

PROLOGUE

TWO MONTHS EARLIER

SHE HESITATED IN THE DOORWAY, GLANCING over her shoulder one last time. The soft blue-green glow of the moon made the room look ethereal, almost dreamlike, as if any minute she might wake to find she didn't have to leave. Hints of silver shimmered along the bed, highlighting the rhythmic rise and fall of her husband's chest. For once, his snoring was a welcome sound. She knew she would miss it.

Her grip tightened around the duffel bag's rough handle. *You have to go*, she reminded herself. *It's the only way to keep them safe.* Clutching at the ache in her womb, she pictured her five children sleeping peacefully in their rooms. The ripped paper on the desk said what she'd never get to say to them: *I love you all. I'm so sorry.*

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“Forgive me,” she whispered, letting the tears fall as she stepped through the door.

1 MIDNIGHT

I STARED AT THE NEON NUMBERS ON MY ALARM clock until my eyes went blurry. *Two minutes. She still has two minutes.* The glowing digits taunted me through the darkness, callous reminders that the odds of Mom showing up were dwindling by the second. Not that they were all that great in the first place; I hadn't heard from her in two months.

A gust of frosty air blew into the room, and I pulled my comforter tighter around my shoulders. Even in my thick flannel pajamas, I was shivering. Like a crazy person, I'd cracked open the window on a freezing February night. All the cars had stopped passing by hours ago, but I still listened for the crunch of gravel in our driveway, the jingle of Mom's keys in the door. Just in case.

My sheer curtains fluttered in the breeze, revealing tangled

silhouettes of trees outside the window. Their leafless branches formed a tattered black net across the inky sky. Clusters of stars poked through the gaps like the stubborn bits of hope fighting through my doubt. *She's coming*, they insisted. *She wouldn't break tradition.*

I wanted to believe it. Even though part of me still hated my mother for leaving without so much as a good-bye—because that lame two-sentence note she left did *not* count as a good-bye—a bigger, more pathetic part of me longed to see her burst through my door the moment the clock struck twelve. It was our birthday-eve tradition. Ever since I could remember, she'd popped in at exactly midnight to throw her crappy homemade confetti at me and shimmy around the room with her annoying little paper roll-up horn.

The scene was so familiar I could play it in my mind like a movie. I could see her espresso-colored bob swaying along her chin, hear the deep belly laugh she let out whenever she caught me rolling my eyes at her ridiculous dance moves. She'd always been here for this moment. Yet here I was, seconds away from officially turning sixteen, and she was nowhere to be found.

I tucked a dark drape of hair behind my ear and glanced at the clock again. 11:59. *This is it.* If she didn't show up tonight, she wasn't coming back. Ever.

The thought was like a fist in my gut. I bit down on my tongue and held back the moisture building behind my eyes. I'd nearly mastered that skill over the last couple months. I'd had to. Dad was hanging on by a thread, and my younger siblings didn't need an emotional wreck of a big sister on top of everything else.

XODUS

They also don't need a delusional big sister. Common sense told me Mom wasn't coming. I knew holding on like this was stupid, but I couldn't help it. It was all I had.

The floor creaked on the other side of my door, and my heart jumped into my throat. Flinging the blanket aside, I leapt off the bed. The wood floor was like ice against my thin socks as I raced to the door and yanked it open. "Mom! You—"

My voice cut off when I saw the enormous figure in the hall. A man at least seven feet tall with shoulders twice the size of mine stood inches away, dressed all in black. The moon cast a silver glow along the left side of his face, illuminating a jagged scar running down his cheek and half of a murderous glare.

All the air rushed out of my lungs. I stumbled backward, trying to force out a scream. Fear choked off the sound and kept me bolted in place. I couldn't help but imagine the man robbing us at gunpoint. I dared a glance at his hands.

No weapon. Maybe I had a chance.

The man lurched to the side. His movement set my brain in motion, and I whirled around to yank the lamp off my nightstand. The cord popped as it snapped out of the socket and slapped against the doorframe. Snatching it with my free hand, I charged forward, wielding the lamp like a battle axe.

I stopped short just outside my room. He was gone. The dark hall was empty. All the doors were closed. Everything was eerily quiet, except for the sound of my own heavy breathing.

I rushed over to the railing in front of me and scanned our moonlit living room from above. The man wasn't there, either. Everything was in place.

My mouth fell open as I stepped back. I'd only turned for

a second. There was no way he could have gotten down the stairs that fast, and I would have heard him open and close one of the doors upstairs.

So where was he?

I started to call for Dad but thought better of it. The room closest to mine belonged to my youngest sister, Salaxia. I couldn't risk her coming out here with some intruder waiting to pounce. My eyes fell on her bedroom door. Could that man have slipped inside her room without my noticing? What if he was in there now?

Terror closed around me like a giant fist. I dashed toward Salaxia's room, tightening my grip on the lamp as I moved. The man's horrifying face flashed into my mind, and my stomach clenched. If he hurt my sister...

A jolt of electricity stopped me dead in my tracks. The sound of a thousand hornets exploded into the air. My body went rigid, and my eyes clenched shut against my will. I felt myself shaking violently, every part of me suddenly out of my control.

The buzzing grew louder, drowning out the jumbled thoughts colliding in my mind. I tried to cover my ears, but I couldn't move my hands—I couldn't move anything. The deafening roar zapped all my strength, swallowed all my senses, consumed everything. It vibrated inside my skull until it felt like my head might explode.

Then, all at once, it stopped.

I cried out in relief. Everything was still black, and my body felt numb as I strained to see.

"I don't know anything else!" a woman's voice shouted.

I jumped back in surprise. Where did she come from? She sounded like she was right in front of me.

“Who’s there?” I wheezed, looking blindly toward the voice.

A bright light flooded my eyes, and I instinctively raised my arm to shield them. Blurry outlines shifted into view. Though I couldn’t see the details of the room, I could tell I wasn’t in my hallway anymore. A fresh wave of panic surged through me. Where was I?

Blinking furiously, I fought to make out my surroundings. The haze over my eyes lifted, and the scene slowly came into focus. Just in front of me was a massive man towering over a woman with long red hair.

I staggered back, nearly falling. It was *him*—the man I’d seen outside my room. His scar was clearly visible now, a warped white earthworm shape running from his flared nostril to the sharp point of his cheekbone. He wore the same dark clothes and lethal expression, except this time it was directed at the woman he had pinned against a glass table.

My eyes shot around the unfamiliar space. It was an expensive-looking home, with bright white walls and an L-shaped granite counter between the living room and where we stood. I grasped for some memory, but I was sure I’d never seen it before, and I had no idea how I’d gotten here. The man with the scar must’ve knocked me out somehow and brought me to this place. But why? What did he want with me?

He slammed his fist on the table, making the silverware clatter, and the woman and I both jumped.

“Don’t lie to me!” he bellowed. He lowered his head until his hooked nose almost touched the freckles on hers. “Don’t make

me hurt you.”

She clung to the edge of the table and cowered away from him, her hair spilling over her shoulders and pooling along the bamboo place mat between her hands. She wasn't short, but she looked tiny and helpless compared to him, especially in her baby blue sundress. I had to do something.

“Leave her alone!” I yelled. I immediately regretted my outburst. The man was built like a linebacker and could probably crush me like a bug. Still, I couldn't just let him assault her. Maybe the two of us could take him down together.

I stepped back, waiting for him to lumber after me, but he didn't even flinch in my direction. Neither did she. They stayed locked in their stare down as if they had no idea I was here.

They hadn't responded to me before, either. Was it possible they couldn't see me? I looked down at my body. It was just as visible as theirs. Why weren't they aware of me?

“None of us have spoken in nearly fifteen years,” the woman gasped. “I can't—”

“Do you think I'm a fool?” The man's hand flew up and yanked down her bottom lip, revealing a strange black X-like tattoo. “I know this symbol links all of you.”

I gaped at the mark. The shape was like a crooked plus sign with curves where the inner right angles should have been. It was haunting, almost cult-like. Who *were* these people?

She pulled away, and her lip snapped back into place. Her pale skin showed a pink mark where his thumb had been.

“It doesn't work like that,” she said.

The man's pea-colored eyes bored into her pale blue ones. In a quick burst of motion, he snatched her arm with one hand

and grabbed something at his hip with the other. There was a flash of black, and I watched in horror as he pressed a gun to her temple. "I've waited too long for this," he growled. "You *will* tell me where they are."

A visible gulp moved down her throat, and it took all my strength not to run. Everything in me screamed that I should get out of here, but I couldn't leave her.

"Five seconds," he said. He moved his thumb and the gun clicked. I'd seen enough movies to know it meant he'd taken off the safety. The wild expression on his face told me he was crazy enough to kill her.

I spun in a frantic circle. There was a wooden bar stool under the kitchen counter.

"Four!"

I lunged for it. The instant my hands reached the cushion, they bounced back as if the seat were surrounded by some kind of force field. I caught my balance and frowned at my palms. What was going on?

"Three!"

I didn't have time to think. I tried to grab the chair again, but my hands shot into my chest, repelled like magnets with matching poles. Black started to cloud my vision.

"Two!"

I whipped around. "Say something!" I screamed. But the woman just stared at him, her chest heaving. Without thinking, I squeezed my eyes shut and threw myself forward to tackle the man.

I was too late. The whole room reverberated with the explosion of the gun.

A scream died in my throat. I was falling, and then somehow, I was standing again. Hands closed around my shoulders. I heard a dog howl, and Dad's voice came out of nowhere.

"Lali, wake up!"

My eyes snapped open. Dad's face was inches from mine, his bushy brows bunched in concern. I teetered, jerking my head left and right. I was back in my hallway. The strange man and woman were gone. No gun. No buzzing. Nothing.

The scene I'd just witnessed rushed through my mind. I'd been too late. That woman was dead. "He killed her," I choked out. "He *killed* her!"

Something rubbed against my leg, and I screamed. I sprang backward as our beagle Gottfried circled my feet. He barked, and I screamed again.

"Shoo!" Dad moved the stumpy dog aside with his foot. "Lali, it was just a dream. No one killed anyone." He ran a hand through his thinning hair and reached over to tug the lamp out of my grasp. I'd forgotten I was holding it.

I gasped, suddenly remembering the man in the hall. "Dad! Someone was in the house!" I pushed past my father and raced to Salaxia's room. Her door creaked as I shoved it open, and Gottfried scampered inside behind me.

"Lali," Dad whisper-yelled. "Get out here."

Ignoring him, I studied Salaxia's tiny form wrapped up in her leopard-print comforter. She was snoring softly, her night-light glowing just enough for me to see she was okay. I let out a relieved breath.

"Lali!" Dad hissed again. I twisted around to see him jab a finger toward the floor in a silent order to come back out to

the hallway.

I scanned Salaxia's room. The man wasn't in here, but I wouldn't be able to rest until I checked the whole house. I rushed past Dad and hurried down the staircase, stumbling over Gottfried as he wove between my feet.

Dad called my name again, but I didn't respond. I was already thudding down the steps. Clawing my bangs out of my eyes, I ran to the kitchen and checked the front door. The deadbolt was in place.

Panting, I examined the windows. They were all locked, too. I started in the direction of the living room, but Dad blocked my path.

"Xitlali Marie Yavari! No one is down here!" His volume shattered my resolve. I looked around the kitchen. Everything was in place. Nothing had been moved in the living room, or upstairs either, apart from the lamp I'd nearly destroyed.

Had all of that really been a dream? It seemed so real, so vivid. But what other explanation was there for the man disappearing? Not to mention, I'd suddenly appeared in a strange home next to two people I'd never met, and neither had even noticed my presence. It couldn't have been real. I must've fallen asleep waiting for Mom and had a crazy nightmare.

Dad exhaled loudly and kneaded his eyelids with his thumb and index finger. Guilt tugged at me. I was only adding more stress to his life. It was bad enough he was dealing with five kids on his own. Now here I was, chasing down phantom trespassers in the wee hours of the morning.

After a moment, Dad dropped his hand and looked at me with the checked-out expression he wore more and more these

days. Stubble lined his face, and his dark eyes were swollen. The usual deep olive of his skin looked as pale and worn out as his raggedy plaid pajamas.

“I’m sorry, honey.” He sounded like he’d just mustered up the last of his strength. “I didn’t mean to yell at you. I’m just—”

“I know,” I said, feeling worse by the second.

He pulled me into a rigid hug, and I stiffened. His sporadic displays of affection still weirded me out. Mom was the queen of all things touchy-feely, but Dad hadn’t been into hugs until after she left. I didn’t know if I’d ever get used to it.

His chest moved against my cheek, vibrating as he spoke. “I know you’re the oldest, and things have been even tougher on you since...” He let his voice trail off, and I pulled away.

“Since Mom left,” I finished for him.

He winced.

