the door closed. Once she had, I shifted the car into reverse and began to back out of the parking space, turning the wheel as I went. Suddenly, a hand shot over from the passenger seat and gripped the wheel, stopping me from turning.

I jumped and jammed on the brakes, bringing us to a jerking halt to several moans and groans from the backseat. Chase was gripping the wheel, leaning over from the passenger seat, a slightly panicked look on his face.

“What was that for?” I asked.

“You were about to run into that car right next to us,” he said, nodding toward something off to my left.

I turned to look out the window and saw that the front left end of the car was only about a foot away from the one beside us. I sighed and straightened the wheel out, easing off the brake and letting the car roll backwards out of the space and into the small aisle between the parking spaces. Once the front end of the Land Rover had cleared the bumper of the car beside us, I turned the wheel sharply. Using the mirrors, I made sure we didn’t back straight into a car behind us before shifting into drive and slowly pulling away, just barely missing the car in front of us as we swung around.

Within minutes after dealing with the parking lot ordeal, we were back on the highway and cruising along. Shawn and Maya were looking over the map in the back seat, attempting to be navigators for us, but it was hard when we had no idea where the rest stop even was on the map. We were able to follow a general idea of where we were going, but we were waiting until we saw a sign that told us which highway we were on. A green side on the right side of the road was coming toward us, and I quickly glanced over at it.

“Guys, that says Highway 16 is coming up in an exit or two,” I said, glancing in the rearview mirror at the two navigators.

They quickly scanned the map for several seconds before Maya jabbed a point on it with one finger.

“Found it!” she said. “Okay... don’t get on that one, because it goes north and south from here, and that’s nowhere we want to go. So if that’s coming up, that means we might be on...”

“Twenty?” Shawn supplied, as I heard him point to somewhere else on the map.

“That would seem to be true...”

Just then, I noticed a set of road signs hanging from a metal structure over the road ahead of us, indicating which lanes were for which highway or street name was associated with upcoming exits. The left lane or two had a sign for Highway 20 over them, while the others had a sign for 16.

“I think that sign says we’re on the twenty, or at least we will be soon,” I said glancing in the mirror at Maya and Shawn again.

“Awesome, now we know where we are, at least somewhat,” she said. “Although... this is going to take us through Fort Worth and Dallas.”

After several moments and no one had said anything, Lexi voiced what most of us were thinking.

“And...?”

“They’re big cities; it might slow down travel time,” she said.

Everyone slowly nodded, thinking about what that meant in regards to our quickly dwindling gas tank.

“Well, on the other hand, that would mean it would be a better place to find another way to catch a ride somewhere,” I offered. “There are more people, more trucks, more trains, all of that...”

“That is also true...” Maya replied.

“How much gas is left in the tank?” Shawn asked.

“Uh... just about three quarters of a tank,” I replied, glancing down at the meter for just a second before instantly returning my attention to the road.

“Well, I’m no master at the scale of this map,” he said, “but I’m thinking we won’t run out of gas before or even near those cities.”

“Well, we don’t necessarily have to run out of gas,” I said. “We could just abandon this and look there, since our chances would most likely be higher, anyway.”

After several seconds of silence, I glanced in the rearview mirror again.

“So what’s the group vote on that?”

“Sounds like a good idea to me,” Lexi called from the back. Shawn shrugged and Maya nodded. Damien simply shrugged, looking a little unsure of himself.

“*That kid really isn’t used to dealing with people, is he?*” I thought to myself as I glanced over toward Chase.

“What about you?” I asked as I turned my attention back to the road.

“Sounds like a good idea to me,” he replied.

“All right, it’s settled: we’ll ditch the car up ahead and hitchhike, hop on a train, or do something that will get us to New York.”

With that, the car fell silent. I wondered if everyone was pondering the gravity of what we had just planned to do as much as I was. Taking the car and driving off in the middle of the night had been a big step for us, but now that we were contemplating trying to get around like some kind of roving pack of bums made me feel at least a little nervous. This had not been what I, nor anyone in our group, I suppose, had expected. So far, freedom had not been as mystical and amazing as it had once seemed.

So far, freedom had been a bitch.

## 14

### Eastward and Upward

September 15<sup>th</sup>, 1999  
12:34:28 P.M.  
Fort Worth, TX

The general rattling, along with the slowing of the hum of the tires on the road, told Kailyn that the bus was coming to a stop. The compartment was dark, lit only by faint lines of light coming through the cracks around the panels facing the outside. The sunlight came through the small cracks, casting beams against the walls and ceilings of the enclosed space. She began to stir, stiffness well-settled into her limbs. The bus came to a stop, but it could have just been another stoplight.

A few seconds later, she heard the sound of voices outside and turned her head toward the bars of light to her left. The voices seemed to be coming from just outside, which instantly made her tense up. Her right hand closed around her bag, pulling it closer to her. Moments later, she heard the sound of a lock opening and then one of the panels farther down past her feet swung up, letting in a deluge of sunlight. She rolled onto her side, struggling to move amidst the luggage she had made her bed.

Another panel opened a little closer to her as she prepared herself to move at a moment's notice. The panel next to the one just in front of her opened. Her heart rate skyrocketed as she took a deep breath. A moment later, she heard the sound of someone trying to open the lock, only a foot or two in front of her face. Finally, the lock opened and she heard the sound of the panel beginning to swing open, light flooding the compartment.

“What in the hell...?”

Kailyn didn't wait to see who had spoken, she simply scrambled forward, rolling out of the luggage compartment of the bus and onto her feet, staggering a step or two as she regained her balance. The sunlight seemed blinding to her, so she blinked rapidly in an attempt to clear her vision. People were beginning to talk excitedly, and one person was shouting. He began to walk

toward her as she started to back up.

“Who the hell are you?” he asked, stepping up to Kailyn.

“No one important,” she replied, slipping the strap to her bag over her head and across her chest, pushing the bag around so that it rested against her back.

“What the hell were you doing in there?” he demanded.

“Doesn’t matter, I’m out now,” she said, turning to leave.

“Hey!” the man said, grabbing her arm and yanking her to a stop. “No, you’re not.”

Kailyn whirled to look back at the man, fire in her eyes. He wasn’t looking at her, though, he was looking back toward the main bus station behind them, calling to one of the police officers outside the station.

“Let go of me,” she said quietly, menace creeping into her voice.

She saw a man in a black uniform beginning to walk toward the bus, a curious expression on his face. Kailyn knew she couldn’t hesitate any longer. Before anyone could comprehend what had happened, the man’s arm snapped at an extremely unnatural angle as he let out a bloodcurdling scream of pain. Other people began to scream, as well, and pointed to him, but as the officer reached the scene, Kailyn was nowhere to be found.

As the crowd began to draw in to see who was screaming and why, Kailyn slipped through them, making her just about the only person going in the opposite direction. She managed to break free from the crowd of people and immediately began running toward the street in front of the bus station. Once she reached it, she paused for a moment on the sidewalk and looked around, trying to get her bearings. The sign on the front of the station told her she was in Fort Worth, but that meant little to nothing to her, except that she had made it to Texas.

It wouldn’t take long for more police to begin showing up to look for the girl who had just assaulted the bus driver, so she knew she had to think fast in order to figure out where she would go to stay one step ahead of them. Amaryss and the others had a head start on her, but she didn’t know where they were heading. Generally eastward seemed like a reasonable assumption, and therefore Fort Worth or Dallas would make a good first major

stopping point. The only thing she hadn't really thought through before sneaking aboard the coach bus was how she would know if the others were in the city or not.

As she was trying to think where to go, the realization of what she had just done hit her. She had snapped that man's arm without even touching him... and without even thinking twice about it. The knee-jerk reaction to attack him in order to get away had been like instinct to her. She closed her eyes and shook her head, running her hands through her hair. After several deep breaths, she forced herself to focus on the situation at hand again as the sound of distant sirens began to crescendo.

In another split-second decision, she opted to run for the strip mall across the street. She dodged a car to the sound of a blaring horn, but kept running. A few seconds later, she reached the shops and hurried in the front door of the first one she saw; it turned out to be some kind of second-hand clothing store. Several patrons looked surprised at the flustered girl who had just burst in off the street, but Kailyn ignored them as she slipped deeper into the store.

It didn't take her long to make her way through the racks of clothes until she found a door marked "Employees Only." Glancing back quickly to make sure no employees were right behind her, she pushed the door open and almost ran into a woman in a turquoise vest with her name on it. The woman jumped and let out a shout of surprise before quickly recovering and trying to look as composed as she could.

"Excuse me, miss," she said, "shoppers are not allowed back here."

"Oh, bite me," Kailyn said, pushing past her.

"Miss!" the woman called after her, but Kailyn ignored her.

She moved quickly through the hallways until she came to the main storeroom. Boxes lined the walls, while clothes sat out on tables in the center of the room, ready to be tagged and placed on shelves. The brown, metallic door at the back of the room with a sign that read "delivery entrance" on it immediately caught her eye. She hurried between the rows of tables and cardboard boxes to the door and leaned into it, pushing her whole weight against it.

The door opened and she quickly began to walk across the

cracked asphalt. The loading dock was empty except for her and a truck about 100 feet to her left. Just ahead of her was a fence which backed up onto another parking lot. The sirens were incredibly loud now; they must have been at the bus station. Kailyn turned back to look at the fence and saw the barbed wire running across the top of it. She let out a growl of frustration and began to walk along it, looking for another way to get past that didn't involve shredding herself. After she had gone about fifty feet, she came across a section that seemed to have been tied back together. Someone had obviously cut it once upon a time, and whoever had repaired it had simply tied the chain links back together.

She looked up and down the fence a little ways in either direction, but didn't see any gates or other breaks in the chain link. A thought suddenly occurred to her and she turned to face the mended fence once again. Taking a deep breath, she concentrated on the ties used on the chain link fence. She found herself willing them, almost *urging*, the ties to come undone. As she watched, the metal ties slowly began to unwrap from around the chain links until they finally clattered to the ground, leaving the links cut open. She let out the breath she didn't realize she had been holding, her heart pounding in her ears as she panted slightly. Her vision swam for a moment, but she blinked rapidly and it cleared in a second or two.

Kailyn took a step forward, grabbing hold of one side of the cut section of fence. She pushed it forward, creating a gap that wasn't very large, but she forced it as wide as she could before trying to step through. She had almost made it through the gap, when the section of fence in her hand slipped and she was pushed forward slightly as she tried to slip through the hole. A sharp pain suddenly exploded from her stomach and she let sucked in air through her teeth, resisting the urge to shout. She pushed the fence back with her shoulder and managed to slip through the rest of the hole before looking down at her abdomen. A cut now ran across her stomach, a thin line of blood appearing through the hole in her shirt that a section of the cut chain link had left. She gingerly touched the cut with her fingers but immediately pulled them away at the sudden stinging sensation.



“Shit,” she said, looking around the large open parking lot.

She didn’t have anything in the form of medicine or bandages, and she was not too trusting of how clean the fence was. With one last heavy sigh, she turned and began jogging across the open space. The lot seemed to go on forever, but she finally reached the other side and hopped the small barrier that was lowered across the entrance.

After about five minutes, Kailyn found herself almost completely lost somewhere in the middle of Fort Worth. She had come to a stop in a park, falling onto a bench in fatigue. Sweat was rolling down her back and the sides of her face. She pulled the bag’s strap over her head as she let out another sigh. The cut on her stomach burned slightly as her sweat rolled into it, and it had generally been hurting as she had been exerting. By now, she figured it was safe to assume that the police were either giving up their hunt or had been unable to identify her. Also, since she had taken such a roundabout route to get to this park, she had even less of an idea of where to go to head off Amaryss and the others.

Her initial plan when she had stolen the ambulance back in Arizona was to head after Amaryss after their confrontation over what to do with Jared, but she had very little idea of what she would actually do if she found her. Part of her just wanted to talk to her, find out exactly what had caused her to freeze up that night. Jared had been right there, and they had the chance to get back for everything, but she had refused. It was like she had betrayed her, after all those years. Kailyn had almost gone as far as to think of Amaryss as her sister, but now she was starting to feel like maybe she had betrayed her.

Something within Kailyn began to well up, building in her chest like a tight feeling. At first, she wasn’t sure what it was, but then it began to come into focus. It was anger. Part of her wanted to show Amaryss why she was wrong. Part of her wanted to show that weakness couldn’t be tolerated in this world, now.

Just then, she heard someone sit on the bench beside her and she snapped out of her reverie, glancing over at the other person. She immediately pulled a double take when she realized that it seemed like an exact copy of herself was sitting there. She turned her head to look at her and grinned.

“Hello, lovely,” she said.

Kailyn’s heart began to pound as she found herself unable to form words.

“Struck speechless?” she asked. “I can’t blame you. Seeing *this* here all of the sudden must be quite the shocking experience, like meeting a celebrity.”

The copy of herself leaned in toward her.

“I can assure you, this is exactly how you look,” she said quietly, “which is, to say, pretty damn good.”

“How are you here...?” Kailyn said quietly. “It’s not even like a mirror this time...”

“No, it’s not,” the copy said. “I just figured it was a good time to check in, since you seemed to be in the middle of quite a debate at the moment.”

“This is fucking insane...” Kailyn said, turning away, only to find the copy now standing directly in front of her.

She leaned forward, placing her hands on Kailyn’s knees and getting within less than a foot of her face. She instinctually jumped and leaned backwards, which only caused the copy to laugh at her.

“Still so jumpy,” she chided. “Do you get this scared of your own reflection in the mirror?”

Kailyn remained silent, trying to calm herself a bit and slow her pounding heartbeat.

“Okay, reflections don’t usually walk around and talk to you outside of the mirror, I’ll give you that,” she said, shrugging.

“What are you doing here?” Kailyn asked quietly, her voice barely above a whisper in volume.

“What’s that?” the copy said, sliding onto the bench beside her and leaning toward her. “I couldn’t hear you.”

Seeing a copy of herself on the bench beside her and speaking to her was one thing, but it actually felt as if someone was sitting beside her now. She could feel the vague sensation of body heat and the bench had moved slightly, as if weight had been applied. It was becoming harder and harder for Kailyn to force herself to calm down in this situation, so she resorted to looking around the park.

“The old cold shoulder, eh?” the copy said, laughing.

“Okay, fine, I’ll do the talking then. You’re questioning if I’m really here or not... well, I guess that’s a mystery for me to know and you to find out. However, that’s not what’s important right now. We have to figure out what you’re doing here.”

“We?” Kailyn said, finally turning to look over at the copy beside her.

“Well, you appeared to be getting nowhere fast and I am inside your head, after all, so let’s talk it out,” she said, turning sideways and crossing one leg under the other as she rested her arm on the back of the bench. “So you left Jared’s place in a hurry, and didn’t have much time to plan, so you took the quickest route you could justify, and now you’re in Texas. Amaryss probably came this way, too, you reckon, so you’re thinking about possibly trying to intercept her here. However, Fort Worth and Dallas are pretty big cities, so how the hell would you know where she is?”

“Congratulations, you just listed off everything I thought of in the past ten minutes,” Kailyn said, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

“I’m getting to my point, now shush,” the copy said, holding a finger to her lips for a moment before letting her arm fall on the bench once again. “Well, you know they took Jared’s car when they left, so they’re coming by highway, much like you did. Now, that car can’t last forever, especially if they don’t have any money for gas... or better yet, if Jared reported it stolen. So...”

“They’re going to try to ditch it here,” Kailyn said, finishing the copy’s sentence.

“Good! You’re starting to think the right way now.”

“So if I needed another way to keep moving across the country without a car...” she said, her voice trailing off as she stared off into space.

“I doubt the bus, like you did, would be there first choice,” the copy said, tapping her fingers on the back of the bench.

The vibrations reached Kailyn, causing her to shiver at the thought.

“Oh, calm down,” the copy said. “You can stop feeling so unnerved about it.”

“I’m sorry, but you shouldn’t exist right now,” Kailyn

snapped back.

“Perhaps I don’t,” she countered, “maybe it’s all just an elaborate hallucination inside your head.”

“Perhaps this is all one big coma dream after the fight at Mack’s and I’m still asleep in Arizona,” Kailyn said, raising one eyebrow at her copy, who simply smiled and pointed one finger at her.

“Now there’s thinking outside of the box,” she said.

Just then, two cyclists rode past and Kailyn jumped slightly, glancing over toward them before looking back over to her left. The copy was now gone, however, leaving an empty bench beside her. She sighed and leaned her head back, running her hands through her hair as she tried to sort through all of the thoughts whirling through her head.

So Amaryss and the others were most likely going to try to ditch the car somewhere near here, but she had no idea where. If they were looking for a way out of the cities that didn’t include driving or paying, that left very few options. They could hop aboard a bus in the luggage compartment like she had, but that seemed like an unlikely option with so many people. They could try to hop on a train illegally and ride the rails out of town, but she had no idea if there were even any trains here, or where the station was. She kept that option in the back of her mind, but it was more of a “last resort” idea.

The last viable option that came to Kailyn was hitchhiking. With a group that large, they would have to try to catch a ride with a truck or some other large vehicle; a normal car would not be large enough to fit them all. If she could track down where semi-trailers stopped in the city, there might be a chance Amaryss would do the same and she could head them off.

Just as she was making up her mind on her plan of action, Kailyn heard the sound of sirens echoing in the distance and she instantly jumped up, throwing the strap of the bag back over her shoulders and spinning around to look behind her. They appeared to be getting closer, but she had no way of knowing if they were coming for her. It seemed best to just assume that they were, so she took off running in the opposite direction, heading farther into the park and, hopefully, farther into the city.

September 15<sup>th</sup>, 1999

3:08:29 P.M.

Fort Worth, TX

I had always wanted to visit a large city ever since I was young and had seen them on TV, but now that I was finally in one, I couldn't understand why. The buildings were tall and crowded in on me, making me feel like I was trapped between them. People moved about the sidewalks briskly, always in a rush to somewhere else. Our group of six teenagers felt a tad out of place, but I figured that perhaps we could pull off pretending to be college students. Our bags slung across our backs could potentially help this illusion, but no one had even bothered to look at us twice so far.

The others in our group seemed almost just as entranced by the sights and sounds as I was, but with varying degrees of apprehension. Maya's hands were shoved in her pockets and she looked somewhat nervous as we walked down the sidewalk, whereas Lexi moved with a rather carefree gait, as if she was simply there to sightsee. Chase walked beside me, his gaze tracing the people around us more than the buildings. He was looking for someone out to get us, I knew, but I didn't want to quite fall into that level of paranoia yet.

"So, how's the birthday going?" he asked suddenly, catching me by surprise.

"Oh, it's great," I said, laughing dryly. "Just taking a trip with all of my best friends to the city for the day."

He grinned as I laughed, shoving him slightly.

"Come on, you have to admit that was a way better joke than it could have been," I said.

"I don't know, calling your own jokes good and laughing at them doesn't sound like a good way to convince people that they're good," he shot back.

"Oh, shut up."

He laughed but fell quiet as we reached another intersection and came to a stop. We had ditched the Land Rover about fifteen minutes ago in the back section of a parking lot and had been rather aimlessly wandering the city ever since. The electronic

clock in the window to a bank a few blocks back had told us that it was roughly three o'clock in the afternoon, which meant that we either had to find a ride out of here or somewhere to stay the night relatively soon. Unfortunately, we had almost no idea where we would even begin to look for either of those things.

The walk light signaled that it was safe to cross and I stepped out into the street, walking ahead of the group as I looked both ways up and down the street, regardless. The amount of traffic on the city streets had been lighter than we had anticipated, yet it was still far from "dead."

"So, what are we looking for, again?" Shawn called from behind me.

I turned around so that I was walking backwards in order to see him and make sure he could hear me.

"A ride out of here or a place for tonight," I said.

"Okay... do we have an idea of where to begin looking for either of those?"

"Nope," Chase said, glancing back.

"Sounds like a great plan," he muttered.

"Well, I'm sorry we didn't have a time to draw up some detailed steps and a map," Chase shot back, smirking.

"Even just a basic idea would be good," he said, gesturing wildly.

"Calm down, there," Lexi said, taking a step or two to the side to avoid being hit. "What about if we found either a bus station and somehow snuck on board, or some kind of truck depot?"

"Why a truck depot?" Damien asked, looking rather confused.

"Maybe we can hitch a ride with one of them out of here," she said, shrugging. "If one of them has a mostly-empty truck, we could do that."

"Or we could just sneak into one," I offered.

"...Or we could just keep acting like highway bandits," she said, sighing.

"Well, let's be honest here, how the hell else are we supposed to get around?" I asked. "We don't have any money, a vehicle, a place to stay, or anything besides some clothes with us..."

We don't have a whole lot of legitimate options, here."

After several seconds of silence, the group slowly began to nod in agreement.

"Okay, so to start our career as stowaways we go," Maya said.

"C'mon, look at it as... an adventure," I said.

"An adventure?"

"Yeah... We got out of that house so we would have a chance to actually *live*... and now's the chance to start feeling alive. I, for one, welcome the idea of a bit of a rush."

"Besides, it's not like we were going to get out of that place alive if we had stayed with Jared and Mack anyway, right?" Shawn said, a hint of anger in his tone.

"Now you're sounding just like..."

I found myself unable to finish the sentence, so I simply spun around and resumed walking forward so the rest of the group was unable to see my reddening eyes, or how my jaw was suddenly clenched tightly shut. It hurt too much to even say her name. I never imagined that my decision to leave Kailyn would keep hurting like an open wound, yet it still had not gotten better in the two and a half days or so since we had left. I used to be good at blocking things out... so why couldn't I do that now?

Unfortunately, I was not as good at hiding my reaction as I had thought, since Chase moved in closer to me and gently tapped against my shoulder. I glanced over toward him, still keeping my jaw clenched shut in some kind of vain attempt to stop the tears from forming, or any kind of sound leaving my mouth.

"Hey, are you okay?" he asked.

I just shook my head, looking away from him and down the sidewalk ahead of us.

"It's nothing, though," I said.

"It's about Kailyn, I can see that... hell, everyone can see that," he said.

"Really? I hadn't figured that," I snapped, my tone both sarcastic and biting.

"Okay, fine," he said and fell silent, falling behind me by a step or two.

I immediately realized that I had come across far more

harshly than I had intended, but it was too late to change what I had said at this point. In addition to the sadness that still seemed to settle in my chest from the sudden thought of Kailyn, I could feel my blood beginning to boil in anger. I didn't understand why I was so mad at Chase for simply saying one thing, but I still felt like grabbing something nearby and smashing it, but I forcibly restrained myself from doing any such thing.

We just needed to find a way out of this city, and get to New York. I had no idea how that would help us, but I had a feeling that it would. However, we still had no idea how we would find someone willing to take us that far, or even a significant distance in that direction.

"Hey guys, I hate to be that person... but what are we planning on doing about food?" Lexi called from the back of the group.

Chase shook his bag, the sound of clinking metal emanating from within.

"We've still got all those cans from Mack's," he said.

"Cold, canned beans, my favorite," she replied, frowning slightly.

"Well, that's all we've got," he said, "unless someone wants to repeat a Damien incident..."

"What?" he said, suddenly looking nervous at the mention of his name.

I sighed and rubbed my eyes with one hand.

"We are not repeating what happened at that gas station, okay?" I said, making sure to not blurt out that he had attempted to steal while we were walking down the middle of the street in broad daylight; the last thing we needed was someone getting nervous and calling the cops about a roving pack of teenage shoplifters in the city.

"Do we at least have anything to open the cans with?"

"I've got a Swiss Army Knife that we can probably use," Shawn offered.

"Sounds like a plan," Chase said, nodding.

For some reason, I couldn't help laughing. The others must have been looking at me as if I were crazy, because I could feel the stares upon me.



“We’ve got a plan on how to eat our cans of beans, but we can’t figure out where the hell we’re going,” I said, still laughing slightly.

“Well, we just have our priorities straight, that’s all,” Chase said, winking at me so the others couldn’t see.

I rolled my eyes and shook my head, which only caused him to laugh.

“C’mon, cheer up,” he said. “We’ll find a way out of this place soon enough.”

September 15<sup>th</sup>, 1999

5:15:23 P.M.

Fort Worth, TX

Kailyn fell onto a park bench with a heavy sigh, running her hands through her hair as she leaned back. The sun was setting in the Western sky, casting the entire city in an orange hue, the light reflecting off the glass of the buildings around the small park she had found. The sounds of families running around in the dwindling late-summer heat. It had been close to five hours, and she had barely been able to track down any sort of mass transport depot. She had finally been pointed in the direction of a weigh stop on the western side of the city, where any semi-trailer that was leaving the city had to stop. If Amaryss and the rest were leaving town via truck, they would have to be on one there. The thing she had least expected was exactly how far this station was from the center of the city.

Finally, she had made it to the outskirts of the city, and was now about five blocks away from the station; it should be just through a residential neighborhood on the north side of the park. She knew she had to keep going in order to have a chance to head the group off, but it felt hard to conjure the energy to keep walking those extra blocks. With one last sigh and sweeping glance around the park, she forced herself to her feet and began plodding on toward the edge of the city.

Her bag was beginning to feel like a lead weight slung across her shoulders, pain shooting down her back with each step,

but she forced herself to trudge on. The arches of her feet felt like they were on fire and her knees ached worse than she had ever experienced, yet she was determined to outlast the pain through sheer willpower.

After what felt like a mile of effort, Kailyn heard the sound of traffic up ahead, tires racing across asphalt and the occasional roar of an engine. She redoubled her effort until finally she came upon a chain link fence at the end of the cul-de-sac. With a heavy sigh, she raised her hand against the fence, curling her fingers around the metal wire before falling against it, almost all of her energy completely gone. She ran her forehead across the back of her hand to stop some of the beads from rolling into her eyes.

Several semi-trailers were stopped on a small turnoff from the main highway, policeman walking around them with the drivers standing by, looking bored or even impatient. She scanned the trucks for several seconds but didn't see anything that stood out to her as strange or abnormal. As she was watching, one of the trucks pulled onto the scale and came to a stop. She was about to turn away, but something made her stop. One of the police officers was walking toward the truck; his body language told her that something was wrong.

As he reached the back of the truck, the driver appeared on the other side and intercepted him. He appeared to be talking to the officer in some sort of an attempt to stall him. Kailyn shifted her weight and pressed up closer to the fence. She wished there was a way for her to be closer and hear what they were saying, but getting over the fence would take too long; besides, she was far too tired to pull herself up and over the seven-foot fence.

The two men appeared to get into some sort of heated argument, but the officer finally shook his head and wrote something down on a clipboard before gesturing for the truck to take off. The driver clapped his hands and laughed before walking back around the truck and climbing into the cab once again.

“Those clever bastards...” Kailyn said, grinning and shaking her head.

She didn't have to look inside that truck to know why it had been stopped. The extra weight of five people in the trailer were throwing the scale off, which had caused the officer to investigate.

They had a head start on her getting to the truck, and now they had a head start getting out of Fort Worth. She leaned against the fence, squinting in an attempt to see anything about the truck that would help her know where they were going. Just before it began to pull away, she was able to make out the license plate, particularly which state was written on it: New York. Kailyn grinned and took a step away from the fence.

“I’ll see you soon, Amaryss.”

September 15<sup>th</sup>, 1999

5:30:42 P.M.

In the back of a truck

The hum of the tires on the asphalt was comforting; it meant that we hadn’t been caught by the police on the way out of the city. We were on our way toward New York, and away from everything I had ever known. Of course, it wasn’t like I was particularly attached to any of it, anyway. I closed my eyes and rested my head against the metal wall of the trailer behind me, letting the vibrations from the road run through my whole body. It was almost comforting enough to make me want to fall asleep. Just before I could though, I heard someone walk up to me and felt a kick to my foot. I groaned and cracked one eye open to see who dared poke the sleeping bear.

“I have to admit, you have an uncanny superpower for being able to fall asleep anywhere,” Chase said, looking down at me as he put one hand out against a pallet of paper reams to keep his balance.

“Well, I can’t use that ability if you keep waking me up, now can I?” I shot back, shifting my position slightly as he grinned and took a seat against the wall of the trailer beside me.

“I’m just keeping you on your toes,” he said. “You can’t get too relaxed now, we’re not out of the thick, yet.”

“Don’t remind me,” I muttered, rubbing one eye with my hand.

He just laughed and pushed me slightly. I made a noise and looked over at him, narrowing my eyes as he just smiled back.

I shoved him in return, but his smile didn't falter. I leaned forward and glanced around the rest of the trailer to see the others had spread out around the space, each person finding his or her own space to hunker down for the long trip. The space I had found was relatively secluded from the rest, and I was mostly hidden by the pallet of paper that Chase had been leaning against moments ago.

With a sigh, I fell back against the wall again and leaned my head back so it rested against the vibrating metal once again while I stared up at the ceiling. The trailer was lit by one light at the end closest to the cab and one just above the door. The driver said he had left them on for us so we didn't have to ride in pitch darkness the entire time. Even with those lights, however, we seemed to be stuck in a perpetual twilight. Suddenly, an idea crossed my mind, and I found that my heart rate had increased. A strange feeling appeared in my chest, and I instantly remembered when I had felt it before. It was the same one I had felt outside the rest stop yesterday, when Chase and I had been alone... much like we were now.

I leaned my head forward and looked over toward him to see that he was sitting in almost the same position I had been in, but with his eyes closed. An uncontrollable grin spread across my lips just before I poked him in the side. He groaned quietly but didn't open his eyes.

"Hey," I whispered, leaning close to him.

"Mmm?" he replied, his eyes still closed.

"Wake up there for a second," I said.

He sighed but opened his eyes and rolled his head to the side so he was looking at me.

"What is it now, Amaryss?"

"Why don't you scoot over here a bit," I said, patting the space on the floor directly beside me.

He raised his eyebrows slightly at me and I suppressed a laugh.

"Come on..."

His eyes quickly glanced over toward the others before turning back to me. Slowly, he lifted his head off of the wall and pushed himself up slightly with his hands. All of the sudden, he slid over next to me, running into my side. I gave him a hard look,

which caused him to grin, but I couldn't maintain my harsh expression. It seemed safe to assume that he knew what he was getting into by listening to me, so I simply leaned to the side and rested my head on his shoulder. This time, though, he didn't tense up like he had before. Something touched my arm and I glanced down to see him carefully reaching for my hand. I couldn't help but smile slightly as I helped him out by moving my hand so that it was on top of his and lacing my fingers between his.

Chase's grip felt firm enough to be secure, but not constricting. It was comforting. I let out a quiet sigh through my nose and closed my eyes. For the first time in a long time, I felt like I was seeing into how normal people with normal lives might have felt. Even after this brief, fleeting glimpse, I was instantly jealous. Living with Jared when I was younger had been rather normal, if somewhat boring, but he had been my only real human contact; everything else I learned from watching TV and reading whatever book or magazine I might have come across that seemed somewhat interesting. It had been easy and simple, but very lonely. Once Kailyn had come into the picture, however, I finally had the kind of friendly contact I had always hoped for, yet had never been able to experience before. It had been incredibly fortunate that we had bonded so well, so quickly, because it was really just the two of us most of the time. It still hurt to think that I had lost that part of my life now, but this exact moment was telling me that something else could be there to possibly help fill that void.

It wasn't that I was looking for some kind of intimate, romantic or in any way sexual relationship... it was the feeling of companionship. Everyone in the group was a friend, or at least I believed they were at this point, but whatever this was with Chase provided that little extra something. He was someone I hoped I could turn to when everything seemed to be going dark and spiraling out of control and since he was there, even just physically, it would seem just a little lighter.

I suddenly realized how insane all of these thoughts sounded coming from me, and I forced myself to laugh quietly and just kind of shake it off. I felt Chase shift slightly and I opened my eyes to see him looking down at me slightly, looking a little

confused.

“Are you okay there?” he asked quietly.

I smiled and nodded.

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

“Okay, if you say so...” he said and I couldn’t help but laugh again.

After that we sat in silence for a while. I had no idea how long it was, but I didn’t care, honestly. Finally, I felt my right leg going numb from sitting still for so long, so I shifted myself slightly, trying to take a more comfortable seat. As soon as I did, I found that my neck hurt from sitting with it bent to the side for so long. I groaned and lifted my head up, rubbing the side of my neck with my free hand. Chase shifted slightly and seemed to also just wake up.

“Everything okay there?” he asked.

“My neck hurts and my leg went numb,” I said, “so just dandy, I’d say.”

A deep, quiet chuckle rumbled from within his chest as I removed my fingers from between his and pulled my hand back slightly. He released his grip and I pulled my arm back, using it to lift myself an inch or so off the floor. I slid forward and leaned back, stretching my legs out in front of me. The blood flowing back to my leg was an almost instant relief, yet it felt oddly cold, which caused me to shiver. I glanced back toward Chase to see him shifting slightly, as well. As soon as he looked set, he glanced up at me, only to see me fall backwards against him, causing him to grunt from the sudden weight.

I was now lying with most of my torso on top of him, my head resting comfortably against the left side of his chest. He made some sort of noise at me so I leaned my head back to look up at him. The look he was giving me would have most likely made me laugh anyway, but the fact that he now appeared upside down to my vision only made it worse. I suppressed a laugh and he narrowed his eyes. Suddenly, he jabbed me in my side and I sucked in a quick breath of air, arching my back slightly.

“You comfortable?” he asked.

“I was until you started poking me,” I said, attempting to jab him firmly in the leg, but he caught my arm and stopped me.

After a few seconds of muted scuffle, I finally gave up and crossed my arms across my chest, pretending to pout like a young child. After a moment or two, I felt something on my head and I lifted my eyes slightly to see Chase's hand hanging above me.

"Excuse me, I'm not an armrest, Chase," I said.

He laughed as his arm slid off of my head, only for me to feel it wrap around my side a moment later. The gentle pressure felt strange; at first it made me want to tense up, but then I realized that it wasn't the same feeling I always used to have of being held down. I relaxed and just accepted it for what it was as I reached across my stomach with my right hand, placing it on top of his. I felt his grip shift, and then realized that he had moved his hand on top of mine, his thumb slowly moving back and forth across the back of mine. Between Chase's arm and mine, I felt firmly wrapped up in this current position, which meant it was a good thing I wasn't planning on moving anytime soon. Just then, a thought occurred to me and I lifted my head ever so slightly.

"Hey, what did you call me back at that rest stop... like, a day ago maybe?"

"Hmm?" he replied.

"When we were alone outside the rest stop, you called me something..."

"I don't remember insulting you," he said, laughing quietly.

"No, no, it wasn't an insult... it was like... like a nickname."

After a moment of silence, he cleared his throat.

"Ryss?"

"Yeah, that's it," I said, turning my head so I could try to see his face.

The familiar nervous expression was on his face again as he licked his lips and smiled, but it seemed nervous.

"Why did you call me that?"

"I... uh... I guess I just thought... I don't know, it was a spur of the moment thing," he said. "I won't do it again."

"No," I said quickly, possibly a little more so than I had intended, because Chase jumped slightly. "Sorry..."

"Okay..."

"I mean... I've just never had anyone come up with a

nickname for me before,” I said. “I guess I just wasn’t used to it. You know, though... I kind of like it.”

He attempted to raise one eyebrow at me, but didn’t really nail the expression he was going for. I rolled my eyes and elbowed him slightly as he chuckled.

“Okay, then,” he said, “if you say so, Ryss.”

I grinned and fell back against him, staring straight ahead. After only a minute or two, I found that my eyelids felt heavy and were beginning to droop. The fight to keep them open seemed like a long and fruitless battle, so I simply resigned to letting them close, and soon after I began to drift off into sleep.

“Oh yeah,” Chase said, right before I had completely fallen into unconsciousness, “happy birthday.”

I smiled and made a sound that just sounded like “mmm” since I didn’t feel capable of forming any real phrases at this point. Moments later, I was completely out and floating off into the blissful sea of sleep. It was something I didn’t get near enough of, but I eagerly welcomed it like an old friend. For the first time in a while, I dreamed. Tonight, I would not sleep like the dead.



## 15 Hunters

October 4<sup>th</sup>, 1999  
1:38:42 P.M.  
Unknown Location

Jared's shoe softly tapping on the cement floor was just about the only sound in the open expanse of the room. Patience had never been one of his particularly strong suits, but it had gotten progressively worse as of late. James stood several feet away, leaning against a cement column that ran from the floor to the metal ceiling above. The open warehouse floor had seemed like a strange place for a meeting, and both men were on edge. Good things rarely came from meeting strangers in secluded places. Jared glanced at his watch once again and sighed, looking over at James.

"They're late," he said.

"They're not late, yet," James replied, glancing down at his, too. "We said 1:40, they'll be here at 1:40."

Jared let out a groan and rubbed his eyes with his hands before pushing off of the column he was leaning against and began to walk in slow circles. Just before his pacing drove James mad, the sound of an approaching engine caused both men to freeze and look over toward a large door on the opposite side of the space. Moments later, it began to slide open, letting in the bright sunlight from outside. A dark truck appeared from outside, rolling slowly into the space and toward Jared and James.

"I hope you trust these men," Jared said quietly, not looking over at James.

"I never said I did," he replied, "but they know how to get a job done."

The truck rolled to a stop roughly ten feet away from them and the engine came to a stop. The two front doors opened as two men jumped out of the bed. Three of the four men who had appeared from the truck were wearing dark shirts and some kind of cargo pants, while the fourth, the one who had been riding in the

passenger seat, was wearing a suit. The doors closed with solid thuds and the men began to advance toward Jared and James.

“You’re right on time,” Jared remarked.

“Common business practice,” the man in the suit said, revealing the slightest hint of a southern accent in his voice. “My clients tend to deal in specific details, so I do, too. Now, that being established, let’s get straight to them.”

Jared nodded and raised his arms slightly before letting them fall to his sides.

“Where would you like to start?”

“Let’s start with the job,” the man said.

“Not payment?”

“Payment comes one way or another,” he said, something in his tone a little colder than before. “We haven’t even established whether this job is possible yet. So let’s hear it.”

“Track down a couple of teenagers,” James broke in before Jared could speak.

“You want us to do something the police can do?” he said. “Forgive me if this sounds harsh, but that’s a waste of our fucking time.”

“These are not just a group of teenagers,” Jared said, glancing over toward James as if to silence him. “They are subjects in an ongoing experiment, and they are considered highly dangerous. Needless to say, we need them back alive.”

The man definitely seemed skeptical of what they were asking of him and his men, but what Jared had said seemed to have piqued his interest at least somewhat.

“Dangerous how?”

“They have abilities far past what any normal human being possesses,” he explained. “If they feel cornered, they will retaliate, and that would be very bad for business... and the public, of course.”

“What kind of abilities?”

“Increased reflexes, strength, senses, perhaps some other amplifications and modifications.”

The man nodded, looking down at the ground for a second or two as he rubbed his jaw with one hand. Finally, he looked back up at Jared and James.

“So let me get this straight,” he said, “you’re saying that these kids are... what, some kind of superheroes?”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” James chimed in, “but they are definitely not your average, flavor-of-the-day teens, either.”

After a moment or two more of silence, the man nodded, seemingly accepting what they had said.

“So what are you... some deep dark branch of the CIA? Maybe some military R&D department?”

“We’re not associated with any government system,” Jared said.

“Consequently, it would be very bad if any of them found out,” James continued.

“So if you’re not making super-soldiers for the army or anything of the sort... what are you doing?”

“I thought this was a ‘no questions asked’ kind of deal?” Jared said, a slight of annoyance creeping into his tone.

“Normally, yes, but I want to know what kind of shit I’m getting into before I decide if I want to throw myself and my men into harm’s way,” the man spat, immediately looking over toward Jared.

After several moments of tense silence, Jared finally broke it.

“I’ve told you what you’d be up against, and that we are not part of any government agency. This is purely a private business endeavor and we are able to pay and keep this entirely off the books.”

Silence fell over the six men for another second or two before the man in the suit nodded and laughed quietly.

“All right then, Mr. Broder, now we talk payment.”

“What’s your price?”

“Two million, half up front.”

Jared and James glanced at each other before nodding and turning back to the man.

“Deal.”

“Excellent, now where should we begin looking?”

“They escaped a safe house in Arizona, but we have reason to believe they headed east.”

“When did they escape?” he asked.

“Roughly a month ago.”

“Well, they’re long gone now, aren’t they?”

“Precisely, but we have a reason to believe that they knew where they were headed,” James replied.

“And where would that be?”

“New York.”

Jared and James closed the doors to the red sedan and started the engine. The men had left only minutes ago, as soon as Jared had called and confirmed the wire transfer of money. Jared sighed and shifted the car into reverse.

“I hope these men are as worth the money as you say,” he said.

“I know the leader from way back,” James replied. “Trust me, they are.”

“How do you know him?” Jared asked, glancing over at his colleague.

James remained silent, staring straight ahead out the windshield as the car came to a stop and Jared shifted into drive. As they began to pull away, James had still said nothing, and Jared knew that this was the most he would get out of him on this subject.

“How did you know they’re going to New York?” he said, breaking the silence and surprising Jared slightly.

“The crew in California found that information had been accessed from one of the computer terminals there. It was a list of all of the names of subjects tied to this project, and we had reason to believe that they took it with them.”

“The question remains: why New York?”

“As you know, a large deal of our operations involve obtaining subjects from that area, so we had reason to believe that this would be a large enough incentive to draw them in,” Jared explained. “Also, one of the group is on that list from New York.”

“Which one?”

“Shawn Hale.”

“Don’t know him.”

“He was one of Mack’s charges in Arizona,” Jared replied. “It was his work from the start.”

James just nodded, falling into silence once again. The car reached the main road and came to a stop. Jared glanced both ways down it before quickly stepping on the accelerator and pulling out onto the pavement, speeding away to the left. They rode in silence for several minutes before Jared finally cleared his throat and took in a deep breath.

“You know about the new round, correct?”

“Yes, Jared, I’ve worked on it, remember?”

“There are so many people involved at different stages at this point, I honestly don’t,” he replied, still staring straight out at the road.

“Well, glad to know you’re still thinking of me,” James replied.

Jared glanced over at him and the two men broke into laughter. Once it had died down, Jared continued.

“I want you to monitor some of the most promising,” he said.

“Monitor how?”

“We have an estate in Northern Italy, acquired through our network—”

“When you say ‘acquired’...?” James interrupted, letting the question hang.

“One of our ‘friends,’ if you will, had it through some means, and offered it up as the site for a new type of experiment.”

“What new type are you proposing?” James asked, seeming interested for the first time in the conversation.

“Well, it’s not entirely new, but more like a revision of a previous idea,” he explained as he looked back over his shoulder before turning on the indicator and taking an entrance to a highway.

“Go on...”

“Previously we’ve monitored subjects in relative isolation—only one or two at a time—in relatively scattered locations. However, this new plan focuses on centralizing a larger group of them. It would be easier to monitor them and track their progress, as well as allow for a more ‘natural’ integration and socialization of the subjects.”

“So... you want to start a boarding school for a group of

children in this next round of trials?” James said, sounding somewhat confused.

“No, not quite a boarding school... Think of it as a holding tank. They live together, with no knowledge or hint of what the experiments will entail. As far as they know, they’ve been dropped off in the middle of nowhere for no particular reason.”

“So you want to create a fish bowl?”

“More or less, yes.”

James just laughed quietly and shook his head before propping his arm against the door and resting his fist against his chin.

“This sounds more like a melting pot of disaster, Jared,” he said. “What if one of the experiments goes wrong? What if we have another burnout?”

“That is a risk we take,” he said, “but if our goal is to somehow make this a project on a massive scale one day... if we hope to somehow, some way take this public... we have to run trials on people who exist as close to ‘normal’ human beings as we can. Not many people grow up in complete isolation from each other. If we hope to integrate any successful members of these experiments into society, they should know how to coexist with others.”

James remained silent after Jared’s long-winded response, thinking over everything that Jared said, and even some of what he had not actually said aloud.

“So let me guess...”

“I want you to head up this project... to be the monitor.”

James forcefully inhaled through his nose before letting out a heavy sigh.

“I was afraid you were going to say that.”

“James, you get to stay at a beautiful villa in Northern Italy, and all you have to do is report in every once in a while about how things are going. You get to see the fruits of your labor grow and flourish before your eyes. How does that not sound ideal?”

“I don’t know Jared, it’s...”

James trailed off, clearly lost on where he had intended to go next. After a period of what was most likely only thirty seconds or so, but what seemed like whole minutes in the silent car, he

sighed and shook his head.

“I’ll agree, if I get to pick some of the subjects,” he said.

“Of course,” Jared replied, nodding. “Do you have some ‘favorites’ from your projects that you would like?”

“Yeah... a girl, Simmons, and a boy, Craman,” he replied.

“What are the first names?”

“Katelyn and Marcus, I believe,” he said, “it sounds bad but I’ve almost forgotten since all I read are the last names on the forms.”

“Another reason why this experiment would be good for you,” Jared said, “you could get to know your charges better.”

“I already agreed, Jared, you can stop trying to convince me.”

He simply laughed and glanced back over his shoulder before changing lanes to get around a small, red sedan that was driving rather slowly down the highway. The two men rode in silence for several minutes before James cleared his throat and spoke up again.

“When should I leave for this?”

“I’m heading over to our London site soon,” Jared said, “so we can fly together to there and then you continue on to Italy.”

“When is ‘soon’?”

“The end of the week,” he replied.

“I’ll pack my bags tonight, then,” James replied, laughing.

They both laughed for a few seconds before falling into silence for a brief moment once again.

“I hope for our sake this works.”

“It will. I’ve made sure of it.”

“We made sure this round would work, too, and it looks like we’ve been outsmarted by a bunch of eighteen-year-olds,” he replied.

“Hence why we went to your friend.”

“He’s not my friend,” James said quickly, causing Jared to glance over at him.

James’ jaw was set tightly, and he was staring straight ahead out the windshield, seemingly unaware of Jared looking at him.

“I’m sorry,” he said, turning to look back at the road

himself. “Anyway, we hired that man to find them, and soon it’ll be sorted out.”

“How do you plan on paying him?”

“I don’t.”

Now James turned to look at Jared, confusion etched into his face.

“What do you mean?”

“If all goes according to plan, this should be the greatest test of the kids’ abilities, yet,” he replied.

It took several seconds for the gravity of what Jared had just said to settle into James.

“You expect them to kill those men...”

“A cornered animal in the wild will fight with all it has, to the absolute end,” Jared replied, his voice calm and quiet.

They fell into silence yet again, James now staring vacantly ahead at the dashboard. With a sidelong glance at Jared, he spoke once again.

“Then I hope for your sake this works.”



## 16

### New Yawk

November 23, 1999  
11:28:53 A.M.  
New York City, NY

The city reminded me even more of my time spent living in Colorado than I would have thought: I was constantly surrounded by towering peaks, and the wind was biting and cold. Every time a gust blew into me, it seemed to cut straight to the bone, spreading a chill all throughout my body. I shivered, my arms crossed across my chest in some kind of attempt to conserve body heat, although it was clearly not working. If I had the option, I would be wearing just about every shirt I had in my bag right now, although that would probably not be considered “social acceptable.”

Everyone who walked past us was wearing either a coat or a sweatshirt, and it really made me jealous. All I had were the two pairs of jeans and three or four shirts that I owned. All of which, though, looked rather worn and dirty by this point. Life on the road for two or so months would do that to clothes. Needless to say, we did not look our best, either. My hair hung in rather thick strands, stuck together by the dirt and oil that came from not having access to anywhere to shower or even stick my head under water for quite a while.

So far, living on our own was not as great as it had been cracked up to be.

Chase let out a heavy sigh, sitting up straight and stretching his back beside me. We had been sitting on this set of stairs for quite a while, yet Maya and Lexi were still not back from wherever they had gone. I slipped my hand into the back pocket of my jeans, removing the folded stack of papers with the list of names and unfolding it to scan the list for Shawn’s name for the umpteenth time since we had arrived in the city. Granted, we had only gotten here about a week ago, but it still felt like we had been here forever. Our saving grace had been a few homeless shelters where we had spent a night or two.

Our path for getting to New York had been much longer than any of us had anticipated, but we had eventually found our way to the northeast. The first truck we had taken out of Texas only got us as far as Tennessee, and then we had to try our luck with hitchhiking yet again. After two more truck rides north, we had been forced to actually hop a train in Maryland and ride it up to New Jersey. From there, getting into the city was relatively easy, we just had to be stealthy about sneaking onto the subway and avoiding police officers, but we had finally come up somewhere in Brooklyn. Since then, we had been forced to live essentially like the homeless while we tried to get our bearings and track down the address on the list. We could have done this days ago, but I think we were stalling because although we had a goal to find this place, we had no idea what we would do once we were there. We were trying to delay the inevitable, but I knew we couldn't do it much longer.

Just then, the sound of Lexi's voice broke me out of my trance and I looked up from the papers to see Maya and her walking toward the rest of us.

"Good news, guys," she said as she drew within twenty feet of us, "we may have our first real lead on where the hell we're going."

"Oh really?" Shawn said, sitting up and seeming rather interested.

"Mhm," she said, stopping in front of the rest of us, spreading her legs into a wider stance and shoving her hands into her pockets.

"Well, where the hell are we going?"

"The address is to a hospital in Queens," she explained. "It's called Forest Hills Hospital."

"A hospital?" Chase said. "Why would the address on that form be a hospital?"

"I don't know," Lexi said, shrugging, "I just found the damn place, I didn't work out what it meant, yet."

As Chase and Lexi began to debate exactly why it was a hospital, I stared blankly at the paper in my hands, lost in thought. Why would there be a hospital listed beside Shawn's name? Suddenly, it hit me.

“Guys!” I shouted, cutting them off and causing the others to jump and look at me in surprise. “I think I figured it out.”

“Well, do share,” Lexi said, casting one more annoyed glance at Chase before turning her attention back to me.

“Well, you know how we all said we came from different places, right? All of us, except maybe Lexi, remember being somewhere different before whatever place we met each other.”

“Yeah, so?” Shawn said.

“Let me finish,” I chided, silencing him with a finger to my lips. “So it’s highly unlikely that we were really ‘from’ whatever facility that Jared, Mack, Chuck, or Phil had. We aren’t related to them by blood or anything, and we all have different last names from them... well, those of us who know our last names we know that, anyway.”

Damien’s lips formed a thin line as he nodded slowly, yet remained silent.

“So... what if these are the places they got us from?”

Silence followed my last speculation as I waited for someone to weigh in on my idea. Surprisingly, it was Maya who spoke first.

“That... would make a lot of sense,” she said. “I mean... clearly we had parents at some point, so we were born somewhere.”

“So they just gave us up?” Shawn said. “Sounds like parents of the year, right there.”

“Maybe they did,” she said, shrugging, “or maybe they didn’t.”

Everyone fell silent again, their attention shifted from me to Maya.

“Did you guys ever consider that since what’s happened to us is probably highly illegal, and they seem pretty bent on not letting us escape or interact with the outside world, maybe we were taken?”

Everyone fell silent, apparently in the realization that they had never really thought about that. I, on the other hand, had long held that theory, and it was comforting to know that at least someone else had given it serious thought, too.

“I mean... I guess I thought about it, but never all that

much,” Shawn replied.

“Well, I guess now’s the time, huh?” I said, looking over at him as I slapped my hands down on my knees.

He gave me a strange look as I got to my feet, folding the papers once again and shoving them in my back pocket.

“Come on, we know what we’re looking for and where it is, so it’s time to stop stalling,” I said. “C’mon, let’s get our asses in gear and see if we can get one step closer to finding out just what the hell all of this means!”

Lexi laughed slightly as Shawn and Damien looked at me as if I were crazy. Perhaps I had been a little too enthusiastic in my motivational speech, but we needed it. If we continued on at the rate we were at now, winter would have long set in before we found anything useful. Everyone began to slowly get to their feet and gather their things, but I was already set and ready to leave.

“Aren’t you just a ball of energy?” Chase remarked, smirking as he shouldered his bag.

“What?”

He just laughed and shook his head before glancing back toward the others. Shawn tossed Maya her bag, but she wasn’t looking at him. Suddenly, she spun to face it and opened her arms at the exact right second to catch it against her chest. She staggered back a step or so, but the rest of us were impressed by how quickly she had just moved.

“What?” she said, looking around at the rest of us. “I wasn’t looking, okay?”

“That’s exactly why we’re so amazed,” Lexi said.

Maya looked confused as she pulled the strap to her bag over her head and situated it comfortably on her shoulder.

“You weren’t looking, but you just spun at the last second and caught that,” she said. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you move that fast for anything...”

“Oh, well... I guess I’m just full of surprises, huh?”

She laughed nervously and turned away from the rest of the group, but ended up facing toward me as she began to walk down the sidewalk. Her face was clearly red, and she looked incredibly embarrassed. All of the sudden, the memory of her perfectly taking out the light outside the warehouse facility at Mack’s came

to mind, where she had somehow thrown a rock at the perfect speed and angle to ricochet off the building and shatter the light bulb by just simply turning and throwing it. Something in my expression must have given my thought process away, because she glanced at me and one corner of her lips pulled back in a thin smirk, almost as if she were confirming what I was thinking.

I fell in step beside her, leading the group down the sidewalk and hopefully in the right direction toward the hospital. Maya was walking with her head down, staring at the ground only a few feet in front of her. I wanted to talk to her about it somehow, but I wasn't sure how to start that particular conversation.

"So... was that part of the deal like when you showed me that rock throw back in Arizona?"

Subtlety had never been my strong suit, anyway.

"Yeah..." she said quietly, still staring down at the ground.

"Why are you so... embarrassed, I guess?"

She shrugged, fixing the strap to her bag as she did.

"You know, ninja reflexes could be really useful," I said, nudging her in the arm slightly.

She laughed and glanced over at me, the wind instantly blowing some of her hair in her face, causing her to push it aside, but it didn't help much. It just occurred to me that it definitely seemed longer than it had been when we had first met, but then again mine must have been, too. Two months was a long period of time, and it was beginning to feel more so as time went on.

"You know, at first I pegged you for a real pessimist," she said, "but now, I'm starting to think that's not quite true."

"I'm a realist," I replied, "but that also means making the best of what's in front of you, right?"

We laughed as I shook some rebel clumps of hair out of my face, somewhat afraid to touch them for fear of how gross my hair must have felt.

"Well, the occasional optimism is appreciated," she said.

I wasn't sure how to respond to that, but "thank you" sounded wrong, so I simply nodded and said, "Sure." Maya glanced over at me again and laughed. I just shrugged and glanced back at the rest of the group. Lexi and Chase were behind us, followed by Shawn and Damien at the rear. Both pairs seemed to

be conversing rather animatedly, so I didn't want to break into either conversation. As I was turning back to look forward, a black SUV turning down one of the side streets near us caught my eye, but I had no idea why. I passed it off as just one of those strange moments, possibly like déjà vu, and turned back to walking forward.

"Do you know where we're going?" I asked.

"Um... sort of?" Maya replied. "I think Lexi understood the directions better than I did."

"Lexi!" I called over my shoulder.

"What is it now, Amaryss?" she called back.

"Where are we going?"

"You don't have to shout!" she said, quickly appearing on the other side of Maya. "We keep going down here for about five blocks, and then head east for about ten."

"So we're not that close at all, I take it?" I said, already feeling the fatigue setting into my limbs.

"Not exceptionally, no."

"Dammit...!" Maya moaned, hanging her head.

"A little exercise is good for you!" Lexi said, clapping her on the back.

"Says who?"

"I don't know, people, I guess."

"Well, those people clearly don't know shit, then, do they?"

Lexi and I laughed as Maya just shook her head and adjusted the strap to her bag once again.

November 23, 1999

1:08:28 P.M.

New York City, NY

It had taken us close to an hour and a half, but we had finally reached Forest Hills Hospital. The building seemed to be an opposing tower of tan brick and glass with a small blue awning sticking out over the sidewalk to show the front entrance. An ambulance was sitting at another awning a little farther down the road, its lights off and patient apparently delivered. I glanced over

at the rest of the group, who were all staring up at the building, as well.

“So... do we go inside?” Lexi asked, glancing over at me.

“I don’t know,” I replied, shrugging. “I don’t know what else we would do here.”

“Admire the architecture?” Maya suggested.

“Then you can stand outside by yourself and do that,” I replied, “the rest of us are going to head in.”

“I think I’ve admired it enough,” she said, looking back down at the rest of us and falling in behind Damien as Shawn led the way through the front entrance.

Once we were inside, I noticed how much darker it was, yet what light there was seemed much harsher than outside. The very smell of the place immediately put me on edge. It was the scent of disinfectant and sterility... it reminded me of some of the places Jared had brought me before. Memories of sitting under harsh fluorescent lights while Jared or one of his associates prodded me, stared into my eyes, asked me to open my mouth, and told me to run and jump. I shivered and forced myself to pay attention as the group closed in tightly so we could talk relatively quietly in the public space.

“Okay, we’re in, now what?” Shawn said.

“Well, we could look for a record of patients with your last name from around your birthday,” Lexi offered.

“Somehow I doubt they would just let us see those files,” he replied snidely.

“Well, then maybe we just need to find them another way,” I said.

The others all looked at me with looks ranging from confusion to what I could only describe as “are you crazy?”

“Are you suggesting we break into some restricted access office?” Shawn asked incredulously.

“I mean... how else are we going to see those files if they won’t show them to us?”

Some of the group shook their heads, but Damien was nodding slowly, and Chase’s jaw appeared to be clenched tightly.

“Yeah, why not?” Damien said, surprising the rest of the group.

“Seriously?” Shawn said. “That’s a terrible idea. What if we get caught?”

“They call the police, they go to arrest us, and then realize that we don’t have records and don’t technically exist,” he said, shrugging. “That sounds like somewhat of a win either way to me.”

When he put it that way, it suddenly sounded a lot better than I had originally thought. The thought of getting arrested, however, was not the greatest, but he did have a point.

“He’s got a point, you know…” Lexi said quietly, glancing around at the rest of us.

“We don’t even know where in this building those would be kept,” Shawn argued. “They’d be almost twenty years old, anyway, so who’s to say that they’d even have them?”

“We could always ask.”

“Didn’t we just—?”

“They don’t have to give us them for us to know that they still exist,” I interrupted. “If they just tell us that we aren’t allowed to see them, rather than that they no longer exist, there’s a chance they would still be around here somewhere.”

Everyone remained silent, clearly mulling over which of all of these ideas was the least of the evils. I had to admit, the plan wasn’t the greatest, and was half based around the idea that we would get caught, but we didn’t have a whole lot of other options that I could think of at the moment.

“So, to the information desk there?” I asked, nodding toward the row of tellers at a counter talking to people as they walked in, giving them directions and signing them in for their appointments.

Shawn just threw his hands up in the air and spun around to begin walking toward them. I quickly maneuvered around the group so I was beside him and we approached the first open clerk.

“Hello, welcome to Forest Hills, how can I help you?” the woman behind the counter asked, sounding bored.

“Uh, hi, I’m here to… I’m here looking for some medical files,” Shawn said, suddenly seeming much more nervous than I had ever seen him.

“What kind of medical files and whose?” the woman asked,



looking suspiciously between the two of us.

“Uh... mine, I guess,” he said, “and just, like, a general record of visits here.”

She stared at us for a few more seconds before looking at the large, tan monitor on the desk to the left. I heard a faint clicking sound and I realized that she was using a computer, much like the ones Chase and I had used to steal the information from Chuck and Phil.

“What’s your name?” she asked, looking over at Shawn.

“Shawn Hale,” he replied.

She typed something in again and then hit one more key with a little more force than the rest. After several seconds, her eyes scanned over something on the screen before she frowned and looked back over at us.

“This says there’s no record of you here,” she said.

“Really?” he replied, licking his lips nervously, clearly unsure of what to do next.

“Well, he’s just barely eighteen, so maybe it’s in his parents’ name?” I said, stepping in quickly to cover for him.

“And who are you?” the woman asked, staring me up and down.

“I’m his sister,” I lied quickly.

“If you’re his sister, why the hell are you here and your parents aren’t?” she asked, suddenly suspicious.

It was seeming like I should have gone with something more truthful and said that I was just a close friend or something, but it was too late now.

“We were given up for adoption when we were just babies, and we’re trying to find our real parents,” I said. “Our adoptive parents didn’t really know them, and we couldn’t find anyone who helped set it up to tell us, either.”

The woman stared at us for a few more seconds before crossing her arms across her chest and leaning forward against her small desk space.

“This sounds more like a problem of Child Protective Services or the police, not a hospital,” she said.

It was clear that she was very close to completely denying us help, but we had to know if the files were even still here.

“Please, this was the only information we had,” I said, my tone almost begging. “They only knew the hospital we came from and when we were born, but nothing else.”

“I’m sorry, I can’t help you,” the woman said. “Even if we still had those files, I’m not allowed to show you them.”

Swing and a miss.

“Thank you, ma’am,” I said, only half-faking the disappointed tone of my voice.

Shawn and I turned away from the desk and made our way back over to the group. The fact that we were coming back empty-handed and didn’t look very happy was probably enough to tell the others that we had failed.

“So do you know if they even have them?” Lexi asked quietly as we moved into the area of chairs and couches that made up a small waiting area.

“No, we don’t,” I replied, falling into a chair with a heavy sigh.

The seat was far less comfortable or as soft as I had expected, and I winced as I hit the rather stiff cushion.

“She said that it was kind of a toss-up if they even had files that old here,” Shawn said.

“Okay... so are we still going to look for them?” Damien asked.

“Where in the hell would we even start?” Shawn snapped, gesturing wildly around the room. “This place is big enough that it could be fucking anywhere!”

“Keep your voice down,” Lexi hissed, glancing around the room.

“I’m sorry, it’s just rather frustrating to come all this way and be this close—”

“Yes, I know, but it’s not going to do any good if we get kicked out or get the cops called on us now because you’re acting like a crazy person,” she said.

“Maybe that could be my in,” he said. “I’ll act sick and then I can get to the back area and start looking around.”

“That sounds like another good way to get arrested,” Maya pointed out.

“Guys...” I heard Damien say, but no one was really

listening to him.

“Well, it’s looking like that might be our best option, at this point,” Shawn shot back, glaring at her.

“Guys!” Damien said, catching everyone’s attention.

“Would you figure it’s back behind that counter somewhere?”

We all glanced where he was pointing and saw that he was referring to where Shawn and I had just been.

“I don’t know, why?” Lexi replied.

Damien tapped his knuckles on the arm of the chair for a second or two, still staring in the general direction of the counter.

“See those doors behind it?” he said, still not turning around.

There were, in fact, two doors leading to what looked like another office area behind the counter. A woman in pink scrubs and her hair pulled back in a ponytail was walking through one of the doors and up to the woman Shawn and I had just spoken to. As they began to converse, I saw the woman at the counter glance over at us, and then the woman in the scrubs did, too.

“Shit...” I muttered under my breath.

We all quickly turned away from the counter, staring around at each other.

“Well, whatever plan we’re going to use, we better think of it and get going fast,” I said quietly. “It looks like they’re getting a little suspicious of us.”

“I think there might be patient files back there,” Damien said, leaning in toward the rest of us. “If I could get back there, I could try to find the older ones and get them.”

“You specifically?” Shawn said, looking over at him and raising one eyebrow.

“I mean... I’m pretty sure I could do it,” he said.

“Why you and not anyone else, though?”

“Because... I’ve got the secret touch.”

Now everyone was looking at him with expressions that clearly conveyed that we didn’t believe him. He sighed and glanced over his shoulder quickly before removing his bag and placing it on the floor.

“You’ll see... just watch,” he said as he got to his feet and began to walk in the general direction of the counter.

The two women watched him draw closer, but then he took a left and began to head down a hallway. I was about to start groaning inwardly when I realized that the sign hanging from the ceiling near the entrance said “restrooms.” My feeling of dismay quickly turned to one of amusement as I shook my head.

“Clever little bastard,” Shawn remarked quietly as he slumped lower in his seat and crossed one leg on top of the other.

Once Damien had disappeared from sight down the hallway, however, we had no idea where he was or what he was doing. Eventually, the woman in the pink scrubs finished her conversation with the woman at the counter and took a small stack of folders back through the door she had come through and disappeared from sight. Damien, however, was still nowhere to be seen.

After roughly five minutes of waiting, Shawn sighed and glanced at the clock on the wall behind me. The rest of the group was looking equally impatient. Lexi’s foot was tapping softly on the floor, while Maya sat low in her chair with her arms crossed, looking rather bored. Chase was sitting with his hands behind his head, looking as if he was on the verge of falling asleep.

“Either he’s actually just taking a giant shit,” Shawn said, “or this kid is really onto something.”

“Or he ran away,” Maya offered.

“And left what little stuff he has here?” he replied, kicking Damien’s bag lightly. “I doubt it.”

Half of Damien’s stuff was clothes borrowed from Shawn and Chase, anyway, but some of it was stuff that he had “mysteriously” accumulated on our trip from Texas to here. Apparently he had learned from the first encounter at the gas station, but it worried me that he seemed to get the hang of sneaking things out of places so easily.

Just then, he appeared from the hallway, walking casually across the room, although I noticed that his right arm appeared to be crossed across his stomach slightly and pressed up against his body. Once he reached us, he fell into his seat again and let out a heavy sigh. We all looked at him expectantly, and he just glanced from one person to the next.

“What are you guys looking at me like that for?” he asked.

“Well...?” Shawn said, looking rather impatient to see if Damien had actually found anything.

“I’d say it’s a good time of day for a stroll, eh?” he said.

Shawn looked at him with a confused expression for a few seconds before the implication finally seemed to hit him. He quickly nodded and motioned for the rest of the group to head out.

“I guess we better hit up the police next, huh?” he said, shouldering his bag.

“I mean... if you really want to,” Damien said.

Shawn just rolled his eyes and began to lead the way out. We passed the front counter, where I could feel the woman’s gaze on us as we exited the hospital and took a right on the sidewalk outside. Once we had walked past the emergency entrance and gone a block or so farther, Shawn came to a stop in front of Damien, causing him to jump slightly.

“So, what did you find?” he asked excitedly.

Damien smirked and pulled something from under his shirt, holding it out to Shawn. It was a green folder with a small plastic tag at the top that must have had a name written on it. The folder seemed rather thin, which in hindsight was good because anything thicker would have looked noticeably strange against Damien’s thin frame under his shirt. Shawn took it and immediately opened it, scanning the first page he found. He read in silence for several seconds, flipping through a few of the papers. Finally, we couldn’t take the suspense any longer.

“Well, what is it?” I asked, stepping forward to try to see what he was looking at.

“I think these are my parents,” he said, looking up at me, an unreadable expression on his face.

I turned the paper around so I could see what he was looking around and saw what looked general information for someone named Lucy Hale. The most recent date I could see on the page was from several years ago. The center of the page seemed to be dominated by a list of all of her visits to the hospital stretching back to right about 1980.

“When’s your birthday?” I asked, glancing up at him.

“March 28<sup>th</sup>.”

“Of what year?”

“Uh... I’m nineteen, so... 1980.”

“You’re older than me?” I said, shooting him a somewhat surprised look.

“Yeah, is that such a shock?” he said.

I shrugged, looking back down at the file once again. The first entry at the bottom was from sometime in 1979, but then the next one was listed as March 27<sup>th</sup>, 1980. I pointed to that date and looked up at Shawn.

“Well, this would certainly seem to be close to your birthday,” I said. “Also, it’s listed as... ‘Mat’ something-or-other.”

“Could be short for maternity,” Lexi offered.

“Which would probably have something to do about having a baby,” I said, turning back to Shawn and raising my eyebrows. “So there’s a very high likelihood that this could be your mom.”

He stared down at the page silently, his expression still passive and unreadable. I couldn’t imagine the sudden shock he must be feeling at holding the first real clue to where he came from in his hands. It made me wonder, how would I react if I were holding the key to who my mother was in my hands? I had never really given any thought about who my mother might be, but I had to admit that it was something that seemed to draw considerably more interest now.

“Is there any information on her, like where she lives or anything?” Lexi asked, stepping forward and looking over my shoulder at the file.

“Maybe...” Shawn said, scanning the page quickly. “I can’t really see a clear address...”

“They may not include something like that on this sheet,” I said. “Are there any other papers in there?”

He lifted the first page to reveal a small stack beneath it. The first page was yellow, with somewhat faded writing on it. I quickly realized that it was one of those “carbon copy” pages, where someone filled out the top page and the ink was transferred to the page beneath it.

“This seems to be for some sort of visit,” he said, scanning the page. “It must have been filled out by a nurse or something. Wait!”

I jumped slightly, causing Lexi to take a step back to avoid my shoulder hitting her in the face. Shawn was pointing to something on the page, a grin spreading across his lips.

“82 68<sup>th</sup> Ave, Queens, New York,” he read aloud.

“What’s the date on that page?” Lexi asked, moving around to the other side of me so she didn’t have to look over me.

“1979, I think,” he said.

“Okay, not to try to derail you here, but that was twenty years ago,” she said. “It’s highly likely she doesn’t live there anymore.”

“Yeah... you’re right,” he said, sounding a little deflated.

“Well, what if we just go to the most recent one in the stack and see when that was?” I offered, reaching toward the file and lifting all of the papers up to reveal the last one.

I pulled the page out and turned it around so I could see it. The page seemed to be almost identical to the one Shawn he just been looking at, so I began to scan the general area I remembered him pointing to when he had found the address, previously. Finally, I found it in the upper right-hand corner of the page.

“This one has an address of 8525 60<sup>th</sup> Road,” I said.

“What’s the date on it?”

After several seconds of scanning, I found it and frowned.

“1995.”

“Okay, that leaves a four-year-gap,” Shawn pointed out, “that’s way more manageable than twenty.”

“True, but four years is still a long time,” Lexi said.

“It’s the best thing we’ve got, so let’s just go with it,” I said, looking over at her as I held the page out toward Shawn for him to take.

She looked like she wanted to argue back, but eventually decided against it and sighed.

“Fine, let’s go knock on the door and see who answers, shall we?”

November 23, 1999

4:15:28 P.M.

8525 60<sup>th</sup> Road, Queens, NY

It had taken quite a bit longer to find our way here than we had originally anticipated, but we had eventually found our way once Lexi had made us stop at a convenience store to ask the clerk. Now that we were standing on the sidewalk outside the small duplex-like house, everyone seemed to be tense. Despite this being the hunt for Shawn's family, specifically, none of us had ever been this close to figuring out where we came from. The thought had always seemed so nice, but now I was a little terrified. What if our parents were not the people we hoped they would be? I shivered, but forced myself to ignore it as I glanced over at Shawn.

"You ready?" I asked.

He didn't say anything, but nodded, taking a deep breath and walking up to the short set of stairs that led to the front door. Each of the three steps seemed to require a great deal of effort for him, but he finally reached the door and raised his fist to knock, but hesitated. I saw him hang his head for a second before taking a deep breath and firmly knocking on the outer screen door. He took a step back down the stairs and waited; the porch area was so small that if someone opened the door, it would swing right into him, so I guess it was probably a good idea that he had taken a step back.

After about twenty seconds or so, no one had answered the door, and Shawn was beginning to take a step forward to knock again, when it suddenly opened. He froze where he was, but the person inside was not easily visible from the street.

"Can I help you?" I heard a woman's voice ask.

"M-maybe..." Shawn said, sounding nervous.

"Well, spit it out," she said, sounding a little annoyed at his hesitance.

"I'm looking for Lucy Hale, does she still live here?" he asked, sounding somewhat more confident than he had before.

"Who?"

"Lucy Hale..."

"I think she was one of the couple who lived here before us," the woman said. "Derek! What was the name of the people who lived here before us?"

After several seconds of silence, I heard a muted voice



from within the house, but I was just able to make it out when I concentrated carefully on it.

“...she lived here with her husband or whatever before, yeah, why?” I heard a man call from somewhere farther in the house.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought,” the woman said. “We moved in two years ago.”

“Do you know where they moved to?” Shawn asked, obviously trying to hide his disappointment.

“You mean where *he* moved to,” the woman said.

“What do you mean?”

“She died in a car crash, I think,” the woman said. “Her husband moved out of here after that. I have no idea where he went, though. The place seemed to have some damage, holes in the walls and that kind of stuff, so I’m guessing he took it a little hard.”

“Okay, thanks...” Shawn said, beginning to turn away.

“Hold on a minute, why do you want to know all this shit, anyway?”

“I’m... I think I’m her son,” he said.

“Wait, you *think*? How do you not know?”

“I was... adopted when I was very young, and I’m trying to track my actual parents down,” he said, only half-lying, really.

“Those are your friends out there, I take it?” she asked, and I knew she was referring to us.

“Yeah. We’re all kind of in the same boat,” he said.

“Listen, I’d say talk to CPS or the police and maybe they can help you,” she said, sounding slightly more sympathetic than she had before.

“CPS?”

“Child Protective Services. I don’t know how involved they are with things like adoptions, but it could be a start. At least they could maybe point you in the right direction,” she said.

“Okay, thank you very much,” he said, turning to head back down the steps and toward us.

“Good luck,” she called, and then the door closed with a heavy thud.

Shawn reached us, looking rather despondent, but he tried

to force some kind of smile.

“Well, nothing ventured, nothing, gained, right?” he said.

Suddenly, Lexi stepped forward and put her arms around him. Shawn looked surprised and just stood there for a few seconds before slowly returning the embrace. The rest of us were probably just as surprised as him, seeing as Lexi had never exhibited any behavior like this before. Finally, she let go of him and took a few steps back, shoving her hands in her pockets.

“I’m sorry,” she said, “about your mom and all that.”

“Thanks,” he said, quietly, still a bit in shock from the news he had found and from what she had just done.

“Don’t get any ideas, though,” she said, raising one finger at him, almost like she was scolding a child. “This is like a sister thing, got it?”

We all laughed as Shawn nodded, managing the first real smile he had shown in a while.

“I got it, don’t worry,” he said after he had recovered enough to speak.

“Good, didn’t need to start getting into more awkward territory,” she said, shoving her hand back into her pocket.

After another minute or so, we had all finally settled down and fell silent. No one really seemed sure what to do. Our one decent plan had just gone up in smoke, and we hadn’t thought of anything past that. We were right on par with all of our decisions on this journey so far: thinking in the relatively short-term, but not much farther than what was immediately in front of us. Perhaps that was something we should work on.

“Well, it’s getting pretty dark out here,” Chase remarked, glancing up at the indigo sky above us. “We should think about what we plan on doing for the night pretty soon, I’d say.”

As the group began to talk amongst themselves, I happened to look past Lexi and Damien toward the end of the street. The hair on the back of my neck stood up as I instantly recognized the same dark SUV from early sitting at the end of the block. I didn’t remember the plates exactly, so I couldn’t be entirely certain, but something told me that this was the same vehicle. I gently nudged Chase in the arm, but he didn’t seem to notice as he kept talking to Lexi. The lights on the SUV suddenly turned on and it began to

slowly roll forward. I nudged Chase more insistently and constantly until he finally turned to look at me.

“What is it, Amaryss?” he said, looking confused and slightly annoyed.

“Chase, that SUV has been following us most of today,” I said, nodding toward it ever so slightly, “and now it’s coming this way... very slowly.”

He turned to look over toward it, and as he did, the engine roared and it suddenly shot forward, skidding to a stop about ten feet away from us. Now everyone spun to look just as all four doors opened and men in dark clothing jumped out, holding something in their hands. I didn’t have to look closely to know that they were some kind of guns.

“Run!” I shouted, grabbing Chase and Shawn and pulling them in the opposite direction as I began to run, spinning around.

“Hold it!” one of the men shouted, but it was clear that none of us listening.

As a group, we took off in the opposite direction down the street, moving as quickly as we could. I didn’t hear the sound of gunshots, so I assumed that they were unwilling to simply open fire on a residential block in the middle of Queens. It also meant they probably wanted us alive. Although that seemed good for now, seeing as they weren’t shooting at us, it seemed to not bode well in the long run. I didn’t have time to speculate exactly what they were doing here at the moment since we were approaching an intersection.

“Straight?” Chase panted.

“Left!” I shouted in response, already beginning the turn and almost running into him, since he wasn’t expecting it.

We rounded the corner and took off down the street. My heart was pounding in my ears, but I didn’t feel anywhere near fatigued. If anything, I suddenly felt energized. I began to pull ahead of the others without even really trying any harder. It was when I reached the next street and realized that I was alone that I slowed and glanced back. Chase and Shawn were a good ten feet behind me, while the rest of the group was behind them. Damien was behind the other two boys, while Lexi and Maya brought up the rear. Somehow I doubted that Lexi had to run as slowly as she

was; she was staying back to protect Maya. I had never thought of Lexi as an inherently selfish or bad person, but I realized that I had never expected her to display this kind of behavior, starting with hugging Shawn and now hanging back with Maya. It also made me feel so much worse for taking off ahead of everyone.

“Christ, girl,” Shawn said slowing to a quick walk beside me as Chase did the same on my other side, “got some wheels on you, there.”

I looked confused, but he just waved dismissively and shook his head.

“Never mind, I’ll explain it later,” he said exasperatedly, finally sounding like he was back to his normal self.

“Yeah, let’s make sure there is a later for that,” I said, noticing the SUV taking the corner we had come around and barreling down the street toward us. “We need to get somewhere more public.”

“You think that’ll stop them?”

“Maybe, but at least it would give us a crowd to hide in,” I said.

“Good idea,” Chase said, sounding somewhat out of breath.

It suddenly struck me that I barely felt winded at all, despite just making that two-hundred foot sprint in record time. I didn’t have time to ponder exactly what that meant, because the SUV was drawing dangerously close, and I saw one of the windows rolling down.

“Down here, now!” I shouted, gesturing to the cross street in front of us.

We went about ten feet before I saw another SUV come around the corner at the opposite end of the street. We were getting boxed in. I frantically searched for another escape route, and saw an opportunity, but we had to act right now.

“Here!” I said and suddenly hopped a short chain-link fence in front of another duplex.

I glanced back to see Shawn and Chase following suit, quickly followed by the other three. Lexi more or less shoved Maya over the fence before hopping over it herself. Just as she did, I saw sparks fly off of the metal and heard several metallic pings echo through the air. Apparently they had started shooting at

us.

I spun around and took off, heading around the duplex and toward the backyard. We quickly ran behind it, surprising a man standing in the yard, holding the leash to a small dog, which immediately began barking at us.

“What in the hell?!” he shouted, but we didn’t have time to worry about him.

He wasn’t the one holding a gun.

The yard backed up to another duplex on the street behind it, separated by a six- or seven-foot fence. My reflexes told me I could make it, but I knew that not everyone could, so I scanned for another way out of the yard.

“You better get the fuck out of here!” the man shouted, walking toward us.

“*Don’t worry buddy, that’s the plan,*” I thought, but I didn’t say anything aloud.

I suddenly spotted what looked like a gate set into the fence running along the edge of the yard to our left and I quickly ran over to it. The latch lifted, but the gate remained closed. I tried a few more times, but it didn’t open.

“Hey, don’t break my fucking gate! Go back the way you came, you goddamn kids!”

Now he was beginning to get on my nerves, but I didn’t have time to deal with him at the moment. I scanned the latch mechanism quickly and realized that it was held shut by a small sliding lock just above the handle. Now I felt like an idiot. As I was sliding the lock back, I heard a fleshy smack and I glanced back. Lexi was standing over the man, who was now on the ground, staring up at her with a shocked look on his face.

“Goddamn, that was getting annoying,” Lexi said, shaking her hand and looking up at us.