“Dad, it’s been two months. We can say it without keeling over.” The words came out bitter as the blackest coffee, and resentment bubbled in my chest. This was all her fault. If she hadn’t blown off our birthday tradition, I wouldn’t have had such a disturbing dream. It was probably a manifestation of repressed anger—the counselor Dad forced me to see had warned about that.

Thanks a lot, Mom.

I noticed the pain on Dad’s face and regretted being so blunt. “Sorry,” I mumbled. I hated dancing around the reality of the situation, but Dad still had a hard time talking about it.

He stayed silent, staring into space and stroking his wedding ring.

“I really am sorry, Dad. I didn’t mean to upset you. I didn’t

mean to wake you up, either.”

“I was already awake.”

My heart constricted. Dad hardly slept anymore. Every night, I heard him in the halls, opening doors and peeking into all of our rooms. It was as if he worried my siblings and I might pack up and leave in the middle of the night, too. I cringed at the thought of him finding me standing outside my bedroom, crazed and armed with a desk lamp.

“Come on.” He turned out the light with a half-hearted flick of his hand. “Back to bed. You have school tomorrow.”

I followed him upstairs without a word. I couldn’t believe what a scene I’d made. This was not how I had envisioned starting out what was supposed to be my *sweet* sixteen. I hoped this wasn’t a sign of what was to come in the year ahead.

We made it to the top of the steps and found Gottfried snorting into the floor just in front of my room—right where I’d seen the man with the scar standing. The back of my neck prickled. That couldn’t be a coincidence—could it?

Dad cleared his throat, making me jump. He gestured to my door. “Get to bed.”

I forced my wayward thoughts to the back of my mind. That man hadn’t really been in the house. He was part of a twisted dream or a stress-induced hallucination. I wasn’t sure if the latter was a thing, but I made a mental note to look it up.

“Let’s try to get through the rest of the night without waking up your brothers and sisters,” Dad added.

I rolled my eyes. “Yeah right. They sleep like the dead.”

The corner of his mouth twitched like he wanted to smile but didn’t have the strength. “Sweet dreams.” He scooped up

Gottfried and trudged down the hall with the dog squirming in his arms.

I watched them disappear into my parents' room—Dad's room, now—and heaved a sigh. Another stunt like this and Dad might call it quits on us. I needed to get it together.

Stepping into my own room, I closed the door behind me. The Lamp of Doom mocked me from the nightstand. I pursed my lips. Dad must have set it there before he'd followed me into the kitchen. The light from my alarm clock reflected off its metal surface, reminding me that Mom was to blame for that whole fiasco. If she'd just shown up like she was supposed to, none of this would have happened.

I plopped onto the edge of my bed and leaned over to plug in the light. Surprisingly, it still worked, even after I'd recruited it for battle. The soft yellow glow washed over the familiar lines of my room. A wooden easel stood in the corner, displaying my half-finished landscape painting. On the opposite wall, papers covered the top of my desk like a white patchwork quilt. My dresser sat tucked in the nook where the closet wall jutted out, sweater sleeves and ripped jeans dangling from a few partially open drawers. This was my sanctuary.

Wind whistled outside, and I remembered my open window. I hurried over to close it, angry with myself for being naïve enough to listen for Mom in the first place. As if she would suddenly show up after all this time to celebrate my birthday. How stupid could I be?

I climbed back onto my bed and rested my head against the pillows. The collection of Salvador Dalí prints covering my ceiling comforted me. At least Dalí would've understood how

I felt. Most of my favorite paintings of his were based on his own weird dreams. I wondered if turning the nightmare I'd just had into art would make it less troubling somehow. Maybe it was worth a shot.

A snort came from outside my door, and I started. I let out a long breath, tempted to slap myself silly. This was the third time in less than fifteen minutes that my own dog had scared the bejeezus out of me.

Another snort made my fists clench. Why was Gottfried so determined to make sure I couldn't relax? I stormed to the door and wrenched it open. The little dog barely looked at me, his long ears swaying as he sniffed furiously at that same spot—right where I'd seen the man.

I fought back a shudder. "Stop it, Gotty! You're freaking me out!" He ignored me, his nose pressed into the floor so hard the tip jutted out from the edge of his snout. Scowling, I grabbed him up before he wore his way through the laminate. "Why aren't you in Dad's room anyway?"

Dad had adopted Gottfried right after Mom left, and the two hardly ever slept separately. But I was far too creeped out to sleep now—especially with Gottfried's obsession with that spot on the floor—and having the dog nearby would make me feel better. They were going to have to manage without each other tonight.

The little beagle tried to wriggle free as I carried him into my room, but I held him firmly against my chest. If I let him go, he'd just spend all night snorting in the hallway, and I'd never get any sleep. I turned to shut the door with my hip. Before I could stop them, my eyes found the place on the floor where

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Gottfried had been sniffing. It really was the exact spot where I'd seen the man standing.

It's just a coincidence. Ignoring the twinge of doubt in my gut, I dropped my gaze and forced myself to close the door.

PARANOIA

WAKING UP THE NEXT MORNING WAS TORTURE. I dragged myself to the bathroom feeling like I'd been thrown against a brick wall. Repeatedly.
By the Hulk.

One glance in the mirror told me I looked like it, too. My usually bright crystal-gray eyes seemed dull and droopy, the purple half-moons beneath them like weights dragging down my entire face. The tangled mess of black hair on my head looked like an animal had nested among the blue lowlights. Even my lips were pale and shriveled.

Good grief. A few hours of missed sleep and I could make small children cry with just a look. But it wasn't like I could drift back into peaceful dreams last night with all the horrible images from my nightmare still seared into my mind. I'd been

too freaked out to even think about closing my eyes. It didn't help that Gottfried had spent almost half an hour sniffing along my door before settling down.

Even the dog knows it wasn't a dream. The thought showed up uninvited. In the light of the morning, it should've been easier to relax and forget the whole thing. It wasn't real—it couldn't have been. So why wouldn't the nagging feeling go away?

My younger sister Oxanna bounded into the bathroom, pulling me out of my speculation. I recoiled at the sight of her shimmery pink blouse and matching tiara-shaped earrings. All the glitter was painful to look at so early in the morning.

She took her place in front of the right-hand sink and checked her reflection before casting her gaze at mine. "Happy birth..." Her voice trailed off as we made eye contact through the mirror. She quirked a nostril. "Dang, Lali. Rough night?"

I shot her a dirty look. She had no idea.

"Just saying." She readjusted the bobby pins holding her dark wavy hair away from her face and started applying more unnecessary powder to her nose.

We were only a year and a half apart, but we looked much more alike when she wasn't wearing so much makeup. Both of us had raven hair, slender frames, our father's deep olive skin, and our mother's crystal gray eyes—all features we shared with our other three siblings. Oxanna and I were both tall, and we had heart-shaped faces, though my nose was bigger and more pronounced than her dainty one. Mom always joked that I'd have an easier time sniffing out the truth. After last night, I kind of wished that were true.

Oxanna snapped her makeup compact shut, and I chewed

the inside of my lip. I was tempted to ask her if I could borrow it, just to avoid more harsh reactions to my haggard appearance. But I'd never used foundation before, and I was too tired to figure out how to apply it now. Everyone would just have to deal with zombie-Lali today, compliments of The Nightmare from Hell.

It was more than a nightmare.

My jaw tensed. What was wrong with me? I couldn't let myself get carried away with this crazy idea. Quickly turning on the faucet, I splashed my face with cold water. The shock of the icy liquid made me gasp and snapped me back to reality.

That was more like it.

I silently scolded myself as I finished washing my face. This silly hang-up over last night had to stop. I pulled a towel off the rack and exhaled my frustration into the plush fabric.

"Happy birthday, Lali!"

I peeked around the towel. Salaxia stood in the doorway, beaming. Our baby sister always looked like a kid in a candy store at any mention of birthdays. Her pint-sized body and Dora the Explorer haircut made her look like she belonged in the second grade instead of the fourth. The oversized hand-me-down blouse she wore wasn't helping her case.

"Thanks, Sal." I forced a smile.

"Are you guys almost done?" she asked.

"Almost." I hung up the towel and reached for my plastic cup of eyeliner pencils—the only makeup I bothered with. I chose my favorite aqua liner and traced along my lashes in thick strokes.

"What do you need, Sal?" Oxanna asked, keeping her eyes

forward as she fluffed her hair. “To straighten your bib?”

“I’m not a baby,” Salaxia whined. “I’m almost double digits.”

Oxanna and I shared a look. Salaxia’s newest claim to near-adulthood was that she was going to be ten in a few months. Then her age would have two digits just like the rest of ours.

“Just use the boys’ bathroom,” Oxanna said.

“No way! It’s gross in there.”

Oxanna shrugged. “Then you’re going to have to wait.”

“That’s not fair.”

“Okay,” I jumped in. “I’m done. Sheesh, you two.” I grabbed my brush and stepped away from the sink. “It’s all yours, Sal.”

Salaxia muttered her thanks as I moved past her and padded to my room, fighting through the tangles in my hair as I went. It only took me a minute to throw on a black sweater, jeans, and my black and white checkered Converse shoes. With one last look in the mirror above my dresser, I decided I was presentable and headed downstairs to the kitchen.

My twelve-year-old twin brothers, Dixon and Ulyxses, were already sitting at the wooden table in the corner. Their thin, identical faces were dominated by the dark bushy brows they’d inherited from Dad, and they would have been nearly impossible to tell apart if Dixon hadn’t grown out his hair to look like he was in a boy band. Only friends and family knew the easy tell: Dixon was left-handed, while Ulyxses was right-handed. Apparently, it was a mirror twin thing.

Gottfried poked his head out from under the table when I walked in, but neither of my brothers noticed. Dixon was busy racing to finish his homework, and Ulyxses sat frowning at an anagram puzzle on Dad’s iPad between bites of cereal. Dad al-

most never used the tablet. He was old-school, and he probably wouldn't even have known what a tablet was if he hadn't won it in some work raffle. He was James Madison University's Stratigraphy and Paleontology Professor, which was especially fitting considering his behind-the-times stance on technology. All of us were stuck with ancient flip phones because our father insisted smartphones were making everyone dumber.

"Happy birthday, Lalisaurus," Dad said. He leaned against the counter and smiled weakly over his coffee mug.

An ache of longing swelled inside me. For years, I'd groaned in response to his cheesy dinosaur nicknames. He'd dubbed the five of us Lalisaurus, Oxydactyl, D-Rex, Ulyxa Raptor, and Salceratops. The names were still embarrassingly corny, but I missed his silly side now. Seeing him work so hard to look cheery was like a knife in the heart. His square-framed glasses took up a good part of his face, but they couldn't hide the sadness in his red-rimmed eyes.

I returned his smile as convincingly as I could. "Thanks."

My brothers' heads popped up at the same time. "Happy birthday," they said in unison.

I snorted. "Thanks, guys."

"What are you gonna do, Dad?" Dixon asked with a grin. "Lali's gonna be behind the wheel soon." He slapped his cheeks in mock horror, and the loose black sleeves of his Hollywood Undead shirt slid down his forearms.

"Don't remind me." Dad took another sip of coffee as if it would ease the pain. "That thought will keep me up at night."

I suppressed a grimace. I still felt bad about what I'd put him through last night, but I did my best to play along. "Har har,"

I said, heading to the walk-in pantry. I mussed Dixon's hair along the way.

He shoved my hand aside and ducked out of reach. "Hey, don't touch the 'do."

"Just be glad I don't *cut* the 'do," I shot back. We all knew he needed it. The waves along his jaw flipped up as if his baseball helmet had left a permanent indentation. Mom never would've allowed it to get so long, but Dad didn't press the issue. I took it upon myself to do it for him.

I heard Ulyxes snicker as I rounded the corner and pushed on the pantry door. Before it swung open, a thud came from the other side. I jumped back, and Gottfried was at my feet in seconds, barking like a maniac. My mind flew to the man with the scar. Was he hiding in the pantry? Had he been in there all night? I held my breath to listen, but all I could hear was the thump of my heart blending with Gottfried's growls.

"Give it a rest, Gott," Dad said. "Did you drop something, *Lalisaurus?*"

"No," I croaked. "S-someone—" I swallowed, realizing the absurdity of what I was about to say. No one was hiding in our pantry. No one had been in the hallway last night. It was just my imagination. I couldn't keep getting myself worked up over it. I looked down at our beagle trying to shove his nose into the gap between the bottom of the door and the tile floor. He certainly wasn't helping my sanity. "You're going to make me crazy, dog," I muttered.

"What was that?" Dad called.

I straightened up. "Never mind." Flexing my fingers twice, I forced myself to push open the pantry just to prove there was

no one in there. Gottfried wormed his way past me as I gripped at the air in search of the pull string to turn on the light. I found it and tugged, ready to figure out what had fallen and put my mind at ease.