“You punched me, you bi—”

The man never got to finish his sentence, because Damien suddenly kicked him in the side of his head. His eyes rolled back in his head and he fell silent, going limp on the ground.

“Yeah, he was getting pretty annoying,” he said, smirking at Lexi.

“Not now!” I called, yanking the gate open and gesturing

for everyone to run through.

The group ran past me as I held the gate. Lexi was the last one to go through and just as she was passing me, I heard a thud and a small cloud of splinters and sawdust burst from the gate next to my head. I glanced toward the front yard and saw several of the men in dark clothing closing in on us, guns raised. One of them was in the process of hitting the man beside him, yelling something in his face. I used their moment of hesitation to quickly slip around the gate and into the alley beyond it, hurrying to catch up to Lexi.

Just as I reached her, we found ourselves back on the street we had started on. We skidded to a stop and looked both ways up and down it.

“Which way, now?” Damien said, panting as he looked around.

“They came from both ways before...” Maya pointed out.

“But they’re stalled now,” I said. “We’re losing our advantage the longer we stand here.”

“Right, and then left!” Shawn called, pointing off to our right, back toward the house where we had started.

No one argued, we simply began running for the main street off to our right. Once we had reached it, we made the turn as best as we could to stay on the sidewalk and head left. I was on the outer edge of the group and was almost forced into the side of a green Subaru, but Lexi grabbed my arm and pulled me back from the edge at the last second. We continued running down the street, the slight downward sloping aiding our speed and making the running feel easier.

After we had gone several blocks, we came upon a relatively busy intersection. A Laundromat sat on the opposite street corner, while a rather large, brick building rose up on the opposite side of the street to our left. Without saying a word, we all seemed to agree to head for it, so we glanced both ways before sprinting out into the road. Horns blared as we dodged between the cars, finally making it to the other side unscathed. Once we had, we immediately swung to the left and begin sprinting down the sidewalk once again. The sound of screeching tires followed by more angry beeping came from behind us, so I glanced back.

One of the SUVs had made it to the intersection and had barreled straight into it, almost sliding around the turn to get on the same road as us.

I immediately turned to face forward once again, pushing Lexi slightly to urge her to go faster. We reached the end of a short chain-link fence and I saw Chase and Shawn immediately hook right and begin running across the mostly-empty parking lot. The rest of us followed suit, but I saw that we had a lot of ground to cover to get to the building while the SUV was gaining on us. Once we were about halfway across, I heard the sound of tires screeching once again and then an engine roaring. I didn't have to look back to know that the SUV had made the turn, as well, and was now barreling down on us.

Chase and Shawn had just reached a set of doors to the building and managed to pull one open. They were waving for the rest of us to hurry up and get inside. I could hear the engine of the SUV just behind me as I drew within twenty feet of the door. Ten feet. I could almost touch the door. Suddenly, I felt a sharp pain in my shoulder and I let out a cry, stumbling slightly and running headlong into the door. I fell to the side, barely managing to crawl inside as I felt a pair of strong hands dragging me away from the door, farther into the building. Shawn suddenly pulled the door shut with a heavy slam and then ran over to me.

"C'mon, Amaryss, get up!" he said urgently, grabbing my arm and hauling me to my feet.

I turned to run, but I realized that my movements were beginning to feel sluggish. My limbs felt heavy, and my vision was beginning to blur.

"Guys..." I tried to call out, but my voice sounded husky and breathless, almost inaudible amongst the sound of shoes on the tile floor and labored breathing. "Guys!"

Chase stopped and turned to look back at me, which caused Shawn to stop a few feet later.

"What's the matter?" Chase asked, as I approached him.

"I... I can't... I feel... tired..." I muttered, almost falling onto him as I approached him.

"What's that on her back?" I heard Shawn say, but everything seemed to be going out of focus, including my hearing;

everyone's voices sounded like they were trying to talk to me while I was underwater.

I heard panicked shouting and felt someone's arm around my shoulders, holding me up, but I barely had any strength left in my legs to support myself, so they were forced to drag me. I saw Maya gesturing wildly for us to hurry up, but then my eyelids began to droop, and I felt myself slip into unconsciousness mere seconds later.

And just like that, everything had gone dark.

The weight on Chase's arm suddenly felt heavier, but he couldn't stop right there in the middle of the hallway. He made it around the corner a second later, passing Maya as she quickly stepped back around it, as well, Shawn following quickly behind Chase. As they rounded the corner, Lexi and Damien were standing just a few feet away, looking a little frazzled and confused, watching them with eyes slightly wider than normal.

"What happened to her?" Lexi said, her eyes immediately fixated on Amaryss hanging limply from Chase's arm.

"I don't know," he said, pulling her right arm farther across his shoulders and holding on to her wrist in order to keep her from totally slipping out of his grip and falling to the floor. "She was fine, but then all of the sudden she kinda... tripped, and then she ran into the door and I had to drag her inside."

"Once we started running, she yelled something at us and then she just kind of collapsed," Shawn finished, glancing around at the rest of the group.

"Is she...?"

"No, I don't think she's dead," Chase said, shaking his head.

"This was in her back, though," Shawn continued, holding something up for the rest of the group to see.

It looked like some kind of dart, with a sharpened needle at one end and a small, clear tube at the other. The tube was empty, but it was reasonable to assume that whatever had been it was now inside Amaryss. Lexi took the dart from Shawn and looked it over some more, rolling it in her fingers slightly.



“So they didn’t want to kill us,” she said, “or else they would have just shot her.”

“I think it’s obvious they didn’t want to kill us based on how angry some of those guys seemed when one of them shot at us,” Chase said, grunting slightly as he shifted Amaryss’s weight once again. “However, we need to get farther away from that door right now before they come in here.”

The others nodded and Lexi handed the dart back to Shawn, who shoved it in his jeans’ pocket and moved to help Chase, but he shook his head.

“I’ve got this, c’mon,” he said, and began to move after the others.

“Okay, but can you move quickly while carrying her?”

Chase realized that trying to support her weight like he was now would eventually be a little too cumbersome, so he knelt down and prepared to shift her. Quickly, before Shawn could step in to help at all, he pulled Amaryss’s body across his shoulder in a fireman’s carry position and rose to his feet once again.

“Let’s go,” he said, and Shawn just nodded before they took off after the others.

She was not incredibly heavy, which Chase was grateful for, but she was possibly a little more so than he had expected. It didn’t matter at the moment, though, so he just forced himself to suck it up and keep running after the others. They made it down the long, tiled hallway before reaching a set of double doors. Without stopping to look, Damien and Maya shouldered them open, holding them for the rest to run through. As they entered the next hallway, everyone paused for a moment, glancing around.

They had suddenly found themselves in a hallway lined with many doors on either side. What immediately stood out to them was the large cross hanging at the far end.

“A church?” Lexi said.

“Seems like it might be,” Chase said. “We need to either find somewhere to hide in here or get out again, though.”

“You think that if we hid they’d just look in a few rooms and then leave?” Shawn said. “They’d probably spend all night in here trying to find us.”

“Unless the cops showed up,” Maya pointed out.

“Why would they show up? Are you going to call them?” he snapped, glancing over at her.

“No, but there’s a good chance we might have tripped some kind of security system when we just barged in here,” she said.

“Not if there are still people in the building,” Chase said. “Since it’s not all that late, and the lights are on, I’m guessing we’re not alone in here. We don’t have time to waste, though.”

With that, he began to walk down the hallway toward the end with the large cross affixed to the wall. Once he reached it, he found a door leading to a set of stairs, and he quickly turned to look back at the group.

“This door, here,” he said.

Damien pushed it open and held it as Chase and the rest slipped through, hurrying up the stairs. Once they had gone up about a floor, the door to the lower level closed with a rather loud bang, and Chase winced. If the men had been in the hallway at that moment, they most likely would have heard that. He redoubled his efforts and reached the next floor, Lexi slipping ahead to pull it open. Without stopping to think, he hurried into the room and came to a stop. The next person came through and almost ran into him.

“Jesus, Chase, what the hell are you—?” Shawn said, but stopped when he saw what he was staring at.

They had ended up in the main chapel of the church, and were now standing somewhat near the front. It took a few seconds for them to realize that there was actually a man standing near the pulpit, staring at them with a surprised expression. Chase began to move farther into the chapel, watching him as they went.

“How did you get in here?” he asked.

They remained silent, moving somewhat toward the aisle that led to the back of the room, but keeping an eye on him the whole time. The man turned around fully to watch them and took a step forward. They all immediately tensed and looked ready to run, so he stopped and held up his hands in what was supposed to be a non-threatening gesture.

“I’m not here to hurt you,” he said, “I just want to know how you got in here.”

After several long seconds of silence, Shawn spoke up.

“Back door,” he said, and the man seemed confused, so he explained further. “By the loading dock, or whatever that area is.”

“Is she okay?”

He was looking at Amaryss slung over Chase’s shoulders. The group yet again was reluctant to answer him.

“She got hit,” Chase said finally. “We’re just trying to get out of here to get help.”

“Hit by what? A car?”

“No...”

“Did you hit her, son?”

Chase suddenly felt angry, but he didn’t have to respond, because Lexi did it for him.

“Listen, she’s our friend, and we’re all the six of us have in this goddamn world,” she began, the man wincing at her cursing, but she ignored him and continued, “so no, we didn’t hurt her. Don’t you dare suggest that we did.”

The man raised his hands once again, leaning back slightly.

“I was simply wondering due to how vague your answers were.”

Just then, Chase heard footsteps moving up the stairwell they had come through and he swore under his breath before quickly turning and heading down the center aisle toward the doors in the back.

“Where are you going?”

“Away from—”

Suddenly, the door banged open and the men with the guns appeared from within the stairwell.

“Hold it!”

Chase froze, his teeth grinding together.

“That’s it, turn around and put the girl down,” the same man demanded.

He slowly turned to face the men and saw three of them standing just inside the doorway to the stairs, pistols raised at them. There was no way to tell if they had actual bullets or more of the darts like the one they had shot Amaryss with, but he didn’t want to take that risk. As Chase quickly scanned the group with his eyes, he noticed that Maya was off to the side a little more than the others. She appeared to be right next to a bunch of candles of

some sort, although he had no idea how or why she had managed to slip away from the group like that.

“What if I refuse?” Chase said, looking back over at the men with the guns.

“I don’t think you want to find out,” the lead man replied, his voice quiet yet rather menacing.

“You mean to fire your weapon inside a house of God?”

Everyone glanced over toward the man near the pulpit, who was looking on with an expression of disbelief.

“Don’t tempt me, Father,” the man with the gun said, smirking.

He turned back to Chase, training the gun on him once again.

“I guess you’re going to have to show me,” he said, holding tightly onto Amaryss over his shoulders.

The man sighed and appeared to be about to fire, but something suddenly flew through the air and hit him in the hands, knocking the gun loose. He let out a shout of pain and surprise as the others began to turn to their left. Before they could even see their attacker, one of them in the back was hit squarely in the head and he staggered back, lowering his gun as he held one hand to the spot where he had been hit. A second later, the other man was hit in a similar fashion. Chase glanced off to his right and saw Maya holding one of the candles in her hand, ready to throw it.

“Go!” she shouted, waving to the others as she threw the last one at the lead man, clocking him in the temple and causing him to stagger sideways.

Chase spun around and immediately began running for the back doors. He had almost reached them when he heard something hitting the wood of the pews around him and knew that the men had started shooting at them.

“Stop! Stop shooting!” the man from the church shouted, but then a second later he fell silent.

Chase had reached the doors, though, and he barreled straight into them, grimacing as he had to use Amaryss slightly to push them open. They rushed out into the entrance area, immediately running down a set of stairs until they reached the bottom, where Lexi quickly jumped in front of Chase and pushed

the door open, holding it for him. They all rushed out onto the street and glanced around quickly. To the right, the street led to more buildings and appeared to have no clear and easy way out. To the left, however, was a busy intersection with some stores.

“Left!” Chase shouted and began running in that direction.

Without really looking, he jumped out into the street and dashed across it, hopping onto the opposite curb and resumed running straight for the intersection. Once he reached it, he slowed to a stop and turned so he could look back at the rest of his group. They were just reaching him as he turned, but he also saw the men exiting the church’s front doors. Before they could look toward the intersection and see them, Chase quickly hid behind the corner of the building they were standing beside and everyone followed suit.

They remained there for a few seconds, but he knew they couldn’t stay still. The group of teens with one of them being carried over another’s shoulders was a little too conspicuous and suspicious to just remain in broad public view. After a second or two more of catching their breath, Chase turned and began hurrying down the sidewalk once again.

“Come on, we can’t stay so close,” he called as he began to move.

“Where are we going, then?” Damien asked.

“I don’t know, but we can’t stay here right now.”

November 24, 1999

1:08:24 A.M.

New York City, NY

Everything felt heavy, but I could tell that I was regaining consciousness. A thick, dark blanket seemed to cover me, holding my limbs down and preventing me from opening my eyes, but I tried to push it back. It started with my fingers and my toes, I could feel them beginning to move, and then I noticed that the darkness seemed to be growing lighter. After a few more seconds, I found myself able to open my eyes. Everything seemed harsh and bright, but I was determined not to let them close, in case I

slipped back under once again. I managed to turn my head to the side, thus stopping me from staring directly into whatever bright object was directly overhead.

I could now feel myself gaining mobility in my limbs as I curled my fingers into a fist and then relaxed them. Although I could move again, all of the motions felt weak. Just then, I noticed that the light had diminished and I turned my head again to look above me. Someone seemed to be standing over me, but I couldn't make out who it was. After several seconds of staring at the figure, I realized that the silhouette was crouching down toward me. I instinctually tensed and started to attempt to move backwards slightly, but stopped when I realized that it was Chase.

I relaxed slightly, but then realized that his mouth was moving, yet I couldn't hear a word he was saying. The look on my face must have been some kind of mix of confusion and fear, and he picked up on it because he suddenly looked concerned. I reached up and put my hands over my ears for a second before pulling them away; I did this several more times, yet nothing changed. My heart began to pound as panic welled up in my chest.

Chase seemed to be starting to understand my panic as he glanced over his shoulder and seemed to call out to someone else, but I couldn't hear him. I clapped my hands against my ears several times before giving up, since nothing seemed to be working. Chase had turned back to face me as someone else appeared on the other side. Lexi was now leaning over me, trying to say something to me, but I couldn't hear her, either.

"I... I can't hear anything!" I said, entirely unsure of how loud my voice was.

Immediately after I had spoken, Lexi put her hand over my mouth and the two of them looked around nervously for a few seconds before she removed her hand. I could take the hint that wherever we were, I shouldn't be shouting or drawing a lot of attention to myself. Lexi glanced at Chase and said something, which he reacted to by nodding, before standing up and walking away. I followed her with my eyes for a few seconds before I looked back at Chase, confusion etched into my face. He tried to force a smile, but it didn't look convincing or genuine, whatsoever.

Suddenly, I felt something touch my hand and I lifted my

head slightly to look down at it. Chase had gently taken a hold of it, and he squeezed my fingers slightly. I squeezed his hand in return and tried to smile as well, but I knew it was as unconvincing as, or possible even more so than his. Just then, Lexi reappeared and I felt Chase quickly pull his hand away, although she didn't seem to notice anything. She held something up for me to see and I realized that it was a piece of paper, and she had managed to get some kind of pen. Where she had gotten these things, I had no clue, but I wasn't really in a position to ask.

Using her teeth to pull the cap off the pen and hold it, she began to quickly scrawl something out on the paper. After she had finished, she turned it around so I could read it.

“Can you hear anything?”

I shook my head and she frowned, holding the paper and the pen out toward me. I began to push myself into a sitting position, which prompted Lexi to drop the items on my stomach before helping me get set up against the wall. I grabbed the paper and the pen and was about to start writing when I realized that something was different. It sounded vaguely like rushing water. What struck me was that I was hearing some kind of sound at all. I quickly scribbled a note out on the paper and held it up for them to see.

“I couldn't hear anything before, but I can hear something faint now,” it read.

Chase looked up from the note when he was done and began saying something, but I couldn't make it out clearly; however, I could detect vague differences in the rushing sound in my ears and figured that it must be faint hints of his voice seeping through. I shook my head and he grabbed the paper and pen from me, quickly writing something down before holding it out toward me.

“What can you hear?”

“Sounds like rushing water, sort of,” I wrote back, holding it for the other two to see.

They both frowned slightly and looked confused. Lexi said something to Chase before standing up and walking away again. I watched her go and realized that I was now getting my first good look at the space we were in. The room seemed to be made almost

entirely of concrete, and stretched on for quite a ways away from us. The overall space was dark, and there appeared to be scarce lighting throughout the space. One fluorescent work light was hanging right above us, and I assumed that was what I had been staring into when I had first woken up a minute or two ago.

I felt something touch my shoulder and I turned to face forward. Chase was leaning forward, his hand outstretched and inches from me. He waved in my face slightly and I blinked, my expression changing to confusion. I had no idea why he was trying to get my attention, but he suddenly reached next to my head and tried to do something. I turned to see what he was doing and he sighed, dropping his arm. With that, he picked up the paper and the pen and began writing out another message.

“It’s the middle of the night,” it said, “we all need to get our rest.”

I nodded, although I wasn’t entirely sure how I could sleep, especially since I had just been unconscious for apparently a while. He was about to stand up to leave when I grabbed his shirt and stopped him. He stopped where he was and returned to the crouched position he had been in before, looking confused. I quickly grabbed the paper and wrote out a note, holding it up so he could see.

“Please don’t go.”

Once he had finished, he looked up at me, an expression that seemed to be something like sympathy in his eyes. He glanced over to the right before holding up one finger and standing up. I figured he meant that he’d be back in a minute, so I just nodded and watched him go. The others in the group seemed to have set up for the night about ten feet or so off to the right, underneath another one of the work lights. I could see Maya lying underneath what looked like a combination of some of her clothes and some newspapers against the same wall that I was propped up against.

Chase spoke to Lexi and Damien for a few seconds before they all nodded and he grabbed his stuff off of the floor and turned to head back toward me. He took a seat beside me and dropped his bag off to his right, leaning back against the wall, as well. I flipped the paper over, since it was a little full on the front side,



and quickly wrote out a note to him.

“What did you say to them?”

He took the paper back and wrote out his response, holding it out for me to take back.

“You were freaked out and didn’t want to spend the night by yourself.”

I grinned and looked over at him. It was pretty much the truth, although I had some specific reasons why I wanted Chase to stay rather than any of the others. He tried to smile back, but suddenly broke out into a yawn and looked a way, covering his mouth slightly as he did. I laughed quietly and leaned my head back against the wall, staring up at the ceiling a little ways in front of me. After a second or two, I felt something touch my hand again and I glanced down. Chase was slowly moving his hand over mine, which was concealed between us from the rest of the group. I grinned and maneuvered my hand so I was holding onto his, as well. He squeezed it yet again, and I returned it, albeit with a little less strength than his.

Chase seemed on the verge of falling asleep, yet I was scared to close my eyes again. It had been who knows how long before I had woken up this time, and I was at least a little scared that if I fell asleep, I’d be out for almost as long, again. I knew it was an irrational fear, but being stuck in this silent little box I had found myself in made me even more prone to any of the strange fears that might pop into my head. If I were asleep, how would I be able to know if someone was coming or if something had happened and wake up to respond to it? Granted, whoever or whatever that was coming in the building in this hypothetical scenario would pretty much have to come from directly in front of me for me to totally see it coming.

I glanced over toward the others in a group a little ways away from us and saw that they had all more or less fallen asleep. Chase’s head kept leaning forward before bobbing back up when he realized that he was beginning to fall asleep. I must have made some kind of noise, because he looked over at me. His lips moved, but I still couldn’t hear what he said. The distant water in my ears seemed to block out all of the other sounds that otherwise might have gotten through the haze. My lips drew into a thin line and I

shook my head; his nod seemed to tell me that he understood what that meant.

My jaw was clenched shut as I stared at the floor a little ways past my feet. I was beginning to wonder exactly what I had done to deserve this. What had I even been shot with back there? What could have knocked me out like that and also have caused my, hopefully temporary, deafness? Before I could fully stop them, I felt hot tears beginning to leak out of the corners of my eyes. I tried to turn and wipe them away before Chase could see, but suddenly I felt his hand let go of mine and then lay upon my shoulder. He turned me so I was looking more at him before reaching up and gently wiping away the wet marks with his thumb. I still felt too embarrassed to look at him, so I kept my head turned away slightly.

Suddenly I felt something soft on my cheek, and then a quick bout of pressure before it disappeared. A second later, I felt it again, but this time in a different location, slightly more toward the corner of my mouth. I felt Chase's fingers on the side of my face and then he gently turned me so that I was facing him. Before I had a chance to react or change my expression to hide my mini-breakdown, he leaned forward and I felt his lips press up against mine. He simply remained there for a moment before I felt them start to move slightly. It felt like a gentle pressure at first, and then it pulled slightly on my upper lip. After I had gotten over the initial realization of what was happening, I tried to respond accordingly; it felt wrong to just sit there. Soon after, though, Chase stopped and I found myself following him slightly before I forced myself to stop.

He was laughing, which made me feel both confused and embarrassed all over again. I was worried that I had done something completely wrong and he was now laughing *at* me, as my cheeks grew red and I looked down at my legs. A second or two later, I saw him grab the paper and scribble something on it quickly. He nudged my arm and held out the paper toward me. I glanced over to read what he had written.

"I think you just need practice."

Now I laughed, the feeling of embarrassment still somewhat there, although not as strong as it had been before. I

grabbed the paper and quickly wrote out my response.

“Is that what you’re here to do, then?”

He laughed and shrugged, beginning to lean in toward me again, but stopping short, almost as if asking permission. I grinned and moved the last bit forward to meet him. Our lips locked once again, although this time I tried to make my motions much more subtle, and react more to what he was doing than simply trying to do my own thing. I suddenly felt something on my stomach and I jumped slightly, causing us to break apart somewhat. Upon glancing down, I realized that it was just Chase’s hand. He had placed it on my stomach, somewhat off to my right side. As soon as I looked down, though, he pulled it away quickly, and I presumed he muttered something along the lines of “sorry.” I quickly shook my head, but realized that it was a rather vague signal.

He looked a little confused and hesitant, but I smirked slightly and grabbed his hand, placing it on me once again, although a little more off to the side than where he had originally placed it. At first, his touch still seemed a little hesitant, but once I leaned in and kissed him again, he seemed to relax and become somewhat more confident. I felt his hand begin to slide around my side and then onto my back. Our lips remained locked together as his hand began to move up and down my back slowly, in a vaguely circular motion.

After what seemed like several minutes, our lips finally pulled apart and I inhaled deeply through my nose. Chase’s hand remained on my lower back, his other resting on my upper arm. The quasi-embrace felt comforting, secure. To be honest, I could stay like this the rest of the night. He seemed to be watching me with a somewhat amused expression on his face. I smiled and leaned in close to him before whispering, or at least speaking at what I hoped was a whispering volume.

“Think you could stay and keep the monsters away all night?”

I leaned back for a moment and he grinned. He nodded and said something that I still couldn’t hear, but seemed to be along the lines of “sure thing.” I grinned and lifted myself up slightly, sliding forward until I was actually lying down on the floor. Chase

followed suit beside me, before pulling out some of his clothes from his bag in preparation to use them like blankets. I rolled onto my side so that I was facing away from him and shifted myself slightly so that I slid backwards toward him. A moment later I felt his arm wrap over my side and across my stomach, pulling me even more toward him. I felt his other hand on my upper back, just about at the base of my neck before sliding up so that his fingers were running through my hair. Despite having been out for hours before, the sensation was making me feel sleepy. My eyelids began to droop, and I found myself beginning to drift off into sleep.

Just as my eyes closed and I began to slip into unconsciousness again, I felt Chase gently kiss me on my head, and I couldn't help but smile. I had to say, this was far more relaxing than the last time I had simply passed out in the hallway while running for my life.

I could get used to this.

# 17

## Fleet as a Flock of Pigeons

November 24, 1999  
3:48:23 A.M.  
Newark, NJ

It had been a long two months, but Kailyn was no closer to figuring out where Amaryss and the rest of the group had gone. After seeing the truck that she was sure had been carrying them leave Fort Worth, it had taken her several days to catch her own ride out of the city. Even then, she only had a vague idea of where they might be going based on what she had thought she had seen on the truck's license plate. When she had been at the fence, she could have sworn it had said "New York" on it, although the more she thought about it the less convinced she became. She was beginning to wonder if her mind had been playing tricks on her. It's not like it hadn't been prone to do so recently.

On her journey to the northeast, there had been multiple encounters with her "mirror image" in various locations and ways. They had come in the now-familiar forms of full-body apparitions walking, talking, and touching her as if someone else was actually there, as well as moving and speaking as a reflection in mirrors. However, she had also begun to notice "her" influence on other things in the environment sometimes. One particular incident that had freaked her out beyond compare was the appearance that a news anchor on a television in a mall was speaking directly to her. Despite all of these assaults upon her sanity, Kailyn had persevered and made it so far as New Jersey.

The abandoned factory she had holed up in for the night was not quite a four-star hotel, but it was somewhere with a roof. Unlike Amaryss and the rest of the group, though, she had not been above acquiring a few things for her needs. The jacket she had lifted from a strip mall in Maryland was wrapped tightly around her, while she wore three pairs of socks inside her sneakers just to keep her feet from going numb. Unfortunately, the jacket could not cover her head as well as her body, so she had resorted to

wrapping one of her shirts around her head so that only her eyes were visible. She was currently curled tightly into a ball, her arms held close to her chest with her knees pulled up, as well. Despite all of the precautions she had taken, shivers still wracked her body, keeping her in the gray area somewhere between sleep and lying on the floor wide awake.

Suddenly, her eyes shot open and she sat up, staring off into the distance, her eyes widened and her breathing heavy and rapid. After several seconds she blinked rapidly and looked around before pushing herself to a kneeling position. She pulled the shirt from around her head and instantly felt the biting cold of the air on her skin, but it was too hard to move around with her vision restricted as much as it was. It took another second or two for her to muster up the will and strength to get to her feet, but she finally forced herself to stand.

For a second, it had felt like one of the most realistic dreams she had ever had, but now that she was awake, she was quickly doubting that it had simply been a dream. She had felt the cold, had been under the harsh fluorescence of a work light, and had seen her right in front of her. Amaryss had been right there. She could have reached out and touched her.

Kailyn grabbed her bag off the floor and shoved the shirt back in it before zipping it up and throwing the strap over her shoulder. She made her way over to the large, metal loading door and stopped in front of it. When she had entered the old factory, the door had been slightly open and she had just crawled underneath, but then when she had tried to close it, it had fallen shut with a pretty resounding thud, which indicated to her that it was not planning on budging anytime soon. She was about to consider pulling on the chains to the side of the door again in an attempt to open it when she suddenly had a better, if somewhat crazier, idea. She raised one hand toward the door and paused, laughing inwardly at herself slightly.

“Do you think you’re some kind of superhero?” she muttered to herself, but kept her hand raised.

With a deep breath, she focused on the door and began to will it to lift off the floor. After several long seconds, the sound of metal reluctantly beginning to move filled the air, and a small gap

began to appear underneath the door. After a few more seconds, though, Kailyn let out the breath she had been holding and it fell the two inches or so back to the ground with a bang. The sudden fatigue from the effort had not been something she was expecting, or had ever experienced before, but even as she stood there, she could feel her strength returning. After another second or two, she took a deep breath and tried again.

This time, the door jerked upward a good foot or so very quickly, and then began to rise more steadily. Finally, it was just high enough for her to walk under it, so she quickly slipped outside before dropping her focus on the door. It felt to the ground with a loud bang and the sound of something crashing to the ground inside the building, but Kailyn shrugged it off; she had made it back outside, and she was not expecting to need to get back inside again.

Now that she had passed her first hurdle, she turned to look over the river before her. The glowing lights of New York City shone brightly against the dark night sky as she stared at it. Somehow, after waking from whatever vision that she had thought was a dream, she had a feeling she knew exactly where Amaryss and the others were. She smirked slightly, as she continued to stare across the river at the lights.

“Sleep tight, Amaryss,” she said quietly, “sleep tight.”

November 24, 1999

8:25:48 A.M.

New York City, NY

Something immediately told me that I was awake, although I hadn't even opened my eyes. It took me a second or two to realize that it was the sound of the city outside. I could hear. Cars, buses, taxis, people shouting at each other... I could hear all of it. My eyes shot open and I sat up, quickly putting my hands over my ears for a second before removing them, testing to make sure that it was real. I saw motion out of the corner of my eye and I turned to the right to see Chase just beginning to wake up, most likely due to me suddenly shaking him when I sat up. His arm still lay across

my side slightly, although it had slipped off somewhat.

“Chase, I can hear!” I said, my voice slightly husky since I had just woken up, but I was too excited to care or really even notice.

“What?” he said, clearly not fully comprehending what was happening after just waking up, himself.

“I can hear again!” I said, my voice returning to normal.

He suddenly sat up, as well, seeming to finally comprehend what I was saying. Without warning, I lunged forward and wrapped my arms around him, too thrilled to care if the others could see us or what they might think. He returned it quickly, his embrace stronger than his normal, nervous grip. After a few seconds, I let go of him and looked around the room. It was amazing how much different the world now seemed in sound. The building was full of echoes and small sounds of what could have been watering dripping on the cement floor. Sounds from the city nearby filtered in and added to the cacophony. I was actually beginning to wonder how any of them could sleep with all of this noise.

My gaze finally fell upon the rest of the group, who were also just beginning to wake up and look around. Lexi was looking over toward Chase and me with a confused expression on her face. I began to get to my feet, as Chase collected the clothes he had been using as a blanket. I grabbed my bag off the floor and hurried over to the others.

“You look rather chipper,” Shawn remarked, also collecting his things.

“Yeah, you could say that,” I replied.

“Your hearing came back?” Lexi said, pausing her packing to look up at me.

I nodded and she grinned.

“Well, that’s a relief,” she said. “I was beginning to worry that we’d have to keep babysitting your ass around.”

I rolled my eyes and tried to kick her lightly, which caused her to make a noise and try to bend away from it. Suddenly, she let out a cry of pain and arched her back, reaching back with one hand.

“I’m sorry,” I said quickly, “I didn’t mean to kick you that



hard...”

“No, it wasn’t you,” she said through clenched teeth. “It’s just... my back does this.”

“Does what?” Damien asked, watching us with a curious expression on his face.

“Hurt like a motherfucker,” Lexi replied, rubbing her back as best she could with one hand for a second or two before sighing and resuming her packing.

“How long has it done that?” he pressed further.

“I don’t know, a while,” she said. “I just figured I hurt it at some point during those ten years I can’t remember.”

Damien, Maya, and Shawn looked confused and I suddenly remembered that none of them had been there when she had mentioned that. I suppose she had also never said anything once we had met the others, either, but it looked like they were going to find out now.

“Yeah, the first thing I can remember is when I was, like, ten,” she said, zipping her bag shut and getting to her feet. “Before that, who the hell knows? Not me, at least.”

They all nodded slowly, apparently just accepting her explanation. I hadn’t been able to think of anything that could explain it, either, so I didn’t entirely blame them. She glanced at me and I suddenly saw something in her eyes that I didn’t understand. It almost seemed like... she was looking to me for something? No... that probably wasn’t right, but I had no idea what it could possibly be. I decided to file it away for later, because the look was quickly gone, replaced by one of annoyance as Shawn suddenly jabbed her in the back.

“Does that hurt?” he said, grinning.

Lexi suddenly punched him in the arm and he backed away, wincing and holding it with one hand.

“Does that?”

I suppressed laughter, which only drew a contemptuous glance from Shawn, but Chase appeared from behind me before he could make some kind of remark.

“So what do we do now?” he asked. “We tracked down what we came here to find, and that was pretty much a dead end.”

“Yeah...” Lexi said, her voice trailing off as she leaned

back against the cement column behind her, her hands shoved in her pockets.

I noticed that we were all shivering slightly, most people standing with their arms crossed tightly across their chests. It also suddenly occurred to me that everyone was beginning to look thinner. Damien's cheeks looked more hollow than I remembered them being when we had first met. Shawn's clothes looked slightly baggier, and Chase was beginning to look a little thin, rather than just like he was in good shape. Maya's clothes also appeared to be hanging off her frame a little more than I had remembered, and Lexi's face seemed somewhat thinner, her cheekbones more pronounced. I could only imagine what I looked like, but I was guessing that it was not so great, either. We couldn't take this life on the run for much longer.

"Is it a dead end, though?" I said suddenly, causing a few people to jump in surprise.

"Well, we found out Shawn's mom is dead, and who the hell knows where his dad is?" Chase replied, his tone rather biting.

I glanced over at Shawn to see that his jaw was set tightly shut, but he didn't seem to react in any other noticeable way to Chase's statement.

"Well, that doesn't mean he's dead, though, right?"

"Not, necessarily, no..."

"Then why don't we try to track him down?"

"How are we going to do that?" Damien asked, his look skeptical.

I took a deep breath, already having a feeling that they would not like what I was about to suggest.

"We could go to the police."

"If the hospital wouldn't help us, what makes you think the police would?" Shawn said. "We're a bunch of kids with no IDs or anything who are trying to find someone. That's pretty suspicious."

"Well, how else could we track someone down?" I shot back.

"Do we even know his name?" Damien asked.

Shawn dug out the file from the hospital from within his bag and flipped it open. He removed the first page he found and

began to scan over it. After several seconds, he looked like he might have found something.

“Here it says she was brought in with a... Scott Hale,” he said. “Maybe that’s him?”

“I guess we’ll have to hope so,” I replied. “So if we know his name... what, do we just look him up in the phonebook?”

“Maybe...” Damien said, shrugging.

“That could be a start,” Lexi admitted, glancing over at me.

“Why are we tracing him down, though?” Maya asked.

Everyone seemed a little taken aback by her statement, because no one spoke for several seconds. Finally, I decided that I would have to be the one to answer, since seemingly no one else wanted to.

“He’s the next best thing we have for this lead, so why not, I guess?”

“Well, that woman said he kind of went off the deep end, right? What if he’s just, like... some kind of crazy, angry drunk?”

This time, Shawn couldn’t remain silent, it seemed.

“Hey, you know what?” he said, suddenly moving over to her and getting in her face. “If we find this guy, he might be the only thing I have that relates to who I am. I don’t know about you, but I’d sure as hell like to find out just where the hell I came from. I’ve lived for too goddamn long not knowing anything about myself except what I’ve been told.”

Maya remained silent, looking somewhat fearful as she leaned back away from him slightly. Shawn sighed and took a step or two back, rubbing his eyes with one hand.

“It’s okay,” Lexi said suddenly, Shawn turning to look back at her, “we’ll find him one way or another.”

He just nodded slowly, sighing before glancing back up at her.

“Thanks,” he said, also glancing over at me, and I felt that he partially meant that to be directed at me, as well.

I nodded slightly, not wanting to fully respond to him in case he hadn’t actually been talking to me.

“Okay then,” Chase said, “where are we going to find a phonebook?”

After about fifteen minutes of walking, we had ended up in a random diner about ten blocks away from the building we had spent the night. A payphone was set up by the bathroom, so we had sent Shawn over to begin looking through it. The rest of us sat at a booth, waiting on some drinks and toast that we had no intention of paying for. The waitress came back before Shawn did, bringing us our three hot cocoas, two orange juices, and a glass of milk with six orders of toast. We had all settled on the toast for food because it was the least expensive item on the menu, and we felt the least guilty about skipping out on when it came time to pay.

I tried to eat my toast slowly, but after the first bite, I found myself salivating over the first real food we had eaten in at least a day. It seemed somewhat pathetic to me that we were worried since we hadn't had food in a day since there were probably people in this city who hadn't real food in several days. I reasoned it to myself by saying that we hadn't had much more than this small amount of food once a day for the better part of the last two months. All of this meant that, simply put, I devoured my food in about thirty seconds. The empty plate staring up at me felt like a sudden reminder of what I had just done, and what it meant for, most likely, the next 24 hours, at least. It was a miracle that we were still able to keep moving at the pace we were with no real supply of nourishment to maintain our energy.

A quick glance around the table told me that the others were having similar thoughts. No one looked happy, despite having just eaten. Everyone wore the same tight-lipped smile and remained silent, sipping at their drinks. I wrapped my hands around the mug of hot cocoa, initially wincing at how hot it felt against my skin, but quickly getting over it and reveling in the warmth it provided. The liquid felt extremely hot to my lips, so I decided I'd let it sit for a minute or two and instead act as a hand warmer.

Just as I was beginning to wonder if Shawn had run off on us, he appeared at the end of the table and I scooted down to allow him room to sit on the end of the bench with Lexi and me. He took a seat and let out a heavy sigh, grabbing the glass of orange juice

we had ordered for him and taking a sip. Everyone was clearly waiting for him to give us the news of what he had found, yet he remained silent for now.

“So...?” Maya said, finally caving and voicing what all of us were thinking.

“I found one Scott Hale in the book,” he said. “He lives somewhere called Bay Ridge.”

“Where’s that?”

“Somewhere in South Brooklyn,” Shawn said and shrugged, taking another sip of his drink.

“How did you find that out?”

“I asked one of the waitresses,” he said.

Everyone fell silent yet again, heads nodding in acceptance. It suddenly occurred to me how strange it seemed that we all kept doing that, rather than speaking to each other. I chalked it up to everyone still being a little too cold and stiff from spending the night outside, again. We needed to find a place to hunker down indoors tonight, that was obvious, but we had a whole day to track down who we thought was Shawn’s dad, first.

“How do we get there and how long will it take?” Chase asked.

“She said something like an hour by the R line,” he replied.

“Sounds like quite a walk, then,” I said.

“We should get going soon, then,” Damien chimed in.

“Mhm, but let’s at least finish these first,” Lexi said, tapping her mug.

We all finished our drinks in relative silence before glancing around to see if our waitress was anywhere nearby. Once we had seen her enter the kitchen, we slipped out of the booth and onto the street, hurrying away before anyone had a chance to stop us or at least yell at us. Shawn gave us the vague directions he had gotten from the waitress he had spoken to, and we set out in a direction that brought us along the water.

The wind seemed to cut straight through my clothes, no matter how many I wore. I was beginning to wonder if the goose-bumps on my skin would become permanent, at this point, but I kept telling myself that we would find somewhere out of the cold soon enough. Everyone else seemed to be faring about as well as I

was against the cold, which was to say not very well. Lexi and Damien seemed to be walking in slightly hunched positions, yet they were still moving. If everyone else was still walking, then I could keep up, I told myself; I would not be the first person to give up.

Finally, after a grueling four-hour march down the waterfront, we reached the street Shawn had found in the phonebook. We came to a stop at the intersection and glanced both ways up and down it.

“What’s the number?” Damien asked, his voice quavering slightly as his teeth chattered uncontrollably.

“209 77<sup>th</sup> street,” he said, looking down the street to our right. “The numbers go up this way starting at 190.”

“Then that’s where we’ll go,” I said, starting down the street.

The rest of the group followed soon after, moving slightly faster now that our goal seemed to be in sight. Cars lined either side of the street, making it tight for anyone that was actually trying to drive down it. We stayed on the sidewalk, however, which was also narrow, only allowing us to move two-by-two. Maya trudged along beside me, her arms crossed and her hands shoved firmly under her armpits in an attempt to keep them warm. Her eyes seemed slightly glassy as she stared straight ahead, following Lexi and Shawn in front of us. I wanted to say something to her, but the energy to speak seemed too great to expend on small talk.

Shawn came to a sudden stop and I almost ran into the back of him, but caught myself at the last second and stopped almost as quickly as he had. I looked at the house we had found ourselves in front of and found that it was more or less as I had anticipated it to look. It was the smallest house on the block, and it looked like it could use a little fixing-up, but it at least seemed inhabited. Since it was the middle of the day, it was hard to tell if someone was home or not. The cars behind us on the side of the road could belong to anyone who lived in the nearby houses, as well, so that was also not really a good way to tell.

“So this is it?” I said, glancing over at Shawn.

He nodded, his hands still shoved firmly in his jeans’

pockets. I glanced around at the others, who were all looking around at each other, obviously hoping that we would go up and find out if this was the right place, after all. Everyone really wanted out of the cold, and I couldn't blame them.

"Well, let's go knock," Lexi said, gesturing for Shawn to begin walking up the short walkway to the front stairs.

He began to move forward, almost as if in a trance, his feet falling heavily on the stairs. Lexi and I followed somewhat close behind him, although we stayed on the steps as he crossed the small porch and approached the door. After a moment's hesitation, he knocked on the door and took a step back, waiting for a response.

I heard the sound of movement from inside, and then the sound of something falling, followed by an angry exclamation. The footsteps began to approach the door, and I found myself holding my breath. The next second, the door swung open and a man appeared in its place. He appeared to be in his mid-40s, with graying hair and a rather stubbly beard that also showed hints of gray. He was wearing an old T-shirt with some sort of band or sports team logo on the front and a pair of faded jeans.

"Can I help you?" he said, looking Shawn up and down.

"I'm looking for Scott Hale," Shawn said, his voice surprisingly even.

"Well, you found him," the man replied, his voice slightly gravelly. "Who're you with? IRS? Some city tax shark?"

"No, I'm not with any group," he replied, and I could tell that he was becoming more nervous. "I've come halfway across the country looking for you."

"You're not here to kill me or anything, are ya?"

"N-no..." Shawn said, clearly a bit taken aback by the question.

"Then who in the hell would come halfway across the goddamn country to find me?" the man demanded.

I was begging Shawn to just tell the man and get it over with inside my head, but I didn't speak aloud.

"Who the hell are all of them?" the man said, looking past Shawn at the rest of us waiting on the front walkway.

"They're with me," Shawn said, taking a deep breath. "I..."

we came look for you because... I think you're my father."

The man stared at him for several seconds before suddenly looking very confused.

"What?" he said. "I don't have a kid."

"You never did?" Shawn said, and I could tell that he was trying hard to not lose hope. "You never even tried? You and Lucy Hale—"

"How in the hell do you know her name?" the man spat, suddenly sounding angry.

"I tracked her name down first, and that led me to you," he said quickly. "Did you ever try to have a child with her?"

The man stared Shawn down for several seconds before clearing his throat.

"Once a long time ago I tried to have a real family, maybe," he said, "but it looks like the cards didn't play in my favor. Our kid never made it, and then I lost her a couple of years ago. I don't know why I'm telling you any of this, but I figure if you're for real and came all this way, then that's your answer."

"You said your kid didn't make it," Shawn said, obviously trying to keep the man's attention. "How did you know he didn't make it?"

"Well, how else? The doctor's told us he had a weak heart and weak lungs and that he wouldn't live past a few weeks, maybe. We got to see him once and that was it," he said. "Have you tormented me enough, now?"

I could tell that Shawn must have been having the same idea I was: the doctors had lied. Jared and his group had paid them off, or somehow gotten them to take Shawn. Whether or not he actually had those conditions, I had no idea, but those were also a lie, perhaps.

"My name is Shawn Hale, and I have lived my entire life across the country," he began, putting all of his chips in, apparently, in a last-ditch effort to get through to this man, "not knowing where I came from. I had no clue who my parents were, or where they might be. I only had one link to them the entire time..."

He suddenly grabbed the bottom of his shirt and lifted it up as Lexi and I exchanged glances. This was something she and I



had never heard about, but we were suddenly very interested. The man glared at Shawn for a second but glanced down at whatever was on his side that he was trying to show him. Suddenly, his eyes widened slightly and he looked back up at Shawn's face.

"That birthmark..." he said. "Our son... had one... right there."

Shawn let his shirt fall back down as he waited for the man to come to terms with what he had just seen. I heard the sound of the screen door opening and Shawn took a step back. The man stepped outside, still staring him right in the eyes. After a second or two, he took a step back and looked Shawn up and down once again.

"I can't believe this is even possible..." he said. "Twenty years later... turns out my son might be alive?"

"Nineteen, technically," Shawn said, smirking.

The man stared at him for a few more seconds before breaking out laughing. The next second, he threw his arms around Shawn in a tight embrace. He obviously didn't know how to react, but slowly returned it. After a few seconds, the man backed away but held Shawn at arm's length. Maya sneezed, causing everyone to jump and the man looked around Shawn.

"You said they're with you?" he asked.

"These are my friends," Shawn explained. "Without them I never would have made it here."

He looked back at us for a moment or two before gesturing for all of us to follow him inside.

"Come on, let's talk inside where it's not so fucking freezing."

We all laughed quietly and followed the two of them through the front door of the house. Immediately upon entering, I noticed a heavy scent filled the air. I wasn't sure exactly what it was, but based on the others' reactions, I wasn't the only one who noticed. The man, Scott, led us into the room immediately to the right of the front door, which turned out to be the living room. The only furniture in the whole room was an old armchair, a rather small, old couch, and an old rocking chair. A small, battered TV set sat in the corner to our left, the screen glowing with whatever show he had been watching before we had arrived. The walls were

covered in an old-looking white-and-green floral wallpaper that looked like it had been put up in the 60s and hadn't been replaced since. No pictures adorned the walls; in fact, the only one in the entire room sat on a small table beside the armchair. It was a picture of a woman, probably somewhere in her 30s, sitting on a swing in a park. As I stared at the picture a little longer, I began to notice familiar features. The brown hair, the dark green eyes... they were all like Shawn. Scott must have noticed at least one of us staring at the picture because he suddenly picked it up and sighed.

"This is Lucy," he said, holding it out toward Shawn.

He took it and looked down at the picture with an unreadable expression on his face. I couldn't even begin to imagine how he was feeling at that moment, to be so close to meeting a parent he had never had the chance to know, only to have her ripped away once again. After a few seconds, he handed it back to Scott.

"You've got her eyes and her hair, it seems," he said laughing. "I don't know about the rest of you, though. I can't remember enough of my younger days at this point to tell if you look like me."

Shawn laughed slightly, but it didn't feel entirely genuine. After a few seconds of awkward silence, Scott suddenly started, as if remembering something.

"Take a seat, everyone," he said. "You came all this way, I might as well hear from you."

He stepped over to the TV and quickly flicked it off, throwing the room into an even deeper silence. Lexi, Chase, and I squeezed onto the couch together, while Shawn took the armchair and Maya quickly beat Damien to the rocking chair, leaving him to sit on the floor between it and the couch. Scott stood by the door to the next room, leaning against the doorframe as he looked around at all of us.

"So, what's the story?" he said. "I want to know how it came to be that my supposedly dead son has been living across the country for almost the last two decades, only to suddenly show up now."

We all glanced at each other, obviously unsure of how

much of the story we should tell. Finally, we all looked to Shawn, ultimately figuring that it was up to him to decide how much he wanted to tell.

“We were all taken,” he began, turning to look back at his father, “when we were young... just born, most of us. We were taken by the same group of ‘scientists’...”

He traced quotation marks in the air as he said scientists, his tone also becoming more bitter.

“They took us and... began to do... work on us.”

Scott immediately looked rather confused.

“What do you mean by ‘do work’ on you?”

“They experimented on us,” Lexi said, breaking into the story. “Genetic modification or something along those lines.”

Scott looked somewhat shocked and scared by this, turning back to Shawn, who just nodded.

“You’re telling me that some psychos took a bunch of babies and started running *experiments* on them?” he said.

We all nodded and he shook his head.

“Un-fucking-believable,” he muttered. “So what then?”

“Well, that all happened... mostly before any of us can really remember,” Shawn continued. “I first remember some sort of facility, but I have no idea where it was. All I know is that when I was six, I was moved to a house of one of these scientists in Arizona, which is where I essentially grew up. Maya was there with me.”

He gestured to her, and she immediately looked a little uncomfortable as Scott looked over at her. The feeling seem to pass quickly as he turned his attention back to Shawn.

“So far, nothing really noticeable has come of what they did, at least for me,” he said. “I can’t really speak for everyone, though...”

He glanced over at us, but I wasn’t sure if he was referring to any of us in the room now, or possibly Kailyn. Either way, an uncomfortable silence settled over us once more.

“So, how does this lead to you showing up here in New York?” Scott asked, looking a little confused, but still very interested.

“Well, a few months ago, everyone else here showed up in

Arizona, and they already had the beginnings of an idea to escape, since the prospect of staying under the charge of those men didn't seem particularly appealing," he said. "So we broke out... at some point in September, I think. We stole a car and drove it eastward until we hit Fort Worth, Texas. It was about there that we ran out of money, and we were forced to hitch rides in the backs of trucks and on trains the rest of the way here."

"You've been living on the street, basically?" Scott said incredulously, looking around at all of us.

Honestly, I found it strange that he seemed so surprised by that, particularly based on our appearance. Perhaps if he hadn't known us before, he might have just figured this is what we looked like. Maybe he even thought we were living in cages, for all I knew.

"Well, we were kind of living like some kind of 1920s runaways until we hit New York," Shawn replied, laughing slightly.

"Ever since we got here... a couple of weeks ago, I think, we've been living on the streets, really," Chase added, speaking up for the first time.

Scott looked around at all of us, his look of surprise not fading. After several seconds, he cleared his throat and tried to compose himself a bit more.

"I'm so sorry to hear that," he said, "especially with how cold it's been..."

We all nodded in agreement. I rubbed my arms slightly, the chill from outside still seemingly stuck in my skin, but it was beginning to dissipate in the warmth within the house. Scott suddenly snapped his fingers and looked over at the group at large once again.

"It just occurred to me that I never learned any of your names," he said. "You're Maya, though, right?"

He pointed to her and she nodded.

"Maya Edwards," she said.

"I'm Damien," he said, lifting one arm to wave slightly.

"No last name?"

"Don't know it," he said, shrugging.

Scott looked a little skeptical, but turned his gaze to the

next person.

“Chase Morgan,” he said.

“Alexis Roth, but I go by Lexi,” she said and looked over at me.

“Amaryss Torres,” I said.

He looked at me for a second longer than the others, a strange look on his face.

“An interesting name,” he said.

I shrugged.

“I didn’t pick it.”

Everyone laughed at that and I couldn’t help grinning a little.

“Well, I’m—” Shawn began to say.

“Shawn, I know,” Scott interrupted, laughing. “I named you, so I’d hope I knew it. Granted, it has been nineteen years, but... my memory’s not completely shot, yet.”

We all laughed again, and I could feel that the air seemed to be growing lighter as the conversation went on.

“Well... I’m not really prepared to house so many guests,” he said, “let alone teenagers, but you’re all welcome to stay.”

“Thank you,” I said and the others nodded their appreciation, as well.

“Unfortunately, I also don’t have much in the way of food, either,” he said. “Living alone means a lot of canned food and take-out. However, I can order a mean pizza... or two.”

Everyone’s eyes must have instantly lit up because he laughed and began to head into the next room. Once he had left, we all turned to face each other, Shawn letting out a heavy sigh and ran his hands through his hair.

“Hey, you did it,” I said, putting a hand on his knee and shaking his leg slightly. “You found your dad.”

“Yeah...” he said, seemingly still unable to comprehend what had happened, still.

“Look happy, okay?” I said. “At least for everyone else’s sake.”

He looked over at me with his eyes slightly narrowed and I grinned, taking my hand off his leg.

“Yes, mother,” he said.

We both laughed, but something felt strange about him saying that now, especially after what we had just discovered about his own mother. A shiver shot down my spine, but I quickly shook it off and re-engaged in the group conversation.

“So who is in favor of staying inside this house the rest of the day and not setting foot outside for a while?” Damien asked, raising his hand and looking around at the rest of us.

“Oh, you’ve got me there,” Lexi replied, raising her hand as well, as the rest of us followed suit, laughing.

Damien let out a sigh and laid out on his back, spreading his arms out to his side slightly and closing his eyes.

“I never thought I’d miss the feeling of the desert,” Shawn remarked, causing the rest of us to laugh as Maya pointed to him, nodding in agreement. “You never went outside, anyway!”

“It was still warm there,” she argued. “I could just curl up in bed and be all warm and comfy and never have to worry about wearing three layers of clothes and still shivering.”

“Yeah, I have to say that I’ve spent most of my life in warmer places, and I can’t say that I prefer this,” I added.

“Where have you lived, besides Nevada?” Lexi asked. “You came from California, you said, and you mentioned Nevada once when we got to Mack’s. Was there anywhere else?”

“Yeah, Colorado actually,” I said.

“So you’ve experienced this kind of weather before, then,” Maya said, leaning forward slightly and raising her eyebrows.

“Yeah, but I had the proper clothing, then!” I shot back. “We kinda got rid of it when we moved to California, since we weren’t in any areas that needed it. That and Jared wasn’t about to let us go skiing anytime soon.”

Not long after that, Scott reappeared from the other room and clapped his hands together once to get our attention.

“Good news guys, two pies are on their way. It’ll be about thirty or forty minutes, though.”

“Hey, better than never,” Lexi said and we all laughed.

As I glanced around the room, I saw everyone talking and laughing, smiles adorned faces all around. This was the first time in quite a while that I had seen everyone together like this, happy and animated, rather than angry, sullen, or that hollow look that

seemed to appear in people's eyes when they felt lost and unsure of where they were going. We had been through too much tragedy and had too much bad news and bad luck recently. We deserved this. We needed this.

Finally, we had a feeling of home.

November 24, 1999

9:58:25 P.M.

London, England

Jared stood over the shoulder of a woman typing on a computer screen. Numbers and letters seemed to pour forth from her fingertips as they danced across the keyboard, her eyes not once leaving the screen. He had seen a lot of strange and amazing things in his life, but this was a whole new level of amazement for him. Finally, she hit one key rather emphatically and the rattle of the keys came to a stop.

"There, the whole sequence has been mapped," she said, her voice laced with a thick British accent.

As she spoke, a printer off to their right began to stir and come to life. Pages began to pour out of it with a rather grating, digital sound, before it finally came to a stop. The woman pushed her chair back from her desk and walked over to it, tearing the paper out of the machine and scanning it for a few seconds before bringing it over to Jared and handing it to him. He took the pages and began looking at them.

"This is the breakdown of all of the different strands within the DNA samples you supplied us," she said.

He nodded, poring over the data for several more seconds in silence. Finally, he looked up at her, as she flicked open a lighter and lit a cigarette. Jared grimaced slightly as she inhaled deeply and turned her head to the side to blow a puff of smoke. Smoking had been one vice he had never particularly understood or appreciated.

"It seems like the modifications are pairing smoothly with the existing material," he said.

"Aye, that it is," she said, taking another drag from the

cigarette. “It’s quite remarkable, actually.”

“Oh?”

“Everyone has been saying that this can’t be done, that humans are too complex to attempt this sort of procedure without significantly more animal testing, yet... here it is.”

Jared nodded slowly, deciding that it was at least somewhat of a compliment. They had never been something he was good at accepting, since they came so rarely in his circumstances, yet he figured that some were deserved at this point.

“Now, about the other project you sent us,” the woman said, causing Jared to look up at her expectantly.

“Which other project?”

“The one you sent us months ago,” she said. “You wanted us to... be able to copy that information?”

“Ah, yes,” Jared said, placing the papers down on the corner of the woman’s desk.

“Well... we’ve been looking into that project for quite a while now, actually,” she said, a smirk beginning to appear on her lips, “all we need is the exact data you want copied.”

It took a second for what she had said to sink in for Jared, but his eyes suddenly widened and he appeared much more interested.

“You’ve... you’ve already done it?”

“Not entirely... we believe we may have perfected the process, but we need the specific data to supplant,” she explained. “What we have, essentially, are blank slates, waiting for the specific information to be implanted, which will then give instructions to the whole system and kick-start the project.”

Jared couldn’t help but laugh slightly as the woman’s smirk turned into an actual smile. He ran his hands over his face as he tapped his foot on the floor. Finally, he laughed again and looked back over at the woman.

“I can’t believe it,” he said, “this is... wow.”

“I expected such a response,” she said. “Actually, we decided to go ahead and attempt the process with some of the sample you sent us.”

Jared instantly froze, his expression looking somewhere between shock and disbelief.



“Is that a problem?” she asked quickly, her smile faltering slightly.

“No, no...” he said quickly. “How long ago did you do this?”

“About three weeks or so,” she said.

After a moment of silence, he cleared his throat and licked his lips as they had suddenly seemed to go dry.

“Have there been any results?”

The smirk once again returned to the woman’s face.

“Very basic ones... but yes.”

Jared laughed again and banged his fist down on the desk, causing several nearby objects to jump an inch into the air or so. He began to pace back and forth as the realization of what he was hearing began to hit him even more. This had been the one project everyone in the science community had been debating, hemming and hawing, and turning their noses up at for years, now, but they had gone ahead and done it.

“You see, sometimes unrestricted research can work miracles,” he said, glancing over at the woman and they both laughed.

“There’s a reason I joined this team,” she said.

“And a reason we took you on,” he replied. “I knew we’d be hearing some great things from you one day, Miss Kavalla.”

She smiled again and nodded slightly.

“Thank you, Mr. Broder.”

November 24, 1999

3:48:23 P.M.

New York City, NY

Getting into the city had been relatively simple, if somewhat long and unpleasant. The temperature made walking out in the open a struggle, but Kailyn had long since given up on caring if she looked homeless or not. She had finally broken down and wrapped one of her shirts around her head, leaving a space roughly about the size of a pair of ski goggles visible around her eyes. The biting wind had become an almost constant sensation, and she was beginning to question whether she was mentally

blocking it out, or whether her entire body was beginning to go numb at this point.

Whatever strange vision that had occurred in the abandoned warehouse across the river had somehow guided her to a large building that appeared to be under rather extensive renovation. It stretched about fifteen to twenty stories into the air above her, but the ground level was blocked off by a portable fence, secured to the ground by sandbags and by lashing parts of it to cement barricades. As she walked around the building, though, she found one of the sections had pulled open and left that way. Construction workers milled about just inside it, but she still had the insatiable urge to slip inside and see for herself if what she had seen last night was true.

After glancing around to make sure none of the workers was actually watching the open gate at the moment, she quickly slipped inside and crossed the open ground to an open doorway in the side of the building. She hopped through it and stopped just inside the building. The entire ground floor was empty, with all-cement surfaces and multiple large columns scattered throughout. It was only a matter of time before one of the workers noticed the homeless-looking person wandering about, so she set off to her left, looking around the room for something recognizable from what she had seen. Just as she reached the wall, she happened to glance to her right and she stopped. The section of the room before her was just as barren and unfinished as the rest of it, but it was the sudden feeling of déjà vu that came over her that made her stop. The exact image she was seeing was what she had seen the night before, minus Amaryss and the others.

A feeling of accomplishment and fear began to fill her chest as she stared at the section of empty wall. On one hand, it meant that she had been right and found her way to this spot, but on the other, the fact that she had been able to do this meant that something was definitely progressing even further within her. She shut her eyes tightly and looked away for a moment before forcing herself to open them once more. As she did, she jumped and almost let out a scream of surprise. Her copy that had been following her over the course of the entire trip was standing about ten feet away, looking around at the ground where she remembered

seeing Amaryss before.

“They were here, but that was a while ago,” the copy said, looking back at Kailyn. “They moved on this morning.”

Kailyn remained silent, glaring at the copy, who only began to grin.

“But you know that... and you already know where to find them.”

“So what if I do?” Kailyn muttered quietly, barely above a whisper.

“Your instincts were right once,” the copy said.

“So use them.”

The voice had come from directly beside her, which caused Kailyn to jump and spin to her right. Her copy now appeared beside her, laughing as she tried to regain her breath.

“You’re so skittish, you know that?” she said.

Kailyn set her jaw tightly and stalked past the copy, bumping against her shoulder as she passed. She half-expected just to pass right through it, but her shoulder was knocked back as if she had run into a real person. This surprised her more than she cared to admit, but she repressed the feeling and headed toward the door where she had entered. Just as she reached it, she heard someone shouting and she glanced over to her left. One of the construction workers was shouting at her, pointing in her direction, as well. She didn’t wait around to understand what he was saying, she simply spun back to her right and jumped out the door, running for the open gate in the fence. Just as she reached it, a large truck was driving through it, which caused her to jump, but she quickly threw herself against the fence and spun around so her back was against it, sliding along it just inches from the side of the vehicle. It came to a stop in front of her, most likely because the driver didn’t want to run her over, so she used it as cover while she slid along the fence and slipped around the corner, immediately making a break for the street.

Once she hit the sidewalk, Kailyn swung to the left and resumed her breakneck pace, shoving people aside and slipping around them in order to find the fastest route and put the most distance between her and the construction site. After a few minutes, Kailyn slowed to a stop and glanced around. She had

wound up in the middle of the city somewhere, but no one seemed to be following her. The shirt she had previously wrapped around her head had fallen off during her sprint, and she was now clutching it tightly in her fist. The people walking by on the sidewalk looked at her as if she were crazy. Granted, the sight of a girl in old, dirty clothes sprinting down the sidewalk was not really a normal occurrence, at least she had deduced that from their reactions. She fell back against the building beside her, running her hands through her hair as she tried to catch her breath. Finally, she laughed and stood up straight, using her shirt to wipe her face off and attempt to dry some of the sweat from her hair.

Once she had managed to calm herself down a bit and had shoved the shirt back in her bag, Kailyn began walking along the sidewalk once again. Previously, there had been a strange sense in the back of her mind that had been guiding her to the building under construction, but now she felt almost entirely lost. She had not expected Amaryss and the others to still be in the building by this point, but she had been hoping that maybe once she was there, she would somehow know where she had to go next, like after she had awoken from the vision-dream the night before. However, there appeared to be no such luck this time.

After about twenty or thirty minutes of wandering, she came upon a small playground. Kailyn came to a stop and leaned against the metal fence for a few seconds, staring in at the swings and small jungle-gym-like structure. There were no kids currently in the park, which lent a slightly eerie feeling to the whole scene. On a whim, she pushed open the gate and climbed up the short set of stairs, bringing her to the small, open tarmac that looked like a form of mini-court for some kind of sport, although there were no lines drawn on the ground, and an old, ratty net sat at one end.

Soon after she had crossed the tarmac, she came upon the swings and slowly lowered herself into one. The seat was just large enough to accommodate her, but it hung a little low to the ground, so she was forced to bend her legs beneath her, almost so that she was kneeling in the damp, cold dirt and mulch that had been used to fill the playground. As she sat on the swing, idly moving back and forth and twisting slightly as she did, a cold gust of wind blew across the open ground, rattling some dead leaves on

the ground and cutting through her to the bone. Kailyn shivered, but ultimately there was nothing she could really do about it; the jacket was better than nothing, but it could only work so well, and she was already wearing two pairs of jeans.

As she sat there, she found herself staring at the ground in front of her, not actually paying attention to anything in particular. With each cold gust of wind, she was reminded just how far she was from the heat of the desert in Arizona where the others had abandoned her. The simple thought of how Amaryss had left her in some room in that house while she ran off with all of the other kids stung as it was, but it was nothing in comparison to the feeling of the cold knife that seemed to stab straight through her chest when she thought of how Amaryss had abandoned her right when they had the chance to get rid of the one person they could attribute all of their problems to.

“Morality’s a bitch, huh?”

Kailyn nearly fell out of the swing as she jumped and looked around at the sound of the voice. Laughter came from beside her and she quickly spun her head to see the image of herself sitting on the other swing. She let out a heavy sigh and hung her head, massaging her temples with her fingers.

“You know what I always say?” the copy said, glancing over at her.

“Yes, I do, actually,” Kailyn shot back, looking over at her. “You’re inside my head, so of course I do.”

“Hey, I only say what you think deep down, but are too afraid to actually acknowledge,” she said, grinning.

Kailyn remained silent, staring down at the ground beneath her once more.

“So you’re in the big city, looking for Amaryss...”

“That’s the plan,” she said, nodding slowly.

“So what are you going to do when you find her and all of them?”

She opened her mouth to respond when she suddenly froze. The goal of finding Amaryss had always been in her mind, ever since she had stolen that ambulance and drove off, but it suddenly occurred to her that she hadn’t actually thought about what she would do when she found her.

“You’re gonna kill her?”

Kailyn’s head whipped to the side as a look of something like shock and disbelief came across her face.

“That’s what you were thinking, right?” the copy said, raising one eyebrow.

“I—I—”

“Don’t try to argue with your subconscious,” the copy chided, shaking her head, “it knows more about you than you could imagine.”

The copy stood up, groaning as she stretched her arms above her head. It suddenly dawned on Kailyn that the copy wasn’t wearing the same jacket and several pairs of jeans as her. Actually, the copy seemed to be wearing the same type of outfit she had been wearing back in the warm temperatures of Arizona and Texas.

“Wondering how I’m not freezing to death?” the copy said, glancing back at her. “It’s ‘cause I’m up here.”

She pointed to her forehead and laughed as Kailyn remained where she was, seemingly unmoved. The copy sighed and turned to face her.

“Would it make you more comfortable if I changed? Fine.”

Suddenly, the shorts and T-shirt were replaced with the same jeans and dark green jacket that Kailyn was wearing. The copy raised her arms out to the sides and looked down at herself before back up at Kailyn.

“Better?”

A chill suddenly ran down her spine and she shivered as the copy grinned.

“It is a bit cold out here, isn’t it?”

“Fine for you to say, you can’t feel it,” she muttered.

“Au contraire, mademoiselle,” the copy said, dropping her arms and shoving her hands in her jeans’ pockets. “I’m in your head, so I can still feel everything you can. However, I’m more adept at blocking it out, since it doesn’t directly affect me.”

“So if, say, something happened to me... you’d feel it, too?” Kailyn said, raising one eyebrow.

“Well, yes, technically,” the copy said, looking confused for the first time.

“So, if suddenly, say...”

Suddenly, Kailyn pulled the sleeve of her jacket back and dug her fingernails into her arm, gritting her teeth as pain shot out from the points where she had just grabbed herself. The copy suddenly let out a cry of pain and grabbed her arm in the same spot that Kailyn had.

“What the fuck are you doing?!”

Kailyn looked down at her arm to see that one of her fingernails had actually broken the skin and a small trickle of vermilion blood was beginning to leak out around her finger. A strong hand suddenly grabbed her jacket from the front and she was hauled to her feet. She almost fell to the ground from the sudden motion, but the grip remained firm. As she brought her attention to the front again, she saw the copy holding her by the jacket, fire in her eyes.

“You think this is funny?” she growled. “We’re both in this together, whether you like it or not, so I’d appreciate it if you stopped acting as if you were out to get me.”

Kailyn suddenly grabbed the copy’s arm, the shock of how cold it was immediately shooting through her hand, but she forced herself to ignore it. The grip felt like a machine vice, but she began to try to pull it away. At first, the copy remained firm, but after a few seconds, the grip on her jacket began to weaken and finally she was able to pull the hand away. A look of surprise crossed the copy’s face as Kailyn managed to pull her hand away before suddenly throwing it down and to the side, throwing the copy off-balance.

“Need I remind you who’s in charge?” she said.

As soon as she said that, she realized that the copy was gone. The park sat empty and silent around her, just as it had been when she had first arrived. With a heavy sigh, Kailyn ran her hands back through her hair and began to head toward the gate to the street. Just as she reached it and put her hand on the latch, something flashed before her eyes and she froze.

It was an image of a house, although she had never seen it before, at least from what she remembered. Cars lined the street outside it. A short, cement walkway led up to a few wooden steps of the front porch. The brown paint seemed to be coming off in a

few places. The whole place seemed like it could use a little work, frankly. The next moment, Kailyn realized that she was staring at the gate to the playground, her hand still resting on the cold metal latch. She quickly opened it, shaking her head as she stepped onto the sidewalk and glanced both ways down the street. As before, she suddenly had a nagging feeling in the back of her mind that she should head to the left.

As she turned and began to walk down the sidewalk, a smirk creased her lips. She was back on track, and one step closer to finding Amaryss and the others. As for what she would do when she found them, something told her she had some time to figure that out.

November 24, 1999

9:28:34 P.M.

Hale residence, New York City, NY

I settled down on the couch with a heavy sigh. It was the first time I had been able to lie down on something more or less like an actual bed in months. I tried not to think too much about how dirty the couch might be, but it was still less dubious than some of the cots in the homeless shelters we had stayed in. Scott had managed to scrounge up some spare sheets and blankets for everyone to use, but I could have fallen asleep without them, anyway. Due to her back problems that seemed to be flaring up earlier, we had all agreed Lexi should get one spot on the guest bed that Scott had. Seeing as Lexi was in the bed, that ruled out Shawn, Chase, or Damien almost immediately. She and Chase had lived together for years and had shared a room while Kailyn and I had lived with them in California, but they had never really shared beds. Regardless of the past, no one felt entirely comfortable with those circumstances now. Eventually, after much debate, we had decided that Maya could have the other spot. The rest of the group had originally offered it to me, but I had my own reasons for why I wanted my own sleeping space.

Scott had found an old air mattress in a closet and Shawn had inflated it in a seemingly unused office just next door to the



guest room. Damien and he had decided to share that bed. That left Chase and me, and we chose the living room. I took the couch and Chase got the armchair and a small ottoman that had been beside the TV, holding up a small lamp. I felt like the last glance Lexi had given us as she went off to bed had held something akin to recognition of what we were up to with the sleeping arrangements, but I decided that it was a concern to deal with in the morning, or at least tomorrow sometime.

Chase flicked the light off and the room was suddenly plunged into total darkness; the only light that had been on previously was the lamp next to the TV, which had not cast much light in the space, anyway, but I was still surprised by how dark it was once it was gone. I made a noise and rolled onto my side, reaching toward the floor in an attempt to feel for the blanket that had been left for me. My hand finally came upon something slightly fuzzy, and I sincerely hoped that it was just the blanket. I went to pull it up onto the bed when I suddenly felt weight sink into the couch cushion around my abdomen. I turned to look in that direction and could just barely make out the faint outline of Chase in the darkness. As I stared at him for a few seconds longer, I found that everything seemed to be growing slightly brighter, and I figured that my eyes were adjusting to the dark. The amount that I could suddenly see, though, seemed to be much higher than it should be. I could see him and everything else in the room rather clearly at this point.

*“Another product of Jared’s, I guess, although I suppose it’s not horrible,”* I thought, shrugging it off.

Suddenly, I realized that Chase had leaned forward and the next thing I knew, his lips were pressed up against mine. I jumped slightly and he instantly pulled back.

“Sorry,” he whispered.

“No, it’s okay,” I replied, “I was just... spacing out.”

He laughed.

“Maybe you’re too tired for that, right now,” he said, moving to stand up, but I grabbed his arm.

“No, wait,” I said quickly.

He sat back down as I pulled my torso into a somewhat upright position, mostly pulling on Chase’s arm to support me.

The expression on his face conveyed something like amusement and curiosity as I managed to finally get into a sitting position. I leaned in closer to him, yet he remained still, following me with his eyes.

“I’m never too tired,” I said, grinning.

He smiled in return before slowly leaning forward. It felt like an eternity between when I saw him begin to move and when his lips actually touched mine. We remained locked together for even longer, though. Finally, I felt him pull back as I followed him slightly, but eventually stopped. I didn’t remember closing my eyes at any point, but I found myself opening them as I sighed and leaned my head forward, turning it to the side so that my cheek was resting against his shoulder.

“Who thought bumming around New York City would give us so many chances to be alone?” he said quietly.

I grinned as I more felt than heard him laugh. My arms slid around him, my hands meeting behind his back as I inhaled deeply before letting it out slowly.

“You sure you’re never ‘too tired?’” Chase asked.

“Hmm... well, I don’t think I’d be terribly upset if I fell asleep like this,” I muttered, realizing that my eyes had shut once again.

“I’m sure, but if someone else wakes up before us and comes out here...”

I sighed and relaxed my embrace around him, forcing my eyes open once again as I lifted my head and looked up at him.

“If you say so, I guess,” I muttered.

He just grinned as he looked down at me, remaining silent.

“Why you gotta be like that?” I continued, sticking my bottom lip out and pretending to pout.

“Because I’m a joyless, fun-hating human being,” he replied.

I shrugged, finally pulling my arms from around him completely.

“Sounds about right to me.”

Chase shoved my shoulder lightly as I laughed and fell back on the couch, making sure that I didn’t bash my head on the arm as I did. I saw him lean down and reach toward the floor. A

second later, he had grabbed the blanket I had been reaching for earlier and was spreading it over me.

“Thank you, sir,” I said, grinning as he gave me a look.

“I don’t know, just for that I might have to take this back,” he said, reaching for it once again.

“No, it’s all good,” I said quickly, grabbing it and holding on with a vice grip, just in case he actually tried anything.

He laughed and leaned down toward me, gently kissing me on the forehead before standing up and straight and yawning.

“You need to learn how to relax, Ryss,” he said. “You’re always so uptight, girl.”

I narrowed my eyes at him, but quickly realized that he probably couldn’t see me anywhere near as well as I could see him. It was probably better that way right now, honestly. Chase groaned as he fell into the armchair several feet away and I rolled onto my side, facing him and the rest of the room. I was fairly certain that he couldn’t see me at all in the low light, so I didn’t feel as embarrassed as I would have normally when I realized that I was basically staring right at him.

As he pulled a blanket over himself and settled down into a sleeping position, I couldn’t help but notice a strange feeling in my chest. It was something that I didn’t understand, and was reasonably sure I had never felt before. My ability to rationalize and think through what it could be was slowly dwindling as my eyelids began to drift closed, so I was just about resigned to ignoring it and just trying to fall asleep. However, a moment later, it hit me. My eyes shot open and I began to push the blanket off of me. Silently, I got to my feet and slipped across the open floor of the room to where Chase was lying in the chair.

He didn’t appear to be entirely asleep, but was definitely trying. My heart was pounding in my chest as I remained where I was beside the chair. Finally, I mustered up the courage and reached toward his blanket. I lifted the side a bit, which caused him to stir and begin to open his eyes. Before he was fully awake and before I could talk myself out of it, I slipped under the blanket and onto the chair beside him. Chase jumped in surprise and seemed like he was about fall off the opposite side when I laughed softly and he froze.

“Ryss, what are you doing?” he asked, his voice quiet but slightly breathless.

I thought about what I could say to respond, but found that no words came to mind that seemed good enough, so I decided to simply not say anything. Instead, I leaned forward and placed my lips on his. He jumped slightly in surprise, but didn’t pull away. A second later, he began to return the kiss. After several moments of that, I pulled away and watched him for a few seconds.

“That’s a good start,” he remarked, smirking.

I laughed softly before sighing and shifting slightly under the blanket.

“I guess I just couldn’t bear the idea of you being so close yet... so far away.”

Chase all but rolled his eyes as I grinned.

“What about if one of the others—?”

“Screw it,” I interrupted. “We have the time now and... yeah.”

He looked at me quizzically for a few seconds, but the expression quickly passed. A little while passed in somewhat awkward stillness before I noticed Chase’s arm moving ever so tentatively. A second or two later, I felt his fingers brush against mine and I smirked.

“C’mon Chase,” I said quietly.

He seemed confused as I rolled my eyes.

“You can touch me, you know.”

The look on his face suddenly turned to one much like a child who had just been caught stealing a cookie from the jar. I grabbed his hand and pulled it toward me, placing it on my side, just above my hip. It just sat there for a moment or two as I let my arm fall forward and my hand came to rest on his upper arm. Finally, I felt his hand begin to move slightly, slowly sliding up and down my side. The weight of his hand on me felt strange at first, but I quickly found that the sensation felt comforting. He hadn’t pulled his hand away quickly, so clearly the idea didn’t repulse him.

My hand slid up his arm and then off onto his side, as well. As it moved, I found my heart rate accelerating once again. I wasn’t sure why at first, but suddenly a thought popped into my

head which seemed to explain it all. Calling it a “thought,” though, seemed a little too nuanced; “impulse” was probably a better term for what it actually was. As my hand reached just about his hip and I felt the waistband of his jeans, I stopped and moved my hand back up somewhat, instantly slightly nervous.

Chase gave me a strange look as I smiled nervously, just in case he could actually see me decently. After several seconds of serious internal debate, I made up my mind and let out the breath that I didn’t realize I had been holding. My hand slid off his side somewhat and began to run up his torso. Although it was still just on the outside of his shirt, I could feel his somewhat bony frame rather easily. When my hand reached just about his neck, I reversed directions and headed back once again. At the bottom, I paused before sliding it back up on his side. I felt him shiver slightly as I raised my eyebrows at him.

“What was that?” I whispered.

“Nothing,” he replied, but his tone didn’t sound entirely convincing.

We remained where we were for what felt like forever before I quietly cleared my throat and he blinked rapidly, apparently snapping out of some daze... or coming back from the edge of sleep.

“You can keep moving your hand, you know,” I said, surprised at how timid my own voice sounded. “I liked it.”

He attempted to raise one eyebrow and I laughed, leaning my head forward and resting my forehead against his shoulder. A second later, I felt his hand start to move up my side once again. Once it reached just above my hip, though, it slid down onto my stomach and gently moved up my torso, stopping just about at the top of my abdomen before moving back, essentially rubbing my stomach. Despite the idea seeming so amusing in my head, I actually found myself greatly enjoying the sensation.

After a minute or so, but what easily felt like much longer, his hand came to a stop on my side again, just above my hip. It remained still for several moments before I felt him spread out his fingers, one or two of them stretching down toward the hem of my T-shirt. A second or two later, I felt something slightly cold on my skin and I instantly shivered. Chase immediately pulled his hand

off me, the same nervous expression returning to his face.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to—”

“No, it’s okay,” I said quickly.

“Are—are you sure?” he replied.

I took a deep breath and let it out, staring straight ahead into his eyes.

“Yes, I’m sure.”

I felt his hand tentatively rest on my side once again, and then slowly he lifted the bottom of my shirt ever so slightly and slipped his hand underneath. Where his hand touched my skin felt like a strange kind of electricity was arcing between us, but I found that the sensation felt kind of thrilling. His hand slowly slid up my side, dragging my shirt up with it a bit, before moving onto my back.

Despite the initial shock, his touch actually felt rather comforting and... soothing. I found my eyelids beginning to droop somewhat as I fought to stay awake. His hand came to a stop in the center of the small of my back and I blinked a few times, looking up at him again.

“Why’d you stop?” I muttered.

“I think you’re too tired,” he said.

“No,” I insisted, slapping him on the side lightly as he grinned.

Before I seemed able to take control of my actions, I felt my hand slide underneath his shirt, as well, and move up his torso somewhat. He jumped in surprise as I finally seemed to regain control of my renegade limb.

“Hey there, Ryss...” he said.

“I’m so sorry,” I said quickly, moving to extract my hand when he grabbed my arm to stop me.

“You just surprised me, is all,” he said, grinning nervously. “I suppose it’s only fair, though.”

I smiled and laughed softly, dipping my head and shaking it slowly. Just then, I felt something touch the top of my head for a moment before pulling away. It took me a second to realize that it had been Chase. I lifted my head once again and stared up at him, his dark eyes not portraying any easily readable emotions. A moment later, he drifted closer and our lips briefly touched. One

or two of his fingers gently touched the bottom of my chin as I leaned forward slightly, our lips fully connecting this time. I could feel his thumb slowly running back and forth across my cheek as we gave our best attempt at “making out.” If anyone else were watching us at that moment, it would probably have looked like some kind of middle school couple with their first taste of freedom at a school dance.