A small bag of flour lay on the floor, white powder spilling from its ripped corner. I let my hand drop to my side. *There's your big scary intruder.* Shaking my head at myself, I scanned the rest of the pantry and found the empty space on the second shelf where the flour must've been.

Wait.

I frowned and looked at the bag again. It was halfway across the room, as if it had been knocked off the shelf with force. My shoulders drew back. Someone *had* been in here. But I'd opened the door right after hearing the noise. No one could get away that fast.

The man with the scar got away that fast last night. I pressed my hand onto the wall to steady myself. What was going on?

"Are there any more Frosted Mini-Wheats?" Oxanna's voice came from behind me, and I nearly jumped out of my skin.

I whirled around as she stepped into the pantry. "Oxie, you have to see this!"

She held up her palms. "Whoa. Easy, killer."

Killer. The word set my mind ablaze. The scene I'd witnessed last night raged behind my eyes like wildfire. Was there a killer creeping around our house?

"What's wrong with you?" Oxanna asked.

I jabbed a finger toward where Gottfried was investigating the mess on the floor. "That."

"Flour?"

“Flour that flew all the way over there!”

“Okay...” The look on her face added, *you’re totally nuts.*

Ulyxes poked his head into the doorway. “Oxie, I told you, you can have the rest of my Mini-Wheats. I’m full.”

“Ew. I don’t want your soggy leftover cereal. That’s gross.”

“It’s either that or you don’t get any. Besides, I don’t want to waste it. Studies show you can’t digest—”

“Guys!” I shouted. “Shut up for a minute. Lyx, look at this.”

“What’s going on back here?” Dad appeared in the doorway behind my brother and sister. “I can hear you arguing.”

Oxanna rolled her eyes. “Lali’s lost it.”

“You can’t tell me that’s not weird.” I threw my hand toward the flour again. “Look how far that bag is from the shelf. Someone must’ve hit it, right?”

The three of them exchanged skeptical glances.

“Someone like who?” Oxanna challenged. “You were the only one in here. Unless Gottfried has magical powers.”

Ulyxes grinned. “The Bewitching Beagle.”

“This isn’t funny!”

“Okay, just calm down,” said Dad. “Obviously, someone didn’t put the flour all the way back on the shelf. The dog probably pushed the bag across the floor when he was sniffing around in here.”

Oxanna clapped twice. “Mystery solved. Thanks, Sherlock.” She patted Dad on the back and reached around me to get a box of granola bars. “Way to start off your birthday with a bang, Patty Paranoia.” She trotted out to the kitchen, and I scowled after her.

I knew I wasn’t really mad at my sister; I was annoyed with

myself for being so on edge that I hadn't even considered the most obvious explanation. Gottfried could've easily pushed the flour away from where it landed while I fumbled with the light string.

Dad put a hand on Ulysses' shoulder. "Why don't you go make sure D-Rex finishes up that homework?"

"Oh. Uh, *sure*." My brother winked so conspicuously he might as well have announced it with a megaphone. Then he ducked out of the pantry and left me to be interrogated.

Traitor.

"Lali." Dad stepped toward me and let the door swing closed behind him. "You're starting to worry me. I know—"

Gottfried's piercing howl cut him off. The next second, a familiar beep beckoned to me from the driveway. *Just in time.* It was Nelson, our neighbor and one of my best friends. He'd been kind enough to drive me to school ever since he got his license last year, and today, he was the perfect excuse to dodge this conversation.

"Sorry, Dad. I have to go. Can we talk later?"

He sighed and hit the pantry door so the dog could scamper out into the kitchen. "Fine. But don't think I'll forget."

"I know." I hesitated, glancing at the pile of flour.

"I'll clean it up. You just get to school."

"Thanks." I slipped past him and rushed upstairs to my room. Grabbing my white puffy coat and doodle-covered backpack off the bed, I started toward the hallway.

Something made me stop. I had the distinct feeling someone was watching me. Looking over my shoulder, I searched the room until my gaze landed on the closet. For a second, I

was sure someone was in there.

Nelson beeped the horn again, startling me out of yet another bout of paranoia. Ugh. I needed to get a grip. At this rate, I was going to have gray hair before I hit seventeen.

I stepped out of my room at the same time Salaxia bounded out of hers, and we both headed to the kitchen. She joined everyone else at the table as I made my way to the front door.

“Bye. Love you guys,” I said.

“Wait,” Salaxia cried. “Are we doing cake tonight?”

Everyone seemed to tense at once. Mom had worked from home as a pastry chef, and she’d always insisted on making our cakes from scratch. This was the first birthday she wouldn’t be here to do it.

“Sal!” Oxanna snapped. “You promised not to talk about Mom today.”

“I didn’t. I just asked if we’re having cake.”

“That’s the same thing.”

“Nuh-uh!”

“That’s enough, you two.” Dad pinched the bridge of his nose. “I’ll stop at the store on my way home and pick up a cake.”

Salaxia’s face lit up. “Sweet!”

“Literally.” Ulyxses waggled his unruly brows and stretched his mouth into a flat, toothless smile. “And speaking of cake, betcha didn’t know the ancient Greeks made birthday cakes as an offering to the moon goddess Artemis, huh?”

Oxanna dropped her forehead into her palm. “Seriously, Lyx? Where do you even get these stupid random facts from?”

“I actually read.”

“Okay,” I said. “I’m leaving. Bye, you guys.” I ducked outside

and closed the door without waiting for their responses.

Chilly air stung my nostrils and blew my hair across my face. Most of the remnants of last week's snowstorm had melted, but there were still a few patches of white lingering under some of the bigger trees in our yard. The sky was a soft blue-gray, gentle but not quite promising a pleasant day.

Nelson sat in his Chevy pickup truck across the driveway, his cowlick-ridden brown hair bobbing as he played the air drums. The corner of my mouth turned up at the sight. His cheerful energy was exactly what I needed. Gravel crunched under my feet as I hurried over and grabbed the passenger door's icy handle.

A grin stretched across Nelson's face, and he reached to turn down the heavy metal on the radio. "Happy birthday, Lollipop." Despite the cold, he wore khaki shorts and one of his trademark tie-dye t-shirts. Typical. In all the years I'd known him, I'd only seen him wear pants twice: once for his cousin's wedding and once when his mom threatened his life if he didn't put on jeans and long johns during the blizzard of 2011.

"Thanks." Tossing my bag into the middle seat, I climbed into the truck. I'd barely gotten my seatbelt fastened when I heard Nelson's sharp inhale.

"Hey," he said softly. "You okay?"

"I'm fine." *I wish.* "Just tired." *And trying to convince myself there isn't a murderer sneaking around my house.*

"You look...worried." That was Nelson-speak for *you look like crap*. Maybe I should've borrowed Oxanna's makeup after all. Not that it would've mattered in this case. Nelson and I had known each other since preschool. He could read me like

a book.

Still, I didn't want to get into last night's trauma. I deferred to another issue instead. "I just have that test in algebra today." Technically that was true.

"And you're worried?"

I nodded. It felt less like lying if I didn't speak.

Nelson laughed. "Come on. You've never gotten less than an A on anything in your life. Why would this be any different?"

"Forget it. I'll try to pep it up, okay?" I pulled my face into an exaggerated toothy smile.

"Yikes! Go back to the first one."

"Shut up." I gave him a playful shove.

Chuckling, he put the truck in reverse. "Let's just get outta here before you traumatize anybody else with that demented donkey grin."

In no time, we were on the highway, passing pasture after pasture. I couldn't help but wonder for the billionth time why my parents chose to move to Browshire—or as I liked to call it, Cowshire. It had to be the smallest town in Virginia, maybe even the world. Mom and Dad had met in San Francisco, and though I didn't remember it, I'd lived there until I was two. Then for some unfathomable reason, they chose to move here, a town that boasted a whopping population of seven hundred and fifty-one and celebrated an official Drive Your Tractor To School Day.

I would never understand.

I leaned my head against the cool glass of the window and closed my eyes. It was only a matter of seconds before my thoughts drifted to the man with the scar. I wanted to believe

he was just a figment of my imagination, but I could still see every detail of his face perfectly.

Nelson slammed on the brakes, and my stomach bottomed out. I felt myself fly forward, but my eyes refused to open. A loud buzz broke through the sound of screeching tires.

No! My body stiffened against the pressure of the seatbelt. *No! Not this again!* I willed the sound away, but it only increased in volume until it drowned out my silent pleas.

It stopped abruptly. I heard a woman's voice yell, "Don't trap me here!"

I didn't have time to react. My back hit something soft but solid, and my eyes shot open. I stared wide-eyed out the windshield of Nelson's truck, my lungs spasming with each breath. We were at a stop in the middle of the road. Where did that voice come from? It sounded just like the red-haired woman from my dream.

"It's okay," Nelson said. "I didn't hit that cat."

Cat? I felt my lip quiver. I had no idea what he was talking about. What was happening to me?

"The dang cat's fine, Lollipop. If you're worried about anything, it should be my brake pads. *They'll* never be the same." He paused. "Hey, what's the matter?"

"I-I—" Swallowing hard, I forced out the only thing I knew to be true. "I don't know."

3 DISORDER

NELSON DROPPED HIS HAND FROM THE STEERING wheel, his round cinnamon-colored eyes laden with concern. “What d’you mean you don’t know?”

“I mean something weird is going on!” I said, panting. But what? Was I hallucinating? Hearing voices? All I knew for sure was I definitely hadn’t been dreaming that time.

“You’re kinda scaring me, Lollipop.”

I didn’t answer. I was scaring myself. I knew the woman’s voice couldn’t have been real, but I was certain I’d heard it.

Someone honked a horn behind us, and Nelson and I both jumped in our seats. Nelson huffed and floored the gas pedal, but he kept looking at me out of the corner of his eye. “Okay, what gives? You’re white as a sheet.”

How was I supposed to respond when I didn’t even know

what to think myself? There had to be a logical explanation for what I'd just heard, but I was completely at a loss. Was it possible to have post-traumatic stress from a nightmare?

We came to a stop sign with flashing red lights, and Nelson twisted in his seat to face me. "Out with it."

"I just..." I let my voice trail off. Nelson was looking at me as if I were a fragile glass doll—the same way he'd looked at me right after Mom left. I couldn't tell him about the man with the scar or the woman's voice in my head. He'd already spent enough time worrying about my stability. "I had this weird... *dream*." The word felt funny in my mouth. It felt like a lie.

Nelson glanced between the road and me as he eased the truck forward. "Well, what was this dream about?"

"Never mind." I let my head fall back onto the seat. I shouldn't have said anything. This was confusing enough without Nelson demanding answers.

He smashed his lips together, and I knew what he was thinking. He always made that face before he brought up my mother. "Did it have anything to do with—"

"Not everything is about my mom," I snapped before he could get the words out. "Geez, you took one psychology class, and you think you're frickin' Freud."

"I'm just saying I can see how it would hit you harder around your birthday, you know? And stress can make you have nightmares, so it stands to reason."

"Whatever. Forget I said anything." I glared out my window, but I didn't focus on any details as we zipped past the jumble of fields and trees. I just wanted to avoid looking at my annoying let's-analyze-your-feelings-about-your-mother-every-

five-minutes friend. I was going to have to keep whatever was going on with me to myself. Nelson wasn't helping, and Dad had already been through enough. I would just have to sort this out on my own.

Maybe Nelson was right. Maybe Mom's absence had something to do with it. If stress caused nightmares, maybe it caused hallucinations and imagined voices, too. I'd have to do some research later to figure it all out.

Neither of us spoke for the rest of the ride. We turned into the school parking lot, and I pulled my bag into my lap as soon as Nelson cut the engine.

He caught my arm before I could open the door. "Hey, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you."

I sighed. I could tell he meant it, and fighting with him wasn't going to help anything. "It's okay. Sorry I bit your head off about it."

"Don't sweat it." He gave my arm a squeeze before letting go. "But before we head inside, I want to give you something." Reaching across me to open the glove compartment, he pulled out a small black box with a red bow on top.

"Nelson! We said no presents until we both have jobs."

"Yeah, I know." He handed me the box anyway. "But I made an exception. Sixteen is special."

I stared at the gift in awe. I was sure Nelson made the *exception* because he knew I'd have a hard time without Mom today. I felt like an even bigger jerk for blowing up at him. "Thank you," I whispered.

"You didn't even open it."

"Oh, right." I lifted the lid. Inside were two silver clock-

shaped earrings warped to look like they were melting.

"They're like the clocks in that painting you love," he said.

"*The Persistence of Memory.*" I smiled my first real smile all morning. "I love them. Thank you so much." I leaned over to give him a hug with the box still in my hand.

"You're welcome." He moved his hand up and down my back once and pulled away. "You don't have to put them in right now or anything; I just wanted you to have them."

"I'm totally putting them in now," I said, already pulling down the passenger mirror. It was the least I could do after I'd yelled at him. I slipped the hooks into my ears and turned to face my friend. "How's that?"

"Beauteous maximus." The tips of his ears turned pink. "Okay, let's get going. I know how you get when you're late."

I feigned offense as I flipped the mirror back up. "There's nothing wrong with punctuality."

We climbed out of the truck and walked side by side toward the one-story brick building with the statue of a plow horse in front. Though it was called Browshire High, technically the student body was a combination of residents from Browshire and the four neighboring towns. Even with that boost, my graduating class wouldn't break a hundred.

The wind picked up, and I shivered into my coat. Powerful gusts of bitter air tore through my hair and chilled my face. It felt like the wind was fighting to keep me from the school. For some reason, it made me think of the way the stool repelled my hands. That time my shiver wasn't from the cold.

It was a dream! I wanted to shout at myself. I had to stop letting it get to me.

After a quick stop at our lockers, Nelson and I parted ways. I barreled up the stairs and down the hall, as if by speed-walking I could outrun the images from my nightmare and the nagging voice in my mind that insisted it was real. Stress could have been the explanation for everything, but deep down I wasn't buying it. I just couldn't figure out why.

I was so caught up in my thoughts that I ran right into Dr. Jones, my five-foot-nothing history teacher.

"Ack!" He stumbled backward, and I mentally chided myself for not paying attention to where I was going. Dr. Jones was the one teacher at this school who hated me—all because I'd accidentally called him *Mr. Jones* on the first day of class.

"Sorry!" I gasped.

He grimaced and readjusted the collar of his pressed shirt around his skinny neck. "Anxious to get to class today, Miss Yavari? Or do you just want me dead?"

"Sorry," I muttered again, shifting my weight. I stepped out of the way so he could continue out the door.

"Oh, after you. I don't want to get flattened on my way to the bathroom. *Again.*"

I mumbled yet another apology and scuttled past him. Making my way to the last row of desks, I dropped my bag onto the floor and half-sat, half-fell into my assigned seat. I couldn't wait for this day to be over. So far, sweet sixteen sucked.

"Happy birthday, Lali!" My bubbly best friend, Paisley, stood in the doorway with her hands in the air like someone had scored a touchdown. Her hair fell in golden spirals that danced along her shoulders as she sashayed toward me with outstretched arms.

A handful of our classmates—the ones who didn't have in headphones—perked up and shouted happy birthdays my way. I quickly thanked everyone and turned back to Paisley just in time to brace myself for her full-force hug. A fog of perfume smacked me in the face, all flowers and artificial vanilla. I held my breath until she pulled away and grinned at me.

One glimpse of my face up close wiped away her smile. “Oh, hon, what *happened?*” Her southern drawl exaggerated each word. “Is everythin’ okay?”

“Everything is fine,” I grumbled. How many people were going to ask me that stupid question? Apparently I needed a sign that read *Please Don't Comment On My Crappy Appearance Today*. “It was just a late night.” A late night that I was *not* going into detail about again.

“Studyin’?” She giggled. “Such a nerd. But listen, durin’ lunch I can help you cover up the bags under your eyes.”

“No thanks.” I'd made the mistake of being Paisley's personal Barbie doll once. I'd since sworn I would never let her near my face with makeup or an eyelash curler ever again.

“I'm bein' serious! I read an article 'bout usin' red concealer instead of skin-toned. Red cancels out the purple. See how the skin under my eyes looks bright and healthy?” She put on her best toothpaste-commercial smile. “Yours can, too.”

Mercifully, the bell rang and saved me from more makeup tips. Paisley and I took our seats as Dr. Jones walked back into the classroom.

The day's lecture was on revolutionary farming tools. Within minutes, most of my classmates were fiddling with their phones under their desks. Given that I was the only one with-

out a smartphone, I resorted to doodling in the margins of my notebook. Mindless scribbles became dripping clocks like the ones hanging in my ears. Like the ones Dalí had dreamt about and put into *The Persistence of Memory*. Why couldn't my dreams involve innocent things like clocks? Why was I stuck with homicidal maniacs and weird symbols?

Remembering my speculation from the previous night, I decided to try creating my own dream-inspired art. Maybe once I had the images from my nightmare down on paper, my brain would let them go. I started with the strange curved X. Even in doodle form it was creepy. I added a mouth and a finger pulling down the bottom lip. Even creepier.

A ball of paper landed in the middle of my desk, and I instinctively turned to Paisley. Her eyebrows formed a hard line as she jutted her chin toward my notebook. Her expression asked, *what the heck are you drawing?*

I flipped the page over and shrugged dismissively. There was no way I was going to tell her the story behind it. I busied myself with taking down the notes Dr. Jones was scribbling across the blackboard. His tiny handwriting didn't quite reach the top of the board, and I had to squint to read it.

A minute later, Paisley snickered beside me, and I gave her a questioning look of my own. She glanced up from her phone, her hazel eyes flitting to Dr. Jones to make sure he still had his back turned. Then she quickly shoved the phone into my hand. On the screen was an image of a rabbit with a stunned expression. The caption read, *When she looks nothing like her profile picture.*

I rolled my eyes. I wasn't in the mood for memes. I started

to pass the phone back to my friend, but I stopped mid-reach. Maybe I could do a little research while I had it. Positioning the phone under my desk, I pulled up a web browser.

Paisley tapped me, but I held up my index finger. Her bunny memes could wait. I made sure Dr. Jones was still distracted before typing *causes of hallucinations* into the search bar. A partial blurb appeared at the top of the screen.

Mental illness is the most common cause of hallucinations, apart from drug abuse. Schizophrenia and dementia are most frequently reported as causes.

I couldn't resist touching the link and scanning the page. My heart rate sped up when I got to the section on schizophrenia.

Schizophrenia is a serious psychological disorder that makes it difficult for the sufferer to distinguish between what is real and what is not. The most common symptoms include hallucinations, delusions, and paranoia.

That sounds familiar. All of a sudden it was hard to breathe. I slid down in my seat and read on.

Schizophrenia affects men and women equally in all ethnic groups. Teens can also develop schizophrenia. In rare cases, children have the illness, too. Symptoms usually start between the ages of 16 and 30.

Sweat beaded along my upper lip. I just made the age range.

Studies suggest that genetics can create a predisposition to the disorder, with environmental factors triggering its onset. More and more research points to high levels of stress from several factors, including prenatal exposure to a viral infection, physical or sexual abuse in childhood, and early parental loss or separation.

Parental loss or separation. The words seemed to jump off the screen and wrap around my throat.

“Miss Yavari!”

My knees bumped the bottom of my desk. I looked up to see Dr. Jones’ angry Chihuahua face glowering at me from across the room. “Yes?” I squeaked.

“Care to answer the question?”

“Um...” What had he just been saying? I squinted at the scribbles across the board. *Cyrus McCormick’s Reaper* was the last thing he’d written, but it didn’t ring any bells.

“We’re waiting.” Dr. Jones narrowed his beady eyes, and I heard my classmates shifting in their seats.

“Uh, could you rephrase the question?” I hedged.

A few of my classmates snickered, and Dr. Jones’ scowl deepened. “I thought ‘What was the name of his competitor?’ was a straightforward thing to ask.” He turned up his nose and pointed to the biggest suck-up of all time, Krista Dean. “Miss Dean? Did the question make sense to you?”

“Of course.” She gave me a condescending look over her designer glasses. “McCormick’s main competitor was Hussey.”

“You’re a hussy,” Paisley said under her breath.

The whole class erupted into laughter.

XODUS

Dr. Jones puffed out his miniature chest. “Was that supposed to be *funny*, Miss Yavari?”

My mouth hung open. “I didn’t—”

“Why don’t you go laugh about it in Principal Rockbridge’s office?”

A collective *ooh* went around the room. I had to bite down on my lip to stop myself from saying anything that would make it worse. Shoving Paisley’s phone into my backpack, I snatched my notebook off my desk and stormed out of the classroom. I didn’t even look at Paisley on my way out. She’d have to get her phone back later. I had bigger things to worry about, like how I probably had schizophrenia. Not to mention, Dad was going to pop a blood vessel when he found out I’d been sent to the principal’s office.

So much for not stressing him out.

The rubber soles of my shoes squeaked along the linoleum in the hall. I tried to tell myself I was overreacting. The website I’d read was just the first result that popped up in my search. It wasn’t an actual diagnosis. I’d do more research later and find a better explanation. Right now I had to figure out how to get out of a detention slip.

I plodded into the stairwell straining to think of an excuse for what had just happened in class. Even though it was Paisley who’d offended Dr. Jones, I couldn’t throw her under the bus. Especially not after all the times she’d been there to cover for me when I needed her. It was embarrassing to admit how often she’d raced to my house during her study hall to get assignments I’d forgotten in the first few weeks after Mom left. I’d bite the bullet this time, detention or no.

When I stopped outside the door to the office, I was still at a loss for what I was going to tell Principal Rockbridge. If she gave me detention, at least Dad would be upset about something normal instead of worrying about my psychosis. I tried to take comfort in that thought as I heaved the office door open.

It bounced back at me with a thud, making me drop my notebook.

“Whoa,” a voice called from the other side.

“Sorry!” I said. Geez, how many people was I going to plow into today? I needed a padded cell.

For more reasons than one.

A boy poked his head around the edge of the door, and my breath caught in my throat. Ruffled black hair and heavy brows framed a chiseled face that clearly wasn't from around here. His eyes stood out against his tawny skin and made me think of emeralds in the sand.

“Um, hi,” I managed. “Sorry about that. I didn't see you.”

“Yeah, sure.” He stepped into the hallway and crossed his arms over his chest. “Just admit you don't like newcomers.”

My brain went blank as I blinked up at him. He was at least six-foot-four, with wide shoulders and a muscular build—definitely not someone I wanted to make angry.

“Kidding.” He laughed, a deep sound, but light somehow. “I'm Kai.”

I reached out to shake his hand, doing my best to look unfazed. “Lali.”

“Pretty name. Suits you.” The side of his mouth curled up, and I let my eyes linger on the hint of stubble above his sculpted lips.

I pulled my hand away and ran it along the sleeve of my sweater. “Um, thanks.” I noticed Kai’s fitted charcoal t-shirt was paired with what appeared to be board shorts. Another summer-clothes-in-the-middle-of-winter guy. Nelson would be thrilled.

“I believe this”—Kai bent down to grab my notebook off the floor—“is yours.” His eyes doubled in size, and I followed them to my drawing of the mouth with the symbol inside the lip.

Crap. My hand shot out to grab the notebook from him. “Yeah. Thanks.” I hugged the questionable doodle against my chest. I shuddered to think how disturbing it must’ve looked to a normal person whose brain didn’t invent murderers and women with creepy tattoos.

“Do you draw much?” he asked.

I leaned back on my heels. Something in his expression had shifted. It was unsettling, like he was trying to figure out my darkest secret. *He’s probably trying to figure out why you have such a freakish drawing in the margin of your notebook.*

Before I could respond, Principal Rockbridge cleared her throat behind Kai. Her silver-streaked bun wobbled as she tilted her head and gave me the evil eye over his shoulder. “Good morning, Lali,” she said. Her eyebrows were raised so high it seemed like they might make it all the way up to her widow’s peak. “Were you planning to come in?”

“Um, yeah.” I couldn’t stop myself from looking up at Kai. Was it just me, or did he have an I-know-something-you-don’t look on his face?

“I’ll get out of your way,” he said. “It was nice to meet you.”

I nodded, uneasy. “You, too.”

“See ya.” He walked backward a few paces and spun around to head down the hall.

I stared after him, unsure what to make of our brief interaction. There was something strange about him.

Well, he could say the same about you.

Principal Rockbridge cleared her throat again, the shoulder pads in her suit jacket shifting as she put her hands on her hips.

“I’ll be right in,” I said quickly. “I just need a drink of water.”

“Make it fast.”

I moved toward the water fountain with my eyes still on Kai. He pushed through the main doors, and through the long windows on either side of the entrance, I saw him stop next to the benches outside. A man in a long navy peacoat stood up next to him. Surprisingly, the man was even taller than Kai.

The two spoke, and the man glanced over his shoulder in my direction. Though wide sunglasses covered the top half of his face, I caught a glimpse of his left cheek. It was marred with a terrifyingly familiar scar.

4 STORIES

MY INSIDES TURNED TO ICE. THE HALL FELL away, and all I could see was the man with the scar standing right outside the window. *He's real!* The thought repeated over and over in my mind, my heart thumping louder with each refrain. He was real; he'd really been in my hallway last night, and now he was at my school.

Questions swirled around me like a cyclone, their force enough to make me sway on my feet. He was following me—that much I knew. But why? Did he know what was happening to me? Did he know I'd seen him attack that woman last night? He must've hired Kai to pose as a student and keep tabs on me. Why else would he have glanced back in my direction while they were talking?