A few moments later, we stopped and pulled apart somewhat. My hand was loosely clenched into a fist on Chase’s chest as I found my heart pounding in my ears. It was strange; I had never felt quite this reaction before any of the times that we had kissed in the past. Something about right now felt different, but I couldn’t tell what it was. To be perfectly honest, I didn’t particularly care, either.

“Has it occurred to you how...?”

“Lame this is if you think about it?” he finished, smirking.

I laughed and hit him as best I could with my hand still stuck under his shirt. To be perfectly honest, if I thought about it, he was right. This did feel exceedingly childish for two people our age, but the thought of anything farther at this point seemed almost a little too strange for us, at least at this point in time. Suddenly, I felt his hand on my side again, but much farther up than before. A second later, one of his fingers pulled gently at my bra strap and my arm instinctually clamped down against my side, trapping his hand underneath it. He instantly jumped and tried to yank his hand back, succeeding in removing it from under my arm, but my shirt still kept it captive.

“I’m sorry,” he said quickly, the guilty, nervous expression returning to his face.

“It’s... it’s fine,” I said, “maybe just... not now.”

He nodded quickly, slowly trying to extract his hand from underneath my shirt as he did. I laughed quietly as he finally managed to navigate a way out and pulled his hand back to his side. My hand was still resting against his chest, underneath his shirt, and it was beginning to make me feel a little strange after what had just happened. I slowly extracted it and pulled down the hem of my shirt slightly, as it had begun to ride up. After a little while longer in silence, I sighed and put my hand on Chase’s arm.

“I think it might be time to call it a night,” I said, yawning.

“For real this time?” he shot back, smirking.

“Yes, for real,” I replied, my voice distorted slightly as I finished yawning.

He laughed quietly before falling silent. Neither of us moved, despite my urging to go to sleep. I could tell that despite his joking a second ago, he still felt nervous about what had just happened. It was harder than I thought it would be to let him feel bad about it, and I finally caved. I leaned forward and gently kissed him, pulling away just a few inches and remaining there for a few beats.

“I’ll see you in the morning, okay?”

“Sounds like a plan.”

I sighed and shook my head as he laughed.

“Really? That’s what you come up with?”

“Goodnight, Ryss,” he said grinning.

I smiled back before throwing the blanket off myself and sliding out of the chair, getting to my feet. My footsteps were almost entirely silent as I slipped across the room and fell onto the couch once again. With a heavy sigh, I grabbed the blanket and pulled it over myself, rolling so I was facing the back of the couch, my back to the room. It would have normally made me feel somewhat exposed in case someone came up behind me, but for some reason it didn’t bother me, now. I finally felt secure, for the first time since leaving Mack’s house two months ago.

I could get used to this feeling.



## 18

# Playing With Knives

November 25, 1999

8:45:28 A.M.

Hale Residence, New York City, NY

The first thing I felt as I came to was a rather violent shaking sensation. My eyes flew open and I partially rolled over to look behind me. It took several seconds to fully realize that Chase was standing over me, his hands resting on my back as he grinned coyly.

“What the hell, man?” I mumbled, my voice groggy and cracking slightly as I spoke.

“Rise and shine, Ryss.”

My eyes narrowed at him, but his grin didn't fade. I tried to roll back over, but Chase poked me in the back somewhat and I arched it, turning back to look at him again.

“That is not cool,” I said, jabbing one finger at him.

“The sun is up, the birds are chirping, and it's a brand new day out there!” he said.

“It'll still be there in a few hours,” I mumbled and attempted to roll over once again.

A moment or two of silence followed before I felt something soft touch my neck. I quickly realized that it was Chase as he pulled back from the kiss. The thought of what he had just done normally would have scared me or at least thrown me into some sort of “fight or flight” mode, but for some reason this time my heart rate began to accelerate for a different reason. I turned to look back at him again, much more slowly this time, and smiled slightly. He grinned but remained where he was, standing beside the couch with his hands shoved in his pockets. Just then, I heard the sound of someone clearing their throat and my eyes instantly shifted to the doorway past my feet.

“I see you're up early, too.”

Lexi was leaning against the frame, her arms folded across her chest and a smug grin on her face. Instantly, I began to fear

what she had seen, but I tried to play it cool. I made a noise and began to push myself up into a sitting position. Once I had propped myself up, I ran one hand back through my hair, shivering inwardly at how greasy it felt. Lexi's hair didn't look much better than mine at first glance, but then I began to realize that something about her seemed different. My eyes narrowed slightly in confusion as I stared at her. She looked slightly uncomfortable under my fierce examination and shifted her weight from one leg to the other.

"You look different," I said.

"Really?" she replied, looking confused.

For the life of me, I couldn't figure out why I thought so, though. Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail, which was a rare occurrence, but that wasn't the only reason. After a few seconds of looking her over, I figured it out.

"You took a shower, didn't you?"

She laughed, reaching one hand back toward her ponytail and pulling the elastic band out. Her hair fell loose around her shoulders, although it still vaguely retained its shape from the ponytail for a few seconds until she ran her fingers through it several times. Now that it was down, it was clearly visible that it was still somewhat wet.

"Oh my god, tell me where it is," I said, throwing the blanket off me and placing my feet on the floor.

"Calm down, Maya's in there now, I think," Lexi replied.

"It does feel great, though. These clothes, however..."

"I do own a washing machine, you know."

Scott suddenly appeared from behind Lexi and she jumped, letting out a small shriek at the sound of his voice. The rest of us laughed as she regained her composure and crossed her arms across her chest once again.

"Sleep well?" he asked, glancing around at the three of us.

"Yeah, pretty well, actually," Chase said, glancing back at the chair he had spent the night in before looking back over at Scott.

"Sorry about that," he apologized. "I only have so many actually bed-like pieces of furniture in this house."

"It was fine," Chase said quickly. "Still beats sleeping on

cement underneath some newspapers and clothes.”

Scott nodded slowly, seemingly a little disconcerted at the thought of a group of teenagers living homeless in the city. The thought even seemed jarring to me, and I had been one of the people living it. After another few seconds of uncomfortable silence, he cleared his throat and clapped his hands together.

“Well, as I mentioned, the washer and dryer are available to you guys if you so choose, and as you can already tell, the shower is also open. I’ll go see what I can scrounge up for breakfast while you guys get ready.”

As soon as he had walked away, I became acutely aware of how dirty and disgusting I felt. The shower was calling my name, if only I knew where it was.

“Where did you say the shower is?” I asked, turning to Lexi expectantly.

She laughed and gestured for me to follow her. We walked out of the living room and headed toward the hallway that led to the bedrooms and the office. As we drew closer, I could hear the water running, and I had a sneaking suspicion that it was coming from the closed door ahead of us on the right. Lexi came to a stop and gestured to the door in question before looking back at me.

“Here it is,” she announced. “Sounds like Maya’s still in there, though.”

“I can wait,” I replied, shrugging and leaning up against the wall to the left.

“Okay, well, while you do that, I think I will go follow up on that food Scott mentioned,” she said, clapping her hands together before walking past me.

She had only gone about five more steps when she suddenly let out what sounded like a cry of pain and I quickly snapped my head around to see what had happened. There were no outward signs that she had run into anything, or that anything had really even touched her, but she had fallen against the wall, arching her back as she tried to reach it with one hand.

“Are you okay?” I asked, moving closer.

“It’s just... bad back,” she managed to utter through clenched teeth.

“That’s not really okay, Lexi...”

“It’s been like this for a while, it’s nothing.”

She waved it off, but her expression and the way she moved so slowly and stiffly told me that it was anything but “nothing.” I moved up beside her and gently placed one hand on her shoulder. She jumped and glanced over at me, which startled me slightly, but I gestured for her to calm down.

“I’m just trying to help.”

Lexi looked like she wanted to say something, but decided against it and nodded slowly. I reached toward her and gingerly touched a spot just to the inside of one of her shoulder blades. She sucked in a sharp breath through her teeth and I instantly pulled my hand away.

“Which room was the one you and Maya slept in last night?” I asked.

She pointed to the one at the end of the hall and I began to lead her there. Once inside the room, I closed the door behind us and turned back around to face her. Lexi was standing with a slight slouch to her posture, which had to be due to the pain. If she couldn’t even stand up straight, this might be a bigger problem than just popping a few painkillers could fix.

“Why did you want to come in here?” she asked.

“Lie down on the bed and lift your shirt up,” I said.

“Something you want to share with me, Amaryss?” she said, raising one eyebrow at me.

“I’m sorry, Lexi, I just don’t think I can feel that way about you,” I replied.

“Your rejection burns my very soul,” she said and laughed, quickly stopping as her face screwed up in pain once again.

“Seriously, lie down and lift your shirt up so I can see your back,” I said, gesturing to the guest bed.

Lexi slowly and begrudgingly lay face down and pulled her shirt up so that most of her back and her stomach was exposed. I moved over to the bed beside her and pulled the back of her shirt up a little more as I quickly examined her. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary, like an old scar that would be causing her pain. In fact, nothing seemed out of place at all. I gently laid my hands on her back and began to feel up and down it. As I neared her shoulder blades, Lexi visibly became more uncomfortable and her

jaw began to clench tighter and tighter. Just as I was about to take my hands away and declare her a complete medical mystery, I stopped. A somewhat large bump seemed to protrude from her back just beside her left shoulder blade. When I touched it, Lexi sucked in a gasping breath and I pulled my hand back.

“Whatever you just did... that hurt... a lot,” she managed, turning her head to glance back at me somewhat.

“There’s something there,” I said, frowning slightly.

“Don’t make that face,” Lexi moaned and buried her face in the pillow.

As I looked at the spot once again, I noticed there was an almost identical bump on the other side, as well. They appeared to be somewhat darker than the rest of the skin around them, as well. Seeing as I had absolutely no medical experience, and this was not something I or anyone else I knew had encountered, this seemed far beyond my reach.

“Well, what is it?” Lexi asked, causing me to jump slightly.

“What?” I said instinctually, although I was pretty sure I had heard what she said.

“What is this ‘something’ that you found?”

“I’m not sure, it looks like two... bumps on your back.”

“Like... bug bites?”

“No, like... something more serious than that.”

Lexi groaned and buried her face in the pillow once again.

“I don’t like the sound of that.”

“Well, I touched one and you freaked out, so...”

“It’s fucking painful!” she said, turning her head to the side once again.

“I’m not doubting that,” I shot back, holding my hands up defensively, “I’m just making an observation.”

Lexi let out a sigh and began to move to get up, propping herself up with her elbows and pulling her legs underneath her so that she was sitting on her knees. Just as she began to sit up and pull her shirt back down, I saw something that made me grab her arm to stop her. She jumped and let out a small cry of surprise, but I didn’t let go of her.

“They just moved.”

“What?” she said, looking over at me with an expression of

confusion and nervousness.

“Those bumps I was just talking about, they... moved slightly.”

“What do you mean by ‘moved’?” she said.

“Like, with you, almost like... uh...”

The word had entirely escaped me at the moment as I watched her. Not only had the bumps moved slightly again, but it looked like something had just pushed against her skin... from the inside. My mind immediately leapt to some kind of demon movie, but I had a feeling the reason was far less supernatural. Just then, Lexi let out a cry of pain and bent forward again, much like she had in the hallway a few minutes ago.

“L-Lexi...” I stammered, unsure of how to tell her what I had just seen.

“What?” she managed through her clenched teeth.

“There’s... there’s... there’s something with your back—in your back.”

“What?!” she said, her head snapping around to the side to look right at me.

“I just saw something—something move.”

Lexi’s expression had now shifted to pure terror as I saw her chest beginning to heave quickly. Just then, I saw the same thing move on her back and she clenched her hands into fists, grabbing onto the sheets.

“Get it out!” she commanded.

“What?!”

Now it was my turn to be utterly confused and terrified.

“Whatever it is, get it out of me,” Lexi said, tears beginning to form in the corners of her eyes.

“I—I’m not a surgeon,” I said. “I don’t know how to do anything like that.”

“You can handle a knife, right?”

This had quickly escalated from a general concern about a Lexi’s potentially bad back to some kind of psychotic fever dream in the span of only about five minutes. I was actually beginning to hope that I would wake up soon so that this could end. Just then, the door to the room opened and we both jumped in surprise, Lexi quickly pulling her shirt back down. Maya stood in the doorway,

her eyes slightly widened as she looked between the two of us.

“Am I interrupting something?” she said, beginning to back slowly out of the room.

“No, it’s—it’s nothing,” Lexi said.

“You sure?”

“Definitely nothing,” I added, nodding.

Maya didn’t look sure, but she entered the room and grabbed her bag from the floor next to the bed. She kept a wary eye on us as she moved back to the door and went to leave.

“I’m just gonna see about washing these,” she said, holding her back up slightly.

We just nodded and she slowly retreated from sight, pulling the door closed behind her. Once she had left, we both let out heavy sighs and I ran my hands back through my hair. A moment later, however, Lexi had climbed off the bed and grabbed me by the upper arms. I jumped in surprise and tried to move away but she followed me.

“I’m serious, Amaryss,” she said quietly, looking me straight in the eyes. “Please help me.”

My mouth opened to speak, but I quickly found that no words came. Lexi’s expression looked extremely pleading and desperate; I had never seen her like this, and it killed me to be so torn on whether or not I should help her. This really seemed like something we should be going to the hospital for, but we both knew that this was something that some random surgeons in a normal hospital should probably never see. In all honesty, I wasn’t sure I wanted to know what it was. Before I could stop myself, I realized that I had swallowed nervously and begun to speak.

“Sure, but we’re going to need somewhere that isn’t so... obvious.”

“Obvious?”

“Well... somewhere that will be easier to hide it once we’re done... you know, since cutting into people draws blood,” I said, not entirely believing the words I was saying, myself.

Lexi nodded, but looked somewhat relieved. Somehow, that wasn’t the expression I was hoping she would have. She glanced back toward the door where Maya had just exited and then looked back at me.

“Bathroom? It has a shower and all that, so it’s easier to clean, right?”

I swallowed nervously but shrugged.

“As best a place as any, I suppose.”

November 25, 1999

9:04:23 A.M.

Hale Residence, New York City, NY

The metal blade of the knife felt cold against the skin of my stomach as I carefully made my way down the hallway toward the bathroom. Scott and Chase had been in the kitchen, so I had been forced to make a bit of small talk with them until they had returned to making breakfast, which was when I had slipped the knife from the small wooden block on the counter and awkwardly shoved it under the waist of my jeans. In order to make sure I didn’t stab myself in the leg while walking, I could only fit about an inch or two of the blade under the jeans, so the rest of it was pressed against my stomach, underneath my shirt.

As soon as I reached the bathroom, I knocked and glanced around. The door opened a crack for a moment before Lexi flung it open and I hurried inside. She closed it behind us and locked the door before turning around to face me.

“You got one?”

I pulled the knife from its hiding place and she swallowed nervously. It was a rather large kitchen knife, but it was the first one I had seen and the easiest to grab. Part of me hoped that she was reconsidering what she wanted me to do now that she had seen the knife, but the next second she took a deep breath and moved around me to the shower, reaching inside and turning it on. Once the water was running, she turned around to face me and nervously rubbed her hands together.

“How should we do this?” she asked.

“*Not at all*,” I wanted to say, but I held my tongue.

“Well, I would say we might want something for you to bite down on...”

“What do you mean?”



“It helps to have something to bite down on or hold really tightly,” I said. “It was an old trick I used to use when I would get splinters when I was younger and Jared would have to pull them out. It sort of helps get over the pain. Also, if it’s in your mouth, it helps block any kind of scream or shout you might make.”

Lexi nodded and glanced around the room before reaching over to a small stack of towels on the edge of the sink and holding one up.

“This should work, right?” she said, holding it up.

Just as she did, she let sucked in a breath and clenched her hands into fists around the towel, leaning forward slightly. I quickly stepped forward and put a hand on her shoulder. She waved me off and I slowly took it away.

“Let’s just get this over with... *now*,” she said quietly, looking up at me.

I nodded, but my heart was beginning to pound out of fear of what we were about to do. The thought that I was even considering in aiding in this just seemed like total madness. Any second now, I would wake up and shake it off as some kind of strange dream. Lexi handed me the towel and pulled the shower curtain back. She quickly tested the water before stepping inside, remaining at one end so the water only hit the back of her knees, not her shorts or shirt. I began to step forward as she tried to pull the back of her shirt up, but she suddenly stopped and frowned slightly, apparently thinking something over. Suddenly, she pulled it up and over her head, crossing one arm across her chest before handing the shirt to me.

“Would have been a pain to keep trying to hold that up,” she said smirking.

I took it from her and placed it on the closed toilet seat before turning back to Lexi and holding out the towel. She took it from me with one hand and turned so her back was to me so she could take her other hand away from covering herself up to roll the towel into a vaguely tubular shape and put it between her teeth. Now that she had actually done it, the visual of her with something like a gag in her mouth seemed even stranger. Lexi crossed one arm across her chest again and turned so her back was to the water once again. She nodded and I let out a heavy sigh, grabbing the

knife from beside the sink.

I stood beside the tub, the knife held in hand, and gave one last glance toward Lexi. She nodded and turned so she was facing the wall of the shower again. My hands were trembling as I brought the knife up toward her back. The point of the blade hovered over the bump for several seconds as I tried to work up the nerve to finally go through with it. With one final sigh, I attempted to focus on the task and steady my shaking hand.

“All right, here we go,” I said.

I watched the knife press against the skin at the top half of the bump on the left side of Lexi’s back and her muscles instantly tensed. There wasn’t enough pressure to break the skin yet, but I knew I couldn’t just leave it here for too long, since it was already putting her in pain. Finally, I let out the breath I had been holding and pressed down. At first, it looked like nothing had happened, but I heard Lexi make a sound somewhat like a whimper and then I saw a small bead of dark red blood begin to form from under the tip of the knife. I gently began to pull the knife down, moving up one side of the bump. Whatever was causing it seemed to be rather solid and firm since the knife didn’t simply cut right through it.

As the knife began to reach the top of it, Lexi let out a sound, but it was muffled by the towel held tightly between her teeth. Her hand slipped on the wall of the shower slightly and she staggered forward, so I stopped and pulled the knife away somewhat. Lexi quickly regained her posture and nodded, glancing back toward me. My lips set into a thin line as I put the knife back to the point where I had just removed it and pressed down once again. Another whimpering sound escaped from her, but the towel was proving to do its job so far. A second or two later, I had cut past the bump and paused, not sure if I should keep going. Just then, I saw it move slightly and the cut I had just made opened slightly. For some reason, I half expected some kind of alien to or other disgusting creature to pop out, but it didn’t. Instead, something dark did begin to peek through the opening, but I had no idea what it could be. I put the knife against her back once again and drew the incision a little bit farther down. Suddenly, the bump moved again and I saw something press upward from under her skin as before, but this time I was holding

the knife exactly over where it happened.

I pulled the knife away and leaned back slightly, more than a little thrown off by what had just happened. The blood from the incision was beginning to reach Lexi's lower back, growing slightly wider as more of it began to pour out of the wound. It immediately occurred to me that we had put no thought into how to close the wound once we had cut her open, and I began to feel like I had unwittingly agreed to help with a suicide attempt. Just then, I saw motion near the top of the incision, where the bump was protruding from her back slightly. I was about to place the knife back against it and attempt to open the wound a little wider when Lexi made a noise and I saw her chest begin to heave rather violently. Before I could register what was happening, something seemed to explode in front of me and I felt a warm liquid spray onto my face, chest, and arms.

I staggered back a step or two and found that I was only able to stare at what had happened. Lexi was still making a terrible sound somewhere between a growl and a moan against the towel held in her mouth, but that didn't even compare to what I was seeing. One large, dark wing had suddenly appeared from her back, its dark feathers dripping blood onto the floor of the tub. After another second or two, I found myself unable to contain my shock.

"Oh my god..." I said, still transfixed by the sight before me.

Lexi turned her head to look at me before trying to look over her shoulder and see what happened. She must have only been able to see something vaguely dark behind her because her eyes widened and her chest began to heave as her breaths came in shallow gasps. I stepped forward and put a hand on her shoulder, trying to keep her from freaking out. If this had been one side, I immediately knew what must be on the other. I shoved the shower curtain back and climbed into the shower behind Lexi, not caring that I was still fully clothed.

I was forced to duck under and slightly around the one wing that was protruding from her back in order to get in a good enough position. Lexi tried to turn around but I put one hand in the center of her back and held her still. My grip was much less

timid this time as I pressed the knife against her back above the second bump and quickly made the same incision down her back before inserting the knife into the open wound to spread it slightly near the bump at the top. The next second, something heavy hit me in the shoulder and I staggered back until I hit the wall of the shower.

After a second or two of trying to recollect my wits, I shook my head and pushed my now-wet hair out of my face, stepping forward so the water was beating against my back, rather than running down into my face. Two large, dark wings now extended from Lexi's back, still wet and dripping blood. Her head hung before her, both hands placed against the wall to support herself, no longer concerned with covering herself. No words came to mind as I stared at what had happened. Nothing, even out of all of the messed up things I had seen so far in my life, could have prepared me for something like this. Almost immediately, though, I realized that the incisions on Lexi's back still extended beyond where the wings seemed to join her body. The thought of aiding in a suicide attempt returned, and I immediately began to panic.

Just as I was about to start hyperventilating and running for someone else to come help and take me out of this situation, I noticed yet another impossible feat was occurring. The cuts seemed to be sealing themselves, slowly moving up her back until they reached where the wings met her body, and then they simply sealed around them. A second later, all that remained were vaguely bruise-like colorations where they had once been. Seeing wings suddenly spring from within Lexi's back was one thing, but this was simply icing on the cake; I was feeling like I might be the one weak in the knees at this point.

After another second or two, Lexi slowly pulled the towel from her mouth and dropped it onto the floor outside of the shower, still facing forward toward the wall. I thought she might be about to collapse, but she began to slowly turn her head around to look over her shoulder. As she did, the wings moved slightly, and I quickly climbed out of the tub, not caring that my soaked clothes and hair were dripping water all over the floor. Lexi's eyes grew wide and it looked like she might be starting to

hyperventilate as she finally saw her wings.

“Wh-what...?” she stammered.

As she looked at them, they extended outward slightly, fanning open and revealing that they were actually quite large. It was suddenly becoming apparent why it must have been so painful for those to have been enclosed inside her this whole time. The running shower was the only sound in the room for several more seconds as we both remained frozen in stunned silence. Finally, Lexi turned to look at me.

“What... what happened to me?” she asked, her voice timid and shaking slightly.

I simply stared back at her in silence, feeling incapable of speaking, even if I did know what to say. Suddenly, Lexi made a noise that sounded like a combination of a sob and a shriek and pounded her fist against the wall before leaning her head forward against it, as well. Before I knew what I was doing, I found myself stepping forward, leaving the knife in the sink. As I reached the edge of the tub, I put one hand on Lexi’s shoulder. She lifted her head, her eyes red as tears began to run down her cheeks. I stepped up into the tub in front of her and wrapped my arms around her, carefully placing my hands on her back since I was still somewhat afraid of touching her new wings. To my surprise, Lexi returned the gesture, wrapping her arms tightly around me and burying her head in my shoulder as uncontrollable sobs wracked her chest.

“Why did this happen?” she sobbed. “Why did this have to happen to me?”

I had no answers for her, so I leaned my head forward slightly, resting it against hers. After a rather uncomfortably long time of a topless Lexi holding me in a ferocious bear hug, she finally began to loosen her grip and I let her back away. She looked over her shoulder at the wings once again and they began to move, almost as if they were flapping slightly.

“Are you doing that?” I asked quietly.

She nodded, still looking back over her shoulder.

“It’s not that hard, actually...”

Suddenly, she let out a cry of rage and fell forward against me, pounding her fists on my chest. I jumped at the sudden impact

and quickly grabbed her forearms to stop her from pummeling me.

“Hey, stop it!” I hissed, trying not to be too loud so as to avoid drawing the attention of everyone else in the house.

Lexi seemed almost entirely inconsolable, however, and I was forced to simply hold her back until she stopped trying to hit me. Finally, she looked up at me again, her eyes a dark red from the tears and the anger at this point.

“Cut them off!” she sobbed.

“What?!”

“Take the knife... and do it!” she said.

“Lexi, I can’t—”

“Please, Amaryss!”

I hated this feeling; it was so rare for me that I was glad I almost never had to deal with it. It burned in my gut as my jaw clenched tightly. I was unable to clench my hands into fists since they were currently gripping Lexi’s arms. I hated this feeling of someone looking to me when I knew I didn’t have answer. I hated not having some semblance of control of what was going on. I hated feeling helpless.

“Lexi, listen,” I said quietly but forcefully, staring her straight in the eyes. “I can’t do that to you. I know right now you hate what’s happened to you. It feels like your spiraling out of control and like the world is completely against you. I can’t begin to understand exactly how you feel, because whatever those fuckers did to me isn’t super obvious, but I’ve felt it at least somewhat like you have.”

Lexi remained staring back at me, tears still running from the corners of her eyes, but they seemed less frequent.

“If I tried to do some kind of hack job with that little kitchen knife over there, I could actually kill you. I’m no surgeon, and that’s nowhere a sharp enough to go sawing through bones. All it would accomplish is me cutting you a lot and you bleeding out in a random bathtub in New York.”

“Maybe that would be—”

“Stop!” I barked, my voice louder than I had intended, which caused Lexi to recoil slightly. “Don’t say that! That wouldn’t solve anything. You’ve lived how long without knowing about your past? Eight years? Nine years? You’ve been through

some shit, and yet you're still here. You just lived through all of that, and are still standing here, telling me you want out?"

Lexi hung her head as I slowly let go of her arms. She staggered back a step or two, placing her hands over her eyes as let out several muffled sobs. The shower beat down on her wings, now, creating a cascade of red water as it slowly washed the blood away. Finally, she pulled her hands away from her face and crossed her arms across her chest.

"I—I—I just don't know... what to do, Amaryss."

"I know, and I don't either," I said, "but we'll figure it out, right?"

She just nodded slowly before letting out a sound that could have either been another sob or a laugh, but I couldn't tell which.

"Oh god, Amaryss, you're all covered in blood, now... my blood."

I looked down at myself to find that, indeed, the front of my shirt was now soaked through with dark red blood, and my jeans had quite a bit of spatter on them, as well. It also covered my arms, and I could only imagine how much had gotten on my face or in my hair.

"You look like you just murdered someone," Lexi said, laughing slightly.

"Well, what else is new?" I shot back, smirking.

She laughed and shook her head. It was good to hear her make a noise other than a sob. The slight smile that had crept onto her lips also told me that she was finally starting to feel better. Lexi glanced back over her shoulder at her wings once again, moving forward slightly so she could see them stretched out behind her.

"They don't look so bad now that they're not drenched in blood," she remarked.

"You do no longer like the angel of death," I replied, laughing.

She gave me a look but it didn't stop me from laughing even more.

"So how do you think I can hide these?" she asked. "I can't really just go around topless all day."

"Really?"

“As much as I’m sure the guys would love it, I’m going to pass,” she said.

I laughed as I climbed out of the tub and put my hands on my hips, staring at her wings as I thought it over.

“So you can move them, right?”

She nodded and they shook slightly, accidentally flinging water at me.

“Sorry!” she said quickly, looking slightly embarrassed.

“It’s fine,” I said, “it’s just going to take some getting used to, I think.”

Lexi grinned sheepishly and looked back at them once again.

“So anyway, I was going to then say, can you... bring them in a bit?”

She looked at me quizzically and I sighed.

“You know, like how birds fold their wings against their bodies when they’re on the ground and all that?”

She frowned slightly as she looked back over her shoulder once again. A second later, they began to move. They drew in somewhat close to her body, but they didn’t look as if they were about to fold flat. Just as I was beginning to worry that they would be stuck sticking out from her back, they suddenly seemed to collapse and fold in, fitting neatly against her back between her shoulder blades. They only stretched from just below her shoulders to the small of her back, surprisingly, which meant that they could easily be covered by her shirt.

“Whoa... that’s weird,” Lexi said, shivering slightly.

“What?”

“The feeling of them on my back, it’s...” she trailed off and shivered again as I grinned.

“Okay, well that works, then,” I said. “Now you should probably wash off any blood that’s left because, well, that would be kind of suspicious.”

Lexi laughed slightly and nodded.

“Okay, then give me a sec.”

She pulled the shower curtain closed as I walked over to the sink, looking in the mirror. My face was covered in blood spatter and it was undoubtedly in my hair, too. Lexi was right, I



did look like some kind of axe murderer. I stuck my tongue out slightly and shivered as I crossed my arms across my chest and turned back toward the shower. Just as I did, Lexi's hand appeared around the edge of the curtain and dropped her shorts on the floor. A moment later, I saw the silhouette of her wings on the curtain.

After another minute or two, the water shut off and I heard Lexi let out a sigh. The edge of the curtain pulled back slightly and her head appeared around it. She glanced around the floor for a few seconds before reaching down and grabbing the towel and disappearing from sight once again.

"Uh... Amaryss, could you turn around?"

I laughed but turned my back to the shower, facing the door. The sound of the shower curtain sliding along the metal bar came from behind me and I heard Lexi stepping out onto the bathroom floor. A few seconds later, she cleared her throat and I turned my head to the side slightly, not quite looking back yet.

"All good?"

"Actually... I need your help for a second..."

I was rather confused, but slowly turned around, anyway. Lexi was standing in front of the shower, no top but arms across her chest, with her wings open behind her.

"Can you... dry me off?" she said, nodding toward her wings.

We couldn't help but laugh at the statement, but I nodded and took the towel from her. I began to pat her wings down and she shivered. It must have been a strange feeling, so I hurriedly finished and handed her the towel once again. The wings collapsed onto her back once again and I turned around as she hurriedly pulled on her shirt.

"All clear."

I turned around to look at her again and smirked. As she was now, you would never know anything was different. The only telltale hint that something had happened were the slight bloodstains on her shorts.

"Blood doesn't come off easily, does it?" she said, frowning and looking down at them.

"I don't believe so, no," I replied.

"Dammit, I liked these ones, too," she said, sighing and

looking back up at me. “You really should take a shower, now.”

“I would love that, actually,” I said.

“I’ll clear out then,” she said, nodding.

We looked around but realized that there really wasn’t anything else of hers in the bathroom, so she moved over to the door. She turned to glance around the room one more time and suddenly took a step toward the sink, reaching for something. I glanced down to see what she might be reaching for as her hand closed around the handle to the knife. She pulled it out of the sink and held it in front of her, looking over it for a second or two, seemingly pondering the blood that now coated most of the blade. She looked over at me and held the knife like some kind of TV murderer and mimed a stabbing motion at me as she made a face. A second later we broke out laughing as she stepped in front of the sink and tried to rinse off the blade as best she could. Once it was as clean as she was able to get it under only water, she turned the faucet off and looked back over at me.

“How did you manage to get this up here again?”

“I kinda had to stick it under my pants there and hide it with the shirt,” I said, smirking.

Lexi made a face but attempted to store it as I had, also only able to slip it an inch or two below the waistband before it seemed to stab her in the leg.

“Well, this will be fun,” she remarked as she pulled her shirt back down over it and turned to head for the door once again.

As she twisted the handle, the lock opened with a somewhat loud pop and we both jumped. She opened the door a crack and peeked out before quickly stepping outside. Just before she closed the door, though, she leaned her head back inside.

“I’ll see you down at breakfast, okay?”

I nodded and gave her a thumbs up sign as I yawned. Lexi grinned and disappeared into the hallway as I locked the door behind her. Immediately, I began to peel off my blood-soaked clothes until I was left holding them in my hands. I didn’t necessarily just want to drop them on the floor, because that would be one more mess to clean up. Finally, I decided there was only one really safe place for them, and I tossed them onto the floor of the shower before turning the water back on.

It was still warm from Lexi's shower moments ago, so I was able to step right in. The feeling of the water falling against my face felt oddly similar to the blood spatter from several minutes ago, but I forced myself to ignore it. I ran my hands back through my hair, ducking my head under the stream and letting the water soak through it. As it poured off me, I noticed that it was mostly red, and I grimaced slightly. I lifted my head once again and flung my hair to the side slightly so that it didn't fall in my face.

A quick glance around the space revealed one bottle of shampoo and what appeared to be men's body wash in one corner. Normally I would feel a little bad about just using someone else's stuff, but I really needed to get all of this blood off, and I didn't care how at this point. I poured a copious amount into my hand before carefully distributing it all throughout my hair. Once I was satisfied with it, I leaned my head back and scrubbed it out rather emphatically. After I believed I had removed all of the shampoo, I let out a heavy sigh and looked down at my arms. Most of the blood that had been on them seemed to have already washed off, but I could almost still feel it. A minute or so, and a decent amount of men's body wash, later, I turned off the shower and wiped some thick strands of hair out of my face.

As I pulled the curtain back, though, I discovered that I had forgotten to grab one of the towels from the edge of the sink. It was just a little too far to reach from within the shower, so I would have to quickly jump out and grab one. With a sigh, I pushed the curtain back some more and quickly hopped out, grabbing the towel and scurrying back to the shower and climbing inside. Once there, I toweled off and stepped out once again. I turned to look back at my clothes in the shower and found that they were now completely soaked.

"Perfect..." I muttered.

I quickly settled on wrapping the towel around myself and grabbing the clothes from the floor, wringing them out as best I could, but there was no way they'd be dry enough to wear anytime soon. I held them in my arms as I began to head for the door. Just as I passed the mirror, I happened to catch my reflection out of the corner of my eye and I paused to glance at it for a moment.

I was no longer coated in blood, which was a welcome

relief. My hair looked slightly wild from drying it off and not bothering to brush it yet, but I figured that I could come back for that when I had some dry clothes. With that, I stepped toward the door once again and twisted the handle, opening the lock with a loud metallic pop. I opened it a crack and peeked out into the hallway. From my angle, I couldn't see anyone, and I didn't hear footsteps nearby, so I assumed it was all clear. With that, I stepped into the hallway and quickly began to head toward the living room, hoping to get to my bag before running into anyone. I made it almost to the end without seeing anyone, but unfortunately, that's when my luck ran out. Just as I was a foot or two away from the turn to the right, Chase appeared from behind the wall.

I jumped out of surprise and nearly dropped the towel in the process, but I managed to keep my grip and avoid revealing anything. Chase jumped back slightly, himself, but quickly smirked and began to laugh.

"Can't say this is what I expected to find down here," he said.

I wanted to use some witty comeback, but nothing seemed to be coming to me at the moment. Instead, I felt my face flush slightly and I held my clothes and the towel even more tightly against myself.

"So why aren't you wearing those clothes in your hand?" he asked.

I glanced down at them for a second before looking back up.

"They're, uh, wet."

"Wet? Don't you know you're supposed to take them off before you get in the shower?" he teased.

"Guess I got a little too excited about the idea of washing them," I shot back, trying to move toward the living room and grab some clothes so I didn't have to continue standing in just a towel.

Chase looked at me with a puzzled expression for a few moments, clearly catching on to my strange behavior.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Yes, I'm fine," I replied.

"You sure?"

I rolled my eyes as he laughed, but before he could do anything else, I suddenly stepped forward and kissed him. He immediately jumped in surprise, but didn't have time to respond before I pulled away and gave him a look that I hoped came across as mockingly annoyed.

"Yes, now if you want any more of those, can I go get some clothes out of my bag?" I said.

He simply grinned but stepped aside and I hurried past him, muttering a quick "thank you." I made it the rest of the way to the living room without seeing anyone else, so I quickly crouched down beside my bag, holding my clothes and the front of the towel with one hand as I began to search for new clothes with the other. I finally managed to pull my other pair of jeans, a black T-shirt, and a new pair of underwear from the bag. Unfortunately, I had quickly been reminded that I only had one bra, which was now soaking wet.

"Guess we're going without for a little while," I muttered, glancing down at my chest and sighing before standing up once again and heading back down the hallway toward the bathroom.

When I approached the door, however, I heard the sound of the shower running and swore under my breath. I glanced around the hallway for a moment or two before my eyes settled on the door to the room Lexi and Maya had shared last night. With a shrug, I walked over to it and knocked softly. After a moment or two of silence, I began to open the door a crack in order to try to see inside. Once I had opened it about a quarter of the way, I was able to tell that the room was empty.

I slipped inside and closed the door behind me before moving over to the bed and dropping my dry clothes on it. With one last glance back toward the door, I dropped the towel and then also let my wet clothes fall on top of it. In what felt like mere seconds, I had managed to pull on all of my clothing, and was finishing pulling the bottom of my T-shirt down, quickly smoothing it out afterward. The "free" sensation of not wearing a bra felt a little strange to me, seeing as I hadn't really gone without before during the daytime, but I forced myself to simply suck it up and get over it.

I moved back over to the door and opened it a crack,

looking toward the bathroom door to see if it was still closed. Unfortunately, it was, and the sounds of the shower still came from inside. With a slight frown, I closed the door and turned around, running my hands through my hair in an attempt to comb it somewhat. I had a vague understanding of the mess I must have looked, but I simply told myself that I had no other options, and that it wasn't like any of us were in a place to judge others on appearance, here. Hell, most of our clothes hadn't been washed in at least two months or so. After that brief pep talk, I grabbed the towel off of the floor and wrapped my wet clothes inside it before stepping back into the hallway, pulling the door closed behind me.

## 19

# Re-Acquainted

November 25, 1999

9:42:34 A.M.

Hale Residence, New York City, NY

My bare feet hardly made a sound on the wood floor as I began to head back toward the living room. Once I reached it, I dropped my wet clothes and towel unceremoniously beside my bag with a heavy sigh. The sound of voices, along with clinking plates and cutlery drifted down the hall and I eagerly followed them toward the kitchen. Upon entering, I found most of the group standing about the room, talking animatedly with each other and with Scott. If I hadn't known better, this could have almost been the morning after some high school sleepover, rather than what could have essentially been a refugee camp.

"Ah, you're back!" Scott said, noticing me standing in the doorway.

I was about to ask him why I was "back," but then I remembered how I had been forced to make conversation with him in order to get the knife for Lexi earlier.

"Yeah, and showered," I remarked, running one hand through my hair self-consciously.

"Well, you have good timing, though," he said. "Breakfast is pretty much ready."

He gestured to a set of pans and plates set up on the stove and the counter next to it. My stomach involuntarily growled and I put one hand over it, glancing around at the others to see if anyone else had heard. Of course, they had, and most of them were grinning and shaking their heads.

"Oh shut up," I said and quickly strode over to the stack of clean plates, grabbing one off the top.

Once I had stacked it with what I deemed to be the right amount of scrambled eggs, bacon, toast, and something Scott called "hash" I followed the others into the living room. The only table in the house was a rather small one set up in the kitchen,

since Scott rarely ever had the need to feed more than one or two people at a time, so we settled on sitting on the couch and chairs while balancing the plates in our laps. I was one of the last ones into the room, but since someone was still showering, there was one seat left open on the couch, which I quickly slid into, almost knocking Maya's plate off her lap. She turned to look over at me and narrowed her eyes as I smiled back at her.

"Sorry."

"If you had actually spilled my food, there'd be hell to pay," she replied, beginning to grin, herself.

"Note to self, don't come between Maya and her food," I remarked.

"I could have told you that," Shawn called from the chair across the coffee table from us.

Maya gave him a dirty look and picked a small piece of egg off her plate, throwing it at him. The egg hit him square in the middle of the forehead as he threw his hands up a moment too late to try to deflect it. He slowly lowered his hands, looking around for what had hit him.

"Nice reflexes," Lexi quipped, smirking before taking another mouthful of scrambled eggs.

"Like a cat," he replied, winking at her.

"A dead one, maybe," she replied, her tone mocking.

We all started laughing as Shawn opened his mouth, as if to retort, but couldn't seem to think of a good comeback, so he simply closed it and fell silent. Just then, Chase appeared in the doorway to the room, holding some clothes and a wet towel in front of him.

"Hey, everybody," he said, glancing around as he moved over to his bag and dropped the clothes in it and the towel beside it. "Where's the food at?"

"In the kitchen, I think we saved some for you," Lexi said, glancing over at him.

"Well I really hope so," he said. "What've we got? Hey, that looks pretty good..."

He leaned over the top of the chair Lexi was sitting in and grabbed a piece of bacon off of her plate. She tried to smack his hand away but he had already grabbed it and bit off a piece.



“I swear to god, if you touch my food again...” she exclaimed, looking back at him and holding her plate away from her, out of his reach.

“Hey, I was right, it is good,” he said, grinning as he began to back up toward the door.

Just as he was about to back out of the door, he glanced over at me and flashed a quick wink at me. My face immediately grew hot as I looked down at my food, hoping that no one else had seen it, but no probing questions or teasing jabs sounded, so I assumed it was all clear. I glanced back up toward where he had been standing, but he had already disappeared, heading into the kitchen to get his food. Why exactly I was still so embarrassed about the idea of the others knowing what was going on, I wasn’t sure, but the tense, tight feeling in my chest told me that I wasn’t ready for it, yet.

Just as I was about to dig into my food once again, though, a loud knocking came from the front door and we all immediately jumped, a few people looking around for the source of the sound. Scott stood up and began to move toward the door, looking slightly confused. As he drew closer to the door, I suddenly had a very bad feeling about what was about to happen, but I didn’t have time to react as he reached the door and pulled it open.

“Hi, can I help—?” he began to say, but he was cut short as the next instant I saw him flying back down the hallway, hitting the floor and sliding for several feet and out of view of the doorway to the living room.

Everyone immediately jumped to their feet in preparation just as the sound of footsteps moved from the front door toward the living room. Somehow, I almost knew who it was before anyone stepped into sight.

“Now don’t all of you get up just for me.”

Kailyn stood in the doorway, a smirk pulling back one corner of her lips as she glanced around at all of us. I couldn’t speak for the others, but I was more than a little shocked that she had suddenly found us. Clearly she hadn’t been recaptured by Jared or Mack or any of their “associates” after we had left her in the bedroom of that house in Arizona, yet somehow she had managed to follow us all the way to New York, entirely across the

country.

“Stunned speechless?” she asked, glancing around after no one had said anything for several seconds before finally resting her gaze on me. “What’s the matter, cat got your tongue?”

“How did you get here?” Chase asked, speaking up before even I could.

“Oh, you know, just any old way I could,” she said, shrugging, “buses, trucks, boats... no planes, though. Not a big fan of launching myself into the sky in a somewhat pressurized tube.”

“How did you find us? You were—?” I began to ask, but she suddenly interrupted.

“Left behind with Jared and Mack in that house by all of you?”

The room fell silent once again as she glanced around at all of us.

“You know, on one hand I’m disappointed,” she said, her gaze finally returning to me once again. “You suddenly backed out at the last second and then left me behind to... what, be captured all over again? But, I can’t really be all that mad, since... let’s be honest, I’d probably do the same thing.”

“So that’s what you’re here to do?” I jumped in. “You’re gonna give us right back to Jared and all of them?”

“No, my dear,” she said, putting one hand to her chest and scoffing. “I’m going to use you all as bait, but then... well, who knows what will happen? I wouldn’t get too wild in the speculations, though, because there’s probably a good chance I’ll kill you.”

“For just that one thing?”

“For betraying me!” she snapped, pointing a finger at me accusatorily as I suddenly felt pressure on my throat.

I quickly realized that I couldn’t breathe, and I began to panic, my heart pounding as I tried to inhale even the slightest bit of air, but it didn’t work. Kailyn had proven what she was capable of back in Arizona, but I hadn’t felt her use it on me, yet, and now that I had, it was honestly terrifying. Although she probably was not able to grip me so tightly with her own hands, it seemed her telekinetic abilities were much stronger than that. No one seemed

to notice my struggle, though, until Chase happened to glance over at me and must have seen my face turning red.

“Amaryss!” he said and went to move toward me, but Kailyn suddenly snapped her head around to look at him and held out one hand in his direction.

Chase was suddenly thrown off his feet and flew backwards onto the chair he had spent the previous night in, knocking it over and rolling up against the wall as the others finally seemed to realize what was happening. Just as they began to move, I heard a loud click from the front hallway and then a resounding bang that seemed to fill the entire space, piercing straight into my ears. Suddenly, the pressure on my neck disappeared and I immediately gasped for air, falling to my knees, quickly becoming aware of how the edges of my vision had begun to grow dark.

My heart was hammering in my ears as I looked up toward Kailyn just in time to see something hit her square in the side of the head, causing her to stagger, just before Shawn leapt at her and threw both of them to the ground. A brief struggle ensued before I saw a fist rise into the air before slamming down with a loud thud. I managed to push myself to my feet rather shakily as I heard another few thuds follow from the hallway. Someone tried to hold onto my arm, possibly to steady me, but I waved them off, staggering toward where I had last seen Shawn and Kailyn. As I approached, I found him kneeling on top of her, his hands on his thighs as he panted slightly. She appeared to be rather still and silent underneath him as I approached, grabbing onto the doorframe slightly to support myself.

“Are you okay?” I asked, my voice hoarse as I rubbed my neck slightly.

Shawn jumped and glanced back at me but nodded, rubbing his eyes with one hand as he slowly got to his feet, looking down at Kailyn, still. My eyes happened to travel past him and I saw a figure in the doorway at the end of the hallway. For a second I thought it was some kind of intruder, but I quickly realize that it was Scott, however he was holding something in one hand. It took my longer than I liked to admit to realize that it was a silver handgun, although it was currently just held at his side.

“Who in the hell is that?” he said, moving closer slowly, looking down at Kailyn.

“An old friend,” I replied, my voice sounding slightly less strained than moments before.

“I think you put one too many letters in that word,” Shawn said, glancing over at me.

I gave him a look but turned my attention back to his father. That certainly explained what the loud bang had been just before Shawn attacked Kailyn, and I found myself oddly grateful that the bullet hadn’t actually connected with her. Scott approached the unconscious body and looked down at her, not even bothering to look up at us.

“For a second there I was wondering why they’d send a kid,” he finally said, still looking down at Kailyn.

Something about what he had just said seemed strange to me, and it was clear Shawn felt the same way, because he visibly stiffened. My eyes flicked over to meet his as he slowly turned to face Scott.

“Who’s ‘they?’”

He slowly looked up from Kailyn’s unconscious body at us, but remained silent. Shawn turned to face him as I saw one hand clench into a fist at his side.

“Who’s ‘they?’” he asked more forcefully.

Just then, he lifted the gun at us and cocked it. The sound of the metal clicking into place sent shivers down my spine as I instantly debated whether I should try to knock it away or simply go along with whatever he was doing. Shawn was more or less between me and Scott, so the idea of lunging forward and knocking the gun from his hands seemed rather like a bad idea, seeing as I didn’t really want to use Shawn as a human shield.

“What the fuck is this?” he shouted, advancing forward a step.

“Listen, it wasn’t what I wanted to do,” Scott said quietly, “but we needed the money, and we weren’t ready to have a kid.”

My eyes moved between Shawn and Scott rather quickly, trying to size up whether one of them was about to attack the other. The realization had quickly turned to anger in Shawn, but he didn’t seem about to take another step and risk getting shot. Scott’s hand

was not shaking with the gun or anything of that sort, but I sensed some reluctance to actually wanting to pull the trigger.

“You called them, last night,” Shawn said quietly. “When you went to call for the pizza, you called the guys who took all of us.”

“If it weren’t for the check they cut me every year, I wouldn’t be able to survive here, do you understand that?” Scott shot back quickly. “Especially ever since my wife died—”

“You became a piece of shit who can’t keep himself afloat?”

“You don’t understand—”

“I don’t think you fucking ‘understand!’” Shawn interrupted, clenching his other hand into a fist, as well. “You’re no better than those ‘people’ who steal children to run experiments on them.”

Just as Scott was about to say something else in retort, a flurry of motion passed between us and something flashed from the light of the living room. I jumped slightly as he let out a cry in pain and staggered back a step or two. Something heavy landed on the floor with a loud thud and I glanced down to see the handgun lying between Shawn and Scott. I quickly kicked it toward the living room and away from the two of them. Once the gun had clattered away across the floor, I glanced over to the left and saw the pieces of what I assumed used to be a plate lying on the floor next to the wall. Shawn and I both looked toward the living room to see the rest of the group turning to look toward Maya, who was standing in the center of the space, still somewhat in the post-throwing position.

“What the hell was—?” Scott began to ask, but Shawn suddenly grabbed him by his shirt and threw him sideways into the living room.

He staggered and fell to the ground as Maya hopped out of the way, looking down at him for a second before looking around at the rest of us. Just then, I heard the sound of something scratching across the wood floor and my gaze was drawn to Damien. He was just standing up, the handgun held in his hands as if it were something incredibly foreign and unfamiliar. He held it up like he had seen Scott doing, but quickly had to use his other

hand to stabilize it, keeping the barrel pointed at him, as well.

“Easy there, Rambo,” Chase said, putting one hand on his shoulder. “Don’t go blowing holes in anyone, all right?”

Damien nodded, but still looked somewhat shaky holding the handgun. I turned my attention to Scott, who was now just sitting up from the floor. He looked around at us for a few seconds before seemingly just noticing the gun pointed at him.

“Careful with that,” he said, holding one hand up toward Damien.

“Why should he?” Shawn snapped. “You didn’t seem to care too much when you were shoving it in my face a couple seconds ago!”

He looked like he was about to make some kind of rebuttal, but Shawn slammed his fist against the doorframe, causing a loud bang that silenced him. Before he could launch into any kind of tirades, however, I stepped in front of him and crouched down before Scott.

“Who did you call last night?”

“We know who it was!” Shawn spat, but I simply turned around and indicated for him to remain quiet.

“When you dialed a number last night, who specifically picked up the phone on the other end?”

Scott remained silent for a few moments before he nervously cleared his throat and glanced between me and Shawn rather quickly.

“I’m not sure,” he said.

“Let’s start with something simple, Shawn said, stepping up beside me, “was it a man or a woman?”

“A man,” he replied, nodding.

“Have you ever heard this man’s voice before?”

“No, I don’t—I don’t think so,” he said, shaking his head.

“Well, I assume you’ve spoken to a man named Jared before,” Shawn said. “Correct?”

“Something with a J, yeah,” he replied. “It was years ago...”

“Yeah, nineteen, right?”

Shawn suddenly lashed out and kicked him in his right ankle, causing Scott to jump and let out a shout in pain. I rose to

my feet and pushed Shawn back, using my arm to bar across his chest as I moved him several feet away.

“Hey, we need to figure out what’s going on quickly, because I have a bad feeling we don’t have much time before something bad happens, and we’re not going to get anywhere with that shit, okay?” I hissed.

Shawn clenched his jaw for a moment or two, but finally nodded. With that, I released him and turned back to Scott, remaining standing this time.

“So it wasn’t the man you remember from before,” I said, returning to our conversation.

“No, but he might have called before.”

“How recently?”

“Within the last month or so,” he said quickly. “I got a call out of the blue, some number I’ve never heard of. The guy tells me that there’s a chance the bunch of you might show up at my door, and to call this number if you did.”

“And so when you called that number it wasn’t him?”

“No.”

I glanced around at the others, who were all beginning to look more apprehensive.

“Who wants to bet it was one of our friends with the automatic weapons and the SUVs?” Lexi said, voicing what I was sure everyone else was thinking.

My eyes instinctually darted toward Chase as I found him looking right back at me. I could instantly see the same feeling behind his as I felt in my chest.

“Everyone grab your stuff,” I said. “Damien, you can put the gun down, now.”

“Are you sure?” he said.

“I don’t think he’s gonna try anything, himself,” I said, glancing down at Scott. “He called someone in to do it for him.”

Just as I moved over to grab my bag, I heard a muffled cry and glanced back to see Shawn dragging Scott to his feet. I thought about intervening, but decided that perhaps it was best for him to say some of what he needed to say.

“What did you get out of selling me away? Money?”

“Well, I mean, part of it—”

“Well a fat lot of good that did you, huh?” he spat. “Your wife’s dead and you’re living by yourself like a fucking nobody in Brooklyn?”

“Life wasn’t the same after she died!” Scott snapped. “You don’t understand!”

Shawn suddenly fell silent, his hands still clenched into fists, holding Scott’s shirt within them. Finally, he nodded and looked back up at him.

“You’re right, I don’t,” he said. “You made sure I never had the chance to.”

“We were young back then, we weren’t ready to be parents,” Scott tried to argue quickly, but it was evident Shawn wasn’t listening anymore.

He released Scott’s shirt and began to take a step away from him.

“I don’t know to—”

Before he could finish his sentence, however, Shawn spun around and delivered a hefty punch to his face. Scott staggered backwards and hit the doorframe, putting both hands to his face as I began to see blood leaking down over his chin. I sensed Shawn was about to strike again, so I rushed forward and grabbed his arm, pulling him back.

“Not now!” I said firmly.

“Let go of me!”

“We don’t have time for this!” I continued, the volume of my voice rising. “You got your one punch in, leave it at that.”

Shawn looked back at me and for a second I thought he might take a swing at my head next, but he finally shook my grip loose and simply looked back at Scott. With one final act of defiance, he spit on the ground just in front of his feet before turning and motioning for Damien to follow him.

“Come on, we need to get our shit.”

The two of them left the room, followed quickly by Lexi and Maya. Chase and I quickly packed our things as Scott simply stood in the doorway, holding one hand to his face in an attempt to stem the blood. I saw him start to take a step toward the kitchen but I suddenly pointed a finger at him.

“Don’t move,” I barked. “You’re going to stay right



there.”

He gestured to his face and the blood running down it but my gaze remained steady, my jaw set. Finally, he sighed and backed up against the doorframe, keeping his hand held to his nose. I glanced back at Chase to see his lips set into a thin line, his bag held over his shoulder, already.

“So much for that rest, huh?” I remarked dryly.

He just nodded, remaining silent. Just then, the sound of footsteps banging down the hallway caused me to jump and spin around. Moments later, Shawn and Damien appeared, Shawn carrying his bag over his shoulder. It occurred to me that Damien didn’t actually have anything to bring with him, and that his shirt seemed familiar, since it was Shawn’s. I suppose it worked well for Chase that he wasn’t exactly Damien’s size or stature, so he got to keep all of his clothes to himself.

“All right, once the girl’s get back, we’ll be all set to—”

Before I could finish my sentence, however, the sound of loud banging came from the front door. We all jumped as I immediately fell silent, scanning for a way to duck and cover.

“Scott Hale?” a voice called from the other side of the door.

He remained silent, staring over at us, apparently unsure if we would let him speak. As he began to open his mouth, I slipped over and clamped my hand over it, my eyes burning into his. He didn’t try to fight me, however, he simply remained silent, staring right back at me.

“We know you have the charges in your custody,” the voice called again. “We highly suggest open compliance.”

I glanced back toward the others to see that Lexi and Maya were standing at the corner to the hallway, watching the door with wide eyes. As I turned around, though, Maya’s eyes flicked over to me and I nodded toward the others. She tapped Lexi on the shoulder and motioned for her to follow after her into the living room. Just as they were about halfway across the hallway, I heard a loud click from the other side of the door and looked over at them, my eyes wide.

“Move n—!”

Before I could even finish the command, a loud bang resounded in the front hallway and splinters flew from the door. I

quickly ducked down and scampered toward the hallway. Kailyn was still lying on the floor, but she didn't appear to have any bullets or wood shards in her. I grabbed her legs and quickly pulled her back into the living room and behind the couch, hoping to provide some kind of barrier between her and the front of the house, where the gunshot had come from. Once she was behind the couch, I glanced around at the others to see Lexi and Maya both in the living room, neither holding any bleeding wounds, so I assumed they hadn't been hit.

The sounds of heated argument came from outside the house, but I quickly realized that the voices were moving about. They moved farther to the left, drawing closer to the front window. Somewhat luckily, I noted, the curtains were still drawn closed, but they were not going to be any help in stopping a bullet. I gestured for everyone to head toward the back of the house before looking over at Chase. The expression on his face was questioning as I pointed toward Kailyn.

"Help me," I mouthed, not wanting to make any sound.

He quickly slipped forward and crouched down beside me.

"Why?" he hissed. "She just broke in here and tried to kill you."

"She said she wasn't here to kill us," I replied.

"And you trust her?"

"I've known her for years," I shot back.

"That doesn't answer the question."

I looked down at her unconscious form for a few moments before turning back to Chase.

"I don't know, but leaving her here to die by these guys feels wrong."

He looked like he wanted to argue, but instead he remained silent, rubbing his left temple with one hand. Finally, he nodded and moved around to her head, preparing to help lift her up. Just as he did, though, I heard another metallic click from outside and I immediately reached forward, pushing down on Chase's shoulder. Moments later, chaos seemed to erupt around us as the sound of loud gunfire came from just above us, followed closely by breaking glass and other various destructive sounds. After several seconds, the gunfire stopped and I didn't feel any burning pain

from a gunshot wound, so I looked up. Chase was just lifting his head as well, but he nodded quickly, which I took to mean he was fine.

With that, however, we grabbed Kailyn and lifted her off the ground, quickly moving toward the back of the house. We quickly found ourselves in the dining room, where most of our group was standing up against one of the walls. Upon seeing us carrying Kailyn, several of them appeared rather surprised.

“What are you doing?” Shawn hissed.

“I’m not going to leave her to die here,” I said quietly.

“I would.”

“Well then it’s a good thing I’m not you.”

With that, Chase and I placed her on the ground. I quickly moved into the living room, staying as low to the ground as I could and moving over to my bag. It was not zipped closed, but I was not about to make any sort of noise to indicate we were in there, so I grabbed it and scampered back to the dining room, pulling the strap over my head and leaving it across my torso before zipping it quickly. The bag hung against my back in a somewhat awkward position, but it was better there than off to my side, at the moment.

“So, now what?” Lexi whispered. “They’re probably moving around the house as we just sit here.”

I thought for a second, glancing around the room as I bit my lower lip slightly. Finally, I spotted something by the door in the kitchen and glanced back toward the living room. Scott was sitting on the floor now, leaning against the doorframe with one hand over his right ear.

“No hard feelings if we steal your dad’s ride, Shawn?” I asked, turning back to the group.

He glanced over at him for a moment as his lip curled into something like a grimace.

“Fuck him.”

“All right, we’re gonna take his car and get the hell out of here.”

“That’s the grand plan?”

“You got a better one?” I shot back.

“It’s faster than running,” Chase pointed out.

Shawn gave him a look.

“Don’t just agree with her, outright, man,” he said.

“What’s your problem if I do?” Chase said defensively.

“You wanna get shot in the back running away, instead?”

“Boys, not now,” I said, stepping between them. “Argue when we’re on the highway to somewhere else.”

“What do we do about her?” Lexi asked, pointing to Kailyn.

I looked down at her for a few seconds, torn between the devil on one shoulder and the angel on the other. Part of me just wanted to leave her here to be found and possibly captured; it would certainly get her out of our hair for a while. However, the other part of me didn’t want to leave her there in case they decided to kill her. Hers was blood I couldn’t live with on my hands.

“We take her a little ways away, and then we drop her,” I said.

“We’re taking her with us?!” Shawn asked incredulously.

“Keep your voice down!” Lexi hissed, hitting him on the arm.

“I’m not leaving her to die,” I growled, stepping within inches of him.

Our eyes locked, but I refused to let myself back down this time. My jaw was clenched as I felt my fist involuntarily clenching at my side. Finally, he shook his head and threw his hands in the air.

“I feel like this just going to come back to bite us in the ass,” he said.

“Well, I hope you have thick skin, then,” I replied.

“Chase.”

I nodded to Kailyn’s body and he grabbed her arms once again. We went to move into the kitchen when a loud bang came from the front of the house, once again. Damien leaned around the corner slowly to look down the main hallway just as another loud bang came from the same vicinity and I knew the door had been kicked open.

“Where are they?” I heard a man shout, presumably talking to Scott.

I couldn’t hear his response, but Damien suddenly moved away from the corner, his eyes wide.

“They’re right there,” he mouthed, pointing toward the hallway, over his shoulder.

Just then, the sound of footsteps entering the living room came from our left and I instantly spun to look. I was greeted by the sight of a man wearing what looked like a black sweatshirt, black pants, black boots, and a black beanie holding a shotgun just moving into the center of the living room. Our eyes met for a moment and I sensed surprise and hesitation on both of our parts, if only for an instant. The next second, he went to raise his gun and I dove forward. The gun fired with a resounding boom and I heard the sound of shattering wood behind me. I glanced back to see one of the chairs at the table had nearly had its back blown completely off. Hurried footsteps drew close to the entryway to the dining room as I gestured for the others to move toward the kitchen.

Suddenly, I saw a flurry of motion off to my right in my peripheral vision, followed by a quiet shout of surprise. Just then, the man began to appear around the corner of the entryway. Before he had even finished putting his foot all the way down in the room, however, a loud bang sounded from directly beside me. His head snapped back as his body went limp and he fell to the ground. I whipped my head around to look to the right and found Maya holding the handgun Damien had taken still in a raised position. Her chest rose and fell quickly as I heard her breaths coming in rapid pants. After another moment or two, she looked down at her hand and then back over at the lifeless body of the man with the shotgun.

“Holy shit...” she said under her breath, beginning to drop her arm.

Just then, I heard a shout from the front of the house and I grabbed Kailyn’s arms, pulling her toward the kitchen. Chase moved to grab her legs, helping carry her into the other room. Just as we were crossing the doorway to the hallway, I heard two loud bangs from the front of the house and I flinched slightly, but kept moving. Once we were clear, I saw Shawn quickly dash across the open space, followed by Lexi. Maya suddenly stepped out into the open space and raised the pistol once again, unleashing a shot seemingly almost before the gun was even fully raised.

A cry of pain came from the front of the house as she

suddenly grabbed Damien's arm and pulled him after her. They hurried into the kitchen before coming to a stop just in front of me and Chase.

"Nice shot," Damien said, tapping her on the shoulder.

She just nodded, but I could see her trying to get her breathing under control. I glanced back toward the door to see Lexi holding the keys to the car and moving to crack the door open. She glanced through the open sliver for a moment before opening it just wide enough for her to slip through and cautiously stepping outside. After a second, she waved for us to follow and we began to exit, as well. We moved toward the back of the house, Chase and I still carrying Kailyn between us. Lexi reached the back edge of the house first and glanced around it for a moment before hurrying forward. Taking that as a sign that it was all clear, we began to follow after her.

Scott's car was some kind of small, silver sedan, and I immediately saw a problem. While the SUV had worked because there was ample open trunk space that led into the back seat, this car had no such luxury. Five people could sit in the main cabin, and maybe a sixth if they were laying down across the people in the back, but we had a seventh with Kailyn.

"Put her in the trunk," Shawn said, nodding toward the back.

I was about to agree when I happened to glance down at her and noticed something.

"Shit, she's bleeding!" I hissed.

"What?" Chase said, looking down.

Sure enough, blood was staining part of her shirt just above her hip on her right side, slowly dripping onto the ground.

"We're going to have a dead body on our hands if we just drop her in the middle of nowhere," he said.

"Okay, we can put her in the trunk for now, but we're going to have to call 911 when we drop her, wherever."

Shawn looked visibly irritated, but said nothing. Lexi quickly opened the driver's door before moving around to the trunk. She unlocked it and pushed it open, letting Chase and I place Kailyn inside.

"She might wake up soon after that," he said.

“Or she’s gone into some kind of shock,” I replied.

He just nodded before closing the trunk on her.

“Let’s hope she stays out until we get wherever we’re going.”

I nodded and moved around the car on the opposite side from him. As I approached the open back door, I found that Damien and Maya were already in it, leaving room for one more normal seat, and then someone had to get creative. There was no way we were all going to cram into the space normally, so I glanced at Chase over the top of the car.

“I think it would probably be more comfortable for everyone in the back if you were the one who had to lay down across us,” he said.

“Why?” I shot back, a sudden feeling of nervousness appearing in my chest.

“Because you weigh less than me, and you’re shorter,” he said. “You fit better.”

“Oh, right... yeah, that’s probably true,” I said.

With that, Chase slid into the remaining seat and I removed my bag from over my torso, tossing it in ahead of me. Just then, I saw more of the men in black appearing around the side of the house and I quickly dove forward into the vehicle, groaning as I landed atop three sets of knees.

“Go, go, go!” I shouted.

Lexi turned the key and the car sounded as if it were trying to start for several seconds, but the engine didn’t come to life. She hurriedly tried again, but this time the engine started. I heard another gunshot from outside and Shawn ducked down in his seat. Damien pulled the back door closed as Lexi moved the shifter and jammed her foot down on the gas. The car shot backwards and I rolled forward accidentally, falling somewhat into the gap between the seats, and on top of the other three’s feet. The car jerked to a stop and she shifted it once again before sending us rocketing forward.

I felt myself being pressed up against three pairs of shins as I tried to avoid slamming my face directly into Chase’s. As I started to attempt to pull myself back up, Chase put his hand on my shoulder and stopped me.

“You might want to stay down there,” he said.

“Uh, why?”

“Because there’s less chance a cop will see us that way, or something like that,” he said.

“This does seem somewhat unsafe and possibly against the law,” Maya added, looking down at me and grinning slightly.

“Why don’t you switch places with me down here?” I shot back at her, giving her a look.

“I’m good up here,” she said. “You look like you’re all cozy down there.”

I rolled my eyes but attempted to at least roll myself slightly so I was looking up at them, more or less, rather than staring at the bottom of the seat. The car careened wildly around corners, but I had no way of seeing where we were going. The only view of the outside I had was what I could see out the windows, which happened to be a lot of roofs of houses and the sky.

“Where are we dropping Kailyn?” Chase asked, looking down at me.

“She’s bleeding, so we need to get her to a hospital, or something.”

“You know, if we pull a bleeding girl out of our trunk, people are going to be rather suspicious,” Shawn chimed in.

“Right, so perhaps driving up to the emergency room would not be a good idea,” Chase said.

“Shit...” I added, suddenly becoming aware that I was biting my lower lip once again.

I tried to force myself to stop it as I thought about what to do. Suddenly, I had an idea.

“Lexi, we need to find a hospital, but then drop me a block or so away, out of sight,” I said.

“What the hell are you thinking?” she asked.

“Just... trust me.”

“You want your shoes first?” Chase asked.

“What?”

“Your shoes, seeing as they’re still in your bag,” he said, grinning.

I glanced down toward my feet to see that, indeed, I was



barefoot. They hadn't hurt up until then, but almost as soon as I was aware of it, the ache of the cold from running around outside without them began to set in.

"Yes, please."

November 25, 1999

10:05:42 A.M.

Hale Residence, New York City, NY

The leader of the team let out a heavy sigh as he watched two of his men carrying the injured member from by the front door toward their vehicles outside. He glanced back into the living room of the house at the lifeless body of one of his men that the kids had somehow managed to kill. When he had taken the job, no one had mentioned that they might be even remotely this dangerous, or capable and willing of killing someone. He finally turned his attention away from the body to the man sitting on the floor before him, his back against the wooden doorway between the hallway and the living room.

"So you're the one who called us in," he said.

The man nodded.

"And they were here all night?"

He nodded once more.

"Did they threaten you with a gun to let them stay?" he asked.

"No."

"Then where the fuck did they get one?!" he shouted, kicking the man in the feet.

He groaned and leaned away slightly, but the team leader grabbed the shoulder of his shirt and hauled him back into place.

"I lost one of my men, and another is injured, because they... what, conjured a gun from the thin air?"

"No, it's... it's mine," he said. "They took it from me."

"How did they find it?"

"I had it."

"Wait, you had it in your hand?"

He nodded, but immediately winced and put one hand to

his nose again.

“What the hell were you doing waving a gun about?”

“It was... the situation called for it.”

The team leader sighed as he reached toward his hip and produced a black pistol from a holster, there. He held it up in front of the man, casually, as if he were simply showing it to him.

“You have to be careful with these things,” he said.

“They’re dangerous weapons, you know.”

The man nodded.

“And you never know when one might go off.”

The gun suddenly snapped around in his hand, aiming directly at the man’s chest. Before he even had a chance to react, the team leader fired two rounds straight through him and the man went limp. He let out a sigh and rose to his feet, flipping the safety catch on once again before replacing the gun in its holster. With that, he glanced around once more as two more of his men appeared from the front door.

“Sir, there’s bound to be police here any minute.”

He nodded.

“Collect his body and gear, and let’s get out of here.”

The two men nodded before hurrying past him and toward the dead body in the entryway to the dining room. The team leader strode outside and toward the two SUVs parked in the middle of the street. Once he reached them, he approached the open passenger door of one of the lead one. A man was sitting in the seat, one leg partially hanging out of the door as he looked down at something in his lap. As the leader approached, the man looked up from the portable computer unit and nodded.

“Tell me we know where they went,” he said.

“Unfortunately, we only have some educated guesses,” the man in the vehicle said. “They were moving so erratically right after they took off that it was impossible to guess where they might be headed.”

“Dammit!” the team leader shouted and pounded his fist on the frame of the vehicle.

Just then, the two men appeared from inside the house, carrying their fallen teammate between them. As they approached the back of the SUV, another team member opened the back hatch

so they could place the body inside.

“Sir, when we were in there just now, we saw blood in the hallway.”

“I’m assuming there’s more to that than just that,” the team leader replied.

“It was near the kitchen. None of our guys who were hit were back there.”

He began nodding, as he rubbed his hands together slightly against the cold.

“One of them’s injured,” he said.

“It would seem so.”

“Okay, that gives us a new search pattern,” he said, calling back to the man in the front seat of the SUV.

“Sir?”

“We check all of the nearest hospitals. If one of them is injured, they’re going to be looking for help. Let’s get on it before we lose them again.”

November 25, 1999

11:00:12 A.M.

St. Catherine’s Memorial Hospital, New York City, NY

As I clambered out of the car and into the alley, I was instantly aware of the cold, once again. I turned around and reached in toward the car as Maya handed my coat to me. I quickly pulled it on and zipped it up, shivering slightly; it helped some, but it was not entirely resistant to the chill of the morning air. More properly dressed for the day, however, I moved to the back of the car and waited for Lexi to open the trunk. A moment later, the latch popped open and the hatch opened an inch or two. I hooked my fingers underneath it and lifted it open. I half expected Kailyn to suddenly leap at me as soon as I opened it, but she remained as still and limp as she had when we had placed her inside.

I took a deep breath before grabbing her in a strange, hug-like position and beginning to haul her out of the trunk. Once I had most of her torso out, I grabbed one of her arms and pulled it

across my shoulder, holding onto it with my other hand. My grip on her felt much more secure as I pulled her the rest of the way out of the trunk, but I almost stumbled and fell as her entire weight pulled on my shoulders. I managed to recover and get myself into a near-standing position. Chase appeared from around the car and looked to me for a moment. I simply nodded and he closed the trunk.

“Sure you want to do this alone?”

“Yeah, I’ve got it,” I huffed, shifting Kailyn’s position over my shoulders slightly.

He looked as if he wanted to say something else, but he simply nodded and smiled weakly before heading back toward the door to the car. I began dragging Kailyn down the alley toward the main street, instantly realizing that this would be slightly tougher than I had first thought. Just then, I felt a burning in my arms, but I tried to ignore it, shifting Kailyn’s weight slightly to try to remedy it. The feeling only intensified however, and suddenly I felt it flare in my legs, as well. I let out a cry and fell to my knees, Kailyn’s arm slipping from around my shoulders as I accidentally spilled her onto the ground. The burning feeling had spread from the center of my upper arms to include my shoulders, now, and the pain in my legs seemed to shoot straight from the top of my thighs to my knees. I hunched forward slightly, wrapping my arms around myself in a tight embrace as I closed my eyes and grit my teeth.

I was vaguely aware of a voice behind me, but I wasn’t paying enough attention to make out words; my focus was entirely placed on the pain. Finally, I felt it begin to subside just as something touched my back. I jumped, my eyes instantly shooting open as I spun around, nearly falling onto my back as I did. Chase was standing behind me, one hand still slightly outstretched.

“Are you okay, Ryss?” he asked quietly.

After a moment or two, I regained control of my breathing and cleared my throat.

“Fine,” I muttered, pushing myself to my feet.

“Ryss...”

“I’m fine,” I said sharply, shooting a look over at him for a moment before crouching down to grab Kailyn once again.

I managed to pull her arm around my shoulders once again, groaning slightly as I began to pull her weight up. Once I was standing again, with Kailyn hanging limply at my side, I began trudging toward the main street. I heard Chase's footsteps slowly retreating toward the car as I neared the sidewalk. As soon as I cleared the end of the alley, sunlight immediately streamed down the road from my left, causing me to squint slightly. A stiff breeze blew against me from the same direction, but I had no way of trying to block any of it or zip my coat up anymore in my position. To the right, I saw the sign for the hospital and turned toward it, trying to move as quickly as I could.

As soon as I was out of sight of the alley, and the car, I let out a heavy sigh and leaned my head forward slightly, my hair falling forward and into my face. I didn't want to show Chase how badly whatever had happened back there had affected me, for whatever reason, but now I didn't feel as bad letting it out. It had occurred to me as I had begun walking away with Kailyn that second time that she seemed somewhat lighter, or at least the task of carrying her had felt somewhat easier.

*"You admitted it back in Arizona, why are you afraid to now?"* I scolded myself, clenching my jaw slightly as I lifted my head and shook it in an attempt to clear my hair, which didn't work as well as I had hoped.

Something about the idea of physically changing like that left a panicked feeling in my chest, so I simply decided that it was an issue I would deal with later, when I wasn't carrying another person around a very public street in New York.

Finally, I reached the front doors to the hospital and I immediately turned right toward them. The automatic doors slid open as I staggered inside, feeling the blast of warm air as a welcome relief from the bite of the cold outside. Almost immediately, several people in hospital uniforms began to approach me.

"What's going on?" the first woman who reached me asked.

"She just got mugged," I lied, nodding toward Kailyn. "I saw her get shot and then she just collapsed."

"She was shot?"

“Yeah, only about a block away from here,” I said.

“Do you know where?”

“On her right side, just above the hip.”

The woman nodded and glanced back toward a man in green scrubs, waving to him.

“Bring a wheelchair!”

He nodded and hurried through a set of double doors, returning seconds later with one. As he came to a stop in front of me, the woman helped me lower Kailyn into it. Once she was situated, we stood up straight.

“Gunshot wound, right side above the hip,” she said.

“Take her to the ER.”

The man nodded and began to wheel Kailyn away.

“Do you know her?”

I shook my head.

“Okay, well, wait right here, I’m going to notify the police. They’ll probably want to take a statement from you since you saw what happened.”

“Okay,” I said, even though I had no intention of staying.

The woman hurried through the double doors and disappeared from sight. I watched the doors close behind her as I slowly began to back toward the front doors. After a second or two, I took a deep breath, letting it out in a shaky sigh.

“I’m sorry, Kailyn,” I said quietly.

With that, I turned away and hurried outside, running back down the sidewalk to the alley and making the turn. Just as I approached the car and Lexi started it, I heard a loud roar and looked toward the end of the alley ahead of me. A black SUV was bearing down on us, showing no signs of slowing.

“Shit,” I swore and opened the door, diving inside. “Lexi, drive, now!”

She happened to glance back and jumped when she saw the vehicle gaining on us. As soon as Damien had pulled the door closed, the car shot forward, the tires screeching slightly on the asphalt. We didn’t slow down as I felt that we were approaching the sidewalk, however I was still unable to see much of anything from my position in the back seat. Just as I was attempting to push myself up into a position to see outside, the car swerved violently

to the left, nearly throwing me to the floor once again.

“Jesus,” Shawn remarked.

“Well, I wasn’t about to stop and wait!” Lexi shot back.

“Where the hell am I going?”

“Out of the city,” Chase offered.

“Well that’s helpful.”

Just then, I finally managed to push myself up so I could see out of the windows normally, using Chase’s knee as my main point of leverage. All I could see was cars and buildings flashing by us as we drove probably much too fast for this particular street. I happened to look out the windshield just as we were approaching a large, green sign hanging over the road.

“There, follow that 78 sign!” I said, pointing between Lexi and Shawn just as we passed it.

“What? Where?” she said.

“It’s the next right,” I said.

“Where the hell does that go?”

“Newark.”

No one seemed to make any objections, so as we approached the turn, she attempted to switch lanes. Just as she did, however, the entire car shook and I was thrown forward into the back of the seats. The car fishtailed slightly as Lexi spun the wheel in an attempt to correct the car. I managed to push myself up enough to see out the back window to find the SUV mere feet behind us.

“Well, I suppose we didn’t really lose them, after all,” Shawn commented.

“Well, let’s see what happens,” Lexi said, suddenly spinning the wheel to the right and cutting through a red light.

Horns angrily blared around us, followed quickly by the sound of a large engine roaring. Judging by the lack of the sounds of crashing metal or breaking glass, they made it through the light, as well. Chase turned around to look out the back window before cursing under his breath. As he turned back around, he looked over to Maya.

“Where’s the gun?”

“Uh...” she said, leaning forward and attempting to reach for her bag, but found that it was stuck under me.

I attempted to reach under and unzip it. Finally, I got it open somewhat and reached inside. Almost immediately I felt the cold metal under my fingers and I grabbed what I was reasonably sure was the gun.

“What are you going to do?” I asked as I struggled to pull it out.

“Don’t worry about it,” he said, winking at me.

Just then, I managed to produce the handgun and he took it from me. With that, he rolled the window down and leaned out it, holding the gun out ahead of him. Several loud bangs followed from outside as I reached forward and grabbed onto the back of his shirt, suddenly afraid that he would fall out.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” Lexi shouted, glancing back somewhat.

Just then, he pulled himself back inside the car, closing the window.

“It’s empty,” he said.

“You done being an action hero?” Lexi said, her tone rather accusatory.

“Well, I thought I’d at least try something,” he said.

“Did you hit anything?”

“The SUV didn’t stop, if that’s what you’re wondering.”

Just then, a loud crack came from the back window and the three of them ducked their heads as small shards of glass rained down on us. I glanced up to see what was quite clearly a bullet hole in it.

“Well, great, because now they’re shooting at us,” Shawn said. “Is there a way we can lose them soon?”

“I don’t know, but we’re heading toward a tunnel, apparently.”

“What?”

I twisted around to look over the front seats to see the large, dark opening to the tunnel she had mentioned drawing near.

“This could be interesting,” Shawn remarked just as we entered it, Lexi immediately swerving around a car in front of us.

Lexi continued weaving through traffic as I fought to not be thrown around the backseat. After several minutes of that, however, I noticed that we had evidently left the tunnel. I



managed to look out the back window again but didn't see the SUV, anymore.

"Do you think we actually lost them?" I asked.

"How the hell would I know?" Lexi retorted.

The others tried to look back for signs of the SUV, but no one seemed able to locate it. Finally, after a few seconds, Maya let out a heavy sigh and turned back around.

"Well, that was an adventure," she remarked. "What's next?"

December 2, 1999

9:08:54 P.M.

New York City, NY

Jonathan drummed his fingers on the edge of the diner table, staring blankly at the coffee slowly cooling in the cup before him. His eyes seemed glassy and distracted, seemingly not even noticing as another figure approached him. Just then, he slid into the booth seat opposite Jonathan, causing him to jump.

"It pays to be aware of your surroundings in this city, Jonathan," Jared said, smirking.

"You're late," he replied, taking a sip of the coffee.

"I like to make a fashionable entrance."

Jonathan simply rolled his eyes but placed the coffee cup back on the saucer.

"So I'm going to take it you don't have good news, or else we wouldn't be meeting in this diner."

"Unfortunately not," he replied, nodding.

"What happened?"

"They killed one of the members of the team sent after them, injured another, and escaped in a stolen car heading toward New Jersey."