I could feel my pulse in my eardrums as I watched them

start down the walkway. They turned around the side of the building, and I couldn't decide if I wanted to chase after them or run as far away as I could. But running wouldn't help. The man already knew where I lived. The memory of his savage scowl in the moonlight flashed behind my eyes.

"Lali." Principal Rockbridge's voice made me jolt.

Then it happened—the buzzing filled my head. My body tensed and convulsed, quickly slipping out of my control. Blackness consumed the hall around me so fast I didn't even have time to cry out before it was gone.

Everything stayed dark, even after the vibrating roar inside my skull died down. I heard the low whistle of the wind and a car revving in the distance. Was I outside? I sensed a shift in light, as if a cloud had passed over the sun, but I couldn't feel the frigid February air. My vision was still too blurry to make out my surroundings, but I blinked and squinted until the haze over my eyes cleared.

I realized with a start that I was standing at the side of the school. Its long brick wall formed a barricade to my right, and a tall chain link fence blocked off the woods to my left. Just in front of me was the slush-covered slope leading down to the entrance, but the entire width of the path was blocked by the two massive forms moving toward me—Kai and the man with the scar.

I didn't have time to scream. I spun around and tore up the hill. A burst of wind rattled the fence as I ducked around the corner of the building. I caught sight of the gate and blanched. An enormous padlock hung from the latch.

"No!" My eyes shot to the school's back door, but there was

no knob to open it from the outside. There were no windows along the back wall. I was trapped.

That man and Kai would catch up to me in a matter of seconds. How was I going to get away from them? I whipped around, my brain grasping for possibilities. If I charged straight ahead, maybe I could knock one of them off balance.

They stepped around the corner, and I sprang into action. I bolted forward, seeing only a blur of the man's navy coat and a smudge of Kai's tan skin. My focus was on the space between them. It was narrow. Too narrow. I dipped my shoulder to brace for the impact.

But there was no painful slam. I bounced back as if I had jumped into a giant exercise ball. My body hit the ground twice before landing spread-eagled right where I'd started. Gasping, I shoved onto my elbows.

What the—

"You don't even know for sure that she can travel." The man's gravelly voice made me scramble backward in a panic. They were still walking toward me.

Kai's emerald eyes flashed with urgency but didn't so much as flick in my direction. "You didn't see that drawing. She has to know something. She could be exactly what we need."

I stayed on the ground, too stunned to move. My fear morphed into confusion. They were only a couple feet away now, speaking as if they had no idea I was here—as if it were a regular conversation. The man and the red-haired woman hadn't noticed I was standing next to them last night, either. Did that mean these two couldn't see me right now?

"Need?" The man barked out a laugh, and the jagged scar

along his cheek bunched into a warped zigzag. “We need her like a hole in the head. She’ll only complicate things.”

Something told me the *she* they were referring to was me.

They stopped inches away from me, and Kai looked over his shoulder. At the same time, the man pushed up one of his coat sleeves. Without a word, Kai grabbed the man’s exposed forearm and closed his eyes.

Then they both vanished from sight.

I let out a strangled cry. This couldn’t be happening. I forced myself to my feet, but the world swayed so much I nearly fell to the ground again. My arms and legs tingled as gravity increased its hold on me. Somewhere in the distance, Principal Rockbridge called my name.

And everything went black.



When I woke, Principal Rockbridge’s face was hovering inches from my own. “Can you hear me?” Her voice was tight, her sharp features tense.

I responded with a moan. My head throbbed like someone was trying to break out of my skull. The strong smell of rubbing alcohol wasn’t helping. Paper crinkled beneath me as I tried to push myself up from my inclined position.

A chubby arm flew out to stop me. “Don’t sit up too fast.” I knew that singsong tone. *Nurse Grimer*.

Principal Rockbridge backed up, revealing the familiar beige walls of the school nurse’s office. They were covered in posters featuring health tips and colorful body diagrams.

“Easy now,” Nurse Grimer said. She put her hand on my back and eased me forward slowly. “You took quite a spill.”

I rubbed my temples in a weak attempt to push away the throbbing. “What happened?”

“You fainted.”

“What?” I found the nurse’s amber eyes, the only pops of color against her pale skin and white hair. “Fainted?” I didn’t remember fainting. I remembered being behind the school and seeing the man with the scar and Kai...disappear?

No, that couldn’t be right.

“You just tensed up,” Principal Rockbridge said. She held up her hands, her mouth hanging open like she couldn’t think of the words she wanted. “I thought you were having a seizure. I ran over to see if you were okay, and the next thing I knew, you collapsed. It’s a miracle I caught you before you slammed your head into the floor.”

“The *floor*? Wasn’t I outside?”

The two women shared a look, and I immediately felt stupid. Of course I hadn’t magically buzzed myself outside. It was all a hallucination. Another one. Whatever was happening to me was getting worse. This time I’d even collapsed.

Nurse Grimer touched my shoulder. “Were you feeling okay this morning?”

Not even close. “I, um, didn’t get much sleep last night.” The wind rattled the window behind me, and I jumped.

“Let me get you some juice, hon,” Nurse Grimer said. “Just in case your blood sugar’s low.”

As soon as she stepped out of the room, I looked up at the principal pleadingly. “Please don’t tell my dad about this. He’s

dealing with enough already.”

“We already called your father. He’s on his way.”

I heaved a sigh. The last thing Dad needed was to hear I was in the nurse’s office—*after* being sent to the principal’s office. He was going to flip for sure.

“Listen, Lali.” Principal Rockbridge regarded me cautiously, like she wasn’t sure if she should feel bad or dole out a punishment. “I know things have been tough at your house these last couple months, but that is not an excuse to act out in class.”

I didn’t. “I know. I’m sorry.”

“You’re a bright student. I would hate to see you jeopardize that. I’m going to let you off with a warning this time.”

“Really?” I perked up. “I mean, um, thank you.”

“If it happens again, I won’t be so understanding.”

“I know. I mean, it won’t.”

Nurse Grimer reappeared and shoved a tiny plastic cup into my hand. “Drink this.”

I smelled citrus and did my best to mask my disgust. I hated orange juice, but I didn’t want to get on Principal Rockbridge’s bad side again. Holding my breath, I choked down a sip of the sour, pulpy liquid.

“You can wait here until your dad arrives,” Nurse Grimer said. “The principal and I need to speak in private for a bit.”

I nodded and forced down more of the orange nastiness in my cup. Once the door was closed, I set the juice on the counter and sank into the crinkly paper covering the exam table.

This was all happening too fast. I knew schizophrenia was serious, but how could it progress so quickly? I’d gone from feeling fine one day to hallucinating multiple times the next. I

couldn't even trust my own eyes anymore. Everything I'd seen was as clear as what I was seeing now. How was I supposed to tell the difference between reality and my delusions?

Another gust of air shook the window, and a realization landed in my lap. *The wind!* When I thought I was outside, I'd heard it, but I hadn't felt it. I hadn't felt anything. No pain when I bounced off Kai and slammed into the ground behind the school. No cold from the frozen earth. Come to think of it, I didn't remember feeling anything during the first buzzing incident, either. That was how to tell the difference.

I pinched the tender skin of my wrist between my nails.

Ow!

Okay, this was real. At least I could be sure of that.

There was a knock on the door, and Dad poked his head into the room. "Lali?"

I sat up, doing my best to look composed. "Hi, Dad."

He rushed to my side, his pressed suit and tie a stark contrast to his disheveled wisps of hair. He must've been doing his stressed-out head rub the whole ride over. "They told me you fainted."

I sighed. I was single-handedly destroying any chance he had at a peaceful day. "I'm okay now. I promise."

"You sure?" He rested the back of his hand on my forehead.

"I'm sure. Sorry you had to leave work."

"Work will be there tomorrow." He flipped his hand over to gauge my temperature with his palm. "You feel clammy."

"Nurse Grimer thinks it was just low blood sugar. Maybe I should've taken Lyx up on his soggy Mini-Wheats offer."

Dad didn't even pretend to smile. "I made an appointment

with Dr. Caudill on my way over here just in case.”

“I don’t need to go to the doctor!” With my luck, she’d be an expert in psychological disorders and tell Dad something was seriously wrong with me. I put on my best protesting face, but he raised his thick brows in that I’m-your-father-and-you-do-what-I-say way of his.

It was settled.

Dad led the way out of the office, stopping to thank Principal Rockbridge and Nurse Grimer on our way to the hall. I let myself wallow in self-pity as I trudged behind him. Could today get any worse? It was like the universe had taken everything that could go wrong and wrapped it all into one day—the day that was supposed to be *my* day. I hated my life.

We stopped at my locker just as the bell rang. Bodies poured into the hallway, and I packed up my stuff as fast as I could. Maybe we could make it out the door before too many people saw Dad. I could do without the questioning looks right now. I kept my head down and quickly zipped up my bag.

“Hey, Mr. Yavari,” Paisley sang behind me.

I closed my eyes and exhaled through my nose. Now we were never going to get out of here. Slamming my locker shut, I turned to face my friend.

“Hi, Paisley,” Dad said. “Please, call me Yoseph.” That had to be the thousandth time he’d extended that offer, but she never actually called him by his first name.

Paisley gave me a side-eyed glance. “Why’re you goin’ home? Everythin’ okay?”

“Long story,” I mumbled. “Oh, I almost forgot.” I dug her phone out of my bag and handed it to her. “Here.”

“Thanks,” she said. “Hey, are we still on for birthday bowlin’ tomorrow night?”

Crap. I’d totally forgotten about that. We’d planned to go bowling, and then I was supposed to spend the night at Paisley’s house. There was no way I was going through with those plans now—not when I could slip into crazy delusions at any moment. But I’d have to make up an excuse later when Dad wasn’t around to ask questions or lecture me about being an unreliable friend.

“Um, yeah.” I slipped on my coat and gave her a tight smile. “Can’t wait.”

Paisley tossed a blonde curl over her shoulder. “Good. Oh, hey, before you go, I hafta show you this.” Her French manicure clacked against her phone.

“P, we have to go.”

Her eyes squished into slits, like she’d just bitten into a lemon. “Why were you lookin’ up schizophrenia?”

Oh, no. I’d forgotten to close the browser. I couldn’t stop my eyes from darting to Dad. He was frowning at me, too. Paisley and her big mouth. Was it her sacred mission to destroy my life today?

“I’m supposed to do a project.” I spewed words as they came to me. “For school—for psychology, I mean.” I cringed inwardly at my pathetic lying attempt.

“I thought we weren’t startin’ disorders ’til—”

“Paisley, we have to go.” I slung my bag over my shoulder, doing my best to communicate *shut up* to her with my eyes.

“Oh. Okay.” She was clearly still confused, but at least she took the hint. “I’ll just see you later then.”

“Yeah, later.” I started down the hall as fast as I could, and panic took control of my mind. What if Dad saw through my stupid lie? How could he not, with Paisley all but wearing a flashing sign that said I was full of crap?

Dad and I stayed quiet as we walked out of the building, hiked through the parking lot, and climbed into our gold minivan. I slouched in my seat and faced my window, hoping Dad would pick up on the fact that I didn’t want to talk.

He didn’t.

As soon as he closed his door, he asked, “What’s the matter?”
“Just tired.”

“Mmm.” He started the engine and backed out of the parking space. “And this has nothing to do with that whole schizophrenia thing?”

I blew the air out of my cheeks. I was going to kill Paisley later. Then when I pleaded insanity, it wouldn’t be that big of a stretch.

Dad gave me a knowing look. “Lali, are you self-diagnosing because I said I was worried about you this morning?”

“No!” I said it too fast, and I knew he didn’t believe me.

“See, this is why I hate Google. You come across one site, match one symptom, and all of a sudden you’re dying of carbon monoxide poisoning or cancer of the big toe.” He shoved his glasses back onto his nose and looked both ways before pulling onto the main road. “When I said I was worried, I didn’t mean I thought you had a mental illness. I just think you’re under a lot of stress.”

“It’s not that.”

“Then what is it?” The alarm in his expression made me

want to take back my words. Now he was going to stress. “What’s going on, Lali?”

“Nothing. I was...” Ugh. I should’ve gone along with his theory. How was I going to get him off my case now? An idea popped into my head, and I hated myself for even thinking it. But it was the best way to stop Dad from losing more sleep worrying about me. “I was wondering if Mom ever had any issues.”

Dad flinched, and my conscience screamed at me for being a horrible person. “Why would you think that?” he asked.

Swallowing my guilt, I continued before I lost my nerve. “Well, she left without warning, and she didn’t even come back for my birthday or call or send a card—” My voice caught, and I realized it would’ve been much easier to handle Mom’s leaving if she really did have a mental illness. That would’ve dulled the constant ache of knowing I wasn’t enough reason for her to stay. My eyes stung with emotion. Served me right for mentioning her when Dad was still so sensitive.