Jonathan raised an eyebrow, folding his arms on the table in front of him.

"That sounds like quite the adventure," he said.

"Perhaps for them."

"So what happens now?"

Jared sighed, rubbing his eyes with one hand.

“I have no clue, to be honest,” he said. “We lost track of them after that incident, and that was about a week ago.”

Jonathan let out a “huh” sound before taking another sip from his coffee. Jared watched him with an expression of curiosity, folding his hands on the table before him.

“You don’t seem particularly bothered by this,” he observed.

“I just have a feeling they’re not bound to be missing for long,” Jonathan replied, shrugging.

“Why’s that?”

“Because they always seem to turn up somewhere. That car doesn’t have enough gas to last forever, and they don’t really have any money to get more, so that means eventually they’re going to have to ditch it. If they’re on foot, they might disappear for a while, but they’re going to stop somewhere again.”

“What makes you so certain?”

“Well, it’s clear they knew about New York, somehow, so it stands to reason that perhaps they know where to go to look for something.”

Now it was Jared’s turn to lightly drum his fingers on the table.

“So where do you think they’re going, then?”

“Well, I’d say it stands to reason they want to get rather far away from here,” he began, “so that leaves heading west or south, primarily. They originally came from the west, so perhaps they wouldn’t want to head back that way, either.”

“So you think they headed south?” Jared supplied.

“I say that I don’t think that’s a bad idea to start with,” he replied.

Jared nodded slowly, staring distractedly at a spot on the table between the two of them. Just then, the waitress appeared at the table, holding a pot of coffee in one hand.

“Hey there, can I get you some coffee?” she asked, looking down at Jared.

“No thanks, actually,” he replied, looking back over at Jonathan quickly. “I need to be heading out.”

## 20

### Southern Air

February 3, 2000  
10:04:23 A.M.  
Rosier, Georgia

“Rise and shine, my darling.”

I cracked my eyes open to find a silhouette above me. It took a few more blinks and another few seconds to see the image clearly. Shawn’s face materialized out of the darkness, a grin pulling one corner of his mouth back. I made a face at him and his smirk simply widened into a grin.

“The last thing I expected to see when I woke up was your face,” I remarked.

“Well, I figured I couldn’t let you waste the day away.”

“That seems too kind,” I replied, slowly pulling myself into a sitting position as he moved out of the way.

“Well, that and we’re here, so we have to get out of the car.”

I shot him a look before yawning and shaking my head. My limbs still felt heavy as I rolled to my side slightly, ending up on my hands and knees. Finally, I summoned the strength to push my torso up, stretching my arms above my head as I did. With a groan, they fell to my sides once again as I glanced around the space.

The mostly empty train car seemed even more so now that, evidently, everyone else had already hopped out. I hoped that maybe at least a few people were still inside, but it appeared to only be me and Shawn. With a sigh, I reached to my right and grabbed my bag, pulling it closer to me. I rose to my feet, dragging the strap with me and putting it over one shoulder. As I adjusted it slightly so it ran comfortably across my chest and back, I glanced down at myself and inwardly grimaced.

My shirt, that had once been green, appeared to be rather dim and faded with stains and general grime. Not only were the signs that my clothes hadn’t been washed in two months, at least,

showing rather clearly, but I also noticed how they seemed to hang off my frame more than I remembered. According to the mental image I was able to conjure, the shirt and jeans had once hugged rather close to my body, but perhaps had a little bit of room to be loose; from what I saw before me now, however, the shirt hung rather loosely around my waist, and the jeans seemed to show more leeway in the thighs, while the belt I had appropriated was just about down to the last notch.

“You awake, there?”

I suddenly looked up, jumping slightly at the sound of Shawn’s voice. He was standing with his hands on his hips, looking somewhat impatient. I nodded, spinning my bag around so it was more behind me than at my side.

“Well, come on then,” he said. “The others are waiting.”

I followed him to the open door at the side of the car and waited for him to hop out first. He crouched down at the edge, almost sitting on it, before hopping to the ground below. As soon as he had moved out of the way, I simply hopped out of the car, falling the several feet to the ground and landing in a semi-crouched position. Shawn rolled his eyes as I smirked and rose to a normal standing position.

“Don’t give me that,” I said, pointing a finger at him accusatorily before turning to find the rest of the group standing nearby.

Maya was talking to Lexi, the two of them seemingly in the midst of quite an animated conversation. Damien was standing near them, clearly listening, but seeming as if he didn’t want to be obvious about it. My eyes finally found Chase off to the right of the group, his hands shoved in his pockets as he idly kicked at rocks on the ground. I immediately wanted to move over and say something, but part of me said that wouldn’t be a good idea if I didn’t want to draw the group’s attention. Luckily, Shawn walked past me, leading the way toward the group, while moving generally more in Chase’s direction. I followed behind, squinting slightly against the bright sunlight breaking over the top of the rail car.

“All right, everyone’s up, now,” Shawn said, clapping his hands. “Shall we say it’s time to take a trip into town?”

The others mumbled agreement as he motioned for us to

follow him. Without another word, he began to lead the way away from the train tracks and toward the tree line. Just as the group began to fall in step, I approached Chase from behind and carefully put a hand on his back. He jumped slightly and spun to see who had touched him, but relaxed slightly when he saw that it was me.

“Hey,” I said quietly, suddenly unsure of what else to say.

“Last to rise? This must be new for you,” he remarked.

“I couldn’t sleep last night,” I shrugged. “Something about the train, I guess.”

He nodded and glanced toward the rest of the group. Seeing that they were at least a little ways ahead of us, and seemingly engaged with either the hike or their own conversations, he turned back to me just as I wrapped my arms around him. I pressed the side of my face against his dirty, sweat-stained shirt, just about at the top of his chest. A moment later, I felt his arms wrap around me and something soft touch the top of my head. My head turned to face him quickly as I pressed my lips to his exposed skin just where his neck met his shoulders. I quickly pulled away and released him to see a faint smile adorning his lips. He placed one hand on the left side of my face, running his thumb across my cheek before sliding his whole hand back and running it through my hair.

“Sorry it’s all gross,” I said, grimacing slightly as I grabbed the end of my hair and felt the waxy texture.

“It’s fine,” he said. “We’re all in the same boat here.”

“I know, but I still feel weird about it,” I replied.

He just laughed before leaning forward and kissing me on the forehead quickly.

“I thought you were working on relaxing, Ryss.”

I gave him a look as he laughed and nodded toward the group.

“C’mon, let’s not get left behind.”

He turned to follow after the others and I fell in step beside him. We walked for a few moments in silence, and I was beginning to wonder if he was actually going to say anything else to me. The incident in the alley in New York came to mind, but I quickly reminded myself that we had worked that out not long after it had happened. I had been the one to go to Chase, and I had

tried to apologize. The look in his eyes after I had spilled my entire speech still stuck with me: a look somewhere between hurt and uncertainty. In that moment, I had wanted to just break down. I had wanted to throw my arms around him. I had wanted him to let me just cry. All of those things were completely unlike me, but for some odd reason in that moment they were all that had come to mind. In that moment, like now, he had taken a painstakingly long time to say anything. When he had, what he said had actually surprised me.

“I’m sorry, too.”

He hadn’t elaborated on it further, but the fact that I spent that night wrapped in his arms in the back of yet another truck seemed to have at least meant something.

My mind was suddenly brought back to the present as I felt my foot begin to slide out from under me and I quickly attempted to push forward, somehow managing to propel myself away from the mini-landslide that I had created. I glanced back to see that I had simply stepped on a soft patch of dirt along the edge of the path we were following. A hill fell down to our right, although the incline did not appear exceedingly steep, or tall, for that matter. Needless to say, an accidental slip would probably not have been the end of the world.

“You okay there?”

I glanced forward once again to see Chase stopped in the middle of the path ahead of me, looking back with what appeared to be amusement on his face.

“Yeah, just almost died, but I’m good,” I replied, shrugging.

He glanced over the edge before shaking his head and turning back around, resuming the hike along the path. I hurried to catch up to him and fell into a comfortable pace a step or two behind him.

“So what’s this about you not sleeping?” he suddenly said, catching me off guard slightly.

“What?”

“You said you couldn’t sleep,” he replied. “What’s up with that?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” I replied, shrugging despite the fact

that he was facing away from me. “Maybe because I was missing my pillow.”

He laughed and glanced over his shoulder at me for a moment before facing forward once again. I grinned as we carefully hopped over a small, fallen tree across the path.

“Well, unfortunately it was unavailable due to the open train car.”

“I noticed.”

After another moment or two, I leaned to the side slightly and glanced around Chase to see that the rest of the group was not too far ahead, yet the path seemed relatively straight forward from here on out. Something took hold of me all of the sudden and I tapped him on the right shoulder. He glanced back as I grabbed his arm and pulled him to a stop.

“Hold up a second,” I said, speaking somewhat softly.

“What is it?” he asked, looking concerned.

“It’s, just... I had a thought...”

He remained silent, staring at me and awaiting whatever I had to say. My heart was hammering in my chest as I fought to control my words, thinking through exactly what I wanted to say. Finally, I managed to summon some amount of courage and control to open my mouth and speak normally.

“I have two things, I guess,” I said. “First of all, why were you sorry, too?”

He remained silent for a few moments before sighing and subbing his eyes with one hand.

“Ryss...”

“Chase, it’s been bugging me since you said it,” I replied. “I just... please.”

With one more sigh, he glanced toward the rest of the group to see that they had moved a considerable distance away by now. He nodded toward them and began to resume walking, but I grabbed his arm and stopped him one more time.

“I’ll tell you, but we should keep walking, at least,” he said quietly.

I nodded, instantly taking my hand away. We started walking once again, but at a rather leisurely pace. After a few moments of silence, he finally spoke up.

“I was wrong about you.”

My heart nearly skipped a beat as I found myself panicking, but I tried to control my outward appearance as best I could. Clearing my throat, I glanced over at him.

“H-how so?” I asked, cursing inwardly at my accidental stutter.

“When I first met you, I thought I had a pretty good idea of who you were,” he said. “You seemed pretty calm, collected, and like you had it almost entirely put together.”

While that did sound like how I hoped I was, something told me there was a “but.”

“But,” he continued, confirming my suspicions, “almost right away I saw a little bit of that other side... the one that’s scared.”

“Scared?” I blurted more forcefully than I had intended.

“Scared of not knowing,” he said. “I realized that you’re scared of something inside of yourself.”

I couldn’t tell if this was supposed to be some kind of reassuring truth or rather demeaning, but I held my tongue and let him continue.

“It’s that part of you that we all have, and we’re all scared of it,” he said. “In that alley in New York, I saw that fully. I’m sorry... because I understand it, and I had you wrong.”

“So... you think...” I said slowly, but the idea of where the words were going had suddenly evaporated, leaving my mind blank.

“I think it’s what makes you incredibly human, Amaryss,” he said, suddenly stopping and gently taking hold of my arm to stop me, as well. “I can see everyone and every little thing you’ve experienced in you, including myself.”

I remained silent, still struck dumb with no idea what to say.

“And I think that might be your greatest ability, more than whatever it is you’re afraid of.”

Even though I didn’t know how to respond in words, I suddenly found that we were drifting closer together and before I knew it, I felt his lips against mine. We stayed there, not in some kind of passionate, fiery moment, but one far gentler and somehow



more... intimate. After another second or two, he pulled away, but I felt his arms around me and I wondered if they had actually been there this whole time. His head leaned forward beside mine as I began to lean mine forward, as well.

“We’re all scared, Amaryss,” he said quietly, “even those of us who don’t act like it. If you need someone to help you get past it, though, I’m still here.”

I leaned my head forward and buried my face in his shoulder for a moment or two, closing my eyes as I did. The sound of his breathing close to my head filled most of what I could hear out of my left ear, while the other was pressed up against his shoulder. I could feel the rise and fall of both of our chests, as well as what I assumed was my own heartbeat, but it very well could have been his. Finally, after another moment or two, we slowly released each other and I took a step back, looking up at him as I nervously brushed some of my hair behind my right ear.

“So, I guess this is kind of a serious thing now, huh?” I said quietly.

Chase laughed and shook his head, hanging it slightly for a moment or two before raising it to look at me once again.

“I guess that kind of was my second point,” I continued. “Why are we still trying to keep this a secret?”

His head cocked to the side slightly and I sighed.

“It’s been kind of a while, now,” I pointed out, “so why are we still hiding from the others like it’s forbidden? Maybe I want my pillow back at night, even when everyone else is around. Maybe I don’t want to have to watch what I say and worry about how I act whenever I’m with you in the whole group because we’re afraid someone will catch on.”

He remained silent after I had finished, simply staring back into my eyes. Finally, after what felt like agonizing minutes, he reached forward and I glanced down to see him taking hold of my hand. I looked back up at him as he nodded in the direction we had been travelling prior to this moment.

“Come on, then,” he said.

An uncontrollable smile spread across my face as I laughed and began to walk beside Chase, heading after the rest of our group. The trees began to thin out and we soon found ourselves

exiting the wooded area onto a small hill behind what appeared to be some kind of large, red building. The others were all milling around at the bottom of the hill, apparently waiting for us. I glanced over at Chase once more, and down at our hands held between us, before he suddenly grinned mischievously and pulled me forward, rushing down the hill. With a shriek, I was tugged after him, my cry of surprise quickly turning into laughter as we ran down the hill, managing to stay on our feet all the way to the bottom. When we came to a stop in front of the group, I could feel my heart pounding, but I had a feeling it was not entirely just from the running.

“Hey guys,” I said, looking around at the rest of them.

They were all watching us with expressions that seemed to range from skepticism to amusement. Finally, Lexi let out a sigh and placed her hands on her hips.

“Thank God, it’s about damn time, you two,” she said.

The others laughed as I looked to her curiously.

“What? We weren’t that far behind.”

“You know what I’m talking about, Amaryss,” she shot back.

I smiled nervously and glanced around at the others. Maya appeared to be regarding us with an amused grin, while Shawn looked rather blasé about the whole situation. Damien was the only one who didn’t seem to entirely understand what was going on.

“What’s about time?” he asked, glancing around.

“Those two,” Lexi said, gesturing to us. “They think they’ve been hiding whatever they’ve got going on between them for a while, now, but the rest of us pretty much were just waiting for them to finally say something.”

“What’s going on between them?” he asked, still looking confused.

Chase laughed and shook his head as Maya pat him on the shoulder.

“It’s okay, someone will explain the birds and the bees to you at some point,” she said.

“I vote Shawn,” Lexi spoke up, shooting a look over at him.

“Well, son, you see,” he said, stepping forward and putting a hand on Damien’s shoulder, turning him around as he began to walk toward the front of the large building, “sometimes boys and girls realize they kind of like each other...”

I shook my head as I glanced over at Chase to find him grinning. He looked over at me for a second before squeezing my hand slightly and starting after the others, who had begun to follow after Shawn and Damien. We ended up beside Lexi as we approached the front of the building and the asphalt that seemed to appear just beyond it.

“How long ago did you figure us out?” I asked, poking her in the shoulder.

“You two?” she said, glancing over at me. “Probably the night in Arizona when I came back to our room and found you two there.”

My face instantly grew hot as I looked down at my feet, suddenly too embarrassed to look anyone in the eye. Lexi and Chase both laughed as I focused on the ground a foot or two in front of us. I felt Chase squeeze my hand slightly and I finally managed to look over at him. He just smiled at me and nudged my shoulder playfully with his. I smiled thinly back at him, but finally mustered the strength to lift my head normally once again to find that we had just reached the pavement in front of the large building we had been walking alongside.

The hot, black surface only extended a little ways to our left, but glancing to the right showed that it led past another several large buildings and then curved left, heading through another patch of trees. Wherever this place was, it seemed rather quiet and still, which hopefully meant that whatever went on here wasn’t operating today, and not that we had walked into another set-up. Shawn and Damien were already walking toward the entrance to the trees, while Maya waited at the edge of the pavement for the rest of us.

“I guess they decided we’re continuing on,” she said, gesturing toward the two of them.

“Well, might as well, right?” Chase replied, shrugging. “Can’t really just stay here. We need supplies, so we need actual civilization.”

“Look at you, using big words and all,” Lexi teased.

He swung his free hand at her, but she managed to hop out of the way with a mischievous laugh. As I glanced over at her, however, I noticed her grimace slightly, adjusting the position of her backpack slightly before her expression returned to normal. She happened to glance over at me, that moment, and caught my eye; it must have been rather clear that I had seen what had just happened, because her lips pulled into a thin line as she turned away and began to walk after the other two boys. Maya, Chase, and I followed close behind.

“You think he’s still giving him a sex talk up there?” Maya asked, glancing back at the two of us.

“At this point, I can only assume he’s run out of things to say,” I remarked, smirking.

“It’s not like he has any actual experience because, well, I was the only girl he ever lived with, and there’s no way that was going to happen, so...” she said, raising her arms and shoulders slightly.

The rest of us laughed as she let her arms fall to her sides once again with a sigh. I suddenly noticed that she had finally stopped wearing the red sweatshirt that she had always seemed to have back in Arizona, hopefully because she finally realized that it was too hot for it. It occurred to me that her hair seemed a good amount longer than I had remembered when I met her, but then again it wasn’t like we had money or access to things to deal with those sorts of things, nor were they our first concern. As those thoughts crossed my mind, I suddenly became aware of how low on my back my hair fell and I shivered slightly, feeling the tips of it lightly move across my shirt just a little over halfway down my shoulder blades. I glanced over at Chase and saw that his hair had also grown out, but it was curly so it seemed to make more of a ball around his head than really get long. A slight giggle escaped me before I could stop myself and I instantly clamped my mouth shut and stared straight ahead as I was aware of the two pairs of eyes suddenly on me.

“Did... you just actually make that noise?” Maya asked.

I remained silent, avoiding their gazes, but I could feel my cheeks growing hotter and hotter.

“Oh my god...” Lexi said, her voice rather quiet and her tone incredulous as she turned around to walk backwards, “Amaryss has a girly side!”

“Excuse me?” I said, snapping my head around to look over at her.

“I didn’t think it was true, but it’s so much more amusing than I thought it would be,” she said, grinning coyly.

“I can have more than one ‘side!’” I shot back. “Also, what ‘side’ do you think you’ve been seeing this whole time?”

“You do give off the impression of this kind of tough, tomboyish exterior,” she replied.

“Hey, since when have I been some kind of tomboy?”

“Ladies...” Chase said, glancing between us.

“No, hold on,” I said, holding one finger up toward him. “I want to hear her answer.”

“Well, you certainly aren’t all for revealing your feelings, other than maybe happiness or rage,” she shot back.

I wanted to say something, but I couldn’t think of a good response, so I turned to look at Maya, who nodded and smiled apologetically. With a sigh, I shook my head and looked away from all of them, off toward the paved path heading toward the trees. Just as I did, I noticed something moving farther into them and I instantly focused on it. The shape was dark and seemed somewhat large as it moved between them, seemingly drawing closer. My first thought was some kind of bear, but I had a feeling that was not the case. My suspicions were confirmed a moment later when a rather large, red pickup truck appeared from the opening in the trees.

I immediately tensed up and felt Chase shake his hand slightly, quickly reminding me that I was actually still holding onto it. Hoping I hadn’t accidentally crushed it or anything, I relaxed my grip slightly, but didn’t untangle my fingers from his. The two boys ahead of us came to a stop and Lexi nearly ran into them, but quickly spun around to see the vehicle approaching. It slowed down significantly before finally rolling to a stop about ten feet away, the loud engine still idling. The doors opened and two figures stepped out. As they closed the doors, I saw that it was two men; one appeared older than the other, with grey stubble, a black

T-shirt that said “Jack Daniels” on it, and a pair of old, stained jeans. The other man was younger, but still roughly about our age, or slightly older, with a clean shaven face, a white undershirt, and a pair of dark jeans. Both men were wearing tan boots and baseball hats, also seemingly stained and worn with age.

“Well, what’s this supposed to be?” the older man asked, his voice thick with some kind of accent that I couldn’t place, but it didn’t entirely sound like what I expected from a Southern drawl. “Field trip from the local day care?”

He laughed at his own joke and adjusted his hat slightly as the other man did something similar. It was beginning to creep me out slightly how much like a miniature version of the older man the younger one was.

“We’re just hiking, came out from the trail and are trying to get back to the main road,” Chase suddenly said, speaking up.

“Did I ask you to speak, boy?” the younger man snapped, jabbing a finger at Chase.

“I was just trying to—”

“What did I just say?!”

“Chase, shut up,” Shawn snapped, glancing back at him and shooting him a hard look.

“Thank you, son,” the older man said. “Some people understand manners, but what can you expect, eh?”

He laughed at himself again, but I noticed that the younger man had his eyes locked on Chase, and judging by how stiff he felt beside me he was meeting it.

“Now, I don’t know if y’all know, but this here is private property,” the older man said, pulling up on his jeans slightly. “Which means no trespassers. We got signs up on that trail, too, so if you was just hiking like ya said, then ya woulda seen them.”

As I thought back, I didn’t remember actually seeing any signs with a notice of No Trespassing, but it was also highly likely that I hadn’t really been paying attention to them, at that point.

“I guess we must have missed them,” Shawn said. “I’m terribly sorry.”

“Got a bit of cheek, son?” he replied, narrowing his eyes slightly. “I don’t appreciate it.”

“Terribly sorry.”

Just then, the younger man whistled between his teeth and two men hopped out of the bed of the truck. A moment later, a loud, mechanical roar came from behind us and I glanced back to see another large truck shoot out from between two of the large, red buildings and come to a stop behind us, three more men hopping out of it, as well. My heart was pounding in my chest as I turned to face forward once again, although I saw Lexi and Maya keeping an eye on the men behind us.

“I don’t think ya quite so sorry,” the older man said. “Now what’n the hell are ya doing here?”

“Like I said—”

“Hey, what’s this feller in the back think he’s doing?”

Just then, something shoved Chase forward and he nearly pulled me forward, as well, but we released our hands at the right moment to avoid it. I spun around to see one of the men from the truck behind us standing about where Chase had been a moment ago.

“Hands off, boy,” he said, glaring at him.

“She’s not yours to tell me what I can or can’t do with,” Chase shot back.

“You let this ‘un right here touch ya?” the man said, turning to me now.

“Yeah,” I said, wishing that I could think of something more biting to say, but the words had trouble coming to me.

“What of it?”

Immediately I regretted saying the last part; not only was it a terrible line, but the look that crossed the man’s face told me that I should have left it alone.

“You done let him?” he said, what could possibly be called an evil grin setting in across his face. “I don’t know if that’s any better.”

“Hey, it’s not your problem,” Chase said, stepping toward me, but the other man slid between us.

“Well, I’m making it my problem,” he said. “So I suggest you take a fucking step back...”

I could almost sense what was about to happen as I saw Chase’s left hand clench into a fist and the man’s grin turned into a smirk.

“...boy.”

Just then, Chase took a swing at the man, but he was apparently ready for it, because he quickly jabbed him in the stomach, causing him to falter slightly. The next second, though, Chase drove his other hand in to the center of the man’s chest and he staggered backwards, letting out a loud grunt as the air burst from his lungs. He stepped forward and brought his hand down on the man’s right shoulder, sending him to the ground as I heard several loud, metallic clicks and my head snapped around to look over at the group of men nearby. One of them was holding a rather large revolver in one hand, while the other was holding a shotgun at the ready. Looking in the other direction confirmed that the younger man and the other two who had hopped out of the truck bed were also holding guns.

“Step the fuck back!” the man with the revolver shouted, moving closer to us.

Chase stared him down for a few moments and I began to worry that he would actually take him on, but thankfully he straightened up and took two steps away from the man, who was just now getting to his feet. His breath was coming in heavy, wheezing rasps as he held one hand to his chest.

“Got a little bite to ya, I see,” he said, spitting off to the side before coughing and running the back of one hand across his mouth. “That boy got a mean hook.”

With that, he glanced back at me, the same evil smirk returning to his face from before.

“He push you around a bit, hun? You like it when he does that?”

“Hey!” Chase barked, moving as if to take a step forward, but a flash of silver to my left told me that the guns were once again fully trained on him.

“I think you should stop asking questions like that about me,” I said quietly, feeling something grow tense in my core, the fingers of my left hand beginning to involuntarily curl into a fist.

“With an attitude like that, I’d say that’s a ‘yes,’” the man said and laughed.

Just then, I burst forward, leaning forward and shoving my shoulder into the side of the man’s ribcage, partially wrapping my



arms around him as I continued to push him forward. He let out a shout in surprise at the hit, but we quickly hit something else rather solid and I finally tumbled forward. At the last second, I let go of the man and tucked my head and shoulders down, landing on top of them and immediately somersaulting over them until I was on my feet, once again. I glanced back to see the man who I had tackled on top of the one with the revolver, both looking incredibly surprised; the man now to my right with the shotgun also appeared rather confused, because the gun was still pointed at the ground, for the moment. Seizing the opportunity, I rushed at him, as well, letting out a shout of rage as he scrambled to lift the gun fast enough, but I hit him before he could. Just as I reached him, I brought my elbow up and drove it firmly into the center of his chest, causing him to let out a loud grunt and nearly drop his weapon. Before he could regain his footing, I swept one foot underneath him, dragging his feet out from under him and sending his body crashing to the pavement.

The shotgun clattered away a foot or two before I scrambled forward, reaching toward it. My fingers curled around the wooden section at the back as I pulled it toward me. Just as I did, I heard the sound of a loud metallic click and spun around, the gun held out in front of me rather haphazardly. The man with the revolver had gotten to his feet and was now standing with his handgun pointed at Chase's head.

"Drop it, girl," he shouted, "or I'm gonna blow his fucking head off."

At that moment, he made the mistake of looking back toward me, and Chase seized the opportunity. He quickly slid forward and grabbed the man's wrist with the gun, twisting it up at a rather sharp angle. A loud crack resounded across the pavement as the man screamed in agony. A second later, Chase had ripped the gun from his hand and was now holding it aimed at the last man, the one who he had thrown to the ground moments ago.

"All y'all, hold it right there!"

The four men from the truck in front of us now had guns drawn, pointing them at our group. The oldest man, the one who had originally done most of the talking, was holding a revolver rather similar to the one Chase now possessed, aiming it directly at

who appeared to be Shawn.

“Now you’re gonna put those weapons down nice and slow-like,” he said, “and maybe we can pretend like this never happened.”

“*Fat chance,*” I thought, still holding the shotgun from my position on the ground.

“I dun know y’all,” he said, “and it’s a small town, so I woulda know ya if ya was from around here. So, I don’t tell nobody, and y’all just walk up on outta here.”

Chase glanced over at me for a second and I could tell he was thinking something similar.

“How are we supposed to believe that?” Shawn demanded.

“I give ya my word as a gentleman.”

“Some word,” Chase muttered, before suddenly aiming the gun down and firing off a round.

The man in front of him screamed as the bullet tore through a kneecap, sending him falling to the ground. Before anyone else could react, Chase spun and tossed the handgun toward Maya. She caught it and, moving faster than I was sure I had ever seen her move, she spun to the side and quickly fired off four rounds in succession. All four men fell to the ground, screaming in pain, but seemingly still alive. After a moment or two, she let her arms fall to her side and stood normally, turning back toward Chase.

“Here, you keep this,” she said, handing it out to him.

“Thanks,” he replied, taking it and nodding before turning back toward me.

The man partially underneath me began to stir as Chase approached, so I quickly delivered a swift elbow to the back of his head, causing him to go limp and lay still. When Chase reached me, he extended a hand and I took it, using him to help pull me to my feet. Once I was standing again, I glanced down at the shotgun in my hand, looking it over for a moment or two.

“This might be a little too big to explain carrying around,” I remarked, looking back up at him.

“True, but it could probably be rather useful,” he said.

“Would it really, though?”

Before he could say anything else, though, I noticed Shawn approaching the older man from the group ahead of us and I put a

hand on Chase's arm to stop him from speaking. He followed my gaze to see what I was staring at so intently. His eyes fell upon Shawn just as he stepped on the man's leg, causing him to scream rather loudly. I pushed Chase slightly as I began to hurry toward the scene. When I approached, I found that his foot was actually pressed against a dark red patch on the man's jeans, most likely where Maya had shot him.

"...you think you're some kind of outlaw justice out here?"

"Shawn, what the hell are you doing?" I said, cutting in on whatever rant he appeared to be on.

"These guys just wanted to shoot us!" he shot back, glancing over at me. "You're concerned with roughing them up a bit?"

"You don't need to torture them!" I spat. "Does that really make you better than them, if you do?"

"This isn't about being better than them—"

"Well, call me insane, but I like being the better person, quite often," I interrupted. "They've already had enough, especially now that you've stomped on what I can only assume is a gunshot wound, there. Let's just take our shit and leave."

Shawn glared at me for a second or two before looking back down at the man on the ground. Finally, he stepped away, but not before pushing down on the wound one last time. I let out a sigh and turned around to survey the rest of the group. Lexi didn't appear too shaken by the whole ordeal, and neither did Maya, for the most part. Damien, on the other hand, was a different story. I could see his hands visibly shaking as he glanced around at the men on the ground.

"Hey, Damien, come on, you're with me," I said, waving to him.

He jumped and looked at me with a confused expression for a second before slowly beginning to walk. Once he had approached, I began to lead him down the paved path toward the truck. The engine appeared to still be idling as we approached and I moved toward the driver's side. When I pulled on the door handle, it swung open freely, so I used the inside of the door itself and the frame on the right hand side to pull myself up and into the interior. A moment later, Damien did the same on the passenger's

side, glancing around the space.

“So, what are we looking for in here?” he asked. “Are we gonna take it?”

“Maybe,” I said, “but first I wanted to talk to you, quickly.”

“Oh?” he replied, looking slightly nervous again.

“I just wanted to make sure you were all right,” I said.

“All right?”

“Yeah,” I replied, nodding. “You seem kind of shaken up.”

“Well, I mean... the house in New York was one thing, but this...”

“What was different?”

After a pause of a second or two, he let out a shaky sigh and ran one hand over his face.

“I really thought we could die for a second, there,” he said.

“Hey, listen,” I said, “we’re all scared about things like that in those moments. It’s not just you. The only difference is how we manage to calm ourselves and maintain control.”

“That sounds easy...” he said slowly, “but I know it’s not.”

“You’re right, it’s not,” I replied, nodding, “but as long as you’re with us, there’s always someone here to help you and look out for you.”

He nodded slowly, a thin smile forming on his lips.

“Thanks, Amaryss,” he said.

I just smiled slightly and nodded in response before looking around the cabin of the truck once again.

“We could take this,” I commented, “but how long do you reckon it would take them to report it stolen?”

Damien glanced back toward the men lying on the ground for a moment or two before looking back over at me.

“Well, they don’t seem to be in any state to start walking anywhere,” he said. “So I’d imagine it would be quite a while.”

I grinned and laughed, glancing around the space once more before carefully climbing out of the truck and hopping to the ground once more. The rest of our group had gathered in a small cluster just past where the men Maya had incapacitated still remained on the ground; several of them seemed to be rather still and quiet, while a few others were still rolling and groaning in pain. I began to walk toward them, glancing back to make sure

Damien was following.

“So, is the truck acceptable?” Lexi asked as I approached.

“Seems fine; just depends on how soon we think one of these guys is going to report it stolen,” I replied.

The group glanced around at the men for a second or two before shrugging almost collectively.

“Probably not very soon,” she said.

“Well, then we should get going so we give ourselves the best chance, then,” I said, clapping my hands together in front of me.

“Are we all cramming into one, or are we taking both?” Shawn asked, gesturing toward the other truck on the other side of the field of bodies.

“That truck can only fit, like, four or maybe five people comfortably,” Damien spoke up.

“And we’ve got six,” he pointed out.

“What about in the bed?” Maya suggested. “Could take turns riding back there.”

“With one of those two driving?” he said, gesturing to me and Lexi. “That sounds like a life experience I could live without.”

“Well, it’s a good thing I was going to offer to take the first ride in the back, then,” I said, putting my hands on my hips and looking over at him with what I hoped was some kind of intimidating glare.

“I’ll ride with her,” Maya said quickly, holding one hand up.

Everyone looked over at her incredulously as her hand slowly sank and fell by her side once again, her eyes flicking around between each member of the group.

“What?”

Lexi started laughing as others began to shake their heads. Maya still looked confused as Shawn walked over and put a hand on her shoulder.

“I’ve known you for longer than them, but even you keep surprising me, nowadays,” he said before letting his hand slide off her and walking toward the truck. “I call shotgun.”

“I guess that leaves me driving,” Lexi said, glancing around at the rest of the group.

Chase simply gestured toward the truck.

“Be my guest.”

She grinned devilishly and began to make her way toward it, as well, a slight skip in her step. Chase and I exchanged looks before moving after the others, matching pace as we drew closer.

“Volunteering to do the risky stuff, now, huh?” he remarked, glancing over at me.

“I volunteered to do the fun thing,” I replied, smirking.

“You get to ride in the nice, enclosed cab with Shawn, Lexi, and Damien.”

“Sounds like such a fun crowd.”

“Well, just make sure Shawn and Lexi don’t make us run off the road,” I said.

“Oh?”

“Make sure the children keep their hands to themselves,” I said exasperatedly, rolling my eyes.

He just laughed but nodded. We had reached the truck by that point, so he reached for the back door to the cab and pulled it open. With one last exchanged smile, he stepped inside as I moved toward the back. Maya had already pulled the tailgate down and was climbing inside. Without thinking, I simply placed my hands on the gate and jumped, pushing down with my hands at the same time. Instantly, I sprung up to almost the same height as the gate, my feet landing easily on it, albeit in a crouched position. I looked up to see Maya watching me with a slightly impressed expression on her face; clearly she had been watching me just then.

“Sweet jump,” she said.

“Thanks,” I muttered, stepping into the main part of the bed and pulling the gate closed behind me.

I made my way toward the back of the cab and took a seat against it, beside Maya. The feeling of my bag finally being off my shoulders felt like a much greater relief than I had expected; evidently the strap had been cutting into my shoulder and pulling on my back more than I had realized. It wasn’t all that heavy, by any means, but apparently it had been just enough. Soon after we had taken our seats, I heard the sound of something sliding and glanced up. Moments later, Chase’s head appeared out of a small window set in the back of the cab, looking down at us.

“Hey, look what I found,” he said.

“Damn, I thought we wouldn’t actually have to deal with any of them back here,” Maya quipped, snapping her fingers.

Chase made a face at her before pulling his head back inside the cab. As soon as he had done so, the engine grew louder and we jerked forward somewhat, the vehicle beginning to set in motion. As we began to turn around, the sensation of sliding to the right began to feel somewhat jarring, since there was nothing to actually hold onto in the back. Just then, I felt Maya bump into me and I glanced over.

“Jesus,” she commented, pushing herself a little ways away, again. “Sorry about that. It’s a little slippery back here.”

“And I thought you just wanted to get closer to me,” I shot back, smirking.

Maya gave me a look and I laughed, pulling my bag into the space between us, which she did, as well, moments later. By now the truck had completely turned around and we were beginning to head down the roadway we had seen it arrive from minutes ago. Almost immediately we were engulfed in the trees, the canopy mostly blocking the sky overhead, but leaving a latticework of shadows and sunlight on everything beneath them.

I leaned my head back against the back of the cab and stared up at the patches of light overhead, watching the leaves and branches shake and sway ever so slightly at the draft from the truck passing by. It almost seemed like this could have just been some kind of lazy spring day in any normal person’s life, except it was February, and we had almost just been killed by a group of men with guns in East Nowhere, Georgia. The truck passed over a particularly large bump and I instantly leaned my head forward to avoid smashing it against the metal behind it. As I began to lean my head back once again, I heard the sound of a zipper beside me and immediately snapped my head to the left, not stopping to think exactly what I might not want to see that could follow that sound. It turned out, however, to only be the sound of Maya opening her bag; she jumped at my sudden motion and stared at me for a second or two before resuming what she was doing, still keeping her eyes on me.

“What?” she said.

“I was just a little nervous when I heard a zipper,” I replied, smirking.

“Oh,” she said, grinning, “don’t worry, I wasn’t that excited that we’re alone.”

I gave her a look and she laughed but finally looked down in her bag. She dug through it for a few more seconds before pulling out her familiar red sweatshirt. My shoulders sagged slightly as I lowered my head, glaring at her with a disappointed look.

“What?” she said, pausing mid-motion.

“Really? The sweatshirt?”

“It’s cold with the wind back here,” she muttered, quickly pushing away from the cab and pulling the hoodie on.

To her credit, she didn’t zip it up, but she still left the sleeves rolled down and crossed her arms across her chest. I shook my head before turning to look over the edge of the truck bed beside me. We were still under the trees, but I had a feeling we were rapidly approaching the edge. A moment later my suspicions were confirmed when the shade disappeared, replaced by blinding sunlight once more. I squinted my eyes slightly against the harsh glare, but continued to survey the area around us.

The roadway led out of the trees and through a rather open area, filled with what looked like brown, dead vegetation. Whatever plants were on either side of us looked like long, brown sticks scattered across the ground, but I knew they must be some kind of plant that just wasn’t entirely in season at this time. I felt myself being pressed up against the cab as I heard the tires begin to slow on the pavement, eventually coming to a stop. Before I could wonder why, the truck lurched forward once again and began to turn to the left. It was my turn to slide across the bed, this time, but the bags between Maya and me prevented the same kind of collision as before. She glanced over at me as I pulled myself back onto my side with help from the edge of the truck bed.

“I guess they worked, huh?” I commented, patting my bag beside me.

She smiled and shrugged, shaking her head slightly in an attempt to get some small strands of hair out of her eyes, but with little success. My hair was beginning to fly around my head



wildly, but I had already resigned myself to the fact that I would be unable to contain it. Despite the thought of that seeming annoying, I actually found the sensation quite enjoyable, the wind blowing through my sweaty, unwashed hair and providing a cool relief across the back of my neck. I closed my eyes and leaned my head back against the wall of the cab once again. Maybe if I didn't have to actually see the world around me, I could pretend that feeling of living a normal life with friends was real, if even for just a moment.

February 3, 2000  
4:23:28 P.M.  
Somewhere in Georgia

I groaned slightly as I carefully lifted my feet off of the dashboard, pushing myself off the seat slightly as I did. My legs felt slightly stiff from staying in the same position, and the upper part of my right leg actually felt slightly numb from sitting on it at a slightly odd angle for so long. Chase had taken over driving the truck a couple of hours ago, which meant that Maya and I had rotated inside the cab of the vehicle, leaving Lexi and Damien in the back. Despite having taken something like a nap when I had been in the back several hours ago, I had found myself falling asleep in the passenger seat shortly after we had resumed driving. No one had attempted to wake me up, however, so I assumed that either no one else cared, or they were all in similar boats.

I yawned and stretched my arms toward the ceiling for a few moments before looking over toward Chase in the driver's seat. His eyes were still fixed on the road, but his elbow was placed on the doorframe, one hand curled into somewhat of a fist and propping his head up with it.

"You've already mastered the art of driving, huh?" I commented, my voice slightly raspy from just waking up.

He glanced over at me before cracking a grin and turning his attention back to the road.

"It's not that hard, really," he said. "Especially out here."  
"Oh?"

“Lots of long, straight roads.”

I nodded, staring out at the patch of it before us, noticing that it was more or less as he had just described. Fields ran along either side with occasional lines of trees that seemed specifically planted to create borders as far as I could see. In the very distance, however, what appeared to be some kind of hills loomed.

“How long was I out?” I asked, glancing back over at Chase.

“At least an hour or so,” he replied. “You looked too peaceful over there to wake.”

“Peaceful? That’s a change,” I quipped, grinning.

He shot me a look and I laughed, shifting my position in my seat once again. As we passed a line of trees, the sun suddenly shown in through the side window, directly into my eyes. I squinted them slightly as I turned my head, trying not to look directly at it. As I turned away, however, I noticed that the entire landscape before us was cast in an orange hue from the setting sun. Something about the scene immediately reminded me of the nights spent out in the Nevada desert all those years ago, and I instantly felt a strange pang in my chest. It seemed so strange to me that I would feel anything remotely like nostalgia for that place, but yet it seemed to have crept up on me, somehow.

“I miss sunsets kind of like this one,” I remarked, still staring out the windshield.

“Is this one different than others?”

I shrugged.

“I don’t know, but it feels kind of like the ones back in Nevada.”

“When was that?”

I grinned slightly and glanced over at Chase.

“When I was a kid, like between when I was eight and twelve years old, I think,” I said.

“Wasn’t all that long ago,” he replied.

“No, maybe not, but it feels like it.”

He just nodded, staring straight ahead out of the windshield. I could almost feel the heat of the desert sunlight on my skin again as I absentmindedly watched the road rolling by underneath us. A few minutes later I felt the truck begin to slow

and I glanced around, seemingly unaware that I had slipped into some kind of strange daze for a while. I looked ahead of us to see a traffic light hanging over an empty intersection, the small red dot shining against the indigo sky behind it. The truck came to a stop just before it as Chase and I looked around. There appeared to be no other cars on any of the other three roads that met at this intersection, so I looked back toward Chase.

“I think we would be fine going through this one,” I said.

“I don’t know, you sure?” he asked. “Seems pretty busy.”

I shot him a look and he laughed, but began to drive forward through the intersection. Just as we were about halfway through it, I heard a loud roar from outside and I caught a glimpse of motion from just outside Chase’s window. The next second I felt myself being violently thrown to the right, smashing my shoulder against the doorframe as I heard the sound of crunching metal. I was vaguely aware of the ground rising up toward the window next to me for a moment or two before the window shattered. My eyes closed instantly to avoid getting shards in them, but I could still feel several small pinpricks on my right arm, where I assumed small shards had grazed me. It took me a minute or so more to realize that the world had stopped spinning and we were, indeed, sitting still.

I turned my head to look toward the driver’s seat and found Chase hanging from his seatbelt above me. After watching him closely for several panicked seconds, I saw his chest rising and falling, and knew he was still breathing. He confirmed that a moment later when he groaned and attempted to sit up straight, but found that it was much harder than he had expected.

“What the hell was that?” he croaked, putting one hand to the left side of his head.

Before I could respond, the sound of something banging on the metal side of our vehicle got my attention. Moments later, I felt the whole truck begin to rock, and before I knew it, we were tipping over. I began to fall out of my seat, but was held fast by the seatbelt. The fabric cut into my shoulder and across my chest, feeling like it was restricting my breathing, but I was grateful that it had prevent me from simply falling onto the roof. The blood rushing to my head caused a dull throbbing in my temples, but I

tried to fight through it as I glanced over toward Chase once again. He was hanging, like me, but was actively searching for the seatbelt release. Just then, I heard the sound of glass crunching and my head whipped around to look out the passenger window.

The first thing I saw when I looked out the hole where the window used to be was a pair of boots right beside me. As I watched, a knee appeared and then a figure came into view, leaning down to look into the car. We locked eyes for a moment before he suddenly reached up toward what I presumed was the door handle. I glanced down toward my lap and frantically reached for the release button. Before I could find it however, I heard him pulling on the door. I expected it to fly open and reveal the man outside reaching in to grab me, or worse put a bullet through my head, but instead the door remained still. It took a second or two for my brain to process why, but I quickly guessed that the door must have been damaged in the rollover and was stuck shut.

Just as I was realizing this, however, I heard the sound of a handle being pulled and a door opening behind me. I tried to turn and see as best I could, but the edges of my vision faded for a moment, causing me to blink rapidly in an attempt to prevent myself from passing out. The sound of someone crying out in surprise and fear instantly sent shivers down my spine and I redoubled my efforts to find the seatbelt release. My fingers came across the top of the button and, without thinking, I pushed it. The next second, I was dumped unceremoniously onto the roof of the truck as I felt pain shoot through my skull. I fought through the pain and managed to contort myself so I was on my hands and knees, barely registering that small shards of glass were littered everywhere.

As soon as I looked toward the back of the truck, I saw the back door on the driver's side had been left standing wide open. I crawled between the seats as quickly as I could, squeezing between the somewhat narrow and awkward gap before gripping the doorframe and using it to help pull me through the open space. My legs felt unsteady as I pulled myself up with help from the door, glancing around. The dull pounding in my temples had turned into stabbing pain, but I forced myself to ignore it. As soon as I had

my bearings, I realized that I could still hear the screaming. My eyes instantly focused on the black SUV roughly ten feet away, the metal pipe-like constructs on the front scratched and dented slightly.

As soon as I caught sight of it, I noticed a group of men in all black clothing apparently struggling with someone. They appeared to attempting to force the person into the back of the SUV, but it was not going exceedingly well. Just then, one of the men moved slightly and I caught sight of who was putting up such a fight. Maya's eyes met mine almost instantly and it felt like time had frozen. I had never seen such fear in someone's eyes, let alone hers, and it made my blood freeze in my veins. Before I knew what I was doing, I found myself running toward them. As I began to close the distance, I saw them finally manage to get Maya at least partway into the vehicle, which only served to redouble my efforts to get to her.

One of the men happened to glance to his left and saw me closing in, so he began to fumble with something on his belt. I could only assume that it was a gun, but that information oddly did not make me falter or slow down in any way. Just as I reached the front of the SUV, I saw the group of men surge forward slightly as I heard a shout from inside the vehicle; I could only assume that they had managed to actually get Maya inside. The man who had begun to reach for his gun was still standing outside, however, his gun half-drawn from the holster. Before he could fully draw it, however, I slammed into him full-force, ramming my shoulder into his and sending him reeling backward. Pain shot from where our bodies had collided, but I ignored it.

As I glanced down, I noticed the gun on the ground between us, still skittering across the pavement. I jumped forward and reached toward it, but something collided with my left wrist and knocked my hands away. White-hot pain shot through my forearm as I landed on the pavement and felt the skin of my elbow scrape across it, slightly. The man had evidently seen my attempt and ran forward, kicking my arm aside with his heavy boot. He appeared to be reeling back to deliver another one, but I quickly rolled across the ground to my left, closer to him. As I passed over where the gun was, I pushed it farther away, distancing it from

both of us. I hit his leg as his foot came through in a strong kick straight to my spine. A cry of pain escaped my lips as I arched my back slightly, bright patches appearing before my eyes.

The man appeared to be preparing another attack, but I heard a strange metallic sound, followed by the rapping of a gunshot. A loud scream came from above me as I felt something hot and wet fall onto my right arm, a few drops landing on my shirt, as well. I rolled away as quickly as I could, managing to move into a crouching position in one smooth motion. My left arm was still sending stabbing pain from the point where the man had kicked it moments ago, and my back most definitely still hurt, but the adrenaline seemed to be taking the edge off of things a bit.

The man who I had attacked was holding one hand to the left side of his chest, blood beginning to seep between his fingers and from underneath his palm. A shout came from my left and I quickly glanced over to see a man climbing out of the driver's seat of the SUV, drawing his pistol as he did. Before he could fully draw it, however, two more gunshots sounded from right behind me and the man jumped back, the bullets puncturing the side of the vehicle right near where he had just been positioned. Instead of drawing his weapon fully, he instead rammed it back into its holster and ducked back into the SUV, slamming the door behind him. The tires screeched as it lurched forward and my heart began to pound in my ears.

"No!" I screamed, bursting into a full-on sprint toward it as the back end swung out to the left slightly, lining the vehicle up with the road heading back where we had come from in our own truck minutes ago.

The back of it was just within inches of my outstretched hand for a moment, but within seconds it was pulling away and getting farther. I slowly came to a stop, staring after the rapidly receding black shape. Almost uncontrollably, my knees gave out and I fell to the asphalt, pain shooting from my kneecaps as they hit the pavement with a decent amount of force. A scream of rage escaped my lips, whatever word I may have thought about yelling nearly indecipherable as I leaned back on my heels, placing my hands to my temples and pressing on them for a moment or two before letting them fall into my lap.

By now, even the sound of the SUV's engine had faded into the distance, and it was all but gone, Maya inside. It took a full ten seconds or so for me to finally find the strength and coordination to rise to my feet once again, but I managed to do so. I turned around, expecting to find Chase holding the pistol that had shot at the men, but to my surprise found Shawn. He had the man who he had shot moments ago held at the end of the barrel, saying something I couldn't hear.

My hands clenched into fists as I ran toward them. Both of them seemed to notice me approaching at the same time, but it was already too late for the man in black. I slowed to a walk as I approached, but it hardly felt as if I had hardly slowed down.

"Where are they going?!" I screamed, grabbing the man and throwing him to the ground.

He let out a cry of pain as he landed on his left shoulder, but it only seemed to fuel the fire burning in my chest.

"Where the fuck are they taking her?!" I asked, somehow finding even more volume for my voice.

The man didn't say anything, so I stepped forward and brought my foot down on the spot where he had been shot with a considerable amount of force. He let out a ragged scream, but I simply pressed harder. I didn't hear anyone else speak, but a moment later I felt something pulling on my right shoulder and I glanced back to see Shawn standing behind me.

"Get off him," he said.

"Why?"

"He can't fucking speak like that!" he said, gesturing toward the man on the ground. "Get off him."

After another second or two, I reluctantly removed my foot and returned my attention to him. A sound somewhere between a wheeze and a whimper escaped his lips as he put one hand to the bullet wound, beginning to roll back and forth slightly on the ground. I moved closer to his head and crouched down beside him, placing my hands on my knees.

"Answer my question," I commanded, my voice quiet but dripping with venom.

He looked over at me for a second or two before clearing his throat. Instead of speaking, however, he spit what looked like

blood at me, but it missed and landed between my feet. I instantly reached forward and grabbed him by his shirt, hauling him into a kneeling position. Before Shawn could stop me, I turned toward him and ripped the pistol from his hand. It was pressed up against the man's right temple before anyone else had even realized I had taken it, my finger held loosely against the trigger.

"Amaryss!"

I ignored Shawn's cry, instead focusing intently on the man in front of me.

"You answer my fucking question or I will redecorate this road with your fucking brain," I said, my voice just above a whisper.

The man's eyes met mine for just a second before they widened slightly, finally noticing whatever must have been burning in them. In all honesty, I couldn't even fathom what it must have looked like from his perspective, but I couldn't back away, now. Finally, he coughed and nodded quickly.

"Just—just back to where the clients paid us to," he said.

"And where is that?"

"I don't—"

"If the rest of that sentence was telling me you didn't know, I would suggest you don't finish it," I said, jamming the barrel of the pistol even harder into his temple.

The man's jaw clenched at the pain from the steel barrel, but he sucked in a breath and attempted to continue.

"I heard something about Detroit."

"Are you sure?" I asked, my voice still quiet, yet entirely menacing.

"That's the only place that I can remember hearing about!"

With that, I nodded slowly, pulling the gun away from his head for a moment, only to swing it in from the side and bash the bottom of the hilt against his skull. The man fell sideways, instantly unconscious, to the pavement and lay still. A long, shaky sigh escaped my lips as I propped my elbows on my knees, my hands hanging between them. Finally, after another second or two, I forced myself into a standing position and slowly turned around.

Shawn was standing behind me, looking down at the man on the ground with his jaw set rather firmly. After a second or



two, he finally turned his attention to me, the look in his eyes almost unreadable. Without a word, I simply held the gun out toward him, barrel pointed down, and he took it. I began to move past him, trying to figure out exactly what it was I wanted to do at that moment; part of me wanted to cry, another wanted to scream, and another wanted to collapse. Just as I began debating which seemed most appropriate and feasible, I noticed Chase standing by the overturned truck. Without stopping to think anymore, I hurried across the open ground and threw my arms around him.

My embrace seemed incredibly tight, but he returned it as best he could. He didn't complain, so I assumed I wasn't accidentally breaking any ribs. After a moment or two, one of his hands slowly moved up so it was resting against the back of my head and I felt his fingers slowly begin to run through my hair in short, repetitive motions. Before I could stop them, sobs began to escape from between my lips as I felt my body begin to shake uncontrollably. His head leaned forward beside mine, his cheek resting against what was almost the actual top of my head.

"I couldn't—couldn't..." I managed, my voice barely under control.

"It's okay," he said quietly, "I saw. You couldn't do anything else."

"Why?"

"Ryss," he said, his voice quiet, but almost directly in my ear, "none of us could have done more."

I wanted to say something else, but all words seemed to be escaping me at the moment.

"Fuck..." I finally managed, unable to think of anything else.

I felt his head lift away from mine and I slowly began to release him from the bear hug I had been holding him in. He took a step back and moved his hands to my upper arms, leaning forward slightly to look me more or less in the eye.

"We'll get her back," he said.

I nodded, wiping hot tears from the inside corners of my eyes. A second later I saw him lean in and I felt his lips press gently against my forehead. My eyes closed for a moment or two until he pulled away and I opened them once again. I happened to

glance past him toward the truck and panic suddenly shot through my chest.

“Chase, the truck...”

“It’s okay, we can—”

“No, Lexi and Damien were in the back.”

We both froze for a moment before he released my arms and we both ran toward the rear end of the overturned vehicle. Almost immediately I spotted a shape in the slight ditch that ran along the side of the road and I ran toward it. As I drew closer I saw what looked like blonde hair just above a dark blue shirt. My legs nearly gave out as I approached and immediately fell to my knees beside the figure. I carefully put a hand on her shoulder and shook her. After a second or two of lying completely still, I saw what looked like motion, and then her head began to lift.

“Lexi...?” I said, my voice cracking slightly.

Her head turned to the right, but her hair entirely covered her face. One hand reached up and brushed it aside as best she could, revealing what lay underneath. One half was covered in dirt, but I didn’t see any large gashes or really even any blood running down it; the other half of her face seemed almost entirely untouched.

“Ow,” she finally said, her voice raspy.

I let out a sigh of relief and rested back on my heels, running both hands through my hair. Lexi slowly rolled over and let out a groan, arching her back for a moment or two before attempting to sit up.

“Are you sure you’re okay to do that?” I asked.

“I’m banged up and just about everything kind of hurts,” she said, “but I don’t think anything’s broken.”

That seemed surprising, but she managed to push herself into a sitting position with only minor groans of pain, and no apparent outbursts that I would have expected if something had actually been broken. Once she was sitting up, she let out a heavy sigh and glanced around the area.

“What the hell happened?” she asked, finally turning her attention to me.

“Those guys who were after us in New York rammed us, flipped the truck,” I said.

“Well, that would explain the memory of flying through the air,” she said.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” I asked, concern still lacing my tone.

“Yeah. Like I said, banged up, but not broken,” she said. “Help me get up, though?”

I rose to my feet and extended a hand down toward her, which she took and immediately pulled on me to help get to her feet. A moment later, she was upright and twisting her torso back and forth slightly, as if stretching out. I could more clearly make out the dirty half of her face, and it made me even more curious how she appeared to be relatively unscathed by the entire incident. Before I could ask anything else, however, she let out another groan and looked over at me.

“Where’s Damien?”

I looked around the area for Chase, hoping that maybe he had found him while I had been preoccupied with Lexi. Neither of the boys was visible, however, so I began to walk back toward the truck without saying anything. I could sense, more or less, that she was following after me as I approached the edge of the overturned vehicle and glanced around the driver’s side. Seeing no one, I turned back around to face Lexi, who had stopped several feet behind me.

“Chase?” I called, looking around the area, as if expecting him to suddenly pop up from behind something.

Just as I was beginning to berate myself for such a ridiculous notion, his head and shoulders suddenly appeared above a row of bushes just off the side of the road. I jumped slightly but quickly regained my composure as I tapped Lexi on the shoulder and began to walk toward him.

“Did you find Damien?” I asked.

“Yeah, but...” he called back, his voice trailing off.

Lexi and I suddenly began running toward the bushes where we could see Chase, only coming to a stop once we had reached them. I carefully negotiated my way through a small gap between two of them, presumably where Chase had also passed through, and stepped out on the other side to find what Chase had meant by his last “but.” Damien was lying on his back, one arm

awkwardly positioned across his chest while he lay entirely motionless. His skin seemed even paler than I remembered, and I could see at least several places where scratches were slowly oozing blood. Moments later, Lexi made her way through the row of bushes and came to a stop beside me.

“Jesus Christ...” she muttered, putting one hand to her mouth. “Is he—alive?”

“Just barely,” Chase replied, shaking his head as he took a seat on the ground beside Damien, his back toward the bushes. “That pulse is, like, one every thirty seconds, that shoulder is definitely dislocated, and he’s probably got at least a few broken ribs or something.”

Just then, he seemed to notice Lexi standing beside me and his face contorted into a look of confusion.

“Wait, you were in the back of the truck, too,” he said. “How in the hell are you standing and walking around right now?”

I turned to Lexi, also curious to hear her answer. She looked between the two of us, her eyes clearly betraying her fear, but I had no idea what exactly was causing it. I had seen something that morning in the shower, besides the wings, that I had wondered about ever since, but I wanted to hear her say something about it.

“Lexi...”

Finally, she sighed and ran her hands through her hair, looking down at the ground in front of her.

“I think I can... somehow heal faster... than normal,” she said slowly, pausing every few words, as if to collect herself once again.

Chase and I remained silent for a few more seconds before he spoke up once again.

“What do you mean faster than normal?” he asked. “And heal how?”

“Like, any way!” she said, throwing her hands in the air. “Cuts, bumps... broken bones, apparently.”

Now it was my turn to look confused.

“So... there’s no way you actually just got a little banged up in that crash,” I said quietly, watching her eyes.

The same kind of fear appeared in them for a moment

before instantly disappearing, replaced with something like defeat.

“When I came to in that ditch, I couldn’t feel my left arm, and when I tried to move, my shoulder felt like it was on fire, as did this whole side of my face,” she began, gesturing to the half covered in dirt. “All of the sudden I just felt this... calmness... I don’t know how to explain it. A few minutes later, though, it just kind of... disappeared, and then Amaryss was shaking me and I found that all of that pain was gone and I could feel my arm again.”

“So, you’re saying that you messed up your arm and it was just... fine in a couple of minutes?” Chase clarified, looking at her with an incredulous expression on his face.

“Apparently!” she said. “It’s not all messed up now, is it?”

“So that is what I saw in the shower back in New York,” I remarked, nodding slowly.

“Uh... did I miss something?” Chase said, suddenly appearing much more interested as he sat up straight.

“Don’t get too excited,” I replied, shooting him a look.

“Yeah, I guess,” Lexi replied, her tone exasperated and her shoulders slumped.

“Okay, we can come back to this later,” I said, cutting Chase off before any further discussion could occur, “but for now we need to figure out what to do with Damien.”

The other two looked down at him once again, almost as if they had forgotten he was even there. Finally, Chase let out a sigh and rubbed his eyes with one hand.

“I think we might have to leave him be,” he said.

“Are you serious?!” Lexi blurted, taking me by surprise.

“Look at him!” Chase shouted, jumping to his feet. “He’s barely hanging in there now, his arm is, at the very least, dislocated, and he just looks white as a sheet.”

“We aren’t just going to leave him alone until he dies!”

“What else can we do?”

“We can at least try to help him!”

“How?” Chase snapped, stepping closer to Lexi, suddenly. “We don’t have a car to drive him to a hospital, and we’re in the middle of nowhere. We don’t even know if moving him could mess him up even more.”

“So maybe I can help, then,” she said.

Chase appeared about to argue another point, but froze with his mouth open, the words halted before they could fully form. The look of confusion on his face was quite clear as he stared her down, slowly closing his mouth. Lexi was looking down at Damien, her expression almost unreadable, one hand absentmindedly rubbing and twisting a particular spot on the hem of her shirt.

“Do you think... you think you can ‘heal’ him, too?” I asked, my voice much weaker than I had expected, barely rising above a whisper.

“I can try,” she said, looking over toward me. “I mean... what else can we do?”

I stared back into her green eyes for a moment or two, seemingly unable to look away. The pain and concern I could see in them cut through me like I was made of paper and I felt a strange pang in my chest and I swallowed nervously.

“Yeah, why not,” I said.

Chase said nothing, but stepped away slightly, giving her room to step up next to Damien. She knelt down beside him, nervously brushing some of her hair back behind one ear. Her hands tentatively reached toward him, the seconds ticking by incredibly slowly as I watched her hand slowly come to rest on his shoulder. He didn’t react to her touch, which immediately set off warning bells in my head, but I let her continue. Her hand sat on his shoulder for a second or two before she carefully moved it down and laid it on the bare skin of his upper arm, finally sliding her fingers up underneath the sleeve of his T-shirt.

After another second or two, she took a deep breath and stared down at him. The three of us remained entirely still as we waited for something to happen. The only sound I could hear was the wind in the leaves and branches of the bushes to our right and my own pounding heartbeat. After a few moments, Lexi let out a heavy sigh and slumped her shoulders, her hand slowly sliding off of Damien’s arm and falling to her side. Her head leaned forward, her chin almost touching her chest, as I saw her shoulders begin to shake slightly.

“Lexi...”

She suddenly let out a cry of anguish and leaned forward, resting her forehead to Damien's chest. I quickly slid up beside her and knelt down to her level. I could feel her entire body shaking under my hand as I placed it in the center of her back. She jumped slightly at the touch and glanced back; upon seeing who it was, she suddenly sat up and threw her arms around me, her grip much tighter than I had anticipated. I returned the embrace, but with slightly less fervor. Her chest heaved and shook against mine as I heard her attempting to fight back the sobs.

"I can't do anything..." she finally said, her voice at a whispering volume, but clear to me as her head was right beside mine.

"None of us can," I said, "but at least you had the best chance to try."

"How is it fair?"

"What do you mean?"

"I can heal myself and live through that crash, but I can't help anyone else."

I didn't say anything, I simply shifted my arms slightly and held her a little tighter. After another ten seconds or so, Lexi finally began to release me, and I pulled my arms from around her. She backed away a little bit, wiping at her eyes with the heels of her hands. I put one hand on her shoulder and she turned her attention back to me, letting her hands fall into her lap.

"We'll all get through this," I said.

"We didn't, Amaryss..."

I gripped her shoulder slightly tighter, but not enough to attempt to hurt her.

"I know, but we can't shut down," I said.

"Why not?"

"Because they have Maya."

It took Lexi a second or two to process what I had said, but when she had, her eyes widened and she quickly staggered to her feet.

"What?!"

"The guys who rammed us, they took Maya," I said again, rising to my feet, as well.

"Where?"

“One of them told us Detroit.”

“Can we trust that?”

“It’s the only thing we have, right now,” I replied.

Lexi stomped one foot, turning and pacing a few steps away before turning on the toes of the same one to face us once again.

“So, how are we getting there?”

Chase and I laughed quietly as I shook my head, shoving my hands in my jeans’ pockets. The three of us fell silent as our gazes kept shifting from one person to the other. No one seemed to have a solution or suggestion. Finally, I heard Chase let out a sigh and I turned my attention back to him.

“How are we bringing him somewhere?” he asked, gesturing to Damien. “We can’t just leave him out here.”

“Well, we don’t have a car, anymore…” I pointed out. “Could we carry him somehow?”

“Maybe one of you two, could,” Lexi said, letting out a short laugh.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Chase shot back defensively.

“I remember the gate back in Arizona,” she said, “and just now, Amaryss, there was something to that grip of yours.”

Confusion must have clearly etched into my face as I looked over at her, because she smirked slightly.

“Come on, I told you guys about my freaky special ability,” she said, “what about a little open sharing?”

“You didn’t tell all of it,” I shot back.

Immediately, Lexi shot me a look like a dagger to the chest, but I simply smirked in return. If she was going to try to play a game, I could sure as hell play back.

“There’s more?” Chase asked, raising one eyebrow slightly.

“Maybe I’ll share after one of you two,” she said.

“Fine.”

Chase’s sudden willingness surprised me, but Lexi’s and my attentions were immediately on him.

“I don’t really know,” he said, “but I guess I seem a bit stronger than someone like me should be.”



A brief period of awkward silence followed his statement as he simply stared right back at Lexi. Part of me wondered if he was simply trying to play at her game, but another part wondered why he wouldn't look at me.

"Me too," I spoke up, causing the two of them to immediately redirect their stares. "You guys saw me with the whole hearing thing, too. So yeah, there's something there, I guess."

After another second or two of silence, Lexi nodded and cleared her throat. Suddenly, she turned her back to us and began to pull up her shirt. Chase looked incredibly confused, but I knew what was coming. The next second, her two large wings extended out from her back, opening to either side of her. The last time I had seen them, we had been standing in a cramped shower, so I hadn't really had a chance to fully see just how big they were; as they looked now, they appeared to stretch out a good five or six feet, at least, to either side of her. Also, now that they were no longer wet, or soaked in blood, I could see that they actually appeared to be a very dark brown color, bordering on black, almost, although there appeared to be some feathers running down the center of them that had a lighter, almost golden hue.

"I can't say I was expecting that," Chase remarked. "How long have you been hiding those?"

"Just since New York," she said. "God, I didn't realize how much they were killing me all folded up this time."

Chase and I exchanged looks as we both grinned. Lexi glanced over her shoulder slightly to look back at us and made a face at our apparent amusement.

"If I could turn around without it being super awkward right now I would so give you shit," she said.

"It's okay, I think you could still do that just fine with your back turned," he remarked. "It's like your third special ability."

"What in the hell is going on over here?"

Lexi's head instantly snapped around to look forward as Shawn appeared over the top of the row of bushes, looking confused. Almost instantly he seemed to notice Lexi because his eyes widened slightly and he raised one eyebrow. She let out a shriek and spun to the side, crossing her arms across her chest as

she bent forward somewhat, attempting to face away from Chase and Shawn, I assumed.

“I can’t say that’s what I expected to see over here,” he said, “on two accounts.”

“Goddammit, Shawn!” she shouted, glancing over her shoulder.

“Well, when none of you came back after a minute or two, I thought I’d make sure that everyone hadn’t run away,” he said, “but evidently it’s... some kind of show and tell time?”

Lexi let out a growl in frustration, looking down at the ground for a moment or two before standing up straight, keeping her arms crossed across her chest.

“Well, now you’ve seen what everyone else has,” she said.

“You regularly go lifting up your shirt for people?”

“You know what I’m talking about!”

The mischievous grin on his face told me that he was aware of what she meant, but, of course, he said nothing.

“So now everyone knows how messed up Lexi is,” she said, letting out a heavy sigh and leaning her head forward, letting her hair cascade around it and presumably block her view.

“Messed up?” Chase spoke up, surprising me slightly. “We just all admitted that we had something abnormal going on with us...”

“Well, that doesn’t make all of us necessarily less messed up,” she said. “Besides, no one can easily see whatever’s going on with you guys.”

“You mean, like the whole couple thing? Because, that’s pretty obv—”

“No, not that!” I interrupted, letting out a sigh in exasperation. “Like... her wings, kind of thing... you know?”

He looked at me with a rather confused expression for several seconds before he finally seemed to grasp what I actually meant and he lifted his head slightly.

“Oh...” he said, glancing back and forth between Chase and me, pointing his finger, as well. “You two have them, as well?”

“Wings? No,” Chase said. “But something.”

“Define ‘something.’”

“I feel like I’m stronger and faster than I should be for doing nothing to work on that,” I spoke up, “and I can also, like, see in the dark pretty well and hear shit from really far away.”

Shawn’s expression didn’t seem to change, but he turned his attention to Chase.

“And you?”

“I hauled that gate out of the way when I probably shouldn’t have been able to,” he said.

“So... like, man of steel kind of thing?”

Chase simply shrugged, crossing his arms across his chest. Shawn simply nodded slowly before suddenly jumping in surprise and looking rather alarmed.

“Jesus, is he okay?”

I followed his gaze and realized that he had just noticed Damien on the ground between Chase and me. A heavy sigh escaped my lips as I massaged my right temple slowly.

“No, I don’t think so.”

It took Shawn a second or two to register what I had just said, but when he had, he began to shake his head and I saw his hands repeatedly clenching into fists and relaxing.

“You’re not saying what I think you just said,” he said, speaking quietly and still staring down at Damien.

“She is,” Chase stepped in.

Shawn shook his head again as he began to turn to his right. A moment later, he lashed out and kicked the nearest bush, a cry of rage escaping from his throat. He continued to kick and swipe at the bush, muttering and grunting what sounded like gibberish as he did.

“Shawn...”

“Goddammit, he was just a fucking kid!” he snapped, turning to face us and ceasing his assault on the helpless bush.

“What do you mean?” I said. “We all kind of are...”

“No, we’re not,” he said, “not like him.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” Lexi shot back, her tone somewhere between frustrated and accusatory.

“He’s fifteen for Christ’s sake!”

Ice instantly poured through my veins as I turned to look down at Damien’s form once again. I had always assumed he was

at least somewhat younger than me, but now that Shawn had said it, I began to notice how true it seemed. His face still had remnants of a certain kind of boyish roundness, while his thin frame suddenly seemed less wiry and more child-like. The way he spoke and seemed so nervous... how he seemed to look to us for everything... Goddammit, how could I have never noticed?

“Don’t tell me you didn’t notice,” Shawn snapped.

I glanced back in his direction and realized that he was looking directly at me.

“Do you mean me?” I said, pointing to my chest.

“Yes, you, Amaryss,” he said, “mother goose.”

“What?!” I said, my tone incredulous as I let my hand fall to my side.

“The way you treated him,” he said, “he was like a little brother to you, at least.”

“Are you accusing me of something?”

“You don’t look all that broken up by what happened,” he snapped.

“Don’t you dare!” I shouted, taking several hostile steps forward. “I just found out I lost someone close to me, and let another get taken away, on top of almost getting killed myself. They were both people I said I would protect...”

My voice was beginning to crack, but I forced myself to continue anyway.

“...and now you’re standing here telling me that I don’t seem all that affected? That I don’t care? You’re not inside my head, Shawn, so don’t you fucking tell me how to act.”

I could feel hot tears burning at the corners of my eyes and I fought to hold them back as best I could. If they started now, I didn’t know how I’d get them to stop. Luckily, they didn’t manage to escape and I quickly wiped them away with the back of my hand. By now, I noticed that Lexi had closed her wings and was standing normally, finally turned around to face all of us. Shawn was still staring me down, but his expression seemed less hostile. I could almost feel Chase’s presence off to my left; it was almost like I could feel that he wanted to step in next to me and do something, and part of me wished he would step over and comfort me, somehow. Apparently, it was more than just a wish, because

the next second I heard footsteps to my left and then a pair of arms began to extend around me. As they did, I suddenly felt my knees go weak and I began to drop, but Chase stayed with me.

I would have normally felt incredibly embarrassed, but I felt like I couldn't even begin to muster the strength to stand, so I simply let myself sink to the ground, turning my head to press my face up against Chase's chest. My arms slowly slid around him, underneath his as I felt my entire body begin to shake, again. Finally, the tears seemed to break free and I felt them burning as they seeped past my eyelashes and attempted to run down my cheeks, but they were blocked by Chase's shirt.

A few moments later, I heard someone approaching and felt a presence beside us. A second or two later, I felt another arm wrap behind my back and saw one around Chase's, as well. I didn't have to look back to know who it was, the light touch of the long hair touching my shoulder told me it was Lexi; I felt her head lean forward and rest against my right shoulder lightly, but I didn't attempt to move away. After what felt like several long minutes, but was most likely only several seconds, I heard someone else approaching and assumed it was Shawn. A moment later, I vaguely noticed his shape kneeling down to my right, about halfway between me and Lexi and Chase. His arms extended around Chase's and Lexi's backs slightly as he completed the last part of our strange puzzle.

We remained in our awkward huddle for quite a while, the entire time fighting to control the tremors that seemed to be attempting to rattle me to pieces. Somehow, the presence of the others so close seemed to slowly suppress them until I had finally regained control of my own body. I began to lift my head, which seemed to prompt the others to slowly disentangle themselves from the pile. Once Lexi and Shawn had peeled away, I felt Chase's arms slowly begin to slide from around me, his hands coming to rest on my upper arms.

"Are you going to be okay to stand, now?" he asked.

I laughed and looked down at the ground for a moment, shaking my head.

"I should be fine," I replied, looking back up at him, "but thanks for asking."

He grinned and let his hands fall away from me, pushing back slightly and rising to his feet. I followed suit, my legs finally feeling as if they had regained their normal strength. When we had all gotten to our feet once again, our attentions were once again drawn to Damien's body.

"So, what are we going to do with him?" Lexi asked.

"Could we bring him to a hospital?"

"Three people bringing a dead body into a hospital and not being able to explain how he died?" Chase said. "That seems like pretty good grounds to arrest us."

Everyone fell silent once again for several excruciating seconds before I cleared my throat.

"I think we could at least bury him."

Silence followed my suggestion, and I began to wonder if someone was about to start shouting again, but no such thing came.

"I think we could at least owe him that."

I turned to look over at Shawn to see him looking back at me. Our eyes met for a moment before we both nodded.

"Okay, so let's get to it."

## 21

### Dirt to Dirt

February 3, 2000  
6:48:54 P.M.  
Somewhere in Georgia

It wasn't pretty, or fancy, or anything truly special: it was a mound of dirt off the side of the road in the middle of nowhere in Georgia, but it was the best we could do. The four of us stood around the grave, looking down at it in silence. It had taken forever to actually dig the hole, seeing as we had no real tools to dig with, so we had to resort to using our hands and any other means necessary. I glanced down at mine to see my fingers coated in a dark brown layer of dirt, the grains worked under my fingernails and into the small creases and crevasses on my fingers.

"I'm sorry," Shawn suddenly said, surprising me.

He remained silent for a moment or two afterward, and I began to wonder just who he was apologizing to, but he continued on and answered my question.

"I'm sorry that we have to part like this, Damien," he said. "I had hoped it would have been when we figured all of our lives out and we found where we belonged."

After a moment or two of silence, I cleared my throat and prepared myself to speak.

"I'm sorry, too," I said, "for dragging you into this, only to... to bring you this far for nothing."

My voice had begun to waver slightly, so I stopped and closed my eyes, taking a deep breath.

"I told you just a couple of hours ago that if you were with us, there would always be someone to help you and look out for you... and apparently that wasn't enough... or true."

I felt a hand on my back and I thought it was Chase at first, but I realized that it had come from the right, and I glanced over to see Lexi was the one on that side. She looked over at me and smiled weakly, her lips pulling back into a thin line.

"We can't just stay here forever," Chase suddenly said,

bringing my attention to him. “We’ve got another one of ours out there, without us.”

I slowly nodded in agreement, presuming that the other two were doing something similar.

“So, let’s go get her back,” Shawn finally said. “Looks like we’re taking a trip up to Detroit.”

“Gonna be a long walk,” Chase remarked.

We all laughed, but it sounded almost half-hearted. I glanced around at our group, suddenly noticing the similarities between all four of us: the same tired look in our eyes, the hanging shoulders, the dirt caked hands and knees, the stretched smiles; we almost looked like skeletons compared to the memories of Arizona.

“We walked part of the way to Georgia,” I pointed out. “We’ve figured out ways, before.”

“That we have,” Shawn said, nodding.

“It’s all just... one big, fucked up adventure, huh?” Lexi commented, smirking.

“Worst road trip, ever,” I said.

We all laughed, this time genuinely. I could finally see the spark in the other three’s eyes, and feel it in my own. Finally, we calmed down and I let out a heavy sigh, giving one last glance to Damien’s grave before turning away and beginning to walk back toward the road. The others slowly fell in behind me, forming a slow march back to the asphalt. Once I stepped onto the black surface, I turned around to face them. Chase was the one closest behind me, followed a foot or two behind by Lexi, and then Shawn.

“So, what do we do about the prisoner?” I asked, nodding in the general direction of the unconscious man from the SUV.

“Leave him,” Shawn said, shrugging.

“Just like that?”

“What use is he going to serve us anymore?”

“Maybe where exactly in Detroit we’re going?”

“You think he knows?”

“I think he has a better chance of knowing than we do,” I shot back.

Shawn looked over at the unconscious body across the



roadway, seeming to contemplate him for several moments. Finally, he sighed and shook his head.

“Well, you knocked him out,” he said, “so do you really feel like carrying him? Or are we just going to sit around here and wait until he wakes up?”

When he put it that way, he had a point. I, for one, did not find the idea of dragging an unconscious man around until he woke up; he may not have the best reaction to finding himself in our company, when he did, either. However, we still only had a vague idea of where we were going, with just a city name to go off of.

“I sense hesitation,” Shawn said, giving me a strange look.

“I really wish we knew more than just ‘Detroit,’” I finally said, “but I don’t particularly want to lug him around or wait here.”

“Well, there really isn’t a middle ground, here,” Lexi said, “unfortunately.”

I began to bite my lower lip slightly as I glanced back toward the dark, unconscious form near the wrecked truck.

“We still have the list of names and all that, right?” I asked.

“I think so, why?” Chase replied.

“Well, if we found stuff about New York through that, maybe it has something on Detroit.”

Silence followed my idea for a few moments before Chase suddenly walked by me, pulling on my arm slightly.

“Come on, I think it was in my bag, in the truck,” he said.

“Oh, yeah, we should probably get our shit out of the truck, huh?” Shawn commented.

I smirked as I followed Chase, drawing closer to the red, dented, upside down vehicle. When we reached it, I moved around to the open door on the driver’s side where I had exited and glanced around the inside. No bags were sitting on the ceiling, but I happened to glance up and saw one stuck under one of the front seats. I reached up and grabbed hold, pulling on it with a good deal of strength. After only a second or two, it came loose and I staggered backward slightly, taking care not to accidentally throw it to the ground. It clearly wasn’t mine, but I didn’t recognize whose it was, either. I turned around to face the others and held it up.

“Is this anyone’s bag?”

They all looked at it for a few seconds before shaking their heads. I slowly lowered it, glancing down at the blue fabric. It had to be Maya's, since Damien didn't have a bag, but that didn't mean it was any easier to check. With a heavy sigh, I carefully unzipped the top and glanced inside. Almost immediately, I saw the familiar dark blue shirt with the colorful white, red, and pink design on the front that I had seen Maya wearing the first time I had met her. I zipped the bag up quickly and pushed it away a foot or two, closing my eyes and looking down at the ground.

"It's Maya's, right?"

I opened my eyes and looked up to see Lexi standing by the bag, looking over at me. With a heavy sigh, I nodded. She didn't say anything, but stared down at it for a moment or two. Finally, she turned away and began walking around the back of the truck.

"How far do you guys bet my bag got thrown?" she called.

"I don't know, start walking and let us know when you see it," Shawn called back.

"Super insightful!"

I shook my head as I began to head around the front of the vehicle, only to find Chase just in front of it. He was looking around the area just off the side of the road, a slight frown set into his face.

"What's the look for?" I asked, nudging him lightly with my elbow.

"Trying to figure out where the hell are bags ended up," he said. "I mean, it's not like they should have gone far. We were inside the cab of the truck and our bags were with us."

"Yeah..." I said, trailing off as I found myself biting my lower lip again and forced myself to stop. "Well, remember we flipped onto the side first..."

With that, I suddenly spun around and crouched down just under the hood. I scanned the ground near the top of the cab for a few moments before I finally spotted something. Just above the windshield on the driver's side, a small black strip of fabric seemed to protrude from under the body of the vehicle.

"Are you down there because you think the truck is on top of them?" Chase asked, a hint of a groan in his voice.

"Well, I think I'm right," I said, standing up and turning to

face him. "I think this is on top of them."

"Just when I thought this couldn't get any better..." he muttered.

"Hey, you know what," I said, "why don't you put some of that super-strength to use and help me move this thing, huh?"

He gave me a look and I simply smiled in return. After a few seconds, he let out a sigh and threw his hands in the air.

"How can I resist a corny smile like that?"

I punched him in the shoulder as he laughed but began to lead the way back around the side of the truck. Once we were standing beside the cab, I glanced over at him.

"Ready?"

He nodded and we placed our hands on the side of the vehicle, the metal not quite as cold as I had expected. I tensed my arms and braced my feet as best I could on the asphalt as I heard Chase begin to count down under his breath.

"Three... two... one..."

With a final grunt, we both pushed forward on the vehicle. At first, it rocked slightly but seemed as if it wasn't going to roll at all, but as we kept at it, I began to feel it give. The edge of the roof began to lift up as I shifted my hands' position slightly and tried to push more with my legs. Finally, the sound of groaning metal told me that we were actually beginning to make headway. The next moment, I felt the truck begin to roll away from me, gravity pulling it on its own. Chase and I gave one final push and the truck finally rolled onto its side with a loud crash. The vehicle wobbled slightly on its side before suddenly tipping away from us once again, rolling all the way onto its wheels, once again. I jumped slightly at the sound of the suspension shrieking in protest at the landing, but quickly recovered as Chase and I exchanged glances, grins beginning to pull at our faces. A moment later, we burst out laughing.

"Jesus, take it easy over there, super twins!" Shawn called, looking between the truck and us.

I raised my hand and Chase gave me a rather vigorous high-five, causing me to shake it slightly against the stinging pain that followed. When I looked back where the truck had been moments ago, I immediately spotted what the strap I had seen

earlier was attached to: my bag. At this point, however, it was much flatter than I remembered. Luckily, there were no fragile, non-clothing items in there, from what I could remember.

“Well, I guess that’s one way of straightening out your clothes,” I remarked, pulling the bag off of the asphalt.

After roughly a minute of attempting to reanimate my bag, I managed to get it to a point where I could unzip it and look inside. As predicted, there were only clothes in it; they were slightly wrinkled and out of shape, but nothing had really been destroyed. Chase was looking through his, as well, at the moment. He rummaged around inside it for a little while longer before suddenly looking triumphant and pulling something out; in his hand were a few pieces of paper.

“Got the list,” he said, grinning.

“Good, now let’s see if we see anything about Detroit on there,” I said, dropping my bag on the ground again and holding out my hand for one of the papers.

He passed me two sheets and I quickly began to scan the columns for city names. Once I found the list of locations, I quickly began to make my way down the column, stopping any time I saw a word beginning with the letter D.

“There’s a few Denvers on here,” I said.

“Not the same as Detroit.”

“I know that!” I shot back, giving Chase an exasperated look.

Having found no mention of Detroit on the first page, I flipped to the second and began the same process. Once I reached the bottom of that list, however, I still had not seen any mention of the city. I let out a growl of frustration and looked up at Chase.

“Please tell me you had better luck,” I said.

“So far, not so,” he replied.

I groaned and looked down at the papers in my hands once again. They were rather wrinkled from being crushed in the bag, but they were still readable; yet, I had found nothing about Detroit. Just as I was about to count our search as useless, I remembered that there must have been more than the four or so pages we were both holding at the moment.

“Chase, this isn’t the full list,” I said, holding up the papers

toward him.

He looked at me blankly for a second before his eyes widened and he dug back into his bag. Moments later, he produced another several pages of paper, holding them out to me.

“Look at that, Ryss’s got a mind like a steel trap,” he said, grinning.

“Or something like that,” I replied, already beginning to scan the pages.

The first page proved to be fruitless yet again, however, as soon as I flipped to the second, I instantly saw the entries for Michigan, followed soon after by several with addresses in Detroit.

“Got it! I think...”

Chase looked away from the stack he was holding and leaned in slightly to see what I had found. After reading the addresses, he made a “huh” sound and leaned back slightly.

“Remember with Shawn?”

“What about it?”

“The address on that sheet isn’t necessarily Jared’s facility, but where those people are from, so they might just be hospitals.”

“Well, it’s a start,” I offered.

Just then, I heard something behind us and immediately spun around. There was no immediate threat, but it took my several seconds to realize where the sound had come from: the unconscious man from the group that had taken Maya. I hurried over to his body and came to a stop, looking down at him for a second or two before he stirred and groaned once again.

“He’s awake!” I shouted, glancing over my shoulder for a second.

Footsteps hurried over to me as I looked back down at the man and stepped over him. I crouched in front of him as he began to move more, his eyelids beginning to drift open. After several seconds, his eyes were open, but they did not seem as if he was comprehending what was before him. Moments later, however, reality seemed to kick in and he jumped, trying to move away. As he tried to slide backward, however, he ran into Chase and let out a strange, groggy shout.

“Listen,” I said, reaching forward and putting a hand on his shoulder, “there’s one more thing we need to know, and then that’s

it.”

“Before... you kill me?” he managed, his voice deep and raspy as he was just beginning to become fully awake.

“No one said anything about killing,” I replied, my voice still rather calm and quiet. “We just need an address for wherever you were heading in Detroit.”

He stared at me for several seconds before shaking his head and spitting out what looked like blood on the asphalt in front of me.

“Fuck that,” he said, “once I tell you, I’m no good to you anymore.”

“And you can get on your merry way, and we go on ours,” I replied. “Or you can refuse to tell us and we’ll just get right to whatever is in your worst imagination.”

He simply stared back at me for several long, silent seconds, before I sighed and put one knee down, leaning in slightly closer to him.

“What—is—the address?” I said, speaking slowly and quietly.

After another second or two of no response, I looked up at Chase and shrugged my shoulders. He suddenly reached down toward the man and grabbed his arm, pulling it up and behind him. A cry of pain escaped his lips, quickly followed by a loud popping sound, which only caused him to grow louder.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” he shrieked.

“Tell me the goddamn address!” I shouted back, moving even closer to him.

“Let go of me!”

“Only if you tell.”

“Fine, fine!”

I nodded to Chase and he let go of the man’s arm. He rolled forward slightly, making a sound that could almost be called a whimper. Finally, he lifted his head slightly and looked over at me once again.

“2156 Franklin Street,” he managed. “Warehouse district.”

“Now that was easy,” I said, standing up and looking around at the others.

Before any of us could say anything, Shawn suddenly

pulled the pistol from somewhere and aimed it at the man.

“Wait—!”

The gun fired with a loud rapping and I jumped back, immediately putting my hands over my ears. I could hear a ringing sound rather clearly as I turned back to face Shawn once again. Glancing down at the man on the ground told me that the bullet had done its job.

“What the hell is your problem?!” I shouted, pulling my hands away from my ears and glaring at Shawn.

“I was taking care of a problem before it became one,” he said.

“You just said to leave him here a few minutes ago!” I shot back.

“That was before he gave up an address and Chase damn near ripped his arm off.”

I ground my teeth, but ultimately held my tongue. Finally, I sighed and began to turn away from him.

“Let’s make sure we just have everyone’s things and we can start heading out.”

We found Shawn’s bag right near Chase’s and mine, but it took us another ten minutes or so to finally locate Lexi’s. Chase finally found it half in one of the bushes near the row where we had found Damien. He brought it back to the rest of us, holding it above his head.

“Finally!” Lexi said, rushing forward and taking it from him. “I was beginning to worry I’d have to wear the same clothes forever, or worse, borrow from Amaryss.”

“Hey!” I shot back. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

She gave me an impish grin and I shook my head, rolling my eyes as I did.

“Well, now can we finally get going?” I asked.

“Someone’s bound to come by eventually and this doesn’t look like too good of a sight, to be honest.”

I gestured to the entire scene of the crash, now complete with a dead body, as the others glanced around, as well. Nods came in from all around, so we shouldered our bags and began to walk down the road, heading in the direction the SUV had escaped. As we passed the point where we had buried Damien, all of us

gave one last glance toward the side of the road. The actual grave was hidden from plain sight on the road, but we all knew exactly where it was.

“Peace, man,” Shawn said, waving to the spot.

The rest of us laughed halfheartedly and I glanced over one last time, a weak smile pulling at the corners of my lips.

“Peace...” I muttered under my breath, holding up the sign of two fingers toward the grave.

My hand fell to my side once again as I turned and looked down the road. The sun had set by this point, although light still filled the sky overhead. The clouds above the horizon shone a bright red, the most vivid I had ever seen, with a sliver of a gold lining along the bottom, just above the treetops. I could almost get lost in the sight, not caring whether I came back.

Just then, however, I felt something across my shoulders and I glanced over to my left. Chase was walking beside me, his arm weighing down on me slightly. The weight didn’t feel like a burden, though, it felt comforting. I slid one arm behind his back, wrapping my hand around his side as I felt him squeeze my right upper arm slightly.

After a few moments of silence, I heard someone humming and I looked back and forth between Shawn and Lexi, trying to figure out who it was. Once I determined that it was Shawn, I tried to figure out what the song was, since it sounded vaguely familiar. The longer I thought about what it could be, the more it began to drive me crazy; finally, I broke down and asked.

“What is that song, Shawn?”

He glanced back and smirked before turning around to face forward again.

“On the road again,” he sang quietly, “just can’t wait to get on the road again...”

“The life I love is makin’ music with my friends,” Chase joined in, surprising me slightly.

Shawn glanced back at him and grinned.

“And I can’t wait to get back on the road again,” they sang together.

The four of us laughed as Shawn and Chase exchanged high-fives.



“On the road again,” they began singing again, “like a band of gypsies we go down the highway.”

I began to weave back and forth slightly, dragging Chase with me as he continued to sing along with Shawn.

“We’re the best of friends, insisting that the world be runnin’ our way.”

Chase glanced down at me as I grinned back up at him.

“And our way is on the road again.”

February 3, 2000

7:01:28 P.M.

Rosier, Georgia

The beam of a single flashlight cut through the heavy twilight settled over the train yard, carving a path through the otherwise stillness of the scene. It danced across the tracks for a few moments before sliding onto the train cars sitting still on the center track. The light revealed the graffiti and official markings adorning the steel walls, slowly moving along the side as it bobbed ever so slightly with each step of the owner. Finally, the bobbing motion began to slow as the light fixed on a single door to one of the cars, left open to reveal the gaping darkness beyond. The silhouette of the figure holding the flashlight came to a stop in front of the void, pausing a moment before stepping forward and shining the light inside.

Only an empty space appeared under the bright light, but the figure still placed it on the floor and climbed inside. With a sigh, the light lifted off the floor and began to shine around the space yet again, as if not believing the initial assessment. Finally, the light began to move toward the door before suddenly flicking off. Kailyn stepped forward into the doorway, staring out at the shadowy train tracks and the edge of the woods ahead, all seemingly baring a bluish tint in the shadow of the sunset. A slight breeze blew down the side of the train, ruffling the ends of her hair, and blowing small strands into her eye, which she attempted to dislodge by shaking her head.

“Got your shadow, Amaryss,” she said quietly, tapping the

flashlight against her leg idly.

After another moment or two of contemplation, she carefully hopped out of the train car and began to walk across the tracks, headed for the edge of the trees. Almost instinctually, she headed straight for an opening where an informal path seemed to be worn into the ground, leading farther into the trees.

Once the trees cleared away, she found herself on top of a hill, looking down at several large, barn-like structures, all of them painted red with black, shingled roofs. She carefully made her way down the hill, coming to a stop at the bottom, just next to the nearest building. Everything seemed dark and somewhat abandoned as she made her way along the side, drawing close to a paved roadway at the far end. As soon as she reached it, she glanced around the large, open area before starting toward the roadway leading through another patch of trees. Just as she had taken a few steps, however, bright, industrial floodlights filled the area and the sound of an engine roaring echoed from between two of the buildings ahead, followed soon after by a large, red truck flying into the open and skidding to a halt a little ways away from her. Kailyn froze where she was and watched with an expression that seemed to convey more curiosity than fear as several men stepped out of the truck.

“Back to finish off what your friends started, huh?” the man closest to her said, raising a rather large revolver in her direction.

“Friends?” she replied, cocking her head to the side slightly.

“Don’t you play dumb with me!”

Kailyn’s slightly amused look remained on her face as two other men joined the first, all holding guns.

“Y’all tore through here today and nearly killed a whole buncha’ decent men,” he said.

“Like yourselves?” she asked, looking between the three of them.

“They was our friends, and two of ‘em were his brother an’ father,” one of the two men behind the lead one said, gesturing to the one on the other side.

“Huh... sounds like something I might do,” Kailyn replied.

They looked confused for a moment before their guns were suddenly pulled from their hands, seemingly by thin air. The guns flew across the distance between them and Kailyn before clattering to the ground at her feet. Before they had a chance to fully grasp what had just happened, the two auxiliary men flew backwards into the side of the truck with enough force that they were sent to the ground nearly unconscious. The seeming leader of the group was suddenly pulled forward across the asphalt, his feet dragging behind him. Once he was in front of Kailyn, he was lifted several inches off the ground. He seemed unable to move as she took another step or two closer to him.

“Now, you said something about my ‘friends,’” she said. “Would you be so kind as to tell me where they went?”

The man stared at her with wide eyes, remaining silent. With a sigh, Kailyn lifted one hand, extending it slightly toward his right arm. Before he could even ask what she was doing, she twisted her hand sharply and the man’s lower arm suddenly shot out to the right, a resounding crack echoing across the opening space as the joint in his elbow tore apart instantly. He let out a howl of pain as she took another step closer, bringing his feet back onto the ground so she was slightly closer to looking him in the eye.

“One last time,” she said, “or I’ll break every bone in your body: where did they go?”

“Down the... down the road,” he gasped. “Iunno where they wen’ after that, I swear!”

“Oh, no need to swear,” she said, feigning some form of a Southern Belle accent, “I believe you.”

With that, his neck suddenly twisted sharply and quickly to the right. His entire body went limp as he collapsed to the ground at her feet. Kailyn let out a heavy sigh and stepped over his body, approaching the truck and the other two men. When she reached them, she stopped and crouched down a foot or two away.

“Now, you didn’t see anything, right?”

Both men remained silent and unmoving after her question.

“Good,” she said, nodding shortly and rising to her feet once again.

She glanced back toward the man’s body and the guns,

appearing to ponder something for a moment before holding her hand out toward them. The revolver flew through the air and into her hand, her fingers wrapping around the handle as soon as it had touched her palm. She looked it over for a second or two before nodding approvingly.

“This could be useful.”

Her attention turned to the truck before her and she appeared to contemplate it for a moment or two before shrugging and moving around to the driver’s side, opening the door and climbing in. The engine had been left running, so she didn’t have to worry about where the keys might be; instead, she now had to figure out how to get the vehicle in gear and begin driving. She had figured out how to drive the ambulance, eventually, back in Arizona, and the general layout of the controls didn’t look too different. After about a minute of finagling with the shifter, brake, and gas pedal Kailyn had the truck moving forward. Her hands immediately gripped the steering wheel and guided the vehicle toward the path through the trees, leading away from the buildings and the floodlights.

The paved roadway twisted and wound through the wooded area for a decent while before finally arriving at a straight road that stretched in either direction for quite a ways. The truck came to a stop as Kailyn leaned forward slightly glancing back and forth between both ways up and down the road.

“Now if I were Amaryss, where would I go?” she muttered under her breath.

Something initially told her that she should head to the left, but she hesitated a moment and glanced toward the right once again. After a moment or two, she leaned back in her seat, keeping her foot firmly planted on the brake, and closed her eyes. Almost immediately, she saw the image of a rather old-fashioned gas station, lit by a solitary light over the front door, while cracked, yellowed work lights provided a bare amount of illumination over the pumps. Kailyn opened her eyes once again and turned the wheel to the left, slowly easing the truck into the road.

After roughly an hour of driving, lights on the side of the road caught her attention and she sat up straight, removing her elbow from the door beside her. As she drew nearer, she saw that

it was the same old gas station she had seen just after leaving the large buildings where the men had confronted her. She could feel her heart rate begin to pick up as she eased on the brake and began to make the turn into the front parking lot. As the truck rolled to a stop just before the pumps, she placed the stick in the parked position and killed the engine, the low rumble slowly coming to a stop.

Her hand remained gripping the keys in the ignition for a moment or two longer before her fingers slowly slid off, her hand falling against her knee. With a heavy sigh, she looked clenched her hands into fists for a few seconds, watching her knuckles turn white, before relaxing them and reaching for the door handle. The hinges creaked slightly as the door swung open and she turned to the side, half-pushing and half-pulling herself out of the seat and landing on the ground with a quiet grunt. She stepped aside and pushed the door closed behind her, suddenly taking in just how silent it was in the immediate area; the echo from the door closing seemed to continue for seconds and seconds after it had actually happened.

The light over the front door to the gas station was still on, illuminating the white, red, and black “Open” sign hanging in the window. The flickering, yellow lighting over the pumps looked exactly as she had remembered from a little over an hour ago, but now it seemed to add even more of a horror film flair in the reduced light of the near-total night. A breeze blew through the open space for a moment, tossing small strands of her hair into her eyes, yet again, as she began to walk toward the door to the building. With one hand, Kailyn attempted to brush them aside, but most of them seemed to immediately fall back in the same place they had been moments ago.

Kailyn reached behind her back and lifted her shirt slightly, sliding the stolen revolver under her waistband. Once she was confident it was secure, she made sure her shirt fell over it and let her arms fall to her sides once again. The cold feeling of the metal against her skin sent shivers up her spine, however they also seemed to bring a good deal of energy with them. Her heart was still pounding in her chest, but she could also feel a slight tingling in the tips of her fingers and toes; the adrenaline was just

beginning to kick in. As she approached the door, she noticed a figure standing beside it, leaning with her back against the doorframe.

“Easy now,” she said, smirking, “you don’t want to get too excited.”

Kailyn ignored the copy of herself as she reached for the handle.

“Go get ‘em, Tex,” the copy said, feigning a southern drawl.

With a sigh, she pulled the door open and stepped inside. The interior of the building was not much more well-lit than the exterior: dim fluorescent bulbs lit most of the space, although half of them appeared to be out, and the glass covers that normally went over them were long gone. The space was not much of a store, but two rows of shelves ran down the center of the floor, extending to her left. Immediately to the right was a small counter space, almost entirely occupied by an old register and several racks of what appeared to be gum and breath mints. Behind the counter stood an older man in a dark work shirt and baseball hat; some white hair just managed to peek out from under the front and back, while similar white and grey stubble adorned his jawline. As Kailyn stepped inside, he looked up from something resting on top of the register and appeared to look her up and down once.

“Ay uh... good evenin’,” he said, nodding slightly and adjusting his hat.

“Hi, there...” she said, slowly turning and walking toward the counter.

“How can I help ya?” he asked.

“I was wondering if you had seen some people come through here, actually,” she said, stopping in front of the counter and leaning against it slightly.

His look conveyed mild suspicion, but he remained quiet.

“My friends and I are on a trip and we got separated, so I wanted to see if maybe a group of, say, five or six people my age had stopped by?”

The man stared at her for a few moments before scratching his chin as he glanced up at the ceiling.

“Well, there were ‘bout four kids like you in here,” he

replied.

“When was that?”

“They was jus’ here...”

Just then, the hair on the back of her neck stood up and she spun around. No one was standing directly behind her, however motion off to her left caught her eye. She quickly moved over to the door and looked outside to see four dark figures hurrying toward the truck she had driven into the gas station.

“Hope that—” the man began to say, but was cut off when Kailyn pulled the revolver from under her waistband and fired a bullet in his general direction, not looking to see if it actually made contact.

With that, she burst through the door to the gas station and raised the pistol toward the truck. She immediately fired two more shots into the windshield, causing the figures near it to jump and turn back toward her.

“You’re really beginning to develop a bad habit of grand theft auto,” Kailyn said, still advancing on the vehicle.

One of the figures stepped forward in front of the front bumper with what was clearly supposed to be confidence, although she could easily see the nervousness in the slow movements. As the figure stepped forward, the light from the lights at the gas station dimly revealed Amaryss stepping from the darkness.

“Surprised?” Kailyn asked, finally stopping only feet from her. “Or did you hope that I was dead in that hospital? That maybe I’d bled out too much?”

“I’ve never wanted you dead, Kailyn,” Amaryss replied, her tone quiet, but the slight quavering betraying her nerves.

“Well you certainly keep leaving me in places like you do!” she shot back.

“I brought you to a goddamn hospital after you’d been shot. I hid you in that locked room in Arizona so Jared and Mack wouldn’t find you right away in the morning.”

“And yet you still left me in both places,” Kailyn replied, carefully making sure the revolver was cocked and ready to fire.

The next second, her finger squeezed the trigger and the gun fired once more, recoiling with a decent amount of force and sending pain shooting through her wrist. As soon as she had

regained control of the gun, she looked up to see not Amaryss falling back against the truck, bleeding profusely, but simply yet another bullet hole in the windshield. There were no other people in sight, all signs of the four dark figures seemingly vanished. With a growl, Kailyn took a few more steps forward and brought the butt of the gun down on the hood of the truck. As she brought her arm back to deliver another blow, the growl turned into a scream of rage. When her hand hit the hood once more, her fingers relaxed their grip and the revolver clattered away, falling to the ground.

“You wanted it so badly...”

She looked over her shoulder to see the copy of herself stepping up behind her.

“Of course they left before you even got here,” she continued. “That’s how this little game seems to be going.”

“Well, if you know so much,” Kailyn snapped, “why don’t you just tell me where the fuck they went?”

The copy clucked her tongue lightly as she wagged her finger.

“Now, you know I can’t answer that.”

“Oh?”

“I only know as much as you do,” she shot back, pointing the same index finger at her.

“But I found this place, and followed them down to... wherever the hell this is!” Kailyn snapped, gesturing wildly around her.

“And how do you think that happened?”

Kailyn let out a shout of frustration and ran her hands back through her hair, trying to resist the urge to punch the vehicle beside her again. After she had taken a few more seconds to calm herself, she let out a heavy sigh and turned to look back toward where the copy had been standing, but instead found nothing but the empty gas station. Her lips set into a firm line as she turned back toward the truck and moved to the driver’s door, opening it and stepping up onto the edge of the doorway.

As she glanced around the compartment, she noticed the small shards of glass that had sprinkled on the seat from when she had fired three bullets through the windshield. Without hesitating,



she quickly brushed them onto the floor with her bare hand before climbing inside and taking a seat. The door slammed closed behind her, even though her hands were both engaged with the steering wheel and the keys. As the engine of the truck came to life once again, she leaned back in her seat and rubbed both eyes with her hands.

“Where, oh where art thou?” she muttered, leaning forward and crossing her arms before her, bracing her elbows against the wheel.

The gas station had been mostly a bust, and clearly the man inside was not going to give her much more in the way of details about where several random teenagers had gone a while ago. The quiet, low rumble of the engine seemed to fill her ears as the gentle vibrations through the steering wheel shook her into a strange state of calm. Her eyelids began to feel as if they were drifting closed as she stared ahead at the single light over the door to the building in front of her. Just as her eyes were nearly closed, an image seemed to flash before her eyes: an old, red van with some kind of white logo on the side. Almost as soon as she saw it, her eyes shot open and she leaned back in her seat, blinking rapidly.

“Only know what I do, my ass,” she grumbled, rolling the window down beside her and reaching her hand through the opening.

A moment later, the revolver flew from the ground to her open hand, her fingers curling around the grip once more before bringing it inside and placing it on the seat next to her. She quickly shifted the truck into gear and stomped on the gas, the tires squealing in protest as she took a sharp right turn and tore off down the road, back in the direction she had originally come from after assaulting the backwoods gang.

What had taken her nearly an hour to cover earlier seemed to take significantly less time as she soon found herself flying by the familiar roadway leading into the woods. Something told her that she wasn't even near the halfway point, yet, but she had a feeling that they were not quite moving with as much urgency as she was. The thought that maybe she should have filled up the gas tank while she had been at the station crossed her mind for a moment, but she quickly brushed it aside as she braced her elbow

against the door, propping her head up on her fist.

“Man, high speed chases always seemed so much cooler in movies.”

She didn’t have to glance over to the other seat to acknowledge the copy-Kailyn, and apparently she didn’t require the recognition, either.

“This is just long, lame, and... really pretty boring.”

Kailyn remained silent, staring straight ahead at the road as the headlights carved a path through the inky blackness of the night around her.

“Oh come on, you’re giving me the silent treatment, now?”

The sound of someone shifting in the seat beside her almost sent a shiver up Kailyn’s spine, but apparently the reaction was enough for the copy to notice.

“Still freaks you out, huh?”

“I thought you were supposed to be a figment of my imagination?” she shot back.

The copy scoffed and Kailyn could only imagine the look on her face, since it was undoubtedly one she had used many times, herself.

“Simply calling me a figment of your imagination is such an insult!” she crooned. “I’m not some kind of imaginary friend, here.”

“Right, because if you were, you’d be helpful and I’d enjoy these talks.”

“Listen—”

Suddenly, an ice cold hand gripped her neck and slammed her back against the seat, catching her by surprise and nearly sending the truck careening off the side of the road.

“—we’ve been over this.”

“Yes, and do you remember how that ended in New York?” Kailyn croaked.

Suddenly, she grabbed the hand and began to pry the fingers away from her neck. Slowly, they peeled away until she managed to toss the copy’s arm aside, finally glancing over at her to acknowledge her presence. The sight of the copy seemed to catch her off guard for some reason, but she quickly managed to recover. She was dressed the same as Kailyn: old, white T-shirt

and jeans, which seemed to give her more of a surprise than when she had seen her in the completely wrong clothing for the weather several months ago.

“I just can’t win with you, can I?” the copy shot back.

“You mean—?”

“You freak when I’m wearing the wrong clothes, now you freak when I look the same... is this a better solution?”

She glanced over for a moment and nearly swerved off the road once again at the sight of the copy of her entirely nude in the seat beside her.

“Clearly not.”

“Let’s just try to keep it the same, for now,” she replied.

“Okay, but can you please acknowledge that this is the lamest chase in history?”

Kailyn sighed, rubbing her eyes with one hand for a moment before returning her attention to the road.

“It’s definitely taking forever.”

“And with your foot to the floor like that, this thing might just run out of gas, first,” the copy continued.

“I was afraid of that.”

“Well, maybe you should check the gas gauge every now and then.”

“How do you even know—?”

“It doesn’t take a genius to figure out what it could be called,” the copy chided.

Kailyn glanced down at the dashboard and scanned for one of the dials that could be the gas gauge, hoping that it wasn’t one of the ones close to the red lines. Her eyes finally settled on one to the right with a picture of what looked like some kind of old style can with a long spout attached; unfortunately, it was one of the dials leaning dangerously close to the red lines on the left side.

“Shit...”

“Looks like your lead foot’s gotten us into a bit of trouble.”

Kailyn didn’t say anything in response, instead, she simply clamped her jaw shut tightly and glared straight ahead at the road once again. There were no signs of civilization, or at least another gas station, as far as she could see. At first, there did not appear to be any signs of lights in the sky, giving telltale hints of an

approaching town or city, but as her eyes began to track over the treetops to her left, she spotted a vague glow that seemed to hover over them.

“A town, maybe?”

“Something with electric lights, at least,” she muttered.

“Seems worth a shot, if you ask me.”

“I didn’t.”

“That’s the beauty of it,” the copy said, “you don’t even have to.”

Kailyn simply let out a sigh as she noticed a road sign approaching, white letters on a green background spelling out what appeared to be a town name, along with the information “Next Left.” As she looked back at the road, she saw a T-intersection approaching, another stretch of asphalt branching off to the left.

“Well, I guess you’ve got head toward the lights to find some shadows.”

February 3, 2000

10:04:25 P.M.

Somewhere in Georgia

It wasn’t even all that late at night, and we hadn’t been driving for an incredibly long time, but I found myself blinking rapidly and looking around as I became aware of someone or something shaking me. After a moment or two, my vision and thoughts had settled enough to realize that it was Chase, who was still sitting beside me, our backs up against the wall of the van.

“Rise and shine,” he said.

“It’s not even morning,” I shot back, “you can’t say that, yet.”

“Well, the sun’s not the only thing that has to shine.”

I shot him a look and he grinned.

“Don’t you start pulling that bullshit on me,” I said, pushing away from the wall and getting to my feet with a groan.

Once I was standing, I extended a hand down toward him and he took it, nearly pulling me forward into the metal wall in front of me as he rose to his feet. I responded by punching him in

the chest, which only caused him to laugh and move his arms into a vaguely defensive position. With one last coy glance, I turned and headed toward the back doors, opening the one on the right as I approached. The cool night breeze hit me almost immediately as I hopped out of the van and onto the asphalt, glancing around.

We had stopped in the parking lot to some kind of 24-hour diner, it seemed, complete with the retro metal siding and large neon sign looming over the parking lot. I had to admit that the bright lights from the building did make me feel somewhat more comfortable here than I had expected to be, but the fact that we were standing still, regardless, made me restless. Apparently it was more obvious than I had hoped, because I felt Chase's hand on my shoulder and I jumped slightly, looking over at him. A faint smile adorned his face as I felt him give me a reassuring squeeze and his thumb rubbed across my shoulder blade slowly.

"Not everyone can keep going forever like you can," he said. "We need to take breaks eventually."

I just smiled weakly in return, my lips forming a thin line. The way he said it made me sound like some kind of Super-Woman who had all of this limitless strength and energy, but the truth couldn't have felt farther from that. Judging by the lack of the other two in our party, I assumed they had already gone into the diner, so I nodded toward the doors and Chase began to follow alongside me.

I pushed the door open ahead of us, feeling like my arm barely had the strength behind it to do so. As we stepped in, the tinny chime of a fake bell sounded from an old speaker overhead and the waitress in a white shirt, black skirt, and stained apron glanced over at us from the counter. I saw her eyes linger over Chase for a moment or two longer than me, but she eventually turned back to the customer in front of her as she began to pour him another cup of coffee.

It didn't take long to spot the other two from our group, mainly because as I turned to look down the line of small booths up against the windows, Lexi immediately waved to me from the third one down. I began to walk toward her as Chase followed close behind. When we reached the booth, I slid inside and Chase fell into the seat beside me. By the looks of it, Lexi and Shawn

had already ordered since two cups of coffee currently sat in front of them.

“Sleeping beauty finally arises,” he quipped, glancing up at me.

“I seriously want to know how you have such a talent for sleeping in random places,” Lexi said, “and want you to teach it to me.”

I just grinned and shook my head, folding my arms on the table in front of me.

“I guess that’s just part of my super-secret-superpower,” I shot back.

Lexi made a face at me, but quickly dropped it as she yawned and stretched her arms above her head.

“How’s the drink?” Chase asked, nodding toward the cup in Shawn’s hand.

“Fucking awful.”

Chase just nodded and quietly drummed his fingers on the edge of the cracked tabletop.

“Well, hopefully the food is an improvement,” he finally said.

“Guess we’ll find out in a second,” Shawn replied, looking past Chase.

Just then, the waitress we had seen behind the counter when we had first entered appeared at the end of the table carrying two plates. She placed one in front of each of the other two before turning her attention to Chase and me.

“Hi there,” she said, a quite obvious Southern drawl lacing her rather husky voice, “what can I do you for?”

“I’ll have a coffee and what he’s eating,” Chase said, gesturing to Shawn.

“Coffee and biscuits n’ gravy,” she said, nodding before turning her attention to me. “And for you, sweetheart?”

“Orange juice and eggs and bacon,” I replied, cringing inwardly at being called “sweetheart” by a complete stranger.

“How you want them eggs?”

“Scrambled.”

“All right, I’ll get that right up,” she said before walking away once again.

After he had made sure she had walked a decent ways away, Chase turned back to the rest of us and leaned forward slightly.

“Doesn’t she seem like a delight?”

“Oh, she’s been a barrel of sunshine this whole time,” Shawn replied, his eyes flicking up to watch her over Chase’s shoulder for a moment before returning to his food. “Just so you know, this is barely a step above that coffee.”

“I’ll look forward to both, then,” he replied, smirking.

“Well, at least I know I might not be the only one dying a slow death on this trip after this stop.”

I rolled my eyes as Lexi laughed quietly, cutting off a piece of her omelet with the side of her fork. The driver of the van we were hitching a ride with suddenly appeared at the end of the table, holding his baseball hat in one hand as he shoved the other in his front pocket.

“How much farther y’all say you need to get?”

“As far as you’re willing to have us,” Lexi replied.

“Well, I’m going to be heading out in about fifteen minutes or so, here,” he said. “There’s a motel not far up the street where I’m planning on staying the night, so if you want to keep going, I’d ask around here. Lot of truck drivers and just freight haulin’ folks tend to stop through here.”

“Okay, thanks,” Chase said, nodding.

“All right,” the driver said, nodding. “Good luck with ya.”

With that, he walked away, heading back toward his spot at the counter. The four of us all exchanged looks before I sighed and rubbed my eyes with my hands.

“Well, start scoping people out, I guess,” Shawn said dryly, glancing around the diner with his eyes.

The idea of trying to convince yet another person to let us ride along for free seemed like something that I didn’t entirely want to deal with this late at night, but we had a lot of ground to make up considering how much of a head start the men who had taken Maya had on us at the moment. As I pulled my hands away from my eyes, I happened to glance to my right and noticed a pair of lights on the road. The longer I watched them, the more they appeared to be moving toward us, immediately drawing my

curiosity. The hair began to stand up on the back of my neck as something told me that they were drawing even closer to us, growing brighter. Suddenly, intuition told me to jump into action. I shoved Chase to the side as I reached across the table and grabbed Shawn's shirt on his shoulder, pulling him to the left.

"Move!" I shouted, glancing back toward the road once again to see the lights now close enough that they were beginning to shine into the diner.

They all looked at me like I was crazy for a split second before seemingly noticing the lights outside and glancing toward them. Shawn's eyes went wide as he quickly shoved Lexi to the side as I had done to Chase and we all leapt from the booth. As soon as we were out of the booth, Chase and I rolled to the left as Lexi and Shawn went right. A moment later, just as I was becoming afraid that we had incredibly overreacted to someone simply pulling into the parking lot, the sound of shattering glass and tearing metal filled the entire room.

Pieces of wood, metal, and glass sprayed in every direction as the booths next to us violently shifted forward a foot or two, knocking over condiment dispensers and sending paper placemats flying. Whatever had come crashing through the side of the diner barreled several feet into the building before coming to a stop on the main serving counter. As I scrambled to my feet, I had a moment or two to look more closely at what exactly had caused the destruction: a large, red truck, rather similar to the one we had taken from the men who had tried to attack us.

Before I had a chance to look at it any further, however, a loud band came from the vehicle and I saw the driver's window crack as I was vaguely aware of a bullet slamming into the ground inches from me. Without thinking, I dove to the side and behind the row of booths to our right. I glanced back to see if Chase had followed, but instead saw him leaping over the serving counter and taking cover behind it. Immediately, I cursed myself for not doing something similar, but I was stuck where I was, for now.

The sound of something pounding on metal came from near the truck, echoing around the diner as I kept my head down behind the back of the seat. Moments later, the sound came again, but this time it was accompanied by the high-pitched protest of metal in



motion. A loud sigh came from back near the truck as I heard feet hit the floor, crunching slightly on the shattered glass that I assumed littered the area.

“Amaryss!”

I froze out the sound of the sing-song voice calling my name. The tone was deceptively playful, but I recognized it immediately. My heart was immediately pounding in my ears as my hands clenched into fists, my palms growing slick.

“My dear, you can’t expect to hide behind that booth forever.”

I instantly put one hand out toward the floor to steady myself as I glanced up toward the counter. Chase wasn’t visible from my angle, which was probably a good thing, or else she might shoot him, too. All of the sudden, I was very glad he couldn’t see me, because that meant he wouldn’t be able to see the stupid thing I was about to do. Summoning up all of my strength, I jumped to my feet and faced the wreckage.

Kailyn was standing in front of the truck, holding a rather large revolver at her side, the silver of the weapon immediately drawing my attention under the harsh lights of the diner, or at least those that were still working. As soon as she saw me, a wry smirk pulled one corner of her lips back.

“I always remembered hide and seek being more difficult with you,” she remarked.

“We never had guns, so—” I replied, shrugging.

The motion felt entirely too casual for how much adrenaline was pumping through my veins, but somehow it had seemed to come naturally.

“True,” she said, raising the revolver and looking down at it for a moment, “I guess I did change the rules, a bit.”

I didn’t say anything in response, instead I continued to stare her down. Something about her seemed different, but at first I couldn’t tell what it was. It was beyond the obvious, noticeable lack of haircut that seemed to constantly be in danger of falling into her eyes or the way her clothes seemed to hang on her frame more than I remembered; it was something implied. Her attitude so far, and the previous time we had crossed paths in New York, was still the oddly playful and sarcastic one she had always had,

but now it seemed less endearing and more... terrifying. Something about the way I could see her tightly gripping the revolver in one hand told me that it was most definitely not a prop, or a toy, but something in her was just waiting to pull that trigger again. The only question was: why hadn't she, yet?

"So, you found me," I said, attempting to keep the conversation moving.

"At long last," she replied, nodding. "Like two ships that passed in the night come to rest in the same port."

"So it's been since New York, then?"

She nodded and then shook her head slightly to try to fling some strands of hair out of her eyes.

"Quite the long road, then," I said.

"Indeed, not entirely aided by a little flesh wound."

With that, she reached toward her right side and lifted up her shirt slightly, revealing a small, round scar on her right abdomen, about six inches above the waistline to her jeans.

"I assumed you were curious how that had turned out."

I remained silent for a few moments, staring at the scar that had quite obviously once been the bullet wound she had sustained at the house during our escape, a strange feeling of relief washing over me before I forced myself to focus once again.

"Guys dig scars," I replied.

"Do they?" she asked, letting her shirt fall back into place.

"I guess I could pretend I got in some badass gunfight. Took down a bunch of them with me... or just one."

It was almost like I could sense her actions before they actually happened, which allowed me to suddenly burst into motion. I instantly pushed off with my right foot, moving toward the counter where Chase had hidden what felt like moments ago. Just as my feet were beginning to leave the ground, I heard a loud bang and swore I could feel a hot breeze pass by me. No white hot pain followed, so I assumed that I hadn't been hit as I cleared the top of the counter and slammed into the wall on the opposite side, my right arm and shoulder taking the brunt of the hit. Rather than sitting still, however, I quickly scrambled across the ground toward the door to the kitchen, reaching for the handle. Just as I did, I heard another loud bang from behind me, the sound of the bullet

slamming into the wall following only inches from me. I pulled the kitchen door open and hurried through, sliding across the floor slightly before jumping to my feet.

Almost instantly I felt a pair of strong hands grip my arm and I jumped, wheeling around as I attempted to rip my arm free from the grasp. As I turned, I found Chase behind me and instantly stopped trying to throw my would-be-attacker off. He tugged on my arm once again and quickly began to lead us farther away from Kailyn. Before we could make it to the door at the end, however, I heard the one from the counter bang open and another gunshot resounded in the smaller, more metallic space. I pulled Chase behind some kind of large, silver machine and we pressed our backs up against it.

“Damn, girl, you got fast,” Kailyn called from the opposite end. “Your freak powers coming out too, then, huh?”

I glanced over at Chase for a moment to find him looking around the other side of the machine, trying to catch a glimpse of her. Suddenly, he leaned back as another gunshot ripped through the room, followed by a small amount of dust kicking out from the wall in front of us.

“Hide and go seek?” she called, her tone still oddly playful. “Now this is a new one.”

Suddenly, another crazy idea occurred to me and I made a split second decision to follow it, because if I thought about it at all, my common sense would tell me that Chase would forever hate me for it. Before I, or anyone else for that matter, could stop me from moving, I stepped out from behind the machine and stood in the middle of the open, right in plain sight of Kailyn. She jumped slightly at my sudden appearance but quickly regained her composure, training the pistol on me. The small, silver point at the end seeming much larger all of the sudden.

“We really should stop having conversations like this,” I said, my voice surprisingly even for how shaky I felt.

“You mean at gunpoint?”

I nodded, taking a step forward.

“Well, we could fix that,” she replied.

“I’m not going to kill anyone.”

“It’s too late for that,” Kailyn spat, her tone immediately

changing from teasing to venomous. “You had your one chance, and you blew it.”

“And carrying you into the hospital, bleeding out from a gunshot, means nothing?”

“I’m sure you—”

“I refused to leave you behind,” I interjected, my tone growing stronger as more and more fire began to build in my chest. “I carried you into that building in my goddamn arms to make sure you didn’t die.”

“I’m sorry, but one small act does not make up for the *betrayal* you laid upon me in Arizona,” she replied.

“I saved your life,” I continued, “that’s a small act?”

Kailyn’s jaw appeared tight as she stared me down, but didn’t say anything.

“I’m sorry that you value your own life so little, then.”

“My own life?” she said, her voice suddenly rather quiet. “You think I want this... ‘life?!’”

Her voice had raised to a screaming volume in only a few words, but I could now see the revolver shaking ever so slightly in her hands.

“It’s not *my* life after what those motherfuckers did to me,” she said, “they made this ‘life.’ Just like they made yours... and Chase’s... and Lexi’s... and Shawn’s... and Maya’s.”

Something tight appeared in my stomach at the mention of Maya’s name, but I quickly pushed it aside.

“So no, I don’t value what I was given that greatly,” she said, her voice now quiet once again.

As I watched, her finger squeezed around the trigger.

## 22

### Beg, Borrow, and Steal or Bust

February 3, 2000  
11:04:23 P.M.  
Somewhere in Georgia

It felt like the fire in Kailyn's chest had quickly spread throughout her body, but she was particularly aware of it burning behind her eyes. The metal of the revolver felt weak under her iron grip as she was afraid she might actually crush it. Almost everything around her seemed to have fallen away, leaving only half of the kitchen to the small diner in the middle of nowhere ahead of her, although the brightest point in the room was Amaryss before her. Her brown hair dark from lack of shower spilling over her shoulders, her grey eyes trained on Kailyn, unblinking. The familiar, somewhat rounded face seeming gaunter than she remembered, while her lips seemed to have more red color than she remembered.

Time seemed to slowly grind forward into motion once again as she became aware of a sound echoing throughout the open space of the greasy kitchen. It seemed so loud that it echoed off of every surface and filled her ears, blocking out the entire world around her. Amaryss seemed to slouch slightly as the world fell still, the only sound the quiet buzzing of the lights overhead. Kailyn slowly looked down at the revolver in her hand, staring at the cold metal, her finger still wrapped tightly around the trigger, pulling it all the way back toward the handle. It was almost as if at first her mind couldn't comprehend what she had just heard, but a moment later gravity seemed to weigh doubly on her.

"Looks like you only got five."

Her attention moved up from the revolver to the grill next to her, finding the copy of herself leaning against it.

"Oops," she said, her arms crossed over chest as a grin began to pull at the corners of her lips.

Kailyn's attention turned from the grill to Amaryss once again. Her chest heaved as she let out a heavy sigh.

“You counted?”

“Call it a crazy chance,” she replied.

The slight glint in her grey eyes did nothing to abate the fire in Kailyn’s chest, but part of her began to wonder exactly what was fueling it. The empty, clicking sound of the revolver hammer falling on an empty chamber still seemed to ring throughout the space as she suddenly brought her arm back and threw the gun at the other girl. Amaryss easily sidestepped it, but didn’t advance. Before she had a chance to do anything else, however, Kailyn glanced over to her left and held her hand out toward a large knife left out on a counter. It suddenly lifted into the air and shot across the kitchen.

Despite the speed it was flying at, the knife missed its target and instead clattered harmlessly off a pile of pots and pans in a sink. Amaryss had deftly rolled forward across the ground, drawing in rather close to Kailyn. Before she had a chance to react, something collided with her feet and sent Kailyn to the ground with a loud grunt. She rolled onto her back to see a foot above her, which she quickly continued to roll to her left to avoid. Managing to catch herself on some kind of counter in the middle of the room, she pulled herself to her feet, her eyes scanning wildly for her attacker.

Amaryss was roughly five or six feet away at that point, however something made Kailyn spin around to look behind her. As soon as she did, she held up a hand and a fist that had previously been headed directly for the back of her head was frozen in mid-air. Shawn looked surprised at the sudden block of his attack, but Kailyn simply grinned and pushed her hand forward, sending him reeling backward. He staggered for several steps before Kailyn held out one hand toward a plate in the serving window to her right and, with a flick of her wrist, sent it flying toward him. The porcelain shattered over his head, causing him to let out a cry of pain and hold one hand to his left temple.

Something told her to duck, so she quickly crouched down and spun around just as a large pan, wielded by Amaryss, flew over her. Kailyn quickly struck out and slammed her fist into the other girl’s knee, causing her leg to buckle and nearly sending her to the floor. She suddenly held up the same hand toward her off-

balance opponent and shoved her backwards a good several feet, Amaryss nearly falling backwards as she did. Suddenly, something heavy hit Kailyn square in the back and she was sent sprawling forward onto the greasy, tiled floor. She attempted to push herself back up, but something else collided with her from the side and all of the air burst from her lungs in one, quick burst.

Kailyn fell sideways against a set of drawers to her left as she tried to get a look at her attackers. Before one of them could lay another hit on her, however, she managed to shove both of them back, like she had done with Amaryss. The brief respite gave her a chance to pull herself to her feet and spin around to face the room once again. Lexi was leaning against the counter in the middle of the room that Kailyn had used to pull herself up with moments ago, while Shawn was still farther down the small aisle where he had first tried to attack her moments ago, although she could now see a faint trickle of blood beginning to run down the left side of his face.

She didn't have much longer to take in the situation, however, because Amaryss had suddenly stepped forward and grabbed her by her shirt, pulling her away from the wall. Moments later, she was being thrown forward toward the grill. She managed to stop herself without actually touching the hot surface, but she grabbed a large metal spatula from it and spun around, swinging it as if it were some kind of sword. The edge of it seemed to hit Amaryss in the side slightly and surprise her, but didn't do much in the way of actually injuring her. Seizing the moment, Kailyn swung it once again, this time with a backhand motion, and aimed for her head. Amaryss was able to grab her arm to stop her, however, and suddenly delivered a rather forceful punch to her chest.

Kailyn staggered backwards several steps before glancing around for something to use as a weapon. Finding nothing easily in handheld reach, she settled for raising her hand toward a large pot of something and sending it flying at her. As she did, however, she suddenly felt a jab of pain shoot through her left temple and she grit her teeth. A feeling of fatigue was suddenly beginning to settle into her limbs, but she fought to keep her strength, trying to use the pure adrenaline alone to keep her standing. Amaryss had

managed to avoid the large pot, but Kailyn quickly began hurling various items from around the room at her. Some of them were not exceedingly large, or sharp, but they still left small cuts on the brunette's arm as she tried to deflect them.

Suddenly, the world swam before Kailyn's eyes for a moment and she staggered slightly, attempting to find her balance, once again. Before she had fully recovered, however, something slammed into the side of her head with a good amount of force and she spun to the right, slamming into whatever machine Amaryss had hidden behind earlier. Before she could push away from it, however, someone grabbed her head and brought it back. She knew what was about to happen, but was still not fully braced when her head was brought forward into the metal side with enough force for bright spots to explode before her eyes.

She felt the hand on her head release her and she instantly focused on whatever figure was behind her and willed them to fly off her to right. A moment later, someone crashed into the wall with a cry of surprise and pain as she pushed away from the machine, blinking rapidly. She glanced to her right and saw Chase pushing away from the wall in time for her to raise a hand toward him and pull him toward her. He was taken by surprise as he was yanked forward by an unseen force, only to have Kailyn's fist ram into the bridge of his nose a moment later. Pain exploded through her hand as his head snapped back, but he was still standing. With him still staggering slightly, she whirled around to face Amaryss, who was now a mere foot or so away, reaching toward her.

Kailyn swatted her hands away before holding one out toward her and sending Amaryss flying back across the kitchen. She was actually lifted off her feet for a second or two before she hit a preparation counter covered in what appeared to be the beginnings of some kind of sandwich. She suddenly felt something warm and wet just above her lips and hints of a metallic taste began to fill her mouth. Kailyn wiped one hand across her mouth and held it up in front of her to find blood smeared across it; whether it was caused by the head bashing Chase had inflicted on her or something else, though, it was hard to tell. Filing it away for later, Kailyn quickly hurried toward Amaryss. As she passed



the grill, she grabbed a tool off of it that appeared to be a small slab of metal with a handle attached.

Amaryss was just getting to her feet as Kailyn suddenly leapt on top of her, shoving the tool toward her face. Her arms were blocked by Amaryss's as she tried to hold the hot metal surface away from herself. The two girls struggled against each other for several tense moments, both with teeth gritted and eyes locked. Finally, Amaryss brought one of her legs up in a sharp motion and rammed her knee into Kailyn right about where the joint of her leg met her pelvis. She folded slightly, her grip slackening, and was immediately shoved backwards. The metal tool clattered to the table beside Amaryss as Kailyn took several sharp, deep breaths against the pain shooting through the entire right side of her pelvis and thigh.

"What is killing me going to accomplish?" Amaryss suddenly spat, pushing off of the table and staring her down, breathing heavily.

Kailyn stared right back at her, remaining silent but not breaking eye contact.

"Is it going to make you feel better somehow?" she continued. "It's not going to help you get closer to Jared, now. They're not coming for me."

"They're not going to let any of us just fucking go," Kailyn said through clenched teeth.

"We could just all disappear. They wouldn't be able to find us."

"I found you," she pointed out. "They'll always be able to find you."

Amaryss was speaking again, but Kailyn was suddenly distracted by the copy of herself appearing a foot or two away from her, arms crossed and giving her a disapproving look.

"Why are you still arguing with her?" she said, pointing to Amaryss. "You came in here and were gonna put a bullet through her head, so what's changed?"

Kailyn said nothing, but her eyes were constantly flicking back and forth between Amaryss and the copy. It occurred to her that she had stopped speaking, but she had no idea what had been

said, so she remained silent. It wasn't like this was a true conversation she had to be fully invested in, anyway.

"You've come all this way for your chance, and now she's right—fucking—here!" the copy said, angrily stomping her foot. "Do it!"

"I'm sorry."

With that, she looked back to Amaryss just in time to see her hand swinging toward her. The next moment, something heavy collided with the side of her head and her vision went dark, instantly falling into unconsciousness before she even hit the floor.

"You've got to be kidding me..."

Her own voice echoing inside her head was the last thing she truly remembered hearing.

I looked down at Kailyn's unconscious form on the floor of the greasy diner kitchen, my chest heaving as I heard my heart pounding in my ears. The metal cooking tool felt incredibly heavy in my hand as I tried to get a grasp on what had just happened. I glanced down at it and saw a small patch of blood along the leading edge that had collided with Kailyn's head and immediately tossed it away to my left. The sound of the metal clattering loudly across the tile floor seemed to be enough to jar me back to reality as I quickly looked around. The other three were standing nearby, Lexi and Shawn clearly unsure of whether to look at Kailyn or me, so they switched every few seconds; Chase's eyes, however, seemed rather firmly fixed on me.

"Well... damn," Shawn finally said, breaking the silence that had fallen over the room.

After a few more seconds of silence, it began to dawn on me that I hadn't seen a single person that had been in the diner prior to when the truck had crashed through the front of it.

"So... didn't there used to be people in this place besides us?" I finally said, clearing my throat and looking around at the others once again.

"Uh... now that you say it..."

The others glanced around, as well.

"I guess it's a good thing we haven't heard sirens, yet," Lexi added.

“Perhaps we should get going before we do,” I suggested.

“I’d be okay with that,” Shawn said, already turning to head back into the main seating section of the diner.

I began to follow after him and Lexi, but before I could, Chase grabbed my arm and stopped me.

“Are you okay?” he asked simply and quietly.

“Maybe once we—”

“Amaryss, don’t deflect,” he interjected. “I know you’re not.”

“Then why’d you ask?”

“Because I wanted you to tell me something.”

“What’s that?”

“I don’t know, but just something,” he replied.

I looked at him quizzically for a moment as he sighed and rubbed one temple with his right hand.

“Every time I try to ask you about what’s going on with you, I get deflections and throw away answers,” he said. “I just want to help you somehow but I feel so... helpless.”

My eyes met his for several long seconds before I began to feel as if I couldn’t hold it any longer. The sincerity and pleading that I saw in them almost felt like too much for me to handle as I felt a tight feeling begin to pull at my chest. I finally was forced to avert my eyes, looking down toward my arm, still held loosely in his hand.

“I... I know,” I finally said. “I’m not the best with... talking. I just—I’m not used to it, okay?”

“That’s okay,” he replied. “I just want you to know that—want you to feel that—you can trust me and... tell me whatever.”

I nodded, not sure of how else to respond. After another moment or two, I moved closer and wrapped my arms around him, pulling his wiry frame close against mine. I felt his arms move around behind me, as well, and I leaned my head forward, my nose pressing gently into the crook of his neck.

Before the moment could continue any longer, however, I heard the sound of a loud banging a few feet away and we pulled apart, glancing over toward it. Shawn was standing in the doorway to the main part of the diner.

“Hey, hate to be the one to break up the moment, but we’ve gotta run,” he said.

With that, he tossed something toward us and I quickly reached out a hand and caught it, discovering that it was my duffel bag. A moment later, he tossed Chase’s to him, as well, and he caught it by the strap. I quickly slung mine over my shoulders and followed after Shawn, glancing back quickly to make sure Chase was following behind. We entered the main part of the diner to find several people standing a little ways away from the wreckage, Lexi amongst them. One of the members of the crowd was the driver of the van we had ridden in from the gas station close to the scene of our accident, who was looking visibly shaken up.

“What in the hell would possess someone to willingly drive through the front of a fucking building?” he was saying as we approached.

“I don’t know, a quite deranged person, apparently,” Lexi replied, glancing over at us as if looking for rescue.

“C’mon, we need to get going,” Shawn said as we approached, waving toward Lexi.

“Where the hell are y’all going, now?” our waitress from before asked, looking almost angry at us as we began to pass.

“I wish we could say, but it’s kind of a secret,” he said.

“What do you mean a secret?” she snapped. “Who the hell are you people?”

“Trust me, it’s probably better if you forgot you ever met us,” I interjected, waving my hands in the air before me as I turned around to walk backwards.

The looks I got from the small crowd showed a mixture of anger, confusion, and perhaps slight hints of fear, but no one stepped up to stop us, or say anything else. With that, I turned back around to the rest of the group, who appeared to be approaching the truck Kailyn had been driving, earlier.

“Are you thinking of taking that?” I asked, gesturing to the rather beaten up vehicle.

“Well, what other option do we have?” Shawn shot back.

“Does it still run?”

Lexi shrugged and approached the open driver’s side door, hopping inside and turning the key. The engine groaned and

sounded as if it were trying to turn over for a few seconds, but never started. She stopped for a moment or two before trying again, but with similar luck. With a sigh, she shrugged and hopped back out of the vehicle.

“Do we have a plan B?”

The rest of us exchanged glances before finally shrugging.

“That’s about what I expected,” she said, sighing. “So, I guess we do what do best, huh?”

“What’s that?”

“Beg, borrow, and steal.”

February 14, 2000

3:24:49 P.M.

Detroit, Michigan

Jared paced the raised portion of the loading dock, arms crossed as he stared at the ground before him, his eyes glassy and not entirely focused on what was before him. As he moved, a man’s eyes followed him from his spot leaning against the wall. The only sound that filled the large, hollow space was that of Jared’s shoes on the hard cement floor. After what had felt like an interminably long wait with nothing but the company of a restless man, the sound of a vehicle outside the large metal door broke the tense atmosphere. Both men instantly looked toward the door as voices could be heard from outside. Moments later, a banging came from the metal grating and Jared quickly glanced back toward the man behind him and nodded. He pressed a green button on a control panel set into the wall beside him and the sound of an electronic motor coming to life filled the space.

The metal creaked and groaned as it began to lift, the different segments rotating at the top to lie flat as the door slid up, a small line of bright sunlight appearing underneath it. As the door continue to rise, the sliver of light grew to a bar, and then finally the entire space was filled with the light. A black SUV slowly began to back into the loading dock, several men walking alongside it, as if guarding it. Jared stood at the edge of the raised section as he nervously drummed his fingers on his legs. When the

SUV had pulled fully inside the space, it came to a halt, but the engine remained on.

The driver's and passenger's doors opened and two more men in dark clothes stepped out. Leaving the doors open, they began to walk toward the back of the vehicle and Jared, who immediately recognized the driver as the team leader whom he had first spoken to when he had hired the men for the job months ago.

"Good afternoon," he said, unsure of exactly how to start the conversation.

"One package, delivered breathing, as requested," the mercenary said, stopping just beside the back quarter panel of the vehicle.

"I believed you over the phone."

With a nod, the man banged on the back of the vehicle. The next moment the back doors were thrown open and two more men hopped out, reaching back inside to grab something before hauling a large white object out from within. They carried each end of what looked like a rolled-up rug toward the loading dock, placing it on the ground several feet away and kneeling down beside it. They each pulled out knives and made quick work of cutting the bands of duct tape that had been used to keep the wrapping closed. As soon as they had, the fabric fell away to reveal a teenage girl with medium-length blonde hair, seemingly unconscious. As Jared watched, he could see her chest slowly rising and falling, giving the telltale hints that she was actually still alive.

"Consider the money transferred," he said, glancing up at the mercenary leader.

"With the extra we talked about?"

Jared nodded slowly.

"Well, thank you kindly," he said, nodding his head in return. "Put up quite the bit of trouble, they did. Wasn't expecting such a fight from a group of kids."

"They can really be something else," Jared replied.

"I'll let you deal with her as you wish," the mercenary said before whistling and waving his hand in a circular motion.

With that, the men around the SUV began to fall back in toward the vehicle, several hopping in while a few remained

outside, walking alongside. The engine rumbled softly as the tires began to roll forward, bringing them back into the setting sun of the late afternoon outside. Once the vehicle had fully cleared the door, the man at the back of the loading dock pressed the red button below the green one and the electric motor came back to life. Once the door was securely shut and in place once again, Jared carefully climbed down and approached the girl on the ground.

“You really trust they won’t say anything?” the other man asked, approaching the edge of the upper level.

“They’re mercenaries,” he said. “They get their money and they’re on their way. Done deal.”

The other man sighed and shrugged his shoulders.

“If you say so.”

Jared knelt down beside the girl on the ground, carefully placing one hand on the side of her face and turning her head to look at him. He examined her neck and face with his fingers for a moment before he stood up and waved to the man on the dock.

“Let’s get her inside.”

February 14, 2000

3:30:28 P.M.

West Virginia

When the road trip begins to stretch beyond a week, the novelty and excitement really begins to wear off. If we had our own car that might be something different, but hitching rides on everything from tractor trailers, to trains, to some questionable Samaritans really begins to take a toll. I stopped being able to count how long I had spent sitting or lying on my back on hard, metal surfaces that constantly vibrated and occasionally jerked violently at potholes and dips in the road. Whenever I stood on still, flat ground, I still felt as if I could feel my bones shaking inside me, however that could have been related to other things, as well.

The lack of money had hit particularly hard this time, which meant a rather severe lack of food. Shirts that had once at

least hugged somewhat close to my body hung with a good inch or two of free space. I had been forced to steal a belt from a secondhand clothing store somewhere near the border to West Virginia just to make sure my jeans didn't constantly fall down. However, the greatest discovery we had made was that of homeless shelters and soup kitchens. At first, I had noticed the looks on the others faces as we had entered them, as if they didn't want to believe that we were in the same boat as everyone else around us, but as soon as they had been handed food and offered somewhere to sleep indoors, those thoughts seemed to be put on hold.

These shelters had given us a way to combat entirely wasting away, but I could tell that it was taking a toll on all of us. It wasn't just the bags under the eyes and the loose clothing, it was the hollow look I'd see from time to time. When I'd lie in a sleeping bag or on a cot next to Chase at night, I would occasionally see that look just before we fell asleep. It was like his eyes were staring right through me, or perhaps seeing me all too well, and it killed me.

It absolutely killed me.

I blinked and suddenly an image of myself appeared before me, causing me to jump slightly, my reflection reacting in kind. As I glanced down, I noticed a sink in front of me, and a tile floor beneath my feet. Quickly, my surroundings came back to me as I glanced around the dingy tile bathroom. It was one of our "off" days, where we didn't try to make any forward progress toward Detroit since we had rolled into whatever town this was at about five in the morning.

The sounds of other showers running in the distance slowly seemed to fade in once again, almost like a film slowly beginning to move forward after coming to a stop. My attention turned back to the mirror in front of me and the girl in it. Everything that I had noticed about myself applied to everyone else, and seemingly vice versa. My eyes were just seeming to clear from the trance-like state I had apparently slipped into moments ago, but the fleeting look I saw in them was incredibly similar to what I had seen in Chase's those times in the middle of the night.

I reached up and carefully felt the tips of my hair, finding



that it felt somewhat greasy and not wet, so I assumed that I hadn't actually taken a shower, yet. A moment later, I noticed the white towel slung over my left shoulder and took it off, holding it in front of me before turning around and facing the row of individual shower stalls. I stepped into the closest open one and pulled the curtain across the open space before turning and placing the towel on a small, metal shelf that was bolted onto the wall. The weirdness of showering in a semi-public place like this had long since worn off, although I would not go quite so far as to say that I had totally become used to it, yet. I still took extra care to not bump into any of the walls as I quickly stripped down and turned on the water. As expected, it was initially freezing, taking my breath away for a second or two before it slowly began to warm up. By the time it reached an acceptably lukewarm temperature, my teeth were chattering quietly as I fought to control the shivering that had begun to wrack my shoulders.

A few minutes later, I had finished running my fingers through my hair enough times to feel like I had actually worked the water all throughout it. The shelter had bottles of low-grade shampoo available for communal use, but I had long ago decided that I didn't quite trust them. My hand came down on the knob with a good amount of force and I jumped slightly, afraid that I had accidentally broken it. When I twisted it to the right a second later, however, the water stopped and I breathed a sigh of relief. I reached for the towel I had left on the shelf when I had entered and toweled off as quickly as I could, pulling my clothes on about just as quickly.

As soon as I had pulled my shoes back on, I pushed the curtain aside and stepped out into the main part of the bathroom, carrying the towel in my hands to avoid soaking my shirt. I stopped in front of one of the mirrors at the sinks and quickly ran my fingers through my hair in an attempt to comb it, somewhat. After several passes with a questionably amount of success, I turned away and headed toward the exit. As I stepped through, I immediately found myself in the main sleeping area of the building, surrounded by bodies and voices.

My feet retraced the path to the rest of the group almost on auto-pilot, taking care not to step anyone else or their possessions.

Once I had reached the other three, I dropped the towel on the cot I had spent the night on, causing Chase to jump and spin around to look back at me.

“Hey, that’s wet,” he remarked, reaching back and moving the towel away from him slightly.

“Happens,” I replied, smirking.

He just gave me a look but rose to his feet, stretching his arms above his head.

“The other two went for showers shortly after you left,” he said.

“So you’re the only one who hasn’t?”

“Someone had to hold down the fort.”

I rolled my eyes but sat down on the cot where he had been moments ago, yawning deeply. He gave me a look but I flashed a smile before flopping backwards on the cot, staring up at the ceiling.

“You like surprisingly comfortable.”

“Maybe I just finally went crazy.”

Before he could say anything else, however, Shawn returned from wherever he had gone. His hair seemed wet, so I assumed it was from the showers, but perhaps it was just still greasy from a lack of one.

“You’ve always been crazy,” he said. “You mean you’re finally admitting it?”

I narrowed my eyes at him but said nothing.

“I’ll take the silence as a ‘yes.’”

“I cannot confirm, nor deny.”

The sound of clinking silverware beside me caused me to jump more than I wanted to admit, but I found myself glancing around once again, mildly confused as to where I was. Luckily, none of the others seemed to notice my confusion, so I quickly turned my attention back to the bowl in front of me. The hot, red substance in it steamed slightly as I slowly dragged the spoon back and forth through it. Apparently, my rather questionable behavior was noticed by the others.

“You gonna eat any of that, or just play with it?” Shawn

asked, glancing between my bowl and my face.

I let out a heavy sigh before taking another sip of the contents, the hot liquid burning slightly as it touched my lips. After another several minutes of slowly making my way through the soup before me, everyone else had finished, so I picked up my bowl and followed the rest of them to the dirty dish cart and then finally out of the dining area. Once we had returned to our small camp we had set up around two cots and several sleeping bags, I fell back onto the one I had found Chase on earlier with a heavy sigh.

“So, we’re officially taking this as an ‘off’ day?” Lexi asked, looking around at the rest of us as she took a seat on top of the sleeping bag where she had spent the previous night, or perhaps morning was a better descriptor.

“That was the idea, I thought,” Shawn replied, lying down on the bag next to her and placing his hands behind his head.

“I’m not complaining, really...”

Chase took a seat on the cot next to me and I felt him nudge me with his elbow lightly. I glanced over and saw him flash a quick grin.

“What’s that for?” I asked quietly.

“I can’t make facial expressions, now?”

“Depends on what you’re making them for.”

“Amusement, mostly.”

I shot him a look and he laughed. A moment later, his arm slid around behind my back and his hand wrapped around my side, squeezing me slightly. I leaned in toward him and tilted my head to the side, feeling his shoulder press against it as I did. Lexi’s eyes rolled as she grinned but didn’t say anything. Either Shawn’s eyes were closed or he just didn’t care enough to react, since he remained silent and motionless.

“So where in the hell are we, again?” Lexi finally asked, breaking the silence.

“I want to say West Virginia, still,” Shawn said, surprising me slightly.

“Well, that’s specific,” she replied.

“I wasn’t paying attention to the goddamn sign at four in the morning.”

I sighed as I shook my head slightly, feeling the hair pressed up against the side of my face by Chase's shoulder rub against my skin slightly, my eyes drifting closed for a moment.

“Come on, get with it.”

I felt someone shaking me rather violently as I blinked and opened my eyes, the sight of Shawn before me filling my vision. He looked somewhat annoyed, but took his hand from my shoulder and began to turn away. The feeling of my duffel bag's strap across my torso began to pull on my left shoulder as I glanced down at my feet. My dark purple sneakers seemed slightly worse for wear than I remembered, but I suppose constantly moving through city streets and backwoods trails would leave their mark. The stolen belt clung tightly to my waist as I pulled on it slightly, making sure it was still performing its job adequately.

My legs began to move, almost as if of their own accord, carrying me toward the rest of the group. Lexi stood in the open doorway, light from outside spilling through it and illuminating the left half of her body rather brightly while leaving the other half in almost total darkness. She looked almost like something out of a comic book from this angle. Once I reached the doorway, I slowed down and noticed she was giving me an odd look.

“Are you okay, Amaryss?” she asked, her voice low. “You look kind of like a ghost.”

I opened my mouth to speak, but suddenly found that no words came to me, so I simply closed it once again and nodded. Lexi's brow furrowed and she put a hand on my back, but didn't say anything. I flashed her a weak smile, my lips pulling back into a thin line, and she pat my back gently.

The light that had been shining through the door immediately seemed to fill the world around me as I stepped outside, the orange hue swirling around me and seeping into everything it touched. It felt like it would be hard to get it out of all of my clothes. The two boys led the way from the shelter through the pre-dawn darkness, blazing the path through the unknown streets toward our next ride. At least I hoped that was where we were headed.

Walking to Detroit would be such a drag.

We found someone or something able to take us at least part of the way, yet again, about ten blocks from the building where we had started, and then it was all aboard the brown shipping truck before the driver closed the back door and locked it. Just as I was beginning to wonder if we had been tricked, the vehicle lurched and we began to move forward. There was no saying that this wasn't part of the ruse, if there was one to begin with, but something told me that it was just like all of the others.

The familiar feeling of a hard, metallic floor appeared beneath my back as I attempted to lie down, unsure of exactly what I was hoping to accomplish, but it felt easier than standing. Just as I was about to place my bag under my head as a pillow, I felt a pair of hands grab my arms and stop me. I jumped slightly and blinked several times, a vague impression of someone above me appearing from the darkness.

"Why don't you let me take care of that," Chase said quietly.

Even though I couldn't actually see him all that clearly, I could tell he was grinning, so I responded in kind. His feet shuffled behind me before I heard him take a seat on the ground. A moment later, I felt something press up against my upper back and I took it as some kind of sign to lean my head backwards. It hit something solid, after I had barely begun to lean back, propping my head up at a somewhat inclined angle. A second or two later, the object moved away a bit and my head lowered slightly more, bringing it closer to a position more like I was sleeping on a pillow.

"Looking for some more alone time?" I muttered, my voice barely audible above the sound of the tires on the road beneath us.

"Well, when else is it going to be possible?"

A moment later, I felt fingers slowly begin to comb through my hair and a strange feeling ran down my spine. It was like the opposite of a chill, like a strange feeling of comfort and warmth that seemed to travel from my scalp, down my spine, and then spread throughout my body. My arms and legs instantly relaxed as my eyes drifted closed, although I didn't feel as if I were about to fall asleep.

*“Not this time,”* I thought. *“Don’t you dare, Amaryss.”*

I couldn’t deny that the sensation of his fingers slowly running through my hair felt good, but that seemed to be the trick to get me to drift off and slip out of reality lately. The long chunks of time that I seemed to lose track of where I was and what was going on were slightly worrying, but then again, it wasn’t like I felt like I could keep track of much of anything in my head. Ever since the abduction of Maya and the diner incident with Kailyn, the only thing that seemed to feel real and meaningful was the drive to get to Detroit. We had no map, and no way of knowing if we were actually on the right path, but the fact that we at least seemed to be making steady progress northward was a good start.

“How far is West Virginia from... Detroit?” Chase asked, the slight pause in his voice catching my attention.

“Do you now know what state Detroit is in?” I replied, smirking slightly.

“You know, looking at maps was not really a pastime of mine when I was a kid,” he shot back.

“Easy there, I’m just giving you a hard time.”

I pushed myself off of his legs and lifted myself up as best I could until my lips met his. They only stayed there for a brief moment before I pulled away and lowered myself into a lying position once again. We sat in silence for what felt like a long time, but I had a strange feeling my perspective was slightly skewed.

“So, what state is it in, then?” he asked, his voice interrupting the constant hum of the tires below us.

“Michigan.”

“That’s the one that looks like a hand, right?”

I attempted to glance up toward his face again, but his outline was just barely visible in the dark. A grin pulled at the corners of my lips, even if he couldn’t see it.

“Yeah, that’s the one.”

February 16, 2000

1:04:23 A.M.

Detroit, Michigan

The sound of coffee pouring in a pot was not unfamiliar in the small, makeshift office set up in the converted warehouse, but this had been one of the few nights that had seen less than three by the late hour. The smell and sound alone was enough to start giving energy to Jared's brain as he leaned against the desk haphazardly constructed from a length of old countertop balanced on two filing cabinets, his fingers idly tapping on the old, slightly yellowed surface. As soon as the sounds of the filling pot had slowly tapered to a drop every other second or so, he grabbed it from the machine and stepped to the right, pouring it in the rather generously-sized mug placed in the middle of the desk.

"Burning the midnight oil, I see?"

Jared jumped slightly and nearly spilled coffee all over the countertop, but caught himself just in time as he glanced back to see the man from the loading dock standing in the doorway to the room.

"This isn't the kind of business you get into if you want to get some sleep," he replied, sighing as he placed the pot back in the machine.

"I suppose not," the other man replied, running one hand through his sandy blonde hair. "Do you know the results from tonight, yet?"

"She's stable," Jared replied, nodding slowly as he grabbed the mug and began to move behind the heavy wooden desk he had found in the old office, heading for the rather large desk chair behind it.

"That would seem to be a cause for celebration, no?"

Jared fell into the seat with a sigh before reaching toward the lower right drawer, opening it and pulling something from inside. He held it up for the other man to see and grinned.

"I suppose an Irish coffee would count for both," he said.

The other man shook his head as he took a seat in one of the chairs on the opposite side of the desk. Jared poured a rather generous amount of the Jameson into the coffee before glancing up at the other man and holding it out toward him.

"I'm not a big coffee drinker, myself," he replied, "but if you have a glass..."

“There’s an extra coffee mug over there,” Jared said, nodding toward the coffee machine, “should work just about the same.”

The man laughed quietly as he pushed himself to his feet once more and grabbed the mug from beside the coffee machine, returning to the desk and allowing Jared to pour a good amount in his, as well.

“Hard to believe it’s almost gone,” he remarked, glancing at the rather low level of liquid in the bottle as Jared placed it back in the desk.

“I didn’t finish all of that off by myself, mind you.”

The man grinned as he took a sip of the whiskey, the liquid leaving a slight burning in his mouth and throat. Jared took a long draw from his coffee before placing the mug on the desk and letting out a heavy sigh.

“I swear these last six months have felt like years,” he commented, seemingly out of the blue.

After a few moments of silence, the other man realized that apparently he was not going to go on, and that had been the apparent end of his statement.

“Why’s that?”

Jared simply laughed quietly and ran his hands over his face, pausing to rub his eyes for a second or two.

“Let’s just say that some complications have come up, as of late,” he said.

“The kind that require you to hire mercenaries?”

He nodded in response, reaching for his coffee mug and taking another sip.

“On one hand, I’m rather pissed that things have gone so out of control with the subjects,” he said, “but on the other... I’m almost proud.”

Silence fell over the room once again, but the other man sensed that Jared would go on at any moment, so he remained silent, this time.

“They took what we’ve given them and just—ran,” he said. “In some ways, they’re the best field test we could ever hope for.”

“Field test?”

“We can take measurements and record all kinds of data in



a controlled setting, like here, all day long and say we have an idea what's going on," he explained, "but out there, we're seeing them step up and shine in these stressful moments. They're being forced to think on their feet and adapt to face each new situation. We couldn't have planned a more perfect test."

"So what about the girl we brought in here?"

Jared sighed and took another long drink of his coffee before placing the mug on the desk and swiveling a few inches back and forth in his seat.

"Always room for improvement."

February 19, 2000

1:04:23 A.M.

Detroit, Michigan

I thought we had seen cold in New York's November, but Michigan seemed bound and determined to prove me wrong. The air physically stung any exposed skin, turning it red in a matter of minutes. We had only walked several blocks outside before my fingers and toes began to feel numb, and my face felt stiff. Luckily for us, we had managed to find a 24-hour coffee shop and had holed up in the back corner. I was sitting on the booth seat to the table we had commandeered, my legs pulled in close to my chest so that my feet were resting on the edge of the cushion, my arms wrapped tightly around my knees. Chase had taken the booth seat beside me, leaving Lexi and Shawn with the two chairs on the opposite side of the table.

Staring at the prevalent red patches on Lexi's cheeks and forehead across from me, I knew that I couldn't look much better. Apparently she noticed my gaze, because her eyes suddenly met mine and she attempted to raise one eyebrow. I quickly looked down at the table, unsure of where else to avert my eyes.

"You know, with how much you keep staring at me," she said, "should Chase be worried?"

"What?" I spluttered, looking up in surprise as the boys now looked over, as well.

She laughed and shook her head, waving dismissively.

Shawn and Chase glanced between us for a moment before exchanging looks, themselves.

“I don’t think we’ll ever figure that situation out,” Shawn remarked.

“I mean, it’s easy enough to understand,” Chase replied, shrugging. “I just don’t want to pursue it any further.”

Before I could antagonize him about what exactly he meant by that, one of the workers from the coffee shop appeared at our table. I immediately tensed, thinking that she was about to kick us out, but I noticed that she was holding a small tray with four cups on it.

“Hey, guys,” she said, drawing everyone else’s attention, as well. “I... uh... these are on the house.”

We looked at her quizzically for a moment or two before she placed the tray on the table and quickly handed out the four cups, one to each of us. I glanced down at mine and saw what I assumed to be coffee inside, still steaming.

“We saw you guys come in and... well, thought you could use something,” she said, “since you didn’t order and all...”

The free drinks suddenly made sense, and clearly the meaning was not lost on the others, as well. We all nodded slowly as she placed the tray under her arm and glanced around at us once again, a strange, somewhat uncomfortable look in her eyes.

“Thanks,” I piped up, grabbing the cup and holding it up slightly toward her.

She nodded in response and flashed one more quick smile before hurrying back behind the counter, where the only other employee for the middle of the night was standing, watching the whole situation with an amused expression on his face.

“So, think it’s poison?” Shawn quipped, glancing around the group.

“Well, I’d like to believe that they’re just trying to be nice,” I replied, “but you can be the first to test it, by all means.”

With a shrug, Shawn took a sip. He stared off into space for a minute or two before nodding and looking back around at the rest of us.

“Definitely poison.”

Lexi rolled her eyes and shoved him playfully as he

grinned, taking another drink from the cup. I placed my other hand on the cup and brought it to my lips, the hot liquid stinging slightly as it touched them, but I forced myself to take a gulp of it. Despite the slight burning sensation in my throat from the temperature, the warmth felt incredible in contrast to the subzero temperatures we had experienced outside. The others slowly began to drink their cups, as well, all of us remaining in silence for several minutes as we did. Finally, I placed mine back on the table, but kept my hands on the outside, reluctant to let go of the warmth.

“So, we’re here, finally,” Chase said, breaking the silence, “Detroit.”

The rest of us nodded, but remained silent, yet again. When it seemed as if no one would speak up, I decided I would take the initiative.

“Now we’ve just gotta find that address, right?”

More nods greeted my statement and I let out a sigh, leaning my head forward for a moment before looking back up at everyone.

“Does anyone have it handy?”

Everyone glanced around at each other for a moment or two before I began to feel a sinking feeling in my chest.

“Don’t tell me no one remembers it...”

Just as I was about to start truly freaking out, Chase leaned down toward his bag on the floor and unzipped it, reaching inside. A moment later, after some rummaging, he pulled something out and placed it on the table. I leaned forward and saw that it was a piece of paper as he began to smooth it out with his hands. Once he had tried it several times, he glanced over at me and slid it across the table toward me. On the front, in scrawling black writing were two lines of text: “2156 Franklin Street; Warehouse District.”

“Oh thank God...” I sighed, leaning back in my seat and running my hands through my hair.

“I figured something like this might happen, so I took it upon myself while I remembered it well enough,” he said, grinning.

“Okay, so now we have the address,” Shawn broke in, “but, I don’t know about you guys, I have no idea where anything is in

this city.”

“Well, that’s why we take advantage of our resources,” I shot back.

“What?”

With a smirk, I grabbed the piece of paper off of the table and slid out from behind the table, pushing off the booth seat and slipping past Lexi. I began to make my way through the cluttered shop, slipping between tables in an attempt to make the quickest path toward the main counter. When I finally reached it, I placed the paper on it and waited for one of the two employees to acknowledge me. Almost immediately the woman who had brought us the coffee moments ago appeared before me, folding her hands on the counter in front of her.

“Hello, how can I help you?” she asked.

“First of all, I really want to thank you for the drinks,” I said, gesturing toward the rest of the group at the table. “It really meant a lot to us.”

I had to lay it on thick just to make sure she’d be willing to help; or at least that’s how I thought. It seemed to be working, because the woman smiled sheepishly and shuffled her feet slightly.

“It just... you guys looked like you could use something,” she said.

I gave a small nod and smiled. It didn’t entirely feel like something I would do, since usually my social grace was anything but, however this was not quite a normal situation.

“I was actually wondering if you could help me with something,” I started, placing the crumpled piece of paper on the counter. “We’re new to the city and we’re trying to find an address.”