I turned toward my window to hide the moisture along my lashes. We were almost to town, which was little more than a single street with a handful of buildings that peaked at three stories high.

Dad heaved a sigh. “Lali, I understand that you want to find a justification for her leaving. I can’t say I didn’t hope it was some psychological issue, too, especially after—” He stopped himself. Even with his deep olive skin, I could tell his face had flushed. Was something really going on with Mom?

“Especially after what?” I squeaked.

“Never mind. It doesn’t change anything.”

“Dad.”

“It’s nothing.”

“It’s not nothing! And I deserve to know!”

He shoved his shoulders toward his ears. “She just...a long time ago, she told me she thought she could”—he made a face—“*astral project*.”

I blinked. I must’ve misheard him. “What?”

He leaned toward the windshield, his dark brown eyes moving back and forth behind his glasses as if he were struggling to find the doctor’s office we’d been coming to since I was three years old.

“Dad, there are only like eight buildings. Stop avoiding the question. What are you talking about?”

“You know.” He lifted a hand off the steering wheel and made a rolling motion. “That whole spirit-moving-out-of-your-body thing.”

My mouth went dry. Was *that* what I’d been doing? Moving my spirit out of my body? That would explain why no one could see me when it happened, why I hadn’t been able to feel anything. Sweat pricked along my scalp. Was it possible I’d inherited some supernatural ability?

Or you just inherited delusions of grandeur.

“Y-you can’t be serious,” I said.

“That’s what I said when she told me.” Dad parked the van in front of the old brick building with bronze letters across the gable spelling out *Caudill Clinic*. “But you know she always had an active imagination, and you know how little kids are. She was young and gullible, and she had some dream that she floated out of her body and thought it was real.”

“And you guys never thought to mention this before?”

“Well, it’s obviously not true. And to be fair, your mother did tell you. In her own way.”

“What? When?”

“You probably don’t remember the Adventures of Astralis stories, do you?”

“The ones about the girl who lived in a tree?” I frowned, thinking back to the tales Mom used to make up as bedtime stories. Instead of reading books to us, she would tell my brothers and sisters and me about Astralis, the girl who lived in a tree shaped like a seven where three rivers crossed. Astralis could go anywhere she wanted in her mind, and each of her adventures took place in a different exotic location. But that didn’t really seem relevant right now.

“Dad, what do they have to do with anything?”

“Well, JoAnn”—he coughed as if Mom’s name had gotten caught in his throat—“*your mother* told me she made up those stories because she used to have out-of-body experiences like that when she was a child. I guess she thought maybe one of you kids would imagine something similar, and she didn’t want to squash your creativity. Typical artist.”

I gripped the side of my seat, doing everything I could to keep my breathing even. Had Mom been trying to warn me about this? Did she know this would happen to me? Dad’s skeptical expression made it clear I couldn’t tell him the truth. If he hadn’t believed Mom, he definitely wouldn’t believe me. He’d send me to the shrink in no time.

“But going back to my original point,” Dad said. “I understand why you want to try to justify her leaving. Really, I do.

But that won't help. We all have to accept that she made her decision and do our best to cope with it." His watch beeped, and he unbuckled his seatbelt. "We're going to be late for your appointment. Let's get going."

He climbed out of the van and slammed the door, but I didn't move. My mind was on fire. It couldn't be a coincidence that I'd started having the same experiences Mom described having as a child. Maybe we were both crazy...but what if we weren't? What if my mother really could astral project? What if she wasn't the only one?

5 THEORY

SOMETIME AROUND MIDNIGHT, I CREPT DOWNSTAIRS without turning on the light. The darkness put me even more on edge, but I couldn't risk waking my family. I couldn't handle any more distractions.

After my pointless visit to the doctor—who told me to stay fed and hydrated and to come back if I fainted again—Dad insisted on trying to make my birthday celebration extra special in Mom's absence. We'd picked up my brothers and sisters and driven an hour out of town to my favorite Indian restaurant. While it was nice to have the night off from cooking duty, I spent the whole time counting the minutes until I'd have some privacy. I was dying to find answers about what was happening to me, and now I finally had the chance.

Sliding into the computer chair, I pressed the power but-

ton on our old off-brand desktop. The ancient machine made loud grinding noises as it started up, and I glanced at the stairs. There was just enough moonlight for me to make out the dark outlines of the banister along the upstairs hallway. It extended for a few feet before intersecting with the wall that blocked the rest of my view. I had enough visibility to tell I was the only one out of bed.

Thankfully, Dad had reclaimed Gottfried, and the two were tucked away in his room. It was a relief to know I wouldn't have to deal with the dog's sniffing or barking to give me away. *Or freak me out even more.*

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I worried the man with the scar would show up again tonight. But there was something I couldn't quite reconcile in my mind: if he was after me, why didn't he grab me when he had the chance? Last night, I was barely two feet away from him. He could've easily snatched me up and carried me off into the night, but he didn't. Why? Was he waiting until I was home by myself?

I eyed Dixon's baseball gear tucked away in the corner. A long wooden bat was propped up against the wall. If that man did show up, at least I had more than a lamp this time.

Turning back to the blue screen in front of me, I drummed my chipped black fingernails along the wooden desk. The sound seemed to echo a million times louder than usual, and I snatched my hand back. My head twitched toward the stairs again. I listened for stirring, but all I could hear were the low grating noises the computer was making, as if starting up were the most strenuous thing I could've asked it to do.

I bounced my knees impatiently as the infuriating little

hourglass blinked on and off. It disappeared just long enough to get my hopes up before reappearing to taunt me. I was sure the computer had never taken this long to load before.

Maybe that's a sign. Doubt crept into my mind, telling me it was crazy to entertain any of this: the idea that I'd somehow managed to move my spirit out of my body; the fear that some mysterious man was after me; the belief that I'd really watched two people disappear into thin air. It was all so inconceivable. But no amount of logic could get rid of the charge I felt in my blood, telling me it was all real.

The computer finally finished thinking, and I hurried to click on the web browser. With trembling fingers, I typed *astral projection* into the search bar and pressed ENTER. My heart beat a jerky rhythm in my chest as I waited for the results to show up on the page. I wasn't sure what I hoped to find. It seemed like a lose-lose situation—either I was totally insane, or I really could astral project and the man with the scar was actually stalking me. It would've been a greater relief to find out I was nuts. But I had to know what was going on with me once and for all.

I clicked on the first link without even reading it. It led to a white and blue website with a header image showing a man sitting with his eyes closed. A ghostly form hovered just above his body, connected to him with a transparent cord. The image gave me chills, and I quickly moved on to the text.

Astral projection, also known as astral travel, is a separation of the body and spirit in which the astral body leaves the physical body to travel in an astral plane. It is frequent-

ly reported in association with dreams and meditation. The symptoms most commonly reported in conjunction with astral projecting are feelings that the body is vibrating, sleep paralysis, dizziness or vertigo, and buzzing, whooshing, or roaring sounds that subside once the process is complete.

I fell back into the chair. This was past the point of coincidence. The buzzing, the vibrating, no one being able to see me—I really had been astral projecting.

A second realization hit me like a truck: the man with the scar must be able to astral project, too. That must've been his astral body standing outside my room last night. No wonder he'd been able to disappear so quickly.

But how could I have seen him? No one could see me when I was in my astral form. Did it work differently for different people? I thought back to the pantry incident, and my whole body seemed to fill with lead. I hadn't seen him then, but he had to have been the one who knocked over the flour. He must've disappeared right before I opened the door. How often had he been lurking in our house without our knowledge?

A sharp pain stung my palm, and I realized I was clenching my fist so tightly my nails were digging into my skin. I uncurled my fingers and ran my hands over my face. Why was that man spying on me? If he could do the same thing I could do, then what did he want?

I strained to remember what he said to the red-haired woman with the tattoo inside her lip. He'd insisted she knew something that could help him find someone. Was that what he wanted with me? No, that didn't make sense. Who was I

going to help him find? I couldn't even find my own mother, let alone—

Mom! He was after my mother. That was why he was sneaking around my house. He must've been looking for clues about where she was. Did that mean the red-haired woman knew Mom, too? Now that I thought about it, she did look like she was close to the same age.

And he killed her because she didn't know anything. My stomach twisted. Was that his plan for me if I didn't help him? What was his plan for Mom if he found her?

Wait. Was he the reason she left?

I gasped. That had to be it. Mom must've known that man was after her, and she'd fled to save herself. Deep down I'd always believed she wouldn't leave without a good reason. This all had to be connected.

"Lali?" Dad's voice made me start so hard I almost tipped over the computer chair. "What are you doing down there?"

"Dad!" I shot to my feet. "I know why Mom left!"

"*What?*" He hustled down the stairs, and Gottfried's claws clicked on the steps right behind him.

"That man I saw in the hallway is after her!"

Dad was by my side in no time, the glow of the monitor reflecting off his glasses. "I thought we established that was a nightmare. There was no one—" His confused expression melted into a look of defeat. "Why are you up at one in the morning reading about astral projection?"

"Because I can do it, too! What I saw last night wasn't a nightmare. I astral—"

"Lali, stop. You didn't project anywhere."

“Yes I did! And the same man I saw shoot a woman is trying to get to Mom!”

Gottfried barked at the excitement in my voice.

“Gott, *hush*.” Dad pressed his index finger and thumb into his brow. “This is my fault. I never should’ve told you about your mother.”

“Dad, this is serious. We have to call the police.”

He let go of his face and put his hands on my shoulders, as if he could transfer his logic to me. “Listen to me. It’s not real. You’re going to make yourself crazy with this.”

I wanted to scream. How was I going to make him believe me? “I know it sounds crazy,” I said, barely managing to keep my voice steady. “But it’s true, Dad. I’m sure of it. Mom left because someone’s after her.”

The lines around his face deepened in pain. “I know you miss her, sweetie. And I understand you’re hurt because she didn’t contact you on your birthday. But making up stories won’t make it any better.”

“That’s not what this is!”

“Your mother left, Xitlali.” Dad took on a stern tone that made my chest collapse. “I know it’s hard to accept it, but you have to. No one forced her to leave; it was her choice.”

Pools formed along my lower lashes, and the room turned into swirls of darkened shapes. “Dad—”

“Honey, I think you need to talk to someone.”

“Yeah, the police!”

Gottfried growled and ran in a circle around the sofa.

Dad dropped his arms to his sides with a thud. “Please keep your voice down. And think about what you’re saying. What

will you tell the police? That a man astral projected into our house and vanished without a trace? That he didn't take anything, but you're sure he's after your mother, who left nothing but a note when she abandoned you two months ago?" The words were a slap in the face. It was bad enough my own father didn't believe me, but it was even worse that he was right. No one else would believe me either.

"Dad, please," I whispered. "I need you. I can't do this on my own."

He dragged me into a hug. He still smelled like cumin from the Indian restaurant, but dinner felt like a lifetime ago. As distracted as I'd been during the meal, at least I'd been surrounded by warmth and family. Now I just felt cold and alone.

"I'll make some calls," he said. "We'll get you in to see a counselor, okay?"

I wriggled out of his grasp. "I don't want to talk to a counselor. I want to talk to a father who doesn't think I'm crazy." His expression told me that wasn't going to happen. My throat felt like I'd swallowed sandpaper. I knew an onslaught of tears wasn't far behind, and crying now would just convince Dad I needed counseling even more. "Forget it," I rasped.

Digging my front teeth into the tip of my tongue, I ran upstairs and slammed my bedroom door behind me. My eyes spilled over. What was I supposed to do now? I couldn't figure out who this psycho was and stop him from finding Mom all by myself. No one would ever believe me, which meant no one would help me. I was completely on my own, and I had no idea who I was up against.

I slid my back along the door and crumpled onto the icy

hardwood floor. Wasn't it bad enough that I'd had to deal with Mom's absence? That I had to try to be a substitute mother—cooking, doing laundry, helping my brothers and sisters with their homework and making sure to get them to bed on time when Dad worked late? That I had to pretend to be strong for everyone else when I felt like I might shatter any time I smelled jasmine or walked through the school parking lot and heard my classmates' mothers calling out "I love you" through their car windows? Now I was supposed to cope with some supernatural ability and save my mother from a killer?

I broke. For the first time since the day my mother left, I let myself cry. *Really* cry. Sobs racked my body, hot tears sliding along my nose and slipping between my lips. I tasted salt and anguish in each one.

What if the man with the scar found Mom? What if he hurt her before I could stop him? I didn't even know if I *could* stop him. As much as he'd been spying on me, I had no idea who he was—or *where* he was.

I sucked in a breath. What if I could find him? If I could astral project, I could spy on him the same way he'd spied on me. I'd even have an advantage because he wouldn't be able to see me. Maybe I could figure out where he lived. Then I'd have something to tell the police. If I said I'd witnessed a murder, they'd have to investigate.

Wiping my face with my pajama sleeve, I inhaled slowly and focused on staying calm. I could do this. I squeezed my eyes shut and pictured the man's face. *Find him.*

Seconds ticked by, and nothing happened. I tensed every part of my body, willing the buzzing to take over. *Find him!*

Another minute went by. Still nothing.

I pressed my molars together. Every other time, the projections took over when I didn't want them. Of course, now that I was trying to get them to happen, they wouldn't. But I had to figure out who this guy was and what he wanted with Mom.

Mom. I nearly smacked my palm into my forehead. What was I doing trying to find the man with the scar? I needed to focus on finding Mom. If I could get to her, she could tell me who the man was. Then we could figure out how to stop him.

If she can even see you. I forced away the thought. I had to try. Even if she couldn't see me, maybe I could find an address and go to her in person. That might be my best shot.

Swallowing against the pain, I pictured my mother. I saw her ivory skin, the wide crystal-gray eyes she'd passed down to my brothers and sisters and me, the dark sideswept bangs she used to cover the faint lines across her forehead. I held my breath and concentrated on her image.

Nothing happened.

A bubble of pressure ballooned in my chest. What was I doing wrong? According to Mom's stories, Astralis just closed her eyes, pictured the world around her, and walked or flew to different places in her mind. Why wasn't it working for me? Did I have to know where Mom was before I could go to her?

"Lali?" The whisper on the other side of my door was so soft I thought I'd imagined it at first. Then the door shifted against my back. I slid out of the way, and Salaxia stepped into the room. "Hey," she said.

"Sal, what are you doing up?"

"I heard you and Dad fighting." Her voice was tiny and sad.

It made me think of a baby bird that had fallen out of its nest.

I ran my hands over my cheeks just in case there were any stray tear streaks. I didn't want my baby sister to know I'd been falling apart. "We weren't fighting," I lied, pushing myself to my feet. "Not really. He just didn't want me online so late." That was kind of true.

Okay, not really. But I couldn't go into details. I had to get her out of here so I could keep working on projecting.

Salaxia closed the door, almost catching it on her long nightgown. "Why were you online?"

"Just doing some research. But Sal, you have to get back to bed. It's late."

"I can't." She sniffed. "I had a dream that Mom came back, and I'm scared I'll dream it again."

"Why is that scary?"

She looked at the floor, her dark, chin-length hair slipping across her cheeks. "Because then I have to wake up and remember she's gone." Her voice trembled on the last word.

"Sal—"

"Can I sleep in here? Please?"

Looking at her innocent little doe eyes, I couldn't bear saying no. "Okay. But you have to go right to sleep, or you won't be able to wake up for school."

"I will." In a flash of yellow ruffles, she bounded over to my bed. I watched her curl up under my comforter and sighed. I was such a sucker. For the last few weeks, she'd been doing much better and had only asked to sleep in my room on the weekends. Dad would've been mad if he found her sleeping in here on a school night, but I didn't have the heart to kick her

out—even if I was dying to try projecting again.

“Why were you sitting on the floor?” she asked.

I walked over to grab a hair tie out of the bin on top of my dresser. “I think better on the floor.”

“I can tell you were crying.”

“Allergies.”

“Yeah, right.”

I tugged my hair into a messy ponytail and shot her a look. “Don’t question the only person in this family sappy enough to let you sleep in her room on a school night.”

Salaxia seemed to consider my words, but that didn’t stop her next question. “Are you mad Mom didn’t come back for your birthday?”

All my muscles constricted.

“Because I am,” she said. Her little-kid features bunched as she leaned back against the headboard. “I didn’t think she’d come back for the midnight birthday dance, but she could’ve *called*. It’s like she just forgot about you. About all of us.”

The quiver in her voice made me want to tell her everything. This whole time we’d all been so angry with Mom. Most days, my other siblings refused to talk about her, but I could see the underlying hurt and resentment in the way Oxanna was so quick to snap at everyone now, and the way Ulyxes’ smile didn’t quite reach his eyes anymore. Dixon did a good job putting on a brave face, but I noticed the wounded look in his eyes whenever he saw mothers doting on their babies.

But we’d all been mad without knowing the whole story. Mom was probably in hiding. What if she didn’t call because she was afraid for her life? I pictured her scared in a darkened

room. I had to help her. I had to figure out how to make myself project. The sooner I got Salaxia to settle down and go to sleep, the sooner I could try.

“Do you think Mom will ever come back?” Salaxia asked.

She will if I have anything to do with it. “Yes. I think she will.”

“Then maybe we can find out once and for all what happened to Snugglepagus.”

I rolled my eyes. Salaxia’s favorite stuffed animal—a worn-out elephant she’d intended to name after Snufflepagus from *Sesame Street*—had disappeared the same night Mom did. Salaxia was convinced Mom took it with her, but the rest of us were sure our little sister had just misplaced it. Either way, we’d all grown tired of debating the issue. “Maybe so,” I said, flipping the light switch. “But right now, we need to go to sleep.”

Moving in the darkness, I shooed my sister to the other side of the bed so I could climb under the blankets. They were heavy and warm, but I still felt a chill of fear inside me. Would I really be able to get Mom back? I had to believe I could. She’d always said everything happened for a reason. What better reason would there be for me to have this ability?

Salaxia cuddled up next to me and rested her head on my shoulder. “You know what would make us both feel better?”

“What?”

“If you answer three questions from the Salaxia Quiz.”

I groaned. For the last year, Salaxia had been trying to get all of us to answer trivia questions about her. For the life of me, I couldn’t understand what she got out of it, but she was relentless. Nelson seemed to think her little “game” was cute. The rest of us? Not so much.

“Sal, I changed your diapers,” I said. “You don’t have to test how well I know you every five seconds.”

“Just one?”

As much as I hated to cave, I knew it would be faster just to let her ask her stupid narcissistic question. “Fine. *One*. Then I am done with the Salaxia Quiz forever.”

“Kay.” She was quiet for a moment, as if she didn’t already have a slew of queries lined up. I wouldn’t have been surprised if she had flash cards somewhere. Finally, she asked, “What is my favorite dessert?”

“Easy. All of them.”

She moved her head away from my shoulder. Even in the dark, I could feel her glaring at me. “Come on.”

“Brownies with vanilla frosting.”

“Nope!”

“Okay, I lose. Good night.”

“Don’t you want to know the right answer?”

“Nope!” I did my best to mimic her high pitch.

“It’s brownies with vanilla frosting *and* a scoop of vanilla ice cream,” she said anyway.

“How silly of me. Sweet dreams.”

“One more!”

I rolled onto my side, turning my back to her. “Negative. I’m done forever, remember? We agreed.”

“But you have to end on a good note. You can’t end with a wrong answer.”

“I think I’ll survive. Good night.”

“Lame.”

“Love you.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.” She shuffled beside me, and it wasn’t long before her breathing deepened.

Once I was sure she was asleep, I pictured Mom again and forced myself to breathe evenly. *Come on. Come on!* After what felt like hours, I went back to visualizing the man with the scar. I even tried projecting to Kai.

Nothing worked.

I twisted my fingers into the sheets and squeezed to keep myself from breaking down again. Why hadn’t Mom explained any of this to me? She could’ve taught me how to control my projecting so I didn’t have to waste time trying to figure it out—time that could’ve made all the difference in whether or not the man found her.

No. I couldn’t let that happen. I *wouldn’t*. I’d find a way to stop him somehow.

Rolling onto my back, I looked up at my ceiling. Shadows drifted across the Dalí paintings as clouds passed over the moon. The pictures seemed to shift with the light, reminding me why I loved his famous double images—there was always more than first met the eye. The same had to be true of figuring out what the man with the scar was after, of what had happened with Mom, and of learning how to control my projecting. There had to be something I was missing. And just like the veiled images in Dalí’s work, I was sure the information I needed was hiding in plain sight.

I just had to figure out where to look.

CORNERED

THE FAMILIAR SILHOUETTE STOOD JUST OUT of reach. Bright white light shone from behind her and washed out her features, but I'd know that tall, soft frame anywhere.

"Mom!" I lifted my arms and rushed forward, but she scooted back just as quickly. Or maybe she...floated? It was hard to tell with the brilliant glow around us. I stepped toward her again, keeping my eyes on her retreating form. She *was* floating. I should've been more concerned with how she was managing to drift, but I was too caught up in why. Why was she moving away from me? Wasn't she happy to see me, too?

My voice shook as I called out, "Mom. Stop."

She paused, and all I could see was the shadow of her hand as she lifted it. She moved it from left to right in a slow, de-

liberate motion that made my stomach twist. I knew she was waving good-bye. Forever.

“No,” I whispered. But her form was already shrinking into the distance. I ran after her in a blind haze. She was moving too fast. In a matter of seconds, she was gone, a fading black form swallowed up by the pool of light. “Mom, come back! Please! I need you!”

My alarm blared, jarring me out of sleep. I sat bolt upright, air hiccupping into my lungs as I processed the shapes of my bedroom and the screechy buzzer sounding beside me.

It was only a dream.

The mattress shifted. Still disoriented, I looked over my shoulder at my baby sister clutching a pillow over her head. “Make it stop,” she whined.

Shaking away my jitters, I turned to swat the snooze button on my alarm. Its green numbers jumped out at me, and the previous day exploded into my mind. I didn’t know which was worse—the dream or reality.

I dropped my head into my hands. After everything that had happened, I should’ve been grateful to know for sure that this time, it really was just a dream. A dream that meant...what? That I’d never reach Mom? Was my subconscious telling me it had lost hope?

It wouldn’t surprise me if that were the case. I’d spent most of the night trying to get myself to astral project, but I hadn’t been able to do it. I couldn’t even manage the tiniest buzz. At some point, I must’ve fallen asleep, and my frustration had clearly leaked into my dream. But I couldn’t give up.

Salaxia stirred beside me. “Five more minutes?”

My head snapped up. I had to keep it together in front of her. “Sorry, Sal. It’s time to get ready for school.” There. My voice didn’t give anything away.

Salaxia tossed the pillow aside and sat up, pouting. Her dark locks were matted to her face on one side and sticking out at odd angles on the other. “I say we play hooky.”

I wish. I’d never needed a day off so badly in my life. But I had to go to school. If the man with the scar was spying on me, I was sure he’d love an opportunity to come here in person when I was alone and vulnerable. Staying here by myself—or staying here with my defenseless baby sister—would be playing right into his hands. I had to stay in public.

I faked a smile and reached over to muss my baby sister’s hair even more. “No way, José. Go get ready for school.”

“Lame.”

“You’re gonna *look* lame if you don’t hurry up and get ready before Oxanna takes over the bathroom.”

Salaxia gasped and jumped out of bed. Her long-sleeved nightgown fluttered behind her as she tore out of my room.

As soon as she was out of sight, I slumped against my headboard. At least she didn’t seem to suspect anything was wrong. I’d have to keep it that way, not just for her, but for all my brothers and sisters.

Selfishly, I wanted to tell them everything. I needed to get it off my chest, and they deserved to know that our mother hadn’t abandoned us because she didn’t want us anymore. But even if they believed me—which was a stretch in the first place—I didn’t want to get their hopes up about Mom until I was sure I could get her back. I’d have to keep everything to

myself for now.

I was distracted while I moved through my morning routine. I needed a plan. There had to be somewhere I could find out more about how to astral project at will. Dad had interrupted my research last night before I got to anything about how to control it, but maybe I could sneak off to the school library during lunch to see if there were any books on the subject. I'd just have to make sure the librarian was there, or anyone really, so long as I wasn't alone.

I wondered if the man with the scar had asked Kai to lure me away from the school. I'd heard stories about predators who asked for help carrying stuff to their cars, or made up excuses to pull their victims away from others. Whatever the two of them had planned, I wasn't going to fall for it. If Kai was at school again today, I'd avoid him at all costs.

When I walked into the kitchen, my brothers and sisters were sitting at the table, and Dad was standing at his post by the coffee maker with his suit sleeves pushed up. Gottfried poked his head out from under Salaxia's chair to greet me.

"Morning," I said, pulling a cherry-flavored Pop-Tart from the box on the counter.

"Happy Friday." Ulyxses grinned as I plopped into the seat between Oxanna and Salaxia.

"You, too." I smiled at my brother, hoping my inner turmoil didn't show through. The tell-tale swirls of chocolate dancing around the milk in his bowl told me he'd already finished a serving of Cocoa Puffs. That either meant he'd gotten up earlier than usual or I'd taken longer to get ready than I thought. I glanced at the clock on the stove. It was the latter; Nelson

would be here any minute.

“So, who’s up for a movie tonight?” Dad asked.