I turned it around so she could read it. She leaned forward slightly and stared at the scrawling handwriting for a moment or two before frowning slightly.

“Well, the warehouse district is sort of across town from here,” she said, “but Franklin Street kind of runs along the river.”

“If you could even just tell us how to get to there, it would be a huge help,” I said.

She bit her lip and glanced up at me for a moment before

turning around and grabbing something off of the counter behind her. For some reason, my mind instantly assumed it would be a gun, or at least a weapon of some sort, but I quickly dispelled the notion as she placed a napkin on the counter. She grabbed a pen from a small jar next to the cash register and quickly began to write out a list of what appeared to be directions. Once she had written quite a few lines of text, she pushed the napkin toward me.

“That’s about as well as I can remember how to get there,” she said. “My brother used to go to a high school right near there, so that’s about where that should take you.”

“Thanks a million,” I said and flashed her another smile before grabbing both the paper and the napkin and turning to return to the group.

“You’re not planning on leaving right now, are you?” she asked, causing me to stop and glance back. “It’s freezing out there... you know. You could... probably stay here... for the rest of the night.”

Part of me immediately searched her tone for hints of a set-up, but the slightly nervous inflection to her voice and her hands fidgeting with the pen told a different story. It at least seemed to be one that wouldn’t end with us getting murdered in the back of a random shop in a city we didn’t know.

“Thanks,” I said, “that’s probably not a terrible idea.”

She laughed softly and looked down at the counter for a moment, tapping the pen on it as I grinned. Just as I began to turn away again, she looked back up.

“What’s your name?”

“My name?” I repeated, slightly taken aback.

She nodded, biting her lower lip slightly as she clearly made a conscious effort to hold the pen still in her hands. I debated lying and giving her some kind of fake name, but before I could think of one, I found myself already speaking.

“Amaryss.”

“Amaryss...” she repeated slowly, almost as if trying to let each part of it sink into her tongue as she spoke. “That’s not one you hear every day... pretty, though.”

I felt my cheeks grow hot as I smiled in return, glancing down at the papers in my hand for a moment before looking back

up at her.

“Thanks,” I replied.

“I’m Noelle,” she offered, tapping the pen on the counter once again.

“I like that one, too,” I said and she smiled.

“I guess that’s what happens when you’re born around Christmas,” she said.

“I don’t know of an interesting story to go with mine, unfortunately,” I replied. “Thank you for... everything so far, I suppose.”

She smiled and nodded in response.

“No problem, Amaryss.”

As I returned to the table and took a seat next to Chase once again, I saw him giving me an amused smirk. I raised an eyebrow at him as I slid into the booth seat once again and placed the paper and napkin on the table.

“What’s that look for?”

“You seemed to really hit it off with that waitress up there,” he said.

“Hey, she gave us free coffee and directions how to get to the warehouse district,” I shot back. “Sometimes it pays to be nice, you know.”

He just shook his head but pulled the napkin over in front of himself to read it.

“This doesn’t seem that hard to follow.”

“No, but she did say it was kind of across town,” I replied.

“So, when does our adventure start?” Shawn broke in, spinning his empty cup on the table idly.

“Probably not right this second,” I said. “In case you forgot, it’s kind of fucking cold outside right now.”

“Oh, I didn’t forget,” Lexi chimed in. “My face still hurts.”

“She said we could stay through the night,” I added, nodding toward the counter, “so I think it wouldn’t be a bad idea to take advantage of that.”

I saw Shawn now giving me almost the same amused smirk that Chase had given me earlier and I shot him a hard look.

“What now?”

“Nothing... just making some new friends, I see.”

I shrugged and slid lower in the seat slightly, bringing my feet back up onto the edge of it, wrapping my arms around my knees.

“Eh, so what?”

He just laughed and shook his head, sliding his cup back and forth across the table between his hands.

“Maybe you should try it, sometime.”

## **Part 3** **This is Us**

### **23** **Breaking and Entering**

February 19, 2000

1:30:24 P.M.

Warehouse District - Detroit, Michigan

Even though the skies were overcast, the shining sun would have probably done little to stave off the biting cold that seemed to possess the city. Any of the winters in Colorado seemed balmy compared to what it was like here. I had been forced to resort to drastic measures of wearing multiple layers in order to keep myself from feeling like an ice sculpture. Three T-shirts and two pairs of jeans still seemed hardly adequate against the relentless assault of the winter temperatures, but it was the limit of what I could fit comfortably on my body before I began to feel a bit like the Michelin Man. As it was, I was a little scared that I was able to squeeze into two pairs of my jeans without too much of a struggle. The shorts underneath did little to actually help with insulation, but I figured that putting on the last pair of bottoms that I had, as well, would help at least as some form of placebo.

Despite all of the layers, however, the wind whipping in from across the water instantly made it feel like I was only wearing the shorts and a T-shirt, the cold cutting straight through to the skin, and almost to the bone. My eyes watered against the onslaught of the icy breeze as the few strands of hair that had broken free from the wrap I had created around my head with one of my shirts flitted about. Occasionally, one of them would land in my eye and I would quickly attempt to brush it aside, but it was beginning to feel like a losing battle.

The others didn't seem to be faring much better, which both saddened me and made me feel somewhat validated in my struggle. Chase had copied my idea and wrapped one of his shirts



around his head so that only his eyes were visible, while Shawn and Lexi seemed more apt to brave the weather and had foregone any serious headgear; Lexi had, however, managed to procure a black hat of some sort on our journey across the city, which was pulled low enough that the bottom edge almost covered her eyebrows, her dirty blonde hair sticking out the back. It really did seem to be getting quite long, I noticed; the tips of her hair just touched at the bottom of her shoulder blades. Mine probably looked similar, but it wasn't like we had easy access to scissors, nor had the time to consider our fashion.

“So... this is the warehouse district,” Shawn remarked, bringing me back to reality. “Kind of looks like it makes sense.”

My eyes scanned across the various box-like, brick buildings that sat along the waterfront, a great deal of them rather still from the outside, but the plumes of some kind of vapor from the smokestacks dispelled their abandoned impressions. As I scanned down the line, one happened to catch my eye off to my right. The large smokestacks did not produce any significant clouds, although one or two smaller ones emitted black smoke into the sky, most likely heating ventilation, rather than some kind of production run-off.

“If by that you mean there a lot of square, brick buildings, then yeah, I'd say so,” Chase replied, glancing over at Shawn.

“No, I just have a psychic abil—”

“That one down there's not like the others,” I interrupted, stopping the argument before it could fully become one.

“How so?” Lexi asked, following my gaze.

“I don't see a ton of smoke coming from it,” I said.

“Doesn't seem like it's really building anything.”

“These are warehouses,” Shawn pointed out, “they don't necessarily build anything.”

“Okay, but...” I hesitated, biting my lip underneath the T-shirt wrap, “something tells me it's different.”

“Oh, well if Amaryss's instinct says it's right, then it must be so!” he replied, throwing his hands in the air as I shot him a death glare that he clearly didn't notice.

“Well, we have the address...” Lexi pointed out, “why don't we head that way and see if it checks out?”

Shawn just sighed but turned and began to walk in the direction of the building. I glanced toward Lexi and shot her an appreciative smile before realizing that she couldn't actually see my face. Her grin and response told me that she somehow knew, anyway. The rest of us began to follow after Shawn, our motions somewhat lethargic, almost like we were actually partially frozen. I was grateful that we were no longer facing directly into the wind, but it did little to stop its relentless onslaught, merely changed the angle.

As we drew closer to the building I had pointed out, a strange feeling began to take hold in my chest. At first it felt tight, like something was constricting my torso, and I began to wonder if the toll of wearing all of the various layers was actually beginning to have an effect on me, but then it quickly began to turn into a pounding sensation, like my heartbeat was reverberating through my entire chest. It was like even my body was telling me this was the right decision, but I didn't want to start getting my hopes up too high, yet. The thought that we could be this close to Maya, measured in feet rather than miles, seemed so surreal. It had only been about two weeks, but at some points it had felt like we would never get here.

*"Were those two weeks still not fast enough?"* crossed my mind, and I instantly blocked it out.

"I'm surprised a cop hasn't stopped by, yet," Lexi said, suddenly breaking the silence that had fallen over our group.

"You want one to?" Shawn shot back, glancing over his shoulder and slowing down slightly to match pace with the rest of us.

"No, but with these two all wrapped up," she said, jerking a thumb toward us, "it is a little suspicious."

"You got any cash on you, kid?" I teased, my voice low and gruff as I jabbed two fingers in Lexi's back, as if I were holding a gun.

She let out a small shriek and arched her back at my jab, twisting to get away from me as I laughed. Her eyes narrowed as she adjusted her hat and moved to the other side of Chase. He glanced between the two of us as I attempted to reach around behind his back, but Lexi quickly smacked my hand down. It

accidentally bounced off the back of Chase's jeans and I immediately felt my cheeks grow hot as I pulled my hand back. His head turned to look over at me and I could tell that one of his eyebrows was raised, even if I couldn't really see it through the opening around his eyes.

"Children... children..." Shawn chided, sighing. "Please keep your hands to yourself."

I fell silent once again as I could still hear Lexi snickering from the other side of Chase, but I kept my eyes on the sidewalk ahead of me. A moment later, I felt something touch my shoulder and I jumped, glancing over to my left. Chase's eyes betrayed his smile as he placed his arm around my shoulders, pulling me closer to him. A smile forced its way out of me, as well, as I wrapped one of my arms around his back, as well. My shoulder was pressed almost directly against his side as we continued to walk, our hips occasionally bumping against each other, as well. Our path immediately began to swerve a little more than it had before, but not so much that we could be mistaken for two drunks staggering down the sidewalk.

A few minutes later, we came to a stop at a four-way intersection in the street and I glanced up to see that we were directly across from the warehouse we had been heading toward this entire time. It looked like most of the other ones we had passed so far: partially boarded up and possibly abandoned, but the tell-tale hints of smoke from small ventilation stacks on the roof told otherwise. It occurred to me that if Jared were actually using this building, there was a good chance he would have some kind of security camera system, and I began to feel a little nervous being so close. My eyes immediately scanned the edge of the roof for any signs of watching cameras, but I couldn't immediately find any.

"Is this the right place?" Shawn asked, glancing back at Chase.

He reached into his pocket with his free hand and produced the piece of paper with the address we had received from the mercenary in Georgia. Shawn took it and glanced at the writing for a moment before looking back up at the building. It took us a good minute or so to see any indication of an address, but I finally

pointed it out on a single, metal door facing the main street we had been following: “2156.”

“So... do we go up and knock, or what?” Lexi asked, glancing over at the rest of us.

“As good as kicking down the front door would feel,” I answered, “it would probably not help us or Maya.”

My voice almost cracked on her name, but I forced myself to swallow the lump that had appeared in my throat and continue on.

“We should look for a back way in.”

I removed my arm from behind Chase as he removed his from my shoulders, as well, and I began to lead the way down the street to our left, heading behind the warehouse. As we continued down the street, I scanned the side of the brick building, looking for any sign of a means of entry. Maybe there was an old, weak door or an open window of some sort. The truth was I had no idea what I was looking for, but I felt like I would know it when I saw it. We reached the back of the building, which revealed a large parking lot, empty and cracked from disuse. Snow had piled up in various small mountains across the space, probably blown around by the wind. Just before I could turn around and suggest heading back the way we had come, I noticed that one of the drifts against the back wall of the building had been built up rather high; just above the crest was a window.

I quickly glanced back toward the others and waved for them to follow me as I hurriedly crossed the street and ran through the snow-covered parking lot toward the tall drift. As I reached it, I came to a stop and tentatively reached one foot out toward it. When I put my weight on it, the snow cracked slightly, but didn't really move; the top had iced over, creating a mostly hard surface.

“Want to go play in the snow?” Shawn asked as the other three caught up.

“See up there?”

I pointed toward the window at the top.

“Yeah?”

“That's our way in.”

“And how do you know this?”

“The same way that I knew this was the building, in the

first place.”

He rolled his eyes, but Lexi simply shrugged.

“Well, she was right the first time.”

With a grin and a sly wink from Lexi, I turned back to the tall drift of snow and twisted my bag around so it rested against my back before attempting the ascent. I had only gone a few steps up before I began to feel my feet slipping, so I instinctually jammed the toe of one shoe into the mound, creating a foothold. Once I was confident that I wasn't about to slide back down to the parking lot, I continued up the drift in a similar fashion. Luckily, the snow underneath the frozen top layer seemed to be piled thick enough that I didn't immediately sink through, either. By the time I was closing in on the top, however, the toes of both feet were practically numb, while my knees and ankles felt somewhat sore and painful from having to constantly kick the side of the snow mountain.

As I glanced up and saw the window mere feet away, my determination redoubled and I powered through the last minute or so. Before I knew it, the brick wall of the building appeared before me and I placed a hand on it to steady myself, breathing heavily. I glanced back to see Chase several feet behind me, Lexi and Shawn bringing up the climbing brigade behind him. Turning my attention back to the window I had insisted so desperately on reaching, I quickly found that maybe it wasn't quite so weak or partially open, as I had first thought.

I pressed my hand up against the glass, pushing on it to see if there was any kind of give to it, but the glass seemed firm in its position. With a frown, I pushed harder, but nothing happened. Only darkness seemed to be on the other side, and it quickly occurred to me that we could be trying to open a window about twenty feet off the ground, which would get us nowhere fast, except maybe a hospital.

I pressed my face up against the glass, cupping my hands around my eyes in an attempt to see what was inside, but I couldn't make out much through the darkness. Just then, I felt something tap on my foot and I jumped, nearly sliding back down the side of the snow drift. When I glanced back, I saw Chase right behind me, his head tilted to the side slightly.

“Any luck?”

“I can’t see shit in there.”

“What about getting it open?”

“I think we’re going to have to a little bit of forceful coercion.”

He shook his head as I grinned and turned back to the window. Bracing myself, I curled my right hand into a fist and took a deep breath. My shoulder tensed as I brought my arm across my body and quickly brought it back around and slammed it into the window. Pain shot from my wrist to my elbow, but I simply grit my teeth; nothing felt broken, so I took that as a not terrible sign. It wasn’t a good one, by far, but better than instantly shattering a bone.

“You okay up there SuperGirl?”

I shot Chase a death glare and he simply laughed, but moved to climb up beside me. Despite my attempt, the window appeared unmoved and showed no sign of damage. Despite this, my arm did not feel like it would be entirely up to another attempt. Chase pushed on the window a bit, himself, before letting out a “huh” and looking over at me.

“Help me push on this on the count of three, okay?”

I nodded and pressed my hands up against the glass, instantly feeling the freezing temperature burning my skin. Chase braced himself, as well, before letting out a heavy sigh.

“One... two... th—”

“Wait, do we go on three? Or is it three then go?”

He shot me a look with narrowed eyes as I grinned, hoping the devilish look was apparent in my eyes.

“On three.”

We turned our attention back to the window as he let out an exasperated sigh and began again.

“One... two... three.”

On three, I put all of my weight into pushing on the window. For a moment or two, it felt like we were having as much luck as if he had suggested we simply try to push over the brick wall, but after a few seconds I began to feel something give. I instantly worried that it might have been my hands, since they were rapidly going numb, but I quickly discovered that it was the

window. I heard the sound of wood creaking, and then felt the window budge inwards an inch or so. We didn't relent our force, though, and we were rewarded with another inch or two of give. My arms felt like they were on fire, while my hands had gone almost entirely numb, but I forced myself to keep going, using my legs to give as much power as I could.

Just as I was beginning to wonder when my arms would finally give out, I felt myself falling forward and I instantly snapped my head up to look ahead at the window. With a horrible creaking sound, the center part of the window began to fall into the building, some of the wood frame going with it. Chase and I fell forward onto the snow drift, our hands hanging over the empty space where the glass had previously been. A second or two later, the sound of smashing glass echoed from inside the building and I jumped slightly, causing Chase to laugh.

"Good going, wonder twins!"

I pushed myself to my knees and glanced back to see Shawn with a smirk firmly set across his lips while Lexi looked mildly impressed. With a roll of my eyes, I stuck up my middle finger in his direction before turning back to the open window.

"Someone might have heard that," Chase said.

"If they have ears and are literally not on the other side of the building, yeah, probably," I replied. "So we should get moving, yeah?"

With that, I crawled forward to the opening and stuck my head inside. The room was much darker than it was outside, but I could still make out functioning lights on the ceiling. We had, indeed, found ourselves about twenty feet off the ground in some large, storage space inside the building. There were rows of large storage shelves, metal beams holding up wooden planks balanced across them, lining the room, but they seemed largely empty, or whatever was on them looked like derelict machinery.

"You sure this is the right address?" I asked, glancing back at Chase.

"You said it was."

I let out a heavy sigh, the realization that this could all blow back really badly on me if we did all of this only to have it be the wrong building quickly beginning to set in.

“Well, how does it look in there?”

“It’s definitely like a warehouse,” I replied, backing out of the window slowly and turning to face him.

“Okay, so is there, like, a giant fall on the other side?”

“Maybe, like, twenty feet.”

“Oh, only twenty,” he shot back, sarcasm thick in his tone.

“Well... hold on,” I said before sticking my head through the opening once again.

Looking straight down, I saw one of the shelving units was actually positioned beneath us, breaking the fall by at least half the distance.

“There’s some kind of shelf below the window,” I reported, backing out of the window once again. “Could be kind of a landing point.”

“So who gets to make the lucky leap?”

“Well, all of us, right?”

“Well, that’s where I had an idea,” he said, pointing at something off to my right.

My gaze followed his gesture to find a door set into the brick wall about twenty feet away.

“Only one person needs to go in first, and then they could come let the rest of us in.”

“You don’t even know if that door is just a straight walk from where this window is,” I pointed out. “What if whoever it is gets inside and realized that it’s behind another locked door?”

“Then I guess the rest of us have to try to make the jump down, too, like you suggested from the beginning.”

I let out a sigh in frustration as I pulled my hands back into the sleeves of my jacket, closing my hands into fists and sealing the ends in an attempt to save them from the cold. His idea did make a lot of sense, and it basically just used mine as a backup, anyway; the idea of only one person having to brave the fall did seem quite tempting. It did sound like I would be the one making the jump, though, which made me hesitate for a moment.

“It doesn’t have to be you,” Chase said, almost reading my thoughts.

“Well, I said this was the place and I feel like...”

I trialed off, suddenly unsure about the end of the sentence.



Part of me didn't want to say it because I felt like it wasn't entirely true, but the other part of me didn't want to say it because I simply didn't want to admit it.

"Like what?" he pressed, pulling the shirt from around his head.

*"Don't let me see your face," I begged internally, "I'm not going to be able to resist whatever look you're about to give me."*

It was almost exactly what I expected, like those looks I had seen late at night on the road and in those shelters. His eyes seemed to be seeing straight through me... straight through the words and into my very core. I could try to lie, but he would know.

"I feel like I'm the one who pushed us into all of this," I finished quietly, my eyes glancing over to see if Lexi and Shawn were close enough to hear.

"Ryss, you didn't push us into anything," he said. "If anything, you kind of steered us into the right things."

"Right things?"

"Looking for our pasts," he explained. "Yeah, Shawn's dad was a piece of shit, but it was the right idea. We need somewhere to start from before we try to move forward out here."

I stared into his dark eyes for a few more moments until the image began to waver. For a moment I almost thought this was some strange, ability-induced thing and he could secretly mess with my mind, but I quickly discovered that, in fact, I was crying. Tears began to roll down my cheeks as I quickly wiped them away with my jacket sleeves, turning away from Chase slightly.

"Hey..."

I heard him move forward and a moment later I felt his arms around me. As soon as I felt them close behind my back, I leaned my head forward slightly and felt his shoulder press up against it. My arms slowly reached around him, as well, but they hung with much less conviction.

"As to—" Shawn's voice began to call from below us, but a grunt quickly cut him off as I presumed Lexi must have hit him.

Chase and I let go of each other as I wiped the last remnants of the tears away, now hoping that they wouldn't freeze on my skin.

“I’ll take one for the team,” he said, grinning.

“Please don’t word it that way,” I replied, frowning slightly.

He smirked and pat me on the shoulder one more time before glancing back at the other two.

“I’m gonna jump down in there and make my way to that door,” he pointed to the one he had shown me a moment ago, “and open it from the inside. Meet you guys over there in a minute or two?”

“If you say so,” Shawn replied.

“What happens if you can’t open it, for whatever reason?”

“Then I guess we all have to try to get in through this window.”

“I take it there’s a reason we’re not all doing that now, in the first place?”

“Just meet me at the door,” he sighed before turning toward the window.

He carefully slipped one leg through the opening, straddling the bottom ledge where the pane of glass had previously sat. With one last glance back at me, he brought his other leg inside and turned so he was facing inward. A moment later, he pushed off and disappeared from sight. I found myself holding my breath as I listened for some kind of crash or other loud sound. A second later I heard the sound of something heavy landing on wood, but no sounds of splintering and cracking came from within, so I hoped that meant he had landed safely.

My curiosity getting the better of me, I quickly scrambled forward and looked through the window. Chase was still crouched on top of the wooden shelf below me, but he seemed to be fine and still moving. Just before I could retract my head once again, he glanced back up and grinned, showing me a thumbs-up. I shook my head and backed out of the opening, turning to the other two.

“To the door.”

We half-climbed, half-slid down the side of the colossal snow drift until we had arrived back at the ground. With our footing now much flatter and more stable, we quickly made our way to the door and came to a stop. The wet patches on my pants from kneeling in the snow were beginning to seep through the

second layer of jeans and touch my skin, which instantly sent a shiver down my spine.

“He landed fine, didn’t he?” Lexi asked.

“Yeah, why?”

“Don’t worry, then.”

“Who said I was worrying?” I shot back.

She gave me a look and I sighed.

“I’m cold, Lexi. It’s soaking through my pants.”

I pointed to the wet patches that ran from my knees down to my feet and she nodded, laughing slightly. Before I could attempt to hit her with some other witty comeback, I heard the sound of something moving on the other side of the door and my head whipped around to look at it. After several seconds of what sounded like some kind of struggle, the door handle turned and the grey, metal portal swung open. Chase stood on the other side, one hand resting on the frame while the other was placed firmly in the middle of the door.

“Hello there,” he said, smirking. “Why don’t you all come inside? You look cold.”

I rolled my eyes but quickly moved forward and slipped past him as he moved his arm out of the way. As Lexi passed, I heard him let out a quiet grunt, followed by a laugh. When I spun on my heel and began walking backwards, I saw Lexi just turning away from Chase and following me inside, Shawn moving to enter the doorway just after her.

“You really have a thing for punching people today, huh?” I remarked.

“Sometimes people need it,” she said, nodding in the general direction of the two boys.

“I suppose,” I replied, shrugging.

I saw Chase shoot me a look and I grinned, but remained silent. He pulled the door closed behind us before hurrying to catch up to the rest of the group. Now that we were inside the building, it was eerily silent; the walls seemed to block all surrounding noise from the wind and the city. It was much warmer than outside, though, so I had to give it that.

“Okay, so we’re in,” Shawn said quietly, glancing around. “Where do we go, now?”

We slowly began to wander farther into the room, searching for signs of something that looked a laboratory, I guessed. It made sense that Jared would have something like that set up here if the mercenaries were supposed to deliver Maya to this building. I doubted he wanted to box her up and ship her out, but then again that did sound like an idea that might occur to him.

“So if I were a scientist doing illegal experiments, but didn’t want anyone to know I was doing them in a rather obvious and plain building, where would I do them?” Lexi wondered aloud.

“In the back, maybe?” Chase offered.

“The back of where?”

He pointed through a row of shelves to our left and I saw what appeared to be a large, metal grate door. I quickly slipped between the covered and wrapped pallets stored on the ground floor and made my way toward it. As I approached, I realized that the area right in front of it was actually lower than where we were standing, like some kind of pit that led to another large set of doors set into the outside wall of the building.

“It’s a loading dock,” Shawn observed. “Think maybe someone made a delivery here recently?”

My lips set into a thin line as I glanced toward the large, interior door to our left. It didn’t entirely look like it had been used in quite a while, evidenced by the rust that had begun to set in along the bottom and in a few places on the sides. As my eyes traveled over it and to the right, however, I noticed a much smaller, more person-sized door set into the wall. Without saying a word, I simply began to make my way over to it, trusting that the others would follow. When I came to a stop in front of it, I didn’t find any sort of keypad or advanced security, as I had expected; the door appeared to be locked simply with a key, like any normal one.

“This seems too easy...” I muttered under my breath, frowning slightly.

“No fancy security on the front door?” Lexi remarked, glancing around, as well. “That doesn’t sound like him... well, from what I know. Phil and Chuck always kept everything locked up super tight.”

“And no one bothered to try to sneak in until we showed up, it seems,” I replied, grinning.

“What would have been the point?” Shawn said. “We weren’t really in a position to plot any sort of escape, and it would have been pretty obvious who had broken in if we had.”

“Well, I think he’s gonna know who is this time,” Chase said. “Try the door?”

I reached out and gripped the handle, pushing down on it, but it didn’t budge. Releasing it, I shook my head and glanced back at the others.

“Time for a more aggressive means, I’d say.”

“Not going to even try to pick it?” Shawn asked, his tone somewhat mocking.

“You have anything to do that with?” I shot back. “Would you know how if we did?”

“I was kidding, calm down,” he snapped. “Just doesn’t seem that stealthy, considering we were all about sneaking around a moment ago.”

“My care for sneaking around diminishes the closer in proximity to Jared I get,” I said, shrugging. “Let’s break it down.”

With that, I turned back to the door and braced myself. Before the others could stop me, I raised my foot and drove it into the surface just beside the handle with as much force as I could muster. To my surprise, the lock actually gave way and the door banged open, bouncing off of the far wall slightly and slowly beginning to drift closed once again. We all stood still in stunned silence for a moment as the loud bang echoed through the space, slowly distorting and dying out as it did. Before it had swung completely closed, I stepped forward and put a hand out to catch the door.

“Well... that was easy,” I said, glancing back. “Onwards?”

Shawn just shook his head as Lexi and Chase grinned.

“Who needs lock-picks when we have a badass SuperGirl like Amaryss, here?” she said, stepping up to follow me farther into the building.

I felt my cheeks grow hot as I quickly turned away, moving to step into whatever lay beyond the now open doorway. Immediately, I found myself in a narrow hallway leading toward a set of stairs about twenty feet ahead. Without waiting to see if the others were following, I began to make my way toward them. The

sound of my footsteps on the metal steps echoed throughout the hallway, instantly seeming much louder than even the door had moments ago. My gung-ho attitude about not carrying whether I snuck around anymore began to fade as I quickly glanced up at the ceiling and the top of the stairs, almost as if I expected someone to be watching, or a camera to be overhead.

Despite my sudden apprehension, I pushed on until I came to another door. No keypad sat next to this one, however, so I simply walked up and gripped the knob. Without pausing to think about what could be on the other side, I twisted it and began to push it open a crack. Immediately, light spilled into the darkened staircase from whatever room lay beyond. I blinked against the change in brightness for a second or two before moving forward and moving my eye as close to the open crack as I could, attempting to see what was ahead before I simply barged in.

The space beyond immediately seemed to open up much more than the narrow hallway we had just entered through, but I couldn't make out what was actually in the space. Hearing no voices, nor any other signs of life, I pushed the door open and stepped inside. The space indeed seemed to have originally been intended as some kind of office space, but all of the cubicle walls had been removed, pushed aside and replaced with what looked like hospital gurneys, although they all appeared to be empty, at the moment. Several desks still lay scattered about the room, lending to the credibility of a converted hospital space. It didn't particularly look like the area was being used at all, at the moment, though, since no bodies lay on the gurneys, nor were there signs of Jared and his compatriots.

Part of me was instantly relieved that no one was in the room, but another part felt let down since I had half-hoped to settle this fight right away. My first few steps farther into the space were much more cautious than my entrance through the hallway and the staircase had been, but each footfall still sounded like someone dropping a ton of bricks on the tile floor. My hands nervously gripped the strap to my bag, twisting it slightly and double-checking that it was positioned behind me and out of the way. I kind of wished I had the gun from that mercenary back in Georgia.

My head swiveled back and forth as I constantly swept the

large, open space; still, no signs of life appeared before me. I approached the desk closest to me and quickly glanced down at its surface to find it barren. With another glance around the room, I carefully slid the top drawer on the right open and checked inside: nothing. I searched the other two but found them just as empty as the first, the most interesting thing being a set of empty hanging file folders. The sound of the last drawer closing might as well have been a gunshot in the empty space and I instantly cringed, looking up.

The other three had moved into the room and were glancing around, as well. Lexi was slowly walking through the center of the space, slowly rotating as she moved. Chase and Shawn were moving toward two other desks on the opposite side of the room.

“What are we looking for?” I heard Shawn ask, but his voice couldn’t have been much louder than a whisper.

“I don’t know, anything?”

“Okay, how is that going to help us find Maya?”

“Maybe not her, but there’s got to be some kind of dirt on them in here.”

I was about to step in and say something when I realized that they probably didn’t expect me to be able to understand them from this far away, so I kept my mouth shut, instead moving around the desk and heading toward the center of the room, where Lexi had come to a stop and was frowning slightly. As I approached, she glanced over at me and shrugged.

“Nothing’s here,” she said.

“Well, clearly someone was here, once,” I said, gesturing to all of the equipment scattered about.

“Okay, but Maya isn’t,” she shot back, “which is the whole reason we’re here.”

“I know...” I sighed, rubbing my eyes with my hands, realizing that I now actually had feeling back in my fingers.

“There’s more to this building, though,” she said, nodding to something off to her left.

I followed her gesture and saw a set of wooden double doors in the far corner from where we had entered. Although there were windows set into them, I couldn’t see what lay beyond from where we stood.

“Well, onwards we go, I guess,” I replied. “Let’s grab the others.”

Lexi nodded as I turned on my heel and began to move over toward the boys. As I approached them, Chase glanced up from his search through the desk and nodded.

“Find anything interesting in there?”

“Not really,” he replied, sighing as he closed the drawer. “Just more empty space.”

“I’m starting to see a theme, here,” I quipped dryly.

“Are we expecting to find Maya in one of these drawers?” Shawn suddenly spoke up, standing up from behind a nearby desk that he had apparently been searching.

“No—”

“Then what are we doing with all of these?” he interrupted. “Finding dirt on Jared? Why?”

“Well, it might be worth it to know what the hell is going on.”

“Why?” he shot back, moving closer to me. “Why don’t we just get our friend and get the fuck out of here? I’d be perfectly fine never seeing or thinking about any of these people ever again.”

“You’re not at all curious—”

“What happened to me? Not particularly,” he said. “If anything happened.”

“I think—”

“Don’t go giving me your theories,” he spat. “Until I see some proof, I’m gonna leave it at nothing.”

“So seeing is believing?” I said.

“I guess.”

“More like ignorance is bliss.”

“I’ll take it.”

I wanted to say something else, but I simply resorted to letting out an angry sigh and turning back to Chase.

“There’s a door over there, leads farther in,” I said matter-of-factly. “Let’s go see where it goes.”

He nodded and moved around the desk, falling in step beside me as I brushed past Shawn and moved to meet Lexi, who was leaning against the wall beside the doors she had indicated



earlier. As we approached, she pushed herself off of it and let her arms fall to her sides.

“Farther down the rabbit hole?” she asked.

“Why not? We’ve come this far already,” I said, my tone perhaps a little harsher than I had intended.

She simply nodded as I approached the handle and glanced through the window just above it. Beyond seemed to be yet another hallway, although this one sported windows along the left side, across from a series of doors along the opposite wall. Seeing no one, yet again, I pushed the door open and stepped through, holding it open behind me for the next person. I began to slowly make my way forward, keeping an eye on the right side of the hallway, watching for one of the doors to open at any moment.

As I approached the first one, I moved over toward it and placed my hand on the handle. With a quick glance back to see Chase just behind me, I began to turn it. The door appeared to be locked since it didn’t turn, and I let out a sigh. Shawn was already at the next one, but it also appeared to be locked, since it didn’t budge under his hand. He glanced back at us and shrugged, already moving ahead to try the next one. Just as he was about to grab the handle, however, the door opened and a man stepped out.

Both he and Shawn jumped in surprise, but Shawn recovered first. He quickly shoved the man forward into the doorframe, throwing him off balance. His hands clenched into fists around the man’s shirt as he threw him sideways into the room he had just exited, following immediately after him. Chase and I rushed forward, reaching the doorway a moment later and barging inside.

I found Shawn in the midst of a struggle with the man, who had apparently recovered enough from his initial shock to put up a fight. Both men were gripping each other by the chests of their shirts, trying to keep the other at bay. Although I’m sure he was perfectly capable of handling himself, I quickly rushed forward and wrapped my arms around the other man’s midsection, ramming my shoulder into him in a pseudo-tackle. He let out a loud grunt as I pushed him back until we ran into something solid and he stumbled, falling backwards as I found myself going on top of him. After I had registered we were lying on top of something, I

removed my arms from around him and pushed myself up, holding his chest down as I did. He went to push back against me, but I slammed one of his arms against the surface he was now lying on with enough force that I heard him let out a quiet whimper.

“Hold it,” I growled, keeping one hand firmly pressed against his chest.

He seemed to finally comply, although I suspect it had some to do with the appearance of the other three around us rather than any sort of intimidation I was able to exude. Now that I had a moment to pause, I was able to get a look at just who we had fought. He appeared to be somewhere in his thirties with long, somewhat unkempt curly hair and a scraggly beard. His eyes were bloodshot, which was clearly evident as they were open wide, staring around at all of us. I couldn’t really blame him: it looked like he had just been attacked by a gang of homeless people.

“Who are you?” I asked.

“Who the hell are—”

Shawn brought his elbow down on the man’s stomach, causing him to grunt and stop mid-sentence.

“We asked first,” he snapped.

“Jeremy Marx,” the man wheezed.

“I assume you work with Jared, here,” Lexi continued.

“How do you—?” he began to ask but stopped as a look of realization came over his face. “You’re the escaped subjects...”

“Yep, fugitives on the run,” Shawn chimed in, “and I’m sure you heard all about what happens when someone doesn’t work with us?”

“The, uh, the guys who brought the girl in said—”

Shawn hit him in the stomach once again and he groaned, but stopped mid-sentence.

“It was rhetorical,” he said.

“But back to a point you just brought up,” I said quickly, “you mentioned a girl being brought in?”

“Couple of days ago, I think,” he managed, his voice strained.

“Where would she be right now?”

“I—I don’t—maybe in the treatment area,” he said.

“*Treatment area?*” immediately shot through my head, but

I forced myself to repress my curiosity.

“Where is that?”

“End of the hallway, through the door, take a right, then a left through the big, metal doors, used to be some kind of food storage area.”

“Well, that was easy,” Lexi said, looking around at the rest of us.

“Seems to be,” I replied, shrugging. “Thanks, Jeremy.”

With that, I let go of him and stood back a step or two. Just as he was about to push himself up, Chase took a swing at him and slammed his fist into the left side of his head. Jeremy tumbled sideways and off of the desk that I had thrown him onto moments ago. Once he hit the ground, I heard him moan and saw him vaguely attempting to push himself up. Lexi moved around her side and quickly delivered a swift kick to what I assumed was his head. With one last jerk from the hit, he lay still.

“You know, I almost feel sorry for him,” she commented, looking up at us, “a little.”

“Oh?” I shot back, raising an eyebrow.

“He seemed nice enough,” she replied, shrugging, “and he didn’t seem to be too much trouble.”

“You didn’t already get a soft spot for the dude you just met, did you?” Shawn teased.

“Feeling sorry does not mean I have a thing for him, thank you very much,” she spat, shooting him a death glare.

“Guys, friend was kidnapped, just busted ass across half the country to get her and she might be at the end of the hallway?” I cut in, gesturing with my thumb toward the door.

They fell quiet as I turned to head back into the hallway, although I saw Shawn and Lexi exchange one last glare before they were out of my sight. I pushed open the door to the hallway and immediately turned to the right and began to head toward the doors at the far end, as Jeremy had said. The thought that this could very well be some kind of trap was at the forefront of my mind, but it wasn’t like we had a better option, at this point. Seeing as the first room we had just been in was an office, it didn’t seem likely that we’d find her behind one of the other doors like it. Just before I reached the double doors at the end of the hallway, I

felt a hand on my shoulder and I jumped, instantly wheeling around only to find Chase right behind me.

“Ryss, hold up,” he said.

“What? We’re almost there,” I said, gesturing to the doors behind me.

“I know, but... I think we should be cautious about this,” he said. “We don’t know what’s actually through there. We’ve been careful this whole time, and I think now is especially not the time to stop that.”

“We handled that guy back there just fine,” I pointed out.

“I know, but that was one guy,” he said, “and he wasn’t armed with a gun or anything.”

I found myself biting my lower lip as I stared blankly at the ground just to the right of Chase. Part of me wanted to tell Chase to just take the chance and barge in there with me, but deep down I knew he was right. As much as I wanted to burst through the doors and just find Maya, things could go very badly for us, and her, if we walked in on the wrong people.

“Okay, we’ll do it your way,” I sighed, looking back up at him.

He gave me a look I couldn’t quite read, so I quickly grinned.

“I’m kidding, come on,” I said. “It’s like that time back in California.”

Chase’s head cocked to the side slightly as he looked confused.

“You know, when we snuck into Chuck and Phil’s lab and got all those names,” I prodded. “We were all, in the shadows... like ninjas.”

“Ninjas?”

It was his turn to raise an eyebrow now, and I couldn’t help but laugh at his comically failed attempt to do so.

“Or something like that,” I said. “Come on, it’s killing me to be this close after this whole trip and to be just standing here.”

He laughed and shook his head, but gestured over my shoulder.

“Lead on.”

I spun on my heel and gripped the handle, instantly

realizing how sweaty my palms actually were. With one last sigh, I carefully pushed the door open a crack, glancing through the opening to see another hallway, but this one was slightly darker than where we were standing. I could make out an off-white wall directly ahead, but there was nothing particularly interesting or informative about it. Sensing no immediate presence or threat, I pushed open the door and stepped inside, holding it behind me for Chase. I felt the weight of the door lift from my hand and I assumed he had it, so I dropped my arm and looked both ways down the hallway I was now standing in. To the left was a wall about five feet away, but to the right appeared to be more doors on either side. Most of them looked like the office doors we had just seen in the previous hallway, although about fifteen feet ahead of us stood two rather large, sturdy metal doors that certainly seemed like what Jeremy had been describing.

“I think that’s the one,” I whispered, glancing back at Chase.

“I’d say so,” he replied, glancing back to make sure Lexi and Shawn were right behind us.

I began to quietly and cautiously move toward them, trying to make sure my footsteps made as little sound as possible. The walk seemed to take much longer than it should have, my heart rate accelerating a bit with each step. By the time I stopped alongside the doors, the pounding in my ears almost entirely obliterated all other sounds around me. My eyes remained fixated on the door as I forced myself to take a slow, deep breath. Just then, a single sound penetrated the pounding in my ears: the sound of a harsh metallic click.

I instantly spun around, as did the others, to find Shawn holding the pistol from the mercenary at the wreck in Georgia. It was pointed at the ground currently, but he gripped it with both hands. After a moment or two, he looked up at the rest of us to see three pairs of eyes watching him intently.

“What the hell are you doing?” Lexi hissed.

“Just in case we need it,” he replied.

“If you go in there waving that gun around, you’re going to make a situation where we need it,” she shot back.

“Don’t worry about it,” he snapped. “Better safe than

sorry, anyway.”

I could see Lexi’s jaw working as she turned to look at me and Chase, clearly hoping for backup. When neither of us said anything for a moment or two, her expression turned to one of disbelief.

“You’re okay with it?”

“Keep it hidden,” I said quietly, “but ready.”

Shawn nodded, placing the gun in the top of his bag, and leaving the zipper partially open. I could hear Lexi muttering under her breath as I turned my attention back to the doors. She clearly didn’t want us to have the gun at all, but for once something told me that it might be a good idea, despite Shawn’s previous track record.

With one final deep breath, I stepped across the doorway and gripped the handle of the far door. Chase took up place at the other, grabbing its handle, as well. Our eyes met for a moment and we both nodded.

“One... Two...”

“Three.”

## 24

### Life and Consequences

February 19, 2000

2:00:48 P.M.

Warehouse District – Detroit, Michigan

I don't know what scene I was expecting to see once we opened the doors, but it certainly wasn't what we were currently faced with. The room looked like a makeshift operating room, complete with a hanging curtain of plastic tarp in the center of the room. Shadowy silhouettes moved against the lit backdrop as I heard several confused voices from up ahead. Unable to think of a snap decision, I glanced to Chase for help. He simply looked back at me with slightly widened eyes as he shrugged, throwing his hands up in the air in what looked somewhat like defeat.

"Shit..." I muttered, turning back toward the tarp and voices ahead of us.

One of the silhouettes moved off to the right and I saw a hand reaching for something. A moment later, the tarp pulled back slightly to reveal a man wearing a bright green smock and hat, like something from a hospital, complete with a surgical mask and gloves. When his gaze fell on the four ragged youths across the room, he froze, as did I. Before I could think of anything to do or say, I felt someone push roughly past me and I glanced to my left.

"Step away from there!" Shawn shouted, brandishing the pistol.

The man jumped and went to turn back toward the others behind the tarp, but Shawn suddenly fired a shot into it a foot or so away from him.

"Step the fuck away!" he shouted again. "Hands in the air!"

The rest of us burst into motion, hurrying toward the tarp as the man clearly looked conflicted, but raised his hands and began to step away. As we approached, Chase grabbed him and pushed him up against the wall to the right. I quickly grabbed the tarp and pulled it aside, stepping through the opening.

Immediately I was confronted with the sight of a well-lit table surrounded by some kind of medical machinery. Two more people in similar outfits as the man Chase was currently holding up looked up in surprise at the sight of me.

“Who the fuck are you?” one of them, a man, demanded.

“Step away!” I barked, stalking toward them.

“Don’t come in here like that!” he shouted, pointing at me.

“I said step away!” I screamed, my voice cracking slightly.

As I approached the table, I shoved the man back and he tripped, falling to the floor. The other figure attempted to grab me, but I quickly broke free and grabbed their arm, yanking them in the same direction as the first man.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” the man on the floor shouted.

“We’re here for our friend,” I said. “A blonde girl named Maya.”

“What?” he said.

“Where is she?!”

I sensed a presence beside me and I glanced to my left to find Shawn brandishing the pistol at the two new figures.

“Answer her question,” he growled.

“You’re putting her life in danger by being here,” he said.

“Says who?”

“Says me,” he snapped. “You don’t understand what you’re—”

A sharp boom filled the air and I staggered to the side, immediately slapping one hand against my left ear as I let out a cry of pain. A ringing filled both ears as I blinked rapidly and glanced back toward the others to see Shawn still holding the pistol, the man on the floor lying still and flat on his back while the other figure, apparently a woman, screamed.

“Jesus Christ,” I said, “what did you do?!”

“Where is the girl?” Shawn barked, ignoring me and aiming the gun at the woman.

“Shawn!”

“Where is Maya?!”

I was immediately regretting letting Shawn have the gun as I suddenly lunged forward and pushed his arm down, aiming the



gun at the floor.

“Stop!” I hissed.

My hand was closed tightly around his as I attempted to wrestle the gun from his grasp. After a second or two of struggle, he managed to shove me to the side, my hand slipping from around his as he re-trained the gun on the woman.

“Please, don’t shoot me! I can tell you!” she pleaded.

“So speak!”

“Shawn!” I snapped, regaining my balance and moving toward him again.

“You’re putting her life at risk—”

“Wrong answer.”

“No!”

With another loud bang and a flash of light, the gun fired and the woman instantly fell to the ground with a heavy thud. The ringing filled my ears once again, but the adrenaline and anger pushed it aside as I slammed into Shawn, grabbing his hand holding the gun. He was immediately knocked off balance as I ripped it from his hand, shoving him to the ground. I stared down at him for a moment, breathing heavily as I felt my heart pounding in my chest, reverberating throughout my entire body.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?!” I screamed.

He looked up at me, his eyes shooting daggers, but I was not in any mood to back down.

“Lexi was right to not trust you with this,” I growled, holding the gun up before turning away and stalking toward Lexi and Chase, not looking back at Shawn.

As I approached, I saw Lexi’s face was drained of color, her lips slightly parted as her eyes seemed to stare straight through me. The gun was still held tightly in my hand, although I made sure that my index finger was firmly placed along the side, away from the trigger. Chase was still holding the first man against the wall, although he was looking over his shoulder at me.

“You brought that fucking psycho in here?” the man against the wall demanded. “Are you going to kill me, too?”

“Shut up,” I growled, but kept the gun at my side. “We’re here for our friend.”

“The blonde girl you were shouting about?”

I nodded, standing to Chase's left.

"They tried to tell you that you could be putting her at risk coming in here," he said.

"I heard—" I began to retort but instantly froze.

A chill filled my body, starting in my chest and running to my extremities as I nearly dropped the gun. My look of shock must have been noticeable because Chase pulled a double take before shooting me a concerned look.

"Amaryss?"

I slowly turned around to face the table in the center of the room again. The chill that had run through my body now turned to almost complete numbness in my hands and feet as the gun slipped from my fingers. The sound of it clattering across the floor seemed distant and removed as the lights in the center of the room suddenly seemed much brighter. Blonde hair shone under them as I saw a splash of red just below it. Pale fingers hung toward the ground as I found my knees weakening.

*"No, no, no, no, no..."*

Before I knew it, I was running, my feet pounding across the tarp-covered tile floor, my bag banging against my lower back. As I was just about to the center of the lights, I dropped to my knees, sliding across the last foot or two. My head was just level with the table as I gripped the edge of it with my left hand. The other reached forward and I felt Maya's hot, blonde hair under my outstretched fingers. Tremors began to take hold, starting in my hands and quickly spreading to the rest of my arms, right up to my shoulders.

"You... you..."

My chest began to heave as I felt the shaking in my shoulders intensify, each breath tearing at my throat.

"You can't... oh god..."

My eyes travelled from the still, almost peaceful face toward the blue sheet-like cover placed over her from the shoulders down. One shaking hand slowly reached over and began to pull at it, slowly revealing pale, bare skin beneath it. Just as the sheet began to pull away a bit more, I saw a flash of red and my next breath came in like a ragged gasp, physically tearing at my throat.

I let go of the sheet and immediately pulled myself up with

the table slightly, my hands grabbing at her shoulders and pulling her toward me. Something hot and slick immediately greeted my touch, but I ignored it as I found myself falling back toward my heels, pulling Maya with me. A moment later, a heavy weight seemed to fall upon my chest as I nearly fell flat on my back, but I managed to push back against it, keeping myself upright. I lifted one hand up to see a dark red fluid staining my skin. It started to drip and shake off as my fingers trembled and my eyes moved from my hand toward Maya once again.

My heart skipped a beat, once again, at the sight of red against her pale skin, but this time it was much closer. The weight on my shoulder and chest seemed to grow heavier as I fought harder to hold myself and her up. My vision began to blur as I felt a burning sensation in my eyes.

“We came, we came for you—I came for you,” I choked, my hands pulling tighter on the backs of Maya’s shoulders.

I felt another weight on my other shoulder, but I didn’t turn my head. It took a more insistent tugging to get me to even acknowledge its presence. My head turned to the side, but it leaned forward so that it was resting on Maya’s shoulder. Chase’s hand was resting on my shoulder and a moment later he appeared in front of me, kneeling down slowly.

“Ryss...” he said quietly.

I didn’t say anything, each breath feeling almost like a ragged gasp. Speaking was almost impossible at this point. Instead of saying anything, he gently placed a hand between my chest and Maya’s shoulder, pushing her weight off of me. As soon as it disappeared, I felt myself being pulled backward. When one weight disappeared, another took its place.

My head tilted forward as I buried my face in a well-padded shoulder, my arms wrapping around a too-thin frame as the first audible sob tore itself from my throat. It was less of a sob when it finally came out, but more of a wail. My hands grasped the back of a smooth jacket, clenching into fists around the fabric. Thin, strong arms wrapped around my torso, pulling me closer in a tight embrace. I didn’t want to ever leave it.

“Ryss...”

The voice was soft in my ear, cutting through the pounding

and rasping that seemed to fill my world. The world had been blurry for this entire time, so I simply closed my eyes, the darkness somehow more comforting than the half-reality I had been viewing. I wanted to stay here, in this suspended world, for as long as I could, but reality was beginning to seep back in, tainting the safe space. Voices began to penetrate the black, silent blanket that seemed to have fallen over me. After a moment or two, I realized that some of them didn't seem to be voices, at all. They were like mine; sounds somewhere on the way to being words, but not fully realizing them.

Finally, I felt myself being pushed backwards and then what I assumed were two fingers softly brushed against my cheeks, just beneath my eyes. I opened them to find the world still blurry, but I slowly released my hands from their death-grip on the jacket and wiped away the obstruction with the backs of them. Chase immediately came into focus, his hands gently resting on my upper arms. A moment later, he slowly leaned forward and I felt his lips press against my forehead. I pressed my head against them slightly, but he backed away a moment later, leaving me hanging in space once again.

I finally managed to look somewhere else, turning my head to the left. Lexi and Shawn were standing nearby, her eyes red as she stood with one arm behind him; his jaw seemed set firmly and I could tell that he was trying his hardest not to show some kind of response in the moment. Lexi's and my eyes met for a moment and I felt like I was about to slip back into that suspended reality all over again.

I heard the sound of Chase rising to his feet beside me and a moment later his hand appeared, outstretched and offering. My hand slowly took it and I allowed him to help pull me to my feet, my legs starting to feel as if they finally had regained their strength. The world didn't feel like it was spinning, and I could finally see the entire room once again, not just what was under the bright lights in the middle of the tarp-covered area.

As my eyes wandered to the right once again, I instantly felt the chill fill my body at the sight of what appeared to be Maya's exposed spine in the center of her back. The chill was almost instantly replaced with an intense fire as I turned back to

my left and scanned the ground, my eyes instantly drawn to the gun, resting where I had dropped it. The man Chase had been holding against the wall now sat on the ground against it, head lolled to one side, most likely unconscious. I strode over to the gun, crouching down to grab it, before standing once again and moving in front of the unconscious body.

“Amaryss...?”

Before anyone could say anything or stop me, I raised the gun and pulled the trigger several times. The rappings and flashes seemed much less earth-shattering now as I unloaded multiple bullets into the body of the man. After several shots, though, the gun simply clicked, the clip clearly run dry. I stopped pulling the trigger, but my arm remained raised, holding the gun loosely in my hand. After a second or two, my fingers relaxed and the gun clattered to the floor once more.

A moment later, a hand touched my shoulder and I jumped, but slowly turned to face its owner. Instead of Chase, as I expected, I found Lexi standing behind me. She didn’t say anything, she simply stepped forward and wrapped her arms around me. I returned the gesture, feeling her grip grow tighter. As I began to tighten mine, I placed one hand in the center of her back, feeling a slight bump underneath it. After a moment or two of confusion, I realized that it must have been something with her wings, and I quickly moved my hand away.

“That doesn’t hurt, you know,” she said quietly, her voice muffled by my shoulder.

I didn’t respond, unsure of what I’d even say.

“They’re not so fragile.”

“*Maybe I am, though,*” I thought, but didn’t say anything aloud.

It certainly did feel like I might be made of glass, yet the embraces felt less like they were going to shatter me, but more like they were holding the pieces together.

“We’re gonna have to let go at some point,” Lexi said and I laughed quietly. “We don’t need to give Chase ideas.”

We released each other from our tight embrace as we both laughed, remaining standing as close as we had been, though. She flashed me a thin smile, which I attempted to return, but mine felt

even less convincing. With a sigh, I turned around and crouched down, grabbing the gun off the floor once again. It somehow didn't feel much lighter, even though it was now empty. Turning back to the others, I saw Lexi already heading back to the two boys. At the sight of Shawn crouched over Maya, slowly dragging some kind of sheet over her, my jaw clenched and I felt the fire flare up in my chest once again. My feet carried me toward him, my steps rapid and forceful as I approached.

"You!" I snapped, but he didn't look up. "Look at me!"

He glanced around for a moment before finally realizing I was talking to him.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?!" I demanded, approaching him and suddenly raising my foot, placing it on his shoulder and shoving him backward.

He fell to the ground as I immediately felt two pairs of hands grab my shoulders, holding me in place. I fought against them briefly, but gave up after only a second or two, my chest heaving as I struggled to control my breathing.

"You come in here and start waving that gun around like a psycho," I snapped, "and then you just start shooting everyone?! They were trying to tell us about her!"

"So says the girl who stormed in here and started pushing them around, in the first place!" he shot back.

"I didn't fucking murder two people for no good reason!"

"Stop it!" Lexi suddenly shouted, stepping between the two of us and raising her hands. "Both of you, right fucking now!"

Shawn and I fell silent, glaring at each other around her, still.

"We can't start pointing fingers at each other," she said, her voice still forceful but not quite at such a shouting volume. "We had no idea of knowing what we were walking into when we opened that door. For all we know, that was the moment we made the wrong decision."

She paused, taking a moment to catch her breath as she finally let her arms drop to her sides.

"Now, as much as any of us want to, we can't reverse time," she said, "so what happened is done."

"Dead is pretty fucking done," I spat, my hands clenching

into fists at my sides.

“Amaryss, not now,” Chase said quietly, squeezing my shoulder, but also keeping one hand firmly grasped around my left arm.

Everyone fell silent after that. There didn’t seem to be a good place to go from here. We had just spent the past two weeks making our way across the country just to lose what we had come to save. Maya was gone, and we weren’t fast enough.

“I think... I think we all need a minute to collect ourselves before we decide what happens next,” Chase finally spoke up.

I simply nodded, feeling the fire in my veins beginning to fade, reduced to a strange, dull ache. Shawn turned and made his way over to the other side of the tarp wall, pushing against it until he found an opening and slipping outside, disappearing into the larger storage room. Lexi let out a heavy sigh and leaned back against the gurney in the center of the room, crossing one arm across her chest while covering her eyes with the opposite hand, her shoulders slouching. Chase finally released my shoulder and arm as I felt my entire body sag slightly, catching myself before I collapsed to the floor again.

I couldn’t look at the sheet on the floor, the thought, alone, was bad enough. Before I could start the crazy cycle again, I turned around and pushed my way through the plastic tarp, standing just outside the homemade operating room. My back hit the wall with more force than I intended, ushering a quiet grunt from my lips, before I slid down it. At the last moment, I twisted the strap for my bag around my shoulders slightly, moving it out from underneath me. Once I was seated, I let my head fall back until it touched the wall. The ceiling overhead was shrouded in near-darkness, so I closed my eyes, not changing the scenery greatly.

I half-expected Chase to come over and try to comfort me, but I didn’t hear any approaching footsteps. Part of me was actually glad he hadn’t. He had been there in the moment, and I appreciated that more than I could describe, but right now I needed to be alone. Now that I was on the ground, again, my limbs felt heavy. My eyelids didn’t feel like they wanted to open again. Not so soon, at least.

I couldn't stay here forever, though. At the very least, we shouldn't be here in case someone came looking, either one of Jared's people or the police at the sound of the gunshots. There had to be somewhere we could go next, though. The journey couldn't just end here, in this half-empty warehouse in the middle of freezing Detroit. We hadn't run out of that house in Arizona months ago just to give up here. When Chase and I had taken that list of names, it felt like we had a plan; we were going to follow them, and they would lead us somewhere, to some kind of answer.

One of our friends face down on a tarp-covered, grimy floor and another buried in a shallow grave on the side of a road in Georgia didn't feel like the answer.

It couldn't be.

A gentle shaking brought me back to reality as I forced my eyes open, finding Chase and Lexi standing before me.

"Come on, we're gonna search this place," he said.

"There's got to be something here we can use."

I simply placed my hands underneath me and pushed myself to a standing position, groaning slightly as I stretched my arms out to either side, letting them fall after a moment or two.

"It seems pretty clear that Jared isn't here," Shawn said, suddenly appearing behind Lexi, causing her to jump.

"It would appear that way," she replied. "So where did he go, now?"

"To hell, for all I care," he said dryly.

"As romantic of an idea as that is," Chase began, "I don't think we can get our hopes up so high. We already knew he was utilizing different locations with different people, since Amaryss came from Nevada, Lexi and I came from California, and you came from Arizona, but this place proves that they have places that are more than just the kind of observation houses that we all came from."

"Okay, so what are we going to do about it?" Shawn asked. "We don't really have the means or the firepower to go through and clear them all out."

"No, we don't have to clear them all out," he continued, "but think about it, there has to be a head one, right? A kind of nerve center. Jared couldn't run an operation this big without



somewhere as the central focus point.”

“All roads lead to Rome deal, right?” Lexi piped up.

“Something like that,” he replied, nodding. “I’m willing to bet we can at least set ourselves on the right course through something in this building.”

“So what are we looking for, exactly?” Shawn asked.

“I don’t know,” Chase said, sighing. “It could be... papers of some sort, maybe something on a computer, again...”

“Well, unfortunately we knocked out one person who could probably help us.”

Shawn shot Lexi a look and she rolled her eyes.

“Chase punched him off the table and no one made any motions to stop me,” she pointed out. “We didn’t know what we needed him for at that point.”

“Like we said before, what’s done is done,” Chase interrupted, “so now we just have to start looking.”

“And where do you suggest we do that, then?”

“The office where we ran into Jeremy seems like a good place to start,” he said, shrugging.

After no one offered any other solutions, Chase nodded.

“Seeing no objections... onward.”

February 19, 2000

2:45:34 P.M.

Warehouse District – Detroit, Michigan

I had combed through so many file folders in countless filing cabinets that my eyes no longer felt like they were registering exactly what I was seeing. The pages blurred together, the words meaningless; half of them were scientific gibberish that I didn’t understand, anyway. No hints about locations or really even Jared’s name seemed to appear; he seemed to have done a good job of not leaving too many links to himself in easy-to-find places. A loud growl of frustration broke me out of my reverie and I stopped idly flipping through hanging folders in this particular drawer to look over to the left. Chase slammed the drawer he had been searching closed, slowly dragging his hands over his face.

“Not finding anything?” Lexi called from the other side of the room.

“There’s, what, ten filing cabinets in here and none of them have *anything*?” he said, exasperation lacing his tone.

“I mean, if I were Jared, I’d make sure I did a good job of covering my trail, too,” she said. “You never know when someone like us would come looking.”

“So I’m going to go out on a limb here and say that whatever we’re looking for, whatever that may be, is not going to be in one of these?” Shawn said, closing the drawer he was looking in and turning around, crossing his arms across his chest.

“Looks like it,” Chase sighed.

“So, that leaves...”

I looked around at the other three to see Shawn and Chase looking at something in the middle of the room. Upon tracking their gazes, my eyes fell upon the computer on the desk. My hands absentmindedly pushed the drawer I was standing in front of closed and turned around. Chase took a seat at the chair behind the desk, tapping a button on what I think he had told me was called the “mouse.” After a moment or two, I saw him reach for the board in front of him, his fingers poised over the keys.

“Where do you even start in here? Holy shit...” Lexi muttered, leaning down to look at the screen.

“Well, let’s try...”

Their voices seemed to disappear into the background as I tuned out, turning away from the desk and idly beginning to pace toward the far wall. When I reached it, I slowly spun on one heel to face them once again. My footsteps seemed slow and methodical as I traced an invisible line on the floor, carefully placing one foot in front of the other while raising my arms slightly to balance myself. When I reached the corner of the desk, I spun around once again and retraced my steps back toward the far wall.

I happened to glance up from my path across the carpeted floor to look through the open doorway. Sunlight streamed in from the window directly across the hall, falling on the tile floor and reflected rather harshly back up into my eyes. Suddenly, it was no longer white tile, but blonde hair and pale skin, lit up like a perpetual camera flash. I forced myself to look away, a splash of

red staining the corner of my vision. Weight landed on my shoulder, pressing against me and slowly spreading to push my whole torso backwards, ever so slightly. I wanted to push it off, but when I raised my hands, there was nothing there.

But the weight didn't go away.

Suddenly realizing that my hands were raised in front of me, as if pushing against something that wasn't there, I quickly crossed my arms across my chest, burying my hands underneath them. I didn't want to look back to see if the others were watching, undoubtedly one of them was, but that only left the doorway with the brilliant light outside. Finally, I strode over to it, wheeling around the corner the instant I reached it, my shoulder making contact with the wall. The area of tile floor just to the left was not as bright; it was below a section of wall where the window set in it was covered up, for whatever reason. My legs suddenly feeling shaky again, I lazily made my way over to the wall and spun around, using it to slowly lower myself into a seated position.

My knees instinctually pulled in toward me as I kept my arms crossed. In an attempt to avoid looking like a total freak show in front of the others, I had probably just given them reasons to be confused.

*“Perfect.”*

The sound of voices came from inside the office, sounding mostly hurried and excited, but I couldn't make out any distinct words. The entire world felt distant, like I was somehow removed on my own little island. It was like my normal hyper-senses had flipped, leaving me somehow half as receptive as a normal person, rather than at least doubly so. I was oddly okay with it, whatever meant I didn't have to feel the warmth against my chest where Maya's head had rested and the sound of her strained voice.

I was vaguely aware of motion off to my left, but I didn't make any move to look over at it until something nudged my leg. Upon glancing up, I found Lexi standing over me, looking excited. Her lips moved, but at first it seemed no sound came from them. I blinked and suddenly it was like I could hear every little thing around me; the idle drone of the wind and river outside sounded like a raging storm, while the hum of the lights overhead was like some kind of buzzing alarm. It took me another second to realize

that Lexi seemed to be waiting for some kind of acknowledgement, her grin beginning to fade into a look of worry with each passing moment.

“Amaryss?” she said quietly, her voice conveying her shifting emotions.

“Yeah?” I said quickly, my voice sounding almost as if I had just woken up. “Sorry, what was that again?”

“I said we found it.”

My face screwed up in confusion.

“Found what?”

“The jackpot, the mother load... the needle.”

The quizzical expression didn’t leave my face, but she extended a hand toward me, her grinning beginning to re-appear. I took it and she helped pull me to my feet, a quiet groan escaping my lips as I stretched my legs. She led the way back into the office space where Jeremy still lay on the floor beside the desk, unconscious. Chase and Shawn were staring at the computer screen, both looking rather excited, while Chase seemed exceptionally pleased with himself. Upon seeing me, his grin seemed to spread wide and he waved us over.

“What is this amazing thing you’ve found?” I asked, moving around behind the desk to stand beside him.

“Jared’s nerve center,” he said.

“Uh... isn’t it where everyone else’s—?”

“His operation’s nerve center,” he interrupted quickly.

“You know, the *main* place where everything flows into and where most of his work is done?”

That did sound rather exciting.

“So where is it?” I asked, glancing at the screen to find it full of green text that I couldn’t begin to decipher at a glance.

“You’re not going to believe it.”

I gave him a strange look, raising one eyebrow.

“You better not say Georgia.”

He shook his head.

“New York? Arizona? California?”

He kept shaking his head, still grinning.

“Okay, I give up,” I sighed. “Where am I not going to believe?”

Chase leaned back in the office chair, swiveling slightly to look over at me as he crossed one leg over the other and folded his hands in his lap.

“Ello miss,” he said in a terrible accent, “care for a cup ‘o tea?”

The exasperated look I gave him was enough to make Shawn snort slightly and look away, causing Chase to spin around and shoot him a glare.

“What in the hell is that accent?” I asked and he turned to face me once again.

“English,” he said. “It’s in London.”

My eyebrows shot up as I crossed my arms across my chest, leaning against the desk to my right slightly.

“Jared’s main facility is in London?”

He nodded, Shawn following along, as if in case I didn’t believe him. With a sigh, I looked down at my feet for a moment before returning my gaze to him.

“Well, looks like we’re going on a little trip then, huh?”

All four of us laughed as I shook my head. London... we were going all the way to London just to follow Jared. I didn’t know where the line between determination and fanaticism lay, but something was beginning to make me question it. Just then, I felt something touch my elbow and I jumped slightly, snapping out of my reverie. Chase was standing beside me, apparently having removed himself from the desk chair; the excited look from before was now gone, though, replaced with one of concern. He nodded toward the doorway to the office and I gave him a confused look, but followed as he led the way toward it.

Once we had stepped into the hallway, he immediately turned to face me and placed his hands on my shoulders, stopping me in my tracks. His touch was firm enough to stop me, but not so much to make me feel at all threatened.

“Hey, Ryss, are...” he began, but trailed off, seemingly re-evaluating his words. “This sounds really dumb, but... are you okay?”

“Okay? No,” I answered immediately, surprising even myself; based on the slight wince Chase gave me, it was also perhaps a little harsh. “Sorry, I didn’t mean for that to... come out

like that.”

I took a deep breath, shifting my weight on my feet slightly.

“It’s—I just saw my friend die—another one. This time we had a chance though—I had a chance—and...”

My voice cracked slightly as I forced myself to look down at my feet, unable to meet Chase’s eyes anymore.

“It still wasn’t enough. We were too late. *I* wasn’t fast enough.”

“Amaryss,” he began, his voice quiet and his tone soothing, “don’t blame yourself. It was absolutely not your fault, or any single person’s fault. There was no way we could have gotten here any faster—”

“We could’ve just powered through and not taken those days off!” I interjected, finally looking up at him again.

“And what good would that have done anyone if we showed up tired and drained because we never ate or slept? We wouldn’t have been in any shape to come in here and handle these people; we barely were, anyway.”

I wanted to say something in response, but no words came to me. My mouth hung open, poised as if to speak, but my tongue couldn’t seem to move properly. Finally, some kind of sound halfway between a choked sob and a cry of frustration came out and I leaned forward, burying my face in Chase’s shoulder.

The world went dark once again as I felt his arms wrap around me, pulling my shoulders closer. My arms instantly shot around him, as well, encircling his torso and pulling him into me as hard as I could. I could feel our bodies pressed rather firmly up against each other, and this time it wasn’t like that night in New York, at Shawn’s father’s house. The touch felt comforting, holding a living, breathing person so close that I swear I could feel the pulse of his blood running all the way from the center of his chest down to his legs.

One of his hands slid up my back and a moment later his fingers gently ran through my hair. It may have been kind of oily and disgusting, but I didn’t care this time. The sensation immediately felt calming as what felt like some kind of strange vibration ran down my body, starting from my head and moving to

my feet; it actually felt rather pleasant.

“Maybe I should chop it all off,” I said, finding my voice suddenly back under my control. “It would probably be easier to take care of.”

“I like your flowing mane, though,” he replied.

We both laughed and I could feel the vibration from both of our chests shake me. I slackened my grip on him and began to pull back as I felt his fingers slide through my hair one last time. Apparently I had closed my eyes, because as I found myself blinking them open, my vision seemed blurry. With one quick wipe with the back of my hands, though, it returned to normal, revealing Chase watching me with a slight grin set across his lips. I tried to flash him a smile in return, but it felt weak and unconvincing, even to me.

“Come on, we can’t stand around here all day,” I said, hitting him in the chest playfully. “We have a big trip to plan.”

February 20, 2000  
12:01:34 A.M.  
New York City, New York

“Do you think they found it, yet?”

Jared drummed the fingers of his right hand on the opposite arm, staring blankly at the floor a few feet in front of him. After a few seconds, it appeared he hadn’t heard who had spoken, so they shifted position slightly and prepared to ask again.

“Undoubtedly,” he said suddenly, still not snapping of his daze.

“And you’re not worried about that?”

With a sigh, Jared finally looked up from the random spot on the floor.

“What I am most concerned about at this moment, Jonathan, is the failure of the process with Maya Edwards.”

Jonathan frowned slightly and crossed his arms across his chest, leaning against the table between them. The busy pub seemed to provide the perfect backdrop to their conversation: loud, rambunctious, and no one was looking at the two men in business

casual clothing sharing two pints at a table on their own. Granted, the crowd had mostly shifted to football fans and university students at this hour, especially immediately following a game, but they still were treated with nothing more than passing glances from the rest of the clientele.

“Well, you expected them to come looking for her, right?” he said. “So when they barged in—”

“We knew it was a failure before they even got there,” Jared interrupted. “At least, I did. Jeremy thought he had a way to salvage it, and tried after I left for here.”

“Have you heard word, then?”

“He called about half an hour ago,” he said, nodding. “Sounded urgent, said that the kids had knocked him out in his office and when he came to, the other three members of his skeleton team were dead and our foursome was nowhere to be seen.”

Jonathan let out a heavy sigh, uncrossing his arms in order to rub his eyes tiredly. Once he had finished, he gripped his glass and quickly took a rather large drink of his beer before bringing it back down on the table with more force than he had intended. Jared jumped slightly at the sound, but otherwise didn’t react.

“What the hell have we gotten ourselves into?” Jonathan asked.

Jared looked at him quizzically, but said nothing.

“We started this with the idea of, what? Bettering other people?”

“We—”

“And now how many people are dead because of it?” he continued, stopping Jared from breaking in. “How many people have been nearly killed? This isn’t just an experiment in a lab with numbers and variables, anymore.”

“We knew that—”

“We didn’t know what we were doing, Broder,” Jonathan snapped. “We took a crazy idea and bet everything on it. We ran with it as far and as fast as we could from the beginning. We took the experiment out of the lab almost immediately. We turned it into a goddamn social experiment in addition to a genetic one.”

“What are you talking about?”



Jonathan sighed and took another drink from his beer, finishing the last small bit before placing it back on the table once again.

“The second we pulled those kids out of a lab setting and starting raising them almost like they were normal, we started messing with their heads. We were seeing what happens when you give them this illusion of reality, but we didn’t let them fully experience. We swapped cages with metal bars for cages with couches and locked doors, and now we’re seeing the result of that. We’re seeing what happens when you cage an animal.”

“They are not animals,” Jared said firmly. “These are real, living people—”

“No, Amaryss is. The rest are animals in cages to you.”

Jared’s face instantly grew darker as his jaw clenched. He leaned forward, resting his arms on the table, as well.

“What are you saying, Jonathan?”

“She was the first one, and you took it upon yourself to personally oversee her. You put everything you hoped for what we were doing into her, and that held a special place for you. Your ‘special girl.’”

Jared slammed his fist down on the table with enough force that the pint glasses skittered across it a few inches, Jonathan’s coming dangerously close to falling off the edge

“Don’t you fucking tell me how to run my experiment—”

“She stopped being your experiment a long time ago,” Jonathan interrupted, seemingly unfazed by Jared’s outburst.

“So what is she, then?”

Jonathan fell silent, leaning back in his chair as he studied Jared across the table. Both men made direct eye contact, but neither said anything for several long seconds. Finally, Jonathan pushed his chair back and stood up.

“You know the answer to that.”

He dropped several paper notes on the table near his glass and brushed past Jared, heading for the door. As soon as he had gone, Jared grabbed his glass and quickly drained the last half, slamming it back down on the table once again, scaring a young couple who happened to be walking by at that moment. The woman almost dropped her drink, but quickly recovered as they

skittered away, not wanting to hang around the clearly enraged man. Finally, Jared pushed away from the table, himself, and moved toward the main door, as well.

As soon as he stepped outside, he glanced around, but did not see Jonathan. With a sigh, he turned to the right and began to walk back toward the apartment where they were sharing space for the time being. The clouds had held off for the night, leaving the city with a rather prominent chill, and he immediately began to wish that he had brought a coat that was heavier than the jacket-sweater combination that he had pulled on over his Polo shirt. As he glanced up, though, he happened to catch a plane drifting across the sky, landing gear protruding, as it appeared to be coming in for landing.

Undoubtedly, the kids had found the location of the London facility in Detroit, seeing as they hadn't done much to actually hide it, but the thought that sometime soon they possibly could be on one of those planes heading there suddenly seemed to hit him. He had stopped in New York to simply check in with Jonathan and some of the other team members in that location prior to heading across the ocean, himself, but what he found had demanded more of his time, so it seemed he would not be heading out quite so soon. It did look like James would perhaps be receiving some of the new charges that he had told him about several months prior. At the realization that the initial meeting with the mercenaries to track down Amaryss and the others had been four months ago, already, he laughed quietly under his breath and shook his head.

"Times flies..." he muttered, "time flies."

March 1, 2000

11:08:23 A.M.

Jersey City, New Jersey

The bar stool at the window counter creaked as Kailyn shifted her position in, groaning slightly and rubbing her lower back with her hands. The pain that had started in her head when she had come to in a local Georgian prison cell seemed to have slowly migrated to other parts of her body, each rearing its head in

intervals of a few days at a time. She shook her head in an attempt to clear her hair from her face, but was only partially successful. With a sigh that ruffled some of the errant strands, she leaned forward against the counter, folding her arms in front of her. She idly pushed the spoon in the empty coffee cup in circles, staring down at the few dregs that remained in the bottom with a bored expression.

Although she hadn't been particularly happy with how the event at the diner in Georgia had played out, she couldn't entirely say she blamed Amaryss for doing what she did. She had seen her opportunity and took it.

"If only you had done the same, maybe you wouldn't be sitting here, right now."

With a sigh and a roll of her eyes, she hung her head forward, not in the mood to hear the sound of her own voice.

"Oh, don't you give me that," the copy sighed. "This is completely on you."

"I'm not in the mood for this," Kailyn grumbled under her breath, hoping that it was quiet enough that no one else could hear her.

"What was that?" the copy said and she was vaguely aware of her leaning closer. "Speak up, you're mumbling."

Kailyn remained silent, however, but lifted her head, staring out of the window directly in front of her. Soft laughter came from beside her and she didn't have to turn to know it was still the copy of herself. The street immediately outside the coffee shop she had wandered into was relatively busy at this time of day, both with vehicles and pedestrians. As the weather had begun to warm, the winter coats had begun to give way to lighter jackets and sweatshirts. For Kailyn it meant she could finally ditch multiple layers of shirts and simply wear one shirt and her jacket, like a normal person.

Her eyes followed a silver sedan as it slowly rounded the corner the shop was situated on and began to make its way down the street, stopping suddenly to avoid a man in an overly-large and puffy black coat and baggy jeans as he seemed to simply stroll out into the roadway. The driver didn't honk or make any sort of angry indication, however, simply driving on once the man was out

of the way.

“You would have run him over, wouldn’t you?”

Yet again, Kailyn chose to ignore the copy. Instead, she pushed her stool back and rose to her feet, groaning slightly as she stretched her arms over her head. She grabbed her cup and the saucer it had come on and brought the back toward the main counter. The barista looked up from whatever he was currently making as she approached.

“Thank you,” she said, placing it on the counter near all of the other dirty plates and cups.

“Of course,” he said, nodding.

The fact that he had actually given her something to drink when she had simply come in looking for a place to sit for a few minutes had actually filled her with a sense of happiness that she hadn’t felt in a long time. The smile on her face as she turned away and began to head toward the door actually felt genuine, and almost alien to her at this point. As she exited, the cold wind immediately hit her from the side and hunched her shoulders slightly, pulling the zipper on her jacket up to its highest point; even then, the collar only came up to just about her chin, but it did at least stop the wind from blowing down and into her shirt.

“So, where to now, brave adventurer?” the copy asked, suddenly appearing in front of her, jacket also zipped up as high as hers, although she seemed much less cold.

Kailyn sighed and glanced both ways down the street before setting off to the right, her back to the wind. Similar to the first time she had headed toward New York, she felt as if she were being guided by some kind of feeling beyond her normal comprehension. It was almost like she was being compelled to travel here, although she had no idea why.

“It’s because of Amaryss again, that’s why you think you’re here, right?” the copy said, walking backwards in front of her. “She’s always the reason.”

Kailyn glared at the copy but remained silent. A moment later, a sign on the opposite side of the road caught her eye and she came to a stop at the next crosswalk. When the cars had stopped for her, she hurried across the painted walkway and started toward the sign. As she approached, she saw the copy of herself standing

in front of it, reading the text.

“Morris Canal Park,” she read aloud before glancing over at Kailyn. “You thinking of having a picnic?”

“No,” she said, acknowledging the copy’s presence aloud for the first time in quite a while, “but they do make lovely places to think.”

“You need more time to sit and think?” the copy said, raising her eyebrows. “Too much of that is what’s gotten us into this situation, in the first place.”

“So now it’s ‘us?’”

The copy shot her a harsh glare as Kailyn passed her and moved farther into the park, her hands shoved firmly in her jacket pockets. Once she had made her way through about half of the small park, she found a row of benches set just before a fence that marked the edge of the river. Looming before her, glass reflecting in the bright mid-day sun, stood the skyscrapers of New York City. It had only been a few months since she had last been in the city, but a slight ache began to appear just above her right hip, her hand instinctually reaching out of her pocket to rub the spot where the scar from the bullet wound resided.

“Fuck this city,” she muttered under her breath, moving toward one of the benches.

As she approached, she saw the copy of herself already sitting on one of them, arms stretched out along the back to either side of her.

“I concur,” she said, glancing back over her shoulder toward Kailyn.

“You didn’t even get shot,” she remarked, falling onto the bench.

“Girl, I’m in your head,” she said, tapping her on the temple and causing her to recoil from the touch. “I feel what you do, so stop getting us hurt.”

Kailyn shot her another reproachful glance and the copy simply smirked, but fell silent. She turned toward the towering buildings across the water once again and let out a heavy sigh. Something had to be drawing her back to the place that had nearly gotten her killed in multiple ways, yet what that could be seemed to escape her. It didn’t seem likely that Amaryss and her company

would immediately come back here, but she had no idea where they had been heading when she had caught up with them in Georgia, either.

“Well, getting caught up in that prison cell wasn’t really going to help you find them,” the copy said, jarring Kailyn out of her thoughts, once again. “Although that exit was most impressive.”

She remained silent, her jaw tight as she stared ahead at the buildings.

“I don’t think I’d ever imagined that such a fat man’s arm could fit between those bars... well, I suppose it didn’t totally fit...”

“Shut the fuck up!” Kailyn snapped, her outburst louder than she had intended. “I was there. You don’t need to remind me.”

“For such a murder-bent fanatic, you seem suddenly squeamish,” the copy said, a playful lilt to her tone.

Kailyn jumped to her feet, pushing off of the bench and walking over to the railing along the water, leaning against it and crossing her arms. The wind whipped straight into the city and into her face, blowing her hair around as she squinted her eyes slightly against it. It didn’t take long for her to notice a figure lean against the railing beside her out of her peripheral vision, but she didn’t need to turn to know who it was.

“So I have a crazy idea,” the copy said, “well, I suppose that means it’s also your idea... but what if it’s not Amaryss that’s drawing you here?”

Kailyn didn’t respond, but she couldn’t deny that thought had occurred to her.

“You know, despite your crazy pseudo-mental link you’ve got going on, it seems,” she continued. “Are you sure you two aren’t, like, twins or something?”

Kailyn finally turned to look at the copy, a look of confusion etched into her face.

“You know, the whole ‘twins might have a mental link’ thing? No?”

She shook her head and turned to face forward once again, staring down at the dark water below her.

“Well, anyway,” the copy continued, “there is maybe someone else here who you might want be tracking down...”

Her eyes remained fixed on the water, watching the waves gently lapping at the side of the wall the park was built on, for a few moments before she suddenly stood up straight, her eyes fixating on the buildings once again.

“That look says you’re onto something...”

Kailyn’s hands closed around the metal railing tightly, her knuckles turning white. Her jaw clenched involuntarily as she felt the familiar fire begin to build in her chest.