“Oh, me!” Salaxia’s hand flew into the air so fast she almost knocked over her oatmeal.

Ulyxses smoothed his plaid button-up shirt. “There’s a new documentary—”

“No way,” Dixon said. “We’re not watching a stupid documentary. You’re the only one who thinks that’s fun.”

Ulyxses looked down his nose at our brother. “Do you know how many people it takes to create a documentary?”

“No, but I’m sure you do.”

“Not to mention,” Ulyxses continued, “no one would put the time and money into making it if they didn’t expect it to turn a profit, which would come from people going to see it. So obviously, I’m not the *only* one who thinks it’s fun to expand my mind. Lots of people enjoy learning.”

Oxanna’s eyelids fluttered, revealing the pink glitter she’d smeared across them to match her flowery top. “Maybe those people can adopt you so we won’t have to suffer through your crappy movie picks.”

“Okay, okay.” Dad took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes with the back of his hand. “Forget I said anything.”

“I want to go,” Salaxia protested. “Just leave them behind.”

“Hey!” Dixon and Ulyxses cried.

Oxanna tried to jab Salaxia with her elbow but missed. “I can’t go until after six-thirty,” she said. “I’m staying after practice to help Bailey and Lynn make welcome baskets for the new cheerleaders, remember?”

I nearly choked on my Pop-Tart. *A welcome basket!* That was

the perfect way to get an address. If I told Mrs. Moubrey, the school secretary, that I wanted to send Kai a welcome basket, she'd surely tell me where he lived. Kai was too young to have his own place, so there would have to be an adult's name on the lease. Maybe that name would belong to the man with the scar. Even if it didn't, at least it would be something to go on.

"How about you, Lalisaurus?" Dad asked.

"Oh, um..." It took me a minute to remember what we were talking about. "I can't do a movie tonight. I'm supposed to go bowling with my friends." Good thing I hadn't canceled on Paisley in front of Dad yesterday. Bowling was a great cover in case I ended up doing research about Kai's address after school. My friends would just have to forgive me if I bailed on our plans at the last minute.

Gottfried howled half a second before Nelson's horn sounded, and I was out the door in record time. The sooner I could get to school and figure out who this man was, the better. I was so busy trying to figure out what I was going to say to Mrs. Moubrey that I hardly heard a word Nelson said on our way to school. I hardly noticed anything around me at all until I was standing in front of the school's front office.

A sudden batch of nerves snatched my breath away as I stared at the door handle. Why was I so worried? It wasn't like Mrs. Moubrey would suspect what I was really planning. There was no reason to be nervous; she wouldn't believe me even if I told her. I wiped my sweaty palms on my jeans and reached for the door.

"There you are!" Paisley's voice rang out behind me, and I whirled around like I'd been caught shoplifting. A flicker of

annoyance flared inside me. Paisley had such horrible timing lately. Even worse, she had her new copycat sidekick, Jessica, with her. The duo sauntered over in their matching black lacy tops and skinny jeans.

Paisley dug inside her suitcase-sized purse and pulled out a pink gift bag. "We were plannin' to give this to you yesterday after school," she said, pushing the bag into my arms. "Happy day-late birthday. It's from both of us."

I doubted that. Jessica only tolerated me because she worshipped Paisley like some kind of southern belle deity. She dyed her hair the same shade of blonde and had even started using the same makeup Paisley used. It was borderline disturbing.

I forced a smile anyway. "Thanks, you guys." I glanced at the clock on the wall above the office. The warning bell was going to ring in five minutes. Quickly shifting the tissue paper aside, I pulled out a collection of jewel-colored eyeliner pencils.

"Do you love 'em?" Paisley gushed.

"Of course." I prayed my voice sounded enthusiastic. "These are great. Thank you." I studied the package for an extra moment before dropping it back into the bag. Tucking the gift under my bicep, I gave both of them one-armed hugs. I couldn't help but notice Jessica was wearing the same perfume as Paisley. They smelled like manufactured vanilla twins.

Paisley's face fell as I pulled away. "You're lyin'."

"No, I'm not," I insisted. "I really like them." I really did. They were beautiful, bold colors, and I would have wanted to experiment right away under normal circumstances. But I was going to lose my mind if I had to wait until lunch to talk to Mrs. Moubrey, and I was down to four minutes.

“We were at the store for over an hour,” Jessica grumbled. She narrowed her dark eyes at me, and I wondered how long it would be until she got hazel contacts to match Paisley’s natural eye color.

“I know. I mean, thank you,” I said, flustered. “I’m just distracted. I have to run to the office before class.”

Paisley looked wounded. “Fine. Are we still on for bowlin’ tonight? It’s fine if Jessica comes, too, right?”

I nodded impatiently. “Yep. See you guys there.” I’d have to come up with an excuse to get out of it later. I didn’t have time to deal with Paisley interrogating me about why I couldn’t go.

“Or I’ll see you in about two minutes in history,” Paisley said, quirking a perfectly plucked brow.

“Right.” My eyes darted toward the office door. “Which means I really have to get in there.”

“Okay, okay. I can take a hint.” Paisley looped her arm in Jessica’s. “See you in class.” The two scampered down the hall, and Paisley shot me one last look over her shoulder. I knew I’d be hearing about this later.

One crisis at a time. I crammed the gift into my backpack and shoved my way into the office.

Mrs. Moubrey peeked over her bifocals, and the web of lines around her face folded into her grandmotherly smile. “Xitlali. Glad to see you’re feeling better.”

“Thank you.” My face heated up. I was already giving myself away, and I hadn’t even started lying yet. Pathetic.

Thankfully, no one else was in the office. Principal Rockbridge was probably out monitoring the hallways in hopes of finding a reason to write someone up.

“What can I help you with this morning?” Mrs. Moubrey asked in her sweet old lady voice. Why did she have to sound so innocent? In that moment, I was sure she’d never lied in her life. The bright, cheery room wasn’t helping my shame either. Its mint-colored walls, oversized vases of flowers, and framed portraits of smiling members of the administration all set me on edge. I felt like the lone force of malice among so much good. But what I was doing was for the safety of someone I cared about. Surely lying for that purpose wasn’t so bad.

I hung on to that thought and squared my shoulders. “Um, I was curious if you could tell me where the new boy—I think he said his name was Kai—lives. My friends and I want to make some cookies and take them over to his house.” The words tumbled out quickly, probably unconvincingly. “You know, to welcome him to Browshire. It just seemed like a nice thing to do since we don’t get new people around here that often.”

Mrs. Moubrey’s watery blue eyes twinkled. “That’s a sweet thought. But I’m afraid I can’t give out students’ addresses.”

“Oh.” I felt my shoulders slump.

“If you want to leave it here in the office, we can call him to come pick it up.”

“Okay. Thank you.” I lingered, trying to come up with a way to get something useful out of her. Even a last name might help. “I, uh, forgot what he said his last name was,” I tried. “Writing *Kai and family* just doesn’t sound as personal, you know?”

Mrs. Moubrey pursed her lips and gestured at something behind me. “Why don’t you ask him yourself?”

A hollow feeling moved through me as I realized what she meant. I turned around stiffly and confirmed it: Kai stood in

the doorway, his fingers wrapped around the straps of his book bag. Despite the cold weather, his skin looked sun-kissed, and he was dressed like he'd just come from the beach.

"Awana," he said, a smirk creeping across his face.

My brain barely registered his voice. All I could think about was how badly I wanted to run out of the room and get as far away from him as possible. But I had to act like nothing was wrong. As far as I could tell, Kai didn't know I knew what he and the man with the scar were trying to do. I didn't want to make him think otherwise. There was no telling what either of them would do if they figured out I was onto them.

Kai's crooked smile faltered. "My last name is Awana."

"Oh." My voice came out an octave too high, and his expression changed to one I couldn't read.

"Why do you ask?" he pressed.

I felt my palms start to sweat. I wondered if the man with the scar was lurking around here somewhere, too.

The bell rang, and I jumped.

"Okay, you two," Mrs. Moubrey said. "Get to class."

I made a beeline for the door, barely managing to say, "Bye." Kai stepped aside as I dashed into the herd of students heading down the hall.

"Hey, Lali," he called after me.

I froze. Someone bumped into me, but I didn't see who it was or fully register the angry curse directed at me. *Just act normal.* I turned to face Kai.

"Yeah?"

"Can I walk you to class?"

My jaw went slack. He wasn't even trying to hide the fact

that he was following me. Our classmates filed around us, and I wanted to cry out to them that this guy was dangerous, that he was working for someone who had killed a woman trying to track down my mother. Instead, a question sprang from my lips before I could stop it.

“Why?”

Kai frowned. “Because I’m a nice guy?”

I wasn’t buying that for a second, but I had to act clueless. I didn’t want to trigger some knee-jerk reaction from him. “I-I mean, didn’t you have to do something in the office?”

“Just needed to get a form signed. No big deal. It can wait.”

The hall cleared out, and I was sure Kai could hear my heart thudding against my ribs. He was targeting me—there was no question about it. I knew I couldn’t keep avoiding him; he would start suspecting something eventually. But my history class was upstairs, and there was no way I was walking into an empty stairwell with him.

“Actually, I, um...” I swallowed. “I have to pee.”

He breathed a laugh, but his mouth stayed downturned. “Glad you’re so open about that.”

“I just have to hurry, you know? Don’t want to be late. Maybe next time.”

“Sure. Next time.”

I walked away as fast as I could without breaking into a run. Ducking into the girls’ room, I staggered to the sink and dropped my backpack on the floor beside me. What was I going to do? What if he was waiting in the hall when I left the bathroom? I couldn’t hide in here until next period.

The door banged open, and I spun around. Kai stood a few

feet away with his arms crossed, his body blocking my escape. The walls seemed to close in on me. He had me cornered.

"I-I think you have the wrong bathroom," I squeaked.

"Why are you afraid of me?"

I gasped. He knew I was onto him. I shook my head frantically. "I-I'm not."

"Lali, please. Your face reads like a book. You're terrified of me, and I just wanna know why."

"I told you I'm not." The tremble in my voice betrayed me, and I slowly leaned down to grab the strap of my backpack. I squeezed it in my fist, ready to swing if I had to. Whatever Kai was trying to do by following me into the bathroom, I was sure it wasn't good.

His eyebrows lifted. "You saw me, didn't you?"

"What?" Confusion only made my heart beat faster. What did he think I'd seen? Was he a murderer, too?

"In your hallway," he clarified, as though he could hear the questions racing through my mind. "I thought I got us out of there before you noticed me, but I guess not."

"You were there?" I remembered what I'd seen behind the school the day before, and suddenly I understood. Kai was the one who had scanned the area and put his hand on the man's arm before they disappeared. *Kai* was the one who could astral project. And somehow, he could take people with him. He must have been hidden behind the man's massive frame when he'd projected him out of my house the other night.

And the next morning.

"That was you in the pantry, wasn't it?" I whispered.

"That was an accident. You startled me."

“But how...?”

He shrugged. “Our powers come out differently. You know that. I just happened to get the bring-a-friend ability.”

So I’d been right: astral projection *did* work differently for different people. That explained why I could see Kai. But that also meant—

All my blood drained into my feet. If Kai could transport people with him, then he could do the same with me. And now we were alone. I’d fallen right into his trap.

“The more important question,” he went on, advancing on me, “is what power did *you* get?”

I stumbled backward and bumped into the edge of the sink. “Stay away. I’ll scream.” Screaming was all I could do. There was no way I’d make it to the door without him catching me. I could try to fight him off, but he was bigger than me. All I had was a bag full of textbooks.

He held up his hands. “Hey, I just wanna know how your power works.”

The final bell rang, startling me so much I cried out. Kai opened his mouth, but I didn’t wait for the words to come. I heaved my backpack at him. It smashed into his shoulder, throwing him off balance. I squeezed past him and dove for the exit.

Kai caught the door before I could open it. He pressed his palm into the wood just above my face and held it closed. “Would you—”

“Help!” I drove my heels into the floor, pulling the handle with all my strength. It didn’t budge. “Somebody help me!”

Kai shoved his foot against the bottom of the door and

clamped a hand over my mouth. “Lali, just *listen*.”

His thick fingers muffled my screams, and I smelled salt on his skin. My pulse drummed in my temples. If someone didn’t come soon, I was sure Kai was going to project me out of here and take me to a place where there wouldn’t be anyone around to help.

I hurled my body backward, but I couldn’t throw him off me. More screams burned in my throat, and I clawed at the hand that blocked their sound. My nails dug into the back of Kai’s wrist, serrating the skin all the way to his knuckles.

He cursed but didn’t let go. “You wanna do it this way?” he barked. “Fine.” Snaking his other arm around my waist, he moved his head down until his lips were right next to my ear. “Then brace yourself. And you might wanna close your eyes.”

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