“Jared.”

“Now you’re getting it,” the copy said, laughing quietly as she leaned over toward Kailyn, nudging her elbow. “Come on, whaddaya say we go see if we can catch him before he takes flight again?”

Just as Kailyn was about to step away from the railing, a splitting pain shot through her forehead and she let out a quiet gasp, pressing one hand to it in some kind of feeble response. She closed her eyes and was immediately presented with the image of what looked like some kind of shipping yard. The impression of large container ships loomed around her as she saw several small figures in the center, in the middle of a roadway along the edge of a forest of long, metal containers. A moment later, the pain disappeared and she opened her eyes, gasping slightly as she gripped the railing once again for support. The copy was looking at her with a look of genuine confusion, which gave Kailyn a slight bit of amusement as she struggled to catch her breath.

“What the hell was that?” she said.

“You didn’t know anything about it?”

“Not until you did!” she shot back. “What is it?”

“Jared’s not here,” she said breathlessly, a crooked smirk pulling at the corner of her lips, “but it looks like I came here for a reason, after all.”

“No fucking way...”

“Amaryss is back in town.”

## 25

# The Big Smoke

March 8<sup>th</sup>, 2000  
9:01:23 A.M.  
London, England

The first thing that I noticed upon finding myself awakening was the absolute stillness. Not in silence or energy, but in the physical ground beneath me. The bed was no longer rolling and pitching in various directions, moving in a constant rhythm. I was still, and so was the ground beneath me. What a revelation. Already, I found a grin pulling at my lips as I began to open my eyes. Light filled the room, but not enough to entirely blind me as I blinked several times, my vision growing clearer with each successive motion. Once I could see clearly again, I arched my back slightly, straightening my legs out as I groaned softly. Suddenly, my shoulders hit something behind me and my feet bumped into something and I jumped, twisting my torso slightly to look back over my shoulder.

My attempt to see what I had hit was blocked by a large mass of my hair directly in my face, which I quickly reached up to bat aside. Once I had, I could suddenly make out the shape of another body behind me. Despite the fact that I had a pretty good idea who it was, I carefully rolled onto my other side so that I was now facing the other person. Chase was beginning to stir, most likely a result of my bumping him and jostling the bed. My grin refused to fade as I carefully positioned myself so our faces were even with each other and watched as his eyes began to slowly open. Moments later, his dark brown eyes were staring directly into mine, but it took a second or two for the spark of recognition to appear that told me he was truly seeing what was in front of him.

“Good morning,” he said groggily, raising one hand to wipe at his eyes.

“Morning,” I replied, still grinning.

“How’d you sleep?” he asked.



“Fine,” I said, shrugging. “You?”

“Well, I’m beginning to rethink my comment about how I like your wild mane there,” he said, pulling at a few strands of my hair.

“Hey!” I replied, batting his hand away. “I was the one who said I should chop it all off, but who disagreed?”

“I can change my opinion, can’t I?” he replied, smirking.

I pretended to consider it for a moment before shaking my head.

“Nope.”

He gave me a disapproving look and I laughed, quickly leaning forward and planting a kiss on his lips.

“Don’t think you can bribe me like that,” he replied, smirking.

Without saying another word, I leaned forward and kissed him softly on the tip of his nose, and then once again on the lips, but this time remaining there for a few moments. Before I could back away, I felt him move forward and press his against mine. I instinctually closed mine around his lower lip, pulling at it ever so slightly. We remained in our mini-struggle for several more seconds before we both disengaged, remaining so close that I was able to lean my forehead against his, propping my head up slightly. I suddenly became aware of something touching me and realized that Chase’s hand had stealthily moved onto my side, sliding underneath my shirt. The touch didn’t feel so new and foreign as it had in New York months ago, and I found myself rather okay with the notion of letting it remain.

“I have to say, this was a pretty sweet find,” I said.

“Oh?”

“Yeah... this apartment, you know?”

He looked at me for a second before shaking his head and laughing quietly.

“What, you thought I meant you?” I shot back, grinning mischievously.

“I never know what to think around you,” he said.

Before he could say anything else, I pressed forward once again and laid another kiss on him. Even if he had been thinking of continuing, he clearly gave up the thought. I could feel his hand

move onto my back, slowly massaging it for a second or two before it migrated back over my side and across my stomach. A shiver shot up my spine and he pulled away for a moment, giving me a curious look.

“It’s fine,” I said quickly and planted yet another kiss on his nose, before moving to another one on his cheek, just alongside it.

I could feel his fingers slowly tracing up my torso, along my stomach, but they eventually moved back onto my side, and then into the center of my back. By this point, however, my shirt was beginning to pull at me a little, despite the relative amount of free space it had, nowadays, and I began to move my arm to push his arm back down when a thought suddenly popped into my head and my heart began to pound much quicker. Chase seemed unaware of the sudden change, so I tried to take a deep breath.

“You know what?” I said softly, pulling back from him slightly.

Before he could say anything in response, though, I propped myself up on one elbow and grabbed at the bottom of my shirt. Not giving myself time to rethink my actions, I pulled it up and over my head, struggling slightly to get my hair through the collar, but finally tossing it off the side of the bed.

“That should make it a bit easier,” I finished, grinning slightly, but fueled by more nervous energy than I would have liked.

Chase’s eyebrows raised as I tried to suppress the slight tremors that had begun to start in my hands, threatening to move to the rest of my body. His arm was held just above me, where he had moved it when I had propped myself up suddenly. After a second or two, he slowly lowered it onto my side once again, his hand gently moving into place in the center of my back once again. A shiver ran down my spine once again, but whether it was from the sheer nerves or the sudden chill that seemed to settle in I couldn’t decide. As if in an attempt to assuage his apprehension, I leaned forward and once again pressed my lips against his.

He seemed to take my confirmation and I felt his hand press up against me with slightly more conviction. His hand seemed to move in massage-like motions across my back and I

couldn't deny that it actually felt great. The tension that seemed to have built up in my shoulders seemed to lessen slightly as I lifted one arm between us, reaching my hand toward his face. A moment later, my fingers brushed against his jaw and he broke off the kiss, turning his head slightly into my outstretched hand. He gently kissed the tips of three of my fingers, causing me to laugh quietly. Shooting me a quick smirk, he curled my fingers into a loose fist, placing another kiss on the front of them before moving my hand so he kissed the back of it.

Suddenly, his hand on my back pulled me toward him as his attention turned from my hand back toward what I thought was my face. When he leaned in again, however, he moved toward my neck, placing a kiss just about on my jaw. As his arm pulled me in closer to him, I found my head leaning back slightly as he moved to kiss me again, this time farther down on my neck. I suddenly became aware that I could feel his shirt pressed up against my now bare stomach and I realized just how close we were, a strange tingle of energy shooting down my spine.

His lips finally met my collarbone, as I leaned my head forward, placing a kiss of my own on the top of his head. He stopped what he was doing and looked back up at me, his face already practically touching mine. Before I could form any real thoughts or ideas, I found myself pressing my lips up against his with an aggression that I had never seen in myself, before. His hand slid down my back, gently rubbing at it the whole way, before moving back into its previous position in the center. However, just when I thought it had stopped, it kept moving up. Moments later, I felt his fingers slip under my bra strap and a forceful shiver shot through me, actually causing us to break our kiss. His hand instantly slid back down several inches as he looked concerned.

“Sorry, I forg—”

“Don't,” I said quickly, cutting him off and sounding perhaps more breathless than I thought I would.

His look of concern changed to one of confusion as I shifted slightly, still highly aware of his hand pressed against my back and his shirt against the front of my torso.

“Maybe—just—it's fine,” I said. “It was fine... what...”

yeah.”

He cocked his head to the slightly as best he could and I grinned sheepishly. At my sudden awkward reaction, he leaned forward and gently placed a kiss on the tip of my nose.

“Like I said, I never know what to think around you,” he said quietly.

My cheeks grew hot as I looked down, desperate not to meet his eyes in that moment. Finally, after a second or two, I became aware that his hand had begun to gently massage my back slightly and an idea popped into my head.

“Do you think... maybe... you could...” I began, suddenly afraid to actually vocalize the idea, but he waited patiently for me to finish. “Back rub?”

He didn’t respond for a moment or two, but finally grinned and laughed quietly.

“I could try my hand at it,” he replied.

The heat in my cheeks seemed to intensify as I grinned and squirmed away from him slightly so that I could roll onto my stomach. I felt the bed shake slightly as he pushed himself into a kneeling position beside me. My hands trembled slightly as I suddenly reached behind me, my fingers reaching for their target. It was almost impossible with shaking hands, but I finally managed to grab a hold of the clasp on the back of my bra and snap it open, letting it fall away to either side. I didn’t have to look at Chase’s face to know what expression he was giving me.

“It’s just a back, Chase,” I quipped, my tone sounding less confident in the joke than I had intended, “everyone has one.”

I heard him laugh quietly a moment before I felt his fingers tentatively touch my lower back. The weight from them increased as he put more conviction behind his actions, until his hands were pressing rather firmly against my back. I couldn’t lie, it actually felt great. His hands began to move in slow, circular motions as his fingers gently clenched and squeezed at regular intervals. The tension that I had felt before seemed to melt away at his touch, slowly dissipating as his hands moved up my back. At first, his touch seemed as if it would falter slightly as it reached where the bra strap had been, but he seemed to convince himself enough and the weight remained, his hands sliding up and onto my shoulder

blades. As his hands slid up and over the top of my shoulders slightly, forcing them down into the bed a bit, a familiar spark of energy shot down my spine, seeming to spread out across my torso, borne by my veins.

“For someone just trying his hand at this,” I mumbled, my face half-buried in the pillow and my eyes closed, “you’re doing a pretty good job.”

“Why, thank you, miss,” he said and I laughed.

I opened my eyes and lifted my head slightly, glancing back toward him. As I did, I realized that he was kneeling beside me, and the position as he reached toward my shoulders did not seem all that intuitive or comfortable.

“You know, wouldn’t it be easier from a different angle?” I asked.

“Are you judging my methods, here?” he shot back, glancing down at me and grinning.

“You’re doing a good job, but—” I said, the nerves causing me to pause mid-sentence, “wouldn’t it be easier if you were... sorta, like... sitting on me or something?”

He attempted to raise one eyebrow at me and I rolled my eyes at the comical look that he actually managed to portray. After a second or two, however, he removed his hands from my back and moved to lift one leg over me. I shifted to the left slightly so he would actually have room to place it on the bed, and not fall off the side. The bed to my right sank slightly under his weight and a moment later I felt his hands return on my back.

The sensation on the bed stayed pretty much the same as his hands slowly worked their way up toward my shoulders once again, starting at my lower back. My stomach was pressed into the bed as his hands started in the center, just over my spine, and moved out toward the sides. As they slid outwards one last time, I felt his fingers drag up my sides as he moved them toward my shoulder blades and a shiver ran down my spine.

Once his hands had made their way onto my shoulder blades and up onto my shoulders, I suddenly felt an additional weight on the back of my upper thighs and then something soft pressed against the back of my neck, just about where it met my shoulders. I turned my head to the side slightly to find Chase

leaning forward, his lips pressing against the back of my shoulder. He must have been basically sitting on me, which explained the weight, but I honestly couldn't care. Each spot where he kissed me felt like sparks of electricity shot from it, and I let out a heavy sigh.

He moved back up toward my head once again, placing yet another kiss at the nape of my neck before pausing and looking up at me. Our eyes met and suddenly something seemed to take hold of me. I slowly began to roll onto my side under him, eventually turning so I was lying on my back. He lowered himself toward me until our lips met, his motions soft at first. As I felt one of his hands slide behind my back and pull the bra out from under me, I also felt him lower more of his weight on top of me. Once he had pulled the obstructing garment from under me, he slid his hand under me once again, doubling down with the effort in his kiss.

I suddenly felt something poke at my upper lip and I was caught off guard, but quickly realized what it was. My mouth parted slightly and I felt his tongue slide inside, brushing up against mine. Unsure of what to do, I simply resorted to pressing mine up against his for a moment before following him slightly. I felt it brush up against his teeth before his own tongue pushed mine back yet again. On a whim, and rather accidentally, I felt my lips close around his for a moment, pulling it back toward me before I released it, my cheeks growing hot as a wave of embarrassment washed over me.

“Damn, Ryss,” he said, almost breathlessly.

“Sorry, I—”

He stopped me mid-apology with another kiss, equally as passionate as the last, but slightly shorter. Eventually, he pulled away and glanced down for a moment before looking up at me once again. As he did, I suddenly realized that my hands had made their way onto his sides, pulling up his shirt slightly.

“Here, let me steal your idea for a second,” he said, grinning as he sat up on his knees.

With one quick motion, he pulled his shirt up and over his head, dropping it off the side of the bed with mine before lowering himself on top of me once again. At the feeling of his skin pressed up against mine, I felt my whole body shake and he grinned, but kissed me quickly.

“It’s not—I’m sorry—”

“Ryss, don’t apologize,” he said, “I’m freaking out here, too.”

His confession helped somewhat, actually, as some of the nervous tension disappeared, replaced with laughter as I leaned my forehead forward, his lips pressing up against it. As soon as my head leaned back, he leaned forward and placed a kiss on my neck. He continued to place several more, each one moving a little farther down. When I suddenly felt his lips on my collar bone again, a nervous jolt suddenly ran down my spine.

*“Oh shit, oh shit...”*

My hands slid from his sides to his back, pulling him closer to me as I felt his lips make contact with my skin again and an intense tremor shook my entire body. I pulled him toward me with more insistence, moving my hands farther up toward his shoulders, forcing him to lift his head so he was once again even with my face. With reckless abandon, I pressed my lips against his so tightly that I was afraid I might accidentally hit our teeth together or something equally painful and embarrassing.

I could feel our torsos pressed up against each other, warm skin on warm skin from just about our collarbones all the way to the waist of my shorts. My arms held Chase tightly to me, as if I never wanted him to back away, which wasn’t entirely false. His arms were wrapped beneath me, helping in part to hold us so close together. A moment or two later, our lips finally parted and we both found ourselves panting. An uncontrollable smile pulled at my lips as a similar one appeared on Chase, a quiet laugh escaping his lips, the small puffs of his breath blowing against my neck.

“I guess this was a good find,” he said quietly.

“Are you talking about me?” I asked, playfully cocking my head to the side.

“I guess that’s for you to figure out.”

With that, we kissed once more, although for significantly less time. When we finally pulled apart, we remained entangled in each other’s arms, both of us seemingly unwilling to move. Jared be damned, I could stay like this all day.

“What did we come all the way to Europe for, again?” Chase asked, smirking.

It would seem we had the same thought.

“Feels like a vacation, to me,” I replied. “Can we do that, instead?”

“Take a vacation?”

“Yeah! We could just lie around here for a few more hours, then... I don’t know, go see Big Ben or something.”

We both laughed as he hung his head, his hair pressing against the top of my chest slightly for a moment before he looked back up at me.

“Just as long as whoever actually owns this apartment doesn’t come back anytime soon,” he replied.

“We can take ‘em.”

He rolled his eyes as I laughed. With that, he let out a sigh and leaned forward slightly, bringing his head to rest on top of my right shoulder, turning his head so his cheek pressed up against me. His hair brushed at the right side of my face slightly as I squirmed slightly at the ticklish sensation. I slowly ran my right hand up and down his back as best I could, my fingers lightly pressed against his skin so that they slid with almost no effort. Chase’s warm breath against my neck felt oddly soothing, each one blowing small strands of my hair that tapped against my skin in a slightly rhythmic pattern. After a little while, I began to grow suspicious and I poked him in the back of the shoulder.

“Hey, you didn’t fall asleep on me, did you?” I asked quietly.

“Nope,” he replied, “just didn’t see the point in moving from here.”

I grinned, my hand resuming its slow pattern up and down his back once again.

“Me, neither.”

March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2000

8:24:35 P.M.

*U.S.S. Scalia*

Sneaking aboard a ship across the Atlantic Ocean was beginning to feel like a truly terrible idea. Kailyn leaned her head



against the metal side of the shipping crate as she stared up at the darkness where she presumed the ceiling was. The only light in the cramped space was a single electronic lantern which she had managed to pilfer from a supply closet on the first day. The light was better than simply residing in the dark, but it did not entirely fill the space. The constant bobbing and rocking of the ship definitely took its toll; she couldn't remember exactly how many times she had vomited in the first several days, so far, but the nausea was mostly a constant.

When she had made her way to the dock she had seen in her strange vision-like moment at the park in New Jersey, the boat that she had seen the others next to was gone, however, she had managed to extract its destination from a rather terrified dock worker. To her luck, there was another ship heading for the same location, a port in a town named Southampton. The thought that she was actually a stowaway on a trip to England seemed almost ludicrous to her as she laughed and shook her head.

“Kailyn Massey, modern day pirate of the high seas,” she muttered, finally looking back down from the ceiling to stare at her legs, a wave of nausea churning her stomach again.

“Some pirate you are,” echoed from across the shipping container.

Kailyn lifted her eyes to see the copy of herself sitting against the far wall, half-shrouded in shadows as she watched her with a look of amusement on her face.

“If you feel all my pain, how come you don't look so sick?”

“Oh, I can feel it,” she said, “but it's not like I actually have anything to throw up, now, is it?”

With a sigh, Kailyn leaned her head against the side of the crate once again. Her hand reached out to her right, her fingers brushing up against waxy wrapping paper as she attempted to pull it closer to her. After a few moments of struggle, she managed to grab hold of the package and pull it into her lap. Still without looking, she reached inside and extracted one of the items within. The saltine crackers tasted almost like nothing, but they seemed to help stave off some of the milder bouts of nausea.

“Are you going to subsist entirely off of those crackers all

the way to England?” the copy asked, a hint of what could have almost been disgust beginning to lace her tone.

“I’ve taken more than that from the kitchen, so far,” she said, looking back down at the image of herself seated against the far wall. “Gotta prevent scurvy, you know.”

The copy rolled her eyes as Kailyn grinned and ate another saltine. Upon reaching into the wrapper once more, however, her fingers found nothing but the crumbs that littered the bottom. With a heavy sigh, she tossed the waxy wrapped aside before running her hands over her face, rubbing her eyes.

“I wish I could just sleep all the way there,” she muttered.

“That might actually get you killed easier than scurvy,” the copy shot back.

Kailyn groaned as she let her hands fall into her lap once more.

“Why couldn’t I have the ability to teleport or something?”

“Because how else would you learn the value of patience, my dear?”

“I wouldn’t have to,” she shot back, “simple as that.”

Now it was the copy’s turn to groan as she brought her hands down on her lap with a light slapping sound.

“You are impossible.”

“You would know.”

March 8<sup>th</sup>, 2000

9:35:24 A.M.

London, England

Despite our best attempts and intentions, Chase and I couldn’t actually spend all day, or even all morning, lying in bed. The moment had been interrupted several minutes later by the sound of loud banging on the door to the room we had shared. At first, we had feared that either the actual owners of the apartment had returned, or that the police had arrived, but it had only been Lexi, informing us that she had found food. Leave it to Lexi’s stomach to get in the way of our alone time.

When I reached the kitchen, after carefully making sure

that I had redressed completely and looked how I imagined I normally would have shortly after waking up, I found her standing in front of the stove, the sound of something frying filling the air. The smell that accompanied it immediately made my mouth water as I walked over to her and peeked over her shoulder. Some kind of meat was currently in the pan, some kind of juices or sauce sizzling around it.

“Back, you mangy animal,” she said, smirking as she waved a spatula at me.

I growled at her before grinning and stepping back, running my hands through my hair yet again. As I approached the section of the counter that ran perpendicular to the one Lexi was using, I spun around and leaned back, resting against it with my arms crossed. It was even more apparent now, in her pajamas, just how long her hair was getting. The tips of it seemed to touch just about at the halfway point down her back.

“You’ve got quite the mane going, there,” I remarked.

“You’re one to talk.”

“Hey!” I shot back, self-consciously reaching back to bring it over my shoulder, immediately realizing how it stretched a good ways down over my chest, as I did.

“It is starting to be a pain in my ass, though,” Lexi continued, glancing up from her cooking.

“Got any scissors?”

I jumped slightly as Shawn entered the kitchen, shuffling up behind Lexi and grabbing her hair in a sort of ponytail shape, just above where it touched her shoulders.

“I could take care of it for you real quick.”

“I’m not sure I trust you with a sharp object that close to me,” she said, shaking her head and stepping away slightly, pulling her hair free from his grasp.

What at first had seemed to be another joke quickly seemed to be something more as I happened to take a closer look at her body language: her shoulders were tense, and I could see that she looked almost like she was ready to spring away at any moment.

*“Is she actually afraid of him after the Detroit incident?”*

Shawn looked at her quizzically for a moment before backing away, moving to take a seat at the small table set up next

to a window looking out at the narrow lot that served as the backyard. I had been so busy being angry at him for his outburst in the warehouse several weeks ago that I hadn't even considered how the other two might feel about it. Before I could begin to wonder even more, Chase appeared from down the hallway where Shawn and I had come from, yawning as he pulled up on the waist of his basketball shorts slightly.

"I'm almost beginning to forgive you for waking me up, Lexi," he commented, glancing toward the stove, as well.

"Oh, please, as if you weren't already awake," she said.

Chase and I immediately exchanged terrified glances, but quickly tried to hide them.

"Uh... what do you mean?" he asked.

"I swear you never sleep," she continued. "You just somehow stay awake despite staying up for, like, eighteen hours at a time."

It felt almost as if we had dodged a bullet, but I didn't totally believe Lexi's justification. Something told me she knew, or had at least inferred based on a good imagination.

"Okay, I think I've done about as good of a job with this as I can," she said, turning the burner off and grabbing the pan to turn around.

She quickly crossed the open space and scooped four seemingly generous chunks of something onto waiting plates that I hadn't noticed before. Once the food was served, she dropped the pan in the sink and turned around to face us, clapping her hands together.

"Food's up. Help yourselves."

The second-best sound after that of the meat cooking in the pan had to have been that of the shower coming to life. I had finally managed to navigate the knobs to the point where the water began flowing, and shortly after that, it began to grow warmer. My hands were almost shaking in anticipation as I went to begin disrobing, hoping to hop directly in the shower. Just as I was pulling my shirt over my head, however, I heard the sound of the doorknob turning and I jumped, crossing my arms across my chest

and spinning around to face the door. It had opened a crack, but no one had entered. Just as I was beginning to wonder if perhaps ghosts were real, Chase's head appeared around the side and he grinned.

"Mind if I come in?"

"Jesus," I sighed.

"I don't know what kind of answer that's supposed to be..."

"Either hurry up and get in here or get out and close the door," I hissed, not wanting to be too loud.

With his grin widening, Chase opened the door a bit more and slipped inside, pushing it closed behind him. As soon as he had, I dropped my shirt to the floor and let out another sigh, shaking my head.

"What do you want?" I asked quietly, not wanting the other two to hear us in the bathroom alone.

"Well, I don't know," he said, suddenly seeming unsure of what to say. "To spend more time with you?"

I gave him an odd look for a moment as I crossed my arms across my chest, shifting my weight more onto one leg than the other.

"Was earlier not enough?"

"I mean... I would never say no to more."

"More...?"

"Time," he said quickly.

A smirk pulled at the corner of my lips as I laughed dryly.

"Nice save."

Chase's grin had faded, leaving an all-too-familiar expression that looked quite a lot like a mix of worry and apprehension. With a sigh, I let my arms fall to my sides and I stepped forward, placing one hand on his chest as I leaned in and kissed him. My lips pulled at his slightly as I backed away, my eyes searching his.

"You should know me better by now," I said quietly.

"Like I said," he replied, "I never know what to think around you."

A grin spread across my lips as I leaned in and kissed him once again.

“I guess it stays interesting that way, huh?” I replied, my voice more of a breathy whisper as I pulled back once again.

He grinned in reply as I took another step or two back, glancing back toward the shower before returning my attention to him.

“So... was your plan to just kind of hang out and wait here while I hop in?” I asked. “Or... what?”

“Well, I, uh... I don’t really know,” he said.

A shiver suddenly ran down my spine and I tried to hide it as best I could.

*“You wanted to come in there with me.”*

I didn’t say anything aloud, I simply crossed my arms across my chest and idly brushed my foot back and forth across the tile floor, my bare sole skipping slightly as it stuck to the damp surface, the humidity from the shower clearly beginning to fill the room. This morning had been one thing, but something like that... it was completely different territory. It might as well have been a different planet.

“Well, no peeking, but you can hang out in here while I take a quick shower, okay?” I said, breaking the silence.

He nodded quickly, almost as if he were grateful that I had spoken first, instead of forcing him to decide. With a gesture of twirling my index finger around, he grinned sheepishly and turned so he was facing the door. I quickly stripped the remainder of my clothes off and hurriedly slipped inside the shower, closing the small glass door quickly. The design featured a kind of fogged appearance, already, but the humidity from the warm water had served to help obscure it even more.

The sensation of the water rolling over me sent an instant wave of joy through my body, a smile forcing itself onto my face. I ducked my head forward and let the water run through my hair for a few moments before I lifted it and brushed the clinging strands out of my eyesight. Several bottles of shower supplies sat in the right-hand corner behind me, so I grabbed one and scanned the label until I discerned that it was shampoo. I quickly set to work on my hair, washing out several applications of the fruity gel before I was finally satisfied that it felt even remotely clean.

Just as I was about to reach for the bottle next to it,

however, I felt a sudden, intense burning in my stomach and I froze, gritting my teeth. I tried to simply clench my hands into fists and wait for it to subside, but it suddenly seemed to spike yet again and an audible cry of pain escaped my lips.

“Ryss?”

I felt physically unable to respond to Chase’s concerned call as I leaned forward, placing my hand on the wall in order to steady myself. The pain in my stomach seemed to double as I pressed my other hand against it. I nearly screamed as I felt what seemed to be my abdomen writhe and clench slightly. Before I could slip and fall in the shower, I slowly lowered myself to a sitting position, turning around so that I faced in the direction of the showerhead. The water now landed about on my knees as I pulled them in close to my chest, wrapping my arms around them, as well.

A moment later, I could feel a burning sensation beginning to build behind my eyes as pressure began to build in my ears. I closed my eyes tightly, almost as if it could somehow help ward off the new layers of pain that had begun to appear. It must have been a solid minute or so of me sitting in what seemed to be silence, dealing with these burning pains and incredible aches that had seemed to suddenly appear across my body before I felt something touch my shoulder and I jumped, my eyes instantly snapping open.

I didn’t know what I had expected to be there beside me, but for some reason the sight of Chase surprised me, at first. A moment later, I felt the feeling of surprise and confusion fade away as I turned and buried my head in my arms.

“Ryss, what’s wrong?” he asked softly.

I didn’t respond; I was too busy trying to hold back some kind of wailing sob that I did not want the others to hear. After another moment or two, I felt him gently tugging at my shoulder and I turned my head to look at him once again. He was holding a faded pink towel, somewhat outstretched toward me. I managed to shakily push myself to my feet as I stepped toward him and he wrapped his arms around me, draping the towel with them.

As soon as my feet touched the small shower mat on the floor, I felt my knees go weak and I began to collapse, but Chase

held me tightly, slowing my descent. We both ended up on the floor, the towel wrapped around me as I leaned in toward Chase, burying my face in the crook of his neck.

“It’s okay, Ryss, it’s okay,” he said. “Bad memories?”

“Pain...” I managed.

“I can understand why it might be—”

“No,” I moaned, shaking my head, “I can feel it. It hurts.”

I felt him shift slightly and, without looking, I knew he must have been glancing down at me. The look of worry he must have had was clearly visible in my mind, but this time it was an oddly comforting thought.

“What hurts?”

After a moment or two more of attempting to collect myself, I was finally able to form words again.

“Everything... my eyes, my ears... my stomach, my arms...”

I felt his embrace grow tighter before something soft touched my right cheek a moment later; I didn’t have to look to know it was him.

“Is this like in that alley back in New York?”

Ice suddenly poured into my veins as I remembered that incident; I had forgotten Chase was there. Finally, I let out a heavy, shuddering sigh and shrugged my shoulders, staring down at the towel about where my knees would be.

“Something like it, I guess.”

“Ryss... you can tell me what’s going on,” he said. “I’m just—”

“I know,” I interrupted, lifting my head to look up at him once again, several clumps of my soaking hair still in my face. “It’s... like what you talked about in Georgia; it’s what I’m scared of.”

He remained silent, his arms still wrapped around me. I shifted slightly underneath the towel to avoid crushing my left foot under my own weight.

“Whatever... whatever Jared did... it seems to keep getting... I don’t know, more?”

“More what?”

“Just... more of it,” I managed. “You’ve seen some of it: I



can hear things better than I should, I'm hyper-aware of everything around me, I haven't had a fully decent meal in weeks yet I still feel like I could physically take on anyone or anything in front of me."

"That iron strength, huh?"

Despite myself, I couldn't help laughing, the motion shaking my entire body as it seemed caught somewhere between a true laugh and a sob. I could hear Chase laugh quietly beside me as his hand closed around my right bicep, through the towel, and squeezed it. When I actually tried flexing it, he let out a sound that actually seemed to indicate a bit of his impressed response.

"You know, I was half-joking before, but now..."

"You better watch yourself, then," I said quietly, turning to look at him with a devious smirk.

We both laughed softly as I felt myself begin to relax, the tension slowly easing away as I began to fall more into his arms, forcing him to support my weight slightly more. Chase shifted his position slightly, moving his arms so they were wrapped more loosely around me. I let out a quiet whine as I wriggled closer to him slightly, attempting to pull his arms more tightly around me, once again. With a laugh, he moved one of his hands onto my back, rubbing it slowly.

"You know, it's probably about time you finished that shower," he said.

I gave him a hard look and he laughed. With a sigh, I collected my legs under me and began to push myself into a standing position, taking care to make sure the towel stayed wrapped around me at all times. Once I was on my feet, I wrapped it around my torso so that it stretched from my chest to about halfway down my thighs.

"I think I was pretty much done, anyway," I commented, pushing the glass doors on the shower open so that I could turn the water off.

When I turned back around, I made the same circular motion with my finger toward Chase and he grinned, but rose to his feet and turned his back. I quickly dried myself off and pulled on the clothes that I had brought in with me. We had taken full advantage of the apartment we had been squatting in all night and

used the washer and dryer to fully clean our clothes. As I pulled on the first set of clean clothing that I had worn in weeks, I couldn't help but revel in the feeling. Pulling my hair from under the collar of my grey T-shirt, I cleared my throat and Chase half-turned to look over his shoulder.

"Coast clear?"

"Yes, the coast is clear," I shot back, my tone mocking.

As he turned around, I attempted to at least partially dry my hair by wiping and batting at it with the towel, finally deciding that it was not going to work as well as I had hoped and dropping it on the floor.

"So, you in there next?" I asked. "I forgot to ask before shutting the water off."

"I suppose I could," he replied, shrugging.

"Well, now that I took a shower," I said, stepping forward and jabbing a finger into his chest, "no more kisses until you get clean and change out of those old clothes."

He narrowed his eyes at me as I grinned mischievously before pushing away and reaching to grab the clothes I had slept in; they even felt dirty in my hands as I collected them into a ball, holding them away from me slightly. I began to slide past him when I felt him wrap an arm around my waist, but I quickly spun around and away from his grasp.

"What did I say?" I chided, raising one eyebrow.

He just shook his head as I opened the door and slipped back into the hallway, closing it behind me. As soon as I turned around I jumped, finding myself face to face with Lexi. Instantly, my heart started pounding in my chest as I tried to collect myself, but the nerves made that rather difficult.

"Good morning," she said, smirking.

"Shower's taken," I said quickly, brushing past her before she could say anything else.

Before I could make a full escape down the hallway, or even five feet, her voice called from behind me, echoing slightly in the long, narrow space.

"I figured."

March 7<sup>th</sup>, 2000  
9:38:24 P.M.  
Southampton, England

Solid ground seemed almost like a dream too good to be true as Kailyn finally made her way out of the shipping crate and into the chilly, darkened night. The sun had long since set, but the bright work lights at the docks blocked out all of the stars above. She inhaled deeply, the smell of the salt water not far away still filling the air around her as she closed her eyes, tilting her head back. A slight breeze from across the water ruffled her hair, but it felt instantly different than the whipping wind that had seemed to tear at the cargo ship's main deck in the middle of the ocean.

Although the constant motion of the ship at sea had felt bad enough, the last leg of the journey, from the storage deck to the actual dock on land, had been the roughest, or at least the strangest. The sensation of being dangled a hundred or so feet in the air by a crane while trapped inside an all-metal box had not been a tranquil experience, but she had made it out alive, and without any significant injuries, as had the rest of the crew. At least, not injuries from her. To the best of her knowledge, Kailyn had gone almost entirely undetected for the entire five day journey, managing to sneak about the ship when in need of supplies undetected.

Her eyes snapped open at the sound of voices nearby, breaking her small moment of tranquility and celebration. She quickly ducked off to the right, moving out of sight behind another stack of shipping containers. As soon as she had, two men clad in hard hats, reflective vests, and coveralls appeared from around the other side of a shipping container beside the one she had stowed away in. As they were about to continue walking, one of the men suddenly stopped and pointed in Kailyn's general direction. Her heart skipped a beat as she thought she had been spotted. The next moment, she pulled away from the corner, plastering her back against the metal surface and holding her breath in anticipation.

The men's voices drew closer and closer until she was certain that they had to have reached the container where she had started. The voices didn't seem to come any closer, however, so

she slowly moved toward the corner, only moving so that she could see around it with one eye. She couldn't see anyone moving toward the stack she was currently hiding behind, but she could just make out one of the men standing in front of the crate beside her.

"...bloody idiots on these ships don't even check t'make sure the doors are locked," one of the men was saying.

Her brow creased in confusion for a moment before she realized that they must have spotted the door she had left open, rather than herself. Breathing a sigh of relief, she moved back from the corner once again and ran her hands over her face.

"No ultra-violence today?"

Kailyn glanced to her left and saw the copy of herself leaning against the container, as well, sticking her bottom lip out in a pouting gesture. She shook her head and prepared to keep moving through the shipping yard in search of an exit when the copy tapped her on the shoulder and she jumped. No matter how many times the copy had proven that she could touch her, the sensation always startled her.

"First of all, you need to get over that," the copy said, "but second of all, and most importantly, how are you planning on tracking Amaryss out of here?"

"Well, I'm going to take a wild guess that they're headed for London," Kailyn muttered, suddenly glancing back in the direction of the two men as she realized she had spoken aloud.

"Okay, but this is not London," the copy said, pointing to the ground. "How are you going to get there?"

Kailyn shrugged, turning to walk away again.

"The same way you have been so far?" the copy called after her. "It's getting late; you want to risk your luck hitching a ride in a foreign country?"

She stopped in her tracks, grinding her teeth as her fists clenched at her sides. After a second or two, she turned around and stalked back toward the copy, who had remained where she was the entire time.

"I bet one of those lovely gentlemen has a vehicle," the copy said as she approached, "and I bet he has keys to it, as well."

As much as Kailyn didn't want to admit it, the copy did

have a point. There were two ways she could go about getting those keys, however, and both had their problems. Sneaking around and pickpocketing them, essentially, would avoid direct confrontations, but would inevitably burn a lot of time. Directly confronting the men would be the quick way, but would most definitely lead to violence and injury, as well as the potential for others to hear or see what was going on.

“Tick tock, tick tock,” the copy chided, grinning.

With a heavy sigh, Kailyn resolved herself to a decision and tried to mentally prepare herself. A moment later, she walked around the corner of the shipping container and began to approach the men, who were just beginning to turn away from the container. When she reached the end, she saw one of them pull a double take before tapping the other on his shoulder.

“Excuse me, miss,” he called, “you can’t be here.”

“I’m sorry, I’m just... looking for someone,” she said, still approaching the two of them.

“Well, that’s fine, but you can’t be out in the yard like that, you could get hurt.”

Kailyn suppressed a dry laugh as she tried to hide her grin, as well.

“We can bring you back to the front gate,” the second man offered. “Does the person you’re looking for work here?”

“You could say that.”

“What’s his name?”

“What’s yours?”

The man looked confused as Kailyn suddenly raised one hand toward him. He was pulled forward by an unseen force, letting out a cry of surprise just before he smashed face-first into the side of a metal shipping container. The other man jumped and swore, looking over at his friend before back at Kailyn.

“Did you?”

She suddenly lifted him roughly ten feet into the air before slamming him straight back down, his body lying still as the dust settled. Kailyn sighed and shook her head, quickly moving to search the second man’s pockets. Finding nothing, she frowned and moved over to the other man on the ground by the shipping container. He was groaning and slowly beginning to roll onto his

side as she approached. When she reached him, she placed a foot on his shoulder and pulled it toward her, flipping the man onto his back. Blood was running from his nose and a gash that had opened on his forehead. His eyes widened as he saw Kailyn standing over him, her foot still on his shoulder.

“What do you want?” he managed, his voice sounding thick, as if he might have bitten his tongue. “Please, don’t kill me!”

“I’d hope I don’t have to kill you just for some car keys,” she remarked.

“Keys?”

“Indeed. Would you like to make this easier for both of us and just hand ‘em over?”

The man looked confused for a moment before quickly digging into the right-hand pocket of his reflective jacket. After a second or two of frantic searching, he produced a ring with two black keys attached. They jingled slightly as he held them up toward Kailyn, who took them eagerly.

“Now that was easy.”

With that, she suddenly lifted him off the ground with her abilities before ramming him into the side of the container once again. This time, when he fell to the ground, his body remained still and limp. She doubted the blow had been enough to kill him, but she didn’t particularly have the time or concern to check, at the moment. A heavy sigh escaped her lips as she turned quickly and began to make her way away from the waterfront, hoping to find the front entrance to the shipping yard.

After about five minutes of walking, she came to the end of the rows of containers only to find herself confronted with a chain link fence. Barbed wire ran around the top while white signs hung on the actual fence, itself, facing away from her. She didn’t need to see the fronts to guess that they said something to the effect of “No Trespassing.” No obvious signs of a front gate appeared to the right, however she did notice what appeared to be a white trailer parked on the other side of the fence about a hundred feet to her left, several sets of bright lights mounted from poles next to it.

“Ten bucks says that’s the way out of here,” the copy said, drawing Kailyn’s glance over to the shipping container to her left.

“Do they even use dollars here?” she shot back before heading toward the trailer and the lights.

To her luck, she didn’t run into any other workers on the way, although the sound of voices came from an open window of the trailer ahead. Glancing around and seeing no one else, she decided that she would have to try her luck. She moved as quickly as she dared while avoiding making too much noise. The sound of her bag hitting against her hip seemed much louder, suddenly, as she held her breath. The voices didn’t stop or change in tone as she passed the open window, staying in a half-crouch in an attempt to stay at least somewhat hidden from sight. As soon as she had cleared the gap she believed the window could easily see, she stood up and broke into a jog.

To her disappointment, the gate was not a simple barricade to block vehicles, as she had hoped, but an actual rolling gate that appeared to be made of the same material as the rest of the fence, including the barbed wire at the top.

“You’ve got to be kidding me...” Kailyn muttered, running her hands through her hair and glancing around.

She was incredibly exposed standing in the middle of the bright lights, but there didn’t appear to be an obvious way to get around the gate. The thought of crawling over the fence, even if she could somehow protect herself from the barbed wire, didn’t seem particularly appealing, and she doubted that she could simply ask the people in the trailer to come let her out.

“It looks like you’re at quite the impasse,” the copy said, suddenly appearing at the gate, curling her fingers through the metal links as she scanned the space on the other side. “There seem to be a rather limited set of options, here.”

“No shit.”

“I am only inside your head,” she said, smirking. “I’m only about as far ahead as you are.”

“And yet you act like you know everything...” Kailyn grumbled, glancing around the area as she began to grow slightly more panicked.

“I get it from you.”

Kailyn’s gaze came to rest on the gate, once again, idly biting her bottom lip as her eyes seemed to glaze over. A moment

later, they came to rest on the wheels along the bottom edge. Her mouth twisted into a strange, half-frown as she slowly raised one hand toward them. With a heavy sigh, she concentrated on the entire fence segment. Slowly, the wheels began to squeak and groan as the gate began to slide open. The sound was much louder than she had hoped, but she stopped it after she had managed to pull it back about a foot or so. As soon as she relaxed her concentration, she let out the breath she had inadvertently been holding, panting slightly as she glanced toward the trailer. She could just make out motion behind one of the closed windows, so she hurried forward toward the gap, turning sideways to slip through it.

Just as she was about to fully make it through, however, something brought her to a jerking stop, pulling at her shoulder. She glanced back to see that her bag hadn't quite fit through the opening like she had, so she swore and quickly began working to pull it through. Luckily, it was mostly filled with clothes, so she was able to compress it and pull it through the narrow gap. She staggered forward for a few steps as she was suddenly released from the obstruction, but managed to regain her footing just as she heard the sound of the trailer door opening.

Not waiting to look back, she ran forward, dashing toward the row of parked vehicles ahead of her. A voice vaguely called from behind her, but she didn't pay any attention to what it might be saying. As soon as she reached the first car in the row, a black sedan, she came to a stop and glanced down at the keys, scanning for some kind of identification of which vehicle they belonged to. She spotted an insignia on the black, plastic part at the top and quickly scanned the row of vehicles in front of her for the matching badge. About halfway down the row, she spotted it on the back of a beige station wagon and she immediately took off toward it.

When she reached the car, she immediately moved down the left side and tried the key in the lock. It twisted to the right under her grip, so she immediately removed it and grabbed the handle, pulling the door open. She removed the bag from over her shoulders and tossed it into the vehicle before sliding in, herself, and slamming the door. As she turned to look for the wheel,



however, she found herself facing nothing but the empty dashboard. After a moment of confusion, she glanced to her right and saw that the driver's seat was actually on the other side of the car. Cursing under her breath, she grabbed her bag and threw it toward the backseat before awkwardly clambering over the center console and falling into the other seat.

Now that she was in the correct position, she jammed the key into the ignition and turned it. Nothing seemed to happen, though, as the engine kept turning, but never caught. Her brow furrowed in confusion as she glanced toward the back window to see if anyone was approaching. No one was immediately behind the vehicle, however, so she turned her attention back to the problem at hand. Looking down at her feet, she happened to notice that there was a third pedal that she hadn't seen in the vehicles she had commandeered, previously.

“What in the hell...?”

She tentatively pressed it down before turning the key once again. This time, the engine turned over and finally came to life.

“This is going to be a shit show,” she muttered, immediately reaching for the shifter in the middle of the console to her left.

When she glanced down at it, however, there were no clearly indicated positions for it, which caused her to pause for a moment. Upon closer inspection, she noticed a small grid emblazoned in the top of the actual shifter, itself, outlining a pattern including the numbers 1 through 5, along with “R” and “N.”

“Okay, so R is reverse...” she muttered and went to move the stick into the correct position, but it didn't seem to want to stay.

After another attempt or two, she decided to try her luck again, pressing the mysterious third pedal in and moving the stick. This time, it moved to the location and stayed there when she let go of it. Immediately, she let go of the pedal and the car shuddered to a stop.

“What the hell?” she glanced back toward the key in the ignition, but found that it was still in place.

“Now this is new,” the copy said, suddenly appearing in the

passenger seat. “Didn’t quite steal a car like this back home, huh?”

“Unless you have something helpful to say, don’t say anything,” Kailyn snapped, glancing out the rear window once more.

One of the people from the trailer had to have surely been making their way toward her, at that moment, if they hadn’t already begun following the mysterious figure who had took off running toward the cars.

“Jared never did teach us how to drive stick, did he?”

Kailyn glared at the copy for a second before looking down at the shifter once again and groaning.

“It’s a fucking manual?” she moaned, running her hands over her face.

“Nothing like a crash course in driving lessons,” the copy chimed in.

“No, but a crash is going to be involved somewhere, I think,” she growled. “Time for plan B.”

She unlocked the driver’s door and pushed it open, stepping out into the cool, night air once again. Taking a deep breath, she walked toward the back of the vehicle and was immediately confronted by another man in a reflective vest and coveralls.

“Who in the bloody hell are you?” he demanded, his voice deep and gravelly, as if he smoked at least three packs a day.

“I’m looking for a ride.”

“Well this isn’t a fucking taxi service,” he said. “Now where’d you get those keys?”

“I never said I needed you to drive.”

Just then, the man was thrown sideways into the truck beside him. His head ricocheted off the tailgate as he fell to the ground, holding both hands to the spot where it had made contact with the metal.

“What the f—?”

Kailyn suddenly appeared over him, placing one foot on his chest.

“You got a car?”

“What? You—what kind of—” the man sputtered, seemingly unable to form a cohesive sentence.

“Do you have a car?” Kailyn asked, speaking slowly and

deliberately.

“Well, yeah—”

“Is it an automatic?”

“What?!”

“Is it an automatic or do you need to shift it?”

The man began to spit out some other non-answer, so Kailyn sighed and removed her foot from his chest. A moment later, he was lifted forward once again and his head was thrown against the rear of the truck. His body went limp as she let him fall onto his back. Looking through the pockets of his vest, she found nothing of use, or that could even be mistaken for keys. A hurried search of the pockets to his coveralls finally yielded a key ring with many different keys on it, including a pair that seemed as if they would belong to a car. Kailyn quickly worked to pull them off the ring before tossing the rest of the keys back onto the man’s chest.

“Let’s give this a try,” she muttered, glancing up and down the row for the insignia, once again.

This time, she spotted the matching badge on what looked like some kind of van several cars back toward the fence. She hurriedly grabbed her bag from the first car and made her way to the second, unlocking the right-hand door and glancing inside. She didn’t see the same third pedal that the other car had, so she said a silent cheer and threw her bag into the passenger seat before taking her own.

When the engine immediately turned over and came to life, she slid the shifter to the reverse gear before pressing her foot down on the gas pedal. The vehicle shot backwards and she nearly spun the wheel into the car next to it, but managed to recover and avoid any sort of collision. Once she was free of the parking space, she brought the van to a stop and shifted into drive before stepping on the accelerator once again. She shot forward, racing along the gravel road and away from the shipping yard. As soon as she began to distance herself from the lights, however, she quickly began to realize that she couldn’t see anything in the darkness.

After much twisting of knobs and pressing of buttons leading to various surprises, such as the windshield wipers and the hazard lights, she managed to turn the headlights on and illuminate

the speedometer. Breathing a sigh of relief, she settled in as she turned on to a normal, paved road, and headed off to the right, going solely off of instinct, like she had when tracking Amaryss, previously.

“Well, that was quite the ordeal,” the copy said and Kailyn felt a cold hand on her shoulder.

It seemed the copy had appeared in the back area of the van, seeing as she had thrown her bag in the passenger seat.

“Nice of you to save my seat, though,” she remarked, clearly following Kailyn’s train of thought.

“I was in a rush. Plus, it’s not like it matters to you if you stand or sit forever.”

“I suppose that’s true,” the copy replied, laughing slightly. “So, where are we headed?”

“You need to ask?”

“It just seemed polite.”

Kailyn smirked and shook her head, keeping her eyes trained on the road. Just then, a road sign loomed out of the darkness, displaying the distance to various cities and the highways that led to them. Her eyes immediately locked onto the name at the bottom.

“London.”

March 8<sup>th</sup>, 2000

1:23:48 P.M.

London, England

My joke to Chase earlier about us taking a vacation to do touristy things instead of searching for Jared’s facility had originally been entirely in jest, yet we somehow had found ourselves standing in the middle of a busy square full of various crowds, all quite clearly not from London, themselves. I looked up at the large, brass lion crouching beside some kind of looming tower-column-thing as I tried to avoid being accidentally swept up in the group of Asian families that had suddenly appeared in the same spot. As I stepped out of the way of about the eighth photo in the past minute, I felt someone tugging on my right arm and I

glanced over to find Chase attempting to lead me away.

“Not worth fighting that crowd,” he said, grinning.

“I could probably take ‘em,” I replied, shrugging.

He just shook his head as I laughed but followed him away from the statues. Shawn and Lexi were making their way toward a large fountain closer to an enormous stone building at the other end of the square as we broke free from the crowd. I nodded in their direction and Chase adjusted our course to follow after them.

“So where are we, again?” he asked, glancing around the large, open space.

“Trafalgar Square,” I replied, remembering some sign that I had seen roughly twenty minutes ago, now.

“Huh... I’d say it’s more round.”

I punched him in the shoulder as he laughed and shied away, hoping to avoid any additional attacks.

“Don’t be such a smartass,” I chided, narrowing my eyes at him.

By that point, however, we had reached the other two, who were both looking rather unimpressed by the fountain. Lexi had a look of bored indifference on her face as Shawn was giving most of his attention to the other people around us.

“Paranoid?” I asked, elbowing him as I approached.

“Not so much,” he replied, “just interesting to see all of the different people in this one place.”

“Not much different than New York, that way,” I said, shrugging.

“I guess,” he said, “but more accents.”

“What, New Yawk wasn’t ‘nough for ya?” I shot back in a terrible impersonation of an accent I had probably heard in some gangster movie on TV years ago.

“Well, if it wasn’t enough before,” he said, “that sure as hell killed it.”

I rolled my eyes but glanced around the square, myself. He did have a point: something about these crowds seemed to just feel different. Maybe it was the nagging feeling of being in a foreign country, already, that added to the strangeness, even though everything was in English. I did have to admit that not having a language barrier to deal with when navigating the city was

incredibly useful. We would have been royally screwed if we had gone to, say, Germany or Italy, instead.

“So, we are no closer to finding this warehouse,” Lexi said, startling me out of my daze, “but we managed to find the sightseeing areas.”

“Well, they actually have signs that specifically lead you to these places,” Chase pointed out. “I don’t think Jared is about to start putting up posters and billboards advertising the location of his secret genetics lab.”

“You make him sound like some kind of comic book villain,” she shot back.

“If you don’t think about it too deeply, it kind of starts to feel that way,” he replied, shrugging.

“So what does that make us, superheroes?” Shawn chimed in, raising one eyebrow.

“I don’t feel so super,” Lexi replied, shrugging.

“Says the girl with—”

“Okay, whatever,” she interrupted quickly, glancing around as she self-consciously adjusted her jacket a bit.

Shawn just smirked as I sighed and turned to Chase once again.

“Do you still have the address we got off that computer?”

“Yep,” he replied, reaching into the back pocket of his jeans and producing a folded piece of paper.

The address was scrawled in black pen on the inside, Chase’s handwriting messy but at least still legible. As I looked at it for what felt like the millionth time, it still didn’t seem any closer than it had in Detroit. We had traveled halfway across a country, across an ocean, and were now standing in the middle of a city that I had only dreamed I might visit someday, and we couldn’t be more than a few miles from the warehouse, but the street name still meant nothing if we couldn’t actually find it.

“So, when do we break down and just try to ask someone where it is?” Shawn asked.

“I mean, didn’t Amaryss do that in Detroit?” Lexi added, looking over at me.

“Basically, yeah,” I replied, nodding.

“So why the hell are we just wandering around, then?”

Everyone fell silent, exchanging glances around the group. The answer was clear, even if none of us were saying it. The thought that anyone else in the group was just as scared as I was had never occurred to me, yet here we were. We could have easily asked for help a long time ago, but we had tried to look on our own. It wasn't that we thought we could find it without assistance, deep down we didn't want to find it so quickly.

"What do you say we find another coffee shop or something and ask the barista?" I finally spoke up, breaking the awkward silence.

"Do they even have those here?" Shawn asked.

"We can find something like it, I'm sure," I shot back, rolling my eyes.

"Would it be a tea house, maybe?" Lexi chimed in.

"I don't give a shit, let's just find one."

The others laughed as I pointed in the general direction over Lexi's shoulder.

"Onward!"

I led the way across the square toward the side streets spiraling off in each direction from the crowds of tourists and choked traffic. We didn't have to go far from the initial square to find a place that seemed to fit our needs: a small café nestled between a souvenir shop and a store that seemed to sell fancy kinds of paper for letters and such. As we turned to head through the front door, held open by Shawn, the passing thought of whether I would have been more interested in the creative store if we had lived any semblance of normal lives up until now came to mind, but I quickly dismissed it and followed Chase inside the café.

It was understandably crowded inside the small space as we slowly edged our way through the crowded tables and small groups of people standing about the space, sipping on drinks and eating small pastries and baked goods. We made our way to the very back of the seating area, our typical haunt of any restaurant, and carefully observed the room. The line at the counter was somewhat lengthy, which immediately concerned me; it would be hard to try to talk to the employee behind it to get directions if they were trying to get through each customer as quickly as possible.

"You think that line will go down anytime soon?" I

wondered aloud, looking over at the others.

“We’re only a few blocks from Tourist Central,” Shawn said, laughing dryly, “I doubt they have a slow time. Guess you better be extra charming.”

I shot him a dirty look and he just smirked, glancing over at me.

“Why is it my job, per se?”

“You were so good at it last time.”

“I’ll give it a try, since everyone seems so afraid,” Lexi sighed, stepping forward and taking the piece of paper from Chase before making her way through the crowd toward the line.

Part of me was actually slightly relieved that she had stepped up, although I also worried slightly because I had no idea exactly how she would go about approaching the young man behind the counter. She ended up about five or six people back in the line when she had made her way across the crowded space, so we glanced around for a place to settle down and wait. No tables immediately presented themselves, so we simply backed up against the wall and tried to plaster ourselves as closely against it as we could. The bag at my feet suddenly seemed surprisingly light as it dawned on me that it had been the only really consistent thing that I could consider a “home” in the past seven months; it held every possession that I could call my own, and had even served a purpose as a pillow more times than I could remember.

I felt a nudge in my ribs and my head immediately snapped around to the right to see Chase beside me, nodding toward something across the room. As I followed his gaze, I saw that Lexi had reached the front of the line. She flashed the young man behind the counter a big smile as she twisted back and forth slightly, her hands resting over the piece of paper before her. Just as I was beginning to become weary that her attempts were about to fail, the employee smiled and laughed, as well, nervously rubbing the back of his neck.

“She’s good,” Shawn said quietly.

As we continued to watch, she lifted one hand up to play with a loose strand of hair that had slipped out of her ponytail, glancing down at the paper before turning it so the employee could see. He leaned forward and looked it over for a few seconds



before frowning slightly. My heart immediately began to sink as I began to bite my lower lip, crossing my arms across my chest, as well. After a moment or two of tense waiting, he looked back up at Lexi and held up a finger toward her before he quickly stepped behind the display case and crouched down. For a second I began to wonder if she had actually ordered something, but he quickly returned with what appeared to be some kind of notepad.

Grabbing a pen from a small jar next to the register, he quickly scrawled something on it before tearing off the top page and handing it to her. Lexi took the paper and flashed another smile at him before quickly slipping to the side and maneuvering back toward us.

“Amaryss isn’t the only one with the power of persuasion,” she said, holding up the new piece of paper for us to see.

“Guess we can scratch that off the list of new abilities, then,” Shawn said, shooting me a smirk before turning back to Lexi. “So, he know where it is?”

“Sort of,” she said, looking down at whatever he had written. “He said he knew where the street was, that part of town, all that, so he could get us that close.”

“That would probably be good enough,” I said, shrugging. “We got about that close in Detroit and were able to figure it out.”

“That’s what I figured,” she replied, nodding. “So, shall we get on our merry way?”

The sudden silence that seemed to fall over the group seemed surprising at first, but it all but confirmed my earlier suspicions about our true willingness to leap into action. The last time we had rushed off to a mysterious new location one of our group had ended up dead on an operating table. I reached out toward Lexi and it took her a second to realize I had even moved, but she quickly handed me the piece of paper. As I looked over the directions to what we hoped was the correct area of the city, I forced myself to prevent my hand from shaking. Finally, I looked up at the others as I carefully folded it and put it in my pocket.

“Well, we’re sure as hell not going to find it by standing around, here,” I said and grabbed my bag from the floor, slinging it over my shoulder and across my torso once again. “C’mon, we came here with a mission in mind.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Shawn replied, his militaristic tone somewhat mocking, but I ignored it as I began to press through the crowded café.

Whether we wanted to or not, we were on our way, once again.

As soon as I stepped out onto the busy sidewalk once again, I glanced both directions before pulling the folded piece of paper from my jeans’ pocket and glancing at the handwritten instructions. Evidently, we had to go back through Trafalgar Square, so I turned to the left and motioned for the others to follow. After I had gone no more than about ten feet, I felt something brush up against my hand and I glanced down. Chase’s fingers loosely closed around mine for a moment before I more securely slid my hand into his. As he gave me a gentle squeeze, I glanced up at him. He didn’t say a word, though, he simply flashed me a quick smile before looking forward once again to make sure we weren’t about to run into anyone else.

The truth that I would never admit to him, in front of the others, was that the small things, the handholding, the hands on the backs, the playful shoulder bumps, seemed to help push me past whatever doubt I had at the moment. Based on the timing, it was almost like he could sense it, too. I didn’t want to give too much credit to the idea that he could somehow read minds or sense other people’s emotions, but I wouldn’t have been too entirely surprised.

“Feels like a long way from bed, already,” he muttered, causing me to glance over at him once again, the corner of his lips pulled back in a smirk.

“Think they will mind that we didn’t bother to make it before we left?”

He shrugged.

“I’d say if we’re going to be delinquents and break into apartments, we might as well rustle a few more feathers.”

I laughed and shook my head as I squeezed his hand once again, although I quickly realized that I had done so a little more tightly than I had anticipated and immediately winced, glancing up at him.

“Sorry.”

“There’s that iron grip, huh?” he said, laughing. “It’s okay,

I don't think you broke any of my fingers."

"Did it hurt, though?"

He shrugged.

"Not especially."

"Really?" I asked, a coy grin spreading across my lips. "If it had, I might have tried to make it feel better."

He raised his eyebrows slightly as he glanced over at me once again, noticing the look on my face.

"And how would you do that?"

"Guess you won't know, since you don't need my help," I replied, looking away across the street as I fought to contain my laughter.

"Now that you mention it..."

I finally broke down and began laughing, looking back to see the elicited grin on Chase's face. Suddenly, I lifted our hands up in front of me, turning them so the back of his was facing my direction, and gently kissed it. As I let our hands fall between us once again, he gave me a strange look for a moment, but it quickly faded into a smile as I couldn't help but return it with another.

"Get a room, you two!"

I glanced back between us to see Shawn and Lexi only a step or two behind, both looking rather amused. My one finger response only seemed to amuse them further as I turned back to watch where we were walking.

March 8<sup>th</sup>, 2000

4:01:24 P.M.

Wapping District – London, England

The walk from Trafalgar Square probably shouldn't have taken us just over two hours, however we were not the most direction-conscious group, and thus wrong turns seemed to plague us just about everywhere we went. The directions from the man at the café were relatively clear, but at times I sensed that whichever member of our group had taken over as navigator for the time being was perhaps having a little too much fun toying with the rest of us. Despite all of our setbacks, however, we had ended up in

the right part of the city, at least according to an elderly couple whom we had stopped to ask for help.

“They were about as charming and British as... I don’t know, crumpets or some shit,” Lexi remarked, her voice just quiet enough that we could hear, but not the couple.

“I can tell you’ve got the whole British culture thing down pat,” I shot back, smirking.

“It’s not like I actually went to school or anything, you know!”

“Well, that would explain a lot,” Shawn muttered, clearly speaking just loud enough that it would sound as if it could be an accident.

“Don’t need school to kick your ass, though,” she shot back, her tone laced with venom as she placed her hands on her hips.

“Okay, save the punching and kicking for later,” I intervened, stepping between them before one of their ribbing sessions turned into a full-blown argument. “We came to a new continent and all the way through a city we’ve never been to and all that, yeah?”

“Hey, it wasn’t a serious argument,” Shawn countered, holding his hands up.

“Not yet, anyway,” I sighed, rubbing my temples with my fingers as I stepped away, moving toward Chase, who was waiting a few feet away on the sidewalk.

“Playing mother goose, again?” he asked, grinning.

“Oh god, no,” I said quickly, looking up at him. “I can barely look after myself.”

“Group mom!” Lexi suddenly whined from behind me as I let out a heavy sigh and slumped my shoulders. “He’s touching me!”

“Next person to complain or argue gets a finger broken, how about that?”

The other two fell silent as I finally glanced back to see Lexi with her hands clasped behind her, while Shawn had his firmly jammed in his pockets, neither of them looking at each other.

“Such children,” I grumbled and waved for them to follow.

“Come on, we’ve already wasted enough time.”

As we turned to resume our trip down the sidewalk, I suddenly had a flashback to a freezing day on the waterfront of Detroit. Even though it was March and mildly cool, I could instantly feel the burning cold biting at my face, causing my eyes to water only to almost instantly freeze into small, crystalline fragments. With a shake of my head and some rapid blinking, the cold disappeared, but the wet feeling below my eyes still remained. Before I could begin questioning my sanity, however, I felt another wet spot appear and I glanced up. Almost instantly, I closed my right eye as something hit it and I rubbed at it for a moment or two with the back of my hand. Shielding my eyes, I glanced up toward the sky once again to see that the grey clouds that had been overhead for most of the day had suddenly grown much darker.

A few moments later, the sound of raindrops falling on the asphalt around me began to build in intensity, until a rather steady drizzle had formed. I glanced over to Chase to see him zipping up his jacket and glancing at the sky with a slight frown. A smile began to form on my lips, almost uncontrollably, as I turned to glance back at the other two. Lexi appeared rather unfazed by the rain, even holding her hands out to either side of her to catch the drops as she glanced up at the clouds. Shawn hunched his shoulders, hands still in his pockets, but otherwise made no real outward displays of annoyance or enjoyment.

“Just what we needed, huh?” Chase remarked, drawing my attention back to him.

“Afraid to get a little wet?” I shot back, raising one eyebrow as a smirk pulled at the corner of my lips.

He gave me a dirty look before finally cracking a smile, as well, and shaking his head. As our laughter died down, I glanced around the street we had found ourselves on, taking in the large, brick building to our right, about half of its windows covered with plywood. I reached into my back pocket, feeling for the paper with the address stolen from the computer in Detroit, but found it empty. Quickly feeling around in my front pockets and the ones in my jacket, I found no trace of the folded, white scrap.

“Hey, who had the address paper last?” I asked, glancing around at the rest of the group.

The others all began to check their pockets until Shawn produced a small, white rectangle from his. After he had unfolded it, he nodded and held it up. I noticed the paper shaking from the raindrops hitting it, and I immediately wanted to tell him to keep it from getting too wet, but he quickly held it inside his jacket pocket.

“What’s it say, again?” I sighed, rolling my eyes.

He pulled it out and quickly glanced at the writing for a moment before shoving it back in his pocket, safe from the rain.

“Seventy-four Forbes Street,” he recounted.

I looked around for some indication of what street we were on, but I didn’t see anything that looked like the street signs I was used to seeing back home. Finally, Chase tapped on my shoulder and I turned around to see him pointing toward something.

Following his gaze, I saw a white sign hanging on the side of a brick wall that ran around the outer edge of some property on the street corner ahead of us.

“Ellen Street,” I muttered. “Well, that doesn’t get us much closer, does it?”

“Tells us we’re not on Forbes,” he pointed out.

“Okay, fine,” I sighed. “I’ll give you that.”

“Didn’t that man and woman back there say it was right up here?” Lexi asked, appearing beside me and causing me to jump slightly.

“I thought so,” I said, managing to calm myself quickly before it became too obvious that she had scared me more than I would have liked.

Almost absentmindedly, she began to wander down the street ahead of us as I turned back toward Chase and Shawn. Neither of them seemed to have any better ideas than me, and so remained standing in the middle of the sidewalk, looking between the three of us for someone to step up and give a suggestion. When none came, I sighed and turned back toward Lexi, just about to call her back to us so we could keep moving on and searching. As I turned down the street once again, I saw her turning to look at the other side of the building we were standing beside and she instantly froze. My curiosity was piqued as I began to take a few tentative steps toward her.

“Guys, come here!” she shouted, waving excitedly toward us.

I broke into a light run, catching up to her in just a few moments as I tried my best not to accidentally run into a small metal pole set into the ground along the edge of the sidewalk where it met the asphalt. As soon as I had come to a stop, I saw her pointing toward something on the building behind me and I turned to follow her gesture. Clearly placed on the brick wall was a white sign featuring simple, black letters that read “Forbes Street.” My heart rate immediately leapt up as the two boys joined us on the corner. When they saw where she was pointing, I heard Chase let out heavy sigh as Shawn made a “huh” sound.

“So this is the place, then,” he said, glancing up at the large building we had been standing beside the entire time.

The silence that followed his comment didn’t dispute his statement; rather, it seemed to all but confirm it. No one wanted to admit that we had actually made it, so it must have been true, or else someone would have easily denied the notion. As my eyes scanned over the brick façade and large windows placed intermittently along the entire side of the building, I couldn’t deny that it suddenly seemed almost perfect for Jared and his group.

The building was quite clearly a converted warehouse, complete with large, outside doors set several feet off the ground that seemed to lead to nowhere. A construction notice hung in one of the windows, accompanied by a “No Trespassing” sign. For all intents and purposes, this place should have been abandoned. It was brilliant.

“No one would even think to look twice at this place,” I commented quietly, but the others still turned to glance back at the sound of my voice.

“The perfect hiding place,” Lexi affirmed, nodding slowly.

“I’ve gotta hand it to him,” Chase said dryly, “hiding in plain sight is kind of a brilliant idea.”

A shiver ran down my spine at the use of “brilliant” to describe Jared in any way, but I didn’t say anything to the effect out loud. Even if I had wanted to, it felt like my voice wouldn’t respond correctly, at that moment.

“So... how do we get in?” Shawn finally asked, glancing

back at the rest of us. “I mean, there’s no easy open windows or anything to climb up on, like that snow bank back in Detroit.”

I was somewhat inclined to suggest trying the front door, but something told me that such an idea may not be quite so easy, in actuality.

“Breaking and entering, yet again?” Lexi suggested quietly, glancing around to make sure no one else was listening to us.

“I mean, that’s kind of our specialty, at this point,” I quipped.

The others laughed quietly as I grinned and attempted to wipe some of my now-soaked hair out of my face. The thought that everything in my bag must have been absolutely soaked by this point crossed my mind, but I quickly pushed it aside as it was not quite a pressing concern, nor was it something I had an easy answer to at the moment. After a few moments, when the laughter had died down but no one had moved, still, I let out a heavy sigh and began to lead the way down the sidewalk, glancing around to see if we were potentially being observed by either some kind of security system or other pedestrians. Seeing neither, I came to a stop in front of a decent-sized window set into the bottom of the outer wall.

“Here, let’s try this,” I said, gesturing to it as I glanced around once again.

“Do you know where that leads?” Shawn asked, looking slightly doubtful.

“No, but... I have a feeling,” I said, my voice sounding much less confident than I had hoped or intended.

“A feeling...?” he said, raising his eyebrows slightly at me. “That’s it?”

“Listen, if—if you guys...” I trailed off, attempting to bring my shaking voice under control, “if you guys don’t believe me—or just don’t want to be a part of this—I won’t blame you for backing out now. My decisions—my ideas—have led to...”

I paused, taking a deep breath before letting it out in one forceful rush.

“I really fucked up before, and I understand if you don’t want part of anything I’m saying.”

Silence fell over us as I looked down at the sidewalk



between us all, slowly studying the cracks in the cement and everyone's feet. I felt entirely unable to meet their gazes at the moment, despite how badly I wanted to see their reactions. Finally, I saw Chase's feet begin to move toward me, coming to a stop as I slowly looked up to meet his eyes. As soon as I did, I felt the weight of his hands resting on my shoulders appear and I instantly wanted them to wrap around me, pulling me close to his chest, where I could lose myself in the darkness and security of his shoulder. He didn't move to fully embrace me, however, but he did move one hand to my chin, lifting my head ever so slightly so that I was staring him right in the eyes, his gaze unflinching.

"No one blames you," he said quietly. "You haven't forced any of us into doing something against our wills. We've made our own decisions, just like you have."

Lexi and Shawn nodded in response as I tore my gaze from Chase's eyes to look past his shoulder at them.

"Just because you're our little enabler doesn't mean that you shoved us ahead," Shawn said, Lexi nodding her approval once again.

I laughed softly, although I felt hot tears beginning to form in the corners of my eyes, and I instantly felt like an idiot. Here I was, crying on a street corner thousands of miles away from anything I had known, about to undertake the single most important moment of my life in order to piece it all back together, and all I could do was cry.

"*Some SuperGirl you are, Amaryss,*" I thought, my own voice in my head dry and sarcastic.

Chase moved his hands from my shoulders to cup my face between them, lifting my head so that I was looking up at him once again. He gently used one thumb to wipe away a tear that was beginning to roll down my right cheek.

"I've got your back through all of this," he said softly. "You always have, Ryss."

I smiled uncontrollably at the nickname, suddenly realizing how grateful I felt that he had made it up on our first bout of our extended road trip in Texas. From what I knew, the other two had only heard him call me it once or twice, maybe, but it was exclusively his in use. He suddenly leaned forward and I felt his

lips press up against mine. They moved ever so gently as I found myself returning it, his lips hanging on mine for a brief moment as he began to pull away. I realized that my eyes had been closed, so I opened them, a sheepish smile spreading across my face as I felt the tips of my ears grow hot. Chase took his hands away from my face and I glanced over at the other two. One corner of Lexi's mouth was pulled back in a slight smirk, and Shawn had a look on his face that conveyed some sort of amusement.

“Okay then,” I said, clearing my throat slightly, “let's get started, shall we?”

**26****The End is Never—**

March 8<sup>th</sup>, 2000

4:31:24 P.M.

Jared's Operation Nerve Center – London, England

The sound of broken glass crunching under my shoes seemed to reverberate and fill the entire space as I instantly froze, my eyes scanning the darkness before me in a desperate attempt to spot any signs of motion or life that might betray our detection in the first ten seconds of our breaking and entering attempt. Seeing and hearing nothing, I carefully stepped away from the small pile of glass shards, the crunching sound ringing out once again as I hopped to the safety of the open cement floor a foot or so away. Moments later, the sound of another pair of feet landing on the shards came from behind me and I glanced back to see that Chase had followed next, also freezing at the sound underfoot as he landed. When his eyes fell on me and I nodded, he stepped away to the safety of the open floor, as well.

The other two followed in a similar fashion until we had all made our way through the broken window to the street and were standing in the dark basement of 74 Forbes Street. The sound of the rain pounding on the cement sidewalk just through the empty pane we had climbed through took the place of the crunching broken glass as it seemed to fill the relatively open space.

None of us moved for several long seconds as we all seemed to be summing up the situation, waiting, listening, and watching for any signs of security guards or some other kind of defense. When none came, I decided to be the one to take the first leap, once again, and began to walk forward into the darkened space, my eyes quickly adjusting to the lower light level to reveal what essentially looked like a bare cement floor marked by support beams placed intermittently about the space. Some stacks of what looked like crates and large drums, both plastic and metal, were scattered about the room, although the majority of them seemed to be concentrated just ahead. As I pushed farther through the

unknown toward them, I quickly realized that there was a short set of stairs and a door set into the wall ahead.

*“That would explain all of this shit being piled right here,”* I thought, glancing around at the stacks of what I assumed was nothing but junk or empty storage containers.

“That a way out?” I heard Chase ask from behind me and I glanced back to see him looking past me toward where I assumed the door was.

I nodded in response and he glanced down at me for a moment before giving a single, resolute nod. The bottom step creaked slightly as I put my weight on the wooden construct, carefully testing it to make sure it was actually still capable of holding weight. When the entire set of stairs didn’t collapse into a wooden heap, I began to ascend. No “Exit” sign, or any sort of marking, for that matter, adorned the metal portal, so I simply reached for the knob and took a firm grip around it.

With one final sigh and a surge of adrenaline, I opened the door and carefully peeked around it to see what lay beyond. Another short set of stairs greeted me from the other side as I frowned slightly and glanced up toward the top of them. The space at the top of them also appeared to be relatively dimly lit, although I had a slight feeling that the ceiling was much higher above the floor than it first seemed, which would contribute to why the faint, yellow lights I could make out against the darkness overhead were doing little to actually illuminate the space.

“What’d you find?” Chase asked from right behind me, his voice barely louder than a breath.

“More stairs,” I muttered, taking less care to speak quite so softly, but still maintaining a whisper.

“More?” he repeated. “What is this, some kind of fucked up funhouse?”

I glanced back at him to see a smirk set in across his features.

“That sounds like a brilliant business idea to keep in mind when we get through with this,” I quipped, a grin beginning to pull at my lips as I spoke.

“Noted,” he replied, winking at me as I rolled my eyes and turned to head up the stairs on the other side of the door.

The second set didn't squeak or groan quite as much as the first, luckily, and I was able to ascend them with little noise and drama. Immediately upon reaching the top, my guess that the ceiling was actually quite high above us was confirmed when I found myself standing in the middle of what looked like a large, empty warehouse. Stacks of the large storage shelves used for holding large pallets stood off to our right, while a few appeared about the space to our left, as well, although these were empty. The other shelves, however, were filled with what looked like large, wooden crates, steel drums, pieces of old machinery, and lots of smaller, cardboard boxes that revealed what I could only guess were pieces of computers protruding from the open tops.

Other than these shelves and their contents, however, the space seemed rather empty. The dim lighting only contributed to the desolate feeling, while the silence seemed almost oppressive. Moments later, I heard Chase step up beside me and come to a stop, presumably also glancing about the room. When I turned to look over at him, he was just turning to me, as well, a look of confusion etched into his features.

"Is this the right place?" he whispered.

"It's the only real building on this street," I replied. "How could it not be?"

"Well, there's nothing here..." he muttered, glancing around once again.

"No shit."

Shawn and Lexi joined us moments later, also looking rather confused as they scoured the space for signs of what one would assume an important, off-the-grid research facility would contain. There were no signs of medical beds, desks, or other pieces of equipment like we had found in Detroit, nor were there signs of where they may have even once been. Just then, I felt an urgent tapping on my right arm and I glanced over to find Lexi's gaze fixed on something on one of the shelves off to our right. I followed where I assumed she was looking and immediately froze in place.

A long, narrow wooden box was sitting on the ground level of the shelves, just off to the right a bit.

Without stopping to consult the others, I began to make my

way toward it, my footsteps quick, but still trying to avoid making too much sound. I closed the gap surprisingly quickly despite resisting the urge to break into a full-on run. As my feet came to a stop next to the large wooden box, I found that my knees were trembling, almost giving away as I took a deep breath and tried to will them to grow still, once again. Before any of the others could arrive and stop me, I reached forward and lifted the top slightly, pushing it aside.

I half-expected to see Maya's body lying before me, like some sick joke, but instead I found an empty space. Letting out a shaky sigh of relief, I took my hand away from the open top and stepped back, placing my hands over my face as I shook my head. Moments later, someone else approached and I glanced back to find Lexi approaching, coming to a stop to my right side.

"It's... empty?" she said, her confusion clear in her tone.

"Yeah," I replied, unsure of how else to answer her.

"I was almost expecting—"

"A body?" I offered, interrupting her.

"Hers, maybe," she replied, nodding.

No actual name was needed for both of us to know exactly who she was talking about. After another moment or two of silence, I let out a heavy sigh and let my hands fall to my sides once again.

"Just another empty box," I said, turning back to face the two boys behind us, who had kept their distance this entire time. "Come on, let's see if anyone's actually home."

Lexi turned away from the shelves before us and followed me toward the other two. When we reached them, I nodded to the right, indicating the rest of the open space. They didn't say anything, but began to follow along as we headed farther into the building. As soon as we passed the first of row of empty storage shelves, we found ourselves in the middle of a rather large, open space. Our footsteps seemed to echo and ring about the space for minutes, cascading off of the brick walls and causing me to glance around, paranoid that some of the footsteps were not, in fact, echoes.

My body language must have been quite apparent, because as I glanced over my shoulder for what felt like the hundredth

time, I caught Chase's worried expression. I tried to give him a weak smile, but it felt more like a grimace, so I quickly turned away, looking up at the windows set into the walls on the second floor. The dark clouds were easily visible outside, fine droplets of water running down the glass as the image flickered and distorted slightly as new drops landed. Something about the storm outside seemed oddly fitting considering where we were, although perhaps a tornado would have felt most appropriate.

"So, do you think they just took the penthouse suite for themselves, or what?" Shawn asked, breaking the silence and causing all of us to jump.

"Well, there certainly doesn't seem to be anyone down here," Lexi replied, holding her arms out to each side and spinning slightly to indicate the empty space. "Are there more floors above us?"

"Well, there's only two stories worth of windows we can see from here, but I feel like there were at least four or so when we were looking at it from outside," he said. "So... kinda stands to reason that there might be more?"

"Well, that's all well and good," I said, "but how do we get up there?"

Shawn pointed off to the right and I followed his gesture to see a door set into the wall, a faded and torn sign that seemed to portray the symbol for a stairway. As I looked back over at Shawn, he gave me a look of mock exasperation.

"Really, Amaryss, you need to be more observant," he said.

"Well, since you found it, you can lead the way," I shot back, placing my hands on my hips.

With a shrug, he turned and began to walk toward the door, seemingly not waiting to see if we were actually following. After glancing between each other, the rest of us followed after him, making no real hurry to catch up or close the gap between us. As soon as he reached the far wall, he pushed on the metal bar that ran across the center of the door, but came to an immediate halt. He backed up a step or so before trying again, throwing his shoulder against the metal barrier, but it didn't seem to want to open. By the time we caught up, he had tried, unsuccessfully, to open the door several times. At the sound of our footsteps, he gave up on

his final attempt and turned to face us.

“Door’s jammed,” he said, jerking a thumb over his shoulder.

“We hadn’t noticed,” Lexi said, her tone dripping with sarcasm.

“Well, does one of the Wonder Twins want to give it a go?” he asked, turning his attention to Chase and me.

“For the record, I resent that nickname,” I said, “but I will give it a try.”

“Okay, fine, *SuperGirl*.”

With a heavy sigh, I shook my head but pushed him aside. At first I simply pressed on the metal bar and tried to lean my weight against it, attempting to gauge exactly how stuck it was. When the door refused to budge even an inch, I frowned and stepped back. I took a second or two to mentally and physically prepare myself before charging forward a step or two and bringing my foot up in a rather high kick. The sole of my shoe connected squarely with the center of the door and immediately pain shot down my entire leg. A cry of pain escaped my lips as I staggered to the side and tried not to actually fall over. My jaw clenched tightly as I refused to look back at the others, not wanting to see the amused expression that I was sure Shawn currently exhibited.

“Well, it didn’t move, as far as I can tell,” Shawn remarked as I gingerly placed weight on the leg I had used to kick the door, immediately feeling another stab of pain shoot up it. “Chase?”

I was still looking down at the ground, trying to hold back the slightly nauseous feeling that had begun to rise in my throat. Just then, a resounding bang rang throughout the room and I jumped, spinning around to face whatever had made the sound, momentarily ignoring the pain in my leg. Chase was standing before the now-open doorway, shaking his foot slightly before placing it back on the ground. Lexi and Shawn both looked rather impressed as they kept glancing between the doorway and him.

“Did you do that?” I managed, unable to think of something smarter to say.

“I—”

“Holy shit, he did!” Lexi interrupted, laughing. “Chase is a fucking badass!”



He immediately appeared somewhat embarrassed as he smiled sheepishly and looked at the ground, seemingly unwilling to meet anyone's gaze. Shawn stepped forward into the doorway and glanced through it before looking back at the rest of us.

"Come on, the creepy, dark stairway to the unknown awaits us," he said, nodding toward it before slipping out of sight.

Lexi followed after him, giving Chase a pat on the back as she past and laughing once again. As I approached, limping slightly, he finally looked up to meet my eyes.

"Hey, at least you didn't maybe break your ankle," I said, gesturing to my right foot. "This shit hurts like you wouldn't believe."

He glanced down for a moment before looking back up at me, grinning.

"I would offer to try to help make it better like you did earlier, but..."

"Kissing my foot might be a bit odd, yes," I finished, laughing. "You could—"

His lips suddenly appeared against mine, stopping me mid-sentence. Just as soon as I felt them wrap around my bottom lip, they pulled away and I was left drifting toward him slightly until I forced myself to stop. He remained close to me for a moment, his forehead almost touching mine as each of us left out a heavy sigh.

"Already one step ahead of you," he replied quietly, his voice barely louder than a whisper.

I couldn't think of a good response, so I simply leaned forward and kissed him once again, simply planting my lips on his for a second before pulling away.

"Keep that up and I'll start to think you can actually read minds," I said, grinning.

"Wouldn't that be the day?"

"Hmm, a terrifying one, yes," I replied before pushing on his shoulder slightly. "Come on, the other two are waiting."

We entered the creepy, dark stairwell, as Shawn had so aptly described it, and began to ascend. The pain in my right leg and ankle was already beginning to disappear, but the constant pounding from the stairs was not particularly helpful. After a grimace-filled, two story climb, we came upon Lexi and Shawn

standing outside the door to the next floor. They glanced back at us as we approached and I shot them a confused look.

“Whatcha waiting for?” I asked.

“Your two slow asses,” Shawn replied.

“How kind of you.”

He rolled his eyes before we all exchanged glances. If we had seemed reluctant to actually get moving, find the building, and come inside, the next step of simply stepping through this door seemed even worse. The pain in my leg told me I didn’t want to repeat the same tactic of kicking it down, but part of me didn’t feel like just sneaking around, anymore.

“Is it open?”

“Haven’t tried it,” Lexi replied, shrugging.

“Well, why don’t we step in and see if there’s anyone worth saying hello to,” I said, stepping between them and reaching for the handle.

As soon as I gripped it, though, I found myself hesitating, seemingly incapable of actually the small metal contraption. I glanced up at Shawn next to me to find his jaw squarely set, his eyes locked on my hand and the handle underneath it. At my hesitation, he looked up and our eyes met for a moment; they didn’t look scared or nervous, like I had half-expected, but rather they seemed resolute. He gave a small nod and I took a deep breath, using the entire weight of my arm, it seemed, to push the handle down and shouldering it open.

The door swung easily, unlike the one at the ground floor, and I found myself instantly taking several steps inside the space beyond it. Almost immediately, I took in the wide space, just as empty as the one downstairs. No desks or hospital beds littered the space. No team of men holding guns trained on us stood ready to cut us down the second we walked in. There was simply nothing.

My eyes swung across the open floor once or twice before suddenly settling on something directly ahead. At first glance, I had missed the dark shape against one of the windows across from us, but as soon as it seemed to register with my brain, I couldn’t ignore it. The shape seemed to be a silhouette, vaguely outlined against the dark grey scene outside. It didn’t take me long to make out arms folded behind the figure’s back, calmly, almost as if he

were simply waiting for the mail to arrive, or for someone to return home. My hands instinctively clenched into fists as I began to walk forward, my legs seemingly moving of their own accord. Part of me wanted to turn and get away, or at least hold my ground, but I seemed unable to stop myself as I moved ever closer.

At the sound of my footsteps moving carelessly across the hard floor, the figure began to turn away from the window. A second or two later, I froze where I was, my legs finally seeming to come back under my control and listen to what my brain was screaming at them to do. The figure stepped away from the window, moving closer to me, but stopping after only a few feet. My eyes had already adjusted to the dim lighting of the empty warehouse space, so I could clearly see who now stood only fifty feet away.

“It’s been a while, Amaryss.”

Jared brought his arms from behind his back, only to shove his hands in the pockets of his khakis a moment later. Everything about him seemed almost exactly as I remembered: the same brown hair cut in the same short style while the same brown eyes stared at me, observing every detail.

“*Take it all in, you fucker,*” I thought, my jaw clenching, “*look at what you’ve done.*”

“I would say you look as I remember, but I’m not entirely sure that’s true,” he said, breaking the silence once again.

“I would say the same for you, but I’m not entirely sure that’s true, either,” I shot back, the sarcasm hanging thick in the air as I spoke, while each clearly enunciated syllable felt bullets flying off my tongue.

“Well, at least your wit hasn’t changed,” he remarked.

“The more things change—”

“The more they stay the same,” he finished, interrupting me with a slow nod. “How true that seems, sometimes...”

After a moment or two more of silence, I felt my fingers clenching so tightly that I began to wonder if I would accidentally pop one of them out of place through my own sheer strength.

“I should have killed you back in Arizona,” I suddenly spat, my voice much stronger than I had anticipated.

“And yet you didn’t,” he said. “You stopped Kailyn, if I

recall.”

“We all make mistakes.”

“Believe me, I know that all too well,” he replied.

“I think it was you who taught me what to do with them, though.”

“Oh? And what’s that?”

“Make sure you don’t make the same ones twice.”

Just then, I began to take a step forward, but immediately felt two pairs of strong hands grip my arms, holding me in place. My heart rate leapt up as I glanced back, expecting to see two goons, like the guys who had taken Maya in Georgia, holding me, but instead I found Lexi and Chase.

“What the—?”

“Amaryss, hold—”

“Let go of me!”

I twisted in their grasp, attempting to break free, but they held fast, Chase’s grip slightly firmer than Lexi’s, but neither showing signs of truly letting me slip away.

“Amaryss, stop,” Chase said quietly but firmly.

“No!” I shrieked, pulling harder at their grips. “I need to do this!”

“What is ‘this’ exactly, Amaryss?” Jared called from across the space.

My head instantly whipped around to look at him once again, my jaw clenched as I felt a tight, hot feeling beginning to appear in my chest.

“You’ve taken so much from me,” I growled, “and I’m going to take it all from you.”

“Taken?” he said. “What I may have taken is small in comparison to what I’ve given you.”

“I don’t want anything you’ve ‘given’ me,” I spat, still struggling against Chase and Lexi. “I want my friends back. I want Damien not to be dead in a ditch in Georgia. I want Maya to be standing here right now and not abandoned in some freezing shithole in Detroit. I want—”

My voice finally cracked as I fought to keep it under control in the face of the burning tears that were beginning to form in the corners of my eyes.

“I want my best friend back.”

The confused look that immediately came over Jared’s face almost instantly shattered the cool, controlled façade he had managed to maintain this entire time. I felt Chase and Lexi’s grip weaken momentarily, as well, so I seized the moment and ripped my arms free. My balance was thrown off for a moment and I staggered forward a step or two, but I quickly recovered.

“Whatever *you* did,” I continued, jabbing a finger at Jared, “destroyed Kailyn and turned her into a person that I know she isn’t... that she shouldn’t be.”

His confusion seemed to lessen somewhat, replaced partially by what could be surprise, but it wasn’t enough to stop me from slowly advancing on him.

“Eighteen years, Jared,” I said, “that’s how much you’ve taken from me. I never got to have a chance, or even a glimpse, at a normal life... at who I should have been. You took that away within minutes, and made sure that I could never get it back. You did that to all of us. Eighteen years. You owe me. You owe *us*.”

“Your ‘normal’ life?” he replied. “You want to know how you could have been if you had stayed?”

I remained silent, my jaw clenched tightly, once again, as I listened for the other two approaching from behind, but they appeared to be remaining where they were.

“Do you know what life I took you from?” he continued, his confusion and surprise seeming to give way to something like irritation. “Your mother was just a teenager, Amaryss. She was a nobody in Colorado. It would have been a miracle if you’d have been able to grow up normally, if some child services agent didn’t show up to take you away from her, eventually.”

The hot tears had returned once again as I tried my hardest to control myself from saying or doing anything to break my resolute stance.

“I gave you a life better than so many people could ask for,” he said. “I gave you the gift of being a step forward for the human race. I gave you a house and food. I gave you a friend. Most importantly, I gave you a chance.”

His last words seemed to ring out through the wide, empty space. No one moved or said a word. The only sound I could hear

was my own pounding heartbeat and my rapid breathing.

“So this is how you repay me?”

“I’m not so generous,” I replied, clenching my hands into fists once again.

Just as I began to take another step forward, I felt someone grab my arm once again, and I wheeled around, ready to throw a punch at whoever had decided to stop me, this time. As my fist circled through the air, it was immediately caught as I found myself face-to-face with Chase, his hand gripping my fist only inches from his own head.

“Amaryss, stop,” he said quietly.

“Why?” I shot back, my voice much more of a shriek than I had hoped.

“If you kill him now, what was the point of stopping Kailyn before?” he said.

“I made a mistake then,” I replied. “I didn’t know better!”

“No, that wasn’t it,” he said.

“Oh? Then what the hell was it, Sage Chase?”

“You’re strong.”

“Really? Now’s the time you try to play some kind of line on me?”

“Not like that,” he said, shaking my fist held in his hand slightly, “as a person.”

I opened my mouth to retort with some snappy comeback, but found that words failed to come to me. A strange feeling had come in and tempered the burning anger in my chest, cooling the fire and twisting my stomach into a strange knot.

“W-what do you mean?”

“Letting your rage get the better of you is easy,” he said, “we’ve all felt like doing it at some point. Kailyn fell for it back in Arizona, but you didn’t. You were stronger than that. You could take that feeling and say, ‘no, I am in control.’ I’ve seen so much more of that ever since then, and—”

He paused, swallowing somewhat nervously as he looked down between us for a moment before returning his gaze to meet mine.

“I’ve come to love you for it.”

My heart seemed to come to an almost complete stop as I

felt my arms grow weak, my hands immediately loosening from fists as I felt my mouth hang open slightly. The fire in my chest felt like an entire bucket of water had been dumped on it, only to be replaced by a completely different feeling.

“Y-you—you l-lo—” I stammered, unable to finish a single word. “Chase?”

My hand fell from his grasp as I staggered back a step or two as a crestfallen look immediately came over his face. Realizing what it looked like, I forced myself to step forward once again.

“No, don’t look—that’s not—” I stammered, finally able to form words, but sentences seemed to be too much of a stretch.

I immediately reached forward and grabbed his hand, threading my fingers between his before closing them tightly and squeezing with a good amount of force, but not enough to worry about crushing him.

“No one’s ever—”

“I know,” he said quickly, interrupting me. “Well I mean... I guessed.”

“But—you—you mean—”

“Yes, Ryss, I mean it.”

Just then, I heard loud footsteps to our right and my head whipped around to see if someone was coming toward us, but instead I saw Shawn stalking by, heading right toward Jared.

“Shawn?” Lexi called, suddenly appearing just past Chase’s shoulder.

“If she’s not going to,” he growled, “someone might as well.”

“Shawn!” I called, turning away from Chase as we released each other’s hands.

Jared had remained where he was during our entire conversation, apparently, but started when he saw Shawn coming right toward him. Before I could take more than a few steps forward, however, I saw a fist rear back before driving straight into Jared’s face. He staggered backwards a few steps, holding one hand to his nose before shaking his head and looking back up at Shawn.

“Shawn!”

Just as I was about to break into a run toward him, I heard a muted cry behind me and instantly spun around, feeling slightly dizzy as I did. As soon as the images before me stopped moving of their own accord, I saw Chase bent over, holding his hands to his head.

“Chase?!”

I rushed forward and immediately placed a hand on his back, reaching toward his arms with the other.

“Chase, are you okay?” I demanded. “C’mon...”

He didn’t say anything, he simply continued to breathe heavily, each one sounding slightly strained, as if he were in pain. I glanced up at Lexi for a moment, but she looked as scared and confused as I felt.

“Chase!” I shrieked, crouching down in an attempt to look him in the face. “No, no, c’mon, everything’s fine, right?”

He didn’t say anything, but he seemed to be almost completely still, still hunched over with his hands held to his head. We both remained still and silent for a moment or two more before I began to lean in toward him.

“Chase...?”

The next thing I knew, I was knocked to the ground, landing on my bag behind me as I felt pain begin to well up in the right side of my face. My momentary shock seemed to hold it back, but the sensation only seemed to last for a few seconds. I put one hand to my right cheek and felt a hot, burning sensation underneath my fingers, as well as a slightly numb feeling on the inside of my cheek. It took several more seconds for me to fully comprehend that it had been Chase who had knocked me back.

“Chase...?” I managed, my voice small and weak with fear and disbelief.

He was standing a few feet away, his hands still held to his head as he shook it slightly, still not looking over at me. Before I could get back to my feet, Lexi moved toward him, her hands outstretched in a non-threatening gesture.

“Hey, man, what’s going on? You don’t look so—”

She was cut short as Chase suddenly took his hands away from his head and grabbed her by her jacket. Lexi let out a shriek in surprise before he suddenly threw her to the ground. She slid



across the dirty, tiled floor for a few feet before coming to a stop, looking about as surprised as I felt. I began to get to my feet when Chase suddenly whipped around to look at me. My entire body seemed to freeze as our eyes met.

His eyes were normally dark brown, seemingly almost black at times, but it was quite clear that his irises now seemed to take up almost the entire center of his eyes. Red, bloodshot veins trailed away through the white area surrounding them, the red coloring growing more pronounced by the second.

“Chase?”

Suddenly, he made toward me once again, walking quickly as I scrambled backwards, attempting to propel myself across the floor as I tried to find a good way to jump back to my feet. Just as I rolled onto my stomach in an attempt to get my legs under me, once again, I felt a strong grip take hold of my jacket and lift me up. Moments later, I was in the air, only to crash down to the hard floor before I could fully comprehend the sensation. My chin bounced off the floor as a slightly metallic taste began to leak into my mouth.

My head whipped around to the right to see Chase almost upon me, once again. As soon as he approached, however, I reached out and grabbed one of his ankles, tugging as hard as I could. His leg was pulled out from under him and he fell to the ground with a shout of surprise. I used the momentary pause to scramble to my feet, but as soon as I was upright, I felt something grip my ankle. Looking back, I saw Chase’s hand firmly closed around it, his jaw clenched and his teeth half-visible through the near-snarl that seemed to have contorted his lips. I tried to pull my foot free from his grasp, but he simply pulled it out from under me, as I had done to him, and I tumbled to the ground once again.

Almost as soon as I landed, he appeared over me and something closed around my neck. It took me only a second to realize it was his hands as I felt something jab into my windpipe, closing it off. My mouth instinctually fell open as I attempted to gasp for air somehow, but nothing seemed to work. The look in his eyes as he stared down at me seemed to stop my heart, once again. The expression of absolute rage and malice that seemed to exist seemed so foreign that I wouldn’t have even thought it was

possible, before now.

I couldn't even get a word out, let alone breathe, under his iron grip. The only sound that came from my mouth as a strange, strangled croak. Just as the edges of my vision were beginning to grow dark, however, the pressure on my neck disappeared and I gasped, sucking in a full lungful of air. It took another second or so to realize that Chase was no longer over me, but the sounds of a scuffle were coming from nearby. I tried to lift myself into a sitting position, but the world began to spin and I quickly closed my eyes, letting my head fall back onto the floor.

A muted grunt and the sound of something heavy slamming to the floor came from a few feet away, so I forced myself to open my eyes and turn my head to the side. The world wasn't spinning so quickly anymore, but I bright spots still seemed to be blooming before me, blocking a good deal of my vision. I tried to blink them away, but it didn't seem to help much. Despite the handicap, I rolled onto my side, trying to face more toward the sound of the struggle nearby. As soon as I did, I saw two figures ahead of me, although it also appeared to be no more than a tangle of writhing limbs, occasionally one would extend above the tangle, only to come back to the sound of a loud grunt in pain.

I placed one hand on the floor in front of me and took a deep breath before pushing up with all of my strength. The world began to spin slowly, once again, but I forced myself to keep going, breathing deeply and heavily as I did. Finally, I had managed to lift myself into something nearing a sitting position, but I could tell that I was not about to get to my feet anytime soon.

Suddenly, I heard a loud thud from off to the left and I lifted my head to look for the source. The spinning seemed to slow for a moment as I focused on trying to see what was right in front of me. One of the figures was lying on his back on the floor, while the other appeared to be resting on his knees over him, one hand gripping some article of clothing, either a shirt or a jacket, in order to hold him still. My eyes drifted over to the left just in time to notice a third figure standing a little ways away. He began to take several steps back, seemingly in an attempt to move away.

*"Jared..."*

As I tried to focus on the silhouette that I knew had to be

his, he began to turn and move away at a quicker pace.

*“Jared... running away...”*

“Not... again...” I wheezed, my voice barely louder than the heavy breaths that still burned my throat and caused my chest to heave.

Just as I began to attempt to push myself off the floor, my arms seemed to go weak and slid out from under me. My head hit the tile once more, and I felt a shooting pain explode from the point where it had made contact. I shut my eyes against it as I clenched my jaw, cursing my sudden weakness. A moment later, I forced them open once again to see the same bright spots floating before me. I concentrated on seeing through them and after a moment or two they began to clear. As soon as they did, I saw one of the two figures involved in the struggle ahead of my raise two hands above his head, clasped together into a single fist, before bringing them down with great force on the one still on the ground.

A sickening crunch split the air as I felt my stomach flip and my blood turn to ice. The same figure raised both hands once again before repeating the motion, accompanied by yet another loud crunch. This time, I could make out some kind of fluid dripping from the hands of the figure on top as he pulled them away. The figure on the bottom seemed rather still under him as he began to rise to a standing position, his hands held away from his sides slightly so that they didn't touch his clothes.

I could clearly see who it was, but my mind didn't want to comprehend and admit it. There was no way that what I was seeing could be reality. It was some kind of trick. I had finally lost it after Damien and Maya. This was all some crazy hallucination, and I should be put in a straightjacket and fed pills in a padded room.

As Chase stepped away from Shawn's still body, I thought he was heading toward me, but I quickly realized that his course was aimed to my right. My eyes followed his trajectory until I saw where he must be heading and my blood turned to ice once again. Lexi was lying on the ground, still, seemingly unmoving. As Chase approached however, I saw the telltale hint of motion in her left foot and I had a sinking feeling. Just as his feet came within range of her, she suddenly lashed out, hooking her foot around his

ankle and pushing forward, throwing his leg out from under him.

As Chase fell to the ground with a surprised shout, Lexi rolled in the opposite direction and quickly pushed herself to her feet, jumping out of his arm's reach. As soon as she did, she rushed over to me and crouched down.

"Hey, you with me?"

I mumbled something that didn't entirely sound like real words, but she at least took it that I was conscious and grabbed my arm, pulling me to my feet. As soon as I was standing, my legs felt shaky, but the world was not spinning wildly, as I had feared. She tugged on me, pulling me across the room, and presumably out of harm's way, but I staggered and nearly fell to the ground once again.

"C'mon, Amaryss!" she hissed. "We need to get out of here."

"Where—? What—?"

"I don't know what got into him, but we need to find some way to snap him out of it, okay?" she said, placing both hands on the sides of my face, forcing me to look at her. "Okay?"

I nodded and she sighed, releasing my head and grabbing my arm, tugging me after her.

"God, what happened to you?"

"Me?" I muttered, my voice sounding thick and slow, like I had just woken up.

"Both of you, I guess," she replied, glancing back at me before her eyes glanced over my shoulder. "Shit!"

I glanced back to see Chase on his feet once again, beginning to follow us, his steps deliberate and quick, but not quite at a running pace, yet. Lexi tugged on me with more urgency and I attempted to break into a run with her, but I seemed incapable of safely moving faster than a jogging speed. As soon as we had gone only about ten feet, I heard pounding footsteps closing in from behind. The next moment, I felt Lexi release my arm and she disappeared behind me as I staggered to a stop, glancing back just in time to see her deliver a punch square to the side of Chase's jaw. He staggered for a step or two, clearly caught off guard by her sudden attack.

"Snap out of it!" she screamed. "What the hell's gotten

into you?”

Chase let out a low growl and suddenly grabbed her by the throat, moving quickly enough that she wasn't able to anticipate it and move out of the way. She was suddenly lifted off her feet as the world finally seemed to clear around me and I was laser-focused on the two of them ahead of me.

“Chase!”

He glanced over toward me and for a moment I thought I saw him falter, which was evidently enough for Lexi, because she suddenly swung her foot forward and delivered a swift kick to the inside of his thigh, missing her likely intended target. He still flinched and managed to relax his grip enough that she brought her hand down on his elbow, causing his hand to release her and his arm to retract. Her feet hit the ground and she immediately spun to make a getaway. He attempted to grab her by her jacket, but his fingers merely brushed across it as she sidestepped his outstretched fingers. As soon as she approached me, she could tell that I was more alert and simply grabbed my arm, spinning me around.

“Run now, figure it out later.”

We ran across the empty space, not entirely sure of what we were looking for, but I assumed we were hoping there was some other way down other than the stairs we had taken up here. No doors or signs seemed immediately apparent, but I vaguely realized that this was the way Jared had attempted to escape not long ago, so that must have meant some kind of exit existed on this side of the room. As we reached the far wall, we took a left and began to run along it, searching frantically for signs of a door leading somewhere other than the empty air above the street below.

“What is the point of these doors to nowhere?” Lexi huffed, beginning to sound out of breath.

“I don't know,” I shot back, not feeling quite as winded as she sounded, but I didn't particularly have the time to think through what their purpose might actually be.

After running a little while longer, I noticed that we appeared to be coming up to a wall. At first I thought it was the outer wall of the building, but I quickly realized that there seemed to be far more windows than the exterior walls usually held. We

skidded to a stop just before the large row of glass and I quickly glanced through them. Below us stretched about half of the deserted ground floor of the warehouse, a few of the shelves almost directly below the row of windows.

“This overlooks the big room?” Lexi huffed, sounding somewhat confused.

“Seems so,” I replied, glancing back to see that Chase was, indeed, following after us, his arms pumping furiously as he ran along the same path we had taken. “Got any good ideas?”

“Ideas, but not really good ones,” she replied, glancing back, as well.

“How about any that have a low chance of death?”

“Best I’ve got is a good chance.”

“Perfect.”

I remained facing Chase as he began to slow his pace, drawing within about fifty feet of us. The likelihood of us figuring out a way to make it down to the floor safely seemed rather slim at this point, so I began to brace myself for some kind of fight. Just then, I heard the sound of a zipper beside me and I glanced over only to pull a double take. Lexi was currently ripping her jacket off and tossing it to the floor. As I watched, she grabbed her shirt and pulled it over her head, as well, leaving her in nothing but her bra and a pair of jeans.

“What in the hell are you doing?” I demanded, my eyes widening.

“One crazy way down,” she said, looking over at me with a strange glint in her eyes.

Before I could ask what kind of insane plan she had, I saw something large move behind her and the idea suddenly became clear to me. Her large wings suddenly unfurled from her back, stretching out to either side of her. Our eyes met for a moment, and her lips pulled into a thin line.

“Well, if the odds—”

Before she could finish her thought, I quickly spun around and brought my foot up, the sole of my shoe landing square in the middle of the nearest pane of glass. Cracks formed from the impact point as I pulled my foot back and ran at it, ramming my shoulder into epicenter. The glass immediately shattered as pain

shot across my back and down my arm, radiating out from my shoulder. With a grimace, I looked back toward Lexi to see a rather impressed look on her face.

“Well, care to take a crazy ride?”

I glanced over toward Chase to note that he was not more than twenty feet away, but had slowed to a walking speed, clearly confused by whatever we were doing. Before he could totally piece it all together, however, I looked back to Lexi and nodded toward the new opening, holding my arms out toward her. Without hesitation, she ran toward me, extending her arms at the last second and enveloping me in a bear hug. The next second, we both moved up to the opening in the window and paused for a moment.

“On three,” I said.

“Three.”

Before I could comprehend what she was doing, Lexi began to propel us sideways. I just barely had enough time to push off with my feet, as well, attempting to help us get through the open window frame. Just as we were about to pass through it, however, I felt something heavy hit us from the side and we were suddenly thrown forward with even more force. I glanced down to see that Chase had suddenly reached us, diving forward into some kind of flying tackle. Everything seem to go into slow motion as soon as we cleared the opening, and I became very aware of how high up we actually were.

The extra weight and surprise of the impact seemed to throw Lexi for a moment, but she quickly recovered and I saw her attempt to beat her wings. Unless she had been practicing in secret, this must have been her first time, and something told me it wasn't quite as easy she hoped. My heart began to sink as I felt a similar feeling in my stomach. As I turned my head to the right to see how much farther we had to fall before greeting our imminent doom when we smashed into the cement floor, I suddenly saw one of the warehouse shelves rising up to meet us.

I only had a second to brace before we crashed into the top level at full speed, the same shoulder I had used to break the window taking the brunt of the impact; pain exploded from it, as I let out a loud cry, but could do little else to help the situation. We

tumbled and rolled across the wooden shelf surface before I suddenly realized that we were falling once again. Evidently, we had rolled right off the opposite edge of the unit.

This time, there was no lucky landing area to break our fall, just the cement floor quickly rising up to greet us. I suddenly realized that we were rotating as we fell, the ground no longer approaching directly under me. Lexi had seemingly rotated us so that she was now on the bottom of our heap, placing herself between both Chase and me and the floor. Just as I realized this, however, I saw the ground just behind her head and I felt my body come to a jarring halt. I bounced what felt like a foot or two into the air before falling to my right, immediately feeling pain resonate from my head to my feet.

The world spun around me as I rolled across the ground for several seconds, finally coming to a stop as my momentum wore out. It felt like I had been hit head-on by a semi-truck on a highway; every part of my body hurt, and for a moment I thought I might be unable to actually move, but I attempted to curl my hand into a fist and felt my fingers touch my palm. With a groan, I attempted to roll my head to the right to look for Lexi, pain shooting down my neck as I did.

My vision blurred for a moment in response to the pain, but I blinked several times and forced myself to focus on whatever was directly ahead of me. After the fog had cleared, I saw Lexi and Chase several feet away, seemingly in similar situations as me. Both of them appeared to be slowly stirring and groaning on the ground, but neither seemed all that capable of actual movement, at this point. Almost as soon as the thought had crossed my mind, however, I saw Chase beginning to push himself to his hands and knees.

*“No fucking way...”*

After remaining still for several more seconds like that, he turned his head to look toward Lexi and began to push himself to a standing position. She seemed in no state to be getting up, however, her back arched under her as she continued to let out quiet gasps and groans. I tried to warn her, to say anything, but my tongue felt heavy and uncooperative. My vocal cords didn't seem to want to function, no matter how hard I tried. Before I knew it,



Chase was standing over her, panting heavily as he looked down at her still, probably rather broken, form.

Suddenly, he put one foot under her back and flipped her onto her side so that she ended up facing me. Immediately, I saw that her eyes were actually open, and tears were running down her face. I attempted to lift my right arm, pain immediately shooting from my shoulder out across my back and up my neck, but I forced myself to power through it. My fingers stretched out toward her as her hand began to raise in a similar fashion. Suddenly, I saw Chase reached behind her and the next thing I knew, a resounding crack filled the room as Lexi let out a bloodcurdling scream of pain, her eyes closing tightly as her mouth gaped wide.

It occurred to me that I hadn't seen her wing bent up at such an angle a moment ago, but I didn't have time to dwell on it as Chase suddenly grabbed her by one arm and pulled her to her feet, immediately pushing her up against one of the metal supports of the shelving unit next to us. Holding Lexi in place with one hand around her neck, he reached down and I saw him pulling at something for a moment or two before he suddenly ripped her belt free from around her waist.

I could almost guess what was about to happen before I even saw it, and yet I couldn't seem to look away. Chase wrapped the belt around her neck, securing it behind her head tightly enough that her eyes immediately widened and she feebly began to claw at it. He suddenly reached up and draped the long end over one of the metal bars that ran perpendicular to the support beam he was holding her against, grabbing the opposite end as soon as he could reach it. With one hard pull, she was lifted a good several inches off of the ground, her face instantly turning red as her fingers scratched helplessly at the belt and her own neck.

I tried to say something. Anything.

No words came.

I could only watch as Lexi's motions grew weaker and weaker as hot tears burned my eyes. Finally, a sound escaped my mouth, tearing its way from my chest through my vocal cords and splitting the air of the empty warehouse. A loud vocalization that I could only think of as somewhere between a wail and a shriek escaped me as my hand desperately stretched toward Lexi once

again. Through the blur of the tears in my eyes, I could see one of her arms feebly reach toward mine, but it soon fell back against her side as her head hung forward and her shoulders slumped.

Her fight was gone.

Chase released the end of the belt he was holding, letting Lexi's body fall to the floor in a limp heap. With a heavy sigh, he took a step or two back and ran his hands through his hair. This couldn't be happening.

*"I've lost it, I'm insane. It's all in my head."*

As soon as the thought crossed my mind, Chase turned his attention to me and began to slowly approach, each step deliberate and agonizingly slow. His feet stopped just before me, but I couldn't bring myself to look up at his face; my eyes were still locked on Lexi. The next moment, however, he grabbed my jacket and began to pull me off the ground. Once I was in a near-standing position, a fire seemed to rip through my body, obliterating all of the pain and foggiess that had come from the fall.

As soon as my eyes met his, the familiar brown color almost completely replaced with black as I noticed several of the bloodshot veins seemed to have broken, tinging the entire whites of his eyes a reddish hue. These were not the same eyes I had stared into all of those nights on the run from Arizona, to New York, to Georgia, to Detroit, to London. This was not the same person I had spent the morning in bed with, enjoying our freedom, only to cry into his shoulder hours later on the floor of the bathroom. This was not the same Chase that had told me he loved my strength mere minute ago.

This was something Jared had created.

This was not Chase Morgan.

With a growl from deep in my throat, my right hand shot forward and my thumb immediately jammed into the center of his throat, pressing as hard as I could. His eyes widened in surprise as his grip faltered for a moment and I fell to the ground, landing shakily on my feet as I released my hand from around his neck. He staggered back a step or two as he rubbed at it, coughing and wheezing, but I didn't wait for him to recover.

Instead, I lashed out with one foot, delivering a kick to the

side of his knee with all of my strength. He buckled under the blow, nearly falling to the ground, but I quickly grabbed him by his jacket and swung him to the right, slamming the back of his head against one of the same metal supports he had held Lexi to moments ago. His head bounced off of the metal with a resounding thud as he let out a grunt in pain, one of his hands attempting to reach up and pull mine away, but I quickly drove my knee into his groin and his attempts instantly grew weaker.

I stepped to the side and immediately threw him forward, watching him stagger and fall to the floor. Almost instantly, I descended upon him, pinning his arms to the ground with my knees as I grabbed the front of his jacket with one hand, curling the other into a fist and bringing it back behind my shoulder. As he looked up at me, I rammed my knuckles straight into his face, landing the punch just about at the bottom of his nose. Blood burst from his nostrils as his head snapped back and ricocheted off of the cement floor.

As I brought my fist back once again, I found myself unable to move it from its ready position. Chase's image swam before me as hot tears leaked from my eyes once again. With a cry of rage, I wiped them against my shoulder as best I could, clearing my vision. My arm still seemed frozen where it was, unable to deliver another blow.

"Why?" I suddenly screamed, looking down at Chase.

He didn't say anything in response, simply stared back up at me, his jaw set and his eyes cold. Blood was running rather freely from his nose and over his lips, spilling down over his chin.

"Why?" I repeated, my voice much softer, faltering slightly as I choked on the single word.

I saw one of his hands reaching up in an attempt to push me off of him, but I quickly unclenched my right and grabbed his wrist, bending it back in a single, lightning-fast motion. A resounding snap filled the air as I saw his entire forearm bend at an odd angle and something pressed against his skin, pushing it up slightly just before the elbow. He let out a scream of pain as his arm fell to the ground once again, limp and almost entirely useless.

My right hand slowly clenched into a fist, once again, and drew back beside my head. I could feel the hand holding his jacket

beginning to shake as I clenched my fingers even tighter, willing my strength to stand firm.

“Why did you have to make me do this?” I pleaded, my voice almost entirely a sob so that the words barely sounded at all.

He suddenly looked me straight in the eyes and I froze.

“Do it,” he said quietly, his voice almost entirely a growl as his eyes searched me, as if looking to call my bluff.

Unfortunately, I had never been one to back down from anything.

My fist came down with a speed that I didn't know I was capable of, my knuckles ramming into his nose just about at the tip. I heard the resounding crunch at normal speed, but I was forced to watch as his head snapped back against the cement in slow motion. As it hit, it remained in place, not lifting to challenge me with those dark eyes once again. After a moment or two, all of my senses seemed to catch up to each other and I was left panting, both of my hands clenched into fists on his chest.

Finally, everything seemed still. The only sounds in the entire warehouse were my pounding heart and the rain against the windows nearby. Nothing moved, and no one spoke. There was no one left to do either.

Well, except me, perhaps.

My eyes drifted closed as I bowed my head, my chin touching my chest. Tears began to leak from between my closed eyelids, almost immediately dripping onto the jacket of the boy below me, not even bothering to run down my face, first. Finally, I felt my arms give way and I collapsed forward, my head falling against the chest where it had spent so many nights. A sob tore its way from my lungs as my hands closed tightly around the jacket underneath them.

“I'm so sorry,” I wailed. “I'm so sorry. Why...? Fuck, why did they do this to you?”

My chest heaved against the still torso beneath me, my eyes still shut tightly.

“Why couldn't I save you?”

My voice felt so small in such a vast space, but it only had to stay between the two bodies right here, beside an empty set of shelves in an empty warehouse.

“Fuck, no, no, no, no, no!”

My fist pounded against a still chest with each word, growing more insistent with each strike.

“Why did you have to tell me?” I managed through a sob. “Why did you have to wait until now?”

Just then, I heard something off to my left and I immediately froze. I listened for the sound once again, but the familiar silence pervaded. When it had been long enough that I simply assumed it was my imagination, the sound came again and I instantly sat up, my eyes flying open as I spun my head to the left. I listened intently for several more seconds, my eyes scanning the darkened half of the room before I realized that the sound wasn't coming from inside the warehouse, it was drifting in from outside. It was police sirens.

“Police?” I muttered, wiping my eyes with the backs of my hands as I waited to hear if they would simply move on, but they continued to grow louder.

As the volume increased, I pushed myself to my feet and began to slowly spin in circles in place, trying to pinpoint where the sound was coming from, exactly. After another ten seconds or so, the sirens were undoubtedly closer, and I began to get a sinking feeling in my chest. Another ten seconds or so later, they seemed to be just on the other side of the wall. The sound of squealing tires caused my heart to skip a beat and my blood ran cold. Voices began to shout from outside as I spun around, desperately searching for an exit. Escaping the way we had come in seemed likely to be a bad idea, unless I immediately wanted to run into whoever was outside, so I needed another escape route. My body was most definitely not up to the task of breaking another window, so that meant looking for a more conventional exit.

My eyes swept across the two bodies next to me one last time as I felt a sob catch in my throat, but I forced myself to turn away, breaking into a run toward the end of the aisle between the shelves. As soon as I reached it, however, the pain from the fall began to creep back, shooting up my legs and spine with each step, but I forced myself to keep going.

Getting caught in a warehouse in London with several dead bodies was not going to let me get any sort of revenge on Jared.

I made my way back across the open space, crossing the area where we had first found the door to the upper floors and approaching the far wall. As soon as I reached the far wall, however, I found no indications of an easily accessible exit. Several large, wooden doors stood off to my left, but they all appeared to be locked shut with some considerably large metal latches that may have very well been welded into place. Breaking another window was out of the question, so I was forced to turn back around.

Just then, I heard a loud bang emanate from across the building and my eyes quickly scanned the far end. Beams of light began to cut through the darkness, scanning about the shelves and along the walls, as I immediately leapt into action. I made a mad dash for the door we had taken earlier, slipping through it as several flashlights began to search in my section of the room at the sound of my pounding footsteps. Just before I could slip through the opening, one of the beams landed on me and I immediately heard shouting echo from the distance. Cursing under my breath, I bounced off of the door and scrambled down the hallway beyond, attempting to remain upright and not spill onto the floor.

There was nowhere else to go except up the stairs, however my eyes instantly fell on what I had thought I remembered from the first time through: a window set into the wall at the first turn in the stairs, halfway to the second floor. I charged up the stairs, ignoring the splitting pain running through my calves and resonating all the way up to the base of my skull, and stopped just before the window. After several seconds of trying to pull on it, the window remained steadfast, seemingly stuck in place.

“No fucking way!” I exclaimed, slamming my fist against the glass.

After taking a few deep breaths, I gripped the small metal handles at the right side and pulled with all of my strength. My fingers began to burn at the metal digging into them, but I forced myself to ignore it. Just as I was beginning to wonder which would actually give first, my fingers or the window, I felt it budge a fraction of an inch.

“Well, that answers that,” I muttered, letting go for a moment and shaking my hands to alleviate the stinging sensation.

One glance back toward the door showed me that the flashlights were still trained on it and I could only assume several of the police officers must be almost there by this point, charging ahead after the one person left alive in an old, abandoned warehouse. As I turned back to the window, I let out a sigh and gripped the handles once again.

“Fuck this place.”

I pulled with all of my strength, once again, and the window suddenly let out a cracking sound and jumped a good foot or so, leaving just enough room for me to crawl through. As soon as I had let go of the metal handles on the window, I gripped the edge of the bottom sill and jumped up, using my arms to help propel me. As soon as my knees were on the wood and I was about to finish climbing through, I heard a voice shouting from directly to my right. The sudden sound surprised me and I found myself tumbling forward, through the open window.

“Shit!”

As I fell forward, however, I somehow managed to grip the window sill just enough to spin me around mid-fall. The next thing I knew, I had landed in a crouch, feet-first, on the sidewalk outside the building. I remained in that position for a second or two before quickly jumping to my feet and glancing back up at the window above me; it was set a good eight feet or so above the ground.

“Run now, figure it out later,” I muttered under my breath, feeling a strange pang in my chest as I drew my lips into a thin line and took off down the wet sidewalk.

The rain was still not particularly heavy, but it was just enough that I was already feeling quite wet by the end of the block. Just as I was about to cross the street, a police cruiser pulled up and came to a jerking halt. I jumped in surprise and managed to swerve around it at the last second just as the siren turned on once again.

I had no idea where I was going, but I just knew that I had to get away from that place. Any direction would do, so I kept charging straight ahead. Almost immediately, I passed under a small railroad bridge over the street, the drizzle pausing for only a second or two before I was back out in the open. The street

seemed to end at a T-intersection, so I made the snap decision to swing right and run across the center of the road, hoping that the police cruiser wasn't so close that it would hit me. Once I was safely across and was not a hood ornament, I continued my headlong dash along the mostly-deserted sidewalk.

I glanced back for a moment and saw flashing lights making the same turn onto the road as me. With a curse under my breath, I turned to face forward once again only to find another police cruiser coming down the same road, heading straight for me, its lights and siren on, as well.

"Are you—?" I began, but stopped as I noticed a street to the left, and once again made a snap decision.

My foot nearly slipped on the edge of the sidewalk as I dashed across the street, immediately heading down the narrow roadway. Despite the pain that had become somewhat of a constant by this point, I was somewhat surprised to notice that I didn't feel greatly out of breath. Under any other circumstances, I would have been conflicted about how I felt about the effects of what Jared had done to me, but for now it didn't seem worth questioning.

My escape route through the city turned out to be far less straightforward than I had hoped, since half of the roads seemed to twist and turn, rather than run in straight lines, and I began to feel like I was getting lost in a maze. After a little while longer, the two police cruisers still following close behind, I came to another T-intersection, this time with a large, brick apartment building before me. I skidded to a halt and glanced both ways up and down the street, my chest heaving as I panted from the mini-marathon I had just run.

My clothes were completely soaked through and sticking to my body like a second skin, but that was the last of my concerns at the moment. A quick glance behind me told me that the police were not far behind, the flashing lights weaving through and around traffic in an attempt to close the gap between us.

*"Jared must have called in and reported a murder or something,"* I thought. *"Why the hell else would they have come so quickly and seem so adamant on catching me?"*

The thought that perhaps they weren't actual police officers



crossed my mind for a moment, but I didn't have the time to wonder exactly how plausible that idea was. As I turned back to face the apartment building in front of me, something caught my eye off to the right. The white railing to what appeared to be some kind of pedestrian walkway along the side of the building was just visible around the corner of the wall running around the apartment property.

*"Doubt they can take those cars on that,"* I thought as I immediately made a beeline for it.

As soon as I rounded the corner, I grabbed onto the railing with one hand to both swing myself in the right direction and prevent myself from slipping and falling on the slick cement. I tore along the pathway until I suddenly cleared the wall of the building and came to a skidding halt. Instead of another street before me, as I had expected, I was suddenly faced with the wide expanse of the large river that ran right through the middle of the city.

"Fuck!" I shouted, running my hands back through my hair, brushing away strands that had become stuck to my face with the aid of the rain.

I began to spin in place, debating about whether there would be somewhere to go if I backtracked, when the sight of someone standing mere feet away caused me to jump and let out a scream in surprise. My hands instantly clenched into fists at my sides as I fought to regain my ability to speak once again.

"Who are you?" I demanded.

At first glance, all I could make out was long, dark brown hair pulled back in a ponytail behind a pale face, spotted with light freckles across her forehead and cheekbones. She could have simply been some random girl, but something about the way she was staring right at me, seemingly blocking the path, made me feel that her intentions were not quite so innocent.

"I think you know who I am," I said accusatorily, taking another slow step backwards.

"Amaryss Torres," she said, her voice surprisingly softer and mildly huskier than I had expected, for some reason.

"So Jared sent you, is that it?"

She remained silent, but took another step toward me.

“Hold up,” I said, holding one hand out toward her. “If you you’re looking to take me anywhere, you better stop right there.”

She stopped where she was, cocking her head to the side ever so slightly as I tried to think of my next move.

“Take you somewhere?” she said. “What makes you think that?”

My heart began to pound in my chest once again as I felt an oddly numb feeling in my extremities. If she wasn’t going to take me anywhere, then there was a good chance she was there for another reason. Suddenly, I saw her pull her hand from her pocket and I leapt into action without even hesitating to think about what I was doing. My hand shot out and closed around her wrist, shoving her hand up and away from me as the pistol in it let out a loud rapping, firing harmlessly into the air.

She immediately jabbed me in the side and I let out a cry of pain, arching my back slightly as she fought to free her hand from my grasp, but I refused to relent. Instead, I pulled her arm across my body as I turned, myself, essentially pulling her against me while putting her at an awkward angle to actually get any sort of leverage. I dragged her forward a step or two before bringing her arm down against the metal railing, hoping it would dislodge the gun from her grip. When she held steadfast, I tried again, this time bending her wrist back at an awkward angle as I did.

Her grip slackened on the pistol and I quickly gripped it, pulling it away from her. She tried to hold on with just the tips of her fingers, but the steel was slick from the rain and easily slid from under her grasp. With the gun now in my control, I quickly passed it to my left hand before ramming my right elbow back into the center of her torso. She let out a grunt as I spun around and shoved her away from me.

The girl fell against the railing on the opposite side of the walkway and stayed there for a moment, holding a hand to her chest as she attempted to catch her breath. Her eyes instantly fixated on the pistol in my hand as I held it firmly, but kept the muzzle pointed at the ground between us.

“Afraid of this?” I said, lifting the pistol slightly. “Maybe if it were any other day, you should be.”

Her eyes moved from the pistol to my face, a strange,

somewhat confused expression crossing her features.

“I’ve seen too much death and violence today, already,” I continued, “and my hand was forced one too many times.”

I fell silent once again, breathing heavily as I heard the sound of police sirens on the nearby streets, but I couldn’t tell if they were getting closer or moving farther away.

“You can tell Jared, or whoever the fuck sent you that probably knows him,” I began, moving back toward the metal railing behind me, “that maybe not today, or tomorrow, but he will see my face again. When he does... it will be the last time.”

With that, I quickly aimed the pistol at the ground between myself and the mysterious girl and squeezed the trigger repeatedly, causing her to jump back in surprise, until the mechanism clicked on an empty chamber and I tossed the gun aside. Before she had a chance to recover, I spun around and hoisted myself onto the railing. Immediately, I had the sense that this might be a terrible idea, but there didn’t seem to be a better escape route at this point.

My knees began to bend ever so slightly just as I heard shouting from off to my left. A quick glance over revealed two police officers rushing down the walkway along the riverfront, no guns in hand, as I had expected, though. With a strengthened resolve, I pushed off of the railing, my feet slipping ever so slightly on the slick metal as I threw myself forward into the open air. The sound of the rain falling from above, combined with the sounds of waves from the river churning and crashing against the cement pillars under the walkway all seemed to combine into one loud roar for a moment before I felt gravity truly begin to take hold and my eyes fixed on the dark water below.

The fall was quite a bit farther than I had first expected, but it was too late to back out now. I brought my arms over my head, pointing my hands in a wedge shape as I began to feel myself turn, falling at a much steeper angle. As the water drew within mere feet, I took in a deep breath, all of the sound around me seemingly sucked in with it.

Moments later, the world was dark and cold.

## 27

### The End

March 9<sup>th</sup>, 2000  
1:16:24 A.M.  
London, England

“I think you should.”

I didn't need to be able to see through one-way glass to know that the other detective who had just been in the room was standing on the other side, watching every little thing that was happening, and part of me felt amused at the thought of the nervous look that must have been on his face at that moment. The man before me, whose name I couldn't remember, suddenly seemed a little thrown by my response. Evidently, he hadn't expected the silent, mysterious girl who took a headlong jump into the river to start spouting lines about monsters; or perhaps that was exactly the kind of person who would do such a thing. Regardless, he nervously shuffled some of the papers in the folder before him as he cleared his throat and clearly tried to think of how to proceed.

“What—why is that?” he finally asked.

My eyes moved from the glass to his face, taking in the bloodshot eyes, the unkempt stubble of a man who had been up for far too long that day, and the telltale nervous tapping of one finger on the table.

“Is that what you were running from?”

Something tight appeared deep in my chest, but I knew it wasn't anything to do with something Jared had done to me, at least not genetically.

“You ran from officers in a private building that was locked off from the public,” he stated. “One where they found two dead bodies.”

It seemed they hadn't found Shawn, yet. I wasn't about to entertain any fleeting notions that perhaps Lexi hadn't been dead, after all, and had simply come to later.

“There hasn't been time to do any sort of full-fledged investigation, yet,” the detective continued, “but it certainly looks

guilty, Amaryss.”

My eyes immediately flicked up from the table at the sound of my name, locking onto his and burrowing into them with laser focus. The motion must have unnerved him a bit, because he looked away, turning a page in the folder over before flipping it back to its original position.

“I was.”

“You were... what? Guilty?”

“No.”

“Then what were you?” he asked, leaning forward against the table, frustration creeping into his tone, beginning to destroy the “nice cop” approach he seemed to have been attempting so far.

“Running—from monsters.”

“Well... care to elaborate on what they are, then?” he sighed, leaning in back in his chair and crossing his arms. “Aliens from another dimension? A stampeding herd of purple elephants?”

“The ones that take everything in your life and slowly destroy it... piece by piece... until you’re just running, but you don’t know where... because it feels like there’s nowhere to go.”

The detective fell silent, his doubt and annoyance suddenly gone, replaced with an unreadable expression that I assumed was masking some kind of inner turmoil over whether to be confused, scared, or curious. This interrogation was clearly not going the way he had expected it to, but I was in no particular mode to offer full cooperation. The last thing I had wanted when I ran from that abandoned warehouse and dove into the river was to get picked up by a police boat after only about five minutes. I’m sure they all thought I was some kind of murderer, originally, but now I wouldn’t blame them if they were beginning to wonder if I was insane. Perhaps it was better that way.

Perhaps they were partially right.

“Well, I can tell you that this police station is locked down at this time of night,” the detective said. “I doubt whoever whomever ‘they’ are, they won’t be in here.”

I turned my eyes from the place just past the edge of the table that I had been absentmindedly staring at for the past several minutes to look up at him once again. He didn’t actually look much more confident or sure of what was going on, and my

attention shifting to him once again did little to help.

“Famous last words,” I said quietly, my voice barely louder than a whisper.

“Come again?”

Just then, what sounded like a muffled crash came from the door to the hallway and the detective’s head immediately whipped around to look toward it. He got to his feet and moved to the door, gripping it in one hand. Almost immediately, the buzzer sounded and he pulled it open, leaning into the hallway.

“What in the bloody—?”

Before he could finish his statement, I had leapt up from the table and rushed toward him. Lowering my shoulder, I barreled straight into his side, shoving him into the hallway with all of my weight. He fell forward onto the floor, letting out a shout of surprise as he did. I stumbled out after him, catching myself against the far wall before looking down the hallway in the same direction he had been looking moments ago. At first, everything seemed relatively normal, but the sight of a chair suddenly flying across the opening and crashing to the floor out of sight broke that image.

My heart began to pound as I realized there was really only one explanation for what it could be. I immediately pushed off the wall and began to ran in the opposite direction as I heard the door to the room behind the one-way glass open and I presumed the other detective had stepped out, as well.

“Oi, stop!”

I would have laughed at such a British expression under any normal circumstances, but my focus was too firmly set on the door with the “exit” sign lit up above it at the end of the hallway to pay any serious heed to what was happening behind me. My wet sneakers squeaked on the floor with each step, the sound the only thing I truly noticed other than my heartbeat pounding in my ears. Finally, I reached the door and slammed into, pushing against the metal bar that ran across the center. To my relief, it swung open immediately, unlike the door back in the warehouse that I had attempted to break down.

I nearly fell to the ground as soon as I tumbled through the doorway, but managed to retain my footing at the last second. My

eyes quickly scanned my new environment, finding that I had wound up in a stairwell. Heading up would most likely only lead to some kind of roof access, at best, but I didn't want to hedge my bets on how short or tall the building actually was.

"Down it is," I muttered, immediately heading for the steps descending farther into the building.

My hands gripped the railings on either side of me as I practically flew down them, my feet only touching down about once every two or three steps. When I hit the flat area between the floors, where the stairs turned 180 degrees to face the other way, I held on with my right hand and used the railing to spin myself around the corner, nearly falling face-first down the next of stairs as I did.

When I reached the next level, I came to a stop in front of the door, one hand outstretched toward the handle. Just before I could grab it however, I hesitated, my fingers curling into a fist. Something had made me stop, but I couldn't figure out what it was. After a moment of hesitation, however, I heard a loud bang from above me and hurried footsteps entered the stairwell. I immediately glanced up at the ceiling, knowing that whoever those footsteps belonged to was mere feet above my head. As I was trying to decide whether it was the detective from the observation room or perhaps someone who had been involved in the fight at the end of the hall, I heard the footsteps set out on the stairs, and I had a feeling that they were descending toward me.

Seeing as my decision appeared to be made for me, I reached forward and grabbed the door handle, preparing to twist it. As I did, however, it remained still. I tried again, but the door was undoubtedly locked. Swearing under my breath, I took off down the next set of stairs, once again hopping two or three at a time until I rounded the corner and barreled down the second set. As I arrived at the new door, I once again found it locked, like the previous one. This time, however, I noticed the small, black box attached to the wall to the right of it. I glanced at it quickly and realized that it had a thin slot on the front, alongside two lights, of which the red one was currently lit.

"Some kind of card thing?" I muttered, running my fingers over the narrow slot for a moment before glancing back up the

stairs.

The other pair of footsteps were still pounding down them after me, but I had a feeling that running to the next door would not prove to be a better idea than the last two. Whether I wanted to or not, it looked like I was going to have to face whoever was following me. I stood with my back to the door, hands clenched into fists as I tensed myself, my heart rate instantly spiking. The footsteps drew closer and closer until I heard them round the final bend in the stairs and begin to descend toward the flat level where I was standing. Seconds later, the figure appeared from around the wall and skidded to a stop, jumping in surprise at the sight of me; part of me felt slightly relieved that it was only one of the detectives from the interrogation.

“All of this running doesn’t help with the guilty appearance,” he huffed, sounding somewhat out of breath.

I remained silent, my body still tense and ready for some kind of fight. He seemed to notice my body language, because he took a tentative step backwards, moving closer to the wall.

“All of these doors are locked,” he said. “You need a card to get through them.”

“I noticed,” I replied.

“So, you—?” he began to ask when he stopped mid-sentence, his eyes growing wider.

“If you just give me one, I’ll be out of here, no problem, and no one is any the wiser.”

“You were brought in on suspicion of involvement in a homicide,” he replied. “That’s nothing that can just be excused so easily.”

It was clear this conversation was over; he wasn’t going to budge on just letting me out of here. Time for plan B.

I suddenly leapt forward, grabbing him by his shirt and shoving him into the wall. A grunt escaped his lips as he tried to recover from my sudden burst of motion. My arm was held tightly across his chest, holding him in place as I leaned in close to his face.

“Are you going to give me your card, now, or am I going to have to look for it?” I growled.

His eyes were still somewhat wide as he stared back into



mine. Clearly, this was not the display he had expected to see from the silent girl that had just been sitting in the interrogation room a minute or two ago. Finally, he began to reach toward his pocket, scrambling to fit his hand inside. A moment later, he produced something and held it toward me, nearly jamming it into my stomach. I glanced down and grabbed whatever he was holding, pulling it from his grasp. A white, plastic card sat in the palm of my hand as I flipped it over and saw a picture of the detective, along with his name and some other kind of identification. I looked back up at him as I shoved it inside my own pocket.

“Thanks, John,” I said before suddenly hauling him away from the wall his back was against and throwing him into the one in the center of the stairs.

He hit it with a resounding thud and fell to the ground, holding his hand to his forehead where it had collided with the hard surface. Before he could recover, I pulled the card from my pocket, once again, and moved over to the door, sliding it through the small slot in the reader fixed to the wall. The lights switched from red to green and I quickly gripped the handle, pulling it open. Immediately, I was confronted with what appeared to be yet another long hallway, but I quickly realized that it was quite different than where I had come from a minute ago.

One long corridor stretched ahead of me toward another door at the opposite end, but along the left side were small divider walls that separated the space into individual lanes, while a large, open area stretched off to my left. I stepped forward into the room and let the door swing closed behind me, pocketing the plastic card as I looked around the space. A second later, I heard a loud bang from ahead of me and nearly jumped a foot in the air as I instantly flattened myself against the nearest divider wall, my heart pounding. As I glanced around the space I had taken refuge in, I found it to be rather empty, save for a small half-wall that stood tall enough that it came to just above my waist. My eyes moved up from the wall to glance down at the open expanse of the room beyond it to take in something at the opposite end that made me realize exactly where I had stumbled into: a white, paper target in the general outline of a person’s torso.

“Shooting range...” I muttered, glancing back in the direction I had heard the sound from earlier and moving away from the wall.

I moved around the divider wall and began to slowly make my way down the corridor behind the series of lanes, all complete with the same paper targets set up at the opposite end. Another loud bang reverberated throughout the room, causing me to jump, but nearly as badly as I had the first time, and I glanced ahead, figuring that it had come from only a few more lanes down. As I approached, I found someone standing against the half-wall, a pistol gripped in both hands and ear-protection headphones firmly placed over his ears. When he didn't turn around at my presence, I quickly slunk by, heading for the door only ten feet away.

As soon as I reached it, I grabbed the handle and slipped through, taking care not to let it slam behind me. Even if he hadn't noticed me walking by, the sound of the heavy door closing might be enough to draw his attention. Once I was out of the shooting range, however, I found myself in a room lined with lockers. A large window sat to the left, lit from the inside to reveal some kind of booth, complete with a rather bored-looking police officer sitting inside. She was currently looking down at something on the desk in front of her, so I began to slink forward, hoping to get past without drawing her attention. Just as I was almost clear of the window, however, I heard the sound of paper rustling and a voice called out.

“Hey, who are you?”

I froze in place, hoping that perhaps she wasn't talking to me.

“Where's your uniform?”

I slowly turned around to look back toward the window to see the woman inside staring directly at me, a look of confusion etched into her features.

“I, uh... was just coming to get it,” I said. “Just came from a—workout.”

“A workout?” she said. “In jeans?”

“It was all I had.”

She looked me up and down for a moment before shrugging and letting out a heavy sigh.

“Just make sure you don’t forget your badge or anything, next time,” she said, yawning as she returned to whatever reading material she had in front of her.

Breathing a quiet sigh of relief, I quickly strode across the locker room to the door at the end of it and grabbed the handle. I pulled it open just enough to look through and scanned the room beyond. All I could make out were what looked like cubicles scattered across an open room. Several doors lined the outside edge, although I could see through the large windows beside them that they led to more offices, and not to the outside. I scanned the room for signs of an exit before my eyes finally fell upon an elevator on the opposite wall, almost directly across from me. Leaving through the front door seemed like a rather risky maneuver to pull, but there didn’t seem to be another way through, and it was probably too late to go back to the stairwell behind me.

Just as I was about to sneak through the doorway and begin trying to make my way across the room, a thought occurred to me and I closed the door, glancing around the locker room behind me. My eyes were immediately drawn to one of the ones off to my right; the door was left slightly ajar, and it was clearly not locked. I hurried over and opened it, scanning inside, but found it to be empty. With a frown, I returned the door to the position it had been left at before, and looked around once again. Most of the closed locker doors were fastened tightly with padlocks, although I was beginning to question just how strong they actually were.

I moved over to the far wall, scanning along the names printed on each of the doors until I found one labeled “Winter, Jean.” With one more glance toward the booth where the bored police officer was stationed, I grabbed hold of the lock and prepared to pull on it with all of my strength. Taking a deep breath, I gripped the metal tightly and pulled down with all of my strength. Surprisingly, the lock came undone rather easily and I nearly bashed my hand against the metal door. I pulled the lock free and carefully opened the door. To my relief, I found what appeared to be clothes stored inside. I quickly grabbed the locker’s contents and unfolded them.

A pair of black pants and a white, collared shirt appeared from the bundle in my hands, and I frowned slightly. Neither

appeared to be quite my size, and I also didn't feel quite like putting on such an elaborate costume. I held the clothes under one arm as I looked back inside the locker, scanning for something of use. After a second or two, I noticed what appeared to be a small shelf at the top and reached up toward it, rising onto my toes slightly as I did. My fingers brushed against something and I quickly grabbed it, pulling it toward me and holding it so I could actually see what I had taken. A small, black leather pouch, somewhat like a wallet, sat in the palm of my hand. I flipped it open to find a card inside a plastic sheath on the left side; on it was a photo of a rather serious-looking woman with long, dirty blonde hair with the words "Metropolitan Police" written at the top.

"Here we go," I muttered, tossing the pants and shirt back inside as I slipped the wallet-like accessory into my back pocket and closed the locker, replacing the lock.

Once I was satisfied everything appeared as I had found it, I hurried back to the door and grabbed the handle. After taking a deep breath, I opened it and stepped into the room beyond, releasing it in a heavy sigh. My eyes immediately scanned about the space, but I didn't see anyone actively walking around, or pointing in my direction, so I began to make my way toward the elevator. I took the most direct path I could, walking straight across the aisle ahead of me before turning left and approaching the silver doors. The light on the call button lit up a dull orange color as I pressed it and frantically glanced around once again.

*"Calm down, or it's definitely going to look suspicious,"* I told myself, but it did nothing to actually help.

I glanced up at the display above the doors, watching the electronic numbers count down from "4" until a soft ding sounded as it changed to "2." A frown pulled at my lips as I inwardly cursed myself for stopping just short of the ground floor in the stairs, but I didn't have time to dwell on it for long as the doors slid open. Just as I began to step toward them, ready to slip inside, I froze.

"Leaving so soon?"

It shouldn't have been possible... it couldn't be, but Kailyn was standing before me, a twisted smirk set across her face. My shock and surprise must have been quite noticeable, seeing as I

made no effort to hide it, which only seemed to amuse her further. Before I could say or do anything, however, she held up a hand toward me and I was lifted off my feet. I barely registered that I was airborne before I crashed into one of the cubicle walls, feeling it give away underneath me and deposit me on someone's desk. I rolled off the surface and onto the floor, wincing as the pain from the initial fall in the warehouse resurfaced, shooting throughout my body.

My hand gripped the top of the desk as I laboriously pulled myself to my feet, staring across the space between myself and Kailyn. She had stepped out of the elevator, the doors closing behind her, the smirk still in place.

"How—how are you here?" I managed, unable to think of a more intelligent question.

"Surprising, I know," she said, "but don't think you're quite so special. I'm quite the pirate, myself."

I continued to stare at her for a few moments, unsure of what she meant by that when her statement suddenly seemed to click in my head.

"You stowed away, as well..."

"You can call me Kailyn Massey, master of the high seas," she said, raising her hands as if to showcase herself. "Different ship than you, though, that's what took me so long to find you."

"Why did you follow me here?" I asked, my tone somewhere between incredulous and angry. "After Jared, too?"

"Yes and no," she replied, shrugging. "I could only assume he was the reason you were making the trip, seeing as I doubted that you were just looking for an exotic vacation."

"You're still here after me?" I spat, unable to mask my disbelief.

"Well, you certainly made it more personal when you smashed me upside the head with some kind of sandwich press in that diner back in Georgia," Kailyn shot back, pointing a finger at me accusatorily.

"You drove a truck into the booth where I was sitting and tried to shoot me!"

"Okay, yes, that may have been somewhat of a provocation," she said, nodding, "but we talked about this back

then—”

“Some ‘talk.’”

“Hey, look!” she said, holding her hands up so I could see them. “No gun this time.”

“Well that’s a big comfort,” I said dryly, rolling my eyes.

“I didn’t necessarily just come here to talk, you know,” she said. “So I guess you’re just going to have to live with it.”

“What even is your point in doing this, anymore?” I suddenly said, the familiar fire appearing in my chest once again. “You’re just here to kill me, that’s it?”

“Well—”

“Do you know what I came here to do?”

She remained silent, but crossed her arms on the top of the cubicle wall in front of her, leaning against it somewhat.

“I was here for Jared, like you said,” I continued, “but when I found him—when *we* found him—”

I suddenly felt much less capable of finishing my thought, but I forced myself to continue.

“I wanted to kill him.”

Kailyn raised an eyebrow and for a moment I caught a glimpse of the girl who had sat at the edge of my bed and pressured me to tell her the story of the night I had spent in Chase’s room after the bonfire in Arizona.

“Amaryss suddenly had a change of heart?” she remarked. “So... did you do it?”

“Chase and Lexi stopped me.”

“Boring,” she sighed, rolling her eyes. “You really had me going for a second, there, you know?”

I clenched my jaw, my hands instinctively forming into fists at my sides.

“So, where are the rest of the gang, now?” she asked. “Let me guess, you’re on a daring raid to bust them out of jail?”

“They’re dead.”

Kailyn immediately stood up straight, much more alert and interested in what I was saying.

“I didn’t think Jared had it in him to—”

“It wasn’t him,” I interrupted, “not directly, at least.”

“How does one indirectly kill another person?” she asked,

confusion creasing her brow.

“Whatever he did—had done to Chase, whatever—he just—lost it.”

Kailyn remained silent, watching me with what appeared to be a considerable amount of interest. At least she appeared to be in a listening mood and wasn’t actively trying to throw me across the room, once again, so I pushed on.

“He—he killed Shawn and Lexi, and I had to—”

I stopped mid-sentence, my throat closing involuntarily and preventing me from speaking. It didn’t feel like the time Kailyn had tried to choke me before; it was definitely of my own doing. My fists clenched even tighter, my nails beginning to dig into my palms as I stared at the empty space somewhere between Kailyn and me.

“*You?!?*” she said suddenly, breaking the silence. “You killed Chase?”

Hot tears began to burn the corners of my eyes as I shut them tightly for a moment in an attempt to block them before they could emerge, but it seemed to be pointless. A second or two later, I opened them once again and used the back of my hand to wipe them away, but I could still feel more just waiting for their chance to appear.

“My god…” Kailyn said, laughing slightly, “you really have changed. Where was this girl in Arizona when I was asking for your help?”

I suddenly looked up at her, the fire flaring in my chest once again as I took a step to the side, moving out from behind the desk.

“I didn’t *want* this!” I shouted. “I didn’t *choose* for any of this to happen! I’m not stronger because I was finally able to—to—”

“Be like me?”

My eyes instantly locked onto Kailyn’s as I found hers returning the stare with the same amount of intensity.

“I was weak in the moment and couldn’t stop myself.”

“It’s not weakness, Amaryss,” Kailyn spat. “What would have happened if you hadn’t done it first, huh?”

I opened my mouth to answer, but she cut me off.

“You’d be dead, that’s what,” she said. “Not him, you.”

“Maybe—”

“If you were going to finish that sentence the way I think you were going to,” she interrupted, “then I guess it’s your lucky day, because I’ll be glad to help.”

I could almost sense what was about to happen before she actually moved, so I began to propel myself sideways, lunging for the cubicle across from the one where I had landed. A moment later, I heard a loud crash behind me and I assumed that either a chair or some part of another desk had flown by, mere inches from me. I pushed myself into a crouched position, gripping the edge of the desk as I quickly glanced around in an attempt to figure out some kind of weapon. Seeing nothing that looked promising, I settled on a different tactic.

As I jumped to my feet once again, I grabbed a stapler from next to where my hand was gripping the desk and hurled it in Kailyn’s direction. She jumped in surprise at the sudden motion and threw one hand up, the stapler stopping in mid-air a foot or two away from her. Before she had a chance to recover from the surprise, however, I ran forward, gripping the top of the cubicle wall between us and launching myself over it. My feet collided with her chest and she was thrown to the ground, letting out a shriek as she fell.

I managed to land in a half-crouched position just beside the wall I had used to vault myself, one hand still maintaining its grip. Kailyn quickly rolled to the side and onto her one knee, using a hand on the ground to steady herself.

“Nice one,” she panted. “The stapler was a nice touch.”

“Just like to keep you guessing,” I shot back.

With a smirk, she raised a hand toward me and I felt myself being dragged forward by an unseen force. The strength behind Kailyn’s abilities surprised me at first; it seemed much stronger than I remembered, or would even expect, but I suppose as mine had progressed, it stood to reason that hers had, as well. Just then, I saw a fist barreling straight toward me and I didn’t have time to prepare or try to duck, so I ended up taking the full brunt of the blow in the bridge of my nose. Bright lights exploded before my eyes as pain shot throughout my skull, my head snapping back for



a second as I felt Kailyn's abilities release me from their grasp and I fell to the floor, my hands weakly raising to stop my fall, but doing nothing to actually help.

I hit the floor with a heavy thud, the air in my lungs escaping in one sharp exhalation. A moment later, I felt something hot begin to spread across my upper lip and could only assume that it was now pouring out of my nose. Suddenly, it felt like something had wrapped around my entire torso and was lifting me off the floor. I could feel the ground fall away for a moment before the strange sensation of moving sideways began to take hold. Kailyn must have lifted me up with her abilities, but my vision was just beginning to clear, so I couldn't see where she was, or where I was going.

After a second or two of frantic blinking, I could finally see clearly once again and lifted my head to try to re-establish my bearings. As soon as I did, I saw the silver doors of the elevator before me. Kailyn stood beside me, one hand held out toward me while the other was held out toward the doors. The sound of metallic screeching and protesting filled my ears as I winced slightly, gritting my teeth against the pain. As I lifted my head again, I saw that the doors were slowly being forced open, although no elevator appeared to be waiting beyond them.

*"Shit, shit, oh shit."*

Kailyn hadn't been kidding earlier, it seemed. Before the doors had fully retracted from sight, however, I reached out and grabbed her by the hair at the back of her head. A cry of surprise escaped her lips as I suddenly threw her forward, slamming her forehead into the metal surface of the receding door. As soon as she hit it, I felt whatever force was holding me aloft disappear and I fell to the floor with a loud grunt; the grating sound of the doors being forced open also came to a stop, thankfully.

I quickly scrambled to my feet as I saw Kailyn attempting to do so, as well. Just as she was getting to her knees, however, I grabbed her by the back of her jacket and threw her to the left, the side of her head colliding with the nearly fully-receded door. A cry of pain came from her as I kept my grip on her jacket, hauling her out of the doorway to the elevator and throwing her to the floor. She remained there for a few seconds, her arms and legs

slowly moving in an attempt to get them underneath herself.

“So there’s no convincing you?” I managed, my voice husky and raw as I panted, feeling pain shoot through my head with each word.

I spit blood away from my mouth as I wiped at my upper lip with the back of one hand, pulling it away to see the rather large smear of red across it. The taste of iron still filled my mouth as I shook my head, flinging droplets of blood across the carpeted floor and the nearby wall to a cubicle.

“Convincing me of what?” Kailyn shot back, pushing herself to her hands and knees as she let out a groan. “Not killing you? Well, you had me going for a moment, back there.”

“What moment was that?”

“When I thought you had killed Jared,” she said. “It almost made up for it all.”

“What is this ‘all’ that you keep talking about?” I snapped, throwing my arms up in exasperation.

“You betrayed me!” she shouted, rising to one knee as she finally turned to look at me once again. “Right when I needed you... you let me down.”

“So that marks me for death?”

I could see Kailyn’s jaw working as she wrestled with something to say. After a moment or two, she shook her head, letting out a loud growl of frustration.

“No, stop!”

“Stop wha—?”

“Stop trying to tell me what to do!”

“To not kill me? I think that’s pretty just—”

“I’ve been stuck with your shit for this whole time, and look where that’s gotten us!”

Kailyn’s head suddenly snapped up and her eyes fixed on something off to my right. I glanced over, but saw that we were still alone on the floor. There was nothing of interest where she was looking, let alone anyone to speak to.

“When did this stop being what I wanted, and start being what you *manipulated* me to do?” she spat. “I know. New York.”

“Kailyn...?” I said tentatively, somewhat afraid to interrupt her, but not sure what else to do.

“I’m putting an end to this.”

My blood ran cold as I began to take a step back, but Kailyn suddenly leapt to her feet, holding one hand out toward me. I was immediately bound in place, unable to move my arms or legs. Kailyn began to walk toward me as my heart pounded in my ears, my breathing coming in short, panicked bursts. I struggled against her, trying desperately to move my arms and legs, but the grip was far too strong. Instead of walking up to me, as I had expected, she moved toward the elevator doors, stopping just beside them. They were still partially open, revealing the darkened elevator shaft just beyond them.

Kailyn stepped up to the edge, between the two doors, and looked up for a moment or two. She raised her hand toward something and appeared to focus rather intensely for a few seconds. Suddenly, a loud metallic clanging came from within the cement shaft and she grimaced slightly, but kept her hand raised. She turned toward me as I fought against her abilities once again, my pulse now spread to become a steady throbbing throughout my skull. I expected to feel myself being pulled toward her, but both of us remained where we were.

“So, this is it?” I said, hoping to stall for time, somehow.

“I guess so,” she said, although she sounded somewhat labored, as if she were physically exerting herself rather intensely.

Something about her tone caused me to pause in my struggle for a moment, my eyes suddenly locking onto hers. I expected to see the same anger and playful malice that had seemed to be there the past several times I had run into her, but neither of those seemed to be present. In their place, I saw something else, something that cut straight through my skin and bones and burrowed straight into my heart. There was sadness, something that could have easily been conviction, and something that I couldn’t name, but I could definitely feel it. It was like I could see the girl who I had grown up with again.

I saw my best friend.

“I said I was going to finish it here, didn’t I?” she said, a wry smirk pulling at one side of her lips. “Well, I guess it was in the subtext, but... yeah.”

She glanced up the elevator shaft one more time before she

dropped both of her hands. I felt the grip holding me still disappear as some kind of grinding sound came from within the elevator shaft ahead. Before I knew what was happening, I saw one of Kailyn's feet lift up and move back over the empty space behind her. My heart stopped for a moment, along with the world around me, as I saw her foot begin to dip past the edge of the floor.

The next thing I knew, I was running forward. One arm reached out before me as I saw Kailyn's body begin to tilt at a more extreme angle, her other foot lifting off the floor before her. It felt like I was trying to run through water, my limbs fighting to move faster, but I was unable to make them do so. I was only a foot or so away when I saw her second foot begin to pull farther away from the floor, the dark gap between the sole of her shoe and floor growing wider and wider.

My right arm was stretched out before me as far as it could reach, my fingers extended to their full length. I could have sworn that I saw one of her arms stretched out toward me, her fingers reaching as mine were. At the last second, my shoulder ran into the still partially-open door and I came to a sudden halt, my arm limply falling to my side as I watched Kailyn recede into the darkness of the elevator shaft, the small work lights that lined the walls occasionally illuminating her in a quasi-strobe effect. A moment later, I sensed something right overhead and I pulled back just as a large, dark shape flew by, the sound of grating metal and a strange, metallic twanging echoed from the enclosed space. It took me a second or two to fully realize what had just passed by, but when it had, I immediately ran forward and leaned against the door, looking down just in time to see the elevator come to a sudden stop with a loud crash. The vibration from the impact shook the floor, even from where I was standing.

After the echoes of the metal crashing into hard cement had faded, I heard a different sound continuing on, preventing the world from fading into total silence. At first it sounded like some kind of high-pitched screech, but then I realized it was screaming.

It was my own screaming.

I slowly fell to my knees, leaning my left shoulder against the door to both hold myself up and slow my descent. Finally, I felt the hard floor under my kneecaps and I grabbed onto the door

with my other hand, as if afraid that I could easily slip into the void before me. My mouth still seemed to be hanging open as my throat burned, raw from the cry that had torn itself loose. The sound had faded from a full-on scream to something like a whimper as I leaned my head forward against the cold metal, my eyes closing tightly against the tears that had begun to well up in them. I didn't even bother trying to stop them, this time.

Cool, wet drops fell onto my legs, soaking through my jeans as I began to pound my fist against the elevator door. Even though my eyes were closed, I could clearly see the image of Kailyn, almost completely parallel to the ground, one hand stretching toward mine, the look of anger and malice gone from her eyes as I saw her, for real, for the last time.

That image couldn't be the last I remembered of her. Not the one of her screaming at imaginary people and voices in her head on the floor of a police station in London. Not the one of her holding a gun on me at a diner in Georgia. Not the one of her unconscious, bleeding in my arms as I carried her into a hospital in New York. Not the one of her swinging a shard of a broken mirror at me while Mack lay bloody and bruised on the floor beside us. I shook my head, willing them all to go away.

There were so many better ones. The real ones. Kailyn hopping onto my bed in excitement at hearing the story of Chase and me. Kailyn fighting over me with Chase, pulling at my leg while he attempted to hold me in place by my arm. Kailyn crouching beside my bed, teasing me in an attempt to wake me up at the house in California. Kailyn sitting cross-legged at the end of my bed, flipping through some celebrity magazine that had appeared in the house while we mockingly imitated the poses and facial expressions of the models inside. Kailyn lying flat on her back, arms and legs spread wide as I showed her how to make a snow angel for the first time. All of them with her eyes glinting with playful spirit while smiles and wry smirks pulled at the corners of her lips.

I thought Jared had taken everything from me, but he hadn't entirely, and that was somehow worse.

In the last fleeting moment, I had my best friend back.

At the last moment, Chase had told me he loved me.

But they were only moments.

Single drops in an ocean of memories, only nineteen years young.

But I couldn't just sit here forever, as much as I wanted to sink into that ocean, let the waves pull me out, let the current drag me down. There were many more years to fill that ocean. More waters to navigate and see. Someday, I might wind up back here, somehow, in this spot.

Maybe then... who knows?

For now, though, it was time to explore a new area of land.

The ocean would have its time, but not right now.

Run now. Figure it out later.

Not now.

## Epilogue

June 4<sup>th</sup>, 2006  
8:14:23 A.M.  
New York City, NY

The bustle of a New York City coffee shop during the early morning hours of a weekday was a kind of frenetic chaos that was unmatched almost anywhere else in the world. Baristas rushed about behind the counter like bees in a hive, hurriedly pouring steaming drinks into cups while reaching for scones and muffins in the display case with the other hand. The line of impatient patrons stretched all the way from the counter, wrapped around several tables, and was just beginning to reach beyond the front door. Luckily for all of those at the very end, it was a pleasant summer morning, so being forced to stand outside was not a punishment, in and of itself.

The lucky crowd that had come early enough to claim a table watched those still waiting with mixtures of expressions, ranging from indifference, to smugness, to annoyance, particularly from those who were seated at the tables encircled and encroached upon by the line. As such, no one was looking at anyone else at the tables, at least not for very long. Many of those in line were in a hurry to get to work, so the thought of taking a moment to sit and enjoy their drinks or their food was not one they could entertain. As one patron at a table rose, grabbing his courier bag and slinging it over one shoulder, a woman standing near the counter bearing the various coffee additives, creamer and sugar and the like, slipped between several already-taken ones to drop into the now-vacant seat. Her coffee wavered dangerously close to spilling over the lip of her cup, but no stray drops managed to escape. With a sigh, she brushed her sandy blonde hair back over one shoulder and took a contented sip of her drink, replacing it on the table once again before removing her purse from over shoulder and hanging it off of the back of the chair.

A lone woman seated at one of the tables next to the one that had just sported such a spirited changing of the guard frowned

slightly as both the man leaving the table and the woman rushing to take his place brushed past her, rubbing against her with either their bags or their bodies. She watched the woman sip her coffee once again before letting out a sigh, turning her attention away from the scene and looking back down at the newspaper before her, tapping a pen idly on the top of the crossword section. After a moment or two, she reached up to brush a few loose strands of hair that had begun to fall into her face back behind one ear, although they quickly began to slip out once again, soon falling back into their normal place, curling under her jawline and just touching her neck. Her grey eyes scanned the rows and columns of blank boxes, several already filled in while several had been emphatically crossed out.

Just then, her eyes happened to flick up toward the TV set in the corner of the coffee shop, perched on a stand attached to the wall just beside the window. The flat panel was showing one of the major news shows that ran every morning, complete with the familiar anchors all seated on a large, sectional couch. It was filmed somewhere down near Times Square, the large, flashy signs and electronic billboards in the background all but pinpointing it as distinctly New York. Just before her eyes could look away, however, something about the banner at the bottom of the screen caught her attention and brought her gaze back up to the individuals on the screen.

Alongside the normal news anchors appeared to be a rather large group of guests, all of whom much younger than the usual ilk who graced the screen. They couldn't be much older than their late teens, all seven of them. The woman's eyes quickly flicked down to read the subtitles scrolling across the bottom, white font on a black bar background. It was quite apparent that the words were not fully synchronized with the people's actual words, but it didn't obscure the message, by any means.

It was a story the news anchors couldn't seem to believe, and she was certain almost everyone who was watching couldn't, either, except one person, that is. However, no one in the coffee shop seemed to be paying the story much interest, so no looks of disbelief, startled gasps, or pointed fingers rose from the mass of people crammed into the relatively small space. It didn't engender



any of those responses from the woman, however, instead it kept her eyes glued to the images of the seven teenagers seated on the couch and on their words, appearing sporadically at the bottom of the screen, spilling their story for the world to see.

A story too tall to believe.

Unless someone had lived it, that is.

“Here we go again,” Amaryss muttered, a smirk pulling at the corner of her lips.